ELIOT'S STANCE TOWARDS CLASSICISM
AND ROMANTICISM

Eliot's criticism is one of checks and balances. Difficulty surrounds the job of pasting any particular label on it. So Charles Moorman's observation that his criticism may be better called "continual interaction of antagonisms," has weighty substance subsisting in it. One such interaction is that of classicism and romanticism in Eliot's criticism though Moorman does not broach this particular issue. 'Blend' may be in this connection, a more appropriate term than 'interaction'. Then the two significant strands that are woven into the fabric of Eliot's criticism as well as his poetry are classicism and romanticism. A scrutiny of his attitude to classicism and romanticism reveals his ambivalence. This ambivalent attitude stems from the conflict between the romantic heritage which he has inherited unconsciously and the classical role which he has assumed consciously.

In the early phase of his literary career, Eliot, inspired by an iconoclastic fervour, embarked on a
severe attack on romanticism. As if to confirm his anti-
romantic stance, Eliot proclaimed in 1928 that he was
a classicist in literature, royalist in politics and
Anglo-catholic in religion (LA, 7). But much later in
his "To Criticise the Critic" (July 1961), he seemed
to be rather apologetic and related the circumstances
that had actually driven him to make such a declaration
(TCCW, 15). There is no doubt that in the beginning
of his career, he assiduously built up for himself the
image of an aggressive classicist.

Eliot's classicism was shaped to a considerable
extent by the influence he had imbibed from Babbitt,
Hulme, Pound and the French writers like Maurras and
Benda. His idea of the essence of classicism, as Mario
Pras says, is largely a polemical one, as it germinates
from writers who employed it as a counter against what
they considered to be the pernicious effect of romanticism. 3
This accounts for his denunciation of romanticism and
romantic writers as well as for his panegyrics on
classicism and the adherents of that school.
Eliot's animus against romanticism manifests itself in his early Oxford University Extension lectures delivered in 1916 and they unmistakably bear the influence of Irving Babbitt. He believed that it was Rousseau who let loose anarchy in the realm of literature. His first lecture accuses Rousseau of being the originator of several conflicting tendencies that cropped up in the nineteenth century. In a "Short Sketch of Rousseau's Life", he complains that Rousseau's public career could be construed as a struggle against authority in matters of religion on the one hand and against aristocracy and privileges in government on the other. His doctrines according to Eliot, exalted the personal and the individual above the typical, above thought, glorified spontaneity in everything, deprecated form in art and laid emphasis on humanitarianism signifying belief in the fundamental goodness of human nature. What exasperated him were intense egotism and insincerity which Eliot regarded as insufferable faults. Evidently Eliot cherishes the view that romanticism has inherited from Rousseau such characteristics as the repudiation of authority and aristocracy, apotheosis of the cult of the personal and the individual, indulgence in feeling almost to the exclusion of thought, and preference for spontaneity.
over form. Compounded with these are intense egotism and insincerity which Rousseau has bequeathed as legacy to romanticism. Eliot imputes the creed of emotionalism and deification "science (realism)" to Rousseau. Rousseau for him is the perpetual source of mischief and inspiration (KE, 198). Eliot describes the Romantic age "as a period of intellectual chaos" propelled by a daemonic hunger for novelty; and its hunger, he remarks, "exceeded its strength of digestion." He deplored that "Romanticism is excess in any direction," the two prominent directions being "escape from the world of fact, and devotion to brute fact." Then for Eliot, the vices that disfigured romanticism were its muddle-headedness, emotionalism, escapism, trivial factualism and irrepressible craze for novelty which its anaemic constitution could not assimilate.

Eliot's observations in The Sacred Wood maintain the hostile tenor in his attitude to romanticism. "Romanticism," he asseverates, "is a short cut to the strangeness without the reality and it leads its disciples only back upon themselves.... There may be a
good deal to be said for romanticism in life, there is no place for it in letters" (SW, 31-32). Thus Eliot, calling romanticism eccentric and unrealistic, has no hesitation in banishing it altogether from the realm of literature.

Eliot's anti-romantic ardour glows luridly in a number of pages in The Sacred Wood. In the introduction to this collection of essays, he quotes Arnold with perfect approbation: "It has long since seemed to me that the burst of creative activity in our literature, through the first quarter of this century, had about it in fact, something premature and that from this cause its productions are doomed.... In other words, the English poetry of the first quarter of this century, with plenty of energy, plenty of creative force, did not know enough. This makes Byron so empty of matter, Shelley so incoherent, Wordsworth even, profound as he is, yet so wanting in completeness and variety" (SW, xi-xii). He proceeds to observe that this "judgment of the romantic generation has not, so far as I know, ever been successfully controverted" (SW, xii). His annoyance at the lack of tradition is discerned in his comment that England has produced a fair number of
Robinson Crusoes like the individualistic Blake (SW, 156).

In "The Function of Criticism", Eliot again disparages romanticism. He comments that the difference between classicism and romanticism is "rather the difference between the complete and the fragmentary, the adult and the immature, the orderly and the chaotic" (SE, 26). He fulminates against romanticism more violently in the original Criterion version of the essay: "So important the sense of fact seems to me that I am inclined to make one distinction between Classicism and Romanticism, that the romantic is deficient or undeveloped in his ability to distinguish between fact and fancy, whereas the classicist, or adult mind, is thoroughly realist without illusions, without day-dreams, without hope, without bitterness and with an abundant resignation." But this passage was omitted from the essay when it was published in his Selected Essays. His polemical zeal must have become lukewarm by the time he prepared his essay for a fresh publication.

It may be noticed that illusions, day-dreams, the state of being in bitterness which he obliquely refers to as
the characteristics of romanticism are the traits of what may be termed negative or decadent romanticism. In the same essay he disapproves of the romantic disposition of dependence upon the inner voice which he construes as a euphemism for doing as one likes" (SE, 27).

In After Strange Gods, Eliot again comes down heavily upon personality and the romantic predilection for cultivating individuality. When morals are disentangled from tradition and orthodoxy, he remarks, "the personality becomes a thing of alarming importance" (p. 54). It is deplorable that "the writer should deliberately give reign to his individuality", nurturing his differences from others. He frowns upon the reader's inclination to cherish the author of genius for his "deviations from the inherited wisdom of the race" (ASG, 33). Personality expressed in art is an unregenerate one "partly self-deceived and partly irresponsible and because of its freedom, terribly limited by prejudice and self-conceit, capable of ... great mischief..." (ASG, 63).

Two things that go hand in hand with Eliot's denunciation of romanticism are his eulogy of classicism and his association of classicism with Christianity. In the second of his Oxford University Extension Lectures,
"The Reaction against Romanticism", Eliot declares, "the beginning of the twentieth century has witnessed a return to the ideals of classicism. These may roughly be characterised as form and restraint in art, discipline and authority in religion, and centralization. The classicist point of view has been defined as essentially a belief in Original Sin - the necessity for austere discipline ... A classicist in art and literature will therefore be likely to adhere to a monarchical form of government and to the Catholic Church." Further he looks upon reason as the linchpin of modern criticism. Associated with this intellectual aspect, are his insistence on careful craftsmanship, his advocacy of clarity and his exhortation for an aspiring poet to acquire a vast learning which will equip him with a historical sense that will enable him to follow tradition (SW, 49). (Of course the eighteenth century would not have spoken of historical sense as such a concept was alien to its mental structure). Eliot praises Dante as an "attentive student of the art of poetry" and as a "scrupulous, painstaking and conscious practitioner of the craft." (TCCW, 132). He elevates Donne above Mallarme and Swinburne because "his verse is always definite and concrete," (TCCW, 170). Thus reason, erudition,
craftsmanship and clarity are the significant constituents of his classicism. Then his grouse against romanticism issued from what he considered its deficiencies, such as lack of restraint of emotion, projection of personality in the work of art, cultivation of individuality, waywardness, absence of discipline on account of its failure to submit to an external authority, irrationality, vagueness, and finally its irreligiousness and heterodoxy.

Eliot praises the classical age as one showing order, harmony and equilibrium, and points out that it is preceded and followed by ages noted for eccentricity and monotony; while the classical age finds a "common style", the ages preceding and following it adopt "individual style" with extreme variations and become marked by immaturity or senility (OPP, 57). Eighteenth century classicism of England, for instance, though restricted in its outlook, reprehended "eccentricity or uncouthness" and valued a poet for "his contribution to a common language" (OPP, 165). These statements bespeak his concern for order. To crown his argument, he makes a somewhat ex cathedra pronouncement that "classicism is a goal toward which all good literature strives ... according to the possibilities of its time and place."
Eliot's penchant for classicism can be seen in his debunking of the romantics and in his encomiums for the classical writers. Eliot's derogation of romanticism comes again in his contrastive evaluation of both the schools as evidenced in the assertion that the poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries "possesses an elegance and a dignity absent from the popular and pretentious verse of the Romantic poets and their successors." One question that arises in this connection is whether Eliot has been severely denunciatory in his criticism of the romantics. Louis Kronenberger arraigns him with the lack of fine feeling on the ground that he called the nineteenth century Romantics "riff-raff" and Shelley, in particular, a "blackguard." There is a grain of truth in Kronenberger's complaint. Eliot seems at times to be callously scathing in his attack, as, for instance, when he makes the uncharitable remark that Shelley is "a schoolboy who knows how to write" (UPUC, 89), or that for Coleridge "to be 'a ruined man' is itself a vocation" (UPUC, 69), the latter remark bordering on a churlish quibbling. But by and large, his criticism free from spleen and acerbity, though a little pontifical, is touched by suavity and one may therefore,
be inclined to concede the view of Glicksberg that Eliot’s treatment of Swinburne, Shelley or Blake, “is on the whole urbane and fair-minded”, in spite of his finding fault with them. But Glicksberg himself has failed to point out that Eliot recognizes the merit of the Romantics, wherever he thinks, they have acquitted themselves well. For example, Eliot looks upon Blake as a man of genius (SW, 158). On the other hand, he acclaims Dante as a classic, the implication being that a man of genius is inferior to a classic. If Blake’s genius had been disciplined by “a respect for impersonal reason, for common sense, for the objectivity of science,” he contends, “it would have been better for him” (SW, 157). Blake is censured for incorporating his personal philosophy in his work, which “makes him eccentric and makes him inclined to formlessness" (SW, 155). He extols Dryden only to denigrate Shelley. “Dryden is one of the tests of a catholic appreciation of poetry” (SE, 305) and his “discriminating taste” in poetry (UPUC 58) deserves commendation. “We cannot fully enjoy or rightly estimate a hundred years of English poetry unless we fully enjoy Dryden” (SE, 306). Eliot recognized Dryden as “one of those who have set standards for English verse which it is desperate to
ignore" (SE, 316). On the other hand, Shelley's poetry, he seems to complain, is afflicted with numerous maladies. For instance, the romantic poet's "Skylark" does not disclose a trace of cerebral work in it and "for the first time perhaps in verse of such eminence, sound exists without sense" (LA, 96). He detests Shelley for his confused imagery and eccentric philosophy which interposes a barrier to poetic appreciation (UPUC, 91). One can enjoy, he states, the poetry of Byron, Shelley, Keats and Swinburne in one's adolescent stage (UPUC, 33), the insinuation being that they cannot satisfy a mature taste. He postulates the thesis that the prerequisite to understand any poetry is the enjoyment of Pope's poetry,¹⁶ (OPP, 60). Love of poetry, for him, is a factor inextricably intertwined with the appreciation of eighteenth century poetry: "... certainly to enjoy Pope, to have an analytic enough mind, to enjoy even second rate eighteenth century poetry, is a better test of 'love of poetry' than to like Shakespeare, which is no test at all."¹⁷ He is even tempted to place classical Ben Jonson above Shakespeare on the hypothetical assumption that Ben Jonson, and not Shakespeare would arouse the enthusiasm of the intelligentsia (SE, 159). Shakespeare again gets a raw deal in comparison with Chaucer; for he in Eliot's view
presents Troilus as a 'prodigious' and irresponsible Titan while Chaucer views him dispassionately within the framework of a firm moral order. Shakespeare is even portrayed as moving towards "anarchy and chaos" (SE, 54). When Eliot's punitive pen has not spared even Shakespeare, naturally it will excoriate Wordsworth or Goethe or Yeats or, for that matter, any writer having a romantic propensity. Wordsworth, Shelley, Goethe and D.H. Lawrence, he observes, "belong with the numbers of the great heretics of all times". "It is not a wilful paradox to assert that the greatness of each of these writers is indissolubly attached to his practice of the error, of his own specific variation of the error (the error being philosophising upon his own poetic insight) .... They would not have been as great as they were but for the limitations which prevented them from being greater than they were" (UPUC, 99, 100). The inherent weakness of Lawrence, according to Eliot, is his absolute freedom "from any restriction of tradition or institution" and his sole reliance on "the Inner Light, the most untrustworthy and deceitful guide that ever offered itself to wandering humanity" (ASG, 59). He scoffed at Yeats's fabrication of a phoney
supernatural world that is insulated from the traditional distinction of good and evil. "... Mr. Yeats's 'supernatural world' was the wrong supernatural world. It was not a world of spiritual significance, not a world of real Good and Evil, of holiness and sin but a highly sophisticated lower mythology summoned, like a physician, to supply the fading pulse of poetry with some transient stimulant so that the dying patient may utter his last words" (ASG, 46). Eliot blames Wordsworth, Browning and Tennyson for evolving forms - personal forms - which did not conform to the traditional patterns. "These poets," he remarks, "were certainly obliged to consume vast energy in this pursuit of form which could never lead to a wholly satisfying result" (SW, 63). Eliot castigates Hardy for his subjectivism and emotionalism (ASG, 54-55). Byron is charged with "imperceptiveness" to the English word, and "a defective sensibility". It is his schoolboy command of the language that makes his lines seem trite and his thought shallow." Eliot deals at him a sledge-hammer blow with the pronouncement that Byron writes "a dead or dying language" (OPP, 201). Even Crashaw, a metaphysical poet, is thrown into obloquy, branded as a "voluptuary of religious emotion", the innuendo
being that he too is guilty of romantic emotionalism. According to Eliot, emotional temperature enters into English prose with Newman and that it holds its sway over Francis Thompson and Lionel Johnson. But he praises Samuel Johnson for the "pattern of orthodoxy of principle, and sincere piety of feeling" revealed by him (OPP, 60). His *Vanity of Human Wishes*, Eliot proceeds to say, "is superior to Gray's *Elegy* and such great poetry as this is rare (OPP, 180). His verse, at its best, possesses "eloquence, a quality that can stir the emotion of the intelligent and the judicious" (OPP, 183). As a critic too, Eliot asserts, Johnson has a significance for the modern world in that his criteria of judgment "are permanently relevant" (OPP, 169).

Dante and Virgil are unrivalled examples of classics. Dante is placed on a more elevated pedestal, because, the medieval Italian poet, for Eliot, as Graham Hough observes, "is the impersonal voice of a majestic moral and philosophical system" and is "the supreme imagination of Christendom, and his work, the great central poetic expression of the Christian system." On the contrary Pope was a narrow classic of a provincial
age which witnessed "the disintegration of Christendom, the decay of a common belief and a common culture" (p. 61). Thus two kinds of classics are distinguished—the higher and the universal on the one hand and the lower and the local on the other. The local classicism is the offshoot of a limited range of sensibility especially in the religious scale of feeling, "which produces a kind of provinciality" (p. 61). In his Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, Eliot observes that "the artistic sensibility is impoverished by its divorce from the religious sensibility" (p. 26). The inference that can be deduced is that both the sensibilities flourished in harmonious co-existence at a particular moment in the literary history of Europe and that moment produced Dante; and that the atrophying of the religious sensibility in the nineteenth century (which he diagnoses as more provincial than the eighteenth century) accounts for the impoverishment of romantic literature. Thus classical art is embedded on the matrix of faith which is inalienably bound up with culture. 23

Hence a classic, as the representative of his mature culture, is an organ of the expression of its
ethos rather than the articulation of his private vision. Virgil and Dante are adduced as examples of this sublime type of classic, Virgil being the spokesman of the pre-Christian Latin civilization in its maturity, and Dante, of the Christian culture in its apogee. Eliot's dissatisfaction with the eighteenth century classicism of England arises from his recognition that it falls far short of his own high concept of classicism, with its lack of "amplitude" and "catholicity" (OPP, 60) and its attenuated religious sensibility.

Eliot's classical bias manifests itself in his general observations on the nature of criticism and in his particular pronouncements on critics. He enjoins impersonality, restraint of emotion and conformity to tradition or to a standard as the indispensable outfits for a critic. It is incumbent upon the critic to preserve tradition and "to see literature steadily and to see it whole" (SW, xx). In "The Function of Criticism", Eliot exhorts critics to knit themselves into a community for a common programme and to collect a corpus of useful principles from the critical works of the past so that they may do their job of correction of taste and elucidation of the works of
art from that standpoint. This implies his typical concern for tradition and a common body of reference - a concern motivated by the desire to impose order and discipline on what he considered to be the anarchic field of criticism. The 'romantic' premium on personality and individuality, he hints, has made criticism a Tower of Babel "no better than a Sunday Park of contending and contentious orators" (SE, 25).

He upholds what he regards as the classically view that a critic should have no emotions other than the ones engendered by the work of art, which when valid cannot be called emotions at all (SW, 12-13).

Aristotle is held as a model of criticism. For Eliot, he is a man of remarkable and universal intelligence and his criticism is an example of the disinterested exercise of intelligence (SW, 10, 12). The later classicists like Dryden and Saint-Beuve do not measure up to his greatness because of the limitation of their interests (SW, 12, 13). Even Horace and Boileau fall short of his greatness because of their dogmatic tendency to lay down rules (SW, 11). What vexes Eliot very much is romantic impressionism. He holds Coleridge (SW, 12-13; SE, 33), Goethe (SE, 33),
and Arthur Symons (SW, 2-7) as culprits in this respect.

But it must be noted that Eliot has not been able to maintain a hostile anti-romantic posture throughout his literary career. For he is neither a monomaniac nor a diehard. "I have" he declares, "no general theory of my own . . . Critical speculation, like philosophical speculation and scientific research, must be free to follow its own course" (UPUC, 143). He is not interested in extreme theorising about the nature of poetry or the essence of poetry as it falls within the purview of aesthetics and it is not the concern of a critic or a poet with his "limited qualification" (UPUC, 149-50). He confesses that he has "found the re-reading of his own prose-writings too painful a task" (OPP, 220). On re-reading "The Function of Criticism", he admits, he "was rather bewildered, wondering what all the fuss had been about" (OPP, 103). He expresses his annoyance at his words written thirty or forty years ago, being "quoted as if I had uttered them yesterday" (TCCW, 14). There are statements, he avers, in his earlier work with which he no longer agrees, views which he would not
care to maintain with conviction or vehemence, and areas in which his knowledge has evaporated, besides errors of tone such as "stiffness and pontifical sublimity", "rudeness" and "the braggadocio of the mild-mannered man safely entrenched behind his typewriter" (TCCW, 14). In the Preface to the 1964 edition of The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, he dismisses "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and other early essays as "the most juvenile" and the 'product of immaturity' (UPUC, 9-10). These statements are an eloquent testimony not only to his flexibility and resilience but also to his catholicity and maturity, however pugnacious and dogmatic was his attitude in favour of classicism and prejudicial to romanticism once. A man such as Eliot endowed with a spirit of inquiry, a sense of curiosity and with an instinct to probe and experiment, cannot be penned in a stuffy, literary pigeon-hole for a long time. He knows that judgments have to be provisional and conclusions tentative, dictated by the needs of the poet-critic as well as by the exigencies of the literary situation. A striking example of this flexible approach is his contrastive pronouncements on Milton. Eliot at first deflates the importance of Milton with his assault on his artificial diction. "Even in his most
mature work, Milton does not infuse new life into the word.... Milton writes English like a dead language." (OPP, 140-41). Eliot's second essay too continues his vitriol: Milton's is neither a classic style nor the elevation of a common style to greatness (OPP, 154). "As a poet," he proceeds to declare a factious spirit, "Milton seems to me probably the greatest of all eccentrics. His work illustrates no general principles of good writing..." (OPP, 155). But a little later in the same essay, finding perhaps that Milton has to and will shine with undiminished lustre, he pronounces that the future development in poetry could learn much from Milton's elaborate verse and do well to "avoid the danger of a servitude to colloquial speech and current jargon" (OPP, 160). Milton is even ranked with Dante and wins plaudits from Eliot for his vast erudition (TCCW, 148). Milton's Latinism is recognised as "essential to his greatness" (TCCW, 150). Such instances are legion in his criticism.

His attitude to both romanticism and classicism inevitably undergoes a transformation. Strangely enough, his *After Strange Gods*, where his stridently anti-romantic voice blares, contains sane and wise words on
both the factions. "It is doubtful whether there is any total sum of virtues or vices which may be arrogated" either to romanticism or to classicism. They are terms, he goes on to say, that ignite our passions and tend to prejudice our conclusions, and the debate about them is conducted in an atmosphere of heat rather than in the light of reason (ASG, 26). He himself is aware of the obnoxious nature of the acrimonious debate he has conducted. "Classicism," he avers, "is not an alternative to romanticism." He even speaks of 'classical' as being unpredictable like the romantic (ASG, 29). In the Preface to For Lancelot Andrewes, he admits that "classicist" as a term "is completely vague and easily lends itself to claptrap" (p. 7). He even applies pejorative epithets such as "sterile" and "obscurantist" (UPUC, 49) to classicism and its supporters respectively. "One can be classical' in a sense," he affirms, "by turning away from nine-tenths of the material which lies at hand and selecting only mummified stuff from a museum". 'Classical' is rejected here with utmost contempt as "a mummified stuff from a museum," as something obsolete, almost repugnant to the very modern spirit and irrelevant to the modern context (though the vehemence of his
expression is a little mollified by the phrase 'in a sense'). Eliot's view implicit in his utterance is that classicism is totally inadequate for the purpose of dealing with the problems facing a modern writer. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that he will not indiscriminately lavish encomiums on eighteenth century neo-classicists. According to him, Dryden did not possess "a large and unique view of life" and that "he lacked insight, he lacked profundity" (SE, 316). His appreciative appraisal of Johnson is punctuated with his censure. His judgment on his "Lycidas" and the metaphysical poets, Eliot feels, "outrages our sensibility" (OPP, 167). He lacked "a certain divine levity" that might have added sparkle to his moralistic poetry (OPP, 179). Further, his neglect of structure as an important element in a poem should be regretted (OPP, 181). Thus Eliot is aware of the shortcomings of classicism.

Moreover, Eliot is alive to the fact that it is almost impossible to re-introduce classicism owing to certain ineluctable factors which are the legacy of history both in literature and society, such as the mixture of the romantic and the classic, the absence
of a common standard, lack of a common attitude, and the complexity and variety of modern civilization (SE, 289). Hence his observation that "the damage of a life-time, and of having been born into an unsettled society cannot be repaired at the time of composition" (AGC, 29). The implication is that as Eliot was born in an unsettled society that is oppressed by its romantic inheritance, he could not escape the influence of the age and its heritage, and at best he could only be classical in tendency as, according to him, Baudelaire could be classical only in tendency in a romantic age. This amounts to his tacit admission that he cannot be a pure or full-fledged classicist and that his classicism would inevitably be interwoven with strands of romanticism.

In "What is a Classic?", Eliot defines the qualities found in a classic as "maturity of mind", "maturity of manners", "maturity of language" and "comprehensiveness". But the term, 'classical', which he employs and whose characteristics he discusses in this essay, is not antithetical to 'romantic', as he himself assures us (OPP, 53), but stands for an ideal classic, to the definition of which only Virgil, Eliot asserts, can answer.
In other words, this term does not belong to literary politics. No modern language, he is quite certain, can produce a classic in the mould of Virgil (OPP, 70). To be sure, he never flirts with the idea of re-introducing the Virgilian classicism or Greek classicism or for that matter eighteenth century classicism as he feels the conditions of the modern world and the innate nature of the English language are resistant to such a throw-back. No living art, we are told, can be appraised on the basis of the old canons and defunct standards (SE, 15). Eliot knows that a good English prose style cannot be modelled upon Cicero or Tacitus or Thucydides. He cannot bring himself to enjoy Pindar who "bores us" (SW, 76). He affirms that there has been neither a "classic age" nor a "classic poet" in English, and that it is not a matter for the slightest regret, for the genius of the English language or the English genius itself, has other things to do than realize the classical ideal (OPP, 59-60). Evidently Eliot knows that the genius of the English language need not be curbed by the classical ideal. We may even posit the theory that it is the genius of the English language that has sucked Eliot into its native orbit of romanticism despite his defiant classical posture. All this bears
witness to the fact that Eliot's taste, in the words of Rene Wellek, "is neither classical nor neo-classical."\textsuperscript{33}

The pertinent questions that arise are: what was the kind of literary situation that prevailed when Eliot made his debut - the situation that provoked him to unleash an onslaught on romanticism? Did Eliot merely fabricate a situation to suit his personal ends as Karl Shapiro\textsuperscript{34} claims? Or was the anti-romantic phase of his criticism merely a red herring to distract the attention of the readers from a lynx-eyed scrutiny of his work, both poetical and critical? Affirmative answers to the latter two questions cannot be set aside since they contain a grain of truth. Yet, in fairness to Eliot, we should meet him on his own terms. Eliot believed that the literary garden was infested with 'romantic' weeds. The Georgian poets content to follow the enervated and otiose romantic tradition, played to the gallery by dealing in such stock-in-trade material as flowers, the rainbow, the moon and love in the countryside, without realizing that they were reducing poetry to puerility with their failure to capture the complex rhythms and changing patterns of modern life. He diagnosed that the Georgian poetry was gasping for breath
under the throttling grip of romanticism. In "To Criticize the Critic", he confesses, "I was in reaction, not only against Georgian poetry but against Georgian criticism" (TCCW, 16). Like Ben Jonson in the seventeenth century, he cherished the notion that poetry could have its image refurbished only by means of classical tenets. Further, he felt that by the beginning of the present century a revolution in idiom, similar to the one that was staged by Wordsworth, was due (OPP, 159).

There is another dimension to the problem which cannot be overlooked and which indeed is essential from our point of view. Eliot took his adolescent course with Byron, Shelley, Keats, Rossetti and Swinburne (UFUC, 33). The early poems he contributed to The Harvard Advocate not only bore the influence of Swinburne and Tennyson but also breathed a strong fin de siècle flavour. Though Arthur Symons's Symbolist Movement in Literature opened up a new vista, Eliot must have had a psychological fear that he would be sucked into the vortex of the decadent romanticism, if he was not alert. He must have felt that he could prop up his sagging identity, save himself from being swept off by the tide of romanticism, by
resorting to a virulent attack on it, as if to lend countenance to the adage that offence is the best form of defence. His anti-romantic animosity is, therefore, at once a defensive mechanism and a tool of reform. The words with which Stephen Spender sums up the modern struggle against romanticism, strikingly illuminate the situation of Eliot: "When we uphold Pope against the Romantics we, after all, are only expressing the view that Byron also expressed - despising the works of himself and his contemporaries, and advocating Pope, but having to be Byron." As Eliot himself admits, "A promising adolescent may revolt against the habits and manners of his parents but in retrospect, we can see that he is also the continuer of their traditions, that he preserves essential family characteristics" (OPP, 56). Nothing can be more candid confession of the truth that he shares a common basis not only with romantic criticism but also with romantic poetry.

Eliot's unconscious attachment to romanticism hoodwinks the censor in him and smuggles in compliments to the Romantics even in his early period of iconoclastic fervour. He acclaims Coleridge as "the greatest of English critics, and in a sense, the last" (SW, 1).
Coleridge's "natural abilities" and "some of his performances", he acknowledges, are probably more remarkable than those of any other modern critic; his remarks have a permanent truth; and he is writing as a professional with his eye on the technique (SW, 11, 18, 19). "Experiment in Criticism" (1929) in which he tilts the scale in favour of Sainte Beuve with the praise that he, with his historical imagination, is more modern and more sceptical than Coleridge, brings out his love-hate relationship with the Romantic poet and critic. Eliot calls him "one of the wisest and most foolish men of his time." He describes his Biographia Literaria as "one of the wisest and silliest, the most exciting and most exasperating books of criticism written." One of the most learned men of his time, he had the ability for sudden and illuminating comparisons drawn from poetry of different languages, but tended to be diffuse and lacked "the power of sticking to a point." By 1956, Eliot had unreservedly acclaimed the eminence and importance of Coleridge. Coleridge, he observes, "established the relevance of philosophy, aesthetics and psychology to literary criticism, and he would be considered the pioneer of modern criticism (OPP, 104).

Thus his earlier love-hate relationship stemmed from
his unconscious recognition of his kinship with Coleridge and a conscious desire to liberate himself from the latter's influence. He could not exorcise the ghost of Coleridge from himself. He tacitly admits it when he discloses himself as resembling Coleridge: "As for Coleridge, he was rather a man of my own type, differing from myself chiefly in being immensely more learned, more industrious, and endowed with a more powerful and subtle mind" (TCCW, 133). Eliot might have kept Coleridge at a distance and evolved his own theories and conclusions but might have been astonished or bewikdered to find out a similarity between his views and Coleridge's. As Emerson R. Marks remarks, "The impression given by several of his references to Coleridge's criticism is that of a man who has discovered that some of the theories and quasi-theoretical generalizations independently arrived at in that workshop bear an embarrassingly close resemblance to some of Coleridge's most familiar conceptions." 37

This ambivalent attitude is generally discernible in his dealings with the Romantics. He appreciates Swinburne whom he taunted with sacrificing sense to sound, for his sound judgment and his sensitive and discriminating taste (SW, 20). Swinburne's essay on Chapman is certified as the best "we have on that great poet" (SW, 22).
His merit as a critic arises from his interest in the subject matter and adequate knowledge about it, which "is a rare combination in English criticism" (SW, 24). Swinburne's poetry too has elicited words of praise from Eliot. The world of Swinburne, he observes, "has the necessary completeness and self-sufficiency for justification and permanence" (SW, 149). Eliot extols Blake as a poet "endowed with a capacity for considerable understanding of human nature, with a remarkable and original sense of language and the music of language, and a gift of hallucinated vision" (SW, 157). Hallucination, a Romantic characteristic, gains his assent here. Even Shelley whom Eliot flays more than others, is praised for "a beauty of music and a beauty of content" which the poem, "Music, when soft voices die" exhibits (SW, 147). He looks upon Keats as "a great poet" possessing "a shrewd and penetrating intellect" and "a philosophic mind" only "to a lesser degree than Shakespeare" (UPUC, 100, 102). Keats's critical acumen as enshrined in his letters, so impresses Eliot that he finds his statements upon poetry remarkably true (UPUC, 101). Byron too becomes a recipient of Eliot's eulogy. In his longer poems, Eliot says, Byron did something that no one else has ever
equalled (OPP, 194). Byron is admired for his "torrential fluency of verse" "enlivened by skilful variation, as well as for his "genius for divagation" (OPP, 196). His ingenuity in story-telling (OPP, 198) and his unfailing invention (OPP, 204) which give his verse "the cardinal virtue of being never dull" (OPP, 200), stamp him as a great narrative poet. (But it must be said in fairness to Eliot that he appraises Byron's merits and demerits in the same essay and this is a sample, in addition to the evidences I am adducing to prove unambiguously that his critical attitude is not doctrinaire, hamstrung by his much-bruited antipathy against the Romantics. 38)

Eliot reverses his early judgment on Tennyson. He praises him as "a great poet," as he finds in him "abundance, variety, and complete competence."

"His variety of metrical accomplishment," he goes on to observe, "is astonishing" (SE, 176). Tennyson was careful in his syntax, and moreover his adjectives have a definite meaning." 39 Notice Eliot does not fight shy of using the epithet 'definite' in respect of a Victorian Romantic. Some of Tennyson's poems and Milton's poetry are "among the great triumphs of English versification" (OPP, 28-29). He speaks of nineteenth century poets as "great poets" despite their being amateurs in
the theatre (Opp. 34). Eliot is not niggardly in his tribute to Wordsworth. Along with Spenser, Wordsworth is important in the history of English literature. Enjoying his Prelude is a very good mark of taste. Any one who is going to be a teacher or a literary critic has got to know this poem (Opp. 42). In The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, Eliot praises Wordsworth for the critical insight he has shown in the Preface. According to Eliot, the Supplement "is enough to give him the highest place." His poetry and Preface, he admits, have contributed to "a profound spiritual revival" which communicated an inspiration to Newman and Ruskin. This statement implies that one can be spiritual even if one does not associate oneself with the orthodoxy of the Anglican Church. Further, his poetry, he observes, as that of Coleridge, is "the expression of a totality of unified interests" (UPUC, 80-81). Then it is a tacit recognition of Eliot, that Wordsworth and Coleridge possess a unified sensibility.

Later nineteenth century poets also come under Eliot's benign survey. William Morris's Blue Closet, is a delightful poem in his estimate, which defies explanation because of its dreamy effect (Opp. 30).
(Dream which he detested as a romantic trait not only wins his approbation but also is accepted as an element that contributes to the readers' delight because of its inexplicable vagueness—a quality which again was repelled by him earlier on account of its romantic association.) Eliot was happy to detect a new tone in the poems of Ernest Dowson, John Davidson and Arthur Symons, which was indicative of the beneficial influence of the French Symbolists (TCCW, 58). It gives him satisfaction to note that "nineties are nearer to us than the intervening generation" and that "the fact that they were interested in Baudelaire indicate some community of spirit." Lawrence too came in for praise. Eliot approvingly says that Lawrence's strictures against the modern material civilization are unanswerable. The man's vision is spiritual, but spiritually sick. There is a great deal, Eliot continues, to be learned from him (ASG, 60-61). In 1961, he defended Lady Chatterley's Lover as "a book of most serious and highly moral intention", though he still detested him for his egotism and his lack of a sense of humour (TCCW, 24-25).

While Eliot's criticism of Lawrence fluctuates between praise and execration, his attitude towards
Shelley, Goethe, and Milton underwent a sea-change, swinging from abomination to admiration. He at first abhorred Shelley for his confused imagery and his eccentric philosophy. But his reading of Leon Vivante's criticism on Shelley persuaded him to have a better view of the romantic poet. He discovers Shelley to be closer to Dante in imagination. Because of a natural affinity which Shelley had with the poetic imagination of Dante and his saturation in the poetry including all Italian poetry up to his time, observes Eliot, his mind is inspired to some of the greatest and most Dantesque lines in English (TCCW, 130). Eliot quotes a passage from The Triumph of Life which, according to him, contains "the supreme tribute to Dante in English," and which "testifies to what Dante has done, both for the style and the soul, of a great English poet" (TCCW, 132). Shelley, who was a "humourless, pedantic, self-centred" man and "sometimes almost a blackguard" with a very confused mind (UPUC, 89-90), and an apprentice with immense possibilities (LA, 94), has become transformed into "a great poet" equipped with a Dantesque imagination.

In a similar vein Eliot who flung Goethe to the depth of ignominy elevated him to the Olympian height
of glory. He had dismissed him as a dabbler in both philosophy and poetry, who "made no great success of either" (UPUC, 99). Later in his address delivered at the Hamburg University, in 1955, he ranks Goethe with Dante and Shakespeare, describing them as very great European poets possessing "Abundance, Amplitude and Unity" (OPP, 213). He concludes that "antipathy overcome, when it is antipathy to any figure so great as that of Goethe, is an important liberation from a limitation of one's own mind" (OPP, 210). In his "Milton II," he explains that his better understanding of Milton is due to his emergence from the shell of earlier errors and prejudices (OPP, 146). His re-assessment of Milton, Goethe, Shelley and Yeats bears out his effort to examine his own mind in relation to them and to rectify his errors and prejudices, which is an aspect of the liberation from a limitation of his own mind.

Eliot further admits that he had a quarrel with the age of Goethe, which proved a barrier to his understanding of Goethe - the quarrel that alienated him from the major English poets of the nineteenth century (OPP, 209). When he launched his revolution in the early period of this
century, he had to exalt the merits, he owns, of those poets who offered him example and stimulation, and had to decry the merits of poets who would not be of any help to him in the realization of the particular qualities he aimed at (OPP, 159). These statements reveal on the one hand the early preferences of a practicing poet and clearly indicate on the other that his dispute with regard to romanticism and classicism belongs rather to literary politics, in a large sense, than to the genuine nature of literature itself. He conducted the debate with a limitation of mind, with all the attendant errors and prejudices, excited by passion rather than guided by reason and intellect. He assures us that no creative writer can bother much about romanticism and classicism and that if he does and begins to write with an explicit purpose to be a classicist or a romanticist, he can only do irreparable injury to himself (ASC, 25). This statement is a tacit admission of the presence of romanticism in his poetry. It, moreover, means that he has never set about the task of writing with the avowed intention of becoming a classicist and that he has not bothered to purge his poetry of the romantic traits that have accreted themselves to the "psychic material" shaping itself in the unconscious mind. Naturally his admiration for the
romantics, which had lain dormant in him and which later grew more patent and stronger, stole itself into his criticism and poetry. Once that initial polemical ardour of his fades, he feels that he is concerned with only good poetry and bad poetry and that it matters more than a futile debate about labels. It is immaterial whether poetry falls into the classical or the romantic type. In fact Eliot himself blurs the distinction between classicism and romanticism when he attempts to accommodate English poetry and criticism in one continuous tradition. This proves as Wellek observes, Eliot's taste and tradition cannot be described "in terms of a simple opposition of classicism and romanticism." For his chief concern is only about good or bad poetry, good or bad criticism.

The assertion of Hillis Miller that Eliot's "career as a whole may be seen as an heroic effort to free himself from the limitation of nineteenth century idealism and romanticism," is partly true, for Eliot has not completely freed himself from the influence of romanticism and in fact its legacy sits tight on him; so it is only a "heroic effort" that has failed in one sense. Mowbray Allan concedes the influence of
nineteenth century thought on Eliot and rightly adds that "the importance for him of the criticism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is at least as great."47 It may not be far from truth to say that Eliot has followed the nineteenth century to a considerable extent both in criticism and poetry and that then he has in order to avoid the anxiety of influence, effected a 'clinamen' only to find a voice of his own as a representative of modern sensibility.

NOTES


5. ibid., pp. 10-11.

6. ibid., p. 27.


9. cf. In "Thought After Lambeth" Eliot resents the idea of the Bishops placing their "reliance upon the Individual Conscience" (SE, 373).


11. "... there is a tendency - discernable even in art - towards a higher and clearer conception of Reason, and a more severe and serene control of the emotions by reason." Criterion (January 1926), quoted by Herbert Howarth, Notes on Some Figures Behind T.S. Eliot (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), p. 130.


19. Though it is the opinion of B in "A Dialogue of Dramatic Poetry," Eliot may concur with it for he is of the view that the later ages have lost the medieval virtue of definiteness:

"Compare a medieval theologian or mystic, compare a seventeenth century preacher, with any liberal sermon since Schleiermacher, and you will observe that words have changed their meanings. What they have lost is definite, and what they have gained is indefinite." (SW, 9). It is evident from Eliot's point of view the Middle Ages were more classical than the Renaissance and Post-Renaissance periods.


23. cf. "... no culture can appear or develop except in relation to a religion." (TDE, 27).

24. Eliot's aversion to system is evident in his appreciation of Machiavelli whose lack of system rendered it possible for him to have an amazing exactness of vision and statement (LA, 46).

His respect for his philosophical mentor, F.H. Bradley, springs from the fact that the philosopher professes neither to follow any system in his treatment of philosophy nor "to supply with any systematic treatment of logic" (SB, 444).

25. cf. "I can never re-read any of my own prose writings without acute embarrassment" (SB, 26).

26. cf. "... Romanticism and Classicism are terms which inflame political passions, and tend to prejudice our conclusions" (UPQ, 129).

28. cf. "Romanticism ... ceases to bring with it any praise or blame" (UPUC, 128-129).


30. Note that Eliot describes the modern world as chaotic and refers to its lack of social and moral conventions (SE, 55).

    cf. Spender in his The Struggle of the Modern (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 48, says, "There would not be a return to eighteenth century classicism - to the idea of the unified intellectual culture of an elite, exercising reason to reconcile science, God, and aristocracy, and sublimating the arguments in transparent poetry."

    cf. "... there is no common body of reference, and no "community of belief" on what is meant or demanded by poetry. It is this double community which constitutes a classical age, and its absence makes a complete nonsense of the claim that modern poetry has entered a new classical phase, that the battle with romanticism has resulted in a victory for a neo-classicism, a new Age of Reason."


31. cf. "... a poet in a romantic age cannot be a 'classical poet except in tendency" (SE, 424). "One can be classical in tendency by doing the best one can with the material at hand" (Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot, ed. Frank Kermode, p. 177).

32. cf. Edward Dowden said that "the attempts made... to bend our literature to classicism were not of native origin" and thus could not succeed for any length of time. W.S. Landor, Studies in Literature: 1789-1877 (London: 1878), p. 162.

b) Northrop Frye's similar observation that merits our consideration, is that "the English Romanticism which has close affinities with the individualism of the Protestant and the radical traditions ... is aided in its feeling of being central to the tradition of English literature by the example of Shakespeare". He depicts the incursion of "Catholic, Tory and Classical elements into English literature as a sort of transitory aberration" "Blake after Two Centuries" in English Romantic Poets, ed. M.H. Abrams, (New York: Oxford University Press, A Galaxy Book, 1960), pp. 65-66.


37. Emerson R. Marks, "T.S.Eliot and the Ghost of S.T.C.", Sewanee Review, 72, 2 (Spring, 1964), p. 263. Again Marks asserts, "Neither the divergent characters of Coleridge and Eliot nor labels like Romantic and Classical nor, for that matter, the sharp thematic and stylistic differences between their poetry can hide the fact that Eliot came to adopt in literary and social criticism principles fundamentally the same as those formulated by Coleridge during his mature years" (ibid., p. 268).


41. Roger Kojecky in T.S. Eliot's Social Criticism, p. 94, gives the piquant piece of information that Eliot is reported to have observed that about the time of his writing After Strange Gods, "it was he, rather than Lawrence, who was sick."

42. cf. "... I believe that... the critical writings of poets, of which in the past there have been some very distinguished examples, owe a great deal of their interest to the fact that the poet, at the back of his mind, if not as his ostensible purpose, is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing, or to formulate the kind that he wants to write. Especially when he is young, and actively engaged in battling for the kind of poetry which he practises, he sees the poetry of the past in relation to his own; and his gratitude to those dead poets from whom he has learned, as well as his indifference to those whose aims have been alien to his own may be exaggerated. He is not so much a judge
as an advocate. His knowledge even is likely to be partial: for his studies will have led him to concentrate on certain authors to the neglect of others. When he theorises about poetic creation, he is likely to be generalizing one type of experience; when he ventures into aesthetics, he is likely to be less, rather than more competent than the philosopher... What he writes about poetry, in short, must be assessed in relation to the poetry he writes." (OPP, 26)

It is interesting to note that in his essay "Romanticism", Walter Pater observes that the opposition between Romanticism and Classicism ceases. [Selected Essays of Walter Horatio Pater ed. H. G. Rawlinson, (London: Macmillan, 1927), p. 138.]

cf. a) "Bryden and Pope ... owe more to Marlowe than to the purest taste of the century, whose representative was Daniel with his pure and restrained language, choice vocabulary and clear expression" (SE, 95).

b) Eliot claims that there is little difference between the view of Dryden and that of Wordsworth and Coleridge on poetry: "I should have thought this merely a happy description, in the language available at Dryden's time, and at a less profound insight than that of Coleridge or Wordsworth at their best, of the same sort of process that the latter were attempting to describe in language nearer to our own" (UPUC, 94).

c) "The relation of Byron's 'English Satires' and the poems of Crabbe to the work of Pope was a continuous tradition" (SW, 62).

d) Eliot asserts that the definitions of Dryden, Johnson and Coleridge about poetic faculties such as imagination, invention, judgment and fancy, have a great deal in common (OPP, 189).

e) Eliot praises Wordsworth as an "orthodox critic" and seems to approve of his view on the passions felt by a poet, as "the new version of imitation" (UPUC, 74-75).


"Clinamen" is used here in the original sense of "swerve".