T. S. Eliot’s Poetry of the First Voice:  
A Revision of the Dramatic Monologue

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I. Eliot’s Poetry of the First Voice

Eliot’s sense of the dramatic in the poetic form of the dramatic monologue is directly related with the question of perspective, how to give “various presentations to various viewpoints” (KE 142). The persona, its first person narrator, has been traditionally considered a device to keep an aesthetic distance between the character and the author/audience. It is a poetic form evolved out of lyric and drama from the necessity of distancing the poet from its autobiographical material. This means it is still a song of myself, the self engaged in its own song behind the smokescreen of a mask. In this sense, the persona is primarily a means of self-dramatization. On the other hand, this distance, the incomplete identification between the self and the mask, creates certain tension between them, accompanied by irony. A persona, highly self-conscious, may not simply act as a means, i.e. an acting self which is observed by the audience. It has the potential to simultaneously ‘observe’ itself while it is acting, and create another point of view within the poem. Frequently this new point of view proves not to be reliable but beguiling, when the mask uses the established pseudo-dramatic situation to deceive the audience and/or its other self. This psychic division within a character Eliot finds already in Shakespeare’s character, even before the rise of
psychoanalysis. Othello "sees himself in a dramatic light" but he also deceives the audience in self-sentimentalizing (SE 27, 111). Thus there are two kinds of dramatic situations for Eliot: the character/persona’s self-dramatization in viewing himself in a dramatic light, and the poet/reader’s perception of the persona/character’s self-sentimentalizing from a higher point of view. Because of this, the dramatic is principally a question of perspective and Eliot’s aim in the dramatic monologue is not only to create a distance between the persona and the audience, but also at the same time to create another distance within the persona’s mind between the acting self and the viewing self. Eliot’s interest, therefore, is not in events or actions but in the subjectivity at work—the subjective mind interpreting the events or actions. The subjectivity in question is inherently autobiographical, though he tries hard to smokescreen this from the scrutinizing eye of the popular psychologists with his "Impersonal theory of poetry" (SE 7).

In “The Three Voices of Poetry” (1963) Eliot implies that his early poetry is primarily of “the first voice,” that is, “the voice of the poet talking to himself,” not the second voice, “the voice of the poet addressing an audience” nor the third, “the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse” (OPP 89). It is worth quoting at length Eliot’s exposition of the poetic process of the first voice, for it illuminates how he approaches his early poetry, specifically his generic idea about the relation of form and material:

In the poem in which the first voice, that of the poet talking to himself, dominates, the “psychic material” tends to create its own form—the eventual form will be to a greater or less degree the form for the one poem and for no other. It is misleading, of course, to speak of the material as creating or imposing its own form. What happens is a simultaneous development of form and material: for the form affects the material at every stage: and perhaps all the material does is to repeat "not that! not that!" in the face of each unsuccessful attempt at formal organization: and finally the material is identified with its form. But in poetry of the second and in that of the third voice, the form is already to some extent given. However much it may be transformed before the poem is finished, it can be represented from the start by an outline or scenario. If I choose to tell a story, I must have some notion of the plot of the