

Changing Our Way of Being Wrong:

T. S. Eliot's Shakespeare¹

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Persse McGarrigle, the questing young academic in David Lodge's campus novel *Small World* (1984), seeks to impress the impressionable with a pretentious MA thesis on 'The influence of T. S. Eliot on Shakespeare'. Had Persse been a more attentive student of Eliot, he'd have known that the author of the dictum 'that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past' anticipated his postmodern thunder by half a century.² G. K. Hunter claimed, extravagantly, that Eliot 'virtually invented the twentieth-century Shakespeare in a collection of asides'; a more judicious assessment of the evidence has been performed by Neil Corcoran's recent study, which argues that Eliot is among the poets 'manifestly responsible for making Shakespeare the first modern'.³ Yet the precise nature of Eliot's modern Shakespeare remains elusive. In 1927, Eliot told the Shakespeare Association: 'About anyone so great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong'. According to Eliot, when changing our way of being wrong, 'nothing is more effective in driving out error than a new error',⁴ recalling the merciless succession of power in *Coriolanus*: 'One fire drives out one fire; one nail, one nail; / Rights by rights falter, strengths by strengths do fail' (IV. vii. 54-5). By the end of his career, Eliot was inclined to characterise his lifelong engagement with Shakespeare's oeuvre in less belligerent terms: 'For the understanding of Shakespeare, a lifetime is not too long; and of Shakespeare, the development of one's opinions may be the measure of one's development in wisdom.'⁵ In truth, the long arc of Eliot's Shakespeare follows three distinct phases: the first marked by the iconoclasm of the avant-garde provocateur which, in due course, was obliged to give way to

For the clarification of points of detail, I am indebted to conversations with Martin Dodsworth, Sarah Kennedy and Christopher Ricks. An earlier version of this essay has been published in *Essays in Criticism* LXII:2, April 2012, pp. 160-177.

² T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (1951), p. 15.

³ G. K. Hunter, *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition* (Liverpool, 1978), p. 299 & Neil Corcoran, *Shakespeare and the Modern Poet* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 3.

⁴ *Selected Essays*, p. 126.

⁵ Preface to *Essays on Elizabethan Drama* (1956), pp. vii-viii.

the imperative to accommodate the greatness of Shakespearean tragedy to Christian belief, before a final period in which the practising dramatist sought to do justice not only to the 'musical' but the 'dramatic' excellence of Shakespeare's verse.

Eliot concealed the degree to which his own poetry and criticism were saturated in Shakespeare's language. His disclaimer, often quoted, that it was the 'minor dramatists' of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries rather than the towering example of Shakespeare, that determined his 'own poetic formation' and from which he 'learned my lessons', does not tell the whole story. Whereas the 'supreme greatness of Shakespeare' could lead a young poet into sterile imitation, Eliot suggested that it was other dramatists who appeared in his 1918-1919 tutorial classes on Elizabethan literature – Marlowe, Webster, Tourneur, Middleton and Ford – on which 'my imagination had been stimulated, my sense of rhythm trained, and my emotions fed'.⁶ Christopher Ricks cautions us against the 'melodramatic sub-Freudian parricidal scenario' propounded by Harold Bloom's theorising of an 'Anxiety of Influence', which gainsays the conscious acknowledgement of gratitude felt by a poet for a master of the craft, and yet Ricks's own masterly edition of Eliot's early poetic notebooks demonstrates conclusively, in its fascinating enumeration of sources, parallels and echoes, that if Eliot's debts as a poetic practitioner are revealed in the texture of his words then it was Shakespeare rather than Marlowe, Webster, Tourneur, Middleton and Ford who stimulated his imagination and trained his sense of rhythm.⁷ References to Shakespeare in *Inventions of the March Hare* (1996) easily outnumber the tally for those minor dramatists whose influence Eliot was ready to acknowledge. Shakespeare is the most persistent presence of all in Eliot's works. Only a mature recognition of this fact – 'the measure of one's development in wisdom' – rescinds his former critical ingratitude.

As a young prentice poet Eliot approached the 'supreme greatness' of Shakespeare with a spirit of apprehension, and even anxiety. It has frequently been observed that Eliot's early poetry enacts a Laforguean irony to cut the Bard down to manageable proportions: the Romeo, whom a 'Nocturne' written in early youth refuses to take in '*grand sérieux*' prefigures the odour of Juliet's tomb exuded by the drawing room in 'Portrait of a Lady'. Such portraits conjure scenes of Shakespearean tragic grandeur but then look at them askance. A Laforguean pastiche, which Pound claimed was cherished by Eliot, presents J. Alfred Prufrock failing to take the lead in his own 'love song'; no 'Prince Hamlet' but a bumbling 'attendant lord', at times 'ridiculous', 'at times, the Fool'. These allusive gestures

⁶ *To Criticise the Critic* (1965), p.18.

⁷ See Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford, 2002), p. 6.

are deflationary ‘dying falls’, part of the ‘Shakespeherian’ ragging that is a feature of his poetry up to *The Waste Land*.⁸ The social context of this studied irreverence has received insufficient attention. When Eliot arrived in wartime London, Bardolatry was almost a patriotic duty (*Henry V* was often invoked, as it was during the Second World War). To the annoyance of Blimpish eminences in the London literary establishment, Eliot ostentatiously refused to endorse jingoism. In a 1918 contribution to the *Egoist*, he declared his intention to ‘disturb and alarm the public: to upset its reliance upon Shakespeare, Nelson, Wellington, and Sir Isaac Newton’.⁹ The following year, Eliot aimed a determined blow at current estimations of Shakespeare’s most celebrated play.

An iconoclastic entry into Shakespearean criticism

‘Hamlet and His Problems’ (1919) sought to sever the play from nineteenth century critical traditions. Eliot disparaged the wayward impressionism (after the fashion of Walter Pater’s raptures on the *Mona Lisa*) that read into the apparent enigma of Hamlet’s delay a myriad of irrelevant personal associations. The predominance of ahistorical ‘character analysis’ in discussions of *Hamlet* could be traced to the legacy of the great Romantics. Even Coleridge, whom Eliot thought was the finest of all Shakespeare critics, could stray into mere opinion or indulgent fancy; and although Eliot respected A. C. Bradley as the best living exponent of character analysis, he felt that too many critics after Coleridge, detecting a narcissistic ‘smack’ of Hamlet in themselves, had forgotten that in writing about *Hamlet* their ‘first business was to study a work of art’.¹⁰ The latest offenders in this series of wrong-headed psychological turns were those psychoanalytical critics who, applying Freud’s theory of the Oedipus Complex, seized upon *Hamlet* as the mother of all melodramatic parricidal scenarios. Eliot’s desire to avert his mind from prurient investigations into ‘the effect of a mother’s guilt upon her son’ is inseparable from his diagnosis of the problematic nature of the play.¹¹

Eliot’s essay, ostensibly a review of J. M. Robertson’s *The Problem of ‘Hamlet’* (1919), recapitulated the author’s thesis that an earlier version of the play by Thomas Kyd (now lost) furnished successors with ‘intractable material’. Robertson surmised Shakespeare

⁸ *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (1969), pp. 16 & 65.

⁹ ‘Observations’, *Egoist* 5 (1918), p. 69.

¹⁰ *Selected Essays*, p. 151. Eliot went so far as to slight Bradley’s widely admired *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) as ‘a needless luxury’, ‘London Letter’, *Dial* 73 (1922), p. 95.

¹¹ *Selected Essays*, p. 143.

‘could not make a psychologically or otherwise consistent play out of a plot which retained a strictly barbaric action[,] while the hero was transformed into a supersubtle Elizabethan’. Still, Robertson had concluded that *Hamlet* was a ‘masterpiece ... a perfectly magnificent *tour de force*’.¹² Eliot, on the other hand, claimed that *Hamlet* ‘is most certainly an artistic failure’, unlike *Coriolanus*, which he characterised as ‘Shakespeare’s most assured artistic success’.¹³ Composed shortly after the death of his own father, there is something Oedipal about Eliot’s outrageous swipe at his forebears. The critical scales which weigh the ‘artistic failure’ of *Hamlet* in the balance with *Coriolanus* are not merely tipped to offend the literary establishment, they couple the two plays by Shakespeare in which we encounter the mother of the tragic hero: while Eliot recoiled from Hamlet’s verbal assault on Gertrude, he remained spellbound by the submission of ‘a broken Coriolanus’ to the domineering grande dame Volumnia. Eliot later told G. Wilson Knight that he was convinced the real driving motive of *Coriolanus* was not political but the remarkable study of this mother and son relationship: ‘he did it to please his mother’ (I. i. 38).¹⁴ Struggling to please his own demanding mother and to appease the ghost of his recently deceased father may help to explain the ‘callowness’, not to mention the condescension, Eliot later recognised in his treatment of *Hamlet*’s fraught family drama.¹⁵ William Empson noted with characteristic insight: ‘One ought to have realised at the time that only some great personal distraction could account for so bizarre a judgement.’¹⁶

If ‘Hamlet and His Problems’ marked Eliot’s flamboyantly polemical entry onto the stage of Shakespeare criticism, admirers have been too willing to overlook the essay’s failure to substantiate its arguments. To the charge that *Hamlet fils* exhibited a disturbance ‘in *excess* of the facts as they appear’, Robert Lynd, one of Eliot’s ‘imperfect critics’, retorted that ‘the murder of a father by his usurping brother, the infidelity of a mother and a mistress, the use of former companions to spy on him, the failure of all that had once seemed honest and fair, plots to murder him, the suicide of his beloved, might have caused considerable perturbation even in the soul of a fish.’ Lynd ridiculed Eliot’s conclusion: ‘If ever there was a play in

¹² *Shakespeare Criticism, 1919-1935*, ed. Anne Ridler (1936), pp. 11, 15.

¹³ *Selected Essays*, pp. 143-4.

¹⁴ Charlotte Eliot boasted to the headmaster of Milton Academy: ‘[Tom] has read practically all of Shakespeare, whom he admires, and retains much in memory.’ *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 1: 1898-1922*, ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton (2009), p. 4.

¹⁵ *Essays on Elizabethan Drama*, p. vii. Jacqueline Rose argues that: ‘In Eliot’s reading of *Hamlet*, therefore, the sexuality of the woman seems to become the scapegoat and cause of the dearth or breakdown of Oedipal resolution which the play ceaselessly enacts.’ *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 130.

¹⁶ William Empson, *Using Biography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), p. 198.

which the emotion is not in excess of the facts as they appear, that play is *Hamlet*'.¹⁷ Are we simply to accept Eliot's theory that Hamlet's frenzied questioning of Gertrude in the closet scene fails to dramatise 'a situation, a chain of events' that can elicit 'significant emotion' from an audience:

Ham. Do you see nothing there?

Queen. Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.

Ham. Nor did you nothing hear?

Queen. No, nothing but ourselves. (III. iv. 132-5)

while the couple's broken-backed dialogue in *The Waste Land*:

'Do

You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

'Nothing?'

articulates a completely successful 'objective correlative'?¹⁸ In 1922, Arthur Clutton-Brock published a book on *Hamlet* which attempted to rebut, in forthright terms, the suppositions advanced by both Robertson and Eliot (occasioning Eliot to tell Pound that Brock was 'the dirtiest shit with the worst mind in London'¹⁹). Eliot wrote to Robertson to express a debt to his industrious research and recruited him as a contributor to the *Criterion*, but commentators ignore the damning verdict passed by current scholarship on his ascriptions of plays in the First Folio to a host of collaborators: his reputation as a 'disintegrator' lies in tatters today.²⁰ After all, Robertson founded his interpretation of *Hamlet* on confident assumptions about an ur-*Hamlet* that is not extant. Nevertheless, it was on the basis of Robertson's scholarly and pseudo-scholarly conjectures that Eliot launched an attack on London critics in a book review that has assumed far greater importance than the book it reviewed. That it has done so owes more to the centrality of Shakespeare's poetry to the dense texture of Eliot's auditory imagination than it does to the persuasiveness of claims about the artistic failure of *Hamlet*, claims that Eliot himself subsequently renounced.

¹⁷ *T. S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (Cambridge, 2004), p. 58.

¹⁸ The similarity between these passages was pointed out by Peter Milward in 'Shakespeare in *The Waste Land*', *Poetry and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Milward and Tetsue Anzai (Tokyo: Renaissance Institute, 1982), p. 223.

¹⁹ *The Letters of T. S. Eliot, Volume 2: 1923-1925*, ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton (2009), p. 208.

²⁰ In his 1924 British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, E. K. Chambers presented a devastating attack on advocates of 'The Disintegration of Shakespeare'. On 6 December 1926 Eliot wrote to the editor of *The Nation and Athenaeum* to defend Robertson against Chambers's critique.

‘We ought still to find *Othello* or *Lear* frightful’

Robertson’s remarks on the Senecan stoicism embedded in Shakespearean tragedy provided Eliot with the theme of his 1927 address to the Shakespeare Association. ‘Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca’ represents a crucial milestone in Eliot’s progress as a Shakespeare critic, since it clearly sets forth his deepening preoccupation with the relation of poetry to belief. The lecture draws upon the specialist scholarship acquired in the course of writing a lengthy introduction to a new edition of Seneca’s tragedies, where he contended: ‘No author exercised a wider or deeper influence upon the Elizabethan mind or upon the Elizabethan form of tragedy than did Seneca.’²¹ Eliot was less interested in the reworking of the grisly Senecan tragedy of blood on the Elizabethan stage, than in the presence of Senecan thought as a general philosophy of life which appealed to Elizabethans as a way of coping with the dissolution and chaos of their age. In John Cunliffe’s study of *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy* (1893), recommended to him by Robertson, Eliot inspected passages where the protagonists of Elizabethan tragedy declaim in Senecan style at the point of death. ‘When an Elizabethan hero or villain dies’ Eliot observed, ‘he usually dies in the odour of Seneca’.²² It is lines from Seneca, adapted from Bussy’s dying speech in George Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois*, that echo in the existential nihilism at the close of ‘Gerontion’: ‘Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear’ recalling ‘Beneath the chariot of the snowy Bear’ (V. iv. 106) adapted from Seneca’s ‘sub cardine / glacialis ursae’ in *Hercules Furens*. In the self-dramatising blend of pride and despair, the Senecan tragic hero seeks to overcome nihilism by identifying himself with the universe. Eliot argues: ‘Stoicism is the refuge for the individual in an indifferent or hostile world too big for him’; it is ‘the reverse of Christian humility’.²³ ‘Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca’ connects this absence of Christian humility to the dying speeches of Hamlet, Antony, Coriolanus, and most disturbingly of all, Othello.

Eliot’s commentary on Othello’s ‘last great speech’ was contrived to dislodge the halo Bradley placed on the noble Moor, ‘by far the most romantic figure among Shakespeare’s heroes’ and ‘the greatest poet of all Shakespearean heroes’.²⁴ More immediately, Wyndham

²¹ *Selected Essays*, p. 65.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-2.

²⁴ *Othello: A Casebook*, ed. John Wain (1971), p 57.

Lewis's contention in *The Lion and the Fox* (1927) that the 'overwhelming truth and beauty' of Othello's parting speech represents 'the clearest expression of the favour of Shakespeare's heart and mind' was a cause for concern.²⁵ Eliot thinks that Othello is '*cheering himself up*' in these apologetics. The calculated bathos supplies a jolt. He notes matter-of-factly, 'nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself' and defines this defect as '*bovarysme*, the human will to see things as they are not'.²⁶ The startling conjunction of the Venetian general and the housewife from Rouen strips away any lingering romantic idealism. 'Speak of me as I am' (V. ii. 338) implores Othello; an uncanny echo of dishonest Iago's aside 'As honest as I am' (II. i. 195), above all, his chilling admission 'I am not what I am' (I. i. 65). Eliot's critical hypersensitivity to the minutiae of Othello's speech is evident in his verbal correspondences, elaborations and variations upon the play's words.²⁷ Othello has caught the foul contagion of Iago's sexual nausea: the lechery of Iago's 'as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys' (III. iii. 400) reappears in the violence of Othello's 'Goats and monkeys!' (IV. i. 265), an outburst scrambled into the epigraph of Eliot's sinister poem of Venetian intrigue and sexual betrayal, 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar'.²⁸ Transposed to a contemporary setting, the terror and pity evoked by Othello's jealousy is reduced to sordid self-pity. What is modern about Eliot's Shakespeare is his capacity to see self-dramatisation and self-deception as everyday, rather than tragic, flaws. That Eliot responded to his own wife's adultery with a vow of celibacy might be seen as a sobering antidote to uncontrollable vengeful fury.

There is no malice, then, when Eliot says plainly that Othello *does* extenuate his crime by glossing over responsibility for his wife's murder, concentrating instead on pride in his service to the state: he *is* 'cheering himself up'. Eliot felt keenly this 'terrible exposure of human weakness – of universal human weakness', but he did not flinch from a clear-sighted appreciation of the conflicted motives operating in the play's terrible dénouement.²⁹ 'When a work of art no longer terrifies us' Eliot observed, 'we may know that we were mistaken, or that our senses are dulled: we ought still to find *Othello* or *Lear* frightful'.³⁰ No doubt, what was 'frightful' about these tragedies was the calamity wrought by evil and exacerbated by an

²⁵ *The Lion and the Fox* (1927), p. 190.

²⁶ *Selected Essays*, pp. 130-1.

²⁷ Christopher Ricks amply demonstrated this in his mercurial lecture 'T. S. Eliot's Othello', T. S. Eliot International Summer School, Senate House, London, 30 June 2009.

²⁸ One should add that this poem, deploying acerbic allusions to Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, is anti-Semitic. Eliot's nastiest despoilation of Shakespeare's verse is the travesty of Ariel's song that was thankfully discarded from the drafts of *The Waste Land*.

²⁹ *Selected Essays*, p. 130.

³⁰ 'Contemporanea', *Egoist* 6 (1918), p. 84.

abeyance of Christian justice. Eliot perversely thought that Thomas Rymer's objections to *Othello* had never been answered, when the history of Shakespeare criticism from Dr. Johnson's Preface onwards constitutes a refutation of Rymer;³¹ but in spite of the teasing ironies and the uncertainties of tone with which Eliot addresses his scholarly audience, the ethical challenge of 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca' should be taken seriously. Christian Othello is under no delusion about his damnation and nobility vies with vanity as his epitaph wrestles control of the action back from Iago. Othello's claim he was 'not easily jealous' (V. ii. 341) goes to the heart of the play. Eliot's remarks on Othello's self-deception cannot be viewed in isolation from the remorseless wickedness of Iago's deceptions. Dr. Johnson, distressed by Othello's degradation, concluded 'we cannot but pity him when at last we find him *perplexed in the extreme*'.³² Eliot was also dismayed by the ending of *Othello*. It moved him to reassert Christian judgement in the face of what he believed to be 'the general attitude toward life of the Elizabethans' tainted by the corrosive forces 'of anarchism, of dissolution, of decay.'³³

Eliot and G. Wilson Knight's approach to mystic Shakespeare

Eliot knew that the plenitude of Shakespeare's plays invites the clash of conflicting interpretations and the continual effort of re-interpretation. In 1928, his understanding of Shakespeare was transformed by his discovery of Wilson Knight's holistic approach to the oeuvre.³⁴ Abandoning Robertson's 'disintegration' of the Shakespearean canon, Eliot now contended the 'whole of Shakespeare's work is *one* poem'.³⁵ In his introduction to Knight's collection of essays *The Wheel of Fire* (1930), Eliot praised Knight's 'insight in pursuing his search for the pattern below the level of "plot" and "character"'.³⁶ Knight distinguished his spatial, or better spiritual, interpretations from conventional Shakespeare criticism. In many ways Knight was a disciple of John Middleton Murry, concerned with the underlying rhythms of a work of art – conceived in the poet's soul – which could not be grasped through a purely

³¹ Rymer dismissed *Othello* as a 'Bloody Farce, without salt or savour', quoted in *Othello: A Casebook*, p. 48.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³³ *Selected Essays*, p. 116.

³⁴ In 1928 Eliot read the manuscript of 'Thaisa', Wilson Knight's essay on the symbolism of Shakespeare's late plays, published as *Myth and Miracle: An Essay on the Mystic Symbolism of Shakespeare* (1929).

³⁵ *Selected Essays*, p. 203.

³⁶ Introduction to *The Wheel of Fire* (1930), p. xviii.

intellectual approach. The spiritual dimension of Knight's allegorical readings of the ritual symbolism of reunion and rebirth in Shakespeare's late romances was the catalyst for Eliot's Shakespearean masterpiece 'Marina' (1930). Eliot said that Knight convinced him that the recognition scene in Act 5 Scene 1 of *Pericles* was 'a dramatic action of beings who are more than human'.³⁷ In the manuscript of 'Thaisa' (titled after the wife Pericles commits to the sea during a storm, believing, mistakenly as it turns out, she is dead), Eliot encountered Knight's thesis that a 'tempest-music opposition' is the organising pattern in the Shakespearean carpet. Eliot's attraction to Knight's powerful but idiosyncratic interpretation of Shakespeare's plays is explained by his search for a deeper significance to the oeuvre than offered by Robertson's textual genetics, or the cynical 'Machiavellian' Shakespeare depicted in Wyndham Lewis's *The Lion and the Fox*.³⁸ The redemptive ritual Knight identified in Shakespeare's final plays spoke personally to Eliot at this decisive midlife juncture.

A companion piece to *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), 'Marina' is, ultimately, the more satisfying poem by virtue of its poignant Shakespearean voyage through extreme suffering to dreamy spiritual awakening. Eliot intended the jarring Latin epigraph from Seneca's *Hercules Furens* to enact a 'criss-cross' between Hercules' realisation of his deranged murder of his family and the beautiful scene in which Pericles is restored to his lost daughter Marina.³⁹ Images and motifs from *Pericles* (as elucidated by Knight) suffuse a richness of association in 'Marina'. From their source in *Pericles* 'sea', 'shore' and 'rocks' are renewed, transfigured in another pattern: the sea imagery and sea sounds of Shakespeare's late romances always stimulated elemental reaches of Eliot's sensuous poetic sensibility, unlocking nostalgia for boyhood days sailing off the New England coast. The opening line, 'What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands / What water lapping the bow' echo the rhythmical waves of *Pericles*: 'What pageantry, what feats, what shows, / What minstrelsy and pretty din' (V. ii. 6-7). In the supple interweaving of the silences, dislocated syntax and the full proud sail of Shakespeare's late style, the key motifs of 'Marina' express intimations of death ('sharpen the tooth' recasts 'so sharp are hunger's teeth', *Pericles* I. iv.), of sin ('sty of contentment' invokes the 'criss-cross' of Marina's chaste brothel sojourn 'in this sty' and Hamlet's ugly insinuation of Gertrude 'honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty!' III. iv. 92-3), but is

³⁷ Quoted in Elizabeth Drew, *T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry* (New York, 1949), p. 127.

³⁸ Mario Praz criticised Lewis for his 'fantastic construction' of Machiavelli and for detecting Machiavellism 'everywhere' in Elizabethan drama, *The Flaming Heart* (Gloucester, Mass., 1966), pp. 93n & 118.

³⁹ Letter to Sir Michael Sadler, 9 May 1930, quoted in Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* (Chicago, 1974), p. 131.

then quickened by 'The pulse in the arm' (alluding to Pericles' incipient wonder 'Have you a working pulse?' V. i. 156) preparing for the miraculous, joyous vision of 'My daughter'.

The supernatural music of 'Marina' is an analogue of the silent but harmonious 'music of the spheres' (V. i. 232) which moves Pericles to tears, after long years of silence, when he is reunited with the daughter supposed dead. 'Marina' points to the exquisite music of *Four Quartets* ('music heard so deeply, / That it is not heard at all'). It is a poem radiant with expectant yearning for new life: 'let me / Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken / The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships'.⁴⁰ 'Resign my life' is stamped by Shakespeare's coinage,⁴¹ just as 'unsubstantial' evokes the use of this word in *King Lear* moments before the painful reunion of child and desolate parent. 'Thou unsubstantial air that I embrace: / The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst / Owes nothing to thy blasts' (IV. i. 7-9) are Edgar's premature words before the entry of eyeless Gloucester. If, as Ricks maintains, 'Marina' is the greatest of Eliot's 'between-poems', it is because 'the energies of animosity are at once acknowledged to be substantial and believed to be so transcendable that they can "become unsubstantial"'.⁴² Romeo asks 'Shall I believe / That unsubstantial death is amorous' (V. iii. 102-3). Death conquered through love is the mystic truth glimpsed by Eliot in *Four Quartets* 'in a lifetime's death in love'.⁴³

'Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them'

In 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', Eliot observed that rather than lacking unity, Shakespeare 'unifies so far as they could be unified all the tendencies of a time that certainly lacked unity'.⁴⁴ It is a comment which anticipates Knight's remarkable assertion: 'If we use the word Shakespeare in the interpretation [of the plays] it should be used as we use the word "God": to signify that principle of unity and coherence within apparent multiplicity and disorder'. Eliot must have been struck by Knight's bracketing of Shakespeare's final plays with the *Commedia* as revelations of 'mystic truth from which are born the dogmas of the Catholic Church'.⁴⁵ At times, Eliot came close to saying that the differences between Dante and Shakespeare boiled down to the prominence, or otherwise, of Christian dogma in their

⁴⁰ *Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 110.

⁴¹ 'Tomorrow yield up rule, resign my life', *Titus Andronicus*, I. i. 191.

⁴² *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (1988), p. 234.

⁴³ *Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 190.

⁴⁴ *Selected Essays*, p. 139.

⁴⁵ Knight, *The Crown of Life* (1947), pp. 29 & 31.

work. Eliot agreed with George Santayana that, unlike Dante, Shakespeare was not a philosophical poet, if by ‘philosophical’ we mean a concern for conceptual coherence and consistency. Traces of Seneca, Machiavelli or Montaigne in Shakespeare do not present a coherent philosophy; the dramatist’s personal convictions could hardly be voiced in such a straightforward way. In his 1927 address to the Shakespeare Association, Eliot concluded that several ‘up-to-date’ Shakespeares were vitiated by their extraction of a ‘philosophy of life’ from virtuoso, multivocal poetic dramas.⁴⁶

‘Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third’⁴⁷ is hyperbole justifiable as an impassioned record of Eliot’s spiritual autobiography. However, his comparative analysis of these colossi of modern literature reveals the advantages of what Santayana termed the ‘unprecedented vigour and clearness’ of Dante’s ‘moral vision’ which appealed to Eliot’s rage for order.⁴⁸ In his 1929 study of Dante, Eliot quoted Octavius’ vision of Cleopatra, ‘she looks like sleep, / As she would catch another Antony / In her strong toil of grace’ (V. ii. 349-51), arguing the associative shock of these metaphors depend on the rapid fusion of complicated, dissimilar impressions (elsewhere, Eliot said the ‘whole of Cleopatra’s disastrous power over men and navies is evoked’ in these lines).⁴⁹ The passive strength of Cleopatra, serene in death but coiled like a mantrap, is compared to Brunetto Latini’s squint at astonished Dante, as if he were an old tailor peering at the eye of a needle. Dante’s simile is an explication of the meaning – it encourages us to ‘*see more definitely*’ in the dolorous gloom of Hell. Cleopatra’s paradoxical, promiscuous death mask is ‘expansive rather than intensive; its purpose is to *add* to what you see’.⁵⁰

Put another way, Dante’s visual images possess an expository clarity; he is a mind of the ordered *trecento*. By contrast, Shakespeare’s age was rank and gross with disorder. The difference is not necessarily one of poetic quality but one of belief. In an appendix to *Dante*, Eliot sketched out an ascending scale of ‘poetic *assent*’. Dante’s ‘la sua volontade è nostra pace’ affected this Christian commentator as ‘*literally true*’. Edgar’s ‘Ripeness is all’ (V. ii.

⁴⁶ Eliot mocked Lytton Strachey’s ‘fatigued Shakespeare, a retired Anglo-Indian’, he satirised John Middleton Murry for his ‘messianic Shakespeare, bringing a new philosophy and a new system of yoga’ and attacked the picture painted by Wyndham Lewis in *The Lion and the Fox* of a ‘ferocious Shakespeare, a furious Samson ... a Shakespeare who is a *positive* nihilist, an intellectual force *willing* destruction’. *Selected Essays*, pp. 126 & 134.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁴⁸ *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, Goethe* (New York, 1910), p. 92.

⁴⁹ *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard (1993), p. 123.

⁵⁰ *Selected Essays*, p. 244.

10) is granted, on the contrary, a vaguely ‘profound emotional meaning’.⁵¹ Eliot explained that such ‘gnomic utterances ... gain a great deal of their force from the position which they occupy and the light which they cast on the dramatic action’.⁵² Given the cruelty of the *Lear* universe, it is hard to believe blind, suicidal Gloucester would be readily soothed by gnomic wisdom on the battlefield or on the edge of a precipice. It is the cumulative articulation of an entire dramatic design, not any sententious sound bite (‘Ripeness is all’), which testifies to the greatness of Shakespeare’s theatrical skill.

The Development of Shakespeare’s verse

The launch of Eliot’s own career as a practising dramatist intensified this admiration for Shakespeare’s stagecraft. Although some of Knight’s extrapolations from the imagery of *Coriolanus* permeate the unfinished sequence ‘Coriolan’ (1936), Eliot’s interest in Knight’s symbolist patterns waned as he approached Shakespeare less as a visionary and more from the standpoint of a man of the theatre. By 1937, when he delivered two lectures at Edinburgh University examining Shakespeare’s long career as a popular dramatist catering for a diverse audience, Eliot appeared more enthusiastic about Harley Granville-Barker’s approach to the practical staging of Shakespeare’s plays, as contrasted to that of Knight, whom Eliot noted somewhat archly ‘endeavours to catch a falling star’.⁵³ The Edinburgh Lectures link Shakespeare’s success to the development of Elizabethan blank verse, a topic he had meditated upon for a considerable time.⁵⁴ Eliot’s history of English blank verse can be assembled from a series of BBC radio broadcasts delivered between 1929 and 1931, and his *Elizabethan Essays* collected in 1934. The progression begins with the early declamatory (at times bombastic) phase of Elizabethan rhetoric associated with Kyd and Marlowe. The monotonous metronome of end-stopped lines with a regular beat was ruffled by *Doctor Faustus* which ‘introduced several new tones’ and counter-rhythms.⁵⁵ Eliot concurred with Middleton Murry in arguing that the versification of Shakespeare’s early plays was often

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 270.

⁵² *Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, p. 53.

⁵³ Quoted in Charles Warren, *T. S. Eliot on Shakespeare* (Ann Arbor, 1987), p. 94.

⁵⁴ In 1926, Bruce Richmond commissioned Eliot to write a series of leading articles for the *TLS* on the development of English blank verse from Kyd and Marlowe to Milton. They did not appear.

⁵⁵ *Selected Essays*, p. 118.

inferior to Marlowe; furthermore, Shakespeare's gradual evolution as a verse dramatist would have been slower without Marlowe's example.

By 1600, however, Shakespeare's mature style had emerged as an extraordinarily flexible medium for expressing subtle shades of feeling. Eliot's thoughts reveal the impress of George Rylands's study *Words and Poetry* (1928), which characterised Shakespeare's new manner as 'packed with matter, a style that could gallop at a touch, with freer rhythms and higher emotional pressure'.⁵⁶ These styles continued to develop into the strenuous, sometimes overwrought, verse of the late period. According to Eliot, Shakespeare now disregarded the demands of the box office, leading him to the 'ultra-dramatic' experimentation of the last plays (for instance, the climactic recognition scene in *Pericles*). In conclusion, blank verse during Shakespeare's lifetime 'was more highly developed' and 'became the vehicle of more varied and intense feeling than it has ever conveyed since'; all his successors were inferior men who (with the exception of a few dazzling passages in Webster and Middleton) failed to carry forward his innovations.⁵⁷ By mid century blank verse hit the Chinese Wall of Miltonic magniloquence, quarrying building blocks from Marlovian instead of Shakespearean rhetoric.

This outline of the rise and fall of English blank verse underpins the narrative told in Eliot's 1937 lectures. These talks trace what Eliot called in his 1940 memorial Yeats Lecture, Shakespeare's 'slow, continuous development of mastery of his craft of verse'.⁵⁸ From the early dramatic success of *Romeo and Juliet* with its mixed, albeit not perfectly welded styles, Shakespeare advanced to the peak of his mastery of poetic drama in his most popular play, *Hamlet*. The centrality of *Hamlet* to Eliot's Edinburgh Lectures witnesses public recantation of his strictures on the artistic failure of this play. Eliot's close analysis of the opening scene, later published in 'Poetry and Drama' (1951), was the fruit of a lifetime spent worrying at the possibility, need, aims and future of verse drama. Eliot conducts us masterfully through the full orchestration of registers at the level of vocabulary, syntax and rhythm: from the 'homely idiom' of the 'brusque ejaculations' voiced by the guards on the battlements, to the 'slower movement' of Marcellus' 'Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy' (I. i. 26), then a 'solemn and sonorous' majesty on the appearance of the Ghost – 'What art thou that usurp'st this time of night' (49) – followed by Horatio's 'staccato' words on the Ghost's reappearance, before the lyrical close of 'But look, the morn in russet mantle clad / Walks o'er the dew of yon high

⁵⁶ *Shakespeare Criticism*, p. 386. In 1936 Eliot's secretary, Anne Ridler, incorporated two chapters from *Words and Poetry* in her anthology of contemporary Shakespearean criticism.

⁵⁷ *Selected Essays*, p. 118.

⁵⁸ *On Poetry and Poets* (1957), p. 254. A formative influence was G. B. Baker's *The Development of Shakespeare as Dramatist* (1907) which Eliot studied at Harvard in 1909.

eastward hill' (171-2).⁵⁹ Praise of the russet-clad dawn reverses Eliot's previous suggestion that this versification recalls the immature workmanship of *Romeo and Juliet*. In its 'musical' variety and vitality, as in its compelling 'dramatic' assurance and poise, suspending us in *Hamlet* without the Prince for two hundred lines, this first scene supports Eliot's assertion that it was 'as well constructed an opening scene as that of any play ever written.'⁶⁰

The ghost of *Hamlet* haunts the dawn patrol of the dead master in 'Little Gidding' (1942): Eliot's 'And faded on the blowing of the horn' reforms Shakespeare's 'It faded on the crowing of the cock' (162).⁶¹ These allusive and elusive revenants summon Ricks's meditations on 'ghosts who breathe the air of allusion ... an apprehension of how allusion may itself function as a spirit summoned, at once dead and alive.'⁶² Moreover, Eliot's 'familiar compound ghost' calls to mind the 'affable familiar ghost' of Sonnet 86 (an exploration of poetic rivalry), yet another allusive brush instinct with gratitude and anxiety. 'Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope', the line *Ash-Wednesday* adapted from Sonnet 29, captures something of this ambivalence, a productive tension in the poetry but a disabling one in his verse drama which self-consciously avoids what Eliot called 'the constricting toils' of Shakespeare's blank verse, a strong toil of grace, or fatal Cleopatra who spelt disaster for unwary aspirants to the modern theatre.⁶³

It is impossible to decouple Eliot's conspicuous impact on Shakespeare criticism from his achievement as a poet. This does not mean, of course, that it is impossible to approach Eliot's contribution to Shakespeare studies on this side of idolatry. Eliot himself retreated from the opinions voiced in his two major essays of 1919 and 1927 due to their 'facility of unqualified assertion which verges, here and there, on impudence.'⁶⁴ His public support of Wilson Knight's visionary interpretation of the Shakespearean pattern was as unexpected as it was enthusiastic but, over time, a more considered view led to qualifications, then a partial retraction. Eliot refused to sanction publication of his 1937 Edinburgh Lectures, feeling they needed to be substantially rewritten. They never were. Judged in retrospect, it is difficult to endorse G. K. Hunter's assertion that Eliot invented the twentieth-century Shakespeare. His bold criticisms of the plays lean heavily on the scholarship of others, and yet contemporaries

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 75-7.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

⁶¹ Eliot told John Hayward he was not prepared to lose 'the allusion to Hamlet's ghost'. *The Composition of 'Four Quartets'*, ed. Helen Gardner (1978), p. 196.

⁶² *True Friendship: Geoffrey Hill, Anthony Hecht and Robert Lowell Under the Sign of Eliot and Pound* (2010), p. 110.

⁶³ *On Poetry and Poets*, p. 150.

⁶⁴ *Essays on Elizabethan Drama*, p. vii.

complained that, when at his most original, Eliot was prone to overstatement, perhaps sometimes damagingly so. Aside from a few isolated passages – most notably, his reflections on Othello's dying speech and his rapt attention to the opening scene of *Hamlet* – Eliot's writings on Shakespeare lack the sustained analytical brilliance of Empson's exegeses in *The Structure of Complex Words*. Placed alongside Dante, Shakespeare can appear to Eliot disturbingly free of any interpretative moral framework in which to construe meaning; in Eliot's eyes, an illustration of the Elizabethan propensity towards chaos, a reading of Shakespeare that drew principally upon the tragedies. It is instructive that Eliot was relatively little concerned with the histories, the early romantic and the mature comedies. It was the great tragedies, the Roman plays, and the late romances which stirred his auditory imagination and whose presence can be savoured in his poetry, supremely in the arresting mystic music of 'Marina'.