

T. S. ELIOT: CRITIC AND POET

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Talking about Wordsworth in 1955, Eliot said of the elder poet: "his name marks an epoch." The same can of course be said of Eliot himself. Like Dryden in the seventeenth century, and Johnson in the eighteenth, his name as poet and critic (we may here forget Johnson's poor show as a poet) is an essential part of literature in English in the twentieth century. One may even dislike him —but Eliot, poet and critic, perhaps also dramatist, can not be evaded. In each of these three fields, which may be separate for some, but, for him, are organically interlocked, he has left the imprint of his genius. In each, this imprint invariably meant renovation.

To start with the critic, we can briefly discuss three of his seminal essays, starting with the 1919 one, Hamlet and his Problems. Here the famous concept of the "objective correlative" was first expressed: the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is finding an 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. We may disagree with the final judgement on Hamlet, which condemns the play, on the argument that the emotion is in excess of the action, as expressed. What we cannot do is ignore that, with this comparatively simple statement, Eliot unfurls the flag which marks the end of romanticism in the mainstream of English poetry. After all, even war poetry

could still be romantic — as in the voice of Rupert Brooke — and the Imagists' attempt at renovation was not far removed from Romanticism. The attitude underlying the doctrine of the objective correlative would have none of it. No more narcissistic contemplation of the self, no outpouring of emotion in lyrical personal effusions, no self-indulgent spleen would be tolerated in "serious" poetry any more. When Eliot says "I", we know that this is not the transparent mask, the persona lying close to the lyrical speaker behind it. This "I" may be simply modern man, alienated, isolated, fragmentary, who may be called Prufrock or Sweeney, but is certainly not the legend of the poet about himself. With the concept of the objective correlative, romantic poetry receives a final blow.

Another aspect of the Hamlet essay is its correlation with Eliot's own poetry. In an interview given many years later to the Paris Review, he comments on how it was that, when he was writing The Waste Land, his meaning seemed to exceed his ability to express it — in short, he groped with difficulty towards the finding of his own objective correlative. Eliot's criticism thus reflects his preoccupation with his work as a poet. This feature, which he shares with so many other critic-poets in the English tradition, is an aspect of his oeuvre which has not yet been properly investigated.

In another seminal article, Religion and Literature, Eliot touches on the central issue of the need for intrinsic criticism, side by side with the call for criteria of evaluation exceeding the purely formal. He says that the greatness of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards, though whether it is literature or not can be determined in no other way. The essay then proceeds to its other main concern, i.e., defining the proper meaning

of religious literature. To my mind, the initial statement is the basic one. The concept of literariness as the touchstone by which a literary work is to stand or fall — the essential concern with form that, regardless of the paraphraseable content, is indispensable to the creation of the literary work of art — is apparent here. Eliot anticipates or/and supports many of the central conclusions that the New Critics in America and the Russian Formalists were independently arriving at — even though, unlike the latter, he is not making modern linguistics the starting point of his critical journey. On the other hand, he is doing something that not even more recent trends in criticism have yet dealt with: the fact that subject matter also counts, and that moral and spiritual concerns play an important part in the literary artefact. The saying that form is content can be easily turned around.

Another critical essay which can hardly be ignored, even in the most cursory treatment of contemporary criticism, is Tradition and the Individual Talent. Defending his basic tenet that no poet can continue to be one after he is twenty-five years old, unless he has thoroughly digested the literary tradition to which he belongs, Eliot develops his brilliant argument for the unbroken continuity of the literary series. He discusses the naive concept of originality, which centres on the poet's difference from his predecessors, arguing, however, that if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that no only the best, but the most individual parts in his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. The essay goes on talking of the poet's need for a historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together. (This

preoccupation with the connection between the timeless and the temporal is going to emerge again, now in the poet's work, in Four Quartets — another point showing the organicity of the critic's and of the poet's output.) Further on, Eliot declares: The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new, the really new, work of art among them ... Whoever has approved this ideal of art will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.

In these statements, Eliot again clearly and briefly expresses one of the concepts laboriously proposed by the Russian Formalists and the Prague Structuralists, about literary evolution and the structural character of diachrony: any change in any part of the literary series will inescapably change the whole. So also with the statement that art never improves, but ... the material of art is never quite the same Eliot deals a blow on the naive idea of historical evolution as a synonym of improvement. But his contribution to the formation of contemporary criticism does not stop here. In Tradition and the Individual Talent, some aspects of the question of intertextuality are hinted at in the sentence: I have tried to point out the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors, and suggested the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that was ever written ... Towards the end of the essay Eliot returns, in different words, to the idea of the need for impersonality in art, which had already been advanced with the concept of the objective correlative: 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 ... To divert interest from the poet to the

poetry is a laudable aim...

These concerns, central for contemporary literary studies, explain Eliot's presence in almost any modern anthology of criticism. That he should have advanced so many important views in a lucid, eminently readable prose, free from abstruse terminologies and classifications, only adds to his credit, and makes him truly classical.

It is still useful to note the simple but graphic terms in which Eliot anticipated the recent concept of a literary artist's oeuvre as what one might call an extended speech act. In another essay, Eliot insists on the notion that the entire output of certain writers constitutes a single whole, in which meaning is cumulatively built. In such oeuvres, latter works make earlier ones more cogent, with a kind of retroactive effect, which critics will ignore at their peril. This can certainly be applied to a brief discussion of Eliot's own poetry and thus provides a convenient turning point to the second part of this paper.

Not least among the difficulties of dealing with Eliot's poems is the paradox of coping with a body of work by somebody who calls himself a classicist in literature and yet certainly marked the beginning of modern English poetry with the publication of The Waste Land, who advocates "impersonal" writing and still created a highly personal style, regardless of the complex echoing of multiple sources (for which he was the first to provide clues). Trying to cope with the complexity of a poetic output that, beginning with the earlier Prufrock, Gerontion and The Waste Land, emerging with the solemn meditation of Four Quartets, is inseparable from his five plays, we shall try to show that this output, comparatively meagre in bulk, has an organic significance, cumulatively built and modified retroactively by each series of poems.

The publication of The Waste Land was received with astonishment — some critics even thought of it as a hoax. The apparent fragmentariness of the poem, the fact that its composition might be said to consist of an amalgam of quotations, including echoes of the anthropologist's Frazer's The Golden Bough, echoes of these echoes in Jessie Weston's From Ritual to Romance, of Jacobean dramatists, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Laforgue and Dante — and, perhaps, chiefly of all, the lack of syntactical links among the parts of the poem, which then seemed to make it almost hopelessly obscure — all this and more came to the front of adverse criticism. The use of sordid, disgusting images also played a part in the rejection of the poem. In fact, it was launching a kind of revolution in taste, which seemed all the more strange for the fact that so much of the best in the past of international literature had been incorporated.

The shock caused by The Waste Land is now of course long gone. Even the ordinary reader has come to accept that the seeming formlessness and fragmentariness of the poem is part of its significance: the technique of collage is justified, or rather, is brilliantly resourceful, once one realizes that Eliot is talking about what he sees as the fragmentariness and formlessness of modern life. And the incorporation of so many fragments from previous poets is in turn instrumental to drive home the notion of the mediocrity and sordidness of the contemporary world and of the heroic stature of the past. The poem uses so many images of broken objects — the broken images of Part I, The Burial of the Dead, which are to be recalled by the broken columns of London Bridge, and then, in The Hollow Men, by broken columns, broken glass, broken stone, and, in Ash Wednesday, broken jaw — because its theme is incompleteness, disarticulation, isolation. (We can

here also remember the scattered bones of Ash Wednesday, which are glad and sing of their isolation. The imagery centering on the idea of fragmentariness in The Waste Land also relates to the lyrical speaker himself — the heap of broken images partly relates to his despair of ever succeeding in articulating his meaning. That the effect of fragmentariness is also due to Ezra Pound's "il miglior fabbro" of the dedication, severe editing, is here irrelevant.)

In fact, the effect of fragmentariness permeates not only Eliot's major poem in his early period but also the transition represented by Ash Wednesday. It is here related to another emerging theme: the failure of communication, notably between man and woman, but not restricted to that. There is the impossibility of communication with the hyacinth girl, a symbol of erotic love to reappear in later poems:

When we came back late, from the hyacinth garden
Your arms full, and your hair wet
I could not speak, and my eyes failed. (I, The Burial
of the Dead)

This theme — which, like the echoes of genteel conversation in the poem, recall Henry James's influence — reappears in the series of ghostly characters parading through the poem, all locked within themselves, unable to communicate. Madame Sosostriis, the famous clairvoyante, her Egyptian glory now punctured by the indignity of a bad cold, the drowned Phoenician sailor —, the Hanged Man and the Fisher King, who, unlike their predecessors in myth, cannot bring water, redemption, salvation, new life to their people — the girl who talks about Lil's demobbed husband, all these and others go their way alone. Besides, like the crowd that flowed over

London Bridge, they are moving towards hell, as the echo from Dante will not let the reader forget:

I had not thought death had undone so many.

The theme of isolation pervades the whole of Eliot. (We must remember he himself tells us that certain poets are to be read as wholes.) It is one of the strongest notes in his plays. In The Confidential Clerk, for example, Colby leaves his new-found parents to become the lonely church organist. The Cocktail Party strikes the note of inescapable solitude inseparable from man's fate — be it the endured married loneliness of Edward and Lavinia or the chosen solitude of Celia, the saint.

The Waste Land might, in a way, with the multiplicity of references to earlier literary masterpieces, be called an anthology of Arnold's touchstones. Witness, for example, the magnificent line starting the second part of the poem, A Game of Chess:

The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne
Glowed on the marble . . .

This allusion to Enobarbus's description of Cleopatra in her golden barge from Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra again contrasts the heroic past with the insignificant present: not Cleopatra's, but another, jarring voice, is soon heard:

My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

(Here the theme of incommunicability crops up again. These questions are never answered, and words are cut off from the sentences, as the attempt at communication dies down. Another mark of the anticlimax represented by the lines on Cleopatra and the following voice is the mention of the synthetic perfumes among the rich profusion of satin cases and vials of ivory of the modern woman's toilet table — a sorry attempt at imitation of the great Cleopatra. Everything about the modern woman seems fake, like her perfumes. The same sad contrast can be seen in part III, The Fire Sermon. Here Elizabeth and Leicester go down to Greenwich, the London south borough (one of the many references to London, though the poem is also set in ancient Egypt, Alexandria and primitive places where Spring is still announced by human sacrifices which fail to bring life back). Elizabeth's and Leicester's romantic shades contrast with the view of a Thames undignifiedly soiled by oil and tar. In the poem it is a prosaic, dirty river, from which Spenser's nymphs have forever fled.

The Waste Land is an inexhaustible poem and time prevents that it should be commented on at greater length. It is impossible, however, not to mention, besides the structural devices of past myth and literary allusion on which the vision of fragmentariness is framed, the use of the figure of Tiresias, the androgynous seer. In the middle of the poem it works as a central observer, a focus, which hints at the paradoxical unity of this fragmentariness, dreariness and desolation which have made the modern world into a Waste Land. (Here the similarity with Henry James's use of a character, Strather, as a central focus in The Ambassadors can also be recalled.) One cannot refrain from mentioning, either, the rag-time rhythm which finds its way into the poem.

that Shakesperean Rag -

It's so elegant

So intelligent

"What shall I do now? What shall I do?"

This is in turn picked up by the landlord's voice in the London pub, with its sinister denotations of the shortness of human life:

HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME

This rhythm, so tellingly modern, again reminds the reader of the modern city, the city made unreal by its lack of glory or values or love. The rhythms associated with the glorious past do not prevail:

Elizabeth and Leicester

Beating oars

The stern was formed

A gilded shell

Red and gold

The brisk swell

Rippled both shores . . .

This will stay with the reader as simply another nostalgic echo, which again emphasizes the dreariness of the present.

The ironic contrast between past romance and present dreariness rings in other early poems as well. In Prufrock, where the central character has measured his life in coffee spoons - a statement of the narrowness of modern man's outlook - the contrast begins with the very title, The Love

Song of J. Alfred Prufrock. Love Song forms an absurd collocation with the prosaic modern use of the initials, which foretells the underlying meaning of the poem. As we know, no love song follows. The mermaids, Prufrock says, will not sing to him.

The Hollow Men, published a few years after The Waste Land, is another poetic statement about the emptiness of modern life. The technique of collage is used again. Here Guy Fawkes, which can also be taken as the guy of children's games at Easter Time, or the echoes of a nursery rhyme turned to sinister account, recalls the theme of emptiness, while fragmentariness and isolation are again both form and theme of the poem. The images of desert, rock and of water that will not quench man's thirst likewise reappear. The causes of this unquenchable thirst can be read in Ash Wednesday, the 1930 poem of transition, following on Eliot's conversion to the Anglican Church in 1927. The title announces the religious theme of penance — and hope, which can derive from atonement. At the same time, the beginning of the poem contains a statement about the difficulty of the poet's craft, his doubts about his achievement. The persona of the poet — now in his middle age, the aged eagle — starts off as if finding it hard to phrase his saying:

Because I do not hope

Because I do not hope to turn again

Because I do not hope to turn . . .

Again not an absolutely clear poem, Ash Wednesday leaves little doubt about its religious meaning. The image of the rose in the garden, the Lady — who is Dante's Beatrice and also the Lady of the Rocks (as in Da Vinci's painting of the Virgin

in London's National Gallery) hint at the hope of salvation. So does the multifoliate rose, the hope only of desperate man. And the images of rock, water, desolation and broken bones likewise reappear, making a connection with The Waste Land, and suggesting the cause of its desolation. The poem ends with a Biblical echo: And let my cry come unto thee, where the implied speaker expresses both his hope and the fact that his voice rises de profundis.

If Eliot wrote his Inferno in The Waste Land and The Hollow Men, and his Purgatorio in Ash Wednesday, his last sequence of long poems, The Four Quartets, marks his reaching for Paradise, which completes this modern Divine Comedy. Part of the beauty of the sequence lies in its sheer musical beauty. It recalls the incantatory power of poetry, already so markedly present in Ash Wednesday. Here, however, poetic structure is much more elaborate than in the early poem and in the transitional Ash Wednesday. Meaning, on the other hand, grows increasingly complex, with philosophical implications reminding us of Eliot's training at Harvard, of his study of great mystics like St. John of the Cross and of Hindoo religious classics. Like Ash Wednesday and The Hollow Men, the Quartets were first composed and published as isolated poems, later put together, sometimes with an interval of years. So Eliot, like the reader, now had to work his way from parts into wholes — another hint at the paradoxical axis of fragmentariness and organicity around which his oeuvre turns. We may here remember that parts of the Ariel Poems eventually became sections of Ash Wednesday, just as parts of the Quartets were originally written for Eliot's first complete play, Murder in the Cathedral. (This, we parenthetically note, supports the view that Eliot's dramatic output is inseparable from his poetry, and not only

because of his attempted renewal of poetic drama in English.)

To return to Four Quartets, however, we may first notice the general structure underlying them. Each quartet has five parts, the first one usually contains a series of statements and counterstatements which are going to be — hopefully — brought together at the end, and each starts with a reference to a landscape or a scene — a concrete core of allusion which is the initial objective correlative for the long, sustained, intricate development of a theme. (This use of landscape follows on a phase started with the poems New Hampshire and Virginia, short musical evocations which grew out of Eliot's renewed impressions of America in the early 1930's. Thus East Coker, which names one of the Quartets, recalls a place in Somerset where the Eliot family lived until they moved to the American New England Coast in the middle of the seventeenth century.

The second part of the Quartets is a highly formal lyric, reminding one of Eliot's, as critic, saying: a poem or passage may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words. This part — pure musical incantation, as in sections of Ash Wednesday and matching the musical suggestion of the title Quartets, which also announces variations on a theme — is followed by a sharp drop into a prosaic anticlimatic tone. The third part may vary, but the fourth is always a short lyric, while the fifth contains the resumption and resolution of the theme. This becomes progressively more intricate in the last two Quartets, as the meaning has built cumulatively — in fact this has been happening since The Waste Land and Ash Wednesday, and, more obviously, in the Quartets themselves. Eliot, as he has said elsewhere, believed in the possibility of contrapunctual arrangement of subject matter, and in the use of recurrent

themes. He believed, similarly, in the unity created through images, which recur both in the poems and in the plays — another argument for the inseparability of these different aspects of his legacy. In The Family Reunion, for example, the instant of understanding and communion between Agatha and Henry is spoken of in terms of moments in the Rose Garden — a transcendental symbol of ecstasy, not easily interpretable without reference to the poems.

To turn to Four Quartets again: together they form a deliberate, sustained, discourse on the fragmentariness of experience. The central theme is that of the individual consciousness and identity as against the passage of time — the meeting of the temporal and the timeless, with echoes from Proust, Bergson, Kirkegaard, and finally centring on the Christian mystery of the Incarnation. The last of the Four Quartets, Little Gidding, has the same mixture of present and past evocation we have been learning to accept since The Waste Land. Little Gidding, the English place described, is associated with an Anglican seat for prayer, as with the names of the great religious poet Herbert and Vaughan. This alone suffices to set the religious tone. The occasion is that of a couple of men working as wardens during war time air raids. There is an allusion to the necessary choice between fire and fire — which alludes to London and Berlin, both equally tragic cities — and to the purifying fire of divine love and the destructive fire of lust and recalls the Fire in The Waste Land. As Eliot has told us, the past can be modified by the present: the last of the Four Quartets tells a lot about the early poem. Thus also the themes of Ash Wednesday are here re-interpreted and re-evaluated. The earlier pieces are of course not cancelled but each takes on an additional aspect. Little Gidding is connected with the other Quartets by an important

formal trait: each centres on one of the elements – air, water, fire, earth – and on one of the seasons as central images. The last of the Quartets ends on a note of hope. Echoing a fourteenth-century mystic, Joan of Norwich, the poem states that sin is behovely (unavoidable). Still the dove in it recalls the prophetic voice of the Holy Ghost as well as the Annunciation. The final voice reaffirms this note of hope:

And all shall be well, and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowded knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

So Eliot, the poet of despair, surprises us into hope. He might have surprised us again – had he lived more than the allotted three-score and ten which falls to the lot of mortals. In the Collected Poems, 1909-1962, a frank erotic note erupts at last in this most diffident and discreet of poets. In Dedication to my Wife, his private words said in public, he almost shockingly (after all he is not Yeats's wicked old man) speaks of our bodies, which smell of each other. This may puzzle the reader, if he sides with those critics who point out, among Eliot's defficiencies, his obscurity, and also his insufficient sympathy with the average man and with the merely human. Eliot, the poet, grew in sympathy and hope, just as, in his later years, Eliot the critic allowed for a catholicity of taste that made him revoke his judgement of Tennyson and Milton.

As to the dramatist, whatever may be said of his five full plays as drama, no one will easily deny their achievement

as poetry. In the free verse of the plays, where Eliot so studiously sought to avoid Shakespeare's blank verse, he manages to create, in his great moments, something similar to Shakespeare's poetic drama. One could say for certain passages of The Cocktail Party what Reese has said of Shakespeare's blank verse. It is neither prose, nor simply verse, suffused with the hypnotic power of poetry, but easy, fluent, colloquial, making possible the expression of the hesitations, thrusts and withdrawals of the inspired speaking voice. Such is the voice of Celia, for example, in The Cocktail Party. As, in the painful process of anagnorisis, she discovers herself, in discovering Edward, we find moments of unforgettable poetry.

Such is, for instance, the passage beginning:

Ah, but we die to each other daily
What we know of other people
Is only the memory of other moments
In which we have known them
And they have changed since then.
.....
Every time we meet again
We are meeting a stranger.

Here is Eliot the poet, rid of all obscurity with the lucid sustained voice which might be that of fluent conversation, if men talked like angels. This may be the Eliot that the judgement of the next literary age will perhaps single out as Eliot at his best.

NOTES

¹ Matthiessen, F. O. The Achievement of T. S. Eliot. An Essay on the Nature of Poetry. Oxford University Press, 1947.

² Reese, M. M. Shakespeare, his World and his Work. London, Edward Arnold & Co., 1953.

³ Unger, Leonard. T. S. Eliot - Moments and Patterns. University of Minnesota, 1966.