CHAPTER- IV

Eliot the man and the poet; Petry as the art and practice

Poetry,” Eliot wrote in “The Sacred Wood,” “is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotions, it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from them.” This was valid, and even noble, in 1920 when “The Sacred wood” was published; but to-day, after ten years of depersonalized and over-intellectualized verse, so much of it written in imitation of Eliot, the same sort of thing in the mouths of Eliot’s disciples sound like an excuse for not possessing emotion and personality. The old nineteenth century criticism of Ruskin, Renan Taine, Salnte Beuve, was closely allied to history and novel writing, and was also the vehicle for all sorts of ideas about the purpose and destiny of human life in general. The criticism of our own day examines literature, art, ideas and specimens of human society in the past with a detached scientific interest or a detached aesthetic appreciation, which seems in either case to lead nowhere.

The comparison would be worth making at greater length in order to bring out, not only the likeness in movement of Mr. Eliot’s verse to mature Elizabethan dramatic verse, but also Mr. Eliot’s astonishing power. Nowhere in Middleton, or, for that matter, Webster, Tourneur, or anywhere outside Shakespeare, can we find a passage so sustained in quality as Gerontion. In his essay on Massinger he says: ‘with the end of Chapman, Middleton, Webster, Tourneur, Donne we
end a period when the intellect was immediately at the tips of the sense. Sensation became word and word sensation.’ Gerontion answers to this description as well as anything by any of the authors enumerated: if expresses psychological subtleties and complexities in imagery of varied richness and marvelously sure realization. The whole body of the words seems to be used. Qualities that (if we ignore Hopkins as he was ignored) have been absent from English poetry since the period that Mr. Eliot describes (his critical preoccupation with it is significant) reappear with him. The effect of his few and brief critical references to Milton are notorious. The effect upon Miltonic influence of his practice is likely to be even more radical. If we look at the first Hyperion of Keats we see that it points forward to Tennyson and backward to Milton. This simple reminder (a safe generalization would call for more qualifying than is in place here) serves to bring home the prevalence of certain limitations in the way in which English has been used in poetry since Milton. Milton and Tennyson are very different, but when Tennyson, or any other poet of the nineteenth century (which saw a rough first draft in the revised Hyperion), wrote blank verse, even when he intended it to be dramatic, it followed Milton rather than Shakespeare—Milton who could be associated with Spenser. Even when Shakespeare was consciously the model, it was a Shakespeare felt through Milton. Language was used in a generally Miltonic way even in or Miltonic verse. To justify the phrase, ‘a generally Miltonic way a difficult and varying analysis would be necessary; but I have in mind Milton’s habit of exploiting language as a kind of musical medium outside himself, as it were. There is no pressure in his verse of any complex and
varying current of feeling and sensation; the words have little substance or muscular quality: Milton is using only a small part of the resources of the English language. The remoteness of his poetic idiom from his own speech is to be considered here. (‘English must be kept up,’ said Keats, explaining his abandonment of the Miltonic first Hyperion). A man’s most vivid emotional and sensuous experience is inevitably bound up with the language that he actually speaks.

The devotion and the concentration are represented by the lady, who serves to intimate the poet’s recourse, in his effort ‘to construct something upon which to rejoice, to a specific religious tradition, and they manifest themselves throughout in rhythm and tone. The burden of the grasshopper’ (a fine instance, this, of Mr. Eliot’s genius in borrowing), though a burden, potently evoked, of annihilation, has nevertheless its share of the religious emotion that pervades the poem. The ‘garden where all love ends’ is associated with the garden in which God walked in the cool of the day.’ A religious sense of awe, an apprehension of the supernatural, seems to inform the desert where the bones are scattered.

As for the ‘three white leopards,’ they are not symbols needing interpretation; they act directly, reinforcing the effect of ritual that we have noted in the verse and suggesting the mode of experience, the kind of spiritual exercise, to which Ash Wednesday is devoted. They belong with the ‘jeweled unicorns’ that have bothered some critics in the fourth poem:
Redeem

The unread vision in the higher dream

while jeweled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse.

It is in fact an Old Testament doctrine suited to the intense nationalism and racial self-sufficiency of the chosen people. There is nothing in the new Testament to correspond to it.

Eliot has produced his great effect upon his generation because he has described men and women that get out of bed or into it from mere habit; in describing this life that has lost heart his own art seems grey, cold, dry.

When lovely woman stoops to folly and

Paces about her room again, alone,

She smooths her hair with automatic hand,

And puts a record on the gramophone.

The Christian material is at the center, but the poet never deals with it directly. The theme of resurrection is made on the surface in terms of the fertility rites; the words whch the thunder speaks are Sanskrit words.

In his essay on Babbitt, T.S. Eliot has said, ¹ “Given the most highly organized and temporally powerful hierarchy, with all the powers of inquisition and punishment imaginable, still the idea of the religion is the inner control- the appeal not to a man’s behaviour but to his soul.”

I sat upon the shore
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

Shall I at least set my lands in order?

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

Pois ascosenel foco che gli affina……..

Setting one’s lands in order amounts to approaching the practice of inner control; Cleanth Brooks, Jr. observes: “The protagonist resolves to claim his tradition and rehabilitate it.” In the later poem it is evident that he has been pursuing his resolution and that Ash Wednesday is uttered, so to speak, from el foco che gli affina.

In gerontion the dramatic and imagistic details of the experience or any explicit reference to it are not to be found. To the extent that this poem is allied with the theme, it is so allied generally and conceptually. If one recognizes the theme in the poems where its elements are more openly displayed, one will also see it as underlying Gerontion, and consequently find that poem additionally meaningful. The title and the senility portrayed throughout -the old man- represent a sense of remoteness from the experience of sexual-religious ecstasy and its significance.

The drama, like all art, is essentially artificial, and the removal of one valuable artifice, the use of poetry, which can comprehend so much more varied, and so much deeper, emotion, carries no equivalent compensation. To illustrate
Eliot’s argument in ‘A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry’, the response of the real person to the situation of Lear when he discovers the perfidy of Regan and Goneril would be an agony and distress of mind too strong to find adequate expression. The emotion that requires poetry for its expression in within him. He is not a poet, but he is striving for poetic expression, though the result may be only an inarticulate cry. Shakespeare’s play is realistic in expressing accurately and powerfully what the human feels but is unable to say, in the only medium able to contain such emotion. It is Eliot’s achievement to have contributed towards making this possible again by producing a dramatic verse which has gown from the contemporary idiom.

The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social usefulness for poetry, is the theatre… For the simplest auditors there is the plot, for the more literary the words and phrasing, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm, and for auditors of greater sensitiveness and understanding a meaning which reveals itself gradually… the sensitiveness of every auditor is acted upon by all these elements at once, though in different degrees of consciousness’ (The use of Poetry and the use of Criticism, p-135). The quotation is from the Harvard university lectures delivered by Eliot during the winter of 1932 – 33 , six years after ‘Sweeney Agonistes’ two years before the first production of Murder in the Cathedral. His career as a dramatist, up to the Cocktail Party, covers the period between ‘Journey of the Magi’ and the completion of the Four Quartets. From one viewpoint the play are an attempt to
communicated to the larger audience commanded by drama the themes of these poems. The spectacle of dramatic conflict, and the various levels of enjoyment summarised by Eliot in the passage just quoted, might more readily than the poetry persuade an audience to appreciation of the core of meaning.

From 1931 until the outbreak of war in 1939 most of Eliot’s writing in verse was directed towards dramatic performance, as his preoccupation with self perfection expanded into a concern for the perfection of society. The fruition of this development is to be found in the three wartime Quartets; and the main interest of the play of the 1930s, if it is the poetry one is interested in, is that they enable us to follow the transition from Ash Wednesday to Four Quartets. The plays, together with his thinking about the possibilities of poetic drama, can provide an introduction to the new kind of poetry which he wrote during the war.

The action of Eliot's plays arises from no ordinary kind of dramatic conflict, but rather from the contradiction of the sort of experience which is the usual stuff of drama by the religious vision cultivated in his poetry. This is the constant theme of this writings about poetry in the theatre. In the essay on Marston, which is of great interest in relation to Burnt Norton as well as Murder in the Cathedral and The Family Reunion, he wrote:
It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once..... Or the drama has underpattern, less manifest than the theatrical one.

The Rock and Murder in the Cathedral were both commissioned works, undertaken at a time when Eliot felt he had written himself out as a poet. They are the products of deliberate thought and craftsmanship, and it is no wonder if they lack the inner necessity and fall short of the total integration of his best poetry. What they mainly offer is a clear and full statement of his conscious convictions.

Mr Eliot may reply that morality must be based on truth, and that he is more concerned with the promulgation of truth than with the cultivation of benevolent impulses resting on misunderstandings. It may be that the Christian tradition must be the salvation of the west; but to argue this too narrowly is to neglect aspects of liberalism which are, to put it mildly, worth preserving, and to neglect aspects of liberalism which are, to put it mildly, worth preserving, and to neglect, too, the extent to which liberalism is entwined with our Christian tradition as it in reality and as a working power now is. We may agree profoundly with many of Mr. Eliot’s indictments of present-day society, and agree with him, for instance, when he says that the events of September 1983 inspired in him a doubt of the validity of civilization. And there are events since then which inspire similar doubts. But whatever our religious beliefs, we must hope that the liberal
world can regenerated itself out of its own resource—and we must seek the Christian tradition, in its various forms, within that world.

One cannot but recognize in Eliot’s recent writings a kind of reactionary point of view which had already been becoming fashionable among certain sorts of literary people— a point of view which has much in common with that of the neo-Thomistis in France and that of the Humanists in America. “Unless by civilization.” writes Eliot,” “you mean material progress, cleanliness, etc…. if you mean a spiritual co-ordination on a high level, then it is doubtful whether civilization can endure without religion, and religion without a church”. We feel in contemporary writers like Eliot a desire to believe in religious revelation a belief that it would be a good thing to believe, rather that a genuine belief. The faith of the modern convert seems to burn only with a low blue flame. “Our literature,” Eliot has himself recently made a character in a dialogue say, “is a substitute for religion, and so is our religion. “ From such a faith, uninspired by hope, unequipped with zeal or force, what guidance for the future can we expect?

We cannot help recalling Mr. Eliot’s various observations about the problem of belief. This for instance, seems germane:

I cannot see that poetry can ever be separated from some thing which I should call belief, and to which I cannot see any reason for retusing the name of belief, unless we are to reshuffle names together. It should hardly be needful to
say that it will not inevitably be orthodox Christian belief, although that possibility can be entertained, since Christianity will probably continue to modify itself, as in the past, into something that can be believed in (I do not mean conscious modifications like modernism, etc., which always have the opposite effect). The majority of people live below the level of belief or doubt. It takes application, and a kind of genius, to believe anything, and to believe anything (I do not mean merely to believe in some “religion”), will probably become more and more and more difficult as time goes on.

The poetry of the last phase may lack the charged richness and the range of Gerontion and The Waste Land. But it is, perhaps, still more remarkable by reason of the strange and difficult regions of experience that it explores. Its association with Mr. Eliot’s explicit anglo-Catholicism has encouraged, in the guise of criticism, an extraordinarily crude and superficial approach. Critics speak of ‘Pre-Raphaelite imagery’ and ‘Pre-Raphaelite flavour’ and deplor (or applaud) the return to the fold. But this poetry is more disconcertingly modern than The Waste Land: the preoccupation with traditional Christianity, the use of the prayer book, and the devotion to spiritual discipline should not hinder the reader from seeing that the modes of feeling, apprehension and expression are such as we can find nowhere earlier.

It is in that sense that Mr. Eliot’s poetry may be spiritual exercise of great scope. This class, then, apprehending the dominant presence of Christian
doctrine and feeling in Mr. Eliot’s work, must reach something like the following conclusion as representing provisional truths. The Church is the vehicle through which human purpose is to be seen and its teaching prod and vitalise the poetic sensibility engaged will the actual and with the substrate of the actual.

It is certainly true that the play as a whole is much inner than most of Eliot’s earlier poems; since it is a drama for public presentation, it could hardly have the density of the *Waste Land*. Yet the play cannot be defended as poetry on the grounds of its success as a stage spectacle. As poetry it must have substance—tension and depth of imagery—to be successful. And it should be admitted that parts of the play lack this necessary substance: some of the verse spoken by the priests, the knights, and Becket is embarrassingly weak. But the play must not be set down beside those almost utter failures, *The Rock*, and *The Family Reunion*. For the play has a density of the whole design which helps to compensate for a lack in density of line. Consider the fields of reference which the whole play holds: The Liturgy of the Church, which the choruses resemble. The mystery and miracle plays of the medieval Church.