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The Order in *The Cocktail Party*

Yuko Oka

T. S. Eliot wrote *The Cocktail Party* inspired by the *Alcestis* of Euripides.¹ The play of *Alcestis* is about the unexpected return of a dead wife. It was not until *Alcestis* died that *Admetus* despised himself. Because of the treat which *Admetus* offered to *Heracles* in fear of gods, *Alcestis* was brought back from the dead. It is a dramatic irony that *Heracles* says, 'Must I be turned away for a stranger's funeral?'² In encounter with his wife come from the dead, *Admetus* worshipped gods and said, 'Our life is changed : a new and better day now rises. I confess that Fortune has been kind to me' (157).

Likewise, *The Cocktail Party* deals with the impact of the discovery of truth which bestows wisdom of humility on man. However, Eliot's main concern is the poetic understanding of the world rather than morality. The recognition of the authority of justice is the central action of the play, and there is the sense that 'somebody is always interfering...' (I . 391).³ It is intimated that the affair of the authority is to give freedom to those who surrender. The tone of the play is serious but not grave and becomes more genial towards the end.

I

The movement of the early part of the play is rather swift and unsettled with the interruption of people, phone calls, door bells and so on. The ruin of the marriage has culminated in the leaving of *Lavinia*. The play

treats man's insensibility to degeneration as the cause of grief. It is pointed out that the absentmindedness is the nature of the vain man as Sir Henry says, 'They don't mean to do harm - but the harm does not interest them. / Or they do not see it, or they justify it / Because they are absorbed in the endless struggle / To think well of themselves' (I . 403) .

Edward's attitude changes when he recognises authority in an unidentified guest. Edward ought to have kept the promise he made when he married and continued to love Lavinia, but failed, never realizing his own unrighteousness. Furthermore, to his surprise, he finds that he has never been in love with Celia. The decision he made is to have Lavinia back.

Celia experiences humiliation by Edward's choice. Edward explains Celia the reason as follows :

The self that can say 'I want this - or want that' -
The self that wills - he is a feeble creature ;
He has to come to terms in the end
With the obstinate, the tougher self ; who does not speak,
Who never talks, who cannot argue ;
And who in some men may be the *guardian* -
But in men like me, the dull, the implacable,
The indomitable spirit of mediocrity.
The willing self can continue the disaster
Of this unwilling partnership - but can only flourish
In submission to the rule of the stronger partner. (I . 381)

The image of Edward in the past comes to Celia's mind, as if she has 'unwrapped a mummy' (I . 382) , as 'only a beetle the size of a man,' and she sees him as another person she never knew now.

The blindness of man is repeatedly referred to in this play. There is the

pattern of questioning about the love affair which seems so unsubstantial. Edward says, 'And I *must* get her back, to find out what has happened. / During the five years that we've been married. / I must find out who she is, to find out who I am (I . 364).' Peter asks, 'I was saying, what is the reality / Of experience between two unreal people? / But I must find out / The truth about the past, for the sake of the memory' (I . 371). Celia says, 'Perhaps the dream was better. It seemed the real reality, / And if this is reality, it is very like a dream' (I . 379).

As the play progresses, they come to realize that others they saw were only the projections of their desires and expectations. Celia apologizes Edward for not having loved him, whereas Edward justifies himself by telling that he perhaps loves Celia. She says,

The man I saw before, he was only a projection -
 I see that now - of something that I wanted -
 No, not wanted - something that I aspired to -
 Something that I desperately wanted to exist.
 It must happen somewhere - but what, and where is it?
 Edward, I see that I was simply making use of you.
 And I ask you to forgive me. (I . 382)

The unidentified guest offered Edward the occasion to decide what he would do. Edward's decision disillusioned Celia. They drink to the guardians and part.

II

According to Nevill Coghill, Eliot originally used the word 'daemon' instead of 'guardian'.⁴ In *The Republic* of Plato, it is discussed that the guardians are the defenders of the state, whose characteristics are 'a

philosophic disposition, high spirits, speed, and strength.’⁵ ‘Daemon’ is the half-way between mortal and immortal whose function is to ‘interpret and convey messages to the gods from men and to men from the gods, prayers and sacrifices from the one, and commands and rewards from the other.’⁶

As Grover Smith remarks, ‘The authority of Sir Henry, from the point of view of realism, is not that of a magistrate.’⁷ He is a servant under authority, a loving elder who directs the younger. His fundamental recognition is that man is a multi-dimensional being as ‘an object’ and ‘a person’. He says that ‘one is an object as well as a person. But we forget about it / As quickly as we can’ (I . 362). This is metaphorically described in the image of a surgical operation.

In talking to the matron, you are still the subject,
The centre of reality. But, stretched on the table,
You are piece of furniture in a repair shop
For those who surround you, the masked actors ;
All there is of you is your body
And the ‘you’ is withdrawn.... (I . 363)

There is a sense of the subject beyond the subject. This essence never changes though the personality changes.

The first characteristic of the guardians is to tell the truth under the law of justice. Thus Lavinia is told by Sir Henry, ‘You have come where the word ‘insult’ has no meaning ; / And you must put up with that’ (II . 407). The second is their excellence of knowledge and wisdom. Sir Henry is one who knows characters more than themselves, as he says to Edward, ‘Who are you now? / You don’t know any more than I do, / But rather less’ (I . 363), because for one thing that they have the special way of collecting informations as well as their intellect. Besides Sir

Henry is talented for penetrating the inclination of spirit as Alex calls it his 'usual foresight' (II. 400), and prophesied Celia's death. The third is that guardians, Sir Henry, Julia and Alex, work complementary together in concordance. Alex knows 'everybody, everywhere' (I. 388), thus they have a worldwide network.

III

There were some difficulties for the regeneration of the relationship between Edward and Lavinia, in spite of Edward's decision to submit himself to the rule of the stronger. The play profoundly concerns for the nature of human frailty.

Before Lavinia returns, Edward is directed to consider the significance of accepting authority and starting a new life by the unidentified guest.

UNIDENTIFIED GUEST. You made a decision. You set in motion
Forces in your life and in the lives of others
Which cannot be reversed. That is one consideration.
And another is this: it is a serious matter
To bring someone back from the dead.

EDWARD. From the dead?
That figure of speech is somewhat... dramatic,
As it was only yesterday that my wife left me.

UNIDENTIFIED GUEST. Ah, but we die to each other daily.
What we know of other people
Is only our memory of the moments
During which we know them. And they have changed since
then.... (I. 384-5)

First of all, it is a great responsibility to keep the promise, and second

is that they should not be false in this crucial season. They are requirements for Edward and Lavinia. The unidentified guest continues to explain that one should see others as they really are, 'a stranger' (I. 385), not the images of others made to meet one's own needs. His singing a song after the talk is a comic relief.

However, from the very moment Edward and Lavinia are alone again, they start to quarrel. They justify themselves by blaming each other for the ruin of their own lives. Edward finally visits Sir Henry's consulting room to 'escape from himself - and get better of his wife' (II. 400).

Sir Henry points out that the cause of their failure is to have tried to lie to him. Both Edward and Lavinia concealed their love affair and blamed each other in front of Sir Henry. Sir Henry reveals that both of them came to him not for a cure but for self-interest; Edward's self-esteem was disturbed by the suspicion of his own incapability to love, and Lavinia was shocked by awareness of having never been loved by anybody and feared that nobody could love her. Sir Henry explains that one of the symptoms to qualify a patient for his sanatorium is 'an honest mind. / That is one of the causes of their suffering' (II. 407). If he had sent either of Edward or Lavinia to the sanatorium in the state in which they came to him, 'it would have been a horror beyond your [their] imagining, / The shadow of desires and desires' (II. 410).

Having pointed out the weakness of Edward and Lavinia, Sir Henry indicates the brighter side for them. He says that they are 'exceptionally well-suited to each other' (II. 409).

REILLY. See it rather as the bond which holds you together.

While still in a state of unenlightenment,

You could always say: 'he could not love any woman;'

You could always say: 'no man could love her.'

You could accuse each other of your own faults,

And so could avoid understanding each other.
Now, you have only to reverse the propositions
And put them together. (II. 410)

Edward decisively says with compassion, 'Lavinia, we must make the best of a bad job. / That is what he means.' They have become more humble to accept their weakness after the humiliating experience. Sir Henry encouragingly says to them,

When you find, Mr. Chamberlayne,
The best of a bad job is all any of us make of it -
Except of course, the saints - such as those who go
To the sanatorium - you will forget this phrase,
And in forgetting it will alter the condition. (II. 410)

Two years later, their relationship is completely renewed. They have become loving and sympathetic, and still try to be. Lavinia says to Edward, 'But you know what I mean' (III. 434), and Edward says to Lavinia, 'And you know what I'm thinking.' The compliment of Edward to Lavinia's dress before the cocktail party signifies their enlightenment.

IV

Celia also visits Sir Henry under the guidance of Julia. Celia is a humble woman as to say to him, 'I may have been a fool : / But I don't mind at all having been a fool' (II. 415), whereas Edward is once told, 'Resign yourself to be the fool you are' (I. 363). She can 'laugh about' (I. 387) her error.

She confesses that there are two things which she is suffering from. They are 'an awareness of solitude' (II. 413) and 'a sense of sin' (II.

414). Her awareness of solitude is 'a revelation about my [her] relationship / With *everybody*' in which there is no true understanding of each other. The response of Sir Henry is, 'Disillusion can become itself an illusion / If we rest in it' (II. 417). His concept that the awareness of human limitation is a partial reality reminds Celia of her experience of existential love.

I have thought at moments that the ecstasy is real
Although those who experience it may have no reality.
For what happened is remembered like a dream
In which one is exalted by intensity of loving
In the spirit, a vibration of delight
Without desire, for desire is fulfilled
In the delight of loving. (II. 417)

Eliot clarifies that there are two primary propositions in this play : '(1) nobody understands you but God ; (2) all real love is ultimately the love of God.'⁸

Celia chooses to surrender herself to the utmost reality. Although her death seems waste to Edward and Lavinia at first, Sir Henry calls it triumphant. Act III, with the dominant image of monkeys which are destructive, has the highlight in Celia's death as a symbol. Peter somewhat realises his egotism for the first time by her death.

The play exemplifies the two ways to avoid the final desolation : the way of 'the human condition' (II. 417) and the way of faith. The way of 'the human condition' is to get married and to lead the life of the world without excessive expectation or aspiration. It is 'a good life.' The other way is to serve God and it 'leads towards possession / Of what you have sought for in the wrong place' (II. 418). Sir Henry explains that 'Neither way is better. / Both ways are necessary. It is also necessary /

To make a choice between them.' The guardians are instrumental in this sense.⁹ It is responsibility for each individual to choose.

V

The Cocktail Party ends with the conclusion that every moment is a new beginning and man must go on despite of everything. When the cocktail party begins Lavinia says, 'Oh, I'm glad. It's begun' (III. 440). The underlying concern of the play is the one-way grace of God to continually try to teach and save frail man. Eliot indicates the power of God to accomplish human relationship, depicting men's submission to the will of God fructified in their fulfillment of love.

Notes

¹ T.S. Eliot, 'Poetry and Drama,' *On Poetry and Poets* (London : Faber, 1957), 85.

² Euripides, *Three Plays* trans. Philip Vellacott (Middlesex : Penguin, 1972), 146.

³ All references to this work are to the text of T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London : Faber, 1969)

⁴ Nevill Coghill, ed., *T.S. Eliot's 'The Cocktail Party'* (London : Faber, 1974), 209.

⁵ Plato, *The Republic* trans. Desmond Lee (Middlesex : Penguin, 1974), 128.

⁶ Plato, *The Symposium* trans. Walter Hamilton (Middlesex : Penguin, 1975), 81.

⁷ Grover Smith, *T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* (Chicago & London : U of Chicago P, 1961), 217.

⁸ Coghill, 192.

⁹ David Ward, *T.S. Eliot Between Two Worlds* (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 210.