CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

Eliot's poetry has, by now, received more than three quarters of a century of critical attention. So much has indeed been written on it that we seem to have reached a point of saturation and may, therefore, be a little sceptical of, if not averse to, anyone attempting 'to set budding more,/And still more, later flowers for the bees...' And yet, as more and more insights become available into the circumstances that shaped the poet's early sensibility and provided the stimulus for his poetry, the process of critical exploration continues unabated.

The present study is restricted to Eliot's early poetry, viz. Prufrock 1917 and Poems 1920, an area of the poet's work which, in our opinion, has remained rather opaque, 'The hint half guessed, the gift half understood'. It needs further elucidation in the larger context of the poet's life and work, with a view to discern those basic and crucial philosophical concerns which were to occupy him permanently, as also to establish the nature of such concerns as primarily religious, i.e. moral and spiritual.

The need for a re-evaluation of Eliot's early work cannot be overemphasized. Despite the several interpretations
to which his early poetry has been subjected, there are still large tracts of it where the poet has remained 'incomprehensible'. That critics have greatly misconstrued the poetry is evident from the fact that it has been considered as 'essentially occasional verse' without any consistent design. It is alleged to have 'no identifiable single voice behind it'. The longer poems like Prufrock have been looked upon as 'heterogeneous fragments held together under enormous pressure...bearing down upon a number of displays, retreats and evasions'. It appears that the description of Prufrock by as early a critic as Conrad Aiken as the work of a 'bafflingly peculiar man' has mostly been ratified by subsequent criticism, and is a typical instance of widespread and grave critical misapprehension.

To form some idea of the incomprehension, one can begin with Eliot's Dedication of Prufrock 1917 to Jean Verdenal. In limiting the meaning of the lines from Dante to no more than as signifying the strength of the poet's love for his friend, their spiritual ramifications have altogether been lost sight of.

In dealing with Prufrock, there is the gross misapplication to Eliot's poetry of the philosophy of subject-object correspondence propounded by F.H. Bradley. Critics have tended literally to equate Prufrock with the objects of his perception so that the 'streets, the yellow
fog, the drains, the coffee-spoons are Prufrock..." This approach is untenable since Bradley had warned against solipsistic interpretations of immediate experience: 'It would not follow...that all the world is merely a state of myself.' There has, thus, been a widespread failure to consider Prufrock as an odd man out endowed with a religious sensibility.

Nor have the poems Prufrock, Portrait, Preludes and Rhapsody been perceived as affording a rising graph of a spiritual consciousness. The quintessentially symbiotic protagonist has not been seen proceeding from the initial consciousness of his own pain towards that of others, seeking, finally, their release from it.

Of the Boston Poems of 1915, Hysteria has either been left out of account or at most dismissed as a piece of no consequence. Our analysis, however, shows that the poem is demonstrative of Eliot's perception of woman as the 'eternal enemy of the absolute'. Similarly, Conversation Galante is not simply an insignificant poem of 'seriocomic banter' with 'playful poetic speculations on the moon'. It, in fact, is seriously concerned to depict the world's indifference to the poetics of 'the absolute'.

The focus of Mr. Apollinax, a poem of great spiritual insight, is blurred. No doubt, its epigraph is seen to imply
that "any novelty, however ridiculous, will draw a crowd', and the poem remains "humorous rather than perturbing".9

Coming to the 1920 collection, the Sweeney poems have often baffled critics who wonder why the poet directed so much of his satirical energy in laying bare the abominations of a creature as 'patently tarnished and futile' as Sweeney10, little realizing that in portraying such a character, the poet was, in fact, only 'struggling with his own demons'11. No wonder, in plot, setting, and characters, Sweeney Among the Nightingales has appeared to be 'opacity itself'12. What needs to be perceived is the 'strange double nature of the artist--both 'the drifter to whom things happen', and 'the sharp-eyed' divine 'coldly looking on'13 -- the latter representing, what may be called 'the true voice of Thomas Stearns Eliot'.

The quatrain poems, in certain sections, have been found to be 'almost impenetrably obscure',14. A Cooking Egg, for instance, has provoked 'reams of critical controversy about its meaning'15. In The Hippopotamus, the eponymous character has been confused with the True Church instead of the Unitarian clergy whom, in fact, it represents. The title Whispers of Immortality is seen only as an 'ironic subversion'16 of Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality', with a consequent failure to perceive any such intimations in
the poem'. However, as our analysis shows, the title forms the spiritual core of the poem.

Surprisingly, Eliot's four French poems, namely *Le Directeur*, *Mélange Adultere de Tout*, *Lune de Miel* and *Dans le Restaurant*, which form part of *Poems 1920*, have been left untouched by most critics. We have brought them within our purview, and discovered them to be poems of great spiritual value, and of incomparable artistic merit.

As regards the critics' misconception of Eliot's early poetry, it seems largely to have stemmed from their preoccupation with Eliot's 'dramatic virtuosity'. The poet did, in fact, begin his poetry with the impersonal devices of monologue and aloof commentary, ridiculing, in the manner of Laforgue, emotional extravagance with the irony of common sense. No wonder, contemporary critics like Wyndham Lewis were beguiled by Eliot's superb facade of Impersonality. They took it to represent 'art for art's sake', and associated the poet with I.A. Richards -- a tendency which has persisted vis-a-vis Eliot's early poetry, and from which even the present criticism has not fully recovered.

The tendency was, doubtlessly, fostered by Eliot's initial critical stance which emphasized the need to keep poetry and biography apart. The obscurity of much of Eliot's early poetry may, in part, be on account of the poet's talent.
for "concentration and elimination", but it is largely due to his tendency to disguise his private self behind an impersonal mask so that, as Conrad Aiken observed, behind the "splendid ramparts" he had built, Eliot had become "all but invisible"20.

What needs to be realized is that the poet's "Impersonality" in his early verse is not one of "art for art's sake" where the tyranny of form over content, of objective over subjective attenuates personality till it fades out completely.21 It is, what the poet explained, an escape into "a larger personality" which is made up of "the ideal order". The creating mind, as "a more finely perfected medium", is one imbued with a sense of "tradition" by which he meant "a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together".22 In Eliot's best work, the world of the mystic and the world of everyday life are indeed constantly juxtaposed.

A unique feature of Eliot's early poetry is its strange blend of the classical and the romantic spirit. As a result, it subserves the purpose of religion, albeit within the framework of art. Governed by the "classical spirit, in its purest form", it is "consecrated to the service of a high impersonal reason. Hence its sentiment of restraint and discipline, its sense of proportion and pervading law."23 Nevertheless, as Eliot himself admitted, he was a classicist
only 'in tendency'. Temperamentally a romantic, he abhorred the gap between the actual and the ideal. The impersonality imposed by art on his personal feelings does not detract either from 'the genuineness of his pain', or of 'the loneliness' which it imposes upon him.

The present study is concerned to show the religious orientation of Eliot's early verse within the framework of 'poetry' as a symbolic mode of apprehension where, to quote from 'Little Gidding', 'Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning, / Every poem an epitaph.' It is surprising that in deciphering Eliot's early poetry, critics have not taken fully into account his ideal of a Baudelaire-like use of images:

It is not merely in the use of imagery of the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to the first intensity -- presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something much more than itself -- that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men.

Discerned as an instrument of revelation rather than mere description, Eliot's imagery in fact helps us in viewing his poems as collocations of epiphanial moments in the course of which the poet sees into the meaninglessness and futility of man's temporal existence, arriving at his moment of the Dark
Night of the Soul which is ancillary to his aspiration for the Absolute.

On the whole, the critics' failure to get at the core of Eliot's early poetry may be attributed to their inability to relate his poetry to his life, and realize how various influences were assimilated in the consciousness of the poet, how they shaped his vision of life, and how personal experiences were transmuted into artefacts by the artist. For, 'poetry may have its most significant sources in private experience'. The best of his poetry, Eliot confessed, had cost him dearly in experience. Biographers like Lyndall Gordon and Peter Ackroyd have taken pains to unravel the mystery of the connection between Eliot's life and his work. As more is known of Eliot's life, it becomes clearer that the 'impersonal' facade of his poetry masks an often quite literal reworking of personal experience. Eliot, in fact, wrote that in the creation of a work of art, there is a 'transfusion of the personality, or in a deeper sense, the life, of the author into the character'. It needs, therefore, to be realized that in howsoever disguised a manner, the personal experience, and the more personal of his feelings, form the raw material of Eliot's poetry, that the poet must have felt the need to put into objective images, and thus make universal and representative, the struggle that went on in his soul.
The early poetry of Eliot needs to be perceived in the light of the fact that by the time he composed his first major poem, his religious sensibility had already been formed by the shaping influences of his early life, chief among them being his ideal of the grandfather, William Greenleaf Eliot, his mother's religious fervour expressed in her poetry, Eliot's own solitary habits, his fear of time and decay, his distrust of sex, his disenchantment with Boston, his encounter with the alienated voice of the French symbolists, and his secret wish to know the Absolute. To these may be traced the beginnings of the poet's religious journey. In this regard, it is constantly necessary to keep in mind Matthiessen's view that one cannot understand Eliot 'without reckoning with the Puritan mind -- its absorption in 'problems of belief' and its 'trust in moments of vision', its 'dread of vulgarity', its 'consciousness of the nature of evil', understanding of the 'consequences of loneliness and repression', its 'severe self-discipline and tenderness'.

These, in fact, are precisely the attitudes common both to Eliot and Dante. One has also to recognize Eliot's 'unusual detachment which reverberates with loneliness but which brings with it in compensation a special development of spiritual understanding'.

A knowledge of this background enables one to place, what may be called, the poet's 'Catholic philosophy of
disillusion' and his growing isolation from the world. It helps explain the poet's revulsion against sensuality and his need for Buddhistic, even Calvinistic, discipline and restraint. It also explains the poet's aspiration to rid himself of the earthly self, a haunting feeling he was later to admit in a conversation with Mulk Raj Anand, quoting from Tolstoy's *Diary of a Madman*: "It is myself I am weary of and find intolerable, and a torment. I cannot get away from myself." Eliot's early poetry is rife with this feeling. It reflects the poet's awareness of the void in all human affairs -- the disorder, meaninglessness and futility which he found in his own experience. What is so markedly discernible is the religious sensibility, already evident in Eliot's graduate reading in the literature of mysticism and Buddhism. One is prompted to re-evaluate the early poetry in view of "the kind and degree of belief which must be assumed in the poet and required of the reader in relation to the more or less explicit philosophy of the poems."35

In 1934, when Eliot wrote the *Choruses from The Rock*, he was accused of moving away from the 'pure' poetry of the first part of his life. It was alleged that he had "allowed himself to be robbed of his personality", and "condemned to an unreal position."36 This was, however, "the kind of misinterpretation of which Eliot was fearful."37 The change, in his view, was more apparent from the outside, and,
in The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, he did not fail to emphasize what he saw as the continuity of his own development. In 'A Note on Poetry and Belief' in the Enemy of January 1927, Eliot refuted I.A. Richards' suggestion that in The Waste Land he had effected 'a complete severance between his poetry and all beliefs'. This may safely be applied to Eliot's earlier verse.

Nonetheless, the religious element in the early poetry is not as 'palpable' as it was to be in Eliot's later poetry written after his conversion to Christianity. It is apparently so because, in the first place, he was not writing explicity on a religious subject and, secondly, because he was able to accommodate 'the forces of tradition which claim a spiritual commitment as a matter of right' within the framework of symbolist aesthetics with its focus on impersonality.

It is also helpful to view the early poetry in the light of Eliot's later critical pronouncements. Placed in the philosophic perspective provided by, say 'Religion and Literature' or 'Baudelaire', the early work easily appears to be a repudiation of the secular tendency in contemporary life which, Eliot said, is 'wholly ignorant of our most fundamental or important beliefs', and which is 'simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life: of something which I assume to be our primary concern.'
Studied within these parameters, Eliot's early poetry provides the terms of reference such as desire and temptation, self-possession and self-control, ennui, alienation, disillusion and despair, the Dark Night of the Soul, mystic apprehension, death-in-life and life-in-death, surrender and grace — needed to explore its religious significance. It readily manifests Eliot's ethical and philosophical positions. This is what draws our attention: "the general attitude and principles whose imaginative presentation produces the greatest repercussions, in individual minds and cultural life".41

In attempting to get at the core of Eliot's early poetry — which we believe to be essentially religious, and which is our main thesis — we have relied, as far as possible, on comparison and analysis, "Eliot's favourite instruments of criticism"42: "No critic", said Professor John Crowe Ransom in *The New Criticism* (1941), "proceeds so regularly by the technique of comparative quotation".43 Since Eliot's entire creative output forms, as it were, one work, and an image used in one context often gets amplified in another, it has proved to be helpful to study a piece in the light of others, as also, wherever possible, in the context of other poets, for, as Eliot said, no poet has his existence alone.
At every stage of the exploration, however, there have been suicidal moments when, caught between the devil (who "laughed like an irresponsible foetus") and the deep sea ("Oed' und leer das Meer"), one wished to give up in despair. As Eliot said:

One tortured meditation dragged me on
Concatenated words from which the sense was gone --
A chain of reasoning whereof the thread was gone
Gathered strange images through which I walked alone.44

These, however, were moments of deep introspection and earnest prayer. "Ye who despair", Eliot's mother had written, "know, the light is there, / Though hidden and obscured, again to shine'.45 It did shine, at last, on the brink of failure. It never did fail. And, there was enough compensation too. For, there are large areas of Eliot's early poetry where, we have been able to discover wholly new dimensions of spiritual meaning where earlier none was suspected. Moreover, we have learnt, into the bargain, that this "Birth' is indeed "Hard and bitter agony'.

It may be observed that without empathising with the poet's inner turmoil that gives birth to his poetry, it is well-nigh impossible to get into the spirit of his work, much less decipher or appreciate it. "Criticism', says Owen Barfield, "must try to alter the state of mind of the artist's audience, from mere wondering contemplation of an inexplicable result, towards something more like sympathetic participation in a process.'46
REFERENCES

3. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 33.
15. Ibid.
17. Ackroyd, op. cit., p. 79.
18. Smith, op. cit., p. 3.
20. Ibid., p. 98.
24. Smith, op. cit., p. 3.
33. Ibid., p. 116.
35. Smidt, op. cit., p. xi.
37. Ibid.
38. Smidt, op. cit., p. 63.
40. 'Religion and Literature', Selected Essays, p. 398.
41. Smidt, op. cit., p. xii.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., p. 34.

45. Gordon, op. cit., p. 5.


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