

## Poetics of T.S. Eliot

**Navdeep Sharma**

Associate Professor, Department of English A.S. College, Khanna, India

### Abstract

New criticism was a great influence on modern literature. It was not supported to bring about a revolution but only to help in the restoration of standards which had been undermined by Romanticism. The most drastic change was the revolution of the metaphysical, even though this had started in the seventies of the last century. People sometimes are suspicious of any poetry that has a particular purpose: poetry in which the poet is advocating social, moral, political or religious views; but real poetry survives not only a change of popular opinion but the complete extinction of interest in the issues with which the poet was passionately concerned. Emotion and Feeling, then are best expressed in the common language of the people – that is, in the language common to all classes: the structure, the rhythm, the sound, the idiom of a language, express the personality of the poet which speaks it. We may say that the duty of the poet, as poet, is only indirectly to his people: his direct duty is to his language, First to preserve and second to extend and improve. Eliot's own criticism is often motivated with a view "to Justifying... (his) poetic practice. His early criticism is indeed influenced by the closeness which he could find between the poets he commented upon and the poetry that he himself was attempting. In common practice, critical reflection succeeds creative exercise, but in the case of Eliot, the poet and the critic began almost concurrently.

### Introduction

T.S. Eliot belongs to the line of poet critics running from Sidney, Ben Jonson, Dryden, through Dr. Johnson, Coleridge and Arnold to the modern age. In Eliot's criticism there is the tone of authority coming from the fact that he is a craftsman talking of what he knows from experience. He is no mere theorist. There is a difference between Eliot and the earlier poet critics. In the earlier poet critics, we find a gap between theory and practice. It is especially noticeable in Arnold. A staunch upholder of classical virtues in his critical theories, Arnold the poet wrote, what can only be called 'romantic' poetry. In the case of Eliot we find that his criticism throws light on the aims of his verse, while his verse illustrates many aspects of his critical theory. His critical writings and reviews illuminate his view of poetry.

Eliot's critical theories inform us that he is a conscious poet, who has speculated about the nature and function of poetry, particularly in our time. "His poetry is the product of one; who believes that poetry is neither play nor random experiment, nor something that is achieved without the fullest exertion of his powers. Nor is it, despite his vehement qualification, something unrelated to experience, both his own and that of the race."<sup>1</sup>

The notion of literary criticism as a record of 'travels' in realms of gold, was suitable to the romantic mood. Victorianism brought about some change in this attitude and criticism came to be viewed as a serious intellectual exercise. The long revolution was however, to be completed only with the turn of the century. This was specially characteristic of the twenties when a scientific approach was employed and a severe analysis of literature undertaken. This approach came to be known as "New

Criticism". He is the modern representative of literary classicism, belonging to the tradition of Ben Jonson, Dryden and Samuel Johnson.

New Criticism was a great influence on modern literature. It was not supposed to bring about a revolution but only to help in the restoration of standards which had been undermined by Romanticism. The most drastic change was the revaluation of the metaphysicals, even though this had started in the seventies of the last century. In "The Use of Poetry and the use of Criticism" Eliot says, "Criticism is the adjustment of new objects in the foreground in proportion to the horizon."<sup>2</sup>

Eliot's own criticism is often motivated with a view "to justifying ... (his) poetic practice." His early criticism is indeed influenced by the closeness which he could find between the poets he commented upon and the poetry that he himself was attempting. In common practice, critical reflection succeeds creative exercise. But in the case of Eliot, the poet and the critic began almost concurrently. His poems were published in 1919 and his *The Sacred Wood* in 1920.

It has been rightly remarked by several critics that there is parallel development in Eliot's career as the poet and the critic. His development as poet marks his development as critic also. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" has been considered to be a good commentary on *The Waste Land*. "The Metaphysical poets" and "Homage to John Dryden" offer a justification of his early poetry. The essay on "Dante" is the best commentary on *Ash Wednesday*, and other poems of religious overtones. *Four Quartets* illustrates, and is illustrated in turn by the essay "The Music of Poetry". His criticism anticipates a change in the poetic style.

Eliot in *The Sacred Wood* laid down the postulates of his critical theory of poetry. His theory is known as the 'impersonal theory'. According to Eliot, "The greatness of a work of art does not lie in the intensity of emotions, but in the intensity of the artistic process."<sup>3</sup>

It is not the business of the poet to seek new emotions to express but to work out the ordinary ones into poetry. He rejected Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity". Eliot observed, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion. It is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality, but of course, only those who have personality and emotions known what it means to want to escape from these things."<sup>4</sup>

Poetic process is one of concentration rather than recollection, a concentration of "a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all." This statement is rather obscure because these experiences are the common place objects Wordsworth had wanted to highlight. Also this concentration includes recollection or recapitulation of experiences not in fragments but in a unified sense.

In this essay Eliot reorients the term tradition and gives it a wider significance. He says it is our tendency to find out to what extent a writer is different from his predecessors, "Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity."<sup>5</sup>

But Eliot disparages the blind imitative adherence to tradition by persons lacking in initiative. He wants us to accept the positive character of tradition. We do not inherit tradition as a birth right but, it is a thing to be acquired. It involves in the first place, the 'historical sense', "The historical sense involves a perception not of the pastness of the past, but of its presence, the historical sense compels a man to write

not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.”<sup>6</sup>

Nostalgic awareness of the past is a romantic attitude but to emphasize the presence of past is to take an anti romantic classical stand.

While he is emphasising tradition he warns the poet against the danger of too much scholarship, “He must know as much as will not encroach upon his poetic sensibility.”<sup>7</sup>

According to Eliot’s theory, “the combination of all the particles required to form a new compound”<sup>8</sup> may take place in the poet’s mind under the stress of an emotion aroused by practical experience, or without any emotion at all. But in any case, the combination happens. The poet can neither bring it about by deliberation nor control or modify it with his intelligence. He cannot therefore, be held responsible for the intellectual, moral, social implications of his work. During the process of creation he is nothimself. He has ‘escaped’. That even the catalyst mind is a receptacle not only of feeling and images but also of beliefs, assumptions and habits of thought, and that therefore, the poetic product that issues from it must be “personal” to the extent that it reflects them, Eliot does not seem to recognise at all.

This indeed is a theory which seems to link up its author with those very poet critics against whom he is alleged to have initiated a revolt. It seems to show that despite his professed criticism, he subscribes to the doctrine that the artist is solely concerned with the expression his emotions and this expression is virtually an automatic release. It is also worth noting that Eliot seems to regard the artistic process as something which transforms its raw material namely, emotions and feelings, into something absolutely different from what it originally was, so that any “semi ethical criterion” of the type we can apply to emotions of actual life becomes altogether irrelevant. Besides, during the process of creation, the artist’s mind is said to be “inert, neutral and unchanged”<sup>9</sup> and at the same time, it is claimed that “the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure so to speak under which the fusion takes place”<sup>10</sup> is the only thing that counts. Eliot does not tell us how an inert mind can “digest and transform” the passions which are its material and how, if it is a catalyst, it can also be a “receptacle”. In any case, art appears, according to this theory, as simply an expression of emotions and feelings in various permutations and combinations and it is to be judged purely by its “effect.”

The “escape” theory and the theory of the “objective correlative” justified the kind of poetry he was producing under the compulsion of his own psychological needs a poetry born of self distrust and distrust of the values evolved by the individual intellect and therefore, without any intellectual coherence, without any intellectual coherence, without any explicit personal evaluation of experience. They rationalised and justified also the subjectivity of his early poetry (including *The Waste, Land*) a poetry where the world outside becomes merely a connection of disconnected things, without life or meaning. At the same time, they absolved the poetry of all responsibility for the philosophical implications of his poetry by postulating that the poet hardly knows what he is doing when he writes his poem and that “the difference between the art and event is absolute.”<sup>11</sup>

The poetry, as it were lives independently both of the poet who wrote it and the life around him. The emotions and the feelings which are its material are his but they are as it were detached and disinfected of all personal associations before they constitute a work of art. The poetry reflects the age in so far as the age provides the “Objective correlatives” for the poet’s emotions. “The thought current in the age is

"enforced" upon the poet, but he is not necessarily interested in it nor is it of any importance in evaluating the poetry."<sup>12</sup>

Eliot's theory of impersonal art received a practical application when he brought in the idea of the 'objective correlative' in his essay "Hamlet and his Problems" : "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding in 'objective correlative' in other words a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience are given the emotion is immediately evoked."<sup>13</sup>

Eliot did not intend this phrase which is not his coinage but of George Santayana, to gain much currency. It puts an emphasis on the verbal structure of the poem. Emotions are to be conveyed through a medium - the medium of a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events. Cleanth Brooks says: "The doctrine of objective correlative places a thoroughly anti-romantic stress upon craftsmanship, but Eliot in the way in which, he argues it, manages to involve himself in the language of expressionism."<sup>14</sup>

What Eliot meant was that Shakespeare first planned the emotional background of Hamlet, i.e., how it was going to affect the audience, and then he used the 'objective correlative' i.e. Hamlet to translate it. In fact the success of a poet was to be measured by the extent to which he accomplished this aim. In the essay on "The Metaphysical Poets" he gives another interpretation of 'objective correlative' : "They were, at best engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling."<sup>15</sup>

In the concept of "objective correlative", he contended that the poet only discovers his emotions through trying to formulate them.<sup>16</sup> On Eliot's acknowledgment that poetry is a living organism, Ransom remarks "this is very nearly a doctrine of poetic automation."<sup>17</sup> Yvor Winters asserts that a classical reaction does not find Eliot's classical enough.<sup>18</sup> The anti-classicists have labelled Eliot's criticism "Workshop criticism."<sup>19</sup> Eliot thought of himself as a practitioner concerned with understanding the masterpiece, giving it contemporary importance, persuading the audience that it is interesting, enjoyable and active. Raymond has also levelled a grave charge against T.S. Eliot. "The paradox of T.S. Eliot is that having launched a crusade in the name of austere intellectualism on behalf of tradition, he did his splendid best to destroy the ritual forms of poetry."<sup>20</sup> Scott James also had the same complaint against T.S. Eliot. He says, "It is easy to say what there is not in T.S. Eliot. There is no joy, no exaltation, not even pleasure except the pleasure which is spurious."<sup>21</sup>

Despite all these attacks we agree that Eliot is a powerful literary critic with remarkable critical integrity. George Orwell said: "Modern man is aesthetically inferior to the lowest savage. In our age music has become pop having the jungle rhythm, painting is a riot of utter confusion, the labyrinth of drama absurd and farcical. Poetry is a paradoxical thing to be."<sup>22</sup> So it is nothing unusual when Eliot trying to write according to the times should also lapse occasionally. As a classicist, he is the successor of Aristotle though he, in the essay on "Milton" equated himself with Charles Williams. In the essay "The Function of Criticism" he could not have anticipated himself when he said, "From time to time, every hundred 'years or so, it is desirable that some critic shall appear to review the past of our literature, and set the poets and poems in new order."<sup>23</sup>

Eliot's theory of poetry is essentially unromantic for it directs our attention not upon the poet but upon his poetry. This shift from a consideration of the personal and

subjective aspect of poetry, which for the romantics was of primary significance, to an objective and impersonal evaluation of the author's work links him with the classicists. For Eliot, as for the classicists, poetry is essentially an art being the manipulation of material while for the romantics it is the spontaneous expression of the emotions and personality of the artist. According to Eliot — "The poet does not have a personality to express, but a particular medium which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impression and experience combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality."<sup>24</sup>

There are other points of difference between Eliot and the romantic critics of poetry. For the romantics, as Eliot himself explains, literature was a conglomeration of the works of individual artists and it is through their works that literature draws its meaning and significance. Although Eliot's theory of poetry is essentially classical, there are significant points of differences too. Whereas for the classicists tradition is static, fixed, complete in all ways, Eliot visualizes poetic tradition as something alive and in constant process of growth and development.

The success of *The Waste Land* had a far reaching effect on the creative and critical personality of Eliot. For he not only earned recognition and the fulfilment of his poetic aspirations but there was also a spiritual realization. In *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, there are traces of his Christian thought. It is a common place of criticism to estimate *Ash Wednesday* as 'a finished work of art which points to and exemplifies in a modern form the Christian scheme of sorrow for sin and amendment necessary for renewing the innocence of heart', and to associate *Four Quartets* with St. John of the Cross. Similarly, all the plays of Eliot — *The Rock*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Statesman* reveal his abiding interest in theology. In *On Poetry and Poets*, Eliot is not directly concerned with religion but in some of the essays there are traces of his Christian thought. In "Virgil and the Christian World", for example, his main argument is that "Virgil was indeed a prophet of Christianity and he goes on to discuss those characteristics of Virgil which make him sympathetic to the Christian mind."<sup>25</sup>

The first point relevant to our purpose in "The Function of Criticism" is that the true artist surrenders and forgets himself in collaborating with and contributing to tradition. This again leads to the concept of impersonality which is discussed above.

Poetry may be autotelic i.e. it may be an end in itself, or it may serve the end of certain values not deliberately but even by ignoring them, but criticism can never be autotelic. It must have an end beyond itself, which according to Eliot is "the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste". Now in this task of 'elucidation' and 'correction' the critic must keep out his 'personal prejudices and cranks'.

Eliot's position was challenged by the Murry on the ground that his Catholicism and Classicism obeyed an 'external authority'. While Murry pushed forward the claims of 'inner voice'. Eliot having explained the function of criticism according to his lights, makes the bold assertion: "For those who obey the inner voice (perhaps obey is not the right word) nothing that I can say about criticism will have the slightest value. For they will not be interested in the attempt to find any common principles for the pursuit of criticism."<sup>26</sup>

His essay on "Dante" is the best commentary on *Ash Wednesday*. In *Dante and Donne*, he found his ideal models. He says that: "The poetry of Dante is the one universal school of style for the writing of poetry in any tongue-not even in Latin and



Greek - who stands firmly as a model for all poets ... that the Divine Comedy is a complete scale of the depths and heights of human emotion ... "27

The first lesson that he learns from Dante is that the great master of language should be the great servant of it. He cultivated his notion for the two-fold duty of the poet as a preserver and enricher of his language from the poetry of the Divine Comedy in which he found full affirmation of his own remarkable sense of responsibility of the precise use of appropriate words together with the greatest care for meaning.

### Conclusion

The emphasis which Eliot's theory and practice lays on the impersonality of art, on the discipline necessary to it, and on the absorption of the 'idea' into the sense's embodiment of image and rhythm, reveals at once how alien he felt his own position to be from any ideal of poetry which would describe it either a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' or as a 'criticism of life'. His criticism was prompted by the desire to get acceptance for his poetry. When he regards the poet's mind as a medium rather than a personality, he insists on separating the man and the poet, experience and art; for while man and experience may exist without tradition, poet and art cannot. Indeed Eliot has some defects as a critic. He is often pontifical and sometimes overweening. The major defect of Eliot is that he employs variable standards of criticism regarding the poetry of Shelley and Milton. However his capacity for subtle analysis, and the widely admired lucidity and severity of his prose style make him one of the most distinguished among contemporary critics.

### References

1. George Williamson, A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot (U.S.A. : Thomas and Hudson, 1980), p. 27.
2. T.S.Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (London : Faber and Faber Ltd., 1932), p. 27.
3. T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays (London : Faber and Faber, New York Harcourt Brace, 1932), p.22.
4. Ibid.. p. 25.
5. Ibid., p. 16.
6. Ibid., p. 17.
7. Ibid., P. 19., p. 19.
8. Ibid., p.21.
9. Ibid., p. 22.
10. Ibid., p. 23.
11. Quoted in C. D. Narasimhaiah, Student's Handbook of American Literature (Kalyani Publishers, New Delhi, 1960), p. 36.
12. T.S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems" The Sacred Wood (London : Methuen and Co.Ltd., 1920), P. 74.
13. Quoted in C.D. Narasimhaiah, Student's Handbook of American Literature (Kalyani Publishers, New Delhi, 1960), p. 380.
14. William, J. Handy and Max Westbrook ed. Twentieth Century Criticisms : The Major Statements. (New Delhi : Light and Life Publishers, 1974), p. 33.
15. Quoted in C.D. Narasimhaiah, Student's Handbook American Literature (Kalyani Publishers, New Delhi, 1960), p. 382.
16. Ibid., p. 382.
17. Ibid., p. 382.

18. Ibid., p. 382.
19. Ibid., p. 382.
20. Ibid., p. 382.
21. Ibid., p. 382.
22. T.S. Eliot, "The Function of Criticism", Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1932), p. 27.
23. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent "Selected Essays (London : Faber and Faber, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), p. 23.
24. Ibid., p. 24.
25. T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays (London; Faber and Faber, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1932) , p. 60.
26. Quoted in A.G. George, T.S. Eliot: His Mind and Art (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1969), p. 243.
27. T.S. Eliot, "Dante" Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber), p.168.