

ELIOT'S CLASSICISM AND CONCEPT OF MODERN POETRY

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*Eliot was a traditionalist who challenged the progressive view of history, that originality in poetry is an aspect of individual freedom in life. Eliot's historical view of English literature is a point-for-point reversal of the progressive one. In **Tradition and the Individual Talent** Eliot speaks of the poetic process as "impersonal", not an expression of personality but an "escape" from it. The poet's mind is a place where something happens to words, like a catalyser which accompanies but does not manipulate a chemical action. He was severely opposed to the expression of subjective feelings in poetry and believed that the romantic poetry is of only those who live in a world of illusion or remain contented by seeming an expression of their own feeble desires and feelings in poetry.*

Introduction:

T.S. Eliot, a classicist in literature, was constantly pre-occupied with the theme of tradition, and it is central both of his criticism and to his creative work. Eliot, therefore, condemned the romantic school and praised highly the classical school which achieved an elegance and a dignity absent from the popular and pretentious verse of the romantic poets. In the essay *The Function of Criticism* Eliot says that the difference between the romantic and the classical schools is that between "the complete and the fragmentary, the adult and the immature, the orderly and the chaotic."¹ The classical poets could achieve this completeness, maturity, order and balance only because they submitted to some discipline and followed some authority outside themselves.

Eliot's classicism can be seen in his various theories and concepts, mainly those of tradition, impersonality of poetry, objective correlative, and in his emphasis upon form in literature. In all his works Eliot is mainly concerned with the problem of order as it arises in various ways. In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, he takes up this problem of order by enquiring whether the works of literature coming down to us through the entire western tradition form a recognizable and definable order, and the existence of which is to affect the creative work of the present. Eliot emphasizes the presentness of the past order, and strives to show that the needs of the present age can only be expressed in the perspective of the past tradition. The present also has relevance to the past, because the traditional order is modified by the production of a truly original work of literature in the present, Eliot considers tradition as a part of the living culture of the past and working in the order of the present. This unity of time is expressed by him in *Burns* Norton also :

"Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past."²

Eliot firmly believes that no poet or artist has his full meaning and significance alone. His importance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his kinship with the poets and artists of the past generations. The necessity for the individual talent to conform to tradition is not one sided. W

happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, Eliot says: "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves which is modified by the introduction of the new work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives, and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are re-adjusted, and this is conformity between the old and the new."³ This means that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by past."⁴

The conscious or unconscious cultivation of the sense of tradition is very important both for the poet and the critic. The poet, according to Eliot, must consciously try to make his work from a part of a larger and more important unit than itself, namely the whole literature of Europe to which it belongs. In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, he says: "What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career."⁵ The conscious cultivation of the sense of tradition is even more important for the critic. In the Introduction to *The Sacred Wood* Eliot writes, "It is part of the business of the critic to preserve tradition – where a good tradition exists. It is part of his business to see literature steadily and to see it whole, but this is eminently to see it not as consecrated by time but to see it beyond time, to see the best work of our time and the best work of twenty five hundred years ago with the same eyes."⁶ The chief tools of the critic are analysis and comparison and he can use them to full effect in the background of the standard and the pattern provided to him by the past. Thus a thorough knowledge of the past is very essential for the right understanding and real appreciation of the present.

Eliot explains his theory of impersonality of poetry in his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. He elucidates his theory by examining first the relation of the poet to the past, and secondly the relation of the poem to its author. The past, says Eliot, is never dead; it lives in the present. "No poet, no artist of any sort, 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 contrast and comparison, among the dead."⁷

Eliot is of the opinion that the poem has no relation to the poet. According to him the artistic process is a process of depersonalization, the artist's continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. He must surrender himself totally to the creative work. "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."⁸ Again he says: "The poet has not a personality to express, but a particular medium in which impressions and experiences 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 poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality."⁹

The mind of the poet acts as a catalyst. It operates upon, either partly or exclusively, upon the experiences of the poet himself. But the experiences or emotions are only the material of poetry, the poetic mind transmutes them into new artistic wholes, thus surrendering personal emotion to the emotion of art. The more a poet succeeds in achieving perfection in his art the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates. The difference between the mind of mature poet and that of an immature one is that the mind of a mature poet is "a more finely perfected medium in which special or very varied feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations."¹⁰

Eliot's famous and oft quoted definition of poetry is that "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.⁴² He goes to the extent of suggesting that a work of art has an independent existence of its own, quite apart from that of its creator. In the Introduction to *The Sacred Wood* he says: "We can only say that a poem, in some sense, has its own life, that its parts from something quite different from a body of neatly ordered biographical data, that the feeling, or emotion, or vision, resulting from the poem is something different from the feeling or emotion or vision in the mind of the poet."⁴³

Eliot's theory of the 'Objective Correlative' is closely associated with his idea of the impersonality of poetry. The phrase occurs in *Hamlet and His Problems* in *The Sacred Wood*, and it has been used by him to explain emotion can be best expressed in poetry. Eliot says that we should concentrate not on the poet but on the poetry. The theory of impersonal art implies that greater emphasis should be laid up-on the work of art itself as a structure. Eliot is of the opinion that it is "not our feeling, but the pattern which we make of our feeling (which) is the centre of value."⁴⁴ In his essay on *Hamlet and His Problems*, Eliot says: "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'Objective Correlative', in other words, 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."⁴⁵

Like the neo-classical poets of the eighteenth century, Eliot lays emphasis upon form in literature. He advocates the preciseness of classicism. Conciseness, precision, balance, order, harmony, unity in diversity are the characteristics of conventional classicism to which Eliot aspired, as a reaction against the diffuseness of the Romantic poetry, and especially of the later Romantic poetry. He had a keen desire to maintain verbal precision. His precision demands conscious choice and experiment, rather than a transcription of subconscious dictation. Its ideal is phrasing:

"Where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together."⁴⁶

Another important feature of classicism is its satiric wit, and a vein of mockery and irony. No school of English poetry has so consistently based its art upon satirical wit as the Augustan. Wit disappeared with the ascent of the Romantic school. Eliot is the first to use it again blending in it his use of the manner of the Augustan wit with the purpose of metaphysical wit. The latter he has defined himself as levity intended to intensify the serious. Eliot does not simply aim at evoking wit or provoking amusement in his poems. He is often taken with "ironic sarcasm." Wit requires brevity, careful phrasing, and concern for clarity of thought and expression. Eliot is always ironical when he ceases to be a moralist. Irony, wit, laughter, pun, metaphor, the use of symbol, all meant for Eliot the signs of a high civilization. Eliot's satirical bias remains intact his early non-moral poems as well as in his later moral poems. And it is wholly in the tradition of the Augustan Age.

Such, then, is Eliot's classicism. Like other classicists, he is of the opinion that a writer must have faith in certain system of writing and that a work of art must conform to the past tradition. But there is a significant difference between him and the neo-classical critics of the eighteenth century. The neo-classicists believed that the writer must follow rules of the ancients and that literature must be didactic. Eliot's idea of 'conformity to tradition' is totally different from

this. He says that a work of art must conform to the tradition in such a way that it alters the tradition as it is directed by it pointing out the difference between Eliot and the neo-classicists of the eighteenth century in poetry. Maxwell says that "the structure of modern classical poetry is analogous to that of the eighteenth century. Each accepts an existing poetic framework the rules of an objective authority, and makes a conscious effort to work within that framework. Satirical wit plays an important part in both, and with it goes a concern for the necessity of cultivating precision of form and word. This requires an intellectual rather than an emotional, instinctive approach to the task of relating words, of relating them to each other and to the whole."¹⁶

Yet each of these similarities involves also a difference. The system to which Eliot relates his poetry has a greater scope than Augustan classical authority, and it becomes a more vital part of the poetry which depends on it. By its relationship with Eliot's poetry the traditional system acquires new significances, and becomes a living part of the poetic experience transcribed in the poetry. Not only does tradition clarify the relation between symbol and object, reduce the need for elaboration, and add a dimension to the poem, but it is itself altered by relationship and so shown to be a vital force. There is a more intimate contact than existed between the eighteenth century classicism and Gracio-Romnan literature, and it is a contact which can be common to all poets without inevitably resulting in uniformity.