

A Study of Yeats' Poetry

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Abstract – As we move from Eliot's early to later poetry, we trace a change from the poetry of the persona to the poetry of the poet. From "Ash-Wednesday" onwards, the poet comes in his propioripersona to state what he so far has said in the persons of others. Eliot has already in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" said, "only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things."¹ To make personal emotions impersonal, one needs to have what we like but of what we ought to like, Eliot comes to posit in "Religion and Literature". The two kinds of "having" is attained when we need to be acutely aware of what we like and what we ought to like at once, 'they are not only different but also the same. The first means knowing what we really feel ; the second involves understanding our shortcomings. The two forms of self-consciousness, Eliot adds, knowing what we are and what we ought to be, must go together.

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INTRODUCTION

The simultaneous presence of these two kinds of consciousness is, according to Eliot, the condition of religious poetry. Another mark of Eliot's later poetry, beginning with "Ash-Wednesday" is religious consciousness. As he puts it in "Religion and Literature" : "It is our business , as readers of literature, to know what we like. It is our business, as Christians, as well as readers of literature to know what we ought to like. It is our business as honest men not to assume that whatever we like is what we ought to like; and it is our business as honest Christians not to assume that we do like what we ought to like."²

The last thing Eliot would wish for would be the existence of two literatures, one for the Christian compunction and the other for the pagan world. There cannot be a sacred literature apart from the secular and vice-versa. Eliot cannot think of a morality apart from the sense of the supernatural. His complaint against modern literature is of the same kind. It is not that modern literature is 'immoral' or even 'amoral'; it is simply that it repudiates, or is wholly ignorant of our most fundamental and important beliefs; and that in consequence its tendency is to encourage its reader to get what they can out of life while it lasts, to miss no experience that presents itself and to sacrifice themselves, if they can make any sacrifice at all, only for the sake of tangible benefits to themselves and others in this world either now or in the future.

Thus Eliot repudiates any hierarchy either of the priority of religious or secular literature. For him, the two are relative and therefore need to supplement each other. It is, therefore, doubtful to say that Eliot's later poetry is religious because he in 1927 converted to Anglo-Catholicism marking a shift as some say,

toward philosophical and religious absolutism, away from relativism. The fact, on the other hand, is that Eliot did not give up his deconstructive view of relativism at any stage of his life. The question as to why he changed his religion at all is not very difficult to answer. If religion is a sign, as it is one, then a sign of Protestantism has its opposite in Catholicism. The two forms of religion of Christianity must go together, for they are the same in their relative divergences. Eliot views the problem not only intra-religiously but also inter-religiously or else he would not have invoked the Upanishadic wisdom at the end of *The Waste Land*, as in the middle of *Four Quartets*.

Change, we know, is part of any deconstructive strategy, and when one must change, one changes to an opposite position. That is how after living his early life on the inherited religion, Eliot came in 1927 to adopt Catholicism as his acquired religion. Eliot is, in this and other contexts, an evolutionist. Religion, like tradition, he would say, is not merely inherited but also acquired and acquired with labour. Even otherwise, to know Christianity as a whole, he had to know its Catholic form. Deconstruction does not suffer dogma; it is open ended and flexible. Its ethics is the ethics of synthesis, of reconciliation of opposites.

It is, therefore, wrong to believe that Eliot's position in his later poetry is in any way at odds with his early poetry. If we hold these two kinds as different, they are also the same in the evolutionary sense of the word. According to Eliot, there are two forms of impersonality in relation to two kinds of poetry : "that which is natural to a more skilful craftsman

and that which is more and more achieved by the maturing artist."³

The first, accordingly, is that which Eliot calls the 'anthology piece'. "The second impersonality is that of the poet, who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express a general truth; retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make a general symbol."⁴ This is what characterizes Yeats' poetry; having been a great craftsman in the first kind he became a great poet in the second. It is not that he became a different man as Eliot has hinted. One feels sure that the intense experience of youth had been lived through— and indeed, without this early experience, he could never have attained anything of the wisdom which appears in his later poetry.

Eliot's own development has not been much dissimilar. His early poetry can be said to have a different kind of impersonality, the impersonality of a craftsman, ie, the one whose individual poems for all their intra-textuality can be read separately. But his later poetry, the poetry of wisdom, particularly, Four *Quartets* can be read as a whole only. Using deconstructive insight to analyse Yeats' poetry, Eliot says, "Most men either cling to the experience of youth, so that the writing becomes insincere mimicry of the earlier work, or they leave the passion behind and write only from the head, with a hollow and wasted virtuosity."⁵ There is another, and even worse temptation:, "that of becoming dignified public figure with only a public existence."⁶ In the case of Eliot, the journey from his early to later poetry, each single phase, and for that matter, each single poem is a link in a chain of causality, a transitory phase of evolution. That is why we cannot say at one single point of his development that he has definitely progressed. At the most, one can say that each poem is new and yet old, old and yet new.

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