

# T.S. Eliot as the only 20th Century Leading Critic for Making a Constructive Contribution to the Literature of Criticism and Creation: An Appraisal

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**Abstract-** This paper neatly examines the critical and creative art of T.S.Eliot as a great force in modern English literature who has been regarded as a classicist and a traditionalist, a great innovative and a critic, a social thinker and a philosopher – all combined into one, for he had a complete and many-sided personality standing in the long line of poet-critics beginning with Ben Johnson and including such names as Dryden, Johnson, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold.

**Index terms-** great force, modern literature, innovative critic, social thinker, personality, poet Critic, criticism, creation

## I.INTRODUCTION

T.S.Eliot, a great force in modern English literature, has been regarded as a classicist and a traditionalist, a great innovative and a critic, a social thinker and a philosopher – all combined into one, for he had a complete and many-sided personality standing in the long line of poet-critics beginning with Ben Johnson and including such names as Dryden, Johnson, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold. His period of active literary production covers over forty-five years. During this period, he wrote poems, plays, literary and social essays as well as worked as a journalist and editor. Besides, his critical pronouncements got published largely in the form of articles and essays, in numerous periodicals and journals of the day and collected in such notable books as 1.The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism (1931), 2.The Idea of a Christian Society (1939), 3.Notes Towards a Definition of Culture (1948), 4.Selected Essays (1951), 5.On Poetry and Poets (1957), and 6.To Criticize the Critic (1965), Tradition and Individual Talent, Poetry and Drama, The Function of Criticism, The English Metaphysical Poets and The Frontier of

Criticism are among his more popular essays in literary criticism.

Eliot firmly believed that criticism and creation are complementary activities and therefore a good poet can only be a good critic. In his essay on “The Perfect Critic” in *The Sacred, Wood*, he says:

*“It is fabulous to say that criticism is for the sake of creation or creation for the sake of criticism. It is also fabulous to assume that there are ages of criticism and ages of creativeness, as if by plunging ourselves into intellectual darkness he were in better hopes of finding spiritual light. The two directions of sensibility are complementary; and as sensibility is rare, unpopular and desirable, it is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person” (P 192).*

Eliot has expressed his views on the importance of tradition and poetic process in the essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. There are two different directions of literary criticism in the twentieth century – a re-assessment of the achievements of the past writers and creation of new literary ideas. Eliot also believes that the importance of revaluation of past writers is great. The value of re-assessment is great because of the fact that each generation has its own values of art and judges the writers in a different way. Eliot has been described as the most influential critic and the early twentieth century. George Watson, however, thinks that it is not easy to define clearly the reason of his influence. He says: “The question sounds eminently reasonable, but remains unanswerable”. According to Eliot, every age should revalue the literature of the past ages according to its own standards. At one place, he says:

*“From time to time, every hundred years or so,*

*it is desirable that some critic shall appear to review the past of our literature, and set the posts and the poems in a new order”.*

This is what he has himself tried to achieve in his career and that is why he has given fresh interpretations to the works of Elizabethan dramatists, the Metaphysical poets, the Caroline poets, Milton, the poets of the Eighteenth century, the Romantics, Arnold and so on. Eliot declared himself ‘a classicist in literature, an Anglo-Catholic in religion, and a royalist in politics’. He is a classicist because he believes in order in literature. Like other classicists, he is of the opinion that the writer must have faith in certain system of writing and that a work of art must conform to the past tradition. Both from the point of view of the bulk and quality of his critical writings, Eliot is one of the greatest of literary critics. His five hundred and one odd essays and published as reviews and articles from time to time, have had a far-reaching influence on the course of literary criticism in the country. Though he had in his mind very vivid pictures of the past, he never saw the past as nostalgic world into which he could escape from the present. He always saw it as a force still surviving within the present which could be brought into life and action. And he derived from Dante and placed at the centre of his picture of the contemporary world, the idea of a life not bound either by its pastness or its presentness, but the same always in being outside any particular time and related to what he called ‘final facts’ and the supernatural. To achieve this, he required not only to be a poet but also to be a penetrating analysis critic both of the past and of the present; a critic who, while guarding the integrity of the past tradition, saw modern literature as making those past values new within contemporary life. Eliot had then to be a critic. In his critical writings, too, there is a very wide difference between the early, the middle and the later periods. In his early criticism, he writes as the poet-critic and critic-poet who is concerned with defending poetry against any standards for judging it except those which desire from the study of literature. He is the young poet writing polemical essays that clarify his aims as an artist, relating these to the scrupulously examined and analysed works of the past tradition, and recommending the creative and critical activities of himself and those contemporaries, like Ezra Pound, of whose works he

approves. In his criticism of the late twenties and early thirties, when Eliot became part of the English literary scene, his essays and lectures seem less those of the poet who considers criticism an extension of his own creativity and more of the professional critic and lecturer. The critic and now become the man of letters whose values derive from analysis of the works of the tradition and of all the facts relevant to them. “At a still later stage, Eliot continues to write literary criticism of general problems of culture, education, sociology and politics” (Spender 13). One aim which run through Eliot’s criticism as well as his poetry is “that of escaping from the objective self into a world of objective values. He offered it a new range of rhetorical possibilities, confirmed it in its increasing contempt for historical processes and yet reshaped its notion of period by a handful of brilliant intuitions.” (Watson 186). This double resonance of poet and critic has given Eliot’s name its authority, its place in the roll of English literary dictators which begins with Ben Jonson, follows with Dryden, Pope and Samuel Johnson and carries through the nineteenth century with the careers of those poet-critic-theologians, Coleridge and Arnold. Rene Wellek writes:

*“T.S. Eliot is by far the most important critic of the twentieth century in the English – taste in poetry is most conspicuous : he has done more than anybody else to promote the ‘shift of sensibility’ away from the taste of the ‘Georgians’ and to reevaluate the major figures and periods in the history of English poetry. He reacted strongly against Romanticism he criticized Milton and the Miltonic tradition he exalted Dante, the Jacobean dramatists, the metaphysical poets. Dryden and the French Symbolists as ‘the tradition’ of great poetry .... his concept of ‘impersonal’ poetry, his Description of the creative process which demands a ‘unified sensibility’, his justification of ‘tradition’ his scheme of the history of English poetry as a process that led to the dissociation’ of an originality unified sensibility, his emphasis on the ‘perfection of common speech’ as the language of poetry, his discussion of the relation between ideas and poetry under the term ‘belief’ – all these are important critical matters for which Eliot found memorable formulates” (P 3).*

As a critic, Eliot stands alone among his contemporaries, because in his best works he deals with “essentials” and not with “accidentals”. He is almost the only critic of his age who has made a constructive contribution to the literature of criticism. He affirms the need of a strict critical method as opposed to the “inner light” of the impressionistic critics. He has a strong belief in the craftsman-critic, provided that such a critic has a highly devoted “sense of fact” (SE 23). If his prose is compared with his verse, it is found that few critics can say so much, so empty, in so few words. M.C. Bradbrook rightly observes: “His equipment as a critic is congruent with his equipment as a poet; each reanimates the other” (Rajan 126).

Eliot’s criticism offers both a reaction and a reassessment. His criticism marks a complete break from the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition thereby giving a new direction to literary criticism. Whatever may be the ultimate value of his criticism there can be no denying the fact that he has a great irritant to thought. “Eliot made English criticism”, says George Watson, “though not in a simple sense”. His criticism has been revolutionary; he has turned the critical tradition of the whole English speaking world upside down. Eliot’s practical criticism offers a re-assessment of earlier writers; while his theoretical criticism represents a reaction to romantic and Victorian critical credo. As a classicist in literature, a sense of tradition, a respect for order and authority is at the core of Eliot’s Classicism and in this respect, the essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* is the manifesto of his critical creed. In this way, his criticism is a corrective to the eccentricity and waywardness of the contemporary impressionistic school of criticism. Similarly, he sought to correct the excesses of what he contemptuously called ‘the abstract and intellectual’ school of criticism represented by Arnold. The critic must have a highly developed sense of fact and he must judge on the basis of these facts with perfect detachment and impartiality. He thus sought to raise criticism to the level of science; in his objectivity and scientific attitude, Eliot is the English critic who almost closely resembles Aristotle. In this stress on facts, on ‘comparison and analysis’, Eliot has exercised a profound influence on the New critics by starting many new trends in English criticism. It is not possible to confine Eliot’s critical writings to purely

literary and aesthetic issues. According to Eliot, in our day, literature depends for its existence, even its subsistence upon things” (The Criterion 751).

The most important contribution of Eliot’s criticism to modern thought consists “not in introducing ‘traditionalism’, nor in exploding Romanticism and bringing about a classical revival of letters, but in the philosophy of life implicit in it. The vigour of his literary mind is the vigour of his philosophical mind” (George 241). Many of the celebrated conceptual notions advanced by Eliot such as the notions of “objective correlative” “dissociation of sensibility”, “separation of intellect from emotion”, “impersonality in art” “tradition”, “orthodoxy” and “original sin” are all formulated from the critical standpoint. The phrase ‘objective correlative’ occurs in Eliot’s essay on “Hamlet and His Problems” in *The Sacred Wood*. The phrase has been used by Eliot to explain how emotion can be best expressed in poetry and it is a part of his theory of impersonality of poetry, concentrating not on the poet but on the poetry. The theory of impersonal art implies that greater emphasis should be laid upon the work of art itself as a structure. Though Eliot’s poems are an expression of mental and emotional status, he firmly believes that in great poetry, thoughts and feelings are presented “by a statement of events in human action, of objects in the external world” (198). The concept of ‘objective correlative’ is fully applicable to the poems of Eliot himself. He does not express the emotions directly; he evokes emotions by means of appropriate images and objects. The images in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and fine specimens of his doctrine of the ‘objective correlative’ – the poet himself stands at an ‘impersonal’ distance and lets the images and objects reflect the emotions of the hero. Eliot’s theory of the objective correlative and the impersonality of art from the most significant aspects of his classicism.

The phrase ‘dissociation of sensibility’ occurs in Eliot’s essay on *The Metaphysical Poets*. He uses this phrase to describe the characteristic fault of the later seventeenth century poetry. The opposite of this phrase which Eliot has used is ‘unification of sensibility’. According to T.S. Eliot, ‘unification of sensibility’ produces good poetry and the cause of bad poetry is ‘dissociation of sensibility’. By the phrase, unification of sensibility Eliot means “direct sensuous apprehension of thought, a recreation of

thought into feeling". It has to be borne in mind that in the criticism of Eliot, the relation of intellect and emotion in art and poetry is a fundamental value. The excellence of the artistic performance of the poet depends on the intensity of his sensibility. A poem is 'the emotional equivalent of thought'. Thus, the fusion of thought and emotion is essential to poet creation. Edgar Stanley Hyman, writing on the literary criticism of Eliot, begins by annotating his (Eliot's) essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" which is the key to all his later work" (P 79) and by following such a method, he arrives at the conclusion thus:

*"The personality which emerges finally is that of a sick, defeated and suffering man; the descriptive and impersonality of the poetry, the "tradition" of the criticism, chiefly props sustain him" (P 105).*

Eliot's special achievement was to have brought some order into the modern intellectual and ideological chaos. By this, he has enabled himself as well as his contemporaries to understand the present day human situation fully. Eliot has made his impact felt in religious thought, in social thought and in art. Eliot's attempt was to reinstate the dignity, and glory and freedom of man. Eliot was thus defending the "category of the individual" in thought. Eliot believes in the statement that "society is for the individual and the individual must be sacrificed for the society" (Matthiessen 148). Thus, human dignity springs from the fact that man is a compact of the finite and the infinite, of good and evil, of freedom and necessity, the natural and the supernatural, the contingent and the eternal, of matter and spirit. To ignore any one of the opposing elements is to misrepresent man. The recognition and the dissemination of this idea of man is one of Eliot's major achievements as a critic.

Tradition and orthodoxy are advanced by Eliot as concepts seriously to be considered by the modern mind as alternatives to the implications of liberalism. Tradition does not mean 'standing still'. The etymology of the word itself indicates the dynamic characteristic of the concept. Tradition implies more than anything else, value-judgments and value-judgments are based not only on the human intellect but on the complete personality of man:

*"What is really a tradition therefore is not the institution but the belief in its value .... A certain way of acting is regarded as*

*right; a certain order or arrangement is held desirable. The maintenance of the tradition is the assertion of this judgement"(Radin63) Tradition is thus inextricably related to orthodoxy, the belief in and the knowledge of what is right: "Tradition may be conceived as a by-product of right living, not to be aimed at directly. It is of the blood, so to speak, rather than of the brain; it is the means by which the vitality of the past enriches the present. In the co-operation of both is the reconciliation of thought and feeling" (After Strange Gods 30)*

In his essays on the subject tradition, Eliot is critical of a sentimental attitude towards the past. The sense of tradition is a life-line that keeps the poet in touch with order and reality which he is submerged in the dark waters of the creative imagination.

To conclude, Eliot's criticism is a corrective to the excesses of the biographical and sociological school of criticism. He thus changed the entire course of critical theory and practice. In a word, it may be said that Eliot's criticism, by marking a complete break from the 19<sup>th</sup> century tradition, is said to have given a new direction to literary criticism.

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