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“Sordid particulars”: Deixis in the Chorus of *Murder in the Cathedral*

Abstract

Much has been written about the ritual function of the Chorus in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Eliot's masterful handling of the rhythm and the ritual is undeniable, yet there is always more than meets the eye in Old Possum's works. Eliot himself stated that the Chorus's role is that of mediating “between the action and the audience”. Traditionally this comment has been read as an invitation to the audience to participate in the ritual as if they were, to all purposes, a congregation. This is only partly true. This paper aims to demonstrate that Eliot, through the – partly Shakespearean – use of deixis in the Chorus's speeches, involves the audience not merely in the ritual slaughter of the martyr Thomas, but also, powerfully, in the horrors of history. The terror and revulsion associated with history, in fact, are expressed through Eliot's thoroughly modernistic handling of the sordid, his well-stocked misogynistic repertoire and his references to recent murders as his most powerful tools to express the loathsome, unbearable burden of “very much reality”.

“Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union until it has divested itself of the love of created beings” (*Sweeney Agonistes, Epigraph*, in Eliot 2004: 115). This quotation from St John of the Cross, which Eliot chose as one of the epigraphs to his *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926), has often been interpreted as one of the signs of the author's impending conversion (Coghill 1965: 14). It might be so, and the immediately preceding line, Orestes' cry “I must move on” (*Sweeney Agonistes, Epigraph*, in Eliot 2004: 115), may indeed reflect the author's sense of an impending change, but if we emphasise the second part of the quotation from St John of the Cross and take the first part for granted, which is perhaps more to the point in the present essay, the passage is vital to an understanding of one of the main issues in Eliot's poetics.¹

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1. Eliot loved the paradoxes of Christianity. From his standpoint, the nature of Christianity was eminently contradictory: he wrote that all Christians led a life of incompatible extremes,

If it can be said that *Murder in the Cathedral* is permeated by a very peculiar but unquestionable love of God and by the protagonist's terrier-like determination to seek the "divine union" that comes with martyrdom, it can also, and perhaps more forcibly, be said that the play is – even more than *Sweeney Agonistes* – divested of all "love of created beings".² In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot's observance of the letter of the paradox quoted above leads to the implacable cruelty with which the author expresses the horrors of the human condition, through the medium of the Chorus, whose members express their self-abhorrence, that sense of terrified loathing that persistently emerges from the lines of the Chorus and that Lyndall Gordon calls "the pervasiveness of corruption" (Gordon 2000: 281).³

The importance of the passage from St John of the Cross does not lie in its Christian implications or in their connections with the poet's own spiritual journey. After all, the passage is taken from the epigraph to *Sweeney Agonistes*, which may be many things to many critics, but certainly not a religious work. The passage, in my opinion, is relevant with reference to Eliot's thoroughly Modernist poetics, which shape both his avant-garde "Aristophanic Melodrama" *Sweeney Agonistes* (Eliot 2004: 115) and his later, post-conversion plays.⁴

One of the most shocking innovations of Modernist poetry was its wish to include what had previously been considered unpoetic elements within poetry. Eliot kept faith to this principle both as a young experimentalist poet and as

torn between the world and God: "you must lose your life in order to save it. One has to be otherworldly and yet deeply responsible for the affairs of this world. One must reserve a capacity for enjoying the things of this world such as love and affection" (qtd in C.H. Smith 1963: 214). Elsewhere he wrote: "Scepticism and disillusion are a useful equipment for religious understanding" (Eliot 1928: 60). The paradoxical nature of Christianity is a concept that is also present in *Murder in the Cathedral*, for instance when the Chorus asks "Shall the Son of Man be born again in the litter of scorn?" (1.49), in the same crude, unembellished style that can be found in Lancelot Andrewes' sermon on the Nativity (Eliot 1961: 344-53), from which Eliot derived the beginning of his own poem "The Journey of the Magi" (1927).

2. I cannot agree with Conrad Aiken's ironic observation that "in the play Eliot has become human" ("London Letter" to *The New Yorker*, 13 July 1935, qtd in Gordon 2000: 278).
3. See also Coghill 1965: 127-8.
4. The persistence of Eliot's avant-garde tendencies even after his conversion has been discussed by several critics. See, for example, Cotter 2002: 69-78. On Eliot's bathetic vein and the inclusion of unpoetic material in Modernist poetry, see Higgins 1995: 508-17. Eliot's commitment to Modernist poetics after his conversion had an impact on the early productions of *Murder in the Cathedral*, especially the West End run that took place soon after the first Canterbury Festival production. The original production was very innovative in itself, but in London Eliot felt free of the constraints exerted by the inevitably devotional background of the audience and setting of the Canterbury première, and was able to collaborate with Ashley Dukes of the Mercury Theatre in adapting the play to the less religiously committed West End audience (see Marchesi 2009: xii-xiii, xix-xxi).

the sedate darling of the establishment that he became in his maturity. This is something more radical than Eliot's "bathetic vein" (Blaim and Gruszevska 1994: 24), which, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, can easily be recognised in the lines of the Messenger and in those of the Knights – most famously, in their final apology (Marchesi 2009: 37-57).

Even when he had become a sort of unofficial Laureate, deliberately presenting himself to the world as a sort of mock-Tennyson public figure (Litz 1977: 480, 485; Marchesi 2009: xxii), Eliot had no qualms about shocking his audience with the unexpected irruption of the squalid, the disgusting, or even the downright horrific in his plays: the most famous instance of this is arguably the death of Celia Coplestone – "crucified / Very near an ant hill" (3.307) as Alex puts it in the third act of *The Cocktail Party* (1949, Eliot 2004: 434).

Eliot always felt concern over the artistic quality of his work, and in his post-conversion period he emphatically discriminated between a real poet and a Christian one (Marchesi 2009: xxx-xxxii). In particular, in *After Strange Gods* (1934) he showed his deep dislike for devotional poetry, which, he wrote, he considered to be poetry of a lesser kind:

I am sure that in the matter of devotional poetry a good deal more is at issue than just the purity and strength of the author's devotional passion. To be a 'devotional poet' is a limitation: a saint limits himself by writing poetry, and a poet who confines himself to even this subject matter is limiting himself too. (Eliot 1934: 48)

In *Murder in the Cathedral*, the Chorus is the depository of this disturbing element. The women of Canterbury evoke a world of violence and fear, where evil is accepted as a part of the eternal cycle of the seasons, and the world appears, like Hamlet's unweeded garden, as a place where only rank and gross things can breed.

The opening line, "Here let us stand, close by the cathedral. Here let us wait" (1.1) with its repetition of the spatial deictic "here", takes care to let the audience partake in this world of horrors.

It is from Shakespeare's distinctive use of temporal and spatial deictic markers in the opening line of a play that Eliot probably borrows the effect of including the audience in the here and now of the performance. This effect is particularly marked in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, with its powerfully engaging opening question "Who's there?" (1.1.1), and even more in *Richard III's* equally compelling opening line "Now is the winter of our discontent" (1.1.1), where the audience and the character are immediately projected into the irresistible suddenness of the "now" and in the communality of the experience of "our" discontent.

Eliot may have modelled the opening of *Murder in the Cathedral* on the kind of *incipit* that is typical of Shakespeare, with its sense of a sudden, irresistible

partaking of the audience in the action of the play. In the history plays, this involvement in the action of the play entails the contemporary participation of the audience in the action of the historical events that are performed.⁵

The incipit of *Richard III* has good credentials to be considered the most famous instance of this, but the stress placed there on temporal and spatial deixis is actually a recurrent feature in Shakespeare's histories.⁶ *King John* opens with the word "Now" in the King's line "Now, say, Chatillon, what would France with us?" (1.1.1) and *The Second Part of Henry IV*, after the introduction spoken by Rumour, begins with Lord Bardolph's "Who keeps the gate here, ho?" (1.1.1). In *Henry VIII* the prologue is probably the passage where the recurrence of personal, spatial and temporal deictic markers is most pervasive, even taking into account the fact that there – unlike the cases quoted above – the character named "Prologue" addresses the audience directly, and, as a prologue is often meant to do, acknowledges through its spokesman the fact that the audience and the performance do share the physical space of the theatre and the actual time of the performance:

PROL. I come no more to make you laugh: things now
That bear a weighty and a serious brow,
Sad, high, and working, full of state and woe:
Such noble scenes as draw the eye to flow
We now present. Those that can pity here
May, if they think it well, let fall a tear
(*Henry VIII*, Prologue 1-6)

This is also true in the case of the plays by Shakespeare dealing with Roman history. Eliot's beloved *Coriolanus* begins with "a company of mutinous Citizens" (1.1) whose first representative opens the play with the words "Before we proceed any further, hear me speak" (1.1.1). Thanks to the use of the deictic

5. This is not the only link between the Chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral* and Shakespeare. The function of the Chorus often comes very close to the Renaissance stage tradition of the commoners or lesser noblemen acting as commentators in historical plays. On this topic, with specific reference to *Richard III*, see Marchesi 2009: XXXIII-XXXIV.
6. All the Histories but one begin with an opening line containing a deictic marker. Besides the instances of temporal and spatial deixis quoted below, it should be mentioned that personal and spatial deixis deserves to be considered the keynote of the opening lines of *Richard II*, with the celebrated address of the King to John of Gaunt, while personal deixis is also present in the opening line of *The First Part of Henry IV*, in *Henry V* (1.1.1), in *The Second Part of Henry VI* (1.1.1), in the opening line of *The Third Part of Henry VI*, and in *King Henry VIII* (1.1.1). *The First Part of Henry VI* is the only case in which deictic expressions do not appear in the play's opening. This is not the right place for a detailed discussion of the use of deixis in Shakespeare, but it is worth noting in passing that Shakespeare's comedies, with their exotic settings, only once open with a spatial deictic marker (Viola's opening line in *Twelfth Night*), whereas his tragedies assign a conspicuous function to personal deictic markers, and, in the tragedies where this applies, do so in their opening lines.

markers, the audience here finds itself in the midst of a rebellion, almost as if its members were participating in the rebellion themselves. It might be worth mentioning here that the Citizens in *Coriolanus* surprisingly reveal many points in common with the Women of Canterbury. They "are undone already" (1.1.44) and they are shown lamenting their harsh lot in terms not unlike those of the "poor, poor women of Canterbury" (*Murder in the Cathedral* 1.4):

FIRST C. We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good: what authority surfeits on would relieve us. ... the leanness that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is as an inventory to particularize their abundance: our sufferance is a gain to them... For the gods know, I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge. (*Coriolanus* 1.1.10-16)

Unlike the Women of Canterbury, who meekly accept the fact that "King rules or barons rule; / We have suffered various oppression" (*Murder in the Cathedral* 1.22-3), the Citizens are driven by a desire for social justice and a will to revolt that is absent from the resigned tones of the Chorus. The terms, though, are strikingly similar, as when the Second Citizen laments the carelessness of the patricians who

suffer us to famish, and their store-houses crammed with grain: make edicts for usury, to support usurers: repeal daily any wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily, to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not up, they will. (*Coriolanus* 1.1.59-63)

Even at the structural level there are similarities between the first scene of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and the beginning of *Murder in the Cathedral*: both plays open in a city that is in uproar over an impending political catastrophe. In the opening scene in both plays the discontented citizens are confronted by dignitaries that try to soothe them – all the while clarifying the circumstances for the benefit of the audience, which is their usual role in Renaissance drama – until at last the protagonist comes and quietens the citizens, overwhelming them with his superior dialectics and style. The tone of the saintly Archbishop is different, of course, from that of the proud Roman general, but the dynamics of the scene shows a similar development, and the haughtiness of the two characters reveals a strong resemblance, too:

MART. Thanks. What's the matter, you dissentious rogues,
That, rubbing the poor itch of your opinion,
Make yourselves scabs?
(*Coriolanus* 1.1.145-7)

THOM. Peace. And let them be, in their exaltation.
(*Murder in the Cathedral* 1.206)

The parallels between *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Coriolanus* are suggestive at a deeper level of meaning, and open up an important query: how remote

is Thomas Becket's martyrdom from Coriolanus's fruitless death? Can Becket be considered, within Eliot's oeuvre, another "broken Coriolanus"?⁷

The Chorus's second intervention is an attempt to involve the audience, again through the repetition of the spatial deictic marker "Here", in the sense of an imminent end, a "doom" which the women evoke three times: "A doom on the house, a doom on yourself, a doom on the world" (l.151). These lines are pervaded by the sense of the decay of the world and even of the decay of time itself as it approaches the end: the year is "rotten" ("O late late late, late is the time, late too late, and rotten the year", l.147) and the elements partake of the corruption of nature, in (literally) apocalyptic terms ("Evil the wind, and bitter the sea, and grey the sky, grey grey grey", l.148), echoing Biblical images of the end of the world, such as "the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand. A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness" (Joel 1:1-2)⁸ or Revelation 16:3, which depicts the waters turned to blood: "And the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea: and it became as the blood of a dead man: and every living soul died in the sea" and Joel 16:4, with "the rivers and fountains of waters" that become "blood", or, again, Revelation 8:9, where, after the sea has become blood, "the third part of the creatures which were in the sea, and had life, died".

The women of Canterbury describe their surroundings in the terms of the typical prophetic imagery of a land laid waste by the wrath of God, images such as we can find, for instance, in the Book of Joel:

The field is wasted, the land mourneth; for the corn is wasted the new wine is dried up, the oil languisheth... and the fig tree languisheth; the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree, even all the trees of the field, are withered: because joy is withered away from the sons of men... the seed is rotten under their clods, the garners are laid desolate, the barns are broken down: for the corn is withered. (Joel 1:10, 12, 17)

The "evil" wind to which the women allude in line 1.148 reverses the traditional idea of the wind as a symbol of the Holy Ghost that can be found in the famous verse from the Gospel of St John, "The wind bloweth where it listeth" (John 3:8). Thus, from the beginning of the play, Eliot conveys the idea of an evil, satanic presence walking the earth that will be presented more forcefully by the Chorus during Thomas's debate with the Four Tempters.

7. *The Waste Land*: 419 (Eliot 2004: 74). The similarities between Thomas Becket and the Coriolan of Eliot's early attempt at dramatic writing have already been underlined by Elizabeth W. Schneider, who wrote that, after the incomplete Coriolan fragment, "Eliot's poetical dealings with men and women in the external world were to be carried on through the series of plays; the poems would return to their more subjective element. We hear no more of Coriolanus; he is replaced in drama by the martyr Becket, who utters many lines that might have been his" (1975: 148).
8. All biblical quotations will be taken from King James Bible (2008).

Likewise, the "bitter" sea of line 1.148 is another echo of the eighth Chapter of Revelation, evoking one of the most terrible moments of the destruction of the world, the coming of the third angel:

And the third angel sounded, and there fell a great star from heaven, burning as it were a lamp, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of waters. And the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter. (Revelation 8:10-11)

Afterwards, starting at line 1.153, the rhythm changes: the lines become shorter and more irregular, the style switches to a lower level.⁹ What we hear is the description of the natural cycle of the life of common people, which recalls the typically medieval reliefs representing the seasons and the months – which Eliot may have seen in Italy or in France – but, unlike those medieval images, the Chorus's imagery is based on disturbing scenes of poverty and violence. Then the rhythm changes again, and once again the Chorus speaks in the long and solemn cadences which pertain, we might say, to the 'prophetic' register.

The line "But now a great fear is upon us, a fear not of one but of many" (1.184) opens a passage where the Women of Canterbury's expectation of some catastrophe that cannot be readily predicted, "a final fear which none understands", transcends the historical circumstances of the play and powerfully projects the audience, once again through the temporal deictic marker "now", into its own history, where the fear of something indistinct is shared by those "many" in the audience that are joined to the Women on stage by the personal deictic marker "us".

This involvement in history also explains, in my opinion, the overstrained tones of the Chorus, a feature that makes it burdensome in performance, and often relegates the production of *Murder in the Cathedral* to the amateur world of parishes, religious festivals and university theatre groups: suffice it to say that at the Eliot Festival that took place in London in 2008, *Murder in the Cathedral* was performed as a public reading, a kind of oratorio, unlike Eliot's West End plays, that were actually staged (Billington 2008). It may be significant that, to my knowledge, the most recent London production of the play was staged in May-June 2014 at the church of St Bartholomew the Great in London by a company called "The Little Spaniel Theatre", as a part of the activities of the parish. The sense of horror and the fear of the Women of Canterbury are ineffective as drama, and technically misplaced, if they are read as directed only to the circumstances of the Archbishop's death, that is, to the events that belong within the historical frame of the play.

9. The presence of "two registers" is a distinctive feature of much of Eliot's drama (Raine 2006: 122-3).

Eliot as a dramatist possessed a rare sense of proportion – and he was always a master of understatement, as shown by the success of his West End plays – so the justification of the Chorus’s apocalyptic tones lies, I believe, in the Chorus’s involving and partly mirroring the spectators themselves, and in conveying the sense of a catastrophe threatening the whole of Western civilization that must have been felt, powerfully and pervasively, by a 1935 audience, and, most likely, even by later ones.¹⁰

What emerges from the clash between the ruthless description of the chaos of history in the lines of the Chorus and the thirst for the order of God in the lines of Thomas is an idea that is reiterated several times throughout the play, the idea that “Destiny waits in the hand of God, not in the hands of statesmen” (*Murder in the Cathedral* l. 44), and that is best synthesised by the Third Priest in the lines “Even now, in sordid particulars / The eternal design may appear” (2.61-2), where the “sordid particulars” are mentioned first: they take linguistic precedence over the “eternal design”. History and the evil it entails must be regarded with a modernistically dispassionate eye, represented in their crude details, divesting the poetic voice of pious insincerity. After all, only one year after his conversion, Eliot wrote that “In a world without Evil, life would not be worth living” (Eliot 1961: 55). The Third Priest’s statement has unquestionably something to do with theodicy, but it is also extremely relevant as a declaration of poetics: the Modernist aesthetics of the former avant-garde poet – a master in the art of depicting the sordid – have finally found an extremely good reason to *épater le bourgeois*.

In lines 1.176-9 the anaphora of the personal deictic marker “We” helps the 1935 audience to share the life cycle of the women of Canterbury, and the effect is reinforced by a subtle trick belonging to Eliot’s “bathetic vein”, the allusion to something that his middle-class audience could not have failed to perceive: newspapers. “We have seen births, deaths and marriages” (l. 176) echoes the familiar “births, deaths and marriages” section in *The Times*, and the “various scandals” (l. 176), the “taxes” (l. 177), the “gossip” (l. 178) all sound very much like the fragments of a newspaper read aloud in a middle-class home – besides being the utterances of the Women of Canterbury. Finally, in lines 179-89, “Several girls have disappeared / Unaccountably”, Eliot seems to be quoting an imaginary but credible newspaper clipping, again showing his ability to do “the Police in different voices”.

Referring to the title of the play, E. Martin Browne wrote that Eliot “had always wanted the ritual aspect of the play to be balanced by the homicidal”

10. Ashley Dukes, who saw the 1935 production (and was afterwards responsible for the transfer of the production to his Mercury Theatre in the West End), remembered “the play’s actuality... indeed it was never allowed to become historical drama for a moment” (qtd in Malamud 1992: 87).

(Browne 1969: 55). Eliot was a keen reader of the police news and loved crime fiction – especially Sherlock Holmes stories (ibid.) – and the famous true crimes of the last few decades (Brown 1997: 35-41). Thus, the mention of the “several girls” who “have disappeared” may be linked to real murders Eliot had read about in the recent past.

In this connection one must first mention the Edwardian murder par excellence, the murder and dismemberment of Belle Elmore by her husband Dr Hawley Harvey Crippen, whom Eliot disturbingly impersonated at more than one party, the last time in 1939 (Seymour-Jones 2001: 446). Belle, a music-hall performer who lived in London with her American husband, Dr H.H. Crippen, had “disappeared unaccountably” from their Camden Town home in January 1910. Immediately afterwards, Ethel Le Neve, Crippen’s typist and long-time mistress, had moved into the house with him. Belle’s friends grew suspicious and contacted the police. Belle’s body parts were found in the cellar of the Crippens’ Hilldrop Crescent home. The Doctor, who had run away, embarking on a transatlantic steamer with Ethel Le Neve disguised as a boy and passing for his son, was caught, extradited to England, and hanged.

At a Bloomsbury fancy party in the 1930s, Eliot and his then wife Vivien dressed up as Doctor Crippen and Ethel Le Neve; moreover, links to the case can be found in *Sweeney Agonistes*, whose protagonist was considered by Virginia Woolf to be a kind of masked Crippen.¹¹ Besides this famous Edwardian murder, with which Eliot – Crippen’s fellow expatriate – was evidently well acquainted (Seymour-Jones 2001: 445), during the 1920s there had been several episodes of women who had “disappeared / Unaccountably” and had then been found – murdered.

In particular, I am referring to three similar cases that hit the news during the 1920s: the first is the murder of Emily Kaye by Patrick Mahon, which took

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11. See Seymour-Jones 2001: 445. See also Gordon 2000: 288. In the “Bamboo Tree Song” from *Sweeney Agonistes*, besides links to the Crippen case, references to the notorious case of Cecil Maltby can be found, too. The parallels between the lines from *Sweeney Agonistes* and the case of Cecil Maltby (1923) were first discussed by Grover Smith (1956: 118). In my opinion, reminiscences of another murder can be perceived in the “Bamboo Tree Song”: another possible case is that of Ronald True’s murder of Gertrude Yates, which took place in 1922, only four years before *Sweeney Agonistes* was written. It is likely that Eliot mainly had the crime of Cecil Maltby in mind, considering, among other details, the physical proximity of Eliot’s home to the scene of the crime, but there is one detail that recalls the Ronald True story in the fragment of *Sweeney Agonistes* too specifically to be casual. Sweeney tells Doris and the others how, for a month after the murder of the “girl”, “Nobody came / And nobody went / But he [her murderer] took in the milk and he paid the rent”. True had collected the milk on Gertrude Yates’s doorstep moments before he killed her – and then, after the murder, he had cooked and eaten his own breakfast – and the story was widely circulated in the press (Honeycombe 1982: 112). The detail of the milkman stuck, even if Eliot mixed it with the macabre story of Cecil Maltby, the man that lived for some months secluded with the corpse of the woman he had murdered.

place in a cottage on Penvensey Bay, near Eastbourne, during the Spring of 1924. Patrick Mahon, a married man who worked as a sales manager at Consol Automatic Aerators Ltd. – a firm that sold soda fountains – had persuaded his pregnant mistress, Emily Kaye, a typist for a firm in the City of London, to write to her friends that she was about to leave for South Africa with a man – so that nobody would have noticed her disappearance – and then he had killed her and dismembered her body, hiding the pieces about the cottage – putting her heart and other organs into a hatbox and a biscuit tin, other pieces in a saucepan, her torso in a trunk – and burning the rest in the fire grate (Honeycombe 1982: 115-22). Besides the national resonance of the case, it might be worth remembering that Eliot had actually gone to Eastbourne for a six-week holiday in the summer of that year (Seymour-Jones 2001: 367), so the crime cannot have failed to attract his attention, as no doubt the gruesome and at the same time grotesquely homely details of the murder, which almost reflected in real life the sense of macabre fun that Eliot found in Renaissance stage deaths (“Christopher Marlowe”, Eliot 1961: 123)¹² and which, besides, involved a cast of characters that seemed to have been taken straight from *The Fire Sermon*.

The second *cause célèbre* of the 1920s that involved another girl who “disappeared unaccountably” is the murder of Elsie Cameron by Norman Thorne, in more ways than one a copycat killing, which took place in December 1924. Elsie Cameron, a typist, was engaged to Norman Thorne, a poultry farmer from Crowborough, Sussex. When Elsie learnt that her fiancé had changed his mind and was seeing another girl, she took a train to Sussex to discuss the matter with him, and disappeared. The police found her body only months later, dismembered and buried in the grounds of Norman Thorne’s chicken farm. As in the case of Emily Kaye, the pieces had been hidden in household objects – her head in a biscuit tin, her personal belongings in an Oxo-cube box (Honeycombe 1982: 123-8). Another similar murder of that period was that of Minnie Bonati (1927), a prostitute who was killed by John Robinson, a house agent, in his office near Westminster Cathedral in London, and whose chopped-up remains were deposited in a trunk at the left luggage office at Paddington Station (Honeycombe 1982: 129-33).

The Chorus, in referring to the disappearing girls in the context of this particular passage of *Murder in the Cathedral*, with its recognisable echoes of newspapers reports, very likely evoked in the audience the memories of these or similar stories of disappearance ending in a gruesome murder. Thus,

12. Even the death of Thomas has points in common with Eliot’s idea of the entertaining side of death in Renaissance drama (Marchesi 2009: 108-10). On the relationship between the death-scene in *Murder in the Cathedral* and Eliot’s idea of the horrific in early modern drama, see also Matthews 2013: 174.

it is by these means, through these "sordid particulars", which are part of the experience of both, that the audience and the Chorus share the experience of "the small folk drawn into the pattern of fate" (l. 193), that is, the lesser sordid events that prepare for the greater event of wider significance.

These tales of homely horrors perfectly fit Eliot's Modernist poetics: there is nothing solemn or heroic in these deaths, only the horror that derives from the supremely cruel and the irredeemably squalid. It is not by chance that the original title of *The Waste Land* was *He Do the Police in Different Voices*; the perfect location for the mixture of horror and homeliness that is such a specific trait of Eliot's poetry, where the horrible is always unconnected with the sublime, is reports of police news.

The homeliness of evil, of the Women of Canterbury's "brains unskinned like the layers of an onion" (1.188), can be summarized by the styleme "[our] private terrors" (1.182), where Eliot emphasises the lack of sublime through the adjective "private": the prelude to the great catastrophe of lines 186-7, the communal character of which is stressed by the enjambement after the deictic marker "We" in "We / Are afraid in a fear which we cannot know, which we cannot face, which none understands", "the doom of the world" (1.194). This fear is the anticipation of a great catastrophe, shared by the 1930s audience and the Women of Canterbury alike, united by the repetition of "we", and its approach is described as punctuated by limited but persisting omens: "our private terrors, / Our particular shadows, our secret fears" (1.181-2) – by what the Chorus will later refer to as "a limit to our suffering", where "Every horror had its definition, / Every sorrow had a kind of end" (2.413-15).

After Thomas's dialogue with the Four Tempters, the Women of Canterbury begin to perceive the presence of Evil, and the satanic imagery is deeply permeated by reminiscences of the First World War, which would have been recognisable by a 1930s audience: the scarcity of food and fuel in "The old without fire in winter, / The child without milk in summer" (1.641-2), "the young man mutilated" (l. 645) the "new terror ... over the sky" (l. 653), recalling the fear of the newly invented airships during the Zeppelin raids over England which took place only twenty years before, in 1915, and many in the audience must have remembered clearly.¹³ Likewise, the repeatedly mentioned "dark air" (1.656, 658, 662) is reminiscent of wartime nights spent in complete darkness because of the danger of air-raids. Thus, the Bosch-like figures of the "Lords of Hell" (l. 661), indistinctly perceivable as strange beastly forms – "Puss-purr of leopard, footfall of padding bear, / Palm-pat of nodding ape, square hyaena waiting / For laughter, laughter, laughter" (1.659-61) – that "take shape in the

13. See White 2014: 294. For eyewitness accounts of wartime darkness and the sense of horror that derived from it, see *ibid.* 39-41, 221.

dark air” (1.658) enter into a scenario of darkness and violence, a scenario echoing images of a recent war and foreshadowing another imminent war. Thus, to the audience, as much as in the minds of the Women of Canterbury, the “fear” is that of another conflict, an idea to which the Chorus will return in Part 2: “The peace of this world is always uncertain, unless men keep the peace of God. / And war among men defiles this world, but death in the Lord renews it” (2.14-15).

In part 2, the Third Priest had expressed the importance of the “now”, for the audience too: “the critical moment / That is always now, and here. Even now, in sordid particulars / The eternal design may appear” (2.61-63), ushering in the entrance of the Four Knights, who represent violence and war, and can be considered “sordid particulars” themselves. “Now and here!” (2.132), Thomas’s echoing of the First Knight’s “here and now!” (2.131) abruptly shifts the timing of the deed that is about to be perpetrated to the time of the audience.

Coming at the end of the horrifying “death-bringers” chorus, lines 2.222-32 convey a direct allusion to the present and the fragility of the political order; the Women of Canterbury ask: “Have I not known, not known / What was coming to be?”, and the event – which is only partly Becket’s death – is something that is linked to “the horror of the ape” (2.222), that is, the devil as *simia Dei*, but is also something that takes place, more mundanely, “in the plottings of potentates / As well as in the consultations of powers” (2.226-7), which alludes to the several peace conferences held between the two world wars. Thus, when the Archbishop in 2.257 utters the famous line and Eliot’s future self-borrowing, “Human kind cannot bear very much reality”,¹⁴ it is also Thomas the poet who speaks to his own public – whom he has just presented with the hallucinatory but extremely realistic horrors of the “death-bringers” chorus. It is an audience whose limits the experimental poet knows very well, just as the saint knows the limits of his own flock.

The “Clear the air” chorus is a moment when space and time lose all logic – the logic of the order of God – when exclaiming “Where is England? where is Kent? where is Canterbury? / O far far far far in the past” (2.399-400), but this moment is also strongly meta-theatrical, if we consider the circumstances of the first production, where the space of England-Kent-Canterbury was shared by the onstage characters and the audience alike. It might then be possible that the “past” to which line 2.400 alludes is that of the historical events of Thomas’s murder and that the action, after that murder, is taking place in the present – not so much, in my opinion, in the eternal present of the ritual,

14. The line will be repeated in *Burnt Norton*, Part I (1936). See Gardner 1978: 69.

but very much in the historical moment of the 1930s, as the contemporary language of the Four Knights in their final apology makes clear.¹⁵

It may be worth mentioning too that, on that occasion, the First Knight will return to the linguistic register of crime reports when he alludes to a "Trial by Jury" (2.432); likewise, the Fourth Knight will echo the police news in his question "*Who killed the Archbishop?*", which is written in italics, as if he were quoting some newspaper headings (2.548) and asking the audience for their "verdict" to be that of "Suicide while of Unsound Mind" (2.574-5). Here the Knights do, indeed, represent the banality of evil. In the final section of their apology all the Knights will address the audience as if its members were actually a jury in a trial, blurring the boundaries of space and time so that they may share in the responsibility for the murder: "Unhappily, there are times when violence is the only way in which social justice can be secured... We have served your interests; we merit your applause; and if there is any guilt whatever in the matter, you must share it with us" (2.521-34).

The fact that the "sordid particulars" are all parts of the "eternal design" is expressed by the Chorus's reversal of *coeli enarrant gloriam Dei*, Psalm 19:1: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork". In lines 2.621 "Thy glory is declared even in that which denies Thee; the darkness declares the glory of light", where the second hemistich presents the same metrical pattern as the first part of the verse taken from the King James Bible. Similarly, even the most disgusting and unwholesome creatures, parasites, are seen as part of the manifestation of the glory of God, which includes "the worm in the soil and the worm in the belly" (2.623).

When, in their final prayer, the members of the Chorus praise God by saying that "All things affirm Thee in living", they make a fundamental point: "the hunters and the hunted" (2.619), that is, the victims and the perpetrators of cruelty, are all equally manifestations of the glory of God: "the bird in the air, both the hawk and the finch; the beast on the earth, both the wolf and the lamb" (2.623).

Thus, the role to be played by the cruelty of history, as evoked in the lines of the Chorus, is that of shocking the spectators into accepting the inevitability of evil, the communality of suffering and the role of the Christian audience as participants, through their involvement in history – history with all its horrors, whose details are linked with a deeply Modernist disenchantment, making them fully aware of all its graphic details. Hence the importance of

15. The role of the Chorus has always been considered by critics to be eminently ritualistic. I do not wish to contradict this accepted and largely demonstrated view (on this topic, see Williams 1952: 228; C.H. Smith 1963: 107; Mueller 1958: 414-26; Clark 1971: 7; Cutts 1974: 203; Davidson 1985: 156-7; LeCroy 1969: 60; Gardner 1988: 22), but I am convinced that Eliot's complexity warrants a broader interpretation and leaves ample scope for other, complementary, aspects.

the adverb “consciously” in the following line: man “must consciously praise Thee”.

As a result of these dramatic techniques, the spectators become participants in the “eternal design” of God: this is what might be termed Eliot’s Modernistic theodicy.

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