Two Paths to Salvation in *The Cocktail Party*

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T. S. Eliot's concern for the universal salvation from personal inner agony which pervades in almost all modern minds shapes both his cultural essay, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), and his artistic statements in *The Cocktail Party* (1950). When Eliot was asked in an interview, "How would you, out of the bitter experience (1) of the present time, wish mankind to develop?", he answered:

> "I should speak of a greater spiritual consciousness, which is not asking that everybody should rise to the same conscious level, but that everybody should have some awareness of the depths of spiritual development and some appreciation and respect for those exceptional people who can proceed further in spiritual knowledge than most of us can." (2)

This social and spiritual ideal of his own is realized only in the Christian organic communal life based on leadership of spiritual superiors and mutual understanding among the members of the society. Ritualistic convention, therefore, echoes throughout this play, and its serious and divine atmosphere comes from each word of the characters. This three – act naturalistic but poetical comedy is a work after Eliot's heart, because his seemingly contradictory opinion that comedy is more suitable style than any other dramatic forms if you want to say some serious matters is fully developed.

Eliot's long-term experience and experiment in his playwriting since *The Rock* (1934) obtains good results in awakening dramatic suspense and audience's interest in it before the presentation of problem and solution of it. In the opening scene, there's incomprehensible tone under the pleasant conversation of the guests with intentions and desires of their own in the party of the Chamberlaynes' house in London: Julia complains of absence of the hostess, Lavinia, and doubts about the reason that Lavinia has gone to attend on her aunt; mysterious mood is created around the Unidentified Guest (who is Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly). Serious personal dialogue is often disturbed by the meddlesome Guardians (Julia and Alex) whose true service is not revealed until Act Two. The unusual arrangement in Sir Henry's consulting room suggests the seriousness of the problem. All the setting and all the words of the characters are skillfully devised to realize one aspect of Eliot's conviction with drama that a sense of 'something is going to happen' is needed on stage.

I

Throughout Act One the personal distress of the main characters and the various

efforts to break the deadlock are shown, together with comical interruption of Julia and Alex. After Edward sees callers off, he begins to place puzzled case of his own before the Unidentified Guest. His ignorance of the true reason of Lavinia's running away from home, and his irritation caused by it directs him towards his unexpected condition of self-exploration. As the Unidentified Guest's caution indicates,

> To approach the stranger
> Is to invite the unexpected, release a new force,
> Or let the genie out of the bottle.
> It is to start a train of events
> Beyond your control. (3)

In fact, Edward has taken the personal and inner life of his own and Lavinia's existence for granted, and her departure gives him a serious chance of examining the whole situation of their life for the first time. The objective explanation of the Unidentified Guest about his reduced circumstances draws terrible recognition that there's

> a loss of personality;
> 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. (4)

The only remedy of this spiritually paralytic symptom is a struggle to face his real situation and find the ultimate image of his own. The Unidentified Guest advises to find out

> What you really are. What you really feel.
> What you really are among other people.
> 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. (5)

His painful search for his real self, however, needs the presence of Lavinia whose relationship with him is an important indicator of their spiritual past:

> And yet I want her back.
> 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. (6)

The Unidentified Guest promises that Lavinia will return home on condition that Edward won't ask her where she was.

Ironical change of Edward's part from a patient to an adviser also lets him confirm

the same mental gap between the young persons as that of their seniors'. The problem of Peter Quilpe, an artist, is loss of those moments in which he and Celia Coplestone, Edward's mistress, 'seemed to share some perception, / Some feeling, some indefinable experience.' His 'first experience of reality' was caused by his own illusion that Celia really cared about him and that gave him peculiar happiness and tranquility. Edward's sense and sensibility sharpened by his glimpse of spiritual abyss of isolation catches fruitlessness of Peter's effort to restore their relationship:

> Will it be the same Celia?
> Better be content with the Celia you remember.
> Remember! I say it's already a memory. (7)

Though Peter grows slightly conscious of his own self-deception, he still clings to the lost past between them and make it as a spiritual support for his future.

> I was saying, what is the reality
> Of experience between unreal people?
> If I can only hold to the memory
> I can bear any future. But I must find out
> The truth about the past, for the sake of the memory. (8)

Peter's selfish and one-sided passion for Celia, however, continues for two years until he comes back from California and knows her destiny.

Lavinia's abrupt leaving home also gives a chance for Celia to realize her desire to establish perfect and personal relationship of love with Edward. But his blind wish of Lavinia's return wakes her from her illusionary passion illustrated by her words that,

> I abandoned the future before we began,
> And after that I lived in a present
> Where time was meaningless, a private world of *ours*,
> Where the word 'happiness' had a different meaning
> Or so it seemed. (9)

Her intelligent understanding convinces her not only of her own confused comprehension about dream and reality, but also of her own fault in her unconscious projection of something, a kind of God's image, that she 'desperately wanted to exist'.

> 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, not *wanted*—something 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. (10)

His miserable status of a living object is apparent to her eyes, too: his voice is heard not as a voice but only 'the noise of an insect, ／ Dry, endless, meaningless, inhuman– '; his figure is 'only a beetle the size of a man ／ With nothing more inside it than what comes out ／ When you tread on a beetle.' During their dialogue Edward grasps clearly both inability to love anyone because of his self-centered idea that is caused by his feeling old and his fatalistic resignation. He begins to know,

> what it is to feel old.
> That is the worst moment, when you feel that you have lost
> The desire for all that was most desirable,
> Before you are contented with what you can desire;
> Before you know what is left to be desired;
> And you go on wishing that you could desire
> What desire has left behind. (11)

His pathetic recognition of the absolute victory of 'the tougher self' over the other self in him forms pessimistic view of life and world:

> I see that my life was determined long ago
> And that the struggle to escape from it
> Is only a make-believe, a pretence
> That what is, is not, or could be changed.
> 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 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. (12)

They part with torn and desperate minds filled with each different sense of loss, after the last toast to their guardians, Julia as Celia's guardian, and 'the tougher self' as Edward's.

The distinct notice of analogy between *Alkestis* by Euripides and this work appears in the Unidentified Guest's words in scene 3 that 'it is a serious matter ／ To bring someone back from the dead.' His role in that scene, unlike that of Hercules, is to indicate the continuous human spiritual death:

> 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 must sometimes be broken. We must also remember
That at every meeting we are meeting a stranger. (13)

After his exit without revealing his identity and absurd conversation among the visitors about a telegram, Lavinia comes back, feeling the mysterious power like some machine behind her back. Lavinia's main aim of running away from home lies in Edward's mental resurrection:

I thought that there might be some way out for you
If I went away. I thought that if I died
To you, I who had been only a ghost to you,
You might be able to find the road back
To a time when you were real—for you must have been real
At some time or other, before you ever knew me:
Perhaps only when you were a child. (14)

Their short parting, however, was a good opportunity for her to think over his personality and their relationship as a married couple. She confesses that her practical ability gave him a work at the Bar, and social opportunity of talking with intellectual people, though he is a person of no humour and of passivity. Edward, on the other hand, has experienced 'the change that comes / From seeing oneself through the eyes of other people', and rejects her further intervention whose function seemed to him to invent a personality for him which will only keep him away from his true self. His despair derived from his inability to understand what is his real self, remains even after their conversations, and his solitude brought about by his failure in their mutual understanding, shapes his own Hell in his dark labyrinthian mind:

There was a door
And I could not open it. I could not touch the handle.
Why could I not walk out of my prison?
What is hell? Hell is oneself,
Hell is alone, the other figures in it
Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from
And nothing to escape to. One is always alone.
.....
O God, O God, if I could return to yesterday
Before I thought that I had made a decision.
What devil left the door on the latch
For these doubts to enter? And then you came back, you
The angel of destruction—just as I felt sure.
In a moment, at your touch, there is nothing but ruin.
O God, what have I done? The python. The octopus.
Must I become after all what you would make me? (15)

Ironically enough, Lavinia's practical response is to advise him to undergo a special treatment of a psychiatrist whom she knows.

II

In Act One Eliot succeeds in masterful presentation of dramatic image of human fundamental absurdity that is latent in the modern fashionable city of London. Essentially the polyphonic expression of the human condition in this play enables us to win the philosophical, the religious, and the psychological interpretations from every facet of the mental reaction of each character. Eliot's most urgent duty of his creative activity, however, exists in his discovery of the ultimate escape from the endless tragic cycle of the universal solitude and isolation and his emphasis on its importance. The consistent tendency of his esteem in European tradition of culture is also transformed into his Christian solution of this mental predicament. Carol H. Smith points out two paths to salvation in her critical essay, *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice*:

> In the history of Christian mysticism from the time of the writings attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, there have traditionally been two paths by which the soul could come to God—the Negative Way and the Affirmative Way. Followers of the Negative Way believe that God may be reached by detaching the soul from the love of all things that are not God, or in the terms Eliot most frequently chose to use, by following the council of St. John of the Cross to divest oneself of the love of created beings. The Way of Affirmation, on the other hand, consists of the recognition that because the Christian God is immanent as well as transcendent, everything in the created world is an imperfect image of Him. Thus, all created things are to be accepted in love as images of the Divine. The Way of Affirmation, while less rigorous, has its own implicit difficulties, for the price of loving created beings ultimately involves suffering and loss. (16)

The whole process of the Negative Way appears in the martyrdom of Becket of *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), who had known his death before his return to England, and in a wandering life of Harry Monchensey whose destiny is to expiate sin of his family as a scapegoat in *The Family Reunion* (1939). In *The Cocktail Party*, however, Eliot's religious interest moves into the Affirmative Way and its full development and examination of its validity consists of one path to salvation of the Chamberlaynes, though the ascetic and saint image of the Negative Way continues to reappear in Celia.

The dramatic action of Act Two is concentrated both on unfolding the two paths to salvation proposed to the Chamberlaynes and Celia, and on exposure to the audience the true identity of the Unidentified Guest and the two comic characters, Julia and Alex. Several weeks later, after brief report about Edward by Alex, Edward's secret guardian, Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly who is the Unidentified Guest receives Edward in his

consulting room in London. Edward, surprised to know the identity of the guest in his party, tells the reason why he thought that he wanted his wife to come back and complains of her obstinate, unconscious, subhuman suppression which ends in the unreality of his role. But the worst of it is that he cannot perceive his existence at all without it:

> Without her, it was vacancy.
> When I thought she had left me, I began to dissolve,
> To cease to exist. That was what she had done to me!
> I cannot live with her—that is now intolerable:
> I cannot live without her, for she has made me incapable
> Of having any existence of my own.
> That is what she has done to me in five years together!
> She has made the world a place I cannot live in
> Except on her terms. I must be alone,
> But not in the same world. So I want you to put me
> Into your sanatorium. I could be alone there? (17)

Edward is obsessed by the thought of his own insignificance and suffers from, by his own mode of expression, 'the death of the spirit'. But Reilly's knowledge which is gained by his duty as a psychiatrist proves that Edward has told him nothing, and has been making up his case as he went along. Edward is 'only pieces of a total situation' which a psychiatrist has to explore, and Reilly calls Lavinia in there in order to give a chance for them to investigate their situation at the same time under his guidance and, further, to get freedom. Reilly's first mental therapy is to put his fingers on their self-deception:

> My patients such as you are the self-deceivers
> Taking infinite pains, exhausting their energy,
> Yet never quite successful. You have both of you pretended
> To be consulting me; both, tried to impose upon me
> Your own diagnosis, and prescribe your own cure.
> But when you put yourselves into hands like mine
> You surrender a great deal more than you meant to.
> This is the consequence of trying to lie to me. (18)

Their lies which they have concealed are about their failures in relationship of love, Edward's relation with Celia, and Lavinia's with Peter. Lavinia's absence made him first become aware of a fact that he hasn't loved Celia truly and hasn't any mind to sacrifice on her account; he realized that he had never been in love with anybody, and began to suspect that he was incapable of loving. Lavinia, on the other hand, wanted to deceive herself about her lover, Peter; she pretended to herself that he was aiming at a higher social distinction than the honour conferred by being her lover. Her shock was, then, great when she found that he loved Celia for their mental sympathy; she had wanted to be loved, and after her conviction that no one had ever loved her, a fear that no one could love her

sneaked into her heart. Reilly's duty is to make them realize how much they 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. (19)

Their solution is only to reverse their standpoint in love, namely, to 'make the best of a bad job.' Their future domestic life is a good one, though

They may remember
The vision they have had, but they cease to regret it,
Maintain themselves by the common routine
Learn to avoid excessive expectation,
Become tolerant of themselves and others,
Giving and taking, in the usual actions
What there is to give and take. They do not repine;
Are contented with the morning that separates
And with the evening that brings together
For casual talk before the fire
Two people who know they do not understand each other,
Breeding children whom they do not understand
And who will never understand them. (20)

In Act Three, really, they entertains their Affirmative Way of life whose 'consequence of the Chamberlaynes' choice ／ Is a cocktail party'. The modest acceptance of the past changes their personalities: Edward has won intelligent understanding about latent truth in human relationship; the bitter experience has given Lavinia a new insight to the human condition. The combination of the two ideas, 'that every moment is a fresh beginning' and 'that life is only keeping on', after their knowledge of Celia's martyrdom, becomes their powerful and dominant spiritual support and, moreover, indicates their own success in their chosen way.

The Negative Way to salvation is fully shown in Reilly's suggestions for Celia. Her desperate conviction of inner void comes from her failure in the relationship of love with Edward:

And then I found we were only strangers
And that there had been neither giving nor taking
But that we had merely made use of each other
Each for his purpose. That's horrible. Can we only love
Something created by our own imagination?
Are we all in fact unloving and unlovable?
Then one *is* alone, and if one is alone
Then lover and beloved are equally unreal
And the dreamer is no more real than his dreams. (21)

She has no delusion except that the world she lives in seems all delusion; but an awareness of solitude and a sense of sin begins to extinguish the definite boundary between reality and dream.

> I mean that what has happened has made me aware
> That I've always been alone. That one always is alone.
> Not simply the ending of one relationship,
> Not even simply finding that it never existed—
> But a revelation about my relationship (22)
> With *everybody*.

The second symptom is a sense of sin that is brought from her confirmation of mistake that they have both made egoistic use of themselves, and her impulse to atonement for her sin:

> It's not the feeling of anything I've ever *done* ,
> Which I might get away from, or of anything in me
> I could get rid of—but of emptiness, of failure
> Toward someone, or something, outside of myself;
> And I feel I must····· *atone*—is that the word? (23)

A kind of 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' fills her sense of existence, and she chooses the Negative Way to salvation which leads towards possession of what she has sought for in the wrong place. Reilly's sanatorium is a starting place of the Way which needs 'a faith that issues from despair'. He sends her off there with his words, 'work out your salvation with diligence.'

The result of Celia's choice, her Way of illumination, 'the process by which the human is ／ Transhumanized', is shown in the conversation among the guests in the cocktail party of the Chamberlaynes in Act Three. Peter, who comes home from California because of his work, is told by Alex that Celia was crucified very near an ant-hill in Kinkanja in the East. Celia had belonged to V. I. D. and had been despatched to a Christian village in the country with three sisters in order to nurse the natives suffering from plague. The insurrection among the heathen broke out and she was taken by them; she didn't forsake the natives, though the other sisters escaped. The news, however, satisfies the mind of Reilly who knows that it was her destiny and her life was triumphant one. He confesses that he saw her 'image, standing behind her chair,／ Of a Celia Coplestone whose face showed the astonishment ／ Of the first five minutes after a violent death', when he first met her; all he could do was to direct her in the way of preparation for her death. In spite of her choice of the way of life to lead to death, her pain and fear was greater than any one else. Reilly says that:

> I'd say that she suffered all that we should suffer
> In fear and pain and loathing—all these together—

And reluctance of the body to become a *thing*
I'd say she suffered more, because more conscious
Than the rest of us. She paid the highest price
In suffering. That is part of the design. (24)

She could 'avoid the final desolation／Of solitude in the phantasmal world／Of imagination, shuffling memories and desires', and her final victory lies in her incessant struggle in order to reach the image of God or Christ who was crusified for all human beings. Lavinia tells Peter, who blames himself for Celia, that he has been living with an image of Celia which he made for himself to meet his own needs, and that:

You're only just begun.
I mean, this only brings you to the point
At which you *must* begin. (25)

To purify oneself in a stoic way and to give others a chance of mental resurrection. These duties were her destiny that only saints can forbear with divine hope towards the Kingdom of God.

Ⅲ

The prime obligation of the psychiatrist's work is to adjust their patient to the modern complicated society in which God's power cannot be recognized and human arrogance pervades through all the space. The tragic limitation of their therapy directed Eliot on the difference between Western psychiatry and the discipline of the East as found in Tao and Zen:

> The aim of Western psychiatry is to help the troubled individuals to adjust himself to the society of less troubled individuals—individuals who are observed to be well adjusted to one another and the local institutions, but about whose adjustment to the fundamental Order of Things no inquiry is made……But there is another kind of normality—a normality of perfect functioning……Even a man who is perfectly adjusted to a deranged society can prepare himself, if he so desires, to become adjusted to the Nature of Things. (26)

Reilly's task is, first, to give the Chamberlaynes freedom of their own and adjust them to their normal condition of life, and then to offer the chance for Celia to choose her way between the two ways. But Celia's ideal which lies in 'the fundamental Order of Things' that is seen even in 'a deranged society' is beyond Western wisdom of his psychiatry.

Reilly. And when I say to one like her
'Work out your salvation with diligence', I do not understand
What I myself am saying.
Julia. You must accept your limitations. (27)

The complementary operation done by Reilly and the Guardians, Alex and Julia, is that

of the Community of Christians in *The Idea of a Christian Society*. Without close examination of the discipline of the East, Eliot strives to constitute an ideal society by Christian tradition. The Community of Christians is involved in a Christian society and only the members of the Community of Christian can lead a conscious Christian life on its highest social level. It is not an organization

> but a body of indefinite outline; composed of both clergy and laity, of the more conscious, more spiritually and intellectually developed of both. It will be their identity of belief and aspiration, their background of a common system of education and common culture, which will enable them to influence by each other, and collectively to form the conscious mind and the conscience of the nation. (28)

Reilly, Alex, and Julia, of course, belong to the Community of Christians: the atmosphere of tension coloured by that of religious ritual ceremony pervades Reilly's consulting room; the priest-image is overlapped to Reilly's doctor-image; the whole series of success of the therapy is a fine product of their cooperation. In *The Cocktail Party*, we can hear Eliot's voice everywhere whose basic tone is defined in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, but it is artistically transformed in order to impress upon the audience's mind unconsciously. This work is, in fact, Eliot's great artistic devotion combined with religious gravity to the modern English stage.

NOTES

1. This paper is an outgrowth of my MA thesis entitled "T. S. Eliot as an American Playwright: A Study of his Last Three Plays", which was presented to the Faculty of the Department of English, Graduate School of Letters at Okayama University in December, 1976. Under the same title the author delivered a talk for the Chugoku Branch of Japan Society of Christian Literature (日本キリスト教文学会中国支部) in Okayama on September 27, 1980.
2. J. P. Hodin, "The Condition of Man Today. An Interview with T. S. Eliot", *Horizon*, Vol. XII, No 68 (August, 1945), p.88, quoted in D. E. Jones, *The Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: RKP, 1960), p.123.
3. T. S. Eliot, *Collected Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), p.133.
4. *Ibid.*, p.134.
5. *Ibid.*, p.135.
6. *Ibid.*, p.136.
7. *Ibid.*, p.143.
8. *Loc. cit.*
9. *Ibid.*, p.151.
10. *Ibid.*, p.154.
11. *Ibid.*, p.153.
12. *Ibid.*, p.153~54.
13. *Ibid.*, p.156~57.

14. *Ibid.*, p.168.
15. *Ibid.*, p.169～70.
16. Carol H. Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Dramatic Theory and Practice* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1963), p.157～58.
17. T. S. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.175～76.
18. *Ibid.*, p.179.
19. *Ibid.*, p.182.
20. *Ibid.*, p.189.
21. *Ibid.*, p.188.
22. *Ibid.*, p.186.
23. *Ibid.*, p 188.
24. *Ibid.*, p.209～10.
25. *Ibid.*, p.207.
26. T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1943), p.116.
27. T. S. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p.193.
28. T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber & Faber, 1939), p.42.