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Vol. V, No. 5: Beyond Nihilism: The Fiction of George P. Elliott

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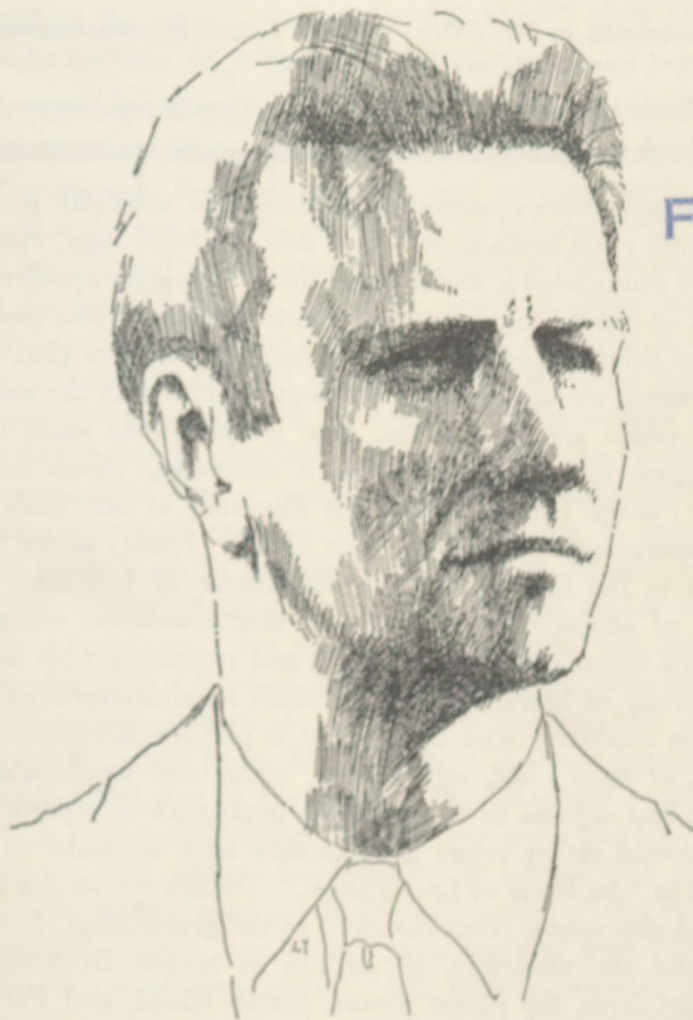
The Hollins Critic

Volume V, No. 5

Hollins College, Virginia

December, 1968

Beyond Nihilism: The Fiction of George P. Elliott



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I

George P. Elliott's fictional world is so fully peopled with men and women of education, intellectuality, and moral will, so completely circumstanced with streets and houses (beautiful and old, with rare newels, mantels, and balustrades; handsome and modern, recessed in woods or high on hills, with exposed beams, casement

The Hollins Critic

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Published five times a year, in the months of February, April, June, October, and December, by Hollins College, Virginia. Second class postage paid at Roanoke, Virginia. Copyright 1968 by Hollins College, Virginia 24020.

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The Hollins Critic is one dollar a year (\$1.50 in Canada and overseas).

windows, and French doors opening on gardens), so tastefully provided with food and fine wines, rare roast beefs sliced razor thin, caviared eggs, avocado salads (but also peanut butter sandwiches), and art and music (Muggsy Spanier—or the Ambrosian Chant), and so closely informed with relationships, complex and dissolving, husband and wife and children and lovers and friends and teachers (but also the disaffected ones), that it seems strange to begin an essay on him with the word Nothing. But that, I think, is where we must begin. For Nothing—the sense of the void, the ambience and appeal of nihilism—remains a motivating theme from Elliott's first novel *Parktilden Village* (1958), where the discovery of evil leads to the brink of the void, to his latest book *An Hour of Last Things* (1968), where "nothing" occurs over thirty times in the first story. The appearance of Elliott's new collection of stories, the work of almost twenty years, provides a welcome occasion for a retrospective look at his fiction: the stories renew and recapitulate his informing themes, and reveal the variety of literary modes in which he characteristically writes. They allow, also, a fresh encounter with a style that is perhaps Elliott's highest expression of craftsmanship, at once lucid, self-effacing, quiet, and yet capable of creating a scale of tonalities that enjoins us to accept the impossible as readily as the everyday eventualities we would rather reject because they hurt us, make us afraid, and fill us with shame, as in "An Hour of Last Things." Though the stories in this collection present a range of characters, from the child to the grandfather, from the human to the anti-human and the unearthly, in settings as remote from each other as an impoverished desert farm, the planet Venus, Staten Island, and Paris, they achieve a kind of unity in their nostalgia for wonder, the child's sense of the magic and worth of life, and in their quest of rituals to renew the adult's contact with sources of wonder in nature, in art, and in love. This quest expresses itself often in a rhythm of withdrawal from life and return, of spiritual death and renewal, explicit in "Better to Burn" in the words of the woman-narrator: "I had buried myself in this stucco tomb, . . . either to die or to gather the strength for going back to life." Underlying all the stories is a concern with the process of living in a distinctively human identity, with values—and this subsuming interest radiates from, and returns

to, a fear of Nihilism, of that "voiding force" within man which is "capable of exhausting significance from anything" (*In the World*). Elliott's withdrawing characters go beyond the question of how to live to the more fundamental one of *whether* to live, thus establishing his affinity with, as well as his point of departure from, contemporary nihilistic writers. They dramatize the fear that the ultimate reality in life may indeed be cosmic Nothingness. This possibility is made quietly explicit in a story from his earlier collection, *Among the Dangs* (1961). The protagonist of "Faq," an explorer-geographer, penetrates a remote village where the native chief confronts him with a question he must answer correctly or die: "What must be?" The hero evokes necessity of the past ("What has always been"), the law of gravity (water must run downhill), and the numeral system (each number must be surrounded by two others); and with each answer he comes closer to death, until he is inspired to the correct response: "Nothing" must be. With that his life is spared and he becomes an initiate into the tribe.

The sense of Nothing has haunted the literary imagination: life is empty, man is absurd, the universe is indifferent; and death is meaningless finality. In response to this vision of emptiness, the most extreme, and perhaps most logical actions—as Camus has indicated—are suicide and gratuitous murder, both abhorrent to the ordinary person, but charged with dramatic possibility to the writer. However, even the question of suicide, as Hamlet classically posed it, loses meaning for some contemporary nihilists, as John Barth's character realizes, after his intensive search for a reason not to kill himself: "If nothing makes any final difference, that fact makes no difference either, and there is no more reason to commit suicide, say, than not to, . . . Hamlet's question is, absolutely, meaningless" (*The Floating Opera*, 1956). Choice also is meaningless when a character, "fixed on ultimacy," takes a "cosmic view" only to be exposed to cosmic void. The narrator in another Barth novel, *End of the Road* (1958), which provides an interesting parallel to Elliott's fiction, discovers that (like Camus' Meursault) he is indifferent to his choices. For him, the consequences of indifference are meaningless activities, but for his mistress, his best friend's wife, they are a botched and bloody abortion, and death. Suicide and abortion—"disconnection"—represent symbolically the nihilistic vision in Elliott's *David Knudsen* (1962), while in *Parktilden Village*, a young man's meaningless drift into a love triangle (like that in the movie "The Graduate") dramatizes a failure of values, in which neither friendship, loyalty, nor trust provides a more adequate motive for behavior than whim. Insufficiency of motive ("I simply ran out of motives," *End of the Road*) reflects a character's sense of the void, indicating that he has, like David Knudsen, lost footing in a familiar and "fixed" country and plunged into the "foundationless abyss." His father's suicide, for motives David cannot find sufficient, seems to him an act "coming from nothing and going back into nothing"; it obliterates from his vision everything but the darkness now opened before him. Like this suicide, the murder in *David Knudsen* is gratuitous, committed without sufficient motive as we ordinarily define it, not for money, revenge, or advancement, but murder for its own sake, as an act of liberation into Nothingness, where no laws bind us, nor values deter, not even the value of human life. In his second novel, *David Knudsen*, Elliott brings his protagonist, an intelligent and moralistic young man, face to face with the end-point of nihilism, suicide and murder,

The Net Breaker

I laid down my long net in the big tide.
The brown web streamed like a dropped sail in the water
Yet seemed small as lace. It lifted and rode,
Widened and lagged. Then it began to flash,
Shivering, gleamed, and sank with a long shudder.
I never knew what hurried and held it hard.
The weight of a million? Or one vaster shape?
The slack of it rose, floating the Niles of calm,
Idling over the rolling of the deepened ocean.

—BREWSTER GHISELIN

both made meaningless by an insufficiency of motive. "The abyss was real," says David Knudsen, "and not to be worded away." Most significantly, however, he takes a step beyond this statement: "But I knew that not everything everywhere was thus." David Knudsen personifies Elliott's quest for alternatives other than suicide and murder, for a way of surviving the void, while not denying it—perhaps by moving in and through it to what lies beyond nihilism. David's action is paradigmatic in Elliott's fiction. He looks into the "darkness and turmoil" of the abyss, where there are "no fixed points . . . , no laws, no lasting forms"; he has been tempted, and still is, to throw himself into this darkness. But he cannot make a final commitment to Nothing, for he cannot help wondering if there is not "something other" and "more" than this chaos. Though, indisputably, ours is an age of negation, is there not something to affirm? This, I think, is the question implicit in George P. Elliott's work, and I should like to explore the meaning and texture of his fictional world as it reveals the values to which we can look if we wish to see Something where we fear there is Nothing.

While some writers have found the abyss so compulsively fascinating that they finally threw themselves into it, as Hart Crane threw himself into the ocean, others have made the creative process itself, the very act of writing, an affirmation of values. In Elliott's recent story, "Into the Cone of Cold," a poet is so exhilarated by the "game of the poem," that he sits up all night to work out a piece that must begin with "in a trance of consciousness" (already a play on words) and end in shock and delight with "dead." Another name for this game of words is immortality: if the writer lives on in an art which may outlast "marble" and "gilded monument[s]," then, implicitly, he negates the negations of nihilism. Playing with words and literary forms reflects also delight in craftsmanship, and this, I think, Elliott strongly feels. He likes the traditions of literature and enjoys experimenting with other writers' techniques. In his first collection of stories, his much anthologized treatment of the "Negro problem," "The NRACP," offers his version of Swift's "A Modest Proposal," just as in his new collection, "In a Hole" turns metaphor into reality in the manner of Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." In Kafka, a young man who feels

like a bug turns into one: in Elliott, a man who knows he is going to fall into trouble drops cataclysmally into a pit where he is forced to act out the existential metaphor of the human condition, being alone, Godless, and creating out of the sole fact of his existence values for his survival. "Better to Burn" presents a neurasthenic woman who has gone underground in the manner of Dostoyevsky's famous underground man: secluded in a motel room, alienated and unnerved, she too writes "notes" in her diary in order to keep a hold on sanity. In an utterly different style, that of Ivy Compton-Burnett, "A Family Affair" uses a stream of continuous and formalized conversation to reveal intricate family relationships. To suggest some other literary analogues, for they are numerous: "Invasion of the Planet of Love" and "Into the Cone of Cold" are patterned after science fiction, though both have serious moral themes; "Rilla," a first-person narration by a city cab-driver has overtones of Ring Lardner; "Miracle Play" and "The Well and the Bulldozers," toned to the naiveté of the child-narrators, recall Sherwood Anderson; and "Tourist and Pilgrim," while significantly different in theme and intonation from Malamud, is Elliott's "Jewish" story. In contrast to these, "Among the Dangs" and "Faq" are adventure tales of modern Gullivers faced with strange customs of imaginary alien people in faraway places. "Miss Cudahy of Stowes Landing" revives the haunted house motif of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"; although the house is not set in a miasmic mist near a stagnant tarn, one may be buried alive in it nonetheless, and an innocent girl is doomed, while a gentlemen is more than venal. The realistic tradition is carried on in "Children of Ruth," "Words, Words, Words," "An Hour of Last Things," and in the three novels.

II

None of this is to say that Elliott is merely a derivative writer, but rather that he enjoys the craft of reading and writing and finds in its exercise a way of getting around and away from the void. This distinguishes him from those contemporaries who affirm Nothing by decomposing the forms of art, thus making form a mimetic expression of the nihilistic theme, as in Beckett, Burroughs, Robbe-Grillet, and Barth (most extremely, in his latest book). If formal decomposition dramatizes a nihilistic impulse towards non-art, then to say that Elliott preserves tradition in itself establishes his esthetic and moral position in today's literary scene. Among contemporary writers, the one I find most comparable to Elliott is Angus Wilson. Both Elliott and Wilson deal with their characters as responsible agents, and both avoid the lower depths, the back-alleys and back-rooms, where almost everyone is the hapless victim of either society or his own derangement. "An Hour of Last Things," like Wilson's *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* (1959)—sheer coincidence of names—deals with a woman, suddenly widowed, who seeks, through various fumbled relationships, to establish a decent life of her own. In *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961), Wilson explores a scientifically ordered futuristic society, such as interests Elliott only because he fears and detests it.

"The world I lived in and knew well," Elliott wrote recently, "was the San Francisco Bay area in the mid-twentieth century." This is the world he recreates in his fiction as a cohesive background, and we can map it, if we care, as definitively as Faulkner mapped Yoknapatawpha County. Except for characters in the fantasies who travel into outer space or inner remote tribal villages, most of Elliott's people

live in the Oakland-Berkeley-San Francisco Bay Area. It has two focal points, the University of California and the College of the Most Blessed St. Anselm, and since many of Elliott's characters come to these institutions as teachers and students, his fiction deals typically with educated and articulate people. In the first novel, Peter Hazen, newly appointed to the University faculty, joins a widening circle of men of high promise, accomplishment, or renown, which includes Devereux, a leading mathematician, Knudsen, a famous physicist, Royce, a law professor and theorist, Brother Quintillian, an Associate Professor of Logic and Medieval History, Brother Nicholas, an expert in cryogenics, Brother Carl, a "mathematical philosopher," and the younger men, Jim Sorb and Leon Kalish, brilliant students. Of the mature men, several are clearly idealized figures of extreme rationality, unassailable virtue, or profound knowledge, to whom "god-like" is often, if surreptitiously, applied. In "Is He Dead?" the epithet describes John Haffner, the symbol of honesty, a man of such self-control and integrity that he renounces his chance to become governor because he does not want to be seduced by power (an interesting story to read in an election year). Men of lesser stature also have god-like prowess; in "Better to Burn," Lloyd may be "stupid and dull and an oaf," but he makes love "perfectly," like a god. While these males may be fantasy wish-fulfillments, like Hemingway's stalwart heroes, they represent an affirmation, if only of the *dream* of man's capacity for moral strength, intellectual vigor, and endurance. Though sometimes they fall into despair and indolence, and sometimes they are guilty of evil and destructive actions, they are never reduced to the sub-human slime that crawls on its belly in Beckett's mud or in Selby's Brooklyn alleys. Fantasy projections tell us much about their creator, and Elliott's dreams, insofar as they can be shared by others and do not contain purely private images, reflect the nobler aspirations that we generally recognize as our own. Surely sometimes we need relief from the nauseating, though powerful, fantasies of dissolution so current in our fiction, pushed to the extreme in the disjunctive prose of William Burroughs.

The characters of Elliott's Bay Area relate to each other in an interesting though tenuous way from novel to novel, interweaving loosely to suggest the fabric of a society. Characters of one work may show up in others and drift through the fiction, sometimes playing a major role and other times a subsidiary one, in a convincing way. As in life, we see characters against new and revealing perspectives; and in reading of any single incident, we can bring to bear what we know from other works. The occasional references to Peter Hazen in *In the World*, which have no more weight than casual gossip, take on greater meaning as we remember the young and promising sociologist from *Parktilden Village*. In *David Knudsen*, David's sister Julia appears briefly, and we see her only from the outside, as she appears to David; in "Better to Burn," we move in, through her diary, to her intimate thoughts and feelings, and we have a realistic sense of discovering the truth about someone we knew casually. We can also understand in that story why her sister, Anne Fisher, evokes such resentment even though she helps, and indeed saves, Julia, when we recall that in *David Knudsen*, she is the family "Shmug," a conventional, moralistic do-gooder whose missionary zeal cloaks insensitivity and officiousness. Moreover, she is married to a geneticist, a scientist who "tinkers" with human life and is anathema to Elliott.

George P. Elliott

Born in Knightstown, Indiana in 1918, George P. Elliott received his A.B. and M.A. degrees from the University of California at Berkeley. Since 1963 professor of English at Syracuse University, he has also taught at St. Mary's College of California, Cornell University, Barnard College, the University of California at Berkeley, and at the Writers' Workshop of the University of Iowa. In 1962 he received the Indiana Authors' Day Award for his book of short stories *Among the Dangs*; he has also been awarded a Hudson Review fellowship in fiction, a D. H. Lawrence fellowship from the University of New Mexico, a Guggenheim and a Ford Foundation fellowship. He has contributed poems, stories, and essays to such magazines as "Nation" and "Poetry". He is married and has a daughter.

—CORNELIA EMERSON

Books by George P. Elliott

PARKTILDEN VILLAGE

Boston: Beacon Press, 1958. \$3.50
 Toronto: S. J. Reginald Saunders, 1958. \$4.25
 Louisville, Ky.: Arlington Books, 1958. \$3.50

FEVER AND CHILLS

Iowa City: Stone Wall Press, 1961. Limited edition

AMONG THE DANGS

New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961. \$3.95
 London: Secker & Warburg, 1962. 18/
 Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1963. (pa.) \$1.95
 Toronto: McLelland, 1963. (pa.) \$2.25
 New York: Viking Press, 1966. (pa.) \$1.45
 Toronto: Macmillan Co., 1966. (pa.) \$1.90

DAVID KNUDSEN

New York: Random House, 1962. \$4.95
 Toronto: Random House, 1962. \$5.95

A PIECE OF LETTUCE

New York: Random House, 1964. \$4.95
 Toronto: Random House, 1964. \$6.50

IN THE WORLD

New York: Viking Press, 1965. \$6.95
 Toronto: Macmillan, 1965. \$8.75

FROM THE BERKELEY HILLS

New York: Harper & Row, 1968. \$4.95

AN HOUR OF LAST THINGS

New York: Harper & Row, 1968. \$5.95

FIFTEEN MODERN AMERICAN POETS (ed.)

New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1956. (pa.) \$1.65
 New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1962. (pa.) \$1.95
 New York: Peter Smith. \$4.00

TYPES OF PROSE FICTION (ed.)

New York: Random House, 1964. \$5.95

—C. E.

Elliott's characters have in common a characteristic way of speaking; inevitably they sprinkle their conversations with "sweetie" and "honey" and they fall into their few but idiosyncratic obscenities. Some of the most vigorous and realistic dialogue is contained in the quarrels between husband and wife, which capture the humor of marital irrationality. The women hold their own beautifully, if not always sensibly: Beth in *In the World* and Marguerite in "Into the Cone of Cold." Almost all the characters are highly articulate (except the hot-rodgers in *Parktilden Village*), capable of long and clear expository statements, so that the fiction, particularly the novels, often makes an essayistic impact. Through speech, the characters connect easily with their own pasts, and at the drop of a hat, anyone will explain cogently and at length who he is, where he came from, and what concerns him now. Many of them enjoy chess, play musical instruments, and drop allusions, occasionally rather esoteric, to literature, philosophy, and religion. While they are thus verbal, serious, and morally educated, they are also capable of sudden anger, petty annoyance, stubbornness, resentment, and folly. They are noticeably forgiving. In short, they behave like members of a family, as indeed most of them are. Marriage and the family are highly valued in Elliott's world—in this respect, he may be considered Victorian.

The Mod side of Bay Area life revolves about Iggy's Igloo, the hangout of the young motorcycle gang in *Parktilden Village* (visited briefly for a hamburger by the Royces at the end of *In the World*). Two worlds sometimes meet at Iggy's Igloo, and with disastrous result for young Jacqueline Devereux (one of my favorite characters). Hazen comes here to do sociological research and encounters the inarticulate but ominous John Henry, a hot-rod leader who wants to be caricatured in Hazen's comic strip, not recognizing himself as B. C. Troglodyte, an apelike figure on a motorcycle. Strongly identified physical landmarks like Iggy's Igloo, St. Anselm's, and clearly specified streets, highways, boarding-houses, motels, restaurants, parks, and beaches convey the sense of place so important to realistic fiction. They create a locale with a distinctive atmosphere and emotional ambience; they give a sense of a way of life and of being caught up "in the world." Moreover, they become charged with symbolic meaning, so that setting—and particularly the home—is not a place, but also a moral environment. Perhaps no writer deals in such considerable and loving architectural detail as Elliott, for to him, as to Henry James and Edith Wharton, a house projects an individual's social class and personal taste, as well as his moral sensibility. Descriptions of the house usually preface the introduction of character and action, pacing the novel to a leisurely and ruminative tempo. In "Brother Quintillian and Dick the Chemist," the house remains a vivid expression of Dick's dead wife; she is there, like many of Elliott's characters, in the home she chose and decorated as the projection of her inner self. Many houses suggest the continuity of life, being handed down from one generation to the next as the gift of the past to the present. Some houses even have names, like Sherman in *David Knudsen*. Almost all have personalities, like the lonely house in "Children of Ruth" that sees the family dispersed, each son privately fornicating in his closed-off room, while the mother wanders alone; or the substantial and supportive house in "An Hour of Last Things" that helps put Betty back on her feet; or the frightening house of Miss Cudahy, that is beautiful and cruel. Parktilden Village, that slick

and commercialized modern beehive of apartments, condemns itself and the people in it simply by being what it is. A sophisticated expression of modern sterility, it includes enough variation in color scheme and design to admit that individuality is a virtue, but its slight differences are fraudulent and cannot conceal its planned homogeneity. Peter Hazen's moral obliquity is pinpointed at the instant he wakes happily in his new apartment, unaware of the "connection between the state of his soul and the place in which he lived." When he tries to break his sterile mold and marry the girl he loves, he moves from Parktilden Village, but it is too late: he is dehumanized, like the apartment, and a corruptive influence. Leon's references to him in *In the World* indicate that he has turned "sleazy." To Sybil Royce, who lives with her parents in a house of personality and distinction, "the image of the horrid village" with its "flawless towers and manors and grounds" suggests a crass public exhibit of "engineered progress." It has a scientifically planned and tidied "ordered perfection"—to use a key phrase from "Façade"—and while such perfection may represent the goal of science, for Elliott, it is the antithesis to humanistic values. The quarrel between Beth and Alfred Royce concerns their house—who wanted it, who paid for it, who liked and disliked it—and the furnishings Beth brings into it as her mother's heritage. Imagine a longtime marriage between mature and intelligent people breaking up over furniture and household stuff; but this happens because a home is being desecrated, and the furniture is Mother and the past taking possession.

III

"Science and the State happened to me," David Knudsen cries when he becomes a victim of radiation fall-out. Both are to be distrusted, for they harbor the power to galvanize hatred into mass destruction. The scientific mind fascinates and repels Elliott: he respects men who think and know, but he fears and condemns much that scientists think and know about. He trusts the scientist only when his devotion approaches religious selflessness, becoming a faith and disinterested pursuit of principle, as in "Brother Quintillian and Dick the Chemist," where the parallelism between the two is clear and mutually validating. I have mentioned that Elliott's characters often play chess, a game requiring the concentration and intelligence he admires; but the game of chess as a paradigm for life is as abhorrent to him as to Nabokov's champion in *The Defense*. Life resembles chess when it becomes an ordered and controlled progression of moves towards a predictable end. To Elliott, this is the scientists' ideal: they pursue knowledge for manipulation and control—for the reduction of accident, pain, and suffering, it is true; but "ordered perfection" is mechanistic and rests ultimately on a view of people as things. Elliott finds in the unplanned disorder of living, and even in suffering, a chance for human fulfillment through trial, error, and spiritual growth. Most of his characters come through their ordeal; none is better for having given up his individuality, which means his capacity for pain, for the benefit of rationalized comfort. This, certainly, is the theme of "Façade." To Elliott, men and things belong to totally different orders; he thinks that the scientist does not make a distinction but levels men, through his indifferent manipulations, to the order of things. The geneticist in *David Knudsen* tampers with human life to control reproduction and the race; the physicist, extending

the limits of knowledge in order to regulate nature, moves the world towards chaos or paralysis. When the elder Knudsen sees the consequence of his experimental work in his son's radiation sickness, he feels such horror and remorse that he cannot live. In a way, Elliott reminds us of Hawthorne with his excessive fear of the cold-hearted man of science who would tinker with the human soul, pervert nature into a poisonous garden, and seek the forbidden knowledge which belongs only to God and from which all of man's woes originate. Modern science thus implies a kind of Faustian compact that can only end disastrously. David Knudsen's wife unwillingly aborts their child as he pressures her with the fear that it will be born monstrous because of his radiation illness. Childless, they become loveless, and turn against each other; their natural functions and relationships are destroyed, and finally, they separate and remain permanently alienated. Considering how much Elliott is a celebrator of marriage—his most common ending is husband and wife together in bed—the destruction of this marriage, like that of Lizzie and Joe in *In the World*, condemns an aberrant and sterile society in which the finest brains and most highly developed technology come together to produce the final Nothing.

It is interesting to see Elliott's characters literally go into this Nothing when they abstract themselves from ordinary surroundings, the circumstanced world of houses, families, and professions, and crawl into a vacuum. Like the subjects of experiments in sensory deprivation, they disconnect from others and from their own sensations, becoming "uncircumstanced," like David's photographs, alone and enclosed in a void—a hole, a cave, a well, a tunnel leading to a cavern, a cone, a special cone of absolute zero, and most realistically, a small boxed-in room. This recurrent image of isolation expresses, I think, a search for absolutes. The vacuum provides the character with an ultimate test situation for discovering what is humanly necessary and enduring, for finding truth away from the distractions and accidents of ordinary life. It throws him back completely upon himself, as in "In a Hole," so that he must uncover a value or meaning that is independent of contingent social circumstances. The explorer motif that runs through Elliott's adventure stories suggests that separation from society involves a conscious desire for discovery. On the other hand, falling into a hole or boxing one's self into a room also represents withdrawal and despair at the emptiness of life. It is the dramatic image of disconnection, the experience of the void. When David Knudsen makes the irrefragable discovery that "God is not good," he rolls into "a cave"; his breakdown, which isolates him in a hospital room, represents a withdrawal from the circumstanced life into the void, where aloneness is emotional and literal. The story "Into the Cone of Cold" brings together most cogently Elliott's complementary themes of disconnection (in the void) and communion (in the world). A scientific experiment, "tinkering" with nature, requires Stuart to crawl into a cone of absolute zero which transforms him into his anti-self, so that when he returns, he embodies the anti-world. If the anti-world is the antithesis of ours, which we commonly assume to have meaning, then its essence is meaninglessness—the realization of the nihilistic dream. "I was never nowhere, and nothing happened," he says: "What happened to me was nothing." *Nothing* leaves him disconnected from and impatient with his students, so that he no longer cares to teach; separated from his wife, so that he no longer loves her or sleeps with her; estranged from his children; and eventually,

isolated and boxed in his room, blotting out consciousness with sleep. The consequence of his experience of the void is disconnection. Another word for it is damnation—he is alone, in Hell, livid with uncontrollable and immediate rage; his knuckles turn white as he clenches his hands into fists which frighten his son. To save himself, Stuart begs to go back into the cone and become reversed into a man again. When this happens, his first reaction is wonder and euphoria (explained scientifically in the story as lack of oxygen). He is overwhelmed by joy, the emotion of beatitude in Elliott's fiction, expressing his glad acceptance of the state of being human and of having a capacity for love. To love life, though not to be blinded to its horrors, to be glad to be a man, though not to sentimentalize that state, to be creative and fully alive in the world means joy. As a man again, Stuart reestablishes connection: he throws himself into his teaching with an abandonment and pleasure that is almost sexual; and eventually, he is reunited with his wife and family in a total commitment. The story ends with husband and wife together in bed, a shape in his mind.

Communion. If my essay began with the word Nothing, it ends with Communion, the bridging of the void through the coming together with someone in the recognition of Something. Communion implies traditional humanistic values: love, and trust that makes love and family life possible, responsibility, and reconciliation to the human condition. "We must try to want what we have"—this is the wisdom Royce arrives at in *In the World* and Betty Hollander ends with as a last thing in "An Hour of Last Things." It is not the wisdom of mere complacency. In the context of Elliott's fiction, it connotes a serious and mature recognition of the limitations which give natural order to human experience. For no matter how much one may increase his strength or expand his consciousness, no one can exceed his physical limitations without courting madness or death. In "Hymn of the Angels," sexual excess, lust beyond the limits of desire, leads to the husband's retirement in a monastery, and the wife's in a madhouse. One cannot exceed his moral limitations without destroying himself in his own disorder. In "An Hour of Last Things," Betty Hollander flirts with the possibilities of giving in to her unsuspected homosexuality and lust and to empty indolence; but she recognizes the limits of decency, and moreover, she knows she can choose to remain within their bounds or go beyond them into moral confusion. To want what she has means for her to remain decent, an important word in twentieth century thinking—pivotal in Camus' existentialism and sustaining Hemingway's morality. The meaning Elliott assigns it is ordinary and recognizable; it contains an injunction against using others as things for one's private ends and against wasting one's self in overindulgence or existential despair. It implies respect for the order of nature and recognition of human limitations. It eschews God-like "tampering." As an affirmation, it moves towards connection with others in a creative and mutually satisfying way, through love. Sexuality divorced from love leads Elliott's characters to the void. David Knudsen comes closest to suicide after having proved his manhood six times in one night (post coitus blues, maybe). Alfred Royce has better sex, more exciting, varied, and expert, with his mistress than with his wife, but he goes back to his wife because she offers him something no other woman can:

The realm of their (Alfred and his wife) lovemaking was narrower,

less dark and gorgeous and reverberating (than with his mistress)—less accessible, even, since a good deal of the time they failed to create much of anything when they embraced. But when they did manage to make a realm of love, what they both did there was to look for and sometimes find one another.

Through sex, they achieve communion; they find each other and connect; they love. Sex thus takes on an almost religious overtone, and in that curious story, "Tourist and Pilgrim," the wife's newly inspired religious feelings express themselves in sexual advances towards her husband, indeed, in aggression. In a uniquely subtle way, for they are sublimated to secular purposes, religious feelings pervade Elliott's world. They come to attention overtly through the interweaving presence of the Brothers of St. Anselm's, and they are symbolized, interestingly enough, by an architectural feat, Chartres Cathedral. To David Knudsen, as to Sheila in "Tourist and Pilgrim," Chartres represents the quintessential religious emotion: it is a "powerful monument" to "ordered" experience, inspiring wonder and awe, and leading to love and communion. Its antithesis is the Bomb, an expression of man's *hubris* in meddling with nature, and leading to fear and disruption, and finally to meaningless death. Elliott's affirmation of human love as the highest secular virtue seems pretty old-fashioned, as Victorian as the structure of his novels which displeases some readers. The idea of love is old-fashioned—old, because it has endured; and fashioned, because it has been designed and shaped by people in response to their deepest need. "Men matter," Alfred Royce insists in *In the World*. They matter to George P. Elliott and to his characters who move beyond nihilism to love; and when they no longer matter, then "Chaos is come again."

—BLANCHE H. GELFANT

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