

06

T. S. ELIOT AS A CRITIC*Dr Suresh S. B., Asst Professor of English, Govt. First College, Yalahanka, Bangaluru-64, Karnataka*

1

When one wants to read T.S. Eliot, he has to study both Modernism and Formalism. The gist of Modernism is that Victorian age came to a bad shape around 1900, because, English imperialism had setbacks in Boer War and in World War I later. Their Indian rule was destabilized by Japan. The middle-class English life was not in peace. So Sr Huxley propounded atheism, and Charles Darwin spoke of the origin of man, nullifying the Biblical concept of man's creation. Sigmund Freud's theories of psychoanalysis, Karl Marx's equality-ideologies to help the working-classes, and Nietzsche's statement about the death of God destabilised European English society. The emergence of science and technology, and the new arts including cubism, expressionism, imagism, symbolism, avantgarde, impressionism, etc. created a new atmosphere in fine arts and literature. The first World War destabilized Europe altogether, creating rifts with Asia, Africa and America. It is said, "The term 'modernism' is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and styles of literature and the other arts in the early decades of the 20th century, but especially after World War I (1914-18)" (Abrams 225). M. H. Abrams thinks some literary historians locate the beginning of modernist revolt as far back as the 1890s, but most agree that what is called 'high modernism,' marked by an unexampled scope and rapidity of change, came after the First World War. The year 1922 alone was signalized by the appearance of such monuments of modernist innovation as James Joyce's *Ulysses*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, as well as many other experimental works of literature. The catastrophe of the war had shaken faith in the moral basis, coherence, and durability of Western civilization and raised doubts about the adequacy of traditional literary modes to represent the harsh and dissonant realities of the postwar world.

T.S. Eliot is known as a Formalist critic too. This Formalism emerged from Russia in the 1920s. Formalism is a literary theory and analysis. Formalism became a neutral designation. The leaders of this school were Boris Eichenbaum, Victorian Shklovsky and Roman Jakobson. The Formalists were persecuted in Russia and they migrated to Europe. Jakobson stayed in Frague, developing the Frague School of Linguistics. Jan Makarovsky and Rene Wellek joined him. Both Jakobson and Wellek continued Formalist discourse in American universities.

It is in this background, we need to understand T.S. Eliot as a critic of Anglo-American literature.

2

T.S. Eliot, as an Anglo-American, modernist poet has been a well-known critic too. He has authored several important plays too. Delmore Schwartz dubbed him a 'literary dictator.' (*Norton Anthology*1088)

Thomas Stern Eliot, born, in St Louis of Missouri, graduated from Harvard in 1909. He had masters from there. His teachers were philosopher poet George Santayana and humanist Irving Babbit. Eliot studied French criticism, including symbolism. He began writing poetry such as 'The Love of J. Alfred Prufrock.'

Critics like Ezra Pound called Eliot a self-made modernist. Eliot studied at Sorbonne in Paris for a year and became a teaching assistant at Harvard. He did PhD on F.H. Bradley's contribution to philosophy, even studying at Oxford. He settled down in England.

Eliot met Pound and married Vivien Haigh-Wood in 1915. He took a job in Lloyd's Bank for eight years. His early criticism appears in *The Sacred Wood* (1920), where he writes this:

“No artist produces great art,” Eliot claimed, “by a deliberate attempt to express his personality. He expresses his personality indirectly through concentrating upon a task 'which is a task in the same sense as the making of an efficient engine or the turning of a jug or a table-leg’” (Selected Essays, 1917-1932). (*Norton Anthology* 1092)

From one angle, Eliot's work is itself impersonal and objective; it is filled especially the poetry with masks, role-playing, and multiple voices. Yet it is saturated everywhere, too, with displaced personal pain, regret, sexual desire, and emotional and spiritual yearning.

Eliot's most remarkable poem *The Waste Land* appeared in 1922 in *The Criterion* which he himself edited. It is a text of literary modernism. The poem evoked the waste and sterility of western world. *The Waste Land* is about the world's trauma. Eliot was a cultural force throughout the 1920s and 1930s. He encouraged Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Marcel Proust and others. He became the editor of Faber and Faber from 1925. He wrote plays in the 1930s (including *The Mirror in the Cathedral*).

Eliot became a British citizen in 1927. However, Eliot was a conservative. He was a Norton Professor at Harvard in 1932-33. His book *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) is much hectoring. He got OM and the Nobel Prize in 1948.

3

Our first selection, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), begins: "In English writing we seldom speak of tradition." The poise and authority of Eliot's critical voice, backed up by his masterful performances as a poet, soon made 'tradition' a key topic for poets, critics, intellectuals, and teachers of literature in the academy. Two of the canonical texts of modern Anglo-American literary criticism, F. R. Leavis's *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1956) and Cleanth Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), were expansions of Eliot's ideas about tradition, and many other books (and countless syllabi) were similarly based on the terms that he had articulated.

For Eliot, each poem exists within the tradition from which it takes shape and which it, in turn, redefines. Thus, tradition is both something to which the poet must be faithful and something that he actively makes: novelty emerges out of being steeped in tradition. Some later critics, such as Harold Bloom, have characterized Eliot as a weak poet-critic because of the priority that he assigns to tradition, but in doing so they overlook the extent to which the poet challenges and revises the tradition to which he defers: "What happens when a new work of art is created," he stresses, "is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it." (Eliot, 1092) Eliot has also been criticized for picturing tradition as variously a simultaneous order, a living whole, an ideal order, and the mind of Europe, thereby idealizing its conflicts, contradictions, and omissions.

Eliot's next essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921) is another central work in the history of modern criticism. Almost as soon as it appeared, the difficult 17th-century metaphysical poets John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and their contemporaries, whom Eliot described as more often named than read, and more often read than profitably studied became models of good poetry. Eliot's essay is condensed in its argument, highly suggestive, and extraordinarily ambitious. He deploys the evaluative terms that in the 18th century Samuel Johnson had used against the metaphysical poets ("the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together") to elevate the very poets whom his eminent precursor had assailed, insisting that modern poetry must be difficult. He packs "The Metaphysical Poets" with unelaborated argument and assertion, stressing in particular the 17th century's disastrous "dissociation of sensibility" into thought and feeling. He illustrates how "tradition" is made, is forced, into the form that later generations of writers require. Many of Eliot's readers took his generalizations as literal truths, and even skeptics, such as the English critic Frank Kermode judged that refuting Eliot demanded full-scale scholarly and critical

demonstration.

Eliot's essay 'Hamlet and His Problems' (1920) speaks of his objective correlative. He writes, "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that particular emotion; such that, when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." (*Norton Anthology* 1090) Eliot uses Hamlet as a test case, surprisingly labeling the play an 'artistic failure' precisely because in it the emotions that Shakespeare evokes are "in excess" of the facts of the story. It is an absurd judgment, in which Eliot may not have believed, but which he uttered with such assurance that it is still cited and debated.

T.S. Eliot is a great influence on New Criticism at Yale. He described criticism as "the disinterested exercise of intelligence . . . the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste . . . the common pursuit of true judgment," (*Norton Anthology* 1090) and the New Critics followed his advice to center arguments in analysis of specific passages and poems. "Comparison and analysis," Eliot said, "are the chief tools of the critic," enabling a precise perception of literary effects, relationships, and values. By the 1950s, Eliot was lamenting the rise of copiously detailed interpretation of texts which he called "lemon-squeezing" but perhaps more than anyone else he had launched the new movement. "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry," Eliot states in section 2 of "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In such sentences, we can see the origins of the New Criticism, with its abiding concern for the words on the page in R. P. Blackmur's formulation, "the words and the motions of the words . . . all the technical devices of literature."

For many critics in the 1970s and after, Eliot Anglican, conservative, New Critical formalist has been the archenemy. Bloom, for example, has derided Eliot's poetry and criticism and sought to revitalize the Romantic tradition that Eliot had shunned. Explicitly or implicitly, many others arguing for the inclusion of women and minority writers within the literary canon have attacked Eliot's judgments about literary and cultural tradition. Eliot's and the New Critics' "tradition," they maintain, is narrow and elitist, enshrining a limited range of authors and presenting to students a partial, misleading literary history.

References:

1. Abrams M. H. And G. G. Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New Delhi: Cengage, 2018.
2. Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Norton Anthology of Criticism*. New York: W.W.W Norton Co, 2010.
3. Schwartz, Delmore. *Norton Anthology of Criticism*. New York: W.W.W Norton Co, 2010.