

The Wind's Talk: Spectres in T.S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion*

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Abstract: *Dominantly, criticism of T.S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* has consisted of attempts to explain the play by referring it to some circumstance of the author's personal history or an interest he has espoused at one time or another. The play has been discussed as a telling of the author's own life by projecting and mediating it through one of the characters, usually the main character, Harry Monchensey. It has also been discussed as his comment on the situation of the old landed gentry, whose way of life was threatened from within and from without, and also upon the conditions of the times in which the play was first produced. Other critics have offered accounts of it as having been shaped by the author's religious beliefs. The view taken in this paper is that recognizing the play as a work demands rather a criticism that focuses on the object as a totality and with the help of close reading to try and make out its organic structure. In this paper, the work is unfolded as a sequence of the pharmakon or pharmakos and it is argued that its movements derive from this principle, which also accounts for its total intelligibility.*

Keywords: *abjection, clairvoyance, Eumenides, expiation, pharmakon, transference, tragic art*

I. Introduction

Eliot's *The Family Reunion* has raised different kinds of concerns throughout its history, beginning with its effectiveness as drama following its first production in 1939, with questions of internal coherence, analysis of effects on the audience, especially because of the classical features, like the Eumenides, and the total meaning to a modern audience to whom, presumably religion and the numinous are not as important as to the audience of Aeschylus in classical Greece. But the question of meaning went beyond the contrast between the spiritual and the mundane. Many have investigated – and sought to justify it – in terms of the way in which some of its moments echo aspects of Eliot's personal history. According to Childs, for instance, 'Eliot explains Harry Monchensey's psychology in sufficiently autobiographical terms for us to recognize a description of his own psychology during the early years of his marriage' (2004: 129). This same issue of personal history is reflected in Schuchard where he writes, 'In Harry's description of his phantasmal world, Eliot gives full voice to the violent drama he has lived for thirty years' (2001: 15). But this personal history is clearly not the reason why the play works like a symbolic form, nor does learning about that history stop the work giving 'rise to thought' (Ricoeur, 1974: 299). This giving rise to thought is in the last instance why criticism must occur – to try to explain to oneself, first of all, the power that a work seems to possess whose effect is to agitate the mind. This paper will search in the text's structure and the patterns and trends traceable in it to understand its power.

Other critics have mentioned Eliot's feelings and ideas as possible objects of interest and suggest the characters to watch closely for this. Hence Badenhausen identifies 'Harry in *The Family Reunion* [as one of those] speakers who at one time or another serve as mouthpieces for the poet' (2004: 78). But Maud Baudkin had earlier cautioned against looking for explanations in the text. She writes,

Of the haunting to which these words refer we can best gain understanding, it seems to me, if we search our own spirits, and putting aside demands of theatrical convention, use the poet's fable and imaginative speech to objectify our own deeper experience at this moment of our individual and collective destiny. For us, too, horror grows of overshadowing disaster. Our world is diseased, constrained to self-destroying violence; and when we question: 'Can devastation of our own homes be averted? Can we, if war comes, refuse part in it?' do we not feel that our questions falsely 'isolate the single event,' 'making small things important'? (1939/2004: 386).

The terrors Baudkin refers to have come and gone, without rendering *The Family Reunion* a relic from the past. It retains the capacity 'always to spring back to life' (Ricoeur, 1978: 188), because its energy is within it, not in the reader. In this light, therefore, Robin Grove highlights that '*The Family Reunion* ... has its own weird power, rather like a haunted house. In it, nightmares of the "crowded desert" give place to the worse nightmare of the desert "cleared, under the judicial sun / Of the final eye," and that in turn to the helpless moment of release, when "the awful evacuation / Cleanses," and realization comes at last.... To be freed, by the way of purgation, from the desert wasteland into a garden of ghosts: that is the essential design' (1994: 168).

It was also debated in the play's early days whether it was a Christian or a pagan play. Some of the discussants were Desmond MacCarthy ('Some Notes on Mr. Eliot's New Play'); Cleanth Brooks ('Sin and Expiation'); Philip Horton ('Speculations on Sin'); John Crowe Ransom ('T.S. Eliot as Dramatist'); and Paul Goodman ('T.S. Eliot: The Poet of Purgatory'). The religion of *The Family Reunion* was considered to be a serious matter since it was commonly agreed that Eliot was 'a Christian poet'. But for a critic like Paul Goodman, the play is what reveals at last that Eliot is not the Christian poet he had been supposed:

looking at what he says, we see more clearly here than elsewhere why Eliot is not a Christian poet; how his Christianity is sapped by Indian ideas; and yet he does not have the Indian wisdom either (1943/2004: 571).

In this paper, we shall explore the 'haunted house', *The Family Reunion*, through close reading to try and establish that the nature of its 'weird power' is in the symbolism of redemptive suffering. This is a religious idea, but not in the Christian sense. This paper will be arguing about redemptive suffering in relation to the *pharmakon*, a mythological image which belongs to the same tradition of thought as the Eumenides. In *The Family Reunion* where 'A curse is slow in coming / To complete fruition / It cannot be hurried / ... cannot be delayed / ... cannot be diverted' and 'An attempt to divert it / Only implicates others'; where 'what is spoken remains in the room, waiting for the future to hear it', it makes sense to seek the sources of its deepest symbols in non-Christian meaning systems rather than Christian. The presupposition in this paper is that the functioning of the *pharmakon*, the Eumenides, and similar elements in the play has much less to do with the religious or political beliefs of the writer than with what the poem *needs*: the constituent elements of a work of art come together in a specific order not because the artist likes it better that way but because it *is* better that way (Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* 98).

Levels of Existence at Wishwood

Lady Monchensey presides over the aristocratic house of Wishwood, maintaining it, holding formal events to keep the family together, managing the taxes, the rent, the repairs, and seeing to the house-keeping. It is this level of existence that she wishes to focus on. But her son Harry knows another level in which there is a different order of experience and knowledge than in his mother's world. In Harry's level, externality is deleted from a happening so that it becomes inseparable from the experienter himself. This level of knowing is something for which the language as it is, is clearly inadequate:

Harry: You are all people
To whom nothing has happened, at most a continual impact
Of external events. You have gone through life in sleep,
Never woken to the nightmare. I tell you, life would be unendurable
If you were wide awake. You do not know
The noxious smell untraceable in the drains,
Inaccessible to the plumbers, that has its hour of the night; you do not know
The unspoken voice of sorrow in the ancient bedroom
At three o'clock in the morning.... I am the old house
With the noxious smell and the sorrow before morning,
In which all past is present, all degradation
Is unredeemable. As for what happens—
Of the past you can only see what is past,
Not what is always present. That is what matters.

Harry is speaking of corruption that is ingrained. Even if it had started as violation from the outside, it has made its way into his inward being to the point that he can now say, 'I am the old house / With the noxious smell and the sorrow before morning, / In which all past is present, all degradation / Is unredeemable'. The noxious smell, the sorrow before morning, the degradation, all of this he has become. But has he always been this? How come that it is only getting to be known now, and by his own declaration? Is this claim here credible?

He is speaking undoubtedly about himself as a person, but all the more about his house Wishwood. When this house speaks for itself, as it were, in the utterances of the main Chorus of the play, there are correspondences to Harry's declaration:

Chorus: I am afraid of all that has happened, and of all that is to come;
Of the things to come that sit at the door, as if they had been there always.
And the past is about to happen, and the future was long since settled.
And the wings of the future darken the past, the beak and claws have desecrated
History. Shamed
The first cry in the bedroom, the noise in the nursery, mutilated

The family album, rendered ludicrous
The tenants' dinner, the family picnic on the moors.
Have torn
The roof from the house, or perhaps it was never there.
And the bird sits on the broken chimney. I am afraid (Part 1, Scene III).

There has been repression going on; and that is the way of this house, Harry's return laden with guilt for the drowning of his wife is the awakening of the conscience of the house, a conscience apparently in need of purging: 'I am afraid of all that has happened'. This idea of purging implicates the question of tragedy and catharsis.

In this play, the 'realistic' plane of Lady Monchensey is confronted by Harry's tragic plane. Lady Monchensey's plane is 'realistic' instead of tragic because of the working of repression and evasion. She actually insists on her innocence, having done all she has ever done in the interest of Wishwood. But there has been selfishness and there has been crime – the kind that is not usually heard in court or summarily disposed of with some official penalty and published in the newspapers, like Arthur's when he runs into and demolishes a roundsman's cart. Amy's selfishness is experienced in every aspect of the life of her family. John Peter speaks of her as 'the parasite-mother, preying for her life on the lives of her children, especially Harry' (1949/1985: 128). According to Harry,

When we were children, before we went to school,
The rule of conduct was simply pleasing mother;
Misconduct was simply being unkind to mother;
What was wrong was whatever made her suffer,
And whatever made her happy was what was virtuous—
Though never very happy, I remember. That was why
We all felt like failures, before we had begun.
When we came back, for the school holidays,
They were not holidays, but simply a time
In which we were supposed to make up to mother
For all the weeks during which she had not seen us
Except at half-term, and seeing us then
Only seemed to make her more unhappy, and made us
Feel more guilty, and so we misbehaved
Next day at school, in order to be punished,
For punishment made us feel less guilty (Part 2, Scene I).

With regard to her husband, he is used and then cast off to die a lonely death in exile; and news of his death had caused intense excitement among the conspirators, the 'triumphant aunts' – together with their principal, no doubt, Lady Monchensey herself. When she broaches this chapter of her life in an exchange with her youngest sister Agatha, the only one who is unsubmitive and undeferring to her, she does not mention what she herself has done, but only pours reproaches on Agatha, taking the attitude that the change in Harry is by his being won over by her. But Harry's consciousness has been greatly influenced by the history of the house which he has experienced.

Harry and Mary the girl his mother had intended for him make some significant recollections about their childhoods together. There is a hollow tree in a place the children had called the wilderness, where they used to slip out and go at night 'to raise ghosts', till they are caught and punished. The two appear to have been the greatest sufferers of the agony, according to Murphy, 'of being incapable of breaking out of the prison that a crippling if not paralyzing attachment to self-centeredness can make of human individuality' (2007: 105). Mary has grown up into a mature woman still believing that the reason for the punishment is their having slipped out of the house after being put to bed, but that what they had been doing had never been found out, to which Harry answers:

Not then. But later, coming back from school
For the holidays, after the formal reception
And the family festivities, I made my escape
As soon as I could, and slipped down to the river
To find the old hiding place. The wilderness was gone,
The tree had been felled, and a neat summer-house
Had been erected, 'to please the children.'

Apparently, there had existed a secret in the world of the old adults of Wishwood which the children had inconveniently stumbled upon. The evidence of its existence had to be destroyed and built over. The contrivance was to go on as if nothing had happened, as if nothing had changed – the very theme that Amy had been stressing in the lead up to Harry's arrival. Whereas MacCarthy writes about Amy: 'she is one of those who deny the importance of the spiritual life' (1939/2004: 375), the above incident rather suggests that she has knowledge of the spiritual in its dark dimension. Her denial of this knowledge by destroying the evidence does not wipe out what she knows. It comes back to the surface in an unexpected form, marking 'the failure of [this] defence' (Freud 390). Thus Harry is saying a great deal in his remark, 'I am the old house / With the noxious smell and the sorrow before morning, / In which all past is present, all degradation / Is unredeemable': he is how all that has been done in this house, in its name, all that is hidden and has been kept repressed has returned to haunt the present. He is the one who has caused the Eumenides to appear to exact justice and it is significant that though they have been pursuing him for some time and he has felt them close by, 'Always flickering at the corner of my eye, / Almost whispering just out of earshot— / And inside too, in the nightly panic / Of dreaming dissolution', it is here in Wishwood that he actually sees them for the first time. This is where they are *at home*. Many will subsequently see what he sees. So in taking himself off the scene at the close of the play in pursuit of the 'bright angels', he is at the same time purging the house of this menace:

John shall be the master.

All I have is his. No harm can come to him.
What would destroy me will be life for John,
I am responsible for him. Why I have this election
I do not understand. It must have been preparing always,
And I see it was what I always wanted. Strength demanded
That seems too much, is just strength enough given.
I must follow the bright angels (Part 2, Scene II).

From all accounts, John is probably the one among Amy's children who is close in habits and temperament to the old master who had to be done away with.

Struggle and the Will to Power

The main exerciser of the will to power in *The Family Reunion* is Lady Monchensey, but the exercise is occasionally contested, leading to setbacks and ultimate defeat. She herself names a main opponent, her sister Agatha:

Amy: I was a fool, to ask you again to Wishwood;
But I thought, thirty-five years is long, and death is an end,
And I thought that time might have made a change in Agatha—
It has made enough in me. Thirty-five years ago
You took my husband from me. Now you take my son (Part 2, Scene III).

Lady Monchensey has immense power of will, and exercises it on everyone and on herself. Mary, the girl she had intended for her son Harry draws attention to this, at the same time confirming the power relations between the two sisters:

You know perfectly well,
What Cousin Amy wants, she usually gets.
Why do you so seldom come here? You're not afraid of her,
But I think you must have wanted to avoid collision.
I suppose I could have gone, if I'd had the moral courage,
Even against a will like hers. I know very well
Why she wanted to keep me (Part 1, Scene II).

The tension of the play is low during most of the action because she is surrounded in most of this action by people she has always had her way with. At her *command*, they all turn up for the birthday party, even though, according to them there are other things, other places that would have suited them better:

Charles: I might have been in St. James's Street, in a comfortable chair rather nearer the fire.
Ivy: I might have been visiting Cousin Lily at Sidmouth, if I had not had to come to this party.
Gerald: I might have been staying with Compton-Smith, down at his place in Dorset.
Violet: I should have been helping Lady Bumpus, at the Vicar's American Tea (Act 1, Scene I).

Agatha is present, but in the absence of an object of their common intentional focus, the atmosphere is more or less placid.

Apparently, the objects of conflict between the two sisters are twofold, the husband and the son of Lady Monchensey. The struggle over the first had been concluded thirty-five years earlier with her in physical possession, but with the knowledge that emotional bonds had been sundered for ever. It is a bitter experience for her, and renders her abject, confronting her with 'something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object' (Kristeva, 1982: 4). Before Agatha, therefore, she bitterly recalls,

the humiliation,
Of the chilly pretences in the silent bedroom,
Forcing sons upon an unwilling father?
Dare you think what that does to one? Try to think of it.
I *would* have sons, if I could not have a husband:

Then I let him go. I abased myself (Part 2, Scene III).

Under the impulse of a totalizing will to power, Amy is obviously unabashed about her insistence in all things to have her way. The husband is here reduced to a means to an end, which is entirely by her determination. But his having in relation to Agatha manifested a will of his own, no matter how ineffectually, has in fact spoilt her sense of total control.

She ultimately accepts defeat; and believing that 'death is an end', she has invited this sister only to take the final blow of losing her son to her. What she refers to above as taking her son from her is in fact the becoming public of a struggle which had been held and concluded also thirty-five years earlier. Some of the things that have happened behind her back as a result would have been even more humiliating than 'the chilly pretences in the silent bedroom':

Agatha: I am the only one who ever met her,
The only one Harry asked to his wedding:
Amy did not know that. I was sorry for her (Part 1, Scene II).

This invitation signifies recognition on the part of Harry of a special bond to this aunt which he has lived with all his life without knowing what it really means. The meaning of that bond is part of what he learns on his homecoming after eight years for his mother's birthday party. He learns it from the only person who can teach him about it, Agatha, to whom he addresses this request:

Harry: If I knew, then I should not have to ask.
You know what I want to know, and that is enough....
When I know, I know that in some way I shall find
That I have always known it. And that will be better (Part 2, Scene II).

The knowledge sought has always been known because it is grounded in Harry's unconscious and only needs to be put into words to move to the stage of consciousness. But this history to be revealed entails what Lacan calls *primal suffering* (2002: 126). On the one hand, it involves defeat of Agatha in her struggle of wills with her sister, although Amy had never seen it that way and had therefore been unable to relish the victory. In the outcome, Agatha 'had to fight for many years to win [her] dispossession, / And many years to keep it'.

Amy's husband had hated her enough to wish to get rid of her permanently, as Harry was to get rid of his own wife only a year before:

Agatha: Oh, a dozen foolish ways, each one abandoned
For something more ingenious. You were due in three months' time;
You would not have been born in that event: I stopped him.
I can take no credit for a little common sense,
He would have bungled it.
I did not want to kill *you*!
You to be killed! What were you then? only a thing called 'life' —
Something that should have been *mine*, as I felt then.
Most people would not have felt that compunction
If they felt no other. But I wanted you!
If that had happened, I knew I should have carried
Death in life, death through lifetime, death in my womb.
I felt that you were in some way mine!
And that in any case I should have no other child.
Harry: And have me. That is the way things happen.
Everything is true in a different sense,
A sense that would have seemed meaningless before.

The saving of the life of the unborn Harry is implicated in Agatha's giving up the claims of love to the elder Monchensey. Further depths to her primal suffering are opened up here: the giving him up reflects at the pre-reflective unconscious level, the giving up all thought of (marriage and) having a child of her own. It is at the same time the saving of her sister's life, but she does not think of her sister, only her own love which should have come with a chance of having a child of her own. Agatha's life is fundamentally rearranged, with the psychological mechanism of transference which is 'present in the [character's own] subjective revelation' (Lacan 130), as well as in the 'closure' in which fulfilment of all her desire for a child of her own is fully invested in this individual. She has *got* something out of this struggle; for according to Lacan,

the transference is essentially resistant, *Übertragungswiderstand*. The transference is the means by which the communication of the unconscious is interrupted, by which the unconscious closes up again. Far from being the handing over of powers to the unconscious, the transference is, on the contrary, its closing up (130).

At the level of the unconscious, the unborn child has been substituted for the primary love object; and so she has not really lost the struggle. As she phrases it to Harry, 'I had to fight for many years to win my dispossession, / And many years to keep it'. As it turns out, the spectre of this struggle has remained, showing itself once at the wedding in a way to make Agatha feel sorry for her sister, and then again at this final meeting at Wishwood for the birthday party where at last Amy has no more illusions:

Charles: Where is Harry going? What is the matter?

Amy: Ask Agatha.

Gerald: Why, what's the matter? Where is he going?

Amy: Ask Agatha.

Violet: I cannot understand at all. Why is he leaving?

Amy: Ask Agatha (Part 2, Scene III).

Agatha

Agatha knows and has taken the measure of each and every one of the characters present and absent whose lives and actions impinge on the play. What she knows about herself is more than anyone could discern. Only the privileged are admitted into this knowledge. Harry is that privileged one:

What people know me as,
The efficient principal of a women's college—
That is the surface. There is a deeper
Organisation.... (Part 1, Scene II).

In the dialogue above between Amy and her other sisters and brothers-in-law she displays certainty that Agatha is to blame for Harry's sudden decision to leave. She also knows that 'Agatha means / As a rule, a good deal more than she cares to betray' (Part 1, Scene I). She does not know, however, the nature of the power acting in her, out of which she speaks, the power of clairvoyance. It is in her discourse which is detached from the conversation going on around her that the foreboding of tragedy is first hinted:

Thus with most careful devotion....
Men tighten the knot of confusion
Into perfect misunderstanding....
Neglecting all the admonitions
From the world around the corner
The wind's talk in the dry holly-tree
The inclination of the moon.... (Part 1, Scene I)

Like a sage, Agatha is hereby giving warning that there is more going on in the ordinary things happening around as well as human immoderation, namely lack of good sense (*sōphrosunē*), which is related to *hubris* ('excess, pride') involved in complicating the present situation.

Because of her, therefore, there is a spiritual dimension at work in the play; by her ministration, the resolution of the play will occur also at that level. The climactic moment occurs between her and Harry. It is a moment of enlightenment for Harry, after which the suffering and pain and disappointed expectations occurring at the level of incident continue to be important only to those without enlightenment:

Harry: Perhaps

I only dreamt I pushed her.

Agatha: So I had supposed. What of it?

What we have written is not a story of detection,
Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation.
It is possible that you have not known what sin
You shall expiate, or whose, or why. It is certain
That the knowledge of it must precede the expiation.
It is possible that sin may strain and struggle
In its dark instinctive birth, to come to consciousness
And so find expurgation. It is possible
You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,
Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.
Indeed it is possible. You may learn hereafter,
Moving alone through flames of ice, chosen
To resolve the enchantment under which we suffer.

Harry: Look, I do not know why,
I feel happy for a moment, as if I had come home.
It is quite irrational, but now
I feel quite happy, as if happiness
Did not consist in getting what one wanted
Or in getting rid of what can't be got rid of
But in a different vision. This is like an end.

Agatha: And a beginning. Harry, my dear,
I feel very tired, as only the old feel.

The killing of his wife is the immediate cause of the present unhappiness in the family: to that extent, he is 'an impurity, the *pharmakon* [which] also acts like an aggressor or a housebreaker, threatening some internal purity and security' (Derrida, *Dissemination* 128). Some Eliot critics are unreconciled to the idea of Harry having killed his wife, but within the logic of the play, there is no other way to explain the Eumenides, even if incertitude had not been introduced through Harry's equivocation in the earlier passage with Agatha. As 'an impurity ... threatening the internal purity' of the house, and thus attracting the vengeful pursuit of the Eumenides, this *pharmakon* has to be got rid of. But there is more to be paid for. Agatha is not even sure that the killing is *the* problem, as she comments, 'It is possible that you have not known what sin / You shall expiate, or whose, or why'. Since Harry is happy to hear that he is the consciousness of his unhappy family in whom its stain will find expurgation, in him both the personal stain and the indeterminate sin still struggling to come to consciousness 'have found their remedy (*pharmakon*)' (*Dissemination* 97). For *pharmakon* (also *pharmakos*) is 'healing or harmful medicine, healing or poisonous herb, drug, poisonous potion, magic (potion)' (*Etymological Dictionary of Greek* 1554).

Agatha is distinctive among the aunts and uncles and is not frequently consorting with them possibly because she is not a favourite of Lady Monchensey who totally dominates the others. These others make up one of the two choruses of the play; she makes up the other alone by herself – although the final scene with Mary may also be considered a choric event, corresponding to the *Exodos* of classical tragedy. With her gift of clairvoyance apparently flowing into everything she does and says, she is not able to blend with the others in dialogue of everyday things. Her speeches touch off echoes going a long way and seemingly out of touch with the everyday concerns that have prompted them. The result is that her choric moments, apart from the sense of an utterance overtaking the speaker and producing itself without support from a human will and human effort, the discourse is fairly consistent with her character, as if rooted in her spirituality. This is not the case with the main Chorus, where the characters become pure vessels at the moment of the utterance.

Concerned with her responsibility as the head of Wishwood, and having thrown out her husband to attain this, Amy had forced herself 'to the purposes of Wishwood'. His death in exile makes a lasting impression on the child Harry because it had occasioned 'hushed excitement' and 'low conversation' among his 'triumphant aunts'. Agatha could not have been part of this as her sentiments for the man had obviously not died out after thirty-five years:

Agatha: Your father might have lived— or so I see him—
An exceptionally cultivated country squire,
Reading, sketching, playing on the flute,
Something of an oddity to his county neighbours,
But not neglecting public duties.
He hid his strength beneath unusual weakness,
The diffidence of a solitary man:
Where he was weak he recognised your mother's power,

And yielded to it.

Clearly, Agatha's consciousness of sin in Wishwood has a historical basis. But the choric speeches suggest that there is a lot more than this one event. According to Harry, Wishwood has its own deadly influence which affects those who inhabit its world. Lady Monchensey may have become the expression of this deadly influence, although she thinks of herself as a transitional figure, keeping the house in as unchanged a condition as possible for the next master. What is clear, moreover, is that Wishwood is in a state of immobility due to abjection. Lady Monchensey and her brothers-in-law with her other sisters, Violet and Ivy, seem to have a distinct sense of a burden not to be shifted, an obstacle not to be circumvented, and yet a reality the existence of which cannot be openly admitted, which renders ludicrous their feeble efforts to give the effect of normality. Agatha does not share in their abjection, but is attached to the house in a different mode. She has become its priestess, with concern for its wholesomeness – no doubt because of her bond to Harry. At the moment of enlightenment above, what is communicated and makes Harry 'feel quite happy, as if happiness / Did not consist in getting what one wanted / Or in getting rid of what can't be got rid of / But in a different vision', is that he is going to be the sacrifice to expiate sin in Wishwood, that through him abjection will finally be confronted. Conscious of personal guilt himself, and pursued and harassed by the Eumenides for it, he welcomes the prospect of attaining his own freedom in becoming the sacrifice that would purge his inheritance, already willed over to a younger brother John, of its corruption and corrupting influence.

II. Conclusion

The Family Reunion is undoubtedly a modern play – a modernist play, with its Janus-like posture towards time: a strong sense of being a captive of the past and simultaneously struggling for transcendence. At the surface level, we have characters caught up in an old way of life still subsisting within a modern situation, 'the genteel home', according to Grove, faced with 'ritual of extinction' (166), and older members of the house unwittingly driving it towards spiritual extinction. Hence Lady Monchensey, unwilling to take responsibility for any kind of change in this genteel home and its associated way of life and value system and having successfully held out against pressure to change and update while her children are growing up and getting settled in life is anxious to hand on both the house and the responsibility for the old value system, as if the question now is one of bare survival. But what is emphasized in what she has preserved are personnel and physical elements. At a deeper level, she has preserved intact – and indeed enhanced the rank decadence that characterizes the house needing to be purged or else 'the incredible / Becomes the actual / Without our intention / Knowing what is intended' (Part 3, Scene III). So the lady apparently sees her way clearly and what her role is, but she is about to bring about an intention which at surface cognition she cannot fathom. At the same time, the play is not only evocative of the ancient Greek tragic tradition, particularly Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, it also resumes the discursive formations of that tragic art in which a curse, a stain, or human error sets off a tragic sequence which outstrips the human power of control. The catastrophe working its own logic at a level beneath the awareness of the human participants is clearly building to the point of eruption, but the movement is broken off and Wishwood held back from the ritual extinction awaiting it by virtue of the appearance of a figure with 'double destinations' (Kristeva, 1980: 43), a new source of stain as well as a remedy for stain, who has to be driven out as a *pharmakon*. This mythological image, the *pharmakon*, is irrational, just as the discourse elements, the Eumenides that physically appear, and the choric utterances which seize the individuals for the moment and release them afterwards oblivious of what they had been involved in the moment before. But it is from these very irrational products of mythic thought that the play draws its power. The *pharmakon* is also energy from within. Harry Monchensey, therefore, will effect removal of stain from the old house through pilgrimage and exile, but in the upshot, the house will only survive in the physical sense, fulfilling Lady Monchensey's express intention, since John will be the new master. As Harry observes to Agatha,

John will recover, be what he always was ...

the only one of us I can conceive

As settling down to make himself at home at Wishwood,

Make a dull marriage, marry some woman stupider

Stupider than himself. He can resist the influence

Of Wishwood, being unconscious, living in gentle motion

Of horses, and right visits to the right neighbours

At the right times; and be an excellent landlord (Part 2, Scene II).

Apart from the removing of the stain and the facing up to the dark secrets which have rendered the house a haunted place, nothing has changed, nothing will change in Wishwood.

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