

A Study of Yeats' Critical Views in His Plays

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Abstract – *Eliot's poetry is dramatic and his drama poetic. His appreciation of the Elizabethan dramatists including Shakespeare is because they are as good dramatists as they are poets. Eliot in the essay 'A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry' compares a poetic drama to a ballet, to a Christian Mass. Both are the forms of dance, an act in which the dancer cannot be separated from dance. In another essay 'Poetry & Drama', Eliot wonders how constantly he has returned to drama, whether by examining the work of the contemporaries of Shakespeare, or by reflecting on the possibilities of the future. As a result, Eliot's thinking on the subject has been constantly modified and renewed by increasing experience. It was perhaps his life-time mission to restore drama to the place it deserved in literature. Eliot's main concern has been to examine whether and if so, why poetic drama has anything potentially to offer the playgoer, that prose drama cannot. He did not view the problem of poetic drama as a kind of conjoining the two genres.*

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INTRODUCTION

If poetry is nearly a decoration added to drama, it is for Eliot, superfluous. It must justify itself dramatically and not merely be fine poetry shaped into a dramatic form. From this it follows that no play he contends, should be written in verse for which prose is dramatically adequate.

The question now is, if the Elizabethan dramatists, Shakespeare in the main, so superbly succeeded, why did Eliot's own plays excepting *Murder in the Cathedral* fail to make a mark? This is the question that all Eliot's readers and critics have raised. Helen Gardner, for instance, puts this question thus: The question that is debatable is whether he has succeeded in writing a great play. She finds faults not so much with the mechanics of play-writing—clumsiness in exposition, insufficient motivation and so on, as with the fundamentals of dramaturgy. Gardner feels that the plays of Eliot do not achieve dramatic expressiveness. She wonders whether the dramatic subject has been conceived dramatically, and indeed whether it is susceptible to dramatic treatment at all. [1] Take for example, the theme of sin and expiation in *The Family Reunion*. Has Eliot been able to give it an objective correlative for which he blames Shakespeare? Could he defer himself in his subject from the action of the play? Could Beckett see the problem with the eyes of the King in *Murder in the Cathedral*? There is, to wit, no dramatic curve, no *peripety* and therefore no discovery of the self in the case of Beckett. After living in exile for seven years he comes to Canterbury to die without learning that the two positions—his and King's are not incompatible. He reaches of course superficially a still point, without however deferring his self. All through his poetry Eliot maintained the relativity of human knowledge, but

suddenly and while writing almost simultaneously his *Four Quartets* and *Murder in the Cathedral*, he relapsed into a stage of differentiation without integration. As a result his protagonist becomes incoherent in claiming superiority of priesthood over its counterpart in the secular world.

Eliot's own evolutionary impulse seemed to have failed him. In the evolution of society and its institutions, the first stage is marked by differentiation of functions. Presently, the chief evolves himself at first, both King and priest, though at a later stage church becomes differentiated from the throne. The entire history of the division of labour is an illustration of increased heterogeneity. Beckett was initially asked to unite the offices in him—that of Chancellor and Archbishop. Had he concurred with the King's wishes, we should, says the second knight, have had an almost ideal state: a union of spiritual and temporal administration under the central government. But the moment the King made Beckett the Archbishop, the latter resigned the office of the Chancellor. This decision on the part of Beckett was not a freak decision. He decided in favour of the spiritual authority because in the given circumstances in the Middle Ages, the Church wielded greater influence and even controlled the temporal authority. And indeed, the Second Knight puts it in so many words, saying that Beckett ostentatiously and offensively adopted an ascetic manner of life. Beckett affirm immediately that there was a higher order than which the King, and he as the King's servant had for so many years striven to establish. But even the Knight wonders why the two orders were incompatible.

Eliot through this statement, coming as Knight, finds this hierarchy suspect. The spiritual ruler is not

superior, nortemporal inferior or vice versa. That is the reason why in *Cathedral* the sacrifice of Beckett is not sentimentalized. If at all, thereader identifies himself with Beckett, as it is likely. Eliot's Second Knight blames it on the audience. The Second Knight knows that Englishmen, being what they are, will have sympathies with the underdog. It is the English spirit, he says ironically, of fair play. The Archbishop, he says, has throughout been presented as the underdog. He questions this assumption but is this really the case? The Knight, therefore, appeals not to the emotions of the people of Canterbury but their reason. They are, he urges, hard-headed sensible people and may not be taken in by emotional claptrap. He therefore, asks them to consider soberly: What were the Archbishop's aims? And what are King Henry's aims? In the answer to these questions lies the key to the problem.

The four Knights invert the hierarchy created by Beckett before and after the murder. They put the whole blame on Beckett. Even when the pact of peace was made and all disputes ended, Beckett, as the Knight pleaded and history witnessed, suspended those who had crowned the young prince, denying the legality of his coronation. This was the main conflict between the King and the Archbishop. Beckett, however, denies the charges, saying that it was Pope who condemned the priest responsible for the coronation and that no Pope could absolve them. However, he does not deny that it was done through him and yet it was not within his power to absolve them.

It goes to Eliot's credit that he keeps the two sides on an even keel, a balance of opposites, a tension, and a struggle in which nobody loses even as neither party wins. Here too, like Eliot's poetry, his deconstructive themes permeate as they do in his later plays. In *Murder in the Cathedral* as in *The Family Reunion*, Eliot works towards and against the possibility of transcendence.

Beckett's problem is that he, for all his spiritual merits is messed up with the balance of power. He still holds Church to be absolute, the Law as he says, of Christ's Church, the Judgement of Rome. In essence, he poses to be a Christ-like figure:

But if you kill me, I shall rise from my tomb

To submit my cause before God's throne.

Beckett thus invokes the transcendental. But he also contradicts himself that "good and evil in the end become confounded." Nevertheless, he rejects the world at every stage and yet aspires to be part of it. He rebukes the priests who want him to stay inside the church and avoid the consequences of confrontation. He tells the priests that they argue by results as this world does. The world judges good or bad act by deferring to the fact but as in time results of many deeds are blended, so good and evil in the end

become indistinguishable. If good and evil are one, as per his own confession, what makes Beckett claim that his position is superior to that of the King? His claim is that though he lived in time, his death will take place out of time:

"It is in time that my death shall be known

It is out of time that my decision is taken

If you call that decision.

To which my whole being gives entire consent

I give my life

To the Law of God above the Law of Man

Eliot looks back to the opening of 'Burnt Norton' recalling that to live in the present— not in memory of the past and desire for the future, as the persona in the opening of *The Waste Land*— is to live in eternity. Beckett's destructive discourse in this way is trapped in a kind of circle, as Derrida would say. The circle, however, is unique. It describes the form of the relation between history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics. "There is no sense in doing without the concept of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language— no syntax and no lexicon— which is foreign to this history,"[2] says Derrida. "We," he adds, "can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. To take one example from many, the metaphysics of presence is shaken with the help of the concept of *sign*."[4] (Derrida's italics)

Beckett thinks contradictorily without contradiction. He claims to be a Christ-like figure enacting crucifixion. But his enactment is only a sign, a deferred presence. But if there is no transcendental or privileged signified and the play of signification henceforth has no limit, he must reject even the sign—which is, as Derrida would say, precisely what cannot be done. Beckett too cannot do without the concept of sign, for he knows, as we do, that even Christ is a sign of the Presence. There is thus endless deferring and differing. If Christ is intelligible, Beckett is its opposite the sensible. "The concept of sign, in each of its aspects, has been determined by the opposition throughout the totality of history. It has lived only on this opposition and its system."[4] As Derrida further says, "But we cannot do without the concept of sign because we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity without the risk of erasing difference in the self identity of a signified reducing its signifier into itself or amounting to the same thing, simply expelling its signifier outside itself."[5]

What Derrida means to say is that the two—the signifier and the signified— should not merge. He rather puts into question the system in which the difference is sought to be erased. Beckett tends to erase the difference but his own language betrays that the difference is erased and traced simultaneously. Eliot apparently does it in order to show (perhaps it cannot be put into words) that deferred from the presence the sign has no signification and it should become sign among signs in the world, existing without pre—eminence. Beckett fails to come to this level. He tries to erase the difference, as he seeks to transcend to the Law of God, above the Law of Man and the Law of God ordains:

We have only to conquer

Now by suffering. This is the easier victory

Now is the triumph of the Cross, now

Open the door !

The words 'easier', 'triumph' further point to Beckett's hierarchical thinking. For him eternity too is not living in the present, for dying crucifying himself on the Cross. The paradox in his case is that the metaphysical reduction of the sign of the Cross needs the opposition it was reducing. The opposition is systematic with the reduction. He is no Christ, nor is he dying for any cause other than his assertion of pre-eminence. This is equally true of all concepts which Beckett invokes—all concepts of metaphysics. There is not one way of being caught in this circle. They are all, as for example, Beckett's hierarchy of Archbishop/King, more or less naive, more or less empirical, formalizations of this circle. It is these differences, according to Derrida, which explain the multiplicity of destructive discourses and disagreement between those who elaborate them—among Nietzsche, Heidegger and Freud, for example.

Murder in the Cathedral too inheres multiplicity of destructive discourses. If Becket is caught in the metaphysics of transcendent and its destruction, so is the King and his Knights and their counterparts—tempters. The first war of opposites begins when the first priest wants the Knights to have dinner before they take up business at hand. The first Knight controverts: "Business before dinner." Meanwhile, Becket arrives at the scene and sounds a characteristically deconstructive note:

However certain our expectation

The moment foreseen may be unexpected

When it arrives. It comes when we are

Engrossed with matters of other urgency.

The necessity that our expectations come true is only logical. Only when situated in logocentrism can we expect things to happen according to our calculation. Derrida thinks that *differance*, postponement of our calculation is "an expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy, that is, as the death instinct, and as the entirely other relationship that apparently interrupts every economy." [6] Derrida thereby shows the illogicality of *differance*. It is illogical to expect things to happen in the way we visualize in future. Becket is sensitive to the loss of presence. Suffering comes, as Auden says, when we are just opening the window or walk dully along.; It is the essence of deconstruction to make us sensitive to the eternal loss of the "I", the presence, which wishes, desires, expects and even when it postpones desire, it does so only to realize its fulfillment later. Mankind in this regard is incorrigible. That is why Derrida shows our metaphysical complicity while at the same time deconstructing it, by pointing to inherent contradictions in it.

Derrida is thus tolerant to human weaknesses. He finds that it is better to be silly than cunning and calculative, flowing than fixed, foolish than wise. We should delay rather than hasten to decide. In fact, we should be what we are and stay where we are. That is what *difference* comes to mean. Becket knows and does not know it. If Becket suffers from learned ignorance, how do we expect the Knight, who comes in haste and anger to defer presence, postpone metaphysical complicity. The first Knight challenges Becket, saying that the Archbishop was made by the King, that he was set to carry out the King's command and therefore the Archbishop was only a sign, the signal of the King. Thus, the First Knight erases the difference between the King and the Archbishop. He adds:

You are his servant, his tool, his jack,

You wore his favours on your back,

You had honours all from his hand; from him you

had the power, seal and the ring

The Knight is, however, oblivious of the fact that when a sign—and in the case of Becket, the seal and ring—is given, it takes the place of the King. "The sign, as Derrida says, "is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, "thing" here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present." [7] The sign, according to him, cannot grasp the thing or show the thing. When the present cannot be represented, we signify. The sign, therefore, is deferred presence. In the case of the seal and the ring, the signs are political representations. Signification of the King's authority for the Knight's is the *differance of temporization*, ie, they do not admit time falling

between the moment of delegation of authority and its execution. They still hold that the King's authority can be reappropriated. It is pertinent to quote Derrida at this point:

Whether we are concerned with the verbal or written signs, with the monetary sign, or with electoral delegation in which we encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence. What I am describing here in order to define it is the classically determined structure of the sign in all its banality of its characteristics — signification as the *differance* of temporization.[8]

He further says:

And this structure presupposes that the sign, which defers presence, is conceivable only on the basis of the presence that it defers and moving toward the deferred presence that it aims to reappropriate.[9]

Derrida further comments that this makes the sign mediate between the thing and its signification. This is exactly what the knights on behalf of the king do, asking Becket to resign. First of all, Becket would not oblige them, and secondly, is it possible to reappropriate the delegated authority? Can the moment of delegating authority be recaptured? Becket replies to the charge of betrayal thus:

Both before and after I received the ring

I have been loyal subject to the King. Saving my order,

I am at his command

As his most faithful vassal in the land.

His reply "saving my order" is significant, and indeed, the First Knight exclaims: "Saving my order!" and retorts: "Let your, order save you." The Knight calls "saving my order" saving Becket's pride, his ambition, his insolence and greed.

These acrimonies apart, the fact remains that authority once delegated, defers the —presence, and in fact, breeds a new seat, a new site of authority, as Becket did, not by living, but by offering to die. According to him, his death will not be an ordinary death, but martyrdom, and a martyrdom is "always a design of God", it is never the design of man. So in Heaven, the Saints are most high, having made themselves most low, and are seen, not as we see them, but in the light of Godhood from which they draw their being. This is the gist of his sermon, his canonization, his transcendence. Becket does not, nor do the Knights, understand that "*differance* is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology - philosophy produce; its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return." [10]

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