

Where the Words Are Valid

T.S. ELIOT'S COMMUNITIES OF DRAMA

Randy Malamud

Where the Words Are Valid

T.S. ELIOT'S COMMUNITIES OF DRAMA

Randy Malamud

Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, Number 58



GREENWOOD PRESS

Westport, Connecticut • London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Malamud, Randy

Where the words are valid : T.S. Eliot's communities of drama /
Randy Malamud.

p. cm. — (Contributions in drama and theatre studies, ISSN
0163-3821 ; no. 58)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-313-27818-0 (alk. paper)

1. Eliot, T. S. (Thomas Stearns), 1888-1965—Dramatic works.

2. Verse drama—History and criticism. I. Title. II. Series.

PS3509.L43Z717 1994

822'.912—dc20 94-22018

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Copyright © 1994 by Randy Malamud

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be
reproduced, by any process or technique, without the
express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 94-22018

ISBN: 0-313-27818-0

ISSN: 0163-3821

First published in 1994

Greenwood Press, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the
Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National
Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

WHERE THE WORDS ARE VALID

**Recent Titles in
Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies**

Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet:

Puppetry as a Theatrical Art

Steve Tillis

George Sand's *Gabriel*

Gay Manifold

Confronting Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*:

Essays in Critical Pluralism

Philip C. Kolin, editor

Challenging the Hierarchy:

Collective Theatre in the United States

Mark S. Weinberg

The Dawning of American Drama:

American Dramatic Criticism, 1746-1915

Jürgen C. Wolter, editor

The Actor Speaks:

Actors Discuss Their Experiences and Careers

Joan Jeffri, editor

Richard Wagner and Festival Theatre

Simon Williams

Playwright versus Director:

Authorial Intentions and Performance Interpretations

Jeane Luere, editor; Sidney Berger, advisory editor

George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre

Tracy C. Davis

Playwrights and Acting:

Acting Methodologies for Brecht, Ionesco, and Shephard

James H. McTeague

Israel Horovitz: A Collection of Critical Essays

Leslie Kane, editor

Jung's Advice to the Players: A Jungian Reading
of Shakespeare's Problem Plays

Sally F. Porterfield

Copyright Acknowledgments

The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge permission to consult T. S. Eliot's dramatic manuscripts and typescripts, courtesy of the T. S. Eliot Collection, King's College, Cambridge University, and to reprint excerpts from the following materials:

Collected Poems 1909–1962 by T. S. Eliot, copyright 1936 by Harcourt Brace & Company, copyright © 1964, 1963 by T. S. Eliot, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company, and of Faber and Faber Ltd on behalf of the Estate of T. S. Eliot.

Four Quartets, copyright 1943 by T. S. Eliot and renewed 1971 by Esme Valerie Eliot, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company, and of Faber and Faber Ltd on behalf of the Estate of T. S. Eliot.

Murder in the Cathedral by T. S. Eliot, copyright 1935 by Harcourt Brace & Company and renewed 1963 by T. S. Eliot, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company, and of Faber and Faber Ltd on behalf of the Estate of T. S. Eliot.

The Family Reunion, copyright 1939 by T. S. Eliot and renewed 1967 by Esme Valerie Eliot, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company, and of Faber and Faber Ltd on behalf of the Estate of T. S. Eliot.

The Cocktail Party, copyright 1950 by T. S. Eliot and renewed 1978 by Esme Valerie Eliot, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company, and of Faber and Faber Ltd on behalf of the Estate of T. S. Eliot.

The Confidential Clerk, copyright 1954 by T. S. Eliot and renewed 1982 by Esme Valerie Eliot, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company, and of Faber and Faber Ltd on behalf of the Estate of T. S. Eliot.

The Elder Statesman by T. S. Eliot. Copyright © 1959 by Thomas Stearns Eliot, renewed © 1987 by Valerie Eliot. Reprinted by permission of Farrar Straus & Giroux, Inc., and of Faber and Faber Ltd on behalf of the Estate of T. S. Eliot.

The Idea of a Christian Society, copyright 1939 by T. S. Eliot and renewed 1967 by Esme Valerie Eliot, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company, and of Faber and Faber Ltd on behalf of the Estate of T. S. Eliot.

The Letters of T. S. Eliot by Valerie Eliot, copyright © 1988 by SET Copyrights Limited, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company, and of Faber and Faber Ltd on behalf of the Estate of T. S. Eliot.

Selected Essays by T. S. Eliot, copyright 1950 by Harcourt Brace & Company and renewed 1978 by Esme Valerie Eliot, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company, and of Faber and Faber Ltd on behalf of the Estate of T. S. Eliot.

"Who Stands the Crux Left of the Watershed," "Consider This and In Our Time," and "Though Aware of Our Rank," from *Collected Poems* by W. H. Auden. Copyright ©

1934 and renewed 1962 by W. H. Auden. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc., and of Faber and Faber Ltd.

"Out on the Lawn I Lie in Bed," from *Collected Poems* by W. H. Auden. Copyright © 1937 by Random House, Inc. and renewed 1965 by W. H. Auden. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc., and of Faber and Faber Ltd.

"As I Walked Out One Evening," from *Collected Poems* by W. H. Auden. Copyright © 1940 and renewed 1968 by W. H. Auden. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc., and of Faber and Faber Ltd.

For Wendy Simonds
with love

Acknowledgments

I thank all my colleagues at Georgia State University for innumerable forms of support while I was writing this book. My present chair, Robert Sattelmeyer, and my past one, Virginia Spencer Carr, have been tireless in their enthusiastic devotion to the department's scholarly enterprise. I am grateful to Dean Ahmed T. Abdelal and Associate Dean Robert Arrington for released time and for their commitment to upholding the highest academic standards throughout GSU's College of Arts and Sciences. Grants from Cleon Arrington in the university's Research Office funded two years of graduate assistantship and enabled me to examine the T. S. Eliot Collection at King's College, Cambridge; I thank that library's modern archivist, Jacqueline Cox, for her assistance. The librarians at Georgia State University's Pullen Library and Emory University's Woodruff Library have also been of immense assistance at every stage of this project.

Deborah Browning's research and editorial assistance have been an immeasurable contribution: her efforts have helped make this book a better one than it would otherwise have been. In the homestretch, Noelle Baker's contributions were invaluable; she has been an incisive and perceptive reader. I thank David Galef for commenting upon my work constructively, and Dabney Hart for being a never ending source of advice on matters large and small. The English department support staff has been just that—I thank, especially, Patricia Bryan for keeping the funds flowing and James Poulakos for his computer wizardry.

All the editors I have dealt with at Greenwood Press have made my work, on this book and a previous one, rewarding and efficient.

I am, as always, indebted to Daniel, Judith, and Lisa Malamud, Wendy Simonds, and Jacob Simonds-Malamud, for their encouragement, tolerance, and inspiration. A man named Dale has irrefutably affirmed for me the enduring virtues of community support.

Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
1. <i>Sweeney Agonistes</i> : "I Gotta Use Words"	7
2. <i>The Rock</i> : "There Is No Life That Is Not in Community"	31
3. <i>Murder in the Cathedral</i> : "Our Eyes Are Compelled to Witness"	63
4. <i>The Family Reunion</i> : "The Particular Has No Language"	93
5. <i>The Cocktail Party</i> : "Where the Words Are Valid"	117
6. <i>The Confidential Clerk</i> : "Mind Control Is a Different Matter"	145
7. <i>The Elder Statesman</i> : "The Words Mean What They Say"	169
Notes	187
Bibliography	199
Index	205

Introduction

My interest in T. S. Eliot's plays began ten years ago in graduate school, in a masterful seminar on Eliot taught by Jeffrey Perl. Under his direction, in a master's thesis entitled "The Importance of Eliot's Later Work: Society and Transformation in *The Cocktail Party*," I argued that Julia Shuttlethwaite represents a crucial development in Eliot's career, emblematic of a new outlook in terms of his treatment of women, human beneficence, and social interaction. That work sparked my interest in how Eliot's drama embodies a social agenda and how his movement in this direction relates to the overall trajectory of his literary career. A decade later, my rudimentary work seems surprisingly compatible with what has developed since then. I quote from the final paragraph of my master's thesis, both to indulge myself and because I think it is important to recognize and identify one's formative critical experiences.

Eliot has arrived, by 1949, at a visionary plateau that allows him to forgive the lady settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl that Julia might have been in her youth, and to forget the self-centered Aunt Helen that Julia was in Eliot's youth. Eliot has embraced the community that he simultaneously creates in the play, and has learned the need for spiritual guidance in every drawing room. . . . In such an egalitarian community of housekeepers, the one who best embodies the ideals that will protect the community is rewarded simply by being perceived as the guiding force of society. Of course, it would be superfluous and counterproductive for the Guardians or their flock to acknowledge anything more than the nebulous outlines of their community, as Julia does when she calls the Guardians together to proceed to the next cocktail party. It is, rather, only the detached audience, which has observed the machinations of their society, that identifies Julia's importance, the recognition of which fulfills Eliot's desire that we apply to our own lives the values we have learned in making this identification.

As a graduate student, I chose the topic largely out of a sense that new avenues of scholarly approach to Eliot were rare, perhaps nearly exhausted; the plays seemed to offer fresh ground, especially for a young scholar overwhelmed by the PS/3509 shelves. To a certain extent, this sense sustains my interest in Eliot's plays. Besides that, though, I have found that I greatly enjoy reading them. They are *pleasant*, well crafted, piquant, fresh, and at the same time, Eliotic, whatever that means (deep? careful? enchanting? perverse? masochistic?). Reading them, I get a sense of being closer to Eliot than when I marvel and shudder at the poses that fill his poetry. I felt this closeness especially when I studied the dramatic drafts and manuscripts in the T. S. Eliot Collection at King's College, Cambridge. As I examined his careful editorial precision (he sometimes contemplated five barely different variants of some pedestrian phrase) I saw a master craftsman who had, for some reason I hoped to understand fully as I completed my research for this book, chosen to engage in what an earlier Eliot might have lambasted as bourgeois tripe.

When asked what my thesis about the plays was, I joked: that there are some nice bits in them. While riveted by Eliot's poetry, I felt that the plays provide something more *accessible*—something that must be read carefully and examined minutely, precisely (in a way that the plays have not very often been studied, especially in comparison to his poetry), to understand something about his complete oeuvre. The plays are one way of getting at the core of Eliot's sensibility, which presents scholars with fundamental insights into the modern age and its aesthetic. I state this perception despite a deepening critical and political antipathy to Eliot, with which I am sympathetic. To understand Eliot's weighty contribution to the pantheon of modernism, I argue, one must take serious account of his dramatic career. Ultimately, if this book succeeds, its most important function will be to bring to modernist scholars' serious attention a large body of work that has often been glibly patronized and relegated to near obscurity.

Though the plays are often dismissed as lightweight or popularized tangents to Eliot's more profound earlier aesthetic, this study attempts to unearth in them a sensibility that in many ways extends, undiminished, his famous poetic from the 1910s and 1920s. I believe that Eliot's plays embody more significant connections than disruptions with the rest of his work and that they are integrally related to it. Further, I have discovered in them a deep and richly suggestive autobiographical vein that illuminates the persona and psyche of Eliot the playwright (and, as well, throwbacks to Eliot as a younger poet and critic). Since Lyndall Gordon's stellar biographical scholarship, the Eliot industry has gradually come to accept the primacy of understanding and uncovering the man behind Eliot's texts. His chronicle of the intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional history of the first half of the twentieth century is conducted from a profoundly idiosyncratic and autobiographically interiorized point of view. To appreciate this perspective fully, it is necessary to know the man and his mind more intimately. The plays enable this endeavor. They consistently direct the audi-

ence and the scholar toward the roots—autobiographical, psychological, and otherwise—of Eliot's elaborate poetic of traumatic alienation; and, in tandem, toward the counterforce to this alienation, the succor of community beneficence that an older Eliot came to embrace in his texts and in his life.

The plays are, of course, substantially different in tenor from the poetry: the poems project a harshly fragmented, incommunicable, solipsistic social vacuum, while the plays embody a quest for social unity and coherence. The plays present a *revision* of the poetic and ethos for which Eliot the poet is better known, but they are not, as many assume, a wholesale refutation of it. Eliot's drama continues and completes the mission he set for himself as a young man: communicating the modern condition, in a language he had to craft as he went along because no extant voice could encapsulate its scope. The poems show the desperation and near futility of the communicative enterprise, while the plays demonstrate its success. But Eliot's poetry and drama are ultimately part of a unified and consistent undertaking and are conducted in remarkably congruous terms, despite obvious generic and stylistic dissimilarities. One cannot appreciate the full effect of the poetry without attention to the resolution inherent in the plays, just as Dante's *Inferno* cannot be wholly understood without the *Paradiso*.

Eliot's interest in drama was longstanding: as early as 1919, critical essays he wrote about such dramatists as Edmond Rostand, Christopher Marlowe, William Shakespeare, and Ben Jonson show an incisive attention to craft and form that presages his own incipient theatrical aspirations. In a variety of ways, Eliot was consistently involved in and attentive to drama and dramatic issues throughout his career—this involvement is perhaps the closest thing he had to a constant focal point. (At the same time, I must concede that none of Eliot's plays was an unqualified success; if Eliot had left only the legacy of his dramatic canon, it would have been an unsatisfying one.) Eliot's drama points (or, perhaps, yearns) toward a community sensibility—admitting the possible nature of modernism as conducive to community, rather than incontrovertibly isolationist—that forms a fundamental component of his total vision. It seems that Eliot knew something was missing from his writing in the 1910s and 1920s: some cohering force, some more secure and credible stance of control, some substantial essence or completion or moral or hope. I believe he felt, even as he looked back from decades later, that this deficiency was acceptable, even imperative, in his earlier work. As he saw it, the world was not ready for this force, or didn't deserve it, at the time; and neither was Eliot himself receptive to such a poetic wholeness.

In 1927, Eliot came to a recognition and remediation of this deficiency in his personal life. His conversion to Anglo-Catholicism betokened a precise location, a confident fixing, of a self that previously had been drifting untethered. His professional life featured the publication of *Sweeney Agonistes* that same year.¹ Even in retrospect, the correlation between these momentous occasions in Eliot's private and public lives is oblique. Eliot's religious experience and

Sweeney's "Hoo-ha's" hardly seem related to each other, let alone part of an enterprise that would lead to the literary manifestation of a dramatically expressed community imperative. Eliot's career has a keenly complex pattern in the carpet, as one would, of course, expect. But this pattern, this sense of direction in Eliot's canon, increasingly asserts itself in fits and starts and in experiments—successful and otherwise—involving primordial social rituals, religious drama, music hall, jazz rhythms, verse drama, historical drama, choral performance, classical transpositions, conversationally bantering light comedies; his efforts span the gamut. They were at times erratic, as he was himself aware, but I find them bravely and honestly so for the writer who had so carefully guarded his work in the past, releasing tiny snippets of highly worked poetry after years of gestation and only when they were perfectly intractable and impenetrable poses, as harshly chiseled in stone as the sculptures of Jacques Lipchitz or Henri Gaudier-Brzeska.

The connection between Eliot's early and late texts is language, words. In *The Language of Modernism*, I examined how Eliot (like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce) wrenches his poetic language, reworks it, smashes and reassociates it, so it can convey something that it could not previously have done: it describes a landscape that had seemed unspeakable in the language of the past. In the present book, as I study a later phase of Eliot's career, I find that he retains his obsession with words. He shows a conviction that the nature of language is a threshold concern in any confrontation with the nature of the surrounding world. But now, linguistic exploration and expression come much more easily than they had before. The speakers *will* this new fluency (as, of course, does the writer). Eliot has come to recognize that even in the modern age one can choose to make things difficult or to make things easy.

In the first half of his career, Eliot reveled in making things difficult and then brilliantly "getting out" of that difficulty (to the extent that a successfully completed poem is always a triumph over muteness, which for Eliot signifies the difficulty of language). By the late 1920s, and even more so by the late 1930s and after, he tries to make things easier with respect to language. In a nutshell, he does so through community: creating communities, upholding them, celebrating them. Drama is itself inherently communal, and the communities in Eliot's plays are consummately self-conscious of their debt to drama and the extent to which they grow out of drama (both the drama at hand and the larger surrounding traditions of drama). The crux of Eliot's dramatic community is that it is, by nature, composed of people who interact, who communicate, who use language, commonly, successfully, with each other. People understand what other people mean; language works.

In and through drama, Eliot found a place "where the words are valid"; I take this expression from act 2 of *The Cocktail Party*.² The *Guardians* offhandedly use the phrase to indicate that when Peter Quilpe has become settled into a stable personal and community equilibrium, it is language that will validate his success. Valid words (obviously appropriate to the social enterprise of

drama, where people must hear and be heard by other characters as well as the audience) represent the antidote to what Eliot bemoaned in his earlier poetry: in "Prufrock," for example, where "It is impossible to say just what I mean." I have latched onto the identification and affirmation of valid language in *The Cocktail Party* as the defining moment of Eliot's dramatic career. I define "communities of drama" in the last section of chapter 2, admittedly a good way into the book for what I present as such a crucial concept in Eliot's dramatic practice and ideals. I reach it only after a protracted discussion of his work up to that point, because Eliot himself reached it only after a long and laborious process: slogging through the wastelandish terrain of Sweeney's agon and the right-hearted but aesthetically unpromising endeavor of a pageant for a church fund-raising drive.

Though I hope this book serves as a fairly comprehensive treatment of Eliot's drama, it is not a start-to-finish trot; some topics, such as Eliot's Greek dramatic analogies, the context of mid-century verse drama, and performance aspects of the plays, are treated relatively minimally. Each chapter has a kind of logic and pacing of its own (or, perhaps, of *my* own, which I hope the reader eventually discerns). I offer a kind of meditation on each play, reflecting what I have found most provocative; my aim is to identify an ingress to the core of each work and to highlight its significance in Eliot's dramatic development. Dissimilarities in my treatment of different plays perhaps result in a cubist approach that presents seven different views of Eliot's communities of drama, from seven different vantage points. There are also, however, fairly important continuities in each play and each chapter, reflecting my conviction that Eliot had an overall program in mind for the dramatic enterprise that he undertook: a search for communities of drama, established in a realm where the words are valid.

Sweeney Agonistes: "I Gotta Use Words"

Sweeney Agonistes is often dismissed as unperformable "closet drama." But in this "Aristophanic Melodrama," as in his various incarnations throughout Eliot's poetry of the early 1920s, the title character is consummately a public figure and one who demands to flourish on stage. Indeed, the manifestation of Sweeney's persona constitutes Eliot's turn from an inward poetic to an extroverted, communal drama.

Eliot's earliest poetry is at root dramatic: peopled with compelling characters in highly charged settings, richly atmospheric, laden with intrigue that awaits resolution. "It may be . . . that there is a dramatic element in much of my early work," he writes in *The Three Voices of Poetry*; "It may be that from the beginning I aspired unconsciously to the theatre" (98). But in this poetry the dramatic fruition of performance is perverted into solipsistic stasis as Prufrock, Gerontion, the Rhapsodist on a Windy Night, and the Portraitist of a Lady retreat into one-man shows sans audience. Prufrock, for example, frustrates dramatic development and climax as he refuses to pose his overwhelming question. He defuses dramatic denouement: he has *already known* all the evenings, mornings, afternoons. He teasingly announces the boundaries of playspace and its promise of character interaction in the drawing room where the women talk of Michelangelo, waiting for the protagonist to enter and bring the dialogue to the audience. But he misses (or ignores) his cue and retreats. Prufrock flirts with inscribing himself in traditional dramatic figures only to disappoint by declining the roles. He is not ultimately Prince Hamlet or even fully—only *almost*—the Fool.