

A QUESTION OF T. S. ELIOT

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It can be said, in a sense, that when we look back the first half of the twentieth century, there seems to be no person who has had more influence upon the view and art of literature in England and America than T.S. Eliot. And what is especially remarkable is the fact that this influence has been exerted equally in the field of theory and the field of practice. Also, here, in our country, Eliot's theory of 'poetry and criticism', or 'tradition and individuality' has been referred to in most cases of dealing with the contemporary English literature. In both countries, his traditionalism has been often taken as if it were the only golden rule rejecting every individualism in literature. In the presence of his authoritative theory, even all sanctions of individual possibilities have sometimes seemed to wither. And that is in a sense what he really has aimed at, even if he did not expect that he himself was set up such a pedestal as a founder of an authority. I wrote that his theory was authoritative, and that he really aimed at it, which might be mistaken for a sort of reaction. But I must say that without misinterpreting it, there is no need of such an apprehension that it might be led to a kind of political totalitarianism. Now, what is Eliot's tradition? He writes:

'Tradition is not solely, or even primarily, the maintenance of certain dogmatic beliefs: these beliefs have come to take their living form in the course of the formation of a tradition. What I mean by tradition involves all those habitual actions, habits and customs, from the most significant religious rite to our conventional way of greeting a stranger, which represent the blood kinship of "the same people living in the same place." It involves a good deal which can be called *taboo*.'

Indeed, he discovered or believed what might be called the traditional orthodoxy, which could be said an outside order or law having priority to an individuality. He insists upon Christian orthodoxy as the priority-order to the inside pattern of human individuals. It becomes inevitably a sort of an authority. And furthermore:

'As we use the term *tradition* to include a good deal more than "traditional religious beliefs", so I am here giving the term orthodoxy a similar inclusiveness; and of course I believe that a right tradition for us must be also a Christian orthodoxy.'

Then, taking it for granted, what relation would this idea of tradition have to the view and art of literature? He answers:

'It is impossible to separate 'poetry' in *Paradise Lost* from the peculiar doctrines that it enshrines; it means very little to assert that if Milton had held more normal doctrines he would have written a better poem; as a work of literature, we take it as we find it; but we can certainly enjoy the poetry and yet be fully aware of the intellectual and moral aberrations of the author. It is true that the existence of a right tradition, simply by its influence upon the environment in which the poet develops, will tend to restrict eccentricity to manageable limits.'

Yes, I see and am agreeable with Eliot's idea of *tradition* as an influence to restrict individual eccentricities in literature, which often results from the writer's loosening personal emotions. Depending upon this criterion, Eliot accuses D.H. Lawrence:

'Lawrence started life wholly free from any restriction of tradition or institution, that he had no guidance except the Inner Light, the most untrustworthy and deceitful guide that ever offered itself to wandering humanity.... A man like Lawrence, therefore, with his acute sensibility, violent prejudices and passions, and lack of intellectual and social training, is admirably fitted to be an instrument for forces of good or for forces of evil.'

Ah, what an embittered moral criticism, embittered by an upbringing of unremitting severity! and, what are violent prejudices, or what is an eccentricity in Lawrence's writings? I can't see. Nowhere I can find it. Nothing but seriousness. As for the intellectual training, though Lawrence had no acquaintance with formal academic standards he did not lack it. F. R. Leavis writes in his '*Lawrence*':

'For those young people in the eighteen-nineties their intellectual education was intimately bound up with a social training, which even if it didn't give them Wykehamist or Etonian or even Harvard manners, I see no reason for supposing inferior to that enjoyed by Mr. Eliot. Moreover, they meet and talked and read in a setting of family life such as, to judge from *The Cocktail Party*, Mr. Eliot cannot imagine to have existed—a family life beset by poverty and the day-to-day exigencies of breadwinning, yet quite finely civilized!

F.R. Leavis, who had a close observation on Eliot and gave a great admiration to him in '*New Bearings in English Poetry*', pointed out in his *Lawrence* that the time had come when Mr Eliot should have another serious look at Lawrence's writings and give more serious critical attention to them. Now, how do you feel, when you read the following passage quoted from *The Rainbow*? It seems to be too long to be quoted, but I dare. Because it is necessary here to be given much careful consideration from each line to all the passage.

'So the Brangwens came and went without fear of necessity, working hard because of the life that was in them, not for want

of the money. Neither were they thriftless. They were aware of the last halfpenny, and instinct made them not waste the peeling of their apple, for it would help to feed the cattle. But heaven and earth was teeming around them, and how should this cease? They felt the rush of the sap in spring, they knew the wave which cannot halt, but every year throws forward the seed to begetting, and, falling back leaves the young-born on the earth. They knew the intercourse between heaven and earth, sunshine drawn into the breast and bowels, that comes under the wind in autumn, showing the bird's nests no longer worth hiding. Their life and interrelations were such; feeling the pulse and body of the soil, that opened to their furrow for the grain, and became smooth and supple after their ploughing, and clung to their feet with a weight that pulled like desire, lying hard and unresponsive, when the crops were to be shorn away. The young corn waved and was silken, and the lustre slid along the limbs of the men who saw it. They took the udder of the cows, the cows yielded milk and pulse against the hands of the men, the pulse of the blood of the teats of the cows beat into the pulse of the hands of the men. They mounted their horses, and held life between the grip of their knees, they harnessed their horses at the wagon, and with hand on the bridle-rings, drew the heaving of the horses after their will.

In autumn the partridges whirled up, birds in flocks flew like spray across the fallow, rooks appeared on the grey, watery heavens, and flew cawing into the winter. Then the men sat by the fire in the house where the women moved about with surety, and the limbs and the body of the men were impregnated with the day, cattle and earth and vegetation and the sky, the men sat by the fire and their brains were inert, as their blood flowed heavy with the accumulation from the living day.

The women were different. On them too was the drowse of blood intimacy, calves sucking hens running together in croves, and young geese palpitating in the hands while the food was pushed down their throttle. But the women looked out from the heated, blind intercourse of farm-life, to the spoken world beyond. They were aware of the lips and the mind of the world speaking and giving utterance, they heard the sound in the distance, and they strained to listen.'

There, no one can deny the vividness of expression, the traditional and at the same time the momentary breath of life, pulse of blood in the passage above. The words here establish an actual presence, in which the bodies of men and women are really combined with heaven and earth, and their lives are the lives of sensations and emotions. The bodies feel real hunger, real thirst, real joy in the sun

or the snow,... real anger, real sorrow,... real passion, real hate, real grief. There, they are, they are not things that can be controlled or replaced by anything else. And in addition it should be noticed that he is not indulging in only descriptive lyricism, loosening personal emotion or writing poetically in order to generate atmosphere, but he is evoking 'blood-intimacy' and 'blood-togetherness' in the traditional country life. And the words here are used, at once so reminiscent and so original, in the way, not of eloquence but of creative poetry. This creative genius Eliot accused of the partisan of instinct against intelligence, tradition. Ah, it is all off the point. Furthermore T.S. Eliot noticed the absence of any moral, social sense in all of the relations of Lawrence's men and women. But knowing that everyday life in an intimate experience, the confrontation, the interpenetration of the old agricultural life, world and earth with the industrial, Lawrence seriously searched all through his life, for much higher or deeper moral sense, broader or more universal social sense than any other moral or religious one in modern world. He might be one of the most serious searcher for God. *The Man Who Died* tells how seriously he did it. He searched and searched all through his words, his works, all over the world, from the earth to, perhaps, the heaven, in and outside himself, by all his body and soul. He himself would have been a true Christian, if he could. In a sense, Lawrence's attitude of search might be more serious than Eliot's. Eliot might be accused, on the contrary, of his ignorance of the real life, in spite of his literary, geographical and theological knowledge. His too much knowledge of books, literary, religious, and anthropological, exposes the shocking essential ignorance of reality, that characterizes, for example, *The Cocktail Party*—'ignorance of the possibilities of life; ignorance of the effect the play must have on a kind of reader or spectator of whose existence the author appears to be unaware: the reader who has, himself, found serious work to do in the world and is able to be unaffectedly serious about it, who knows what family life is and has helped to bring up children and who, though capable of being interested in Eliot's poetry, cannot afford cocktail civilization and would reject it, with contempt and boredom, if he *could* afford it.'

Probably Eliot will answer the question that he is not here in this world to report the reality, 'the knowledge derived from experience.' There are passages of *Four Quartets* which seem even the very answer:

There is, it seems to us,

At best, only a limited value

In the knowledge derived from experience.

The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,

For the pattern is new in every moment

And every moment is a new and shocking

Valuation of all we have been.

And another passage:

You are not here to verify

Instruct yourself or inform curiosity
 Or carry report. You are here to kneel
 Where prayer has been valid.

These are key passages in which he rejects the realistic knowledge and the personalist approach and points to the outside pattern. He prays to enter into and conform with an already existing pattern which has nothing to do with a personal experience or self. But, that this outside pattern is not any fixed one which he imposed by the knowledge, is plainly shown. 'The pattern is new in every moment.' But 'the moment' is essentially different from that of Lawrence. Eliot's moment is eternally turning present 'where past and future are gathered.' He strains his imagination in the endeavour to make us catch the moment, a non-fixed pattern where past and future co-exist in a continuous present:

At the still—point of the turning world, Neither flesh nor fleshness;
 Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
 But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity.
 Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor
 towards,
 Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
 There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
 I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where.
 And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.

But, in spite of this endeavour to make us enter the situation, his prayer seems to have only a weak appeal to me. Eliot's concern is specifically historical, and religious. I think, that it is probably certain qualities of genius he himself inevitably has. *Ash-Wednesday* or *Four Quartets* is a disciplined application of them to the realizing of a spiritual state conceived as depending upon belief—belief in something outside himself. The result is a most subtle poetry of specially technical interest, which may be, in Eliot, resulted from the disposition of the self and the conformity with the orthodoxy. Then, I cannot help being afraid that it sometimes lacks an appeal to those who have not such a belief, but are alive.

He himself cannot deny the fact that he had been in adolescence, April which is 'the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land.' But has never sung his adolescence, without a negative aspect. The only positive effect in his poems is in his suggestive pattern of prayer, belief, stillness, and peace. His poetry has never been that of 'pleasure', but rather that of 'killing joy', except that of prayer, stillness and so on. The result is, of course, sometimes a lack of passionate sensual appeal, which might be a fatal wound in a poem, and for which sometimes nothing can compensate, whatever broad historical and geographical views, or subtlety of reference it has as Eliot's poems.

Here is a poem by S. Spender, which throws a new light on the 'precocious adolescent' poet:

Count rather those fabulous possessions

Which begin with your body and your fiery soul;
 The hairs on your head, the muscles extending
 In ranges with their lakes across your limbs.
 Count your eyes as jewels and your valued sex,
 Then count the sun and the innumerable coined light.
 Sparkling on waves and spangling under trees.

This passionate sensual element in Spender is fundamental, and compensates fully for a lack of any other advantage: such words as 'fabulous', 'fiery', 'jewels', 'sparkling' and 'spangling' are theoretically of the type of words which, according to Eliot, evoke a lack of control of emotions by reason, or according to Dr. I.A. Richards, what are called 'stock-responses.' But no image is over-emotion when it is emotionally exact and apt to its context. During the 'thirties, poets were thumped into obedience by a number of critical successors of T.S. Eliot, who in their intellectual snobbery set out to restrict the vocabulary of poetry. At the age of twenty, Eliot was writing the *Prufrock* poems which surely express the sensibility of a man of forty, and in his early forties he was to liken himself in *Ash Wednesday* to an 'aged eagle.' He has always preferred to exercising some privilege of postulating his age. Is this preference of oldness to youthfulness reduced to his personal mental habit or his emotional pretention? If not, what would it be reduced to? To tradition, or religion, or Christian orthodoxy? Ah, let it be alone! To him, such a pattern is the pattern which existed before he was born and because of that it is the most universal, but it seems to be a strange pattern, *Strange God* for most people, to whom he really wanted to appeal. What is disastrous is, to him, the absence of *tradition*. And the disaster has been resulted from the fact that 'the writer should deliberately be given rein to his *individuality*, and that he should even cultivate his differences from others; not in spite of his deviations from the inherited wisdom of the race, but because of them.' But, that the way of releasing from this disaster is today found only in the idea of Eliot's pattern is too arbitrary and rejective. There is to be other possible ways of thinking.

Here is one of them. It is true that if every artist merely expresses the uniqueness and separateness of his self, then art might be disruptive and disintegrating, and anti-social. A lot of art in the past has been of that kind, and has given rise to the whole problem of 'dilettantism.' Obviously the great artist like Milton, Shakespeare or Dante in which Eliot found the tradition is expressing something bigger than his *self*. Self-expression, like self-seeking, is a sort of illusion. It is, that is to say, 'the action of an individual who pits himself against the community, who says I am bigger, or better, or stronger than others.' But society expects something more than self-expression from its artists. In the case of the great artist, 'it gets something which might be called life-expression. But the "life" which is expressed in great art, is precisely the life of the community, the organic group consciousness. It is the artist's business to make the group aware of its unity, its community. He can do this because he, more than other men, has

access to the common unconsciousness, to the collective instincts which underlie the brittle surface of convention and normality.' Then, the self-denial in the artist is inevitably necessary.

The way of thinking above is mainly due to H. Read's view of art in his *The Politics of the Unpolitical*, which might be rejected as a modern heresy by Eliot. But, still, I cannot help asking another question, borrowing Spender's view of Eliot in *The Creative Element*:

'Even if we make allowance for a few concessions to the values of being alive and of human love, there is little in *Four Quartets* which suggests that Eliot's vision of orthodoxy could be interpreted into terms of the present direction of civilization.... The love which is outside time, and which is the radiance of the dance in *Four Quartets*, will not persuade us to use modern techniques to help men who are starving. It is not inconsistent with doing so, but the interpretation of Eliot's ideas into action taking place within history seems impossibly difficult. I know this objection will seem naïve, but it may none the less be serious. There is a paradox at the centre of Eliot's system. It is anti-individualistic, and yet surely it tends to cultivate individuals, even if these are individuals who devote their lives to shedding their individuality in order to enter into the pattern of the dance. Moreover, I doubt whether any philosophy which denigrates the simple and sensuous values of being alive will ever lead men to do much for the living.'

On purpose or unconsciously, this important question Eliot has not yet answer. If not, his poems will be unable to endure various and severe trials to come.