

*The Talking Cure*

**RELIGIOUS CONVERSION  
OR THERAPY:**

**THE PRIESTLY PSYCHIATRIST IN  
T. S. ELIOT'S *THE COCKTAIL PARTY***

**Jeffrey Berman Ph.D.**

# **Religious Conversion or Therapy:**

**The Priestly Psychiatrist in T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party***

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defenses against emotions, the difficulty of integrating sexual and aggressive drives, and identity diffusion. Fear of unacceptable latent homosexuality may have also been a factor. Although Dr. Trosman does not elaborate on this, literary critics have long speculated on the homosexual implications of Eliot's poetry. John Peter suggested in 1952, for example, that *The Waste Land* was written in response to the death of Eliot's beloved friend Jean Verdenal, whom Eliot met in 1910 and who died in World War I.<sup>17</sup> More recently, James E. Miller, Jr., has written an ingenious book length study that focuses on Eliot's tangled feelings toward Verdenal, whom Miller sees as the central love figure in Eliot's poem.<sup>18</sup>

To view Eliot's illness as a transitory narcissistic regression is not to pigeonhole the man into a convenient clinical category but to attempt to establish a link between the poet's illness, recovery, and the extent to which both his illness and recovery shaped the themes of his creative art. To be sure, it is admittedly dangerous to speculate on the mental illness of a man who guarded his privacy as carefully as did Eliot. Critics of psychoanalysis will argue that the entire medical model of mental illness—including symptomatology, causation, and treatment—remains an unproven myth no matter how much clinical evidence the analyst is able to amass from his patient. Eliot was himself part of the movement opposed to psychiatry, and his subsequent comments on psychotherapy remain predictably cool. The roots of his disapproval extend to many different sources, not simply to the

fact that his therapeutic improvement failed to last very long. Less than three months after Eliot left the Swiss sanitarium, a friend reported that he was "going to pieces" again.<sup>19</sup> He never did enter another sanitarium, although in the summer of 1927 he and his wife attended a health spa near Geneva where they received hydrotherapy.<sup>20</sup> But Eliot's limited success with psychiatry does not entirely account for his sharp criticisms. In "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956), he concurs with the anti-psychiatric sentiment expressed by Aldous Huxley in a preface to the English translation of *The Supreme Wisdom*, a book written by a French psychiatrist. Contrasting Western psychiatry with the discipline of the East as found in *Tao and Zen*, Huxley comments that the aim of the former is "to help the troubled individual to adjust himself to the society of less troubled individuals—individuals who are observed to be well adjusted to one another and the local institutions, but about whose adjustment to the fundamental Order of Things no enquiry is made."<sup>21</sup> In contrast to this normality is a higher state of perfect functioning in which, notes Huxley, men are not merely adjusted to a deranged society. The fear is that, in ministering to the troubled individual, the psychiatrist may be promoting an unhealthy adaptation to a diseased society—a view upheld by contemporary psychiatrists both on the political left (R. D. Laing) and the political right (Thomas Szasz). Eliot cites Huxley's statement because it coincides with his own impression of Western psychiatry which, he believes, "is confused or mistaken as to what healing is for." The attitude of psychiatry,

Eliot insists, must be reversed.

The complaints voiced by Eliot and Huxley raise important issues implicit not only in *The Cocktail Party* but in the anti-psychiatric vision of such texts as *A Clockwork Orange*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *Equus*. These works suggest that a spiritual or religious malaise lies at the root of mental illness. Society is at fault in these books, and Western psychiatry inadvertently conspires with the repressive social and political establishment to enforce a rigid conception of normality upon the benumbed citizens of the therapeutic state. Adjustment to an insane society is the height of madness, as *Catch-22* has taught us. But what if a spiritual crisis arises from or masks psychological illness? Can we treat the human spirit without ministering to the psyche? Eliot implies in *The Cocktail Party* that the major problem is not the sick individual but the spiritually impoverished society, fatally divorced from Christian values. Nevertheless, the play dramatizes a point of view that strikes us as far from healthy either from a religious or psychological perspective. Yet how does one judge health? Although the question ultimately demands a value judgment and is therefore inherently problematic, we may apply Freud's definition of health—the ability to love and to work—to the characters in *The Cocktail Party*. To what degree do they see reality clearly and freely choose their own fates? Does the play succeed in resolving the spiritual and psychological conflicts of the central figures? In the 1932 BBC broadcasts, Eliot warns of the danger of invoking psychological determinism

to rationalize crime. Does he make the opposite error of invoking mystical religious determinism to rationalize the heroine's crucifixion at the end of the play?

The hero of *The Cocktail Party* is Sir Harcourt-Reilly, to whom the other characters refer as a great physician. Literary critics have rightly challenged the psychiatrist's medical authenticity.<sup>22</sup> However, they have not analyzed him to the extent they have scrutinized his three patients, Edward Chamberlayne, his wife Lavinia, and Celia Coplestone. As in *Tender Is the Night*, we should not be surprised to discover that the psychiatrist hero also turns out to be the secret patient and a reflection of the author himself. Much of the abundant criticism of the play has centered on the rich mythic and ritual origins of Reilly's identity, unfortunately ignoring the psychoanalytic implications of the psychiatrist's Godlike behavior. Pursuing a hint offered by Eliot, Robert Heilman has demonstrated Reilly's mythic affinity to Heracles in Euripedes' classical play *Alcestitis*.<sup>23</sup> Like Heracles, Reilly has the power to restore life to the dead: He revives the dying marriage of Edward and Lavinia and inspires Celia to give up her mundane human existence in favor of what Eliot sees as a glorious religious martyrdom. Reilly's mythic symbolism, however, clashes with his role as a modern psychiatrist. We may legitimately inquire into his ambivalence toward psychiatry and the meaning of his need to control omnipotently his patients' destinies. Both Lavinia and Celia assert in identical language that Edward is "on the edge of a nervous breakdown,"

but if we approach the play from the perspective of a psychiatric case study, which is after all the external framework of the play, we discover that Reilly also seems to be struggling against fragmentation, or at least betraying symptoms that coincide remarkably with those of his patients.

Lest we murder to dissect, however, we must acknowledge the danger of reducing literature to psychopathology and confusing literary analysis with a postmortem. The philosopher Abraham Kaplan has complained that "Psychiatrists suffer from a trained incapacity: the inability to distinguish symbols from symptoms." He warns against confusing aesthetic expression with psychological exposure. Quoting Stanley Edgar Hyman, he remarks that "When the interpretation is practiced by men of letters lacking in psychological training, they invite exposure themselves as 'amateur sexologists and Peeping Toms of criticism.'" <sup>24</sup> Kaplan's caveat certainly reflects Eliot's own critical precepts, but it does not invalidate the fact that literature serves as a revelation of the artist's conscious and unconscious intentions. Indeed, Kaplan's insight is double-edged: every act of interpretation reveals something about the interpreter, regardless of whether or not he has had psychological training. After counseling Edward and Lavinia, Reilly walks over to his office couch, in the middle of Act Two, and lies down. The gesture has subtle comic appeal, since he is the only character in the play to lie down on the analytic couch, the symbol of the talking cure. Several questions come to mind. How does Reilly serve as a projection screen

for Eliot's own attitude toward psychological health and illness? To what extent does the fictional psychiatrist's inner world of object relations—including his fantasies, defenses, and perceptions—correspond to the symptoms of his patients and ultimately to the playwright's? And, finally, what are the dangers of a messianic psychiatrist? In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud cautions against the "temptation for the analyst to play the part of prophet, savior and redeemer to the patient."<sup>25</sup> If Freud is right about the danger of succumbing to this temptation, what is the meaning of Dr. Reilly's unorthodox psychiatry in *The Cocktail Party*?

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The best revelation into Reilly's character appears in the long speech he delivers to Edward early in Act One, before his identity as a psychiatrist is exposed. Informed by Edward that Lavinia has walked out on him, leaving the husband with a mystery about her disappearance, Reilly ("The Unidentified Guest") elaborates on what he calls the "loss of personality." The speech begins with an assertion of the mystery of human personality but quickly shifts to a description of dehumanization and reduction to object status:

There's a loss of personality;

Or rather, you've lost Touch with the person  
You thought you were. You no longer feel quite human.

You're suddenly reduced to the status of an object—  
A living object, but no longer a person.  
It's always happening, because one is an object  
As well as a person. But we forget about it  
As quickly as we can. When you're dressed for a party  
And are going downstairs, with everything about you  
Arranged to support you in the role you have chosen,  
Then sometimes, when you come to the bottom step  
There is one step more than your feet expected  
And you come down with a jolt. Just for a moment  
You have the experience of being an object  
At the mercy of a malevolent staircase.  
Or, take a surgical operation.  
In consultation with the doctor and the surgeon,  
In going to bed in the nursing home,  
In talking to the matron, you are still the subject,  
The center of reality. But, stretched on the table,  
You are a piece of furniture in a repair shop  
For those who surround you, the masked actors;  
All there is of you is your body  
And the "you" is withdrawn (p. 307).

If we interpret Reilly's speech from a psychoanalytic object relations approach, which emphasizes an individual's relationship to his own internalized objects rather than to actual external objects in the environment, and if we read the speech as if it were a dream whose logic operates according to the bizarre laws of primary process thinking that Freud disclosed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, several key themes emerge. The loss of personality to which Reilly refers implies a fundamental split or defect in the ego, the self-regulating psychic agency which attempts to reconcile or mediate the instinctual drives of the id with the inhibiting functions of the superego. The movement from human to object status suggests

dehumanization and the ego's failure to integrate intrapsychic conflict. The result is the fear of fragmentation, decomposition, annihilation—in short, breakdown. Although the source of the conflict remains shadowy, the tension seems to be embodied within an indefinable object that menaces the "you" in Reilly's speech. The exact nature of the menace remains ambiguous. On one level, the symptoms of the mysterious illness reflect depletion, loss of energy, emptiness—the ego's insatiable hunger for nourishment or replenishment. Reilly obliquely hints at this when he asks Edward to replenish his drink after the long speech. On another level, the fear of emptiness suggests the presence of an active force which is cruelly depleting the self. Psychological emptiness may be viewed in both ways, the absence of something desirable or, paradoxically, the presence of something harmful which threatens to empty the self.<sup>26</sup>

Significantly, the two extended analogies Reilly uses to describe the loss of personality both contain persecutory imagery. In the first example, he refers to the experience of falling down a flight of stairs and being "at the mercy of a malevolent staircase." It is unclear whether the evil is located within the staircase itself which has tripped up the patient or within the social mask he wears as a defense against the other people at the party. The breakdown results in paralysis. In the second example, Reilly speaks about a surgical operation in which a patient lies stretched on a table, like a piece of furniture in a repair shop. Far from leading to therapeutic recovery, the

surgery mutilates the patient by violating his body and destroying his spirit. Again, it is unclear whether the evil is located within the act of surgery or in the sadistic surgeon. There is also an ambiguity in the positioning of the masked actors: Syntactically they seem part of the repair shop, while thematically they belong with the doctors in the operating room. What is clear, however, is that Reilly's patient is victimized by forces he can neither understand nor control.

The defense against these internalized persecutory objects is loss of feeling through dehumanization, the denial of emotion, and de-realization, the belief that reality itself lacks meaning and value. It is astonishing how, throughout *The Cocktail Party*, none of the characters can openly express the aggressive emotions that inevitably accompany physical or psychological injury—rage, jealousy, hate. Reilly's speech emphasizes the need to submit passively to suffering. No protest is allowed. In the psychiatrist's world, one must stoically endure the fate of reduction to object status. Memory must be obliterated, since it serves as a reminder of past traumas. One has the sense of a past catastrophe which cannot be discussed or forgotten. Human behavior becomes little more than defensive role playing, the adoption of an "as if" personality to conform to the social expectations of others. To be sure, there is real pain in the characters' speeches, but the pain is expressed in abstract philosophical terms. Man is imprisoned in solitude and pain. Knowledge intensifies suffering. Life itself becomes unreal, illusory, hollow. One moment

it is the world itself which has become poor and empty, the next moment it is the ego which is depleted and worthless. Confronted by internal and external dangers, the individual is easily overwhelmed. The man loses Touch with himself, the partygoer stumbles down the malevolent staircase, the patient is penetrated by the surgeon. Reilly's imagery bespeaks of loss, horror, and degradation. In a brutal world, one can only stumble and fall.

There is also a submerged sexual element in Reilly's speech. According to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a dream of ascending or descending a staircase is often symbolic of sexual intercourse. But we do not have to invoke a psychoanalyst's authority to demonstrate the suggestive nature of staircase imagery in Eliot's poems and plays. Leonard Unger points out that staircase imagery functions as a leitmotif in Eliot's writings: Of the five times in which the image appears in the *Prufrock* poems, four involve a "troubled encounter between a man and a woman."<sup>27</sup> Sexual anxiety, concludes Unger, characterizes the mood or context of these images. Indeed, stairs are hazardous and unreliable to Eliot's characters. The morbid sexuality contained in Reilly's image of tumbling down a staircase is reinforced in the next analogy of the surgical operation, in which a helpless patient is being stretched on a table. The patient finds himself "stretched on the table"—"like a patient etherized upon a table," we feel inclined to add. The image is, of course, Prufrockian, as scholars have realized. To cite Grover Smith: "Sir Henry continues with his comparison of Edward's discovery to the jolt at the

bottom of the staircase. His image of the Prufrockian patient stretched on the table clarifies the state of Edward's soul: he is a 'piece of furniture in a repair shop,' and Sir Henry is the craftsman who must reassemble his smashed life."<sup>28</sup>

Must we assume, however, that Dr. Reilly is describing the state of Edward's soul and not his own? The Prufrockian image applies to patient and psychiatrist alike, just as Reilly's allusion to "shuffling memories and desires" (p. 365) echoes the "Memory and desire" in the opening lines of *The Waste Land*. Reilly is one of Eliot's most authorial speakers, and this lends greater significance to the fact that psychiatrist and patient share almost identical visions of the world. Neither man believes in "personality," and they seek ways to transcend the monotony of everyday existence. Their imagery reveals the precariousness of the self and the threat of persecutory attack. Both affirm the value of suffering, humiliation, and resignation. "Reality"—a favorite word in the play—is always a threat to be defended against through unquestioning submission to higher authority. Both speakers have one voice, using the same diction, syntax, and cadence. There are two kinds of discourse in *The Cocktail Party*, light comedy of manners conversation in which the characters engage in witty repartee and easy gossip, and anguished confessional speech filled with unconscious revelations of the artist's life. In Act One, Scene Two, Celia asks Edward whether the returning Lavinia has prepared a trap for them. Edward replies: "No. If there is a trap, we are all in

the trap,/We have set it for ourselves. But I do not know/What kind of trap it is" (p. 319). In the beginning of Act Two, Reilly (who has been absent from the earlier scene) uses identical language to deny Edward's accusation of a trap. "Let's not call it a trap./ But if it is a trap, then you cannot escape from it" (p. 346). Eliot probably intended patient and psychiatrist to echo each other here, and, throughout *The Cocktail Party*, each character delivers major speeches which repeat the other's thoughts.

To appreciate the intense unconscious identification between patient and psychiatrist, we may examine their attitudes toward love and marriage. Upon learning of Edward's separation from Lavinia, Reilly offers him the following consolation. "You experience some relief/ Of which you're not aware," the psychiatrist tells him. The next ten lines powerfully dramatize the nature of this relief:

It will come to you slowly;

When you wake in the morning, when you go to bed at night,

That you are beginning to enjoy your independence;

Finding your life becoming cozier and cozier

Without the consistent critic, the patient misunderstander

Arranging life a little better than you like it,

Preferring not quite the same friends as yourself,

Or making your friends like her better than you;

And, turning the past over and over,

You'll wonder only that you endured it for so long (p. 306).

Purporting to read Edward's mind, Reilly betrays his own vision of marriage. He refers to a wife as the "consistent critic," the "patient misunderstander" whose taste is antithetical to her husband's. It is the wife and not the husband whom Reilly attacks. She rigidly controls life, dominates her husband, steals his friends. The best that Reilly can say in favor of marriage is that it is an experience to be endured. What makes his speech so disturbing is that these lines are among the most poetically convincing in the play, suggesting the intensity of Eliot's hostility toward marriage. Variations on this theme appear throughout the psychiatrist's speeches, as in his chilling description of marriage and family life to Celia. "They do not repine;/ Are contented with the morning that separates/ And with the evening that brings together/ For casual talk before the fire/ Two people who know they do not understand each other,/ Breeding children whom they do not understand/ And who will never understand them" (p. 364). Reilly expresses similar disdain of marriage, later in the play, when he questions the wisdom of encouraging Edward and Lavinia to revive their cheerless marriage. "What have they to go back to," he asks Julia (one of the Guardians), "To the stale food moldering in the larder,/ The stale thoughts moldering in their minds./ Each unable to disguise his own meanness/ From himself, because it is known to the other" (p. 367).

Nowhere in *The Cocktail Party* does Reilly demonstrate sympathetic insight into marriage, bearing and raising children, sharing one's love for another person. "There is no reference to the possibility of either joy or glory," Lionel Trilling has complained about the play.<sup>29</sup> Nor does Edward offer a corrective point of view. He has lived with his wife for five years, but after a brief separation he can neither remember what she is like nor describe her to others. He falls back upon blaming Lavinia for his own unhappiness and identity loss, accusations Reilly fails to challenge. "We had not been alone again for fifteen minutes," Edward confesses to the psychiatrist, "Before I felt, and still more acutely—/ Indeed, acutely, perhaps, for the first time,/ The whole oppression, the unreality/ Of the role she had always imposed upon me/ With the obstinate, unconscious, sub-human strength/ That some women have" (p. 349).

Edward's hostility toward women must be recognized as misogyny, and, although Eliot uses elaborate defenses and disguises to conceal his own mistrust of women in *The Cocktail Party*, there is too much evidence to ignore. In fact, the psychiatrist's unconscious defenses against women and marriage give him away. He uses questionable logic that he passes off as profound psychological truth, as when he rationalizes Edward's inability to explain why he wants to return to his wife. "The fact that you can't give a reason for wanting her/ Is the best reason for believing that you want her" (p. 309). A real psychiatrist would, of course, wince at this explanation. Edward indulges

in the same mystifying logic when he tries to explain to Celia (with whom he has been having an affair) how Reilly has changed his feelings toward his wife. "I have a very clear impression/ That he tried to persuade me it was all for the best/ That Lavinia had gone; that I ought to be thankful./ And yet, the effect of all his argument/ Was to make me see that I wanted her back" (p. 322).

Sometimes Reilly will agree with a perceptive remark but then perversely reach the opposite conclusion. When Lavinia correctly fears that what she and Edward have in common "Might be just enough to make us loathe one another," Reilly concludes: "See it rather as the bond which holds you together" (p. 356). Several times the psychiatrist maddeningly contradicts himself. After cataloguing the horrors of marriage, he answers Celia's alarmed question of whether marriage is the best life by responding: "It is a good life" (p. 364). Without seeing any irony or contradiction in his remarks, he tells her that neither existence, grim marital domesticity' or joyous Christian martyrdom, is superior to the other.

Reilly's most conspicuous error is his mistrust and abuse of psychiatry. He makes extraordinary efforts to deny his patients' psychological problems, voicing Eliot's thesis that "The single patient/ Who is ill by himself, is rather the exception" (p. 350). The psychiatrist pretends to encourage his patients' confessional disclosures, but when Edward actually attempts to begin a

therapeutic dialogue, Reilly retreats on the grounds that such disclosures are a "luxury." In fact, Reilly repeatedly closes off potentially useful exchanges. Edward has been literally dying to talk to someone about his unhappy life; but no sooner does he begin to open up about his past, than the psychiatrist warns him not to "strangle each other with knotted memories" (p. 330). Reilly confides to a friend that he has kept Edward waiting for several days, since it was "necessary to delay his appointment/ To lower his resistance" (p. 345). It is the psychiatrist, though, who resists the talking cure. During the psychiatric interview, Edward tries to focus on the origins of his disbelief in his own personality, but just as he recalls his childhood experiences, Reilly peremptorily cuts him off:

I always begin from the immediate situation  
And then go back as far as I find necessary.  
You see, your memories of childhood—  
I mean, in your present state of mind—  
Would be largely fictitious; and as for your dreams,  
You would produce amazing dreams, to oblige me.  
I could make you dream any kind of dream I suggested,  
And it would only go to flatter your vanity  
With the temporary stimulus of feeling interesting (p. 348).

Reilly condemns psychiatry as nothing less than the deadly art of mind

control. He rejects nearly all the assumptions of modern psychotherapy: the belief that childhood experiences shape adult behavior; the recognition that dreams are a reflection of inner reality; the existence of transference, countertransference, and resistance; the importance of empathic mirroring. Mistrusting his profession, Reilly assumes that all psychiatrists are intent on manipulating their patients and exerting limitless power over them. Recall his Prufrockian metaphor of a patient stretched on a table while doctors perform a sinister operation on the anesthetized body. "All there is of you is your body/ And the 'you' is withdrawn."

The countertransference implicit in Reilly's earlier speech to Edward now becomes clearer to us. Foreshadowing Peter Shaffer's ambivalent psychiatrist in *Equus*, who reduces psychiatry to castration, Eliot's therapist unconsciously reveals contradictory urges: the wish to penetrate and to be penetrated, to humiliate and to be humiliated, to control omnipotently and to be controlled. The difference between Edward and Reilly is not their state of mind but their situation. Whereas Edward remains fearful and passive, on the verge of psychic disintegration, Reilly has inexplicably managed to achieve reintegration. His choice of profession suggests counterphobic motivation. Unlike the patient, the psychiatrist has converted weakness into apparent strength. This is the reason Reilly intuitively grasps Edward's point of view. Yet the psychiatrist's own psychic health seems precarious in the rigidity of his defenses. It is no wonder that he almost drives his patients crazy.

Indeed, to the extent that Reilly's therapy demands blind submission to higher authority, we must question the psychiatrist's prescription for health. Reilly's intense over-identification with Edward's state of mind suggests that he is both the Prufrockian patient stretched on the dissecting table and the Godlike psychiatrist who promises to release the patient from an oppressive personality. Reilly diagnoses everyone, patients and others alike, as spiritually ill, and the only prescription for cure is to be "trans-humanized," Eliot's term for redemption through suffering. There are several paradoxes surrounding Reilly's therapy. Rejecting the manipulation and mind control associated with psychiatry, he nevertheless exerts omnipotent control over his patients' destinies, including what turns out to be a glorified death sentence for Celia. Despite his repudiation of dream interpretation on the grounds of its excessive subjectivity, he never questions the religious assumptions he imposes upon his patients. Preaching humility and resignation, he tolerates no dissent. The salvation he offers is based on absolute submission to religious authority—although Eliot studiously avoids any reference to God. Whereas Fitzgerald's Dr. Dick Diver attempts to heal his patients not through the expansion of their self-insight but through the physician's love and Christ-like martyrdom, Eliot's Sir Harcourt-Reilly encourages his patients to transcend personality and submit themselves to religious authority. Tragically, the psychiatrist affirms the loss of personality from which Edward and the others suffer. Reilly insists that the pretense of

human knowledge, psychological and otherwise, must be abandoned. Instead of analyzing his patients' destructive defenses, in this case, the reliance upon dehumanization and de-realization, the psychiatrist urges renewed repression and self-abnegation.

The issue here is not religious as opposed to psychiatric approaches to human unhappiness, nor the mythic versus medical origins of Reilly's identity. Eliot's hero alarms us because of the rigidity and harshness of his value judgments, the rapid shifts between over-idealizing and devaluating, and the erratic nature of his empathy. He dichotomizes reality in terms of redemption and damnation, omnipotent control and fragmentation. There is no capacity for ambiguity or ambivalence in his imagination: Inflexible control is the only defense against chaos. Personality is evil and must be transcended; the ego is weak and must be subordinated to God; relationships are painful and must be denied. What is missing from Reilly's personality is the broad middle range of human emotion.

Can we infer the psychiatrist's past on the basis of the countertransference he brings into his therapeutic sessions? Without divulging specific details about his life, Reilly makes several observations which hint at deep disappointment and pain over past relationships. In one of his most revealing speeches, he talks about the necessity to approach close relatives and friends as if they were strangers. This is less painful, he says,

than to maintain the pretense that they are not strangers. "The affectionate ghosts: the grandmother,/ The lively bachelor uncle at the Christmas party,/ The beloved nursemaid—those who enfolded/ Your childhood years in comfort, mirth, security—/ If they returned, would it not be embarrassing?" (p. 329). Surely one can imagine emotions other than embarrassment in this situation—deep feelings of love and gratitude and joy as well as the inevitable sadness of personal loss. One suspects that Reilly is concealing something here, perhaps idealizing the past excessively. If his ghosts are truly "affectionate," why does he express the wish to harden himself to them? We defend ourselves against painful memories, not happy ones. Over-idealization nearly always disguises disappointment and pain. Significantly, Edward agrees with the psychiatrist that "There are certainly things I should like to forget." "And persons also," Reilly quickly adds, not only missing the opportunity to open a potentially crucial therapeutic exchange but actually reinforcing the patient's illness. The psychiatrist's advice is that "You must face them all, but meet them as strangers" (p. 330). What Reilly seems to be advocating throughout *The Cocktail Party* is not only repression but the defense of isolation of feeling—the denial of one's emotions, especially the aggressive and unruly emotions of anger, jealousy, bitterness.

Insofar as Reilly succumbs to what Freud calls the analyst's temptation to play the role of prophet, savior, and redeemer to his patients, we may call him messianic. But the word is not nearly precise enough to describe the

structure of his unconscious fantasies and defenses, a structure which appears to indicate in Reilly's case a narcissistic personality disturbance. Although there is sharp disagreement among contemporary psychoanalytic theoreticians over the meaning and treatment of narcissism, including whether the grandiose self reflects a developmental fixation of an archaic though normal primitive self (the view of Heinz Kohut), or whether the grandiose self is pathological and thus clearly different from normal infantile narcissism (the view of Otto Kernberg), all analysts agree upon the crucial importance of narcissism as a personality structure. We may cite Kohut's definition here. "In the narcissistic personality disturbances . . . the ego's anxiety relates primarily to its awareness of the vulnerability of the mature self; the dangers which it faces concern either the temporary fragmentation of the self or the intrusions of either archaic forms of subject-bound grandiosity or of archaic narcissistically aggrandized self-objects into its realm."<sup>30</sup> Kohut speaks about the ego's inability to regulate self-esteem, the sudden rapid shifts between anxious grandiosity, on the one hand, and extreme self-consciousness, hypochondria, and shame, on the other hand. As a consequence of severe deprivation of maternal love, the child develops a grandiose self-based upon a compensatory image of perfection and reinvents his parents, so to speak, into an idealized parent imago. The child thus recreates his insufficiently loving parents into omnipotent figures who function as transitional self-objects, extensions of himself. Kohut postulates

two major types of narcissistic transference relationships (and their corresponding countertransference relationships): the idealizing transference, based upon the therapeutic mobilization of the idealized parent imago; and the mirror transference, arising from the mobilization of the grandiose self.

Kohut's "psychology of the self," as it has come to be called, has intriguing implications to the relationship between transference and countertransference in *The Cocktail Party*. The play reveals a consistent pattern of merging with an omnipotent idealized object. Reilly's patients accord him respect and obedience as though he were a God: They defer to his authority, carry out his orders, incorporate his power. In Kohutian terms, the patients narcissistically transform Reilly into an omnipotent self-object, and the psychiatrist eagerly accepts their idealizing transference. Edward's feelings of emptiness, worthlessness, and fragmentation are counteracted by his merging with Reilly's omnipotence. The psychiatrist clearly functions as an idealized father figure to the patient. Reilly neither questions his magical power to restore life to his patients nor acknowledges the limitations of his psychiatric art. Kohut distinguishes between the analyst's ability to accept the patient's idealizing transference when offered and the analyst's indulgence in or craving for idealization. Only the former response, Kohut argues, is analytically permissible.

Reilly's countertransference reveals a dependency upon omnipotent control and inability to tolerate indecisiveness or dissent. He sternly reprimands Edward and Lavinia for their attempts to work out their own diagnosis and treatment. "But when you put yourselves into hands like mine/ You surrender a great deal more than you meant to./ This is the consequence of trying to lie to me" (p. 353). The reverse side of Reilly's omnipotent countertransference is his subordination to God, the spiritual healer with whom the psychiatrist has an idealizing transference. Reilly submits blindly and totally to divine authority, never allowing himself to voice doubts about religious truths. Interestingly, Kohut observes that the idealizing transference relationship in a narcissistic disturbance may manifest itself through "the expression of vague and mystical religious preoccupations with isolated awe-inspiring qualities which no longer emanate from a clearly delimited, unitary admired figure."<sup>31</sup> This accurately describes the way in which Edward, Lavinia, and Celia accept Reilly's proclamations, invested with a religious and mystical aura. There is also a parallel between the devout worshiper's relationship to his God, the incarnation of perfection, and the child's perception of the idealized parent. This does not imply that religion may be reduced to infantile wish fulfillment, as Freud concluded, but that the patients' deification of the psychiatrist in *The Cocktail Party* is analogous to the idealizing parent-child relationship that Kohut speaks about in his clinical work.

Celia Coplestone's attitude toward Reilly is no less complex than Edward's. Both patients suffer from symptoms of identity diffusion, emptiness, and de-realization. Her opening words to Reilly contain telltale denials which the psychiatrist stubbornly refuses to analyze. "Well, I can't pretend that my trouble is interesting," she says, "But I shan't begin that way. I feel perfectly well./1 could lead an active life—if there's anything to work for;/ I don't imagine that I am being persecuted;/ I don't hear any voices, I have no delusions—/ Except that the world I live in seems all a delusion!" (p. 359). Analysts speak of the importance of a patient's opening words in therapy: Celia can't make up her mind whether she or the world is worthless. She contradicts herself from moment to moment. After asserting her own worthlessness, she reverses herself, expresses wellbeing, and then deprecates the world the emptiness of which she invokes to rationalize her inability to work. Most blatant is her denial of feelings of persecution and delusion—a denial that soon gives way to her projection of persecutory and delusional impulses upon an alien world. She admits that her two major symptoms include an "awareness of solitude" and a "sense of sin," then claims that she "should really *like* to think there's something wrong" with her because if not, "then there's something wrong,/ Or at least, very different from what it seemed to be,/ With the world itself—and that's much more frightening!" (p. 359). With Reilly's immediate approval she concludes that her problems are not individual but universal (not psychological, that is, but spiritual), thus

disavowing the need for psychiatric help. Curiously, she rules out feeling "sin in the ordinary sense" regarding her adultery with Edward. She claims that immorality is not part of her generalized sense of sin and denies hurting Edward's wife. "I haven't hurt *her*./ I wasn't taking anything away from her —/ Anything she wanted" (p. 361). Celia is right but in an unexpected sense: Edward's wife never does seem very interested in him.

Paradoxically, both Edward and Celia would rather confess their sins than try to understand them. What crime has Celia committed to warrant her crucifixion? And why does her psychiatrist express satisfaction upon learning of the details of her martyrdom? Like Reilly, Eliot believes he is treating the heroine of *The Cocktail Party* sympathetically, yet, she bears the brunt of the playwright's violence. What, then, can be the source of the aggression responsible for the violent death of a saintly woman who denies any wrongdoing to others and whom the other characters in the play apparently revere? She seems to be in flight from something or someone; the flight ends in religious crucifixion but also could have culminated in suicide or madness. Perhaps no character in literature has offered a vaguer confession than Celia. "It's not the feeling of anything I've ever *done*./ Which I might get away from, or of anything in me/1 could get rid of—but of emptiness, of failure/ Towards someone, or something, outside of myself;/ And I feel I must . . . *atone*—" (p. 362). She hints at disappointing the expectations of other people but then characteristically internalizes her failures. Yet what lies beneath Celia's

chronic self-accusations? "If one listens patiently to a melancholic's many and various self-accusations," Freud writes in "Mourning and Melancholia,"

one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself, but that with insignificant modifications they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love. Every time one examines the facts this conjecture is confirmed. So we find the key to the clinical picture: we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego.<sup>32</sup>

Sexuality and aggression are the two topics conspicuously absent from any of the cocktail-party conversations in the play or from Reilly's psychiatric interviews. This does not necessarily prove the existence of repressed sex and violence in Eliot's characters; nevertheless, Celia's speeches reveal persecutor}' imagery, displaced aggression, and incestuous fantasies. Her self-reproaches hint at rage toward the lover who abandoned her. Edward's physical appearance to her changes twice as she gazes upon him early in the play. "I looked at your face: and I thought that I knew/ And loved every contour; and as I looked/ It withered, as if I had unwrapped a mummy" (p. 326). If looks could kill, in other words, Edward would be dead. Celia's morbid perceptions of Edward, it seems, disguise murderous thoughts.

There is no object constancy in any character in *The Cocktail Party*: Love dissolves into hate; good images deteriorate into bad ones; memory yields emptiness. Edward serves as the object of Celia's reproaches. She compares

his voice to the "noise of an insect,/ Dry, endless, meaningless, inhuman," and then develops the unflattering image. "You might have made it by scraping your legs together—/ or however grasshoppers do it. I looked,/ And listened for your heart, your blood;/ And saw only a beetle the size of a man/ With nothing more inside it than what comes out/ When you tread on a beetle" (pp. 326-327). Interpreting her speech according to the rules of the dream work, we find the characteristic elements of displacement, condensation, and symbolization. Edward is the beetle she longs to squash. The image of scraping his legs together—"or however grasshoppers do it"—may suggest his sexual inconsequence. Celia is certainly disgusted by the interior of Edward's body. Her pestilential image of Edward coincides with Reilly's allusion to marriage and human procreation—husband and wife "Breeding children whom they do not understand." Celia's sadistic threat to tread on the beetle-like Edward elicits his masochistic reply: "Tread on me, if you like."

Significantly, Edward's mistress and wife both stress his passivity, ineffectuality, and infantility. "You look like a little boy who's been sent for/ To the headmaster's study," Celia tells him (p. 331). Lavinia's reproach is more damaging. "Oh, Edward, when you were a little boy,/ I'm sure you were always getting yourself measured/ To prove how you had grown since the last holidays" (p. 340). Reilly also cruelly casts doubt on Edward's potency. "To men of a certain type," the psychiatrist tells him, "The suspicion that they are incapable of loving/ Is as disturbing to their self-esteem/ As, in cruder

men, the fear of impotence" (p. 355). Edward silently accepts the humiliation. Lavinia, by contrast, seems invulnerable. "I have never known anyone in my life/ With fewer mental complications than you," Edward bitterly tells his wife. "You're stronger than a . . . battleship. That's what drove me mad" (p. 352). The numerous allusions to Edward's sexual inadequacy and unmanliness lead to the conclusion of castration fear, with both his wife and mistress serving as castrating women. Like his more famous literary relative, J. Alfred Prufrock, whose seductive love song is drowned in a sea of *femmes fatale*, Edward lies etherized upon his death bed, lacking the strength to force the moment to its terrible crisis.

Edward's fear of sexual mutilation may explain the ease with which he is able to renounce his affair with Celia. Her comparison of Edward to a squashed beetle suggests both his fear of annihilation and the specific threat she poses to him. Not surprisingly, Edward easily convinces Peter Quilpe, who is also romantically interested in Celia, to avoid entangling alliances with her. Edward congratulates his rival "on a timely escape." Edward gives up his claims upon Celia because she has never meant very much to him in the first place. Indeed, Edward is temperamentally repelled by women. We remember his chilling characterization of Lavinia's formidable power—the "obstinate, unconscious, sub-human strength/ That some women have." Why then does Edward remain masochistically attached to his emasculating wife? This is one of the central weaknesses of *The Cocktail Party*, which never adequately

justifies the continuation of the Chamberlaynes' cheerless marriage. Their over-solicitousness toward each other in Act Three confirms Eliot's inability to imagine a joyful marriage, and the oblique allusions to Lavinia's pregnancy do little to offset Reilly's prior dismissal of procreation.

Reilly also renounces his claims upon Celia but in a different way. Whereas Edward's mistrust of Celia expresses itself through devaluation ("There's no memory you can wrap in camphor/ But the moths will get in," he sadly tells Peter Quilpe), Reilly uses overvaluation or idealization, which attempts to create through fantasy a perfect love object that will resist the disappointments of reality. In narcissistic personality disturbances, idealization is the primary psychic mechanism to ward off anxiety and maintain the grandiose self. Idealization is not a pathological defense, but the difficulty arises when a person shifts back and forth between virulent devaluation and impossibly lofty idealization, thus forming an identity around a rigid grandiose self which cannot tolerate weakness or its own aggression. The insatiable hunger for perfection leads only to perpetual unhappiness and depletion. Narcissistic hunger, as suggested earlier, may be viewed either as the absence of nourishing internalized objects or the presence of poisonous objects residing in die self. *The Cocktail Party* dramatizes emptiness as a plenitude of persecutory objects. Reilly makes the same point (though he uses traditional mystic religious imagery instead of contemporary psychoanalytic concepts) when he refers to his patients as "A prey/ To the devils who arrive

at their plenitude of power/ When they have you to themselves" (p. 356). Celia similarly speaks of the need to harden herself to these demons lest they overpower her. Her solution to inner horror is to reject the human condition and to prepare herself for the purgatorial suffering that will allow her to merge ecstatically with an omnipotent authority. And Reilly's solution to his own inner horror is to confer sainthood status on Celia and then offer her to God.

From a clinical point of view, Celia and Reilly are stuck in an idealizing relationship between transference and countertransference. Both patient and psychiatrist strive to maintain an image of the other's perfection, as if the only way to escape fragmentation is through merging with the other's grandiosity. Each character conceals painful truths from the other. Celia does not allow herself to express aggressive and libidinal drives, because they would destroy the psychiatrist's idealization of her. Reilly does not acknowledge these drives within himself, since they would shatter the patient's idealization of him. She renders him into a God, while he elevates her into a saint. The absence of any clinical or narrative distance between them suggests the extent of their merging. Each recreates or fictionalizes an idealized self to heal a narcissistic injury. They also act out Oedipal fantasies. By encouraging Celia to reject the imperfect human world for a spiritually perfect kingdom that lies beyond death, Reilly expresses the wish to preserve the purity of the original love object, the maternal imago. But preservation demands rejection. By urging

Celia to remove herself from the world, Reilly is thus eliminating temptation—repudiating his own incestuous fantasies and insuring that no other man will possess her. He literally idealizes her to death.

The psychosexual implications are intriguing. On an oral level, the psychiatrist is merging with the patient in a mystical union, incorporating her magical goodness. On an anal level, he is sadistically killing her off and casting her away. On a phallic level, he is sublimating his incestuous drives by offering her to the highest authority, God the father, to whom he devoutly submits himself. Similarly, Celia receives pathological gratification from this misalliance cure.<sup>33</sup> Her martyrdom becomes clearer once we understand that Reilly gives her only two choices, both involving death: ignoble suicide or religiously sanctioned crucifixion. Religious penance allows her to gratify a self-destructive superego the aggression of which has been expressed in symptoms of emptiness, de-realization, paranoia. By rejecting secular love for spiritual union, she is able to gratify libidinal drives while punishing herself for being human. Religious martyrdom allows her to convert rage into altruistic surrender.

*The Cocktail Party* reveals the contradictory wish both to destroy and then retrieve the abandoned love object, renunciation followed by restoration. It is the two-stage process Freud viewed as the structure of every neurosis and psychosis. "In neurosis a piece of reality is avoided by a sort of

flight, whereas in psychosis it is remodeled. Or we might say: in psychosis, the initial flight is succeeded by an active phase of remodeling; in neurosis, the initial obedience is succeeded by a deferred attempt at flight."<sup>34</sup> In Eliot's play, the psychiatrist's messianic fantasies form a perfect fit with the patient's conviction of the absolute worthlessness of human life. Jacob Arlow and Charles Brenner have provided an ego psychology interpretation of the relationship between delusions of world destruction and messianic fantasies. "One need only assume that in the case of the messianic patient, the patient's own role has changed from that of a mere observer of the destruction about him to that of an active savior, rescuer, or restorer of life and health to those threatened by the destructive forces which seem to him to be raging everywhere."<sup>35</sup> The messianic Reilly functions as the savior and restorer to life of the troubled patient whose entire relationship to the world of objects is unstable and threatened by mass destruction.

We are stunned, furthermore, by the violent intensity of the disturbance of the world of objects in *The Cocktail Party*. Following her psychiatrist's orders, Celia withdraws from society to devote herself to missionary work in a remote part of the world. During a heathen uprising, she is crucified "very near an ant-hill," her body presumably devoured—psychic incorporation with a vengeance. Reilly expresses no dismay upon learning the details of her crucifixion. Quite the opposite: The expression on his face, according to Lavinia, is one of "satisfaction." The psychiatrist agrees and acknowledges

that, from the first time he saw Celia, he could intuit her violent death. She was, he claims, a woman "under sentence of death." Significantly, he affirms not the goodness of Celia's life but the sanctification of her death. What is shocking, though, is the gruesome violence of her ending. E. Martin Browne, the director of *The Cocktail Party*, reports that Eliot originally had written a more explicit description of the crucifixion. In Eliot's words, Celia was to be "smeared with a juice that is attractive to ants."<sup>36</sup> Eliot was persuaded to omit the grisly detail from the play, but the feeling of horror persists in *The Cocktail Party*, which is subtitled "A Comedy."

Perhaps the most controversial question in Eliot's drama is the meaning and value of Celia's religious crucifixion. The history of the literary criticism of the play reflects bitter disagreement.<sup>37</sup> To be sure, the audience's attitude toward her martyrdom will depend upon the religious convictions one brings to the play as well as attitudes toward psychiatry, humanism, and eschatology. *The Cocktail Party* raises a host of problematic questions concerning the relationship between religious conversion and psychological health and the issue of free will versus determinism. Eliot's characters repeatedly assert the importance of choice; Reilly insists upon the triumphant free will leading to Celia's saintly ending. Yet Reilly is characteristically evasive here: He manipulates her into martyrdom and then disclaims all responsibility for her actions. His proclamations have an incurably deterministic ring, acceptable only to those who can reconcile Celia's freedom

with religious predestination.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout *The Cocktail Party*, Reilly has been displaying bad faith toward his patients, profession, and religion. Nowhere does he question his own motives or resistance to the fundamental principles of any truthful therapy: insight, structural change, and growth. In interpreting his patients' suffering as a sign of the pervasive religious malaise of the time, Reilly is offering what Freud would call a secondary revision, a coherent but false decoding of a dream or symptom. One can imagine a different ending to Eliot's play, in which Celia goes off to another sanitarium to receive less expensive psychotherapy. Critics remain divided over the artistic justification of her death. Stephen Spender has argued, for example, that her death does not strike one as aesthetically inevitable. "Much of the fascination of these plays is that they make one think about the author; but that betokens some measure of failure."<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, despite Eliot's insistence that a work of art must be divorced from history, biography, and psychology, it is impossible not to think about the relationship between Eliot's psychiatric experiences and *The Cocktail Party*. Scholars may wish to explore two particular links between Eliot's life and art: Edward and Lavinia consult a psychiatrist after five years of marriage, the length of time Eliot was married to Vivienne before he began treatment with Dr. Vittoz; and midway through the writing of *The Cocktail*

*Party*, Eliot's estranged wife died in a mental hospital, an event that must have brought to the surface his complicated feelings toward her. How could he not feel guilt, anguish, mortification, and probably relief upon learning of her death? Bertrand Russell's characterization of Vivienne as a "person who lives on a knife-edge, and who will end as a criminal or a saint"<sup>40</sup> —has relevance to the saintly Celia, whose threat to tread on the passive lover who has abandoned her culminates in saintly martyrdom.

Eliot might argue, though, that, in applying psychoanalytic theory to *The Cocktail Party*, we have been performing a literary autopsy on his characters that fully justifies the playwright's mistrust of Freud. Perhaps, but it is significant that Eliot viewed every act of interpretation, psychoanalytic or otherwise, as an unwarranted intrusion or violation of the text. "Comparison and analysis need only the cadavers on the table," he writes in "The Function of Criticism," "but interpretation is always producing parts of the body from its pockets, and fixing them in place (*Selected Essays*, p. 33). Any literary interpretation was illegitimate to Eliot. The most influential literary critic of his age, he sanctioned evaluation and analysis, not interpretation—as if meaning could be divorced from evaluation. This position led him to dubious assertions, as when he states in the same essay that "any book, any essay, any note in *Notes and Queries*, which produces a fact even of the lowest order about a work of art is a better piece of work than nine-tenths of the most pretentious critical journalism, in journals or in books." Facts cannot corrupt,

he claims; "the real corrupters are those who supply opinion or fancy." How astonishing this claim is in light of the colossal theoretical turmoil of our own age. Even when Eliot softened his objections to literary interpretation, as he did in his "Introduction" to G. Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire*, he remained disheartened by the pluralistic nature of meaning. He views all interpretation as Satanic rebellion, an inevitable falling away from truth and innocence. He invokes the metaphor of demonism to explain the misguided quest for meaning, and he justifies literary interpretation not because of its power to illuminate the text but because of the futility to repress the instinct for knowledge. His reluctant and saddened conclusion is that it is necessary to "surrender ourselves to some interpretation of the poetry we like."<sup>41</sup> The act of interpretation, in other words, is analogous to an intrusive authority seeking to extract the creative essence from the artist's life and work. Additionally Eliot's mistrust of literary interpretation recalls Edward's horror of exposure or violation, a Prufrockian dread of the body or text being probed, dissected, castrated.<sup>42</sup> "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?"

There would seem to be a correlation, then, between Eliot's theory of aesthetics, grounded upon the attempt to avoid literary subjectivity by removing the interpreter from the text, and the "loss of personality" from which the characters suffer in *The Cocktail Party*. The assumption that literary interpretation is a violation of the text, resulting in dangerous fragmentation and loss of belief, coincides with the fear of mutilation and narcissistic injury

seem in many of Eliot's speakers—Prufrock, Gerontion, the speaker in *The Waste Land*, and Edward in *The Cocktail Party*. There is a consistency between Eliot's essentially Protestant approach to literary criticism, calling for a direct communion with the text, and Reilly's rejection of clinical distance in favor of mystical union. Similarly, the papal element in Eliot's proclamations of taste and orthodoxy in literature parallels Reilly's position as high priest of psychiatry. The text must not be corrupted by the reader's opinion or fancy, just as Celia's purity must not be compromised by imperfect human existence. Eliot's theory of art and vision of psychiatry rule out the idea that both the literary text and the therapist function as transitional objects, transformed by reader and patient alike into their unique identity theme and characterological structure.<sup>43</sup> Yet this is precisely what happens, despite Eliot's intentions. His literary pronouncements call attention to his personal suffering, just as his fictional psychiatrist serves as a projection screen of the artist's earlier breakdown and recovery.

A psycho-biographical approach cannot prove conclusively that Eliot's theory of the "impersonality" of art and the "loss of personality" in *The Cocktail Party* both came into existence as a defense against the artist's narcissistic injury. Correlation is not causation. Mental functioning is always multiply determined, moreover, as Robert Waelder has pointed out.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, Eliot's writings reflect both the symptoms of a man continually struggling against psychic fragmentation and, more importantly, the

successful restitutive efforts he made to resist future breakdowns. Although *The Cocktail Party* reveals signs of the playwright's narcissistic injury, the existence of the play demonstrates the artist's struggle toward health and the therapeutically beneficial nature of artistic creation. Art was, for Eliot, a way to heal a narcissistic injury, a method to achieve a magical fusion with the great tradition of literature.

We cannot say, finally, whether Eliot's treatment with Dr. Vittoz proved to have more than a temporary salutary effect on his life and art or whether, had he undergone treatment with a psychoanalyst skilled in narcissistic personality disturbances (and Freud, it must be remembered, did not believe analysts could treat narcissism), Eliot's suffering would have been diminished. It is clear, though, that Eliot's mental breakdown in 1921 and psychiatric odyssey provided him with at least the theme and the apparatus of the psychiatric case study for the play he was to write nearly three decades later. The marriage of religion and psychiatry in *The Cocktail Party* remains as shaky as the Chamberlaynes' union, however, and it is unfortunate that Eliot misunderstood both the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. "There is always an implicit psychology behind the explicit anti-psychology," Erik Erikson reminds us.<sup>45</sup> This remains especially true of Eliot's life and art. We do him a grave injustice by accepting at face value his repudiation of psychology, because we must then ignore his determined efforts to heal himself through art and religion. The artist who suffers a breakdown and

subsequently writes about it, in however disguised form, would seem to be engaged in a counterphobic activity, transmuting illness into psychic and literary health. Replaying his own breakdown and recovery, Eliot rejected nonspiritual forms of psychotherapy and affirmed the only cure he could believe in, religious conversion. Out of his creative malady came *The Cocktail Party*, a striking example of how "some forms of illness are extremely favorable, not only to religious illumination, but to artistic and literary composition."

### Notes

- [1](#) T. S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-igso* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1952), p. 342. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- [2](#) T. S. Eliot, "The Search for Moral Sanction," *The Listener*, Vol. 7, No. 168 (30 March 1932), p. 445.
- [3](#) T. S. Eliot, "The Future of an Illusion," *The Criterion*, Vol. 8, No. 31 (December 1928), p. 350.
- [4](#) T. S. Eliot, "Thoughts After Lambeth," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932, Reprinted 1966), p. 370. All subsequent references are to the reprinted edition.
- [5](#) T. S. Eliot, "Baudelaire in Our Time," *Essays Ancient and Modern* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), p. 65.
- [6](#) T. S. Eliot, "The Frontiers of Criticism," *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1957), p. 123.
- [7](#) Eliot, *Essays Ancient and Modern*, op. cit., p. 69.
- [8](#) Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, op. cit., p. 107.

- [9](#) The psychoanalyst, Freud writes in "On Beginning the Treatment: Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis," *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), Vol. XII, p. 130, "sets in motion a process, that of the resolving of existing repressions. He can supervise this process, further it, remove obstacles in its way, and he can undoubtedly vitiate much of it. But on the whole, once begun, it goes its own way and does not allow either the direction it takes or the order in which it picks up its points to be prescribed for it."
- [10](#) Valerie Eliot, ed., *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 129. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- [11](#) A. Alvarez, *The Savage God* (New York: Bantam, 1973).
- [12](#) Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell: 1914-1944* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), p. 64.
- [13](#) Stephen Spender, *T. S. Eliot* (New York: Viking, 1975), p. 134. Bertrand Russell quotes a letter he received from Eliot in 1925, emphasizing the responsibility he felt for his wife's illness. "I will tell you now that everything has turned out as you predicted 10 years ago. You are a great psychologist. Living with me has done her so much damage" (*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, op. cit., p. 255). In *Great Tom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), T. S. Matthews cites a psychiatrist's comments after reading Vivienne's diaries. "The young girl is neurotic, feels insecure, particularly about her femininity. She suffers from psychosomatic illnesses. ... In the end there is a picture of a full-blown paranoia with delusions. Absurd and pathetic as her delusions may appear, they are her reality. Her suffering is real . . . most likely a gifted person, at the same time vivacious and morose and 'complex'—a combination which can be very attractive if difficult to live with" (p. 104m).
- [14](#) Lyndall Gordon, *Eliot's Early Tears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 75. Gordon suggests an intriguing link between Eliot's inhibition and his father's view of sex as "nastiness" that future biographers may wish to investigate further. "Henry Ware Sr. considered public [sex] instruction tantamount to giving children a letter of introduction to the Devil. Syphilis was God's punishment and he hoped a cure would never be found. Otherwise, he said, it might be necessary 'to emasculate our children to keep them clean'" (p. 27).

[15](#) Bernard Bergonzi, in T. S. *Eliot* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), has connected

Eliot's psychiatric treatment in Lausanne with these lines from *The Waste Land*: "By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept," and "On Margate sands/ I can connect/ Nothing with nothing" (p. 77).

[16](#) Harry Trosman, M.D., "T. S. Eliot and *The Waste Land*: Psychopathological Antecedents and Transformations," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, Vol. 30 (May 1974). All page numbers refer to this article. Also see Dr. Trosman's other article on Eliot, "After *The Waste Land*: Psychological Factors in the Religious Conversion of T. S. Eliot," *International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, Vol. 4 (1977), pp. 295-304.

[17](#) John Peter, "A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land*," *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 2 (July 1952), pp. 242-266. Peter's controversial interpretation, linking Jean Verdenal to Phlebas the Phoenician in *The Waste Land*, infuriated Eliot. His solicitors succeeded in confiscating and destroying most of the copies of the issue.

[18](#) James E. Miller, Jr., *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977).

[19](#) Eliot, Valerie, ed., *The Waste Land: A Facsimile. . .*, op. cit., p. xxiv.

[20](#) In T. S. *Eliot: A Memoir* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1971) Robert Sencourt describes meeting Eliot and his wife in a spa near Geneva, where they all received hydrotherapy. "The treatment at Divonne which the Eliots and I took and from which Tom profited more than Vivienne, was a variant of the *douche ecossaise* in which strong gushes of hot, alternating with icy cold, water were played on the naked body. The doctors on the whole deprecated drugs and avoided psychoanalysis. Their idea was that once they had gained a patient's confidence, he would soon divulge the reasons for his strain. It was evident that the strain from which my new friends were suffering was that they no longer lived together in deepest unity" (pp. 124-125).

[21](#) Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, op. cit., p. 116.

[22](#) For the earliest and best discussion of the psychiatric authenticity of Reilly, see Richard B. Hovey, "Psychiatrist and Saint in *The Cocktail Party*," *Literature and Psychology*, Vol. 9, Nos. 3-4 (Summer and Fall 1959), pp. 51-55. Hovey argues that Eliot's "Inadequate understanding

of depth psychology points up a limitation of his insight into Christianity" (p. 51). For Eliot's comments on Reilly, see "An Interview with T. S. Eliot," *The New York Times*, 16 April 1950, Section 2, p. 1. Eliot also discusses Reilly in "Reflections on *The Cocktail Party*," *World Review*, New Series 9 (November 1949), pp. 19-22. To the question whether the psychiatrist is a *deus ex machina*, Eliot observes: "The doctor could not be a god *from* the machine, since he appears throughout, and not merely at the end. He might, however, be a god *in* the machine, and he certainly bears some slight resemblance to Heracles in Euripides' *Alcestis*. He is also an exceptional doctor who uses somewhat original methods" (p. 21).

- [23](#) Robert B. Heilman, "Alcestis and *The Cocktail Party*," *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 5 (1953), pp. 105-116.
- [24](#) Abraham Kaplan, "Poetry, Medicine and Metaphysics," *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (January 1981), pp. 106-107.
- [25](#) Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (1923), *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), Vol. XIX, p. 50m
- [26](#) For a good discussion of the psychoanalytic meaning of emptiness, see Melvin Singer, "The Experience of Emptiness in Narcissistic and Borderline States, Parts I and II," *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 4, Part 4 (1977), pp. 460-479.
- [27](#) Leonard Unger, "T.S. Eliot's Images of Awareness," in Allen Tate, ed., *T.S. Eliot: The Man and His Work* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), p. 206.
- [28](#) Grover Smith, *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 223.
- [29](#) Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking, 1968), p. 146.
- [30](#) Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977), p. 20. For a different view of narcissism, see Otto Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1980).
- [31](#) Kohut, op. cit., p. 85.

[32](#) Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), Vol. XIV, p. 248.

[33](#) See Robert Langs, *Psychotherapy: A Basic Text* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1982). Langs defines misalliance as "A quality of the basic relationship between patient and therapist, or of a sector of that relationship, that is consciously or unconsciously designed to bypass adaptive insight in favor of either some other maladaptive form of symptom alleviation or the destruction of effective therapeutic work" (p. 733).

[34](#) Sigmund Freud, "The Loss of Reality in Neurosis and Psychosis" (1924), *Standard Edition* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1961), Vol. XIX, p. 185.

[35](#) Jacob A. Arlow and Charles Brenner, *Psychoanalytic Concepts and the Structural Theory* (New York: International Universities Press, 1964), p. 168.

[36](#) E. Martin Browne, *The Making of a Play: T. S. Eliot's The Cocktail Party* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 22.

[37](#) The critics who approve of Celia's martyrdom include Helen Gardner, "The Comedies of T. S. Eliot," in Allen Tate, ed., *T. S. Eliot: The Man and His Work*, op. cit. She writes: "In Celia, the romantic quest for union is directed to its true object and consummated in death. *Causa diligendi Deum Deus est; modus est sine modo*. It is a happy ending for her, for we see the alternative in her first savage reaction to Edward's cowardice and rejection of her" (p. 171). Joseph Chiari, in *T. S. Eliot: Poet and Dramatist* (London: Vision Press, 1972), uses euphemistic language and intoxicated rhythms to describe the martyrdom. "Although the death of Celia could have been less colorful, the religious theme of the play emerges steadily and ripples out, embracing all the aspects of the social life to which the characters belong, and carrying with it an aura of greater and greater light, which lifts the 'Comedy' to a high level of dramatic achievement" (p. 135). Raymond Williams, in *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), expresses similar approval.

Of the many critics who are disturbed by Eliot's treatment of Celia's death, Rossell Hope Robbins offers the most outspoken point of view in *The T. S. Eliot Myth* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1951). "The drama turns on Reilly's work as psychiatrist missionary in reconciling the Chamberlaynes to their hopeless inferiorities and to living with them and with themselves in dreary resignation; and in dispatching Celia, who has nobler stuff,

into a convent and later on a mission where she will be privileged with the martyrdom of being eaten alive by ants nailed to a crucifix. This 'martyrdom' is the outstanding example in the play of Eliot's callous disregard for people" (pp. 21-22). Other critics who disapprove of the crucifixion include Philip Rahv, "T. S. Eliot: the Poet as Playwright," *Literature and the Sixth Sense* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 350; Trilling, *The Opposing Self*, p. 147; W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., "Eliot's Comedy," *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 58 (Autumn 1950), p. 667; Denis Donoghue, "The Cocktail Party," in Hugh Kenner, ed., *T. S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 183-184.

[38](#) For a discussion of the rigid determinism in *The Cocktail Party* and the failure of Celia's attempted salvation, see William Lynch, S. J., "Theology and the Imagination," *Thought* (Spring 1954), pp. 66-67. Walter Stein argues in "After the Cocktails," *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (January 1953) that Eliot's vision of the play is "not that of a humane . . . Christianity" but of a disturbing Manichean world. For an analysis of Eliot's tendency toward determinism, see Yvor Winters's essay in Leonard Unger, ed., *T. S. Eliot: A Selected Critique* (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1948), pp. 97-113.

[39](#) Stephen Spender, *T. S. Eliot*, op. cit., p. 218. Other critics concur. Subhas Sarkar, in *T. S. Eliot the Dramatist* (Calcutta: Minerva Associates, 1972), remarks: "No one can escape the feeling that the playwright has, rather, forced upon Celia a cruel fate she does not deserve" (pp. 180-181). He quotes another critic's observation of Celia's martyrdom: "She was bullied into sainthood—Shanghaied" (p. 181).

[40](#) If Vivienne lived on a "knife-edge," as Russell suggested, Eliot must have wondered at whom the blade was pointed. His biographers have acknowledged his unconscious aggressive impulses toward women, a conclusion that is consistent with the misogyny in *The Cocktail Party*. Matthews notes: "Eliot's sense of guilt seems not only to have been built into him but to have centered on two peculiar obsessions which he stated as general truths: that every man wants to murder a girl; that sex is sin is death" (*Great Tom*, op. cit., p. 98). In "After *The Waste Land*," op. cit., Dr. Trosman writes that "there are indications of increasing preoccupations with unconscious aggression directed towards his wife in the years prior to his conversion" (p. 302). Given Eliot's aggression toward women, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that both the playwright and Dr. Reilly are projecting the identical death wish in the form of glorious martyrdom upon Celia. See also George Whiteside, "T. S. Eliot: The Psycho-biographical Approach," *The Southern Review* (University of Adelaide, Australia), Vol. 6 (March 1973), pp. 3-26. Curiously, even so

excellent a psychological literary critic as C. L. Barber has defended the belief that Reilly's actions are only slightly unusual. "But if his conduct is sometimes unprofessional—or para-professional—his attitude towards himself and his powers is more human, more humble, than that of many an actual professional man on whom we force the role of medicine man." See "The Power of Development" in F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 235-236). The distinguished literary critic and biographer Leon Edel makes the same mistake when he observes that "The interpersonal strategy used by the psychoanalyst in *The Cocktail Party* springs also out of a familiarity with modern psychoanalytic theory." See "Psychoanalysis and the 'Creative' Arts" in Judd Marmor, ed., *Modern Psychoanalysis: New Directions and Perspectives* (New York: Basic Books, 1968, p. 636). The truth is not that Eliot goes "beyond psychiatry," as too many readers have assumed, but that he never comes close to imagining the art of psychiatry, with its limitations and therapeutic possibilities.

[41](#) T. S. Eliot, "Introduction" to G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Methuen and Company, 1962), p. xx.

[42](#) Eliot's fear of self-exposure may explain his reluctance to speak about the "meaning" of his art and the extreme defensiveness of his remarks when he does offer commentary. An example is his often-quoted dismissal of the meaning of *The Waste Land*. "Various critics have done me the honor to interpret the poem in terms of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling" (*The Waste Land: A Facsimile*, p. 1). By contrast, recall D. H. Lawrence's shrewd observation: never trust the teller, only the tale.

[43](#) See D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" (1953) and "The Location of Cultural Experience" (1967), both reprinted in *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971).

[44](#) Robert Waelder, "The Principle of Multiple Function," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, Vol. 5 (1936), pp. 45-62.

[45](#) Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther* (New York: Norton, 1958), p. 36.

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