



Revisiting Eliot's Ideology on Religion and Literature

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Abstract: T.S. Eliot is unanimously acknowledged to have been most authentic and influential critic and poet in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. His choice of subject matter generally informs ethical, orthodox, conservative Christian culture under the garb of objectivity. His literary criticism in elucidating the texts is the representative voice of his age. The positivistic and pragmatic trends in the area of sciences and the Existentialism, Absurdity, Humanism and Nihilism in ethics and religion coalesced to dominate the creative expressions. The hegemonic control of such trends happened to inculcate in reading masses a secular attitude devoid of traditional essence. Besides that the liberal humanism and democratic tendencies in life formed the contemporary mindset, which was held responsible, in part, to have led to two World Wars. Eliot adopts a reactionary attitude in following the cultural tradition which stands against those dominant trends. Eliot and others of his persuasion believed that the dominant trends have caused disorder and chaos in contemporary social life, which needed, as visualized by them, immediate correction of taste. The present paper explores how Eliot foregrounds distortions and confusion and thereafter attacks those dominant trends and philosophical postulations through his conservative Faith in Christianity, Western culture and a European literary tradition.

Keywords: Faith, tradition, criticism, ethics, Christianity, objectivity, liberal humanism, religion, culture.

One of the unhappy necessities of human existence is that we have to 'find things out for ourselves' --- T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 428.

What can be the possible relation of literature and religion? T.S. Eliot raises this important question quite frequently in his critical writings. Arnold and Paul Elmer More look upon literature as 'criticism of life', which Eliot also accepts as an important aspect to literature. As far as religious intellectual poetry is concerned, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Baudelaire's poetry are a case in point. Naturally, the religious attitudes and the realities prevalent in their contemporary world took shape in their ideas being conveyed through poetry. As Eliot holds that the great poet in writing himself writes his time. A poem is unlikely to create its inherent emotions into too detached a reader. It is possible only when it is read with sympathy -- the kind of sympathy which Eliot has demanded from reader for the understanding of any poet of the past. For this purpose, historical facts are to be taken into account on the one hand, the reader also on the other hand get rid of his contemporary ideology so that he could comprehend the author's ideology. This involves essentially a process of the depersonalization, of giving up one's self which is a difficult task. The critic has no nature of his own but he takes the nature of the poet he studies. As regards the matter of understanding a poem's relation to its inherent religious overtones, a critic's job becomes to abnegate his own personality in order to achieve "objective sympathy"(Miller, 19). Eliot is not

reductive in his method. Unlike a formalist Eliot does not pay so close an attention to the words on the page that he could misread the text. Through this stance of objective sympathy, Eliot makes judicious statements about the author's religious views; be it Dante or Virgil, Laforgue or Baudelaire, Milton or Shakespeare. Eliot has his own point of view regarding religious faith. However, he does never impose his own religious or moral notions on the authors he discusses, but he enjoys the revelation of his own faith in the poets mentioned above. Eliot shows his strong disagreement with Arnold's famous dictum that 'poetry will replace religion'. The deteriorating state of religion made him look upon poetry as a means of deliverance. Eliot was right, as in our time a lot of people have turned to poetry for consolation, but it is an effort in self-dramatization and self cheering up. Only literature dealing with religion or mysticism can initiate a person into religious experience. It may seem rather surprising but is not at all absurd that T.S. Eliot should have been converted to Catholicism in part at least by his reading of Dante, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Maurras. He aptly remarks:

Poetry is not a substitute for philosophy or theology or religion, as Mr Lewis and Mr Murry sometimes seem to think; it has own function. But as the function is not intellectual but emotional,... it provides 'consolation': strange consolation, which is provided equally by writers so different as Dante and Shakespeare"(Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 137-38).

In 1935, Eliot pointedly said that our reading of literature "affects us entire human beings; it affects our moral and religious existence"(*Selected Essays*, 396). In the modern world, he is one of those very few, "who seek refuge in religion from the tumult of a strong emotional temperament which can find no complete satisfaction elsewhere"(*For Lancelot Andrew's*, 25). Dante's and Baudelaire's work is a literary embodiment of Christian thought. Eliot emphasized the importance of Christian theology on the basis of the appeal that these writers had for him. He develops accordingly ethics in his literary criticism. For a critic like Eliot it is natural to adopt such a slant in the first half of the century on account of his existential quest for meaning and order in life and literature against the debased culture against which he was contending. In "Religion and Literature" (1935) Eliot makes explicit his ideological concerns:

Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint. In so far as in any age there is common agreement on ethical and theological matters, so far can literary criticism be substantive. In ages like our own, in which there is no such common agreement, it is the more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading, especially of works of imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards. The 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards (*Selected Essays*, 388).

Eliot believes with Aristotle that all literature is essentially imaginative, as the above passage suggests. But literary criticism has to be supplemented by ideological point of view with respect to the age of the author. Literary goodness is not enough for great literature. It has to be great in the sense that it has some specific uses in the field of our social, moral, religious life. But merely reflective poetry based in religious or devotional experience, Eliot recognizes, may not prove to be good literature even if it makes an immediate appeal on religious grounds. That is what Eliot precisely meant for 'great' literature (Buckley, 130).

If we go back to *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) by Arnold, to whom Eliot seems to be indebted, wherein Arnold holds, "But what is greatness? Culture makes us ask. Greatness is a spiritual condition worthy to explore love, interest, and admiration"(Keating, 210). Arnold was a humanist. Eliot, being an orthodox Christian,

transformed this resistance by Arnold on secular spirituality into Christian dogma to determine the greatness. For Eliot, Arnoldian secular culture is not as important as Christian culture is.

It is in Christianity that our arts have developed, it is in Christianity that the laws of Europe have until recently been rooted. It is against a background of Christianity that all our thought has significance. An individual European may not believe that the Christian faith is true, and yet what he says, and makes, and does, will all spring out of his heritage of Christian culture and depend upon that culture for its meaning... To our Christian heritage we owe many things beside religious faith. Through it we trace the evolution of our arts... And through it we have our common standards of literature, in the literature of Greece and Rome. The Western world has its unity in this heritage, in Christianity and in the ancient civilization Greece, Rome and Israel from which we trace our descent (*Notes towards...*, 122-23).

If in an age people do not accept some precise Christian theology, people's moral judgments have unsubstantial foundations. Having already made an interesting study in Elizabethan dramatic ethics, Eliot declares the common code of such concepts as honor, glory, or revenge is quite intolerable to Christianity. The established authors "had a gift of language which makes them delightful to read to all those who can enjoy language well written, even if they are unconcerned with the objects which the writer had in view. And I would add that though a scientific, or historical, or theological, or philosophical work which is also 'literature', may become superannuated as anything but literature, yet it is not likely to be 'literature' unless it had its scientific or other value for its own time" (*Selected Essays*, 389). Literature composed in well drawn form can be enjoyed, but the essence or meaning is important for it to become great literature. Eliot's culture is anti-modern, anti-popular, and anti-technology as is shown in 1923 essay "Marie Lloyd" (*Selected Essays*, 457-459). This essay is written at the death of this famous musician. Popular culture is the opposite of live culture or live tradition. His earlier poetry contemptuously comments upon this disoriented popular adversary culture. He presents a broad review of literary tendencies by focusing attention on his theory related to literature.

Bunyan, and to some extent Defoe had moral purposes: the former is beyond suspicion, the latter maybe suspect. But since Defoe, the secularization of the novel has been continuous. There have been three chief phases. In the first, the novel took the Faith, in its picture of life. Fielding, Dickens and Thackeray belong to this phase. In the second, it doubted, worried about or contested the Faith. To this phase belong George Eliot, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy. To the third phase, in which we are living, belong nearly all contemporary English novelists except Mr James Joyce, it is the phase of those who have never heard the Christian Faith spoken of as anything but anachronism (*Selected Essays*, 392).

Eliot has criticized Elizabethan age as devoid of proper orthodox faith in Christianity. A man of letters can have "the moral and spiritual qualities of a stoic kind which are possible without the benefits of revealed religion; and the mental gifts which are possible without genius" (*The Use of Poetry...*, 13). The Elizabethan dramatists and almost all of the novelists do not go beyond this level according to T.S. Eliot. He looks forward to the unity of culture and religion in the sense that the products of art should be examined critically with the canons of aesthetic literary and essence oriented principles. If art is only for aesthetic pleasure, it can be evaluated in separation from or in isolation from morals and religion. But Eliot unites both pleasure and edification, as had earlier been done by Dr Johnson. Poetry, according to comprehensive literary standards, has the dual role to delight and instruct. Eliot puts forward his conviction as "our religion imposes our ethics, our judgment and criticism of ourselves, and our behaviour towards our fellow-men. Hence our reading of some behaviour pattern in a novel with the approval

of its author certainly influences our attitude. We can be influenced towards behaving in the same way" (*Selected Essays*, 393). This whole instruction or influence arises out of art on account of its intimate culture and religion. The perfect critical discourse can be achieved only through "perfect perception, which is spiritual perfection" (Lu, 69). He elucidates this point at another place:

Aesthetic sensibility must be extended into spiritual perception, and spiritual perception must be extended into aesthetic sensibility and discipline taste before we are qualified to pass judgment upon decadence or diabolism or nihilism in art. To judge a work of art by artistic or by religious standards, to judge a religion by religious or artistic standards should come in the end to the same thing: though it is an end at which no individual can arrive (*Notes towards...*, 30).

Eliot himself has tried to achieve the condition for criticism of this type of perfection in his following essays, "Milton I (1936), "Milton II" (1947), and "The *Pensees* of Pascal" (1931), and other essays in social criticism. In the very beginning of his essay on Pascal, Eliot like a scholar critic narrates "the few facts of Pascal's life which need to be recalled in examining the *Pensees*" (*Selected Essays*, 405). The most important of the biographical information sketched by the critic is Pascal's mystical experience which occurred on 23rd November, 1654. Eliot comments that it is a commonplace fact that some forms of illness are extremely favourable not only to religious illumination but also to artistic and literary inspiration. Eliot opines that *Pensees* are incomplete and have a structure unfinished; now it is the reader's job to complete its structure to understand Pascal's method employed herein. The reader must be an intellectual believer in the Christian Faith. Thus, among religious theories, such a conscious and conscientious reader won't reject the text but he may find Catholic Christianity in particular to account most satisfactorily for the moral world within. The opposite method is taken by Voltaire, hence he has refuted Pascal. Voltaire has presented, better than anyone since, what is the unbelieving point of view. A meticulous reader needs to decide for himself. Thus, Eliot supplements literary criticism with theological and ethical standards in religion and literature. He speaks "only in the role of a moralist" in *After Strange Gods* (Austin, 157).

Change is inevitable and necessary. "Our sensibility is constantly changing; as the world about us changes... our language goes on changing, our way of life changes" (*On Poetry and Poets*, 20). So it is quite natural that writers may be alienated from unity of culture and continuity of tradition. Nevertheless Eliot seems to believe that only living literature can save us our tradition and culture. In the changing nature of the world, it is quite absurd and unhelpful to look to great literature of the past without taking into account the religious belief in which it is embedded. Eliot suggests that poetry preserves our culture, our language, our heritage. Poetry has been assigned here a great role, a role not less important than that assigned by Arnold and I.A. Richards. The latter held that poetry has the capability to save humanity. In 1933, Eliot quoted I. A. Richards' ideas and made a comparative study of Arnold and Richards. He has evaluated their different points of view. Arnold's salvation comes from poetry as it replaces religion for him. This is an anti-religious humanistic kind of vision. But Richards' 'salvation' is different from Arnold's by virtue of "the differences of environment, of period, and of mental furniture" (*The Use of Poetry*, 131). After analyzing *Practical Criticism*, Eliot draws attention to intense religious seriousness of Mr. Richards' attitude towards poetry and enumerates five points in support of his view. First, man's loneliness is caused by the violation of the human situation in the Christian sense of the separation of man from God. Second, the facts of birth and death have remained inexplicable so far, and till date there is no other satisfactory conception of the way of coming into and leaving the world. Third, it is the inconceivable immensity of the universe. Fourth, it is man's place in the perspective of time and fifth, the enormity of man's ignorance. Eliot

refrains from sharing Richards' modern emotional attitude which he shares with Arnold. His Anglo-Catholic temperament wants to persuade modern mind to find haven in Christianity. So the function of poetry is to be moulded accordingly as mentioned in his essay "Religion and Literature" (1935). In 1945, he restricts himself to the social function of poetry, where this function is taken by and large to be to save us from deterioration in culture. Yet towards the end he says, "The trouble of modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God and man which our forefathers believed, but the inability to feel towards God and man as they did" (*On Poetry and Poets*, 25).

However Eliot finds Baudelaire a poet worth reading for the religious sensibility (*Selected Essays*, 419-430). The critic holds that there are similar cultural circumstances between the modern age and that of Baudelaire's age, or the seventeenth century conditions of the metaphysical poets. Baudelaire has enjoyed a sense of his own age and he adheres to the school of 'art for art's sake' but simultaneously Eliot contends that Baudelaire is essentially a Christian and he is neither naturalist nor humanist. His poetic world contains inevitable presence of perception of Heaven and Hell; and, thus, supernatural order is given preference which leads to the rejection of present world. He expresses his human love in definite and positive terms, but his divine love remains vague and uncertain. Hence he insists upon the evil of love and constantly berates the female. Eliot asserts that being human means doing either evil or good. Paradoxically, doing evil than to do nothing at least ensures human existence. It is true that man is capable of both either salvation or damnation. In *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) one of the knights says that action is suffering and suffering, action. Here it is better to do evil deed than to do nothing. Rest depends on the supernatural order. It is not required to try for psychopathological causes for Baudelaire's actions in poetry, and simultaneously nor to worry whether he is damned or not.

Machiavelli is another historical literary figure whose reputation Eliot wants to set right. An individual is likely to misconceive certain passages from Machiavelli when torn apart from their context. Thus, the reader's own emotional personality gets an outlet in the expression of other's writings. This is not objective or detached criticism. This is self-approvement in philosophical literature, and against the Christian virtue of self-abnegation of personality required for a detached criticism. Machiavelli has been associated with Napoleon, Nietzsche, Musolini or Lenin. Eliot, as he comes to know Machiavelli through his prose, believes that the philosopher would have only felt aversion over their deeds, Napoleon, usurper and egoist. He opposed neither religion nor the Catholic Church, but he highlights the corruption of the Church, which he observed in his contemporary world. In his comedy *Mandragora*, he pointed out the relevant instance of corrupted priesthood. Eliot quotes Machiavelli, "Religion produced good order, and good order is generally attended with good fortune and success in any undertaking. And a strict observance of Divine worship and religious duties always tends to the aggrandizement of a state. So the neglect and contempt of them maybe reckoned amongst the first causes of its ruin..." (*For Lancelot Andrew's*, 39). Thus, Machiavelli's estimation of the importance of an established Church to a state illuminates Eliot's own attitude and sentiments and his concept of a Christian state.

Machiavelli has been the victim of Protestants and critics, both French and English. The Frenchmen deformed Machiavelli's doctrine of necessity of institutionalism, because their imagination conceived Italy as the abode of diabolic crime. And the English Protestants happened to oppose his view of Original Sin. Rousseau's hostility towards Machiavelli on account of the latter's failure to see essential potential of goodness in human beings. Even moderns and liberals, though giving him his due credit, have claimed his truth as half. The other half informs Rousseau's ideas.

It would be relevant in this context to recall Eliot's favourite quotation from T. E. Hulme for defining the essence of Eliot's position as a literary critic:

In the light of these absolute values, man himself is judged to be essentially limited and imperfect. He is endowed with Original Sin. While he can occasionally accomplish acts which partake of perfection, he can never himself be perfect... A man is essentially bad; he can only accomplish anything of value by discipline -- ethical and political. Other is thus not merely negative, but creative and liberating. Institutions are necessary (*Selected Essays*, 430).

Thus, Eliot's ideological predilections as a critic are those of the Christian elite who believe in hierarchical classification of society and a stratified culture as was the case in the medieval society of Europe. Eliot's insistence on ethical norms in his appreciation and evaluation of works is indicator of a sectarian and dogmatically religious approach which leaves very little scope for openness to and absorption of values and attitude which fall outside the range of Christianity. His moral imagination of culture ordinarily acts as a forceful weapon in understanding the order and merit of literary artist in terms of faith and traditional morality, but the rigidity of approach does show itself in some context. The extension in later years of the earlier aesthetic sensibility into spiritual and ethical sensibility does not amount to a rejection of his earlier ideas, but it does signify a greater intellectual discipline and some narrowing down of sympathies.

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