

Eliot as a Critic

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Abstract – Eliot, like Derrida, strikes at the root of dogmatism. As a result, their criticism is characterized the way they make reservations, qualify positive assertions and introduce parentheses. Eliot, at times, becomes critical of his own pronouncements by offering recantations. In the essay, 'To Criticise the Critic', he turns against his youthful utterances. There are, he says, statements with which he no longer agrees; there are views which he maintains with less firmness of conviction than when he first expressed them, or which he maintains with imperfect reservations. Deconstruction infreeing the critic from dogmatism makes the critic humble. Derrida too, is humble to the degree possible.

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Deconstruction is, therefore, wrongly said to be haughty and intolerant, destructive and violent. This could it be indifferent and callous, born as it is, out of self-discipline, self-criticism and self-analysis ? All that it does is that it does not take sides, for it sees things in their many-sidedness. It believes that with the passage of time one grows wiser and also self-critical of his earlier responses. Eliot in 'To Criticise the Critic', further says that his early essays find more favour with the critics and students, just because they are seasoned by the tone of arrogance, of vehemence, of cocksureness, or rudeness and which he regrets now as there are errors of judgment along with the errors of tone.

Should we say then that there are two Eliots— Eliot, the critic of the early, and Eliot, the critic of the later phase. But for all his braggadocio, Eliot must acknowledge his relationship to the man, who made those statements and in spite of all the exceptions, he continues to identify himself with the author.

This is like saying as Heraclitus said that though the river changes, yet the river is the same. The author, thus, is and is not. It has generally been held that Eliot argues for the impersonality of the poet and Eliot's own statements seem to support this view but the way he deconstructs the author himself, it leaves room enough to doubt the popular view that the poet is absent from his poem. The poet is absent and present, present and absent simultaneously. That is why Eliot approaches his own essays of the early period with apprehension rather than with hopeful expectation. He finds himself constantly irritated by having his words, perhaps written thirty or forty years ago, quoted as if "I had uttered them yesterday." Deconstruction is a philosophy of change, of the unpredictable and the unpredictable, of the new and the surprising. It does not work on the assumption that a poet's writing is of a piece, innately given, the

end of which is sketched out right in the beginning. Eliot takes care and it has become a habit with him to indicate the original date of publication of his essays and poems: Prufrock, 1917; Choruses from the Rock, 1934; Tradition and Individual Talent, 1919; Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca, 1927 and so on. These are only a few examples and they underline the deconstructive mode, reminding the reader of the time that separates the author when he wrote it from the author as he is today. But he is unhappy with his readers who rarely resort to the mode of deconstruction; they never say quoting him, "this is what Mr. Eliot thought (or felt) in 1933- (or whatever the date was)." Every writer is therefore, accustomed to seeing his words quoted out of context in such a way as to put an unintended construction upon them.

Why Eliot objects to this mode of reading is that it does not take into account the state of mind and maturity of the writer, the situation--political, social, economic available at the time of reading, the poet's own strategy of delay and, last but not the least, his failure to say what he wanted to say. The text falls short of or falls outside, as Derrida says in an interview, "from what I say or write; or rather, it is connected, relayed by so many spaces, languages, apparatuses, histories, and so forth, by so many bands, that I am able to say at one and the same time : I am, to be sure, mobilized by the immediate stakes of these texts ' produced' in my name, but I also live this relation with a disinterestedness that is more and more distracted, in an accelerated forgetfulness that is more and more profound and with the certainty that is the essential thing, as it is called, is going on elsewhere."¹

Deconstruction as Eliot thinks and Derrida elaborates is always a qualified statement. Hence, both do not allow a statement to go without its counterpart. In 'To criticize the critic', Eliot gives an example of how one of his statements has continued to dog him long after it has ceased in his view, to be a satisfactory statement of his beliefs. It is a sentence from the Preface to a small collection of essays entitled 'For Lancelot Andrews', to the effect that he was a Classicist in literature, a Royalist in politics and an Anglo-Catholic in religion. Eliot feels that he ought to have foreseen that so quotable a sentence would follow him through life as Shelley tells us how his thoughts followed him like a bird of prey.

Eliot attributes the dogmatic statement to his youthful years. Of the two causes for making such a bland statement, one, of course, is the dogmatism of youth. When we are young, we see issues sharply defined, adds Eliot. But as we age, we tend to make reservations. We see objections to our own views; we regard the enemy with greater tolerance and even sometimes with sympathy. When we are young, Eliot elaborates the point, we are confident in our opinions, sure that we possess the whole truth; we are enthusiastic or indignant. What are worse, even mature readers are attracted to a writer who is quite sure of himself. If nothing else, one-sidedness provokes controversy.

The second reason for the enduring popularity of some of Eliot's early criticism is that the poet in these essays collected in *Selected Essays*³ was implicitly defending the sort of poetry that "I and my friends wrote." This, according to Eliot, gave his essays a kind of urgency, the warmth of appeal of the advocate, which his later, more detached and he hoped, more judicial essays cannot claim.

Eliot's early criticism is conditioned by the state of literature at the time at which it was written as well as by state of maturity at which the poet had arrived by the influences he had been exposed to and by the occasion of each essay. It is, however, difficult to reconstruct all the conditions under which he wrote, for example, his most celebrated essay of the early period "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). This essay, Eliot wrote between 'Prufrock and other Observations, 1917) and 'Poems' (1920). The essay appeared in *The Egoist* and still to immense popularity among editors and professors who prepare anthology text-books. Eliot traces two influences on the essay — one of Ezra Pound and secondly of Irvin Babbitt. It is in this essay that Eliot's recurrent theme of Classicism vs. Romanticism becomes apparent. Again, it is in this essay that he propounded his idea of tradition and of the impersonality of poetry. Together, these two themes shaped the entire corpus of Eliot's early criticism.

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