

## 5. T. S. Eliot, “The Cocktail Party”

In his 1949 Spencer lecture, T. S. Eliot admitted to trying to conceal the source of the main theme of his play, “The Cocktail Party.”<sup>1</sup> He confessed that he took his theme of a wife who chooses to die for her husband from the *Alcestis* of Euripides. But some students of the play have suspected other sources as well. Two scholars claim parallels with the ancient drinking party depicted in Plato’s *Symposium*.<sup>2</sup> The circumstance of souls who midway in life’s journey have lost their sense of the way forward has reminded one reader of the opening scene in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.<sup>3</sup> Others have linked the Guardians who figure prominently in the play with the Guardians of Plato’s *Republic*, seeing them as a kind of advanced guard of Eliot’s Community of Christians.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly there is no shortage of Christian symbols in *TCP*: a father-confessor/psychiatrist, a saintly young woman who suffers death by crucifixion, repeated references to devils and angels, a trinity of superior beings, two Good Samaritans, even the provision of food and drink as a kind of secular Eucharist.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult, moreover, to encounter references to Zoroaster and the Buddha without suspecting some Eastern influences.<sup>6</sup> Lastly, the contrast between persons and physical objects drawn by the

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<sup>1</sup> “I was still inclined to go a Greek dramatist for my theme, but I was determined to do so merely as a point of departure, and to conceal the origins so well that nobody would identify them until I pointed them out myself. In this at least I have been successful; for no one of my acquaintance recognized the source of my story in the *Alcestis* of Euripides.” Eliot’s Theodore Spencer Memorial Lecture at Harvard University was published as Eliot 1951. I refer to the play throughout as *TCP*.

<sup>2</sup> Yoklavich 1951, 541-42 and K. Reckford 1991, 303-12.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, 1960, 154.

<sup>4</sup> See Jones 1960, 149 ff.; E. M. Browne 1966, 16, and 1969, 185; and Smith 1974, 220.

<sup>5</sup> See Rexine, 1965, 21-26 and Arrowsmith 1950, 411-30.

<sup>6</sup> *TCP* 145 and 183; McCarthy 1952, 31-55.

Uninvited Guest of Act One<sup>7</sup> closely follows Sartre's contrast of the human being who exists "for itself" with the physical object that can exist only "in itself."<sup>8</sup> But in developing his vision of the self in conflict, as earlier in his *Four Quartets*<sup>9</sup>, Eliot also drew heavily on the teachings of Heraclitus.

*TCP*, it seems safe to say, depicts individuals enmeshed in dysfunctional relationships. Edward and Lavinia Chamberlayne have long since ceased loving one another and each has turned to another person in search of affection. As Act One opens Edward finds himself in the awkward position of having to carry on with a cocktail party Lavinia scheduled before she decided to leave him. We soon learn that another guest, Celia Coplestone, has been Edward's mistress. The remaining participant, Peter Quilpe, declares his love for Celia despite the fact that he has been Lavinia's lover. An unidentified guest at the party arranges for Edward and Lavinia to be brought to his office where, now revealed to be the physician/psychiatrist Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly, he seeks to improve their understanding of themselves and their relationships with others. Two other guests, Alexander Gibbs and Julia Shuttlethwaite, assist Harcourt-Reilly in orchestrating the arrivals of the troubled lovers. Edward and Lavinia are made to confront each other and urged "to make the best of a bad job" together. Celia is able to move

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. "Or rather, you've lost touch with the person/ You thought you were. You no longer feel quite human/ You're suddenly reduced to the status of an object—/ a living object, but no longer a person" (*TCP*, 29).

<sup>8</sup> See Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism" in Kaufman 1989 as well as Sartre 1956. In addition, Edward Chamberlayne's comment 'Hell is oneself' (*TCP*, 98) opposes the view of Hell as other people expressed in Sartre's *No Exit*. According to Browne (1969, 233), Eliot acknowledged the Sartre connection.

<sup>9</sup> Eliot selected Heraclitus' fragments B 2 and B 60 as epigraphs for his "Burnt Norton", the first of the four quartets. In doing so he drew on the later religious connotations of *logos* and used the Heraclitean idea of the unity of the way up and the way down to make the point that the path toward a spiritual life is also a departure from sense experience.

beyond her sense of isolation but still seeks to find some meaning in her life. With Harcourt-Reilly's help she chooses a path of service to others that leads eventually to a martyr's death. At the end of Act Two the three Guardians—Sir Henry, Alex, and Julia—drink a toast to those who have embarked on a new life. In the final act the original participants reassemble at Edward and Lavinia's home, two years after the original party. Although Edward and Lavinia appear to have achieved rapprochement, Alex reports that Celia's decision to enter a religious order has led to a painful death by crucifixion "very near an ant-hill." This shocking development, evidently even more shocking in the play's original version<sup>10</sup>, provides an occasion for reflection on opportunities missed and the extent of one person's responsibility for decisions made by others.

Although the focus of *TCP* is the quest for personal understanding and renewal rather than the nature of the intelligent power that link events taking place throughout the cosmos, Eliot's language frequently echoes the teachings of Heraclitus. There is at least a hint of an epistemological problem Heraclitus had identified in the complaint Alex makes against Julia in the opening lines of *TCP*:

You've missed the point, completely, Julia:  
There *were* no tigers. *That* was the point. (9)

Julia's problem, missing the point, is the precisely the ailment which afflicts the guests who have assembled for cocktails at the home of Edward Chamberlayne. Each fails to realize fully who he or she is, whom they love, and even what it means to live a distinctly

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<sup>10</sup> The text for the Edinburgh performance mentioned the decomposition of Celia's body and the villagers' use of "a juice that is attractive to the ants." Martin Browne comments that "It was evident that the physical details which the author intended to reinforce the authenticity of Celia's suffering were having the effect of distracting from what he wanted to say about its meaning: and they were modified to give the present text." (Brown 1969, 225-27; similarly 1966, 22-23).

human kind of life (although Celia ultimately achieves just such an understanding through her relationship with Edward). A failure to realize was also Heraclitus' main indictment of "the many": "But of this *logos* (word/ account/ principle) which holds forever, people forever prove uncomprehending..." (B 1): "The many do not understand the sorts of things they encounter. Nor do they recognize them even after they have had experience of them" (B 16); "Uncomprehending even when they have heard [the truth about things]; they are like the deaf: the saying/speech bears witness to them: absent while present" (B 34). When Julia is unable to find her glasses even though are right where she left them (33), she confirms Heraclitus' diagnosis in B 67: "They are separated from that with which they are in the most continuous contact."

A second Heraclitean note is sounded in Alex's initial declaration: "I never tell the same story twice" (9). For anyone even remotely familiar with Heraclitus, the phrase "never...the same...twice" has an unmistakable Heraclitean ring: in important respects, the persons and things that make up the universe lack an enduring identity. According to B 91a: "It is not possible to step into the same river twice..." and B 12 "As they step into the same rivers, different and still different waters flow upon them." As the Unidentified Guest explains the problem: we are neither precisely what we were nor precisely what we will be:

Most of the time we take ourselves for granted,  
As we have to, and live on a little knowledge  
About ourselves as we were. Who are you now?  
You don't know any more than I do.  
But rather less, You are nothing but a set  
Of obsolete responses. The one thing to do  
Is to do nothing. Wait. (31)

Edward expresses his doubts on just this point when he asks of Celia's lover:

Will it be the same Celia?  
 Better be content with the Celia you remember.  
 Remember! I say it's already a memory.(46)

Celia's words reveal that she has succeeded in distinguishing between the memory of her lover and the current reality:

That is not what you are, It is only what was left  
 Of what I had thought you were. I see another person,  
 I see you as a person whom I never saw before.  
 The man I saw before, he was only a projection—  
 I see that now—of something that I wanted—  
 No, now wanted—something I aspired to—  
 Something that I desperately wanted to exist. (67)

As Celia explains her insight she introduces the related contrast of the dream with the reality as well as the notion of a dream-like reality:

A dream. I was happy in it till today.  
 And then, when Julia asked about Lavinia  
 And it came to me that Lavinia had left you  
 And that you would be free—then I suddenly discovered  
 That the dream was not enough; that I wanted something more  
 And I waited, and wanted to run to tell you.  
 Perhaps the dream was better, It seemed the real reality.  
 And if this is a reality, it is very like a dream. (62)

The blending of waking with sleeping also figures prominently in Heraclitus' thinking:

“The rest of mankind fail to be aware of what they do after they wake up just as they forget what they do while asleep” (B 1); and “Those who are asleep [I think Heraclitus calls] laborers and co-produces of what happens in the universe” (B 75).

Harcourt-Reilly introduces the Heraclitean concept of unity in opposition when he states:

And now you begin to see, I hope  
 How much you have in common. The same isolation.  
 A man who finds himself incapable of loving  
 And a woman who finds that no man can love her. (125)

When Lavinia observes that:

It seems to me that what we have in common  
Might be just enough to make us loathe one another. (125)

Harcourt-Reilly replies:

See it rather as the bond which holds you together. (125)

Eliot's Unidentified Guest combines the two Heraclitean themes of ceaseless change and living through dying when he observes:

Ah, but we die to each other daily.  
What we know of other people  
Is only our memory of the moments  
During which we knew them. And they have changed since then.  
To pretend that they and we are the same  
Is a useful and convenient social convention  
Which sometimes must be broken. We must also remember  
That at every meeting we are meeting a stranger.' (71).

Heraclitus asserted a symbiotic relationship between dying and living in fragment B 76a: "Fire lives the death of earth and air lives the death of fire; water lives the death of air, earth that of water." Similarly B 76b: "Fire's death is birth for air, and air's death birth for water," B 77: "...for souls it is joy or death to become wet...we live their death and they live our death," and B 62 speaks of "immortal mortals and mortal immortals who live the death of those (*zôntes ton ekeinôn thanaton*) and die the life of those (*de ekeinôn bion tethneôntes*)."<sup>11</sup> In short, Heraclitus' vision of a cosmos in which opposing elements are united in ceaseless struggle against one another gave Eliot, as it has given to others, an apt description of the human condition.<sup>12</sup> Heraclitus' indictment of the failure of most

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<sup>11</sup> As Yoklavich 1951, 541 noted, this passage is similar in some respects to Diotima's description of human beings as "always coming and going" (*Sym.* 207). But Diotima makes no mention of persons "dying to each other" or "dying daily."

<sup>12</sup> The point is well stated in Jones (1960, 131): "Eliot extends the Heraclitean conception of ubiquitous physical change into the realm of psychology. We cannot step twice into the same river, not merely because the water has flowed on, but because we

people to grasp the *logos*—to still be asleep even when awake, to still be uncomprehending even when they have heard, and to fail to notice even that which lies closest to them— provided Eliot with the language with which to express his sense of mankind’s estrangement from itself.

We can also turn to Heraclitus for some helpful clues to the identity of Eliot’s Guardians. The notion of the Guardian surfaces in *TCP* on three different occasions, but in essentially two forms—first as an aspect of the individual person and, second, as one or more superior beings. As Edward introduces the idea, a guardian exists in each of us as a “tougher self” and “stronger partner”:

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 contrive the disaster  
 Of this unwilling partnership—but can only flourish  
 In submission to the rule of the stronger partner.(66)

According to play’s producer, Martin Browne (1960, 14; 1969, 184), the original version of *TCP* contained the phrase “*daemon*, the genius” rather than “the guardian.”<sup>13</sup> At some point, evidently at Browne’s suggestion, Eliot changed the wording to make it clear that

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have become different persons in the meantime.” Jones does not, however, link the notion of “dying daily” with Heraclitus nor does he note the epistemological similarities.

<sup>13</sup> Reckford’s view of *TCP* as inspired by Plato’s *Symposium* relies in part on Eliot’s earlier use of the term *daemon*. However, the all-knowing Harcourt-Reilly is wholly unlike the Socrates who disavowed knowledge, and Julia is quite unlike Plato’s Diotima. It is true that a cocktail party is a symposium of a sort, although the Greek *sumposion* took place after dinner rather than before it. Perhaps most problematic is the absence of any of the features that would point unmistakably to Plato’s masterpiece: a series of

“guardian” could refer either to an inner spirit, as Edward uses the term here, or to external beings such as the trio of Harcourt-Reilly, Alex, and Julia.

It is clearly Guardians of this second kind who are the honorees of the toast raised toward the end of Scene Two of Act I:

Edward: “Whom shall we drink to?”  
 Celia: “To the Guardians.”  
 Edward: “To the Guardians?”  
 Celia: “It was you who spoke of guardians.  
 It may even be that Julia is a guardian.  
 Perhaps she is *my* guardian. Give me the spectacles.” (69)

A similar toast is raised near the end of the play:

Edward: “To the Guardians.”  
 Alex: “To one particular Guardian whom you have forgotten.  
 I give you –Lavinia’s Aunt.”  
 All: “Lavinia’s Aunt” (188-89)<sup>14</sup>

Here too “Guardian” appears to refer to the superior creatures who have the power to oversee and influence the lives of ordinary human beings.

Heraclitus speaks of spirits (*daimones*) and guardians (*phulakes*) in the same two ways. In fragment B 119 he declares that “Man’s character (*êthos*) is his *daimôn*,” asserting, on one plausible interpretation, that the power that guides, protects, and determines the fate of each human being lies within his or her own *êthos*—i.e. in the combination of knowledge, values, and habits which makes that individual the person he or she is. And in fragment B 63 Hippolytus reports of Heraclitus that: “He says that in its presence they arise and become wakeful guardians (*phulakas*) of living people and

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speeches on the topic of love, two kinds of love relating to the two Aphrodites (Pausanias), love as being united with one’s missing other half (Aristophanes), love as giving birth in beauty and the ladder of love (Socrates), etc. Plato’s use of the word *daimôn* is significant, as we shall see, but it is only a small part of a larger story.

<sup>14</sup> Suggesting that Lavinia’s absence at the outset of the play was itself the work of the Guardians.



corpses.”. These guardians may also be the same ones “slain by Ares whom gods and mankind honor” (B 24). The historian Diogenes Laertius also attributed to Heraclitus the view that “All things are full of souls and *daimones*” (*Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* IX. 7). The term *daimôn* also occurs in fragment B 79 “A man hears himself called silly by a divinity/spirit (*daimonos*), as a child does by a man.”

Ancient writers describe the nature and function of the *daimones* in different ways, but the general idea is that of a race of semi-divine spirits who oversee human affairs for good or ill, typically from the vantage point of their home in the heavens, a prerogative earned through good works done during their earthly existence. According to Hesiod, *Works and Days*:

...they are called pure spirits (*daimones hagnoi*) dwelling on the earth, and are kindly, warding off evils (*alexikakoi*)<sup>15</sup>, and guardians (*phulakes*) of mortal men; for they roam everywhere over the earth, clothed in mist and keep watch (*phulassousin*) on judgments and cruel deeds, givers of wealth; for this royal right they also received. (121-26)<sup>16</sup>

For upon the bounteous earth Zeus has thrice ten thousand spirits, guardians (*phulakes*) of mortal men, and these keep watch (*phulassousin*) on judgments and deeds of wrong as they roam, clothed in mist, all over the earth. (252-255)

The poet Phokylides declared “But there must be *daimones* in the world, now these and now those, some...to save men from coming ill...” (Clement *Stromata* 5. 725). Theognis on the other hand blames the *daimones* for “making evil seem good, and what is good seem evil” (405-06). By far the most extensive set of views on the nature and function of

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<sup>15</sup> The meaning of “Alex” as “he who wards off” is noted in Arrowsmith (1950, 412).

<sup>16</sup> In his semi-serious etymology in the *Cratylus* Socrates quotes a portion of the first passage from Hesiod and comments: “Now he and other poets say truly that when a good man dies he has honor and a mighty portion among the dead, and becomes a *daimôn*, which is a name given to him signifying wisdom” (398b-c). Plato provides additional information on the *daimones* at *Republic* 469, *Timaeus* 90a, and *Phaedo* 107.

*daimones* come from the self-styled divinity, healer, and philosopher Empedocles of Akragas.<sup>17</sup>

In her speech in the *Symposium* the priestess Diotima explained the roles played by the *daimones* when she identified *Erôs* or ‘Love’ as a *daimôn*:

[Love is] a great spirit (*mega daimôn*), Socrates, and every spirit (*pan to daimonion*) is halfway between god and man... They are the envoys and interpreters that ply between heaven and earth, flying upward with our worship and prayers, and descending with the heavenly answers and commandments and since they are between the two estates they weld both sides together and merge them into one great whole. They form the medium of the prophetic arts, of the priestly rites of sacrifice, initiation, and incantation, of divination and of sorcery, for the divine will not mingle directly with the human, and it is only through the mediation of the spirit world that man can have any intercourse, whether waking or sleeping, with the gods. (202d-e)

In short, the key to understanding the significance of Eliot’s daemons-guardians lies not in the Guardians of Plato’s ideal state, but in the *daimones* of Heraclitus B 119 and B 63. The dual nature of those Heraclitean *daimones*—both as the soul within and as external overseer—enabled Eliot to transform his story of a gathering of friends and strangers into an extended reflection on the conflicts lying within each human soul.

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<sup>17</sup> See Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*, 361c; *On Exile* 607c-d; *Obsolescence of Oracles* 418e; *On Tranquility of Mind* 474b-c; and Hippolytus, *Refutation* 1.3 and 7.29.9-7.30.4.