



## T. S. Eliot and Modern Sensibility

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### ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt at tracing the influence of T. S. Eliot in shaping the development of poetry and sensibility which is generally recognized as modern. First it outlines the mental framework that is associated with modern poetry and which is amply illustrated in the development of this father of Modernism. Eliot's poetry from the early juvenile pieces to the later ones including *The Four Quarters* is undertaken to show the dominant themes and techniques deployed by the poet. Then it follows a sampling of contemporary poets mostly from D.J. Enright's anthology of poets after Eliot to prove the point that these poets grew as John Wain once admitted, in the shadow of Eliot.

**Keywords:** T. S. Eliot, Poetry, Modern Sensibility, Contemporary Poets

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### INTRODUCTION

John Wain in his preface to the second edition of *Interpretations*, gratefully acknowledges a none too complimentary notice Eliot took of the book in his 'the Frontiers of Criticism' and Says that, in sense, the younger generation of English poets can be said to have grown under Eliot's shadow [1]. Coming as this admission does from one associated with the Movement, it is an eloquent testimony of how instrumental Eliot has been in shaping the phenomenon called modern sensibility. An Examination, therefore of the sensibility that emerges from Eliot's poetry will certainly enable us to arrive at a better understanding of modernism and the mental framework associated with it. Maxwell's statement that Eliot is 'the supreme example of the modern classicist' may be taken as representative of the early enthusiastic defenders and adulators [2]. Part of the responsibility for this reputation, of course, goes to the 'injudicious declaration' by Eliot himself when he stated his general point of view as a man of letters. But recent studies on Eliot have explored the romantic element in his poetry and criticism. In fact, it was C. K. Stead who, not only in *The New Poetic* but also in a less well-known essay 'Classical Authority and the Dark Embryo;' Alerted the readers the romantic heritage and moorings of Eliot. As a result of Stead's findings and the later elaborations by Bornstein and Lobb, among others, the picture that we have now of Eliot is that of a man' who had avowedly espoused classicism on the one hand, and who was intensely aware on the other, of the impulsive force which he chose to call the 'dark embryo' out of which poetry necessarily springs [3]. I should like to argue, in so far as Eliot belongs to that line of poetry that runs from the Romantics, he and consequently, the modern sensibility he helped to form are not a deviation from the mainstream of English poetry, as Graham Hough contended in *Image and Experience*, but very much a part of it. In other words, my paper exhorts the need of seeing Eliot in a proper historic perspective in order to know the nature of modern sensibility better and to see its influence on the succeeding poets.

### Eliot's poetry from *Prufrock* to *Four Quartets*

There is happily the rare consensus among critics that Eliot's poetry has a remarkable integrity of theme and purpose. This becomes more apparent if we examine his work in the light of his juvenilia. What we learn from *Poems Written in Early Youth* is that Eliot like any other adolescent of his day, started his poetic career under the influence of the romantics. In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* Eliot speaks of the magical effect Omar Khayyam's '*Rubaiyat*' had on him and of how he thereupon went through the usual adolescent course of Byron, Shelley, Keats, Rossetti and Swinburne. Secondly I should like to draw attention to the last two lines of 'A Song', where the lover, after sketching a cold, white misty scene, tells his beloved that the flowers she is holding in her hands are whiter than the mist from the sea, and finally asks her a gentle, rueful question.

Have you no brighter tropic flowers  
With scarlet life for me?

These lines illustrate some of the dominant features of the romantic temper-discontent with the present and the

desire for the unattainable. These features, I submit, can be traced in Eliot's poetry from *Prufrock* to *Four Quartets*. The Laforgian mode of expression in the early poems is often a convenient stylistic device that invariably acts as a check on the native romantic proclivities. Besides, it enables the poet to ventilate his feelings, while, at the same time, it frees him from, what Helen Gardner has called 'the lyric poet's necessity' of speaking either for himself or for the world in general. But she points out that the need to express this discontent was very much there in his temperament. [4]

Seen in this light, the early poetry begins to look different. Behind the self-deprecations of *Prufrock*, we see his intense desire for the inaccessible lady. His passion is so intense as to become almost ascetic. Irving Babbitt in *Rousseau and Romanticism*, discusses, as a central phenomenon of Romanticism, nympholepsy – a state of desire for the unattainable and fear of its consummation. Thus, according to him, Dante is a religious nympholept, Shelley and Chateaubriand secular ones. In so far as *Prufrock* displays nympholeptic tendencies, he is both the knight and the saint of love. [5]

The 'other observations; in *Prufrock* like 'Preludes' and 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', paint city-life, in all its lurid and nightmarish details. These pieces show that there is no obvious feeling of delight in the presentations of the sordid details. They express, on the other hand, Eliot's painful awareness of the gap between the ideal and the actual. Together these poems center round the squalid, mechanized life of the cities and the standardization of human personality and responses. "Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand' neatly sums up the mood of these poems." [6]

The *Waste Land* is a culmination of this theme of disillusionment explored on a far wider, universal scale. It is an indictment on the disappointing nature of life. The Sybil, suspended in the bottle, saying 'I wish to die' symbolizes the predicament of the artist entrapped in the modern world. The *Waste Land* thus becomes 'the rage of a bird in a cage'. Its five sections, as musical composition, are variations on the Wagnerian leitmotif of disillusionment, in that they represent various aspects of our world.

- a. 'Burial of the Dead' – reversal of Nature
- b. 'A Game of Chess' – lifelessness of life
- c. 'The Fire Sermon' – Debasement of the Beautiful
- d. 'Death by Water' – Uncertainty of life
- e. 'What the Thunder said' – the inevitable fall of civilization and a way of fertilizing the land.

If 'The Hollow Men' shows the world of the waste-landers ending with the tepid whimper, Ash-Wednesday starts the process of rebuilding that world with a positive act of faith. It is a process of chastening the romantic sensibility, of coming to terms with the world. The poet hopes to do with the intercession of the Lady, who as Derek Travers has pointed out, is a latter-day Blessed Damozel. Mention has already been made of *Prufrock's* nympholeptic urges. In turning 'from romance to ritual', Eliot fits into the tradition of mediaeval religious poets, in whom a similar blending on the amatory and the ascetic is seen, as a mere glance at some of titles of their poems will show: (A) 'I will Serve My Lady', (B) A Love Message to MY Lady and (C) 'I Will have no Other Spouse'.

The *Four Quartets*, as a spiritual autobiography like Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, makes, in a sense, the completion of the chastening process, and shows and 'apparent' because 'what might have been' is admittedly 'a perpetual possibility' – though 'only in a world of speculation' – and, as such, an eternal allurements to the humankind who in any case, cannot bear too much reality'. At the end of his major work, the poet says, "All shall be well ..... when ..... the fire and the rose are one". In this desire for the fire becoming rose and vice versa, do we not see here the same adolescent boy wishing for 'brighter, tropic flowers'? All shall be well when the white flowers and the tropic flowers are one. In my end is my beginning.

Thus it is possible to view Eliot's entire poetic output as one integrated whole shot through and through with the romantic discontent with the present and the desire for the unattainable.

Further it is interesting to find that Eliot, like the Romantics displays to awareness of the need to change the idiom of poetry consonant with the changes in sensibility and our perception of reality. By now, it is critical common place to suggest that Modernism, like Romanticism, was an 'experiment' directed at effecting a radical reorientation in the poetic practice of the time. In *Four Quartets*, the 'familiar compound ghost' says.

"...last year's words belong to last year's language  
And New Year's words await another voice." [7]

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The need to 'purify the dialect of the tribe' is a recurrent one. In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot, in his lecture on Wordsworth and Coleridge, reminds us that the 'drunken helots' like Pound and himself were staging the same fight which the founding fathers of Romanticism had fought or which Dryden before them had

done. [8] Thus the whole movement of literary history is seen as an alternation between two periods; a period of revolution followed by a period of stasis. This cyclic view of literary and cultural history is seen in Eliot's review of Maurice De Wulf's book *History of Mediaeval Philosophy*. 'The last part of Dr. De Wulf's book is a valuable contribution. It confirms the view that no great philosophy ever vanquishes another great philosophy; it annihilates merely its predecessors' degenerate descendants. How can we tell who was the greatest prize-fighter in history when every champion is ultimately conquered by some young man'.

In failing to perceive the changes in sensibility and consequently the need to change the idiom, it is the Georgians and not the Romantics, who are the real culprits. They are the 'degenerate descendants' of the Romantics. A look at Eliot's reviews of Georgian poetry will show that his anger is directed against the Georgians and not the Romantics—a point that cannot be stressed too much.

- (A) "Because we have never learnt to criticize Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats . . . . ., Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth punish us from their graves with the annual scourge of a Georgian Anthology".
- (B) "I do not make the mistake of supposing that Keats or Shelley Wordsworth can be incriminated in the production of the Georgian Anthology. Good poets may usually have a bad influence . . . . . the dullness of the Georgian Anthology is original, unique; we shall find its cause in something more profound than the influence of a few predecessors. And that 'something more profound', as he goes on to say, is the slumbering sensibility and the lack of will to evolve and idiom expressive of the changed perception of reality in modern times. Thus Eliot's advocacy of experimentation has its own logic; the need to change is in the very nature of the movement of literary history, And yet he never championed the cause of experimentation for the sake of it. He knew that experimentation has its limits beyond which the law of diminishing returns becomes operative. Even in his exhortation to poets, in 'The Metaphysical Poets', to become more comprehensive, allusive and indirect, Eliot is not all out for a wholesale linguistic dislocation. (. . . . . 'to force, to dislocate, if necessary, Language into his meaning') Hence his realization that *The Waste Land* was the end not the beginning of something, Hence also his sympathy for young poets like Auden and George Barker who took what they wanted from the preceding generation and adapted it to their purposes. He distrusted those who, like scout-boys, in their revolutionary enthusiasm looked to a modernism that rejected all connection with English verse. [9]

The experimentation was needed because of the increasing complexity of life and acute sense of the woeful inadequacy to represent that complex reality. Great writers of all ages were aware of the complexity of life but they never experienced a crisis of confidence in the forms and the techniques available to them. The modernists like Eliot saw themselves confronted not only by the infinite complexity of life, but also the inadequacy of the traditional devices of their medium. In *The Struggle of the Modern*, Stephen Spender rightly pointed out that the modern artist, filled with the awareness of the unprecedented situation, found that the principle of reality in our times is particularly difficult to grasp and that "realism" is not an adequate approach to it. This explains the various experiments in technique that characterize modernism in all arts, Joseph Frank's article 'The Spatial Form in Modern Literature' discussed the decline of chronological narrative structures in modern literature and their replacement by what he called the "Spatial form"- in which the reader is asked not to follow a story but to discern a pattern through the system of internal reference. Eliot's advocacy of the 'mythical method has to be seen in this light. The adoption of this method in *The Waste Land* was in a sense, a counter to the versitic belief that reality is knowable only through the absolutist categories and the objective, non-metaphorical, denotative language of science. It is a 'wholly a significant grouse' against the spiritual aridity which is the inevitable result of excessive scientism at the expense of supernatural sanctions of reality. Carol Smith, while speaking about Eliot's plays, says that their most dominant theme is the predicament of a sensitive soul forced to live in a world that has gone spiritually opaque, 18 And this can be said of Eliot's poetry also. His poetry remains a classic statement of the problems of the modern man amidst the "immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history". [10]

To the extent that the poetry of Eliot and the modern poetry is a reaction against the excessive scientism of our world, as Robert Langbaum says, a continuation of romantic poetry, which itself is an heir to the wilderness left by the Enlightenment, which in its effort to separate fact from value separated fact from all value separated fact from all values bequeathing a world in which fact is measurable quantity and value is man-made and illusory. Such a world offers no room for just those perceptions by which men live, the perceptions of beauty, goodness and spirit. [11]

Romanticism was born when these dangerous implications of the scientific viewpoint became apparent. The poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake, with their use of nature imagery, dream-logic and a mythic interpretation of the world, turned to a language that went beyond the merely stative and enabled them to represent those layers of reality that are far beyond the reach of rational thought and the non-metaphorical language of science.

In addition to the 'mythical method' as a way of coping with complex reality and overcoming the inadequacies of linear narrative structures, Eliot found the musical organization of his thought a very useful device. I. A. Richards' description of Eliot's poetry as 'a music of ideas' in which the verse paragraphs are woven round certain

themes, ideas or motifs remains perhaps the best approach to Eliot. [12]

It is but natural that Eliot, who had thought so deeply about the problems of the artist in the modern world, should have a profound influence on the later generations of poets. During the twenties and thirties, almost every new poet in England took him as a starting point, however great the later divergence forms the model. This applies specially to the poets of the thirties, who reflected Eliot's poetic practice, while not sharing his view of society. The 'narrow strictness', which Auden eulogized as a poetic stance, is typically Eliotic. In fact his *Age of Anxiety* merits comparison with *The Waste Land* as a poem dealing with spiritual drouth. The technical perfection of the Sweeney quatrains affected poets as diverse as Norman Cameron, Geoffrey Grigson, and C. Day Lewis. In matters of technique also followed by the succeeding generations of poets Eliot's influence can be seen. I should like to draw attention to the use of allusion, the heavy dependence on image as the chief device in a poem and the use of myth as a structuring device. In poems like 'The Sunlight on the Garden', 'After the Crash' and 'Taxis' Louis MacNiece is as allusive as Eliot. The poetry of Empson also displays similar complexities due to wide-ranging allusions in his poems like 'Missing Dates', Geoffrey Hill's poems like "Genesis" also depend heavily on allusion as the chief mode of expression. The surrealist poetry of the forties was no doubt influenced by the Freudian and Jungian psychology, but in technique it depended heavily on images in much the same way as Imagism did. Eliot of course is not an imagist, but his poetry does show the influence of imagism. For example, *The Waste Land* and much of the earlier poetry show violent juxtaposition of images and thus become cinematic in technique. Robert Graves and Ted Hughes among others are the two major figures who use myth as a structural device. Like Blake and Yeats earlier, Graves forged out his own private mythology of the White Goddess. Ted Hughes in *Crow* has also structured his work similarly. It might seem somewhat strange to talk of Eliot, Graves, Hills and Hughes in the same breath, Even if we make the distinction between Eliot, Hill as essentially 'myth-users' and Graves and Hughes as 'myth-makers' the fact remains that these poets use 'myth' as a device that enables them to deal with the complex reality of our times.

Harold Bloom in his book *Yeats prophesied*, 'Eliot and Pound may prove to be the Cowley and Cleveland of this age and puzzle therefore to future historians of our sensibilities'. One has only to browse through the *Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse 1945-1980*, edited by D. J. Enright and to see the works of Ted Hughes, Charles Tomlinson, Geoffrey Hill, Richard Wilbur, Howard Nemerov to realize that history has proved Bloom to be a false prophet. [13]

## CONCLUSION

T. S. Eliot's Poetry and the modern poetry is a reaction against the excessive scientism of our world, a modern world with no room for beauty, goodness and spirit. The two signs of modern sensibility are the loveliness that comes from topicality and the difficulty that comes from intellectual abstruseness. On the other hand, there was a reaction in the forties and the fifties against Eliot and the modernists, e.g. Philip Larkin dismissed the 'myth kitty' as something inessential to poetry. However in its effort to deviate from the modernist direct, English poets like Larkin, although good, lost immediacy and universality of appeal. Charles Tomlinson rightly said that with the Movement England once again became an island. The health of English poetry depends on the extent to which it maintains rapport with the continent; we owe his awareness to Arnold as well as to Eliot.

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