

Eliot's views on Poetic language

Eliot has always been preoccupied with the problem of the correct poetic diction. To him, as also to his mentor, Ezra Pound, the questions of language were central to all human experience. Eliot's problem was to discover how the contemporary people would talk, if they could talk poetry. His chief concern was the way in which the words work, especially in a poetic discourse. As part for his own search for precision and austerity in poetic art, he felt a deep sense of responsibility towards words and their uses.

At the turn of the century, Eliot felt very strongly our utter lack of interest in art and culture and also the chaos and confusion that prevailed in every field of human activity. He concludes his essay "**Johnson as critic and poet**" with a clear reference to the chaos. He writes : "But amongst the varieties of chaos in which we find ourselves immersed today, one is a chaos of language, in which there are discoverable no standards of writing, and an increasing indifference to etymology and the history of the use of words. And of the responsibility of our poets and our critics, for the preservation of the language, we need to be repeatedly reminded."

Eliot had of course, an acute sense of responsibility to words, extending into the subtlest literary association and to the profoundest originality of poetic language. His real significance for our century is, in the words of C.L. Wrenn, "as a maker of poetic language." His earlier critical writings embody his own search as a poet for the material, no less than the principles, which would sustain him.

A scholarly poet as he was, Eliot, indeed, took immense delight in the endless powers of words and their meanings. He wanted everything in poetry to be excellent and he also wanted that poetry should have a universal appeal. As early as 1917 when he had just started his career as a poetic critic, he had already stated that – in criticising poetry, we are right if we begin with what sensibility and what knowledge of other poetry we possess, with poetry as excellent words in excellent arrangement and excellent metre."

As a matter of fact, Eliot views language with its total expressive resources in its whole historical perspective. His theory of poetic diction comprehends the whole range of language. Eliot's view of poetic language involves the whole tradition of poetry in the English language, right from Homer to the present time. Eliot's comprehensive view of poetic language is also evidenced by his talking approvingly of Johnson's observation – "it is a general rule of poetry that all appropriated terms of art should be sunk in general impressions, because poetry is to speak a universal language."

Eliot fought against the tendency of regarding poetry a mere pastime in loose and lax words and phrases stolen from the old classics. He rekindled the technical excitement of verse as a medium by stressing the artefact and the structure and above all precise use of words. He surveyed the whole panorama of the contemporary literary scene and found that the poetry of the period had lost all touch with the actual everyday life and speech. Eliot tried to change the prevalent attitude to art and literature.

In order to restore the lost intellectual dignity of poetry, Eliot took it as his main task to revive our genuine taste for poetic art by making us intensely aware of the creative and exploratory uses of the language in it. He indeed, fought a big battle for the revitalization of English poetry. He emphasised the enjoyment of poetry primarily as poetry and reestablished its position as one of the most essential human activities, although the dry materialistic and scientific outlook monopolizing all kinds of human activities to material pursuits stood vigorously in his way. On account of the total breakdown of cultural and literary tradition on the one hand and bankruptcy of spiritual faith on the other, the contemporary society had become dead and inert. At such a critical hour, it was Eliot who brought fresh correspondence between science and technology, on the one hand and art and culture on the other.

By adopting all kinds of scientific and technical terms for the purpose of poetry, Eliot infused a new life into it. By welcoming even the common place things of life into poetry, he made it widely inclusive and widely appealing and effecting as well. His deep study of the French literature gave him further encouragement for writing poetry in the actual idiom of the contemporary speech of the people. It was the works of Baudelaire

and Laforgue which taught him the machine-rhythm of the present age. There he got the clue, and his poetic sensibility responded to their poetic stimulus creatively.

Eliot believed that the poet would do his work better if he is conscious of his duties and responsibilities to his medium, that is, the language. In his essay '**The social function of poetry**,' he asserts : "the duty of the poet, as poet, is only indirectly to the people, his direct duty is to his language, first to preserve and second to extend and improve. In expressing what other people feel he is also changing the feeling by making it more conscious; he is making people more aware of what they feel already, and therefore teaching them something about themselves... And in expressing them (new feelings and sensibility) he is developing and enriching the language he speaks."

One thing significant that we must keep in our mind while discussing, Eliot's views on poetic language is that the term 'language' in his critical pronouncements always stands for the common language of the people. In his theory of poetic diction he always concentrates on the realization of the vigorous potentialities of the common tongue, for he believed that by so doing a poet not only does some service to the language in which he writes but also to the whole society which speaks it.

As a matter of fact, Eliot believed that poetry cannot afford its divorce from the common speech of the contemporary people. He feels that contemporary speech rhythm is not only necessary but also indispensable for writing live and effective poetry. By its very nature and convention, poetry has got to be written in the language of the common man. He writes in his book **On Poetry and Poets** that—there is one law of nature, more powerful than any of these varying currents, or influences from abroad or from the past the law that poetry must not stray too far from the ordinary everyday language which we use or hear. Whether the poetry is accentual or syllabic rhymed or rhymeless, formal or free, it cannot afford to lose its contact with the changing language of common intercourse."

Eliot put emphasis on objective style in poetry chiefly because he wanted to correct the wrong taste of the contemporary literary community. He tried to mould the prevalent subjective bias by asserting emphatically in his own book **Sacred Wood** : The fault of style are, of course, the tumultuous out-cry of adjectives, the head strong rush of

undisciplined sentences, are the index to the impatience and perhaps laziness of a disorderly mind." Eliot, of course, wanted a precisely definite, neat and clean austere style based on 'authentic speech.' He always expressed his liking for transparent and concrete poetic diction, for he believed that by such verbal expression alone the poet can be able to create an exact verbal parallel to the object of poetic stimulus. His comments in this context are very apt and illuminating. At one place he himself says that 'language in a healthy state presents the objects, is so close to the object that the two are identified.'

Eliot repeatedly stresses the points of precision and definiteness in the use of word, because even the most vital poetic elements such as rhythm, feeling and emotion ultimately appear in the form of words. Due to this very fact, he wanted us to concentrate on the interpretation of poetry rather than on the examination of poet's personality. He himself says : "To divert interest from the poet to poetry is a laudable aim : for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good or bad".

In Eliot's view all language is vitally related to rhythm and music, specially for the poetic language, the musical quality is indispensable. A poet can not do without some kind of musical element in his poetry, because to quote William Wordsworth, a poet is a man speaking to men; and all men have a natural appetite for music and sweetness. Eliot himself refers to this appetite and says that all human beings have a natural desire for an occasional feast of 'drums and cymbals.' The relation between music and rhythm and rhythm and diction are so vital that they cannot be conceived separately. Talking of the relation between rhythm and diction, Eliot writes in his book **On Poetry and Poets** that – They imply each other, for the diction – the vocabulary and construction—will determine the rhythm and the rhythm which a poet finds congenial will determine his diction. Eliot, like Poe, knows that rhythm is the very soul of poetry and he feels a rhythm before he thinks of any words. He finds an essential and also inevitable connection between words and music in the same way as he thinks it between words and rhythm.

In his final stage, Eliot with his ascetic indifference even transcends the distinction between the archaic and the fresh word. The full acceptance of Christian faith gave him a sense of humility and tolerance which made him think that no word is too archaic if it is the only word for purpose.