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A Brief Study of T.S Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent*

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Abstract – As a young man, Eliot in his early criticism tends to miss the mark of deconstruction, but since he is aware of the dialectic of the past and present, he soon gets back to the path of equivocation. For instance, in the essay ' Tradition and the Individual Talent', he gives the impression as if tradition is prior, more significant than the individual. In fact he says: Tradition is a matter of wider significance. It cannot be inherited and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour." 6Similarly, he says : No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, Ms appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone, you must set him, for comparison and contrast among the dead." 7 But soon, afterwards, he also says : "The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it."8

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INTRODUCTION

Most readers of Eliot are misled by Eliot's appraisal of the tradition to posit that Eliot is a conservative. What adds to the credence is the obvious and not what undercuts it. Eliot, thus, has been read out of context. He is conservatism, but he is also a revolutionary, as for example, when he says: The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really now) work of art among them. The existing order before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole *art*readjusted; and this are conformity between the old and the new." [9]

Because it is a revolutionary statement unexpected of the one who seems to cherish tradition and call it ' ideal' monument, Eliot had to say : *"Whoever* has approved this idea *of order, of the form of* European, *of* English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past." [10] And he further says, "And the poet who is aware of this order will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities." [11]

Of course, a poet who understands the past and present different, and yet the same, has to be aware of difficulties and responsibilities. Eliot's poetry and criticism are difficult to understand, because as a responsible poet, he could not be otherwise. The poet's response to the existing monuments has to be dialectical, not merely Hegelian, but also Heraclitean. One simply cannot write of his own age or of the ages gone by, but see between the two a Simultaneous order. Eliot is obviously not in favour of blind adherence t the tradition. Such an attitude, he says, should be positively discouraged. Responsible poet in responding to the tradition cannot ignore the individual talent. The same unity subsists between feeling and thought. For Eliot there is no stage of consciousness where one is present and the other is absent. In fact, in the one lies the other and vice-versa. The two-the past and the present, as feeling and thought, are measured by each other. Thai] is what Shakespeare calls ' measure for measure'. When the past judges the present, it is not a judgment given by the canons of dead critics. It is judgment, rather a comparison in which Eliot says, "Two things are measured by each other." [12] So, to conform merely is not to conform at all; it would not be new and therefore would not be a work of art.

Eliot's strategy even in his early criticism is not a strategy of the single motion of balancing, equilibration or overturning. Quite the contrary, "To counter this simple alternative," as Derrida puts it, "to counter the simple choices of one of the terms or one of the series against the other, we maintain that it is necessary to seek new concepts and new models, an *economy,* escaping this system of metaphysical oppositions."[13] This economy he adds, would not be energetic of pure, shapeless force. The different examined simultaneously would be differences of site and differences of force.

By differences of site and differences of force, Derrida mea: that the differences are and are not. The ' now' here is, as for example Eliot, when he

says about the conformity of the past and present. "It appears to conform, and yet perhaps is individual or it appears individual and may conform; but we are hardly likely to find that it is one and not the other."[14]

A complete deconstructive reading then, as Eliot envisages it, is the one which transforms the metaphysical oppositions into simultaneous network of reciprocal relationships. It is then that surprises emerge; It is surprising to find a text transforming metaphysical oppositions into a simultaneous network of reciprocal relationships. But it is strange that Eliot, except in a few cases, studied writers rather than texts, despite his formulation that honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is to be directed not upon the poet but upon his poetry and that in his own experience of poetry he has always found that the less he knew about the poet and his work, before he began to read it, the better. Except for Hamlet, there is no detailed analysis of any text by any poet, and here too, he, in reading the books, tends to read into the mind, the recesses, the crevices of the dramatist. This strikes as a major gap in Eliot's theory and practice. Had Eliot followed his own theoretical view of poetry to be read as poetry and not anything else, he would have given deconstruction its full-fledged formulation. Derrida in this respect scores the point. His deconstructive critique is entirely textual, though these texts happen mainly to be philosophical. In essence, Deconstruction succeeds only in a textual analysis, in searching reciprocal relationships. Eliot's failure in this respect is evident in his own misplaced appreciation of his essays, rather than his general theoretical statements. The latter are quite often exaggerated, though Eliot knows where he went wrong, and yet in the case of poets, he fumbles -- he, as Northrop Frye had to say, a broker in the literary market — downgrades a poet today, as, for example, Milton and then goes again to rescue him.

The only text which Eliot, as we have seen, took up is of Hamlet he discussed this play at some length, because he perhaps did not know enough about Shakespeare's life. But his main interest in the biography of the poet continued to sway his criticism from deconstruction back to structuralism, for his bias for those poets who influenced him continues to inform his hierarchical view of poetry. He, for example, appreciates poets of the alien language — Dante, Virgil, Goethe over Shakespeare or Wordsworth or Keats. About Dante, Eliot grows lyrical, regards Virgil as the greatest classic and raises Goethe to the height of a sage.

Eliot's appreciation of Dante's poetry emanates from its ease. What is surprising, he says, about the poetry of Dante is that it is, in one sense, extremely easy to read. The reason may appear jarring to anyone who has heard Eliot say that poetry, particularly modern poetry, ought to be difficult. Great poetry is indeed, both difficult and easy — difficult because its statements are not unqualified statements.

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