

'Hello Hello are you there?': Theatrics of Place in Eliot's Poetry

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Although the speaker of the first poem in *Ash-Wednesday* pretends to believe that 'place is always and only place' (*PTSE* 1, p. 87),¹ this reductive formulation hardly represents Eliot's customary understanding and does not indicate the position finally reached by *Ash-Wednesday* itself. Rather, 'place' as characteristically evoked in his verse is no simply given category. I want to suggest that in the earlier verse it can have a quality of dramatic artificiality, betraying a pervasive sense of the untrustworthiness of appearance (which includes the fear that, nonetheless, appearance is impenetrable); but that in the later verse, while the understanding of 'place' as an intermediate rather than a final category persists, such artificiality ushers toward apprehension of a truer state beyond its simulations. The metaphor of theatre then comes to be used, less as a despairing indication of the falsity of appearance, than of a truer – if perhaps also intolerable – 'reality'.

First-time readers of *Burnt Norton* sometimes mistake its 'box circle' (*PTSE* 1, p. 180) as indicating a theatre auditorium, when actually it describes, of course, a shaped hedge. Yet this error is potentially suggestive; the garden there offers no Edenic immediacy, but is instead a location in which entities move 'in a formal pattern', as if enacting an unearthly ballet. The inter-implication of theatre and place not only recurs in *East Coker* but is a feature of Eliot's poetry from early on so that, for example, 'La Figlia Che Piange' occurs in a space that has been radically theatricalised, full of stage-directions and dramatic gestures. 'Place', in Eliot, is to a great extent defined by the events, moods or sensations it contains (as on a stage) or has contained, from the entrapping social interiors of the earlier verse or the 'evil neighborhoods of noise' and 'evil neighborhoods of silence' evoked in 'Eldrop and Appleplex' (*P* 1, p. 525), to the transcendent 'grace dissolved in place' of 'Marina' and the Quartets (describing which is difficult: 'I cannot say where'; *PTSE* 1, pp. 107, 181). Far from being an inertly positivist category, 'place' is dynamic; for Aristotle, drama was 'the imitation of an action', and in Eliot, 'place' can imply the imitation of being 'in place', that sense of being 'on location' as opposed to being located. So my title quotation from *Sweeney Agonistes*, Eliot's unfinished drama (*PTSE* 1, p. 116), is intended to provoke questions about what it is to be 'you', what it is to be 'there', and to point up how dramatically resonant the situations (the being *in situ*) evoked in Eliot's writing often are. The theatre offered a metaphor for his sense of the world that is often implicit, when not

¹ All references to Eliot's poetry will cite the two-volume 'Annotated Text' of *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), cited as *PTSE* 1, *PTSE* 2. References to Eliot's letters will cite the ongoing *Letters of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (Faber and Faber, six volumes to date), as *L* 6 (vol. no. as appropriate). Eliot's prose will, as possible, be cited from the ongoing *Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, general editor Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, four volumes to date), as *P* 1 (vol. no. as appropriate). Plays will be cited from *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), as *CPP*.

actually explicit: the roses in *Burnt Norton*, which ‘Had the look of flowers that are looked at’ (*PTSE* 1, p. 180), seem almost to be caught in the act of performing themselves as flowers.

Theatrical metaphor is strongly present in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (*PTSE* 1, pp. 5-9), most obviously in its reaching toward – or, more accurately, declining the gambit – of *Hamlet*. Quite unlike Coleridge’s coy assertion that, ‘I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so’, Prufrock explicitly declares: ‘No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;/ Am an attendant lord’. Ezra Pound deplored this passage but, as he told Harriet Monroe (in whose Chicago-based *Poetry* it was eventually to be first published), for Eliot it was ‘an early and cherished’ part of the poem which he would not sacrifice on Pound’s editorial altar (see *PTSE* 1, p. 366). Perhaps Eliot wanted to retain it, because it made clear how much the theatrical has inflected his poem up until this point: Prufrock sees himself as *being seen* by others, in terms of his thin limbs and thinning hair; he is acutely aware that, however far his costume equips him for his role – ‘My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,/ My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin’ – he will only ever play a bit-part in his own life-story. In terms of ‘place’, the various locations evoked are more actively vigorous than he himself is, from the sky which suggests an operating-theatre, to the streets in which the fog is as animated as a cat, to the predatory drawing-rooms in which the performance of himself falls flat, and the stage-props (‘the cups, the marmalade, the tea’), don’t provide enough business while he tries to remember his part (‘some talk of you and me’). He might well wish himself to be ‘etherised’, rather than suffer such stark exposure, both literally, ‘as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on the screen’, and metaphorically, as the audience dissolves in laughter at his expense: ‘I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker’. This scorn was amplified in the excised ‘Prufrock’s Pervigilium’ section of the poem, when the neighbourhood itself holds him in derision, as he nocturnally progresses through its ‘narrow streets,/ Where evil houses leaning all together/ Pointed a ribald finger at me in the darkness/ Whispering all together, chuckled at me in the darkness’ (*PTSE* 2, p. 316).

There is an excess of meaning in this ‘night-town’ episode with its coarsely diagnostic conclusion of ‘Madness’, which made appropriate its omission from the poem. For, far from being mad, Prufrock suffers a twofold ordeal of consciousness, in terms of its incommunicable excess to the simple facts of the matter (he can’t say what he means, and if he does nobody understands him), and in terms of a disabling state of precognition by which he has always read his own script too far in advance: ‘for I have known them all already, known them all’. He is, in both, related to that stock character also to be found in Eliot’s Laforguean early verse, the marionette endowed with a self-awareness ironically disproportionate to its status as an entity whose strings are pulled by someone

else. The salon that turns into a stage-set is also a feature of 'Portrait of a Lady' (*PTSE* 1, pp. 10-14), where 'You have the scene arrange itself – as it will seem to do':

And four wax candles in the darkened room,
Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,
An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb
Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid.

Again the theatrical intrudes, and again the speaker finds himself reduced to a repertory of gestures as predictable as that 'street piano' whose 'worn-out common song' later evokes 'things that other people have desired'. 'Portrait of a Lady' offers the metaphor of the picture, in its title, as well as of the theatre; and finally, as he contemplates the removal of the apparent source of his dissatisfaction, its closing imagery paradoxically shows a continuing inability to think outside the frame, as he imagines himself the visual subject of, say, a nineteenth-century narrative painting entitled 'Garret Scene: The Uncertain Grief':

What if she should die some afternoon,
Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;
Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand
With the smoke coming down above the housetops;

Thus he has the scene arrange itself, while he spectates his own emotion, or the lack of it. The echo of *Twelfth Night* in the poem's closing passage itself refers to a stage-effect ('music'), further emphasising the sense of theatre; as a specific quotation – given as such, not merely allusively – it reinforces the derivative nature of experience, in a world where the poem's speaker will continue to discover that the verbal formulations pre-exist for what he feels and understands. A year or so after finishing the poem, and embarked on his doctoral studies in philosophy at Harvard, Eliot would write: 'What we ordinarily refer to as experience or reality, what provides the criterion for our truth, is simply the sphere of balance of collective meaning' (*P* 1, p. 63).

It should be acknowledged that the theatre could offer Eliot instances of authenticity, in the confident inhabitation of role, as well as of simulation and inauthenticity. Writing about the music hall, he would see in a figure like Marie Lloyd an admirable artist who was evocative as stage presence and self-assured as performer: 'whereas other comedians amuse their audiences as much and sometimes more than Marie Lloyd, no other comedian succeeded so well in giving expression to the life of that audience, in raising it to a kind of art' (*P* 2, p. 418). But if she, and the Nellie Wallace whom he had seen face down a boisterous East End audience, embodied a desirable exercise of power, the 'comedian' who dominates the stage in 'Suite Clownesque' (I & IV; *PTSE* 1, pp. 249-50, 252) projects a less benignly sharable self-possession. Twice described as 'The most expressive, real of men', he is merely the cocksure sum of his parts, of costume ('dogmatic vest'), exaggerated appearance ('scarlet nose') and dramatic swagger ('Leaning across the orchestra/ Just while he

ponders, legs apart,/ His belly sparkling and immense'). He is all too much at home in the world of appearances and simulation, emerging

Across the painted colonnades
Among the terra cotta fawns
Among the potted palms, the lawns
The cigarettes and serenades

In the final poem of the sequence (whose two central parts have described other aspects of the evening's entertainment), this figure makes an altogether more ominous return, indifferent to the audience already beginning to depart: 'through the painted colonnades/ There falls a shadow dense, immense// It's the comedian again/ explodes in laughter, spreads his toes'. The poem strains to capture the mesmerising awfulness of this performer, in his capacity brazenly to withstand the gaze of others; the reality of this 'most real...of men' is surely one we cannot bear very much of.

I do not claim great originality for Eliot's conception of the artifice of identity, which clearly has a precedent history. Laforgue's marionettes, in poetry, Stravinsky's *Petrushka* in music, the sinister masked faces and animated skeletons to be found in the paintings of the Belgian James Ensor (such as 'The Intrigue', 1890), or the depleted pierrots and performers numerous found in early Picasso, as well as in Edward Hopper ('Soir Bleu', 1914) and Walter Sickert ('Brighton Pierrots', 1915), all suggest a trope of enduring potency and contemporary relevance. In Eliot's case, the sense that drawing-room and city street may equally amount to stage-sets, and the behaviour they contain to play-acting, imparts a sense of the provisionality of place. We could think, for example, of 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night' (*PTSE* 1, pp. 18-20), with its street extending in space-time and its hotel room closing like a trap at the end: this street with its sequentially-receding lamps, each with attendant oasis of light, already has the quality of a false perspective in a stage-set (or, say, the Expressionist townscapes such as were later to be seen in the film, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*). Places evoked in the poem that exist beyond these stark alternatives of street and room, such as 'the beach' that is evoked in memory for its driftwood, are not granted intrinsic superiority, however, and seem to offer no 'world elsewhere' as an escape route from existential predetermination. Rather, that beach – or one like it - offers the site of a failed encounter and mutual incomprehension:

And a crab one afternoon in a pool,
An old crab with barnacles on his back,
Gripped the end of a stick which I held him.

It seems completely impossible, in the world of these poems, to follow E.M. Forster's injunction in *Howard's End* to 'Only Connect'; for only **dis**connection seems on offer – a disconnection seemingly as profound between people as between species. Hello hello are you there? Possibly not. That

marine otherness in which boy has encountered crab (an otherness that would be reprised, much later, in the irreducible 'ragged rock' of *The Dry Salvages*) is merely part of an inhospitality characteristic, as it seems, of any place not humanly constructed; yet the constructed places produce their own kinds of inhumanity. This appears to be the case, detectable beneath the poised urbanity of 'La Figlia Che Piange' (*PTSE* 1, p. 28).

This poem was probably composed in late 1911, after Eliot had returned to Harvard from his 'romantic' Parisian year, during the summer of which he had taken a trip south, into Bavaria and northern Italy; possibly, however, it was composed the following year, as he also gave grounds for believing. Similarly, there are minor inconsistencies in the several accounts he offered of the poem's origin (see *PTSE* 1, pp. 450-1); but the story generally goes that it had been prompted by a friend's urging him to see the stele of a weeping girl, during his visit to Italy, which he had failed to find. This sculpture apparently was identifiable by the poem's title, but none of the scholars subsequently trying to discover it has had any more success than Eliot did.² The dating of the poem has some piquancy, in that were it to have been composed later still it might have involved a species of reference to Emily Hale, whom Eliot seems first to have met in 1912, and with whom he participated in amateur dramatics at the home of his cousin Eleanor Hinckley. Lyndall Gordon takes the connection for granted;³ but this poem of unhappiness and emotional frigidity seems an odd one to have composed at the outset of a relationship which, by his own account, saw Eliot fall in love with Hale – however appropriate it might appear, in the light of what can so far be discerned of the ensuing course of their involvement and ultimate estrangement. There is an additional poignancy in the fact that a photograph of 1920 (or 1921) shows Vivienne Eliot posed 'on the highest pavement of the stair', and leaning against the curved coping of its side wall, in the gardens at Garsington.⁴

The poem's epigraph, from Virgil, refers to a meeting between Aeneas and his mother Venus, who is in disguise but nonetheless has aspects of divinity about her that he notices, without realising her true identity: 'How shall I address you, Maiden?' he asks. This was added after the poem's first publication, but attending to the Virgilian hinterland, as for example Denis Donoghue does in his discussion of what he considers to be 'Eliot's most beautiful poem',⁵ yields fruits such as the further connection possible between the events it implies and the desertion of Dido by Aeneas, later on in Virgil's epic, to which Eliot would refer in 'Virgil and the Christian World'. The formal pleasingness of this poem seems to have become a trial to its author, who excluded it from his *Selected Poems* and noted how anthologists selected it because it lacked the rebarbative qualities

² Nancy Hargrove, who has gone further than most on this quest, tells me that Eliot's notebook of his Italian journey disappointingly provides no solution to the problem.

³ See *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: Norton, 2000), pp. 81-2.

⁴ The better reproduction of this is to be found in Gordon's *Eliot's Early Years* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), facing p. 97.

⁵ *Words Alone: The Poet T.S. Eliot* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 58.

otherwise felt characteristic of his work; but he still liked it enough to evoke it through a phrasal echo, when composing *Little Gidding*.

If we admit its sculptural origin as entitling us to consider it as an ekphrastic poem of sorts, then the contrast between the static quality of a stele and the emotionally busy scene evoked in the poem is productive, alerting us to the differences between stone and tears. The Italian of the title and the unattributed Latin of the epigraph operate somewhat as distancing devices, between us and an outburst of emotion that, even as we come upon it, seems to be turning into simulation, a stage-directed set of gestures:

Stand on the highest pavement of the stair—
Lean on a garden urn—
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair—
Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise—
Fling them to the ground and turn
With a fugitive resentment in your eyes:
But weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.

The 'place' of this poem, despite the externality implied by its 'sunlight', resembles a 'set' of a garden terrace, where a slightly bizarre photo-shoot occurs. Yet through its posed artificiality something like real pain is glimpsed: those flowers, we feel, once flung cannot be un-flung, and however pleased with itself the formulation 'fugitive resentment' sounds, its noun serves to discompose the *mise en scène*.

If this space has been, as I suggest, 'radically theatricalised', to what purpose has that happened? It is part, arguably, of a narrative of 'plausible deniability' camouflaging the implicit story of desertion and betrayal, and from which we are to infer that 'it isn't about me, I'm just the stage-director'. This strategy is advanced, in the poem's second section, by the abrupt change of tense and a pronominal confusion:

So I would have had him leave,
So I would have had her stand and grieve,
So he would have left

The complex, emphatically repeated, conditional perfect tense permits us to suspect that actuality was otherwise – less controlled, no doubt – and the 'him' momentarily installs a culpable third party, until apparently erased by the ensuing formulation, 'we both'. Then there is an unsettling hint of sexual aggression, in 'the body' that has been both 'used' and 'torn and bruised' – which coarse phraseology is not quite finessed out of mind by the ostentatious elegance of 'incomparably light and deft'. The extraordinary good manners and formal poise of the verbal structure, with its abundant felicities of rhyme and rhythm, is suggestively at odds with a more brutal subtext: good form surely masks bad behaviour. I am reminded of Ibsen's Judge Brack insisting that 'People don't

do such things!', in the room next door to the one in which Hedda Gabler has just blown her brains out.

The final section brings another tense-change, to the perfect: 'She turned away' – presumably following the Judas kiss of the 'faithless' handshake proffered in the preceding line. Assembled now in memory, she is a not-entirely-stifled provocation that disturbs the speaker's sense of rectitude as well as ruffling the surface of his sexual self-possession; trying to represent her loss as amounting to no more than that of 'a gesture and a pose' (one of many 'this and that' formulae the poem contains), he gives the game away in the last line's transpositions ('The sleepless midnight and the noon's repose'): somnolent by day but sleepless at night, his reportedly amazed 'cogitations' evidently exceed the control strategies he has brought to bear on them. This, then, is a narrative of dis-placement, its uncertainties persisting into a 'they' to whose involvement with each other it bemusedly refers ('I wonder how they should have been together!'), while presumably suppressing the more appropriate 'we'. The speaker stands even further to the side of his own life than Prufrock, inhabiting a willed insincerity and a simulated world in which he might declare: 'It is impossible to **mean** just what I **say**'.⁶

It's equally impossible, we infer, for him to **be** just where he **is**. One of the interesting features of the very early published verse is how few locations are identified: place-names are rare, and although some generalised American locations such as 'the United States' (in 'Mr Apollinax') and 'New England' (in 'Cousin Nancy') are found, greater specificity was elsewhere removed: so that, for instance, the 'Preludes', as they are known to us, were dissociated from the localities of Roxbury and Dorchester originally in their titles. When the hostess of 'Portrait of a Lady' evokes 'Paris in the spring', it is not a place remembered so much as a gesture rehearsed. In *Poems, 1920*, however, place-names become abundant, notably in its first poem 'Gerontion', where 'Antwerp', 'Brussels', 'London', and 'Limoges' proliferate alongside the names of people (Mme de Tournquist, Hakagawa *et al.*), also profligately tendered like false currency, in this *mélange adultère de tout* which really amounts to a litany of deracination and thus of the deterioration of place. In 'A Cooking Egg' this deterioration is portrayed as an invasive infestation, in a histrionic declaration that 'The red-eyed scavengers are creeping/ From Kentish Town and Golder's Green' (*sic*, *PTSE* 1, p. 39). Those actual London place-names do not authenticate, so much as accrue inauthenticity from their inclusion in such operatic overstatement, which indicates something of the disintegrity of place as a locator for identity, or indeed for anything much. This is a feature, also, of the tableau specified at the outset of 'Sweeney Erect' ('Paint me a cavernous waste shore/ Cast in the unstilled Cyclades', *PTSE* 1, p. 36), in a poem full of people striking poses, whose epigraph from *The Maid's Tragedy* catches a character

⁶ A contrasting pictorial context for interpretation of this poem has been offered by Derek Roper, in *Essays in Criticism* 52.3 (July 2002), 222-34.

in the very act of self-dramatisation. So, too, the numerous locations thumb-nailed by ‘Mélange Adultère de Tout’ (*PTSE* 1, p. 41), which begins ‘En Amérique’ and ends proleptically in ‘Mozambique’, merely replicate the arbitrariness of the roles adopted there. The Venice that is nowhere named but everywhere indicated in ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’ (*PTSE* 1, pp. 34-5), has been reduced to a series of cryptic topographical allusions (‘little bridge’, ‘Canaletto’, ‘the Rialto’, ‘the waterstair’) that might be assembled into a make-believe city in much the same way that Bleistein’s offensively-itemised attributes as ‘Chicago Semite Viennese’ might be assembled into a make-believe person – or, I suppose, into another marionette, since his ‘saggy bending of the knees/ And elbows’ might indicate as much. This all seems to lead toward the résumé later encountered in ‘What the Thunder Said’: ‘Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/ Vienna London/ Unreal’ (*PTSE* 1, p. 69).

The characteristic of an unreal city, *The Waste Land* has by that stage already implied, is that its inhabitants are unaware of their role-playing in a species of shadow-play:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many. (*PTSE* 1, pp. 56-7)

They do not know, that is, the nature of the kingdom in whose thrall they are. ‘[D]eath’s dream kingdom’, in the pseudo-biblical landscape evoked by ‘The Hollow Men’, is a similar site of evasion and of ‘deliberate disguises’ (*PTSE* 1, pp. 81, 82). But if the poetry offers plentiful evidence of people who are trapped in the repetitive and unfulfilling role of pretending to be themselves (like the character in *The Confidential Clerk* who invariably announces himself: ‘Enter B. Kaghan’), such diagnosis of malady implies, at least, an imaginable state of health (an undissociated sensibility, maybe). Eliot’s sense that beneath the superficial drama of location, with its attendant play-acting, lies a deeper layer, poses the question of how that profounder level might be intuited or accessed. One answer (perhaps representing ‘the way down’) is implied by ‘Eeldrop and Appleplex’, in which Eeldrop ruminates upon the fate of one who drops through the surface-tension of ordinary ‘reality’, and passes from a prosaic metropolitan location into eternity:

In Gopsum Street a man murders his mistress. The important fact is that for the man the act is eternal, and that for the brief space he has to live, he is already dead. He is already in a different world from ours. He has crossed the frontier. The important fact is that something is done which cannot be undone—a possibility which none of us realize until we face it ourselves. (*P* 1, p. 527)

He has become, like Baudelaire in Eliot’s later assessment, man enough for damnation (as the ‘hollow men’ were not); and of course it was the French poet’s ‘*Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves/ Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant*’ which underlay *The Waste Land*’s imagery.

These lines Eliot later insisted he had understood because he had lived them: 'I knew what *that* meant, because I had lived it before I knew that I wanted to turn it into verse on my own account' (see *PTSE* 1, p. 613). And strangely, what he may have been thinking of in that retrospection, is the sort of thing he referred to in a letter of 1930 to William Force Stead: 'This sense of dispossession by the dead I have known twice, at Marlow and at Perigueux' (*L* 5, p 287).

The theatricality of place in much of the poetry up to 'The Hollow Men' (itself a poem full of incipiently anguished locational deictics, 'here' and 'there') seems driven by a distrust of its suspect circumstantiality: so that the 'lonely cab-horse' and the 'early coffee-stands' of the 'Preludes' (*PTSE* 1, p. 15) have less any quality of being actual, than that of being tokens of reality, artfully disposed by the stage-manager in charge of a world of simulations. They are almost, in Baudrillard's sense, 'hyper-real'. But for Eliot, as I've suggested, there was something within or underneath appearances that, like a disinterred corpse, could subversively intrude – as evidently occurred to him at Marlow and Perigueux. Much of this irruption seems to have been negative, a glimpse of Hell in the intrusion of the perversely undead; but something more positive occasionally is manifest, like 'The notion of some infinitely gentle/ Infinitely suffering thing' briefly sensed in the final 'Prelude', before its repudiation by the coarse resumption of purely performative gestures of physical selfhood: 'Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh' (*PTSE* 1, pp. 16-17). The potentially Christian suggestiveness of that 'infinitely gentle/ Infinitely suffering' entity ushers toward the ways in which Eliot's perception of place as theatrical is affected by his faith, whereby the notion of 'suffering' loses any sense of being a possible spectator-sport, as in 'La Figlia Che Piange', but more resembles the position enunciated in *The Dry Salvages* (II): 'the torment of others remains an experience/ Unqualified' (*PTSE* 1, p. 196).

That all the world's a stage is the perception of melancholy Jacques in *As You Like It*, whose attitude of by-standing commentator somewhat resembles the stance found in early Eliot; in Shakespeare, its dark development leads to the corrosive nihilism of Macbeth's asserting that human existence amounts to no more than a badly-performed play or tale told by an idiot. 'The Hollow Men' represents Eliot's nearest approach to the totalising despair of Macbeth; but he was also able to envisage a less hopeless application of theatrical metaphor. In "'Rhetoric" and Poetic Drama' he asserted that 'The really fine rhetoric of Shakespeare occurs in situations where a character in the play *sees himself* in a dramatic light', and his three principal examples involved Othello, Coriolanus and Timon, locating themselves as lonely eminences 'in Aleppo once', 'in Corioli', and 'Upon the beachèd verge of the salt flood' (*P* 2, pp. 84-5). In 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca' he would return to Othello's speech as an example of that character's '*cheering himself up*': 'Othello succeeds in turning himself into a pathetic figure, by adopting an *aesthetic* rather than a

moral attitude, dramatising himself against his environment' (*P* 3, p. 248; Eliot's italics). If this self-servingly 'heroic' attitudinising indicates a defect of character, the false ('aesthetic') relation to place it embodies is nonetheless index to a truer ('moral') relation, whereby 'environment' would function as more than backdrop for specious assertions of individuality.

The speaker of 'The Journey of the Magi' has, with his companions, 'returned to our places, these Kingdoms,/ But no longer at ease here' (*PTSE* 1, p. 102); the landscapes through which he travelled have contained disruptive meanings he cannot unriddle, although we can. For while it seems that place continues to be an intermediate rather than a substantive category for Christian Eliot, and so partakes of that quality of being illusory or even delusory that I have been discussing, there also comes into his poetry something I would call the redemptive rather than the futile place. In 'Marina' the phrase 'this grace dissolved in place' is, as it were, seeing location under the aspect of Incarnation, imbued with the Creator's presence. Most of the poems of *Ash-Wednesday* occur, as I read it, within a subjective 'space' that is actually contained 'In the hollow round of my skull' (*PTSE* 1, p. 89), with – for example – the bones under the juniper tree and their attendant leopards comprising an emblematic dreamscape. But in the final poem of the sequence, place is *not* 'always and only place': here is evoked 'the granite shore' and its associations that, like the approached island of 'Marina', derive their potency for Eliot from being an actual landscape and seascape, familiar to him from sailing expeditions off the New England coast undertaken in his boyhood and youth. In letters he named Casco Bay, Maine, as the location he had particularly in mind, although the poems leave it unidentified. But what both poem VI of *Ash-Wednesday* and 'Marina' also have in common, is that this location is endowed with value through an emotionally-implicated act of recollection; recovery of what had been thought lost is an important element.

Both were written before Eliot's appointment to the Norton Chair at Harvard (1932-3) gave him the opportunity to spend a significant period of time back in the country of his birth; the first visit he had made since 1915. Then, he had been returning 'home', albeit briefly; in 1932 he arrived as a British citizen and, whatever the residual importance certain American localities had had and would continue to have for him, the places he then encountered in actuality, rather than as memory, provoked his initial antipathy. Some observations about American places made near the beginning of *After Strange Gods*, which seem unusually revealing, repeat those found in a letter to Geoffrey Faber of late September 1932:

My impressions of Boston and Cambridge do not contradict my first impressions of the country on the journey down from Montreal. The mountains of Vermont are amazingly beautiful – more beautiful than I remembered – and would be so even if they were not now adorned by forest foliage of the most brilliant colours: every shade from light yellow and brown through scarlet to deep heather purple, according to the species of tree. But the towns, the villages and the scattered homesteads are sordid and *mesquin*; the country is

almost a desert; and you [would] not believe that man could have inhabited a territory for a good three hundred years and made so shallow an impression on it. He has not improved nature or in any way come to terms with it – as in England or in Italy you feel an intimate relation between the life of nature and the life of the race; he has merely scratched the surface; and you feel that every house and sign of human life might be swept away and leave exactly the same inhuman natural beauty that was there before. Cambridge, even with its tremendously solid and indeed beautiful buildings, seems an encampment; partly because some most costly and elaborate specimen of architecture may face a most squalid and temporary-looking coffee-room or garage. The buildings, in fact, don't seem real; they seem to have as little relation to what goes on in them as the landscape does. Eliot House [where he was staying] is infinitely luxurious, and even very handsome; and large trees have been planted in the quads to make it look as if it was there to stay; but it gives, by some inappropriateness, an effect of burlesque. (L 6, pp. 458-9)

The theatrical image of this last remark is to my purpose, of course; but there are some interesting aspects beyond that. Although Eliot acknowledges the 'inhuman natural beauty' offered by the original American landscape, his attitude toward it is fundamentally Puritan – comparable, say, to William Bradford's description of the 'hideous and desolate wilderness' encountered by the Pilgrim Fathers on their landfall.⁷ Just as for Bradford the 'wilderness' – like the 'wild beasts and wild men' it contained – could only accrue value through conversion, for Eliot 'place' is both literally and metaphorically a human construct, so that 'inhuman natural beauty' has a kind of weightlessness and is not – to borrow a phrase from Auden's poem 'Memorial for the City' – 'seriously there'. But neither are the efforts at settlement, whose effect is to seem 'burlesque' rather than serious; for the problem with America, in Eliot's judgment above, is that it has failed to constitute itself as a proper place (not 'place enough for damnation', as it were). Although, to be fair, this recorded his initial impressions, they would be recycled in *After Strange Gods* (1934) and, more importantly, underlay his third Quartet which, while it duly acknowledges his *pays natal*, does so by means of associating it with a dangerous and uninhabitable geological extrusion, the untameably natural. John Hayward noticed the difference, when he discriminated 'the Dry Salvages' (as 'the name of a place') from 'East Coker' (as 'a place-name').⁸

The poem's last line, 'The life of significant soil', therefore denotes exactly what Eliot had felt to be missing from America, in 1932. Although he went on, during this stay, to compose the earliest of his 'Landscape' poems, the three named for American places make little effort to describe an actual locality but instead, in the cases of 'New Hampshire' and 'Virginia', associate those States with subjective states of happiness and torpor, in two poems which offer an emphatically contrasting metric. In 'Cape Ann', which closes the sequence as assembled in *Collected Poems*, the precise naming and onomatopoeiac vignettes of a number of birds native to the region are at the end

⁷ See *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Book I, chapter 9.

⁸ See Helen Gardner, *The Composition of FOUR QUARTETS* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), p. 121.

replaced by the ornithologically-inexact 'sea-gull', in whose indiscriminating linguistic gullet all need for precise distinctions somewhat ominously ends.⁹ The Scottish and Welsh landscape poems, by contrast, are more evocative of scenic detail and historical resonance, but, especially in 'Usk', the emphasis falls not on remaining in an achieved place, but on moving beyond it in an act of continual pilgrimage.

The 'hermit's chapel' evoked in the final line of 'Usk' reminds us that such destinations, as places of potential if neglected significance, have been present in Eliot's earlier verse: from 'Saint Apollinaire' in 'Lune de Miel' (1917: another poem full of place-names) to St Magnus Martyr in *The Waste Land* – although in both instances that significance seems to be as accountable in historical-aesthetic terms, as religious. In each, however, there is a sense of contrast between what these buildings contain and the clattering, busy world outside their walls; it is as if the discerning visitor, happening upon their quietness, could there find in process an ongoing performance of the Byzantine or Ionian styles of architecture. That such a visit would be solitary, rather than congregational, may be suggested by some comments made by Eliot later in the postgraduate paper already referred to: 'all significant truths are private truths: as they become public, they cease to become truths; they become facts, or at best, part of the public character, or at worst, catchwords. Degree of truth is degree of individuality' (*P* 1, p. 63). The hermit and the pilgrim at the end of 'Usk' are singular, and distrust of a potentially falsifying collective sensibility is what drives Eliot's condemnation of social charade and the wrong kind of theatre. Yet to see place as theatrical is itself only a partial critique, itself motivated by desire for a deeper significance; this can be seen in a passage from F.H. Bradley that Eliot quoted in his essay on the philosopher:

That the glory of this world in the end is appearance leaves the world more glorious, if we feel it is a show of some fuller splendour; but the sensuous curtain is a deception and a cheat, if it hides some colourless movement of atoms, some spectral woof of impalpable abstractions, or unearthly ballet of bloodless categories. Though dragged to such conclusions, we cannot embrace them. (cited *P* 3, p. 306)

Eliot's solution to the problem outlined by Bradley was to endorse an understanding of the world of appearance, conducive to a reception of its fuller splendour (or as often, of its fuller 'horror'). The sense of the theatricality of place persists into the Quartets, but with less weight of criticism. Yes, the houses all go under the sea and the dancers under the hill, and all the world continues to be a stage:

As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed

⁹ Of the birds enumerated in this poem, only 'bullbat' and 'sea-gull' are not found in *A Field Guide to the Birds East of the Rockies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980); the first is a nickname for the Common Nighthawk (which is included under its proper name); the note to the poem in *PTSE* 1 (p. 855) shows that 'bullbat' was given in Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*, which Eliot possessed.

With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama
And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away – (PTSE 1, p. 188)

But the threat implicit in the theatrical metaphor in the early poetry has lessened: the theatre becomes a place for revelation, less of the falsity of everything, than of a truth underlying appearance. I would speculate that this alteration has in part to do with Eliot's own work in the theatre, as playwright, enabling him to conceive drama as an intrinsically social event which could moderate the exasperated spirit's solipsistic predicament; and also with his attachment to the forms of Christian worship, those liturgical events that were themselves a kind of theatre (as performative rite), by means of which truth was approached rather than falsehood sustained. Additionally, Eliot's two pre-war plays accepted that the fallen delusory world was the appropriate setting within which the majority of humankind would, or would not, work out its salvation. Only a saint such as Becket could experience that confluence of place, time and destiny which fused appearance with reality. As Becket preaches, 'the true martyr is he who has ... lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr' (CPP, p. 261); this differentiates his total immersion in the event at Canterbury from seeing himself 'in a dramatic light', like Othello's 'in Aleppo once' or Coriolanus's 'in Corioli'. 'What you call the normal/ Is merely the unreal and the unimportant' (CPP p. 326), asserts Harry in *The Family Reunion*; incipiently priggish as this sounds, Eliot's play recognises that the normality of keeping up appearances is where most of us reside: to 'follow the bright angels' 'Somewhere on the other side of despair' (CPP, p. 339) is not achievable by many.¹⁰ In terms of the sequence of *Four Quartets*, we would note the progress from the solitary and ambiguous exaltation of *Burnt Norton*, 'I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where', to the reconciliation with place-time that enables Eliot, in *Little Gidding*, to affirm that 'On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel/ History is now and England' (PTSE 1, pp. 181, 208). This endorsement of significant soil involves an Augustinian understanding of the nature of 'truth' which admits rather than disparages the collective experience, and consists in reconciliation or connection with 'the dead', rather than in 'dispossession' by them. The locational deictics in the Quartets move through the 'I am here/ Or there, or elsewhere' in *East Coker* to the transitional 'Here between the hither and the farther shore' of *The Dry Salvages*, to the achieved presence at last imaginable through the communal place and shared history of *Little Gidding*: 'You are here to kneel/ Where prayer has been valid' (PTSE 1, pp. 186, 198, 202). 'For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it' (Matthew 16:25, King James Version); if *East*

¹⁰ Reviewing the first CPP in 1953, W. H. Auden commented: 'If in [*The Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party*], one hears an occasional discordant snobbish note, I believe this is not a matter of sensibility but of technique'; see *W.H. Auden: Prose*, vol. III 1949-1955, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 355.

Coker has asserted that 'where you are is where you are not' (PTSE 1, p. 189), the proposition could be reversed, to represent the position reached by *Little Gidding*: 'Where **you** are not is where you **are**'. The co-identity of essence with existence is an attribute of godhead alone, experienced momentarily, one supposes, by the true saint at the point of martyrdom; 'For most of us, this is the aim/ Never here to be realised', but such extreme self-abnegation is replicated – albeit in a minor key – in the ideal act of devotion, whose self-forgetfulness bears distant relation to the saint's 'Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender' (PTSE 1, p. 200, both). In praying, reconciliation is effected between otherwise antithetical meanings of 'acting'; as 'pretending' is superseded by 'being in doing', and, for Eliot, the dis-located self finds its true place, beyond theatre.