
“LITERARY CRITICISIM AND TRADITION IN ELIOT’S POETRY”

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ABSTRACT

*T.S. Eliot seemed to be standing still. His poetry has developed and matured so that today also he ranks as one of the most outstanding poet. The opinion of criticism and his general audience has shifted and changed. No poet in the past quarter century —has been so often reviled, denounced, defamed, buried so often, revived so often, been so enthusiastically defended, and so passionately denied (by his adverse critics) the merits of human contact and of sincerity.// Back in the war period and in the twenties Eliot’s minor poetry (and also *The Waste Land*, for the matter) was considered, and partially was, a sort of arch, sophisticated. Eliot was the clever young man who shocked the salon reviewers with his risqué cameos of bourgeois sin. In this thesis the aim is, first, to elucidate Eliot’s critical theory. It consists fundamental Eliot’s critical attitude and his theory of poetry in the emphasis on traditional values. The name of Eliot, with all the opposition offered him, and with all his short-comings, is a land-mark in English literature.*

His antipathies for the Romantics as a school, for much of Tennyson and all of Swinburne, for the careless attempts of Whitman and Sandburg, and his revivifying Donne and the Elizabethans revolutionized poetry and set scores of poets imitating him and following his precepts. Eliot was not wrong to say that literature was a timeless order that was modified by very subsequent work of literature.

INTRODUCTION

The social function of poetry explains the benefits of having an updated literary criticism and tradition. Eliot, like Derrida later, strikes at the root of dogmatism. As a result, their criticism is characterized the

way they make reservations, qualify positive assertions and introduce parentheses. Eliot, at times, becomes critical of his own pronouncements by offering recantations. In the essay, 'To Criticise the Critic', he turns

against his youthful utterances. There are, he says, statements with which he no longer agrees; there are views which he maintains with less firmness of conviction than when he first expressed them, or which he maintains with imperfect reservations. Deconstruction in freeing the critic from dogmatism makes the critic humble. Derrida too, is humble to the degree possible. In offering to deconstruct his first gesture of respect, of response, of courtesy, Eliot says in *East Coker* : The only wisdom we can hope to acquire Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless. (Four Quartets)

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Deconstruction is, therefore, wrongly said to be haughty and intolerant, destructive and violent. This could it be indifferent and callous, born as it is, out of self-discipline, self-criticism and self-analysis ? All that it does is that it does not take sides, for it sees things in their many-sidedness. It believes that with the passage of time one grows wiser and also self-critical of his earlier responses. Eliot in ' To Criticize the Critic', further says that his early essays find more favour with the critics and students, just because they are seasoned by the tone of arrogance, of vehemence, of cocksureness,

or rudeness and which he regrets now as there are errors of judgment along with the errors of tone. Should we say then that there are two Eliots— Eliot, the critic of the early, and Eliot, the critic of the later phase. But for all his braggadocio, Eliot must acknowledge his relationship to the man, who made those statements and in spite of all the exceptions, he continues to identify himself with the author. This is like saying as Heraclitus said that though the river changes, yet the river is the same. The author, thus, is and is not. It has generally been held that Eliot argues for the impersonality of the poet and Eliot's own statements seem to support this view but the way he deconstructs the author himself, it leaves room enough to doubt the popular view that the poet is absent from his poem. The poet is absent and present, present and absent simultaneously. That is why Eliot approaches his own essays of the early period with apprehension rather than with hopeful expectation. He finds himself constantly irritated by having his words, perhaps written thirty or forty years ago, quoted as if "I had uttered them yesterday." Deconstruction is a philosophy of change, of the unpredictable and the unpredictable, of the new and the surprising. It does not work on the assumption that a poet's writing is of

a piece, innately given, the end of which is sketched out right in the beginning. Eliot takes care and it has become a habit with him to indicate the original date of publication of his essays and poems: Prufrock, 1917; Choruses from the Rock, 1934; Tradition and Individual Talent, 1919; Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca, 1927 and so on. These are only a few examples and they underline the deconstructive mode, reminding the reader of the time that separates the author when he wrote it from the author as he is today. But he is unhappy with his readers who rarely resort to the mode of deconstruction; they never say quoting him, "this is what Mr. Eliot thought (or felt) in 1933- (or whatever the date was)." Every writer is therefore, accustomed to seeing his words quoted out of context in such a way as to put an unintended construction upon them. Why Eliot objects to this mode of reading is that it does not take into account the state of mind and maturity of the writer, the situation--political, social, economic available at the time of reading, the poet's own strategy of delay and, last but not the least, his failure to say what he wanted to say.

The text falls short of or falls outside, as Derrida says in an interview, "from what I say or write; or rather, it is connected, relayed by so many spaces, languages, apparatuses, histories, and so forth, by so many bands, that I am able to say at one and the same time : I am, to be sure, mobilized by the immediate stakes of these texts 'produced' in my name, but I also live this relation with a disinterestedness that is more and more distracted, in an accelerated forgetfulness that is more and more profound and with the certainty that is the essential thing, as it is called, is going on elsewhere."1 It does not, however, mean that the writer's identity is totally a fiction, as David Hume would say. Derrida is of the view that though the exigencies of the situation, which Eliot call 'objective correlative' would take the writer outside himself, the writer also goes in, as if not totally elsewhere. "Hence", Derrida says, "The attention and at the same time, the distraction with which I relate to what I write. What interests me in going elsewhere, is not taking place where I write (but) I have to write by another route (par allures)" 2 Deconstruction as Eliot thinks and Derrida elaborates is always a qualified statement. Hence, both do not allow a statement to go without its counterpart. In 'To criticize the

critic', Eliot gives an example of how one of his statements has continued to dog him long after it has ceased in his view, to be a satisfactory statement of his beliefs. It is a sentence from the Preface to a small collection of essays entitled 'For Lancelot Andrews', to the effect that he was a Classicist in literature, a Royalist in politics and an Anglo-Catholic in religion. Eliot feels that he ought to have foreseen that so quotable a sentence would follow him through life as Shelley tells us how his thoughts followed him like a bird of prey. Eliot attributes the dogmatic statement to his youthful years. Of the two causes for making such a bland statement, one, of course, is the dogmatism of youth. When we are young, we see issues sharply defined, adds Eliot. But as we age, we tend to make reservations. We see objections to our own views; we regard the enemy with greater tolerance and even sometimes with sympathy. When we are young, Eliot elaborates the point, we are confident in our opinions, sure that we possess the whole truth; we are enthusiastic or indignant. What are worse, even mature readers are attracted to a writer who is quite sure of himself. If nothing else, one-sidedness provokes controversy.

OBJECTIVES

The second reason for the enduring popularity of some of Eliot's early criticism is that the poet in these essays collected in Selected Essays 3 was implicitly defending the sort of poetry-which "I and my friends wrote." This, according to Eliot, gave his essays a kind of urgency, the warmth of appeal of the advocate, which his later, more detached and he hoped, more judicial essays cannot claim. Eliot's early criticism is conditioned by the state of literature at the time at which it was written as well as by state of maturity at which the poet had arrived by the influences he had been exposed to and by the occasion of each essay. It is, however, difficult to reconstruct all the conditions under which he wrote, for example, his most celebrated essay of the early period "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). This essay, Eliot wrote between 'Prufrock and other Observations, 1917) and 'Poems' (1920). The essay appeared in The Egoist and still to immense popularity among editors and professors who prepare anthology text-books. Eliot traces two influences on the essay — one of Ezra Pound and secondly of Irvin Babbit. It is in this essay that Eliot's recurrent theme of Classicism vs. Romanticism becomes

apparent. Again, it is in this essay that he propounded his idea of tradition and of the impersonality of poetry. Together, these two themes shaped the entire corpus of Eliot's early criticism. It is in this essay that Eliot's recurrent theme of Classicism vs. Romanticism becomes apparent. Again, it is in this essay that he propounded his idea of tradition and of the impersonality of poetry. Together, these two themes shaped the entire corpus of Eliot's early criticism. At this point of time, Eliot, as a young scholar thought that Classicism and Romanticism and likewise, the man who suffers and the mind which writes are two different aspects. Eliot's deconstruction begins here, for unless we see difference, we cannot search for similarity. Deconstruction thus looks near, before it looks far. Derrida's claim that since the difference though seen is yet unheard, it is always possible to see what appears to be different, the same. His is thus a new play of opposition, of articulation of difference. Eliot's main grouse against romanticism in his early essays, beginning ' Tradition and the Individual Talent' but more precisely in ' The Function of Criticism' (1923) was that it is fragmentary, loose, subjective, that it is immature, deaf and mute. He calls it ' a new literary disease' a sort of raid on the absolute etc. Eliot, at the end of 1919 essay refers

obliquely to Wordsworth's theory of poetry, saying that poetry is not —a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, it is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality." 4 Eliot's attack here is squarely directed against the poetry of emotion unallied with thought. While discussing the role of emotions in poetry, he, in the same essay, says that it is not in his personal emotion, the emotion as provoked by particular events in his life that the poet is in any way, remarkable or interesting. His particular emotion may be simple or crude, or flat.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing. By complexity of emotion, Eliot does not mean the emotion of a very complex man or of an eccentric. The emotion which finds expression in poetry should be common with the rest of humanity. If the emotion of poetry is common and ordinary and Eliot wishes it so, he should not have objected to Wordsworth's theory of poetry as a spontaneous overflow. Wordsworth was confessedly a poet of common man, speaking in the language not necessarily different from the language of prose. If

Wordsworth thought of poetry as an overflow of powerful emotions, he also said in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* itself that poetry is emotions recollected in tranquility. Could one be both simultaneously? Could one be at once the sensible and the intelligible? Of course, yes. Hume, for example, said that we form all our thoughts on the basis of our sense impressions, and though ordinarily our thoughts are bland in comparison with the liveliness of our impressions, they can be more vivid and alive when we are able to recall them in our reflective moments, as does Wordsworth in 'The Daffodils'. Romanticism in general is not merely emotive. In the flow of conscious experience, Hume, as Wordsworth, distinguishes between two types of things. On the one hand, we have impressions, in which are to be included not merely our sense impressions but feelings like love, desire, will etc. On the other hand, we have thoughts or ideas. The distinction between the two lies in the greater degree of force and vivacity accompanying impressions. But when the imagination and memory are fresh, ideas are more vivid and vivacious than even impressions. The so-called creative mind, according to Hume, amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting or diminishing the

materials, afforded us by the senses and experience.

Eliot, too, says in 'The Function of Criticism' that Matthew Arnold distinguishes too bluntly, between the two activities; he overlooks and this, according to Eliot, is not to deconstruct, the capital importance of criticism in the work of creation itself. Probably, indeed, the larger part, Eliot adds, of an author in composing his work is critical labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much creative as critical. This "is sound deconstruction, finding similarity in things apparently different. But where Eliot misses the point is that he is not able to see similarity of differences in others and in the present context in Arnold. Arnold, on the contrary says that the two movements — critical and creative, must go hand in hand; in fact, the critical precedes, and prepares the ground for the creative movement to take roots. For Arnold, the critical movement consists of philosophical upsurge and that is perhaps what Eliot does not take to be critical in the narrow sense of the word. Eliot suffers from one great handicap, that while he deconstructs his own creative and critical experience, he falls short of his strategy

when he comes to write on other poets. And, indeed, he confesses that in his earlier criticism, both in his general affirmations about poetry and in his writing about authors, he was implicitly defending the kind of poetry he was himself writing. Obviously, he could not do justice, among others, to Wordsworth. A glaring example of his blindside towards deconstruction in Shakespeare is mainly because of his prejudice he bore the great dramatist throughout life. Nevertheless, even when he was writing 'To Criticize the Critic' in the form of a convocation lecture to be delivered at the University of Leeds in 1961, he felt still pleased with Shakespeare's contemporaries, but not with Shakespeare himself. It was, he recalls, from these minor dramatists that he, in his own poetic formation, had learnt his lessons; it was by them and not Shakespeare, that his imagination had been stimulated, his sense of rhythm trained and his emotions fed. Moreover, he had tried them at the age at which they were best suited to his temperament and stage of development and had read them with passion and delight long before he had any thought, or any opportunity of writing about them. Eliot's full-throated praise of these dramatists, is, as we shall shortly see, a little structuralism, as

he over-shoots the mark in order somehow to build the hierarchy: Elizabethan dramatists/Shakespeare. Eliot's case here appears to be that of the anxiety of influence. And he, indeed, says that he preferred to be influenced by minor writers, for a poet of 'supreme' greatness can hardly influence: he can only be imitated and the difference between influence and imitation is that influence can fecundate whereas imitation-especially unconscious imitation - can sterilize. Dante's imitation, however, was different, he says. Imitation of a writer in a foreign language can after all be profitable —because we cannot succeed. Eliot's preference for minor writers is curiously pertinent. He, for example, allowed himself to be influenced not by Baudelaire but by Jules Laforgue. So the dramatic poets he prefixed to read were Marlowe and Webster and Ford, not Shakespeare. Eliot's structuralism critique of the Elizabethan dramatists is, however, conscious and deliberate, that is unconsciously drawn by the pull of Shakespeare.

CONCLUSION

He admits that Shakespeare is a 'supreme' artist and so, inimitable. The only aspect that distances Eliot from Shakespeare is that he,

though not uniformly, descends to his subjective self, to his romantic ego. As a corollary of this romantic 'fall' of Shakespeare, Eliot finds the Elizabethan dramatist suffering from an inferior philosophy of the stoics in general are of Seneca in particular. Eliot thinks that the emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present moment of the past, "unless he is conscious not of what is dead, but what is already living." This is a hallmark of deconstruction that it perceives in discontinuity, a continuous flow — the kind Eliot envisages in the above formulation. But as we have seen in chapter I, there is in essence, not one kind of deconstruction. No two artists can conceive the unity of opposites identically. If Eliot, for example, sees more of unity and continuity, Shakespeare highlights opposition more than he does unity. It is possibly for this reason that Shakespeare's vision is comical, ironical, both sweet and sour, whereas Eliot, in emphasizing the subsistence of the presence in the past and the continuity of the past into the present sounds prophetic and sad. The latter is a

misreading as the former. What could be a greater mix of humour and pathos, or more precisely bathos in 'The Love Song' of J. Alfred Prufrock' than anyone else in modern poetry? And Shakespeare is tragic-comical and vice versa, not alternately, but simultaneously. As a young man, Eliot in his early criticism tends to miss the mark of deconstruction, but since he is aware of the dialectic of the past and present, he soon gets back to the path of equivocation. For instance, in the essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', he gives the impression as if tradition is prior, more significant than the individual. In fact he says: Tradition is a matter of wider significance. It cannot be inherited and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour." 6 Similarly, he says : No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for comparison and contrast among the dead." 7 But soon, afterwards, he also says : "The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. Most readers of Eliot are misled by appraisal of

the tradition to posit that Eliot is a conservative.

REFERENCE

1. Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," Writing and Difference (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) p.8

2. The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (London: Atlantis, 1980) p. 737

3. The essay is included in Contemporary Literary Criticism ed. by Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York & London: Longman, 1984) pp. 230-

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