CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION
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Eliot's criticism has revolutionised our understanding of poetry, especially the kind of poetry that thrives on craftsmanship. Synchronising his creative activity, Eliot's criticism offers a semblance of a theory which helps us to understand his poetry. Eliot is not a theorist like Coleridge or I.A.Richards. His theoretical insights have contributed a great deal to the development of New criticism in America and the kind of practical criticism we associate with F.R.Laavis and his contemporaries. In spite of many contradictions that have been pointed out by his detractors, we notice a certain consistency in his approach to poetry and poems. Moreover, we also notice a creative unity in his critical corpus. Perhaps the most dominant critical principle that pervades his poetry and criticism of poetry, is the principle of Impersonality. Writing in the cultural and critical climate created by T.S.Mulme and Ezra pound, Eliot seems to feel
that evaluation of poetry and poems has to be above what is purely personal and adventitious. Right from "Tradition and the Individual talent" down to a mature theoretical essay like "The three voices of poetry" we notice that 'Impersonality' is the bed rock of his critical enterprise. For example, in the 'Three Voices of poetry' he says:

"I don't believe that the relation of a poem to its origins is capable of being more clearly traced. You can read the essays of Paul valery, who studied the workings of his own mind in the composition of a poem more perseveringly than any other poet has done. But if, either on the basis of what poets try to tell you, or by biographical research, with or without the tools of the psychologist, you attempt to explain a poem, you will probably be getting further and further away from the poem without arriving at any other destination. The attempt to explain the poem by tracing it back to its origins will distract attention from the poem, to direct it on to something else which, in the form in which it can be apprehended by
the critic and his readers, has no relation
to the poem and throws no light upon it.
I should not like you to think that I am
trying to make the writing of a poem more
of a mystery than it is. What I am maintai-
nning is, that the first effort of the poet
should be to achieve clarity for himself, to
assure himself that the poem is the right
out come of the process that has taken place.
The most bungling form of obscurity is that
of the poet who has not been able to express
himself to himself; the shoddiest form is found
when the poet is trying to persuade himself
that he has something to say when he hasn’t.1

The foregoing citation clearly demonstrates that
Eliot’s criticism is always a focus on the poem not on
the poet. In reading a poem the poet’s biography, his
psychology, or in other words, a good knowledge of his
personality are of little help. What is true of critical
activity is also true of creative activity. If a poet were
to arrive at the clarity of his own experience and its

verbalisation, it goes without saying that, what is purely personal must be withdrawn, so that the poet's evaluation and assessment of his experience may be lucid. As C.K. Stead rightly observes, "For Eliot, as for Shakespeare's Richard II, the 'brain' is 'female to the soul'. This point must be stressed, because the formidable quality of Eliot's criticism has led many to the mistaken view that he is a coldly deliberate poet, consciously manipulating words for a purpose designed before the writing commenced. Such a view of Eliot is incorrect, and the reason should be obvious enough; for it is the poet of powerful intellect who needs most conscientiously to look for ways of suspending that intellect where its literal preoccupation may ride over the more delicate operations of the imagination. Hence Eliot's recurrent concern with a negative state of mind 'a state of negative capability or 'Inspiration'."

Eliot's impersonal view of art made him declare his antagonism to the English Romantics openly, perhaps too openly. No doubt, in reading the great English Romantics, Eliot has observed that their poetry celebrates personality without submitting it to the rigour of something more important than personality like Tradition or an Impersonal and a universal norm. It is in this context that the most controversial aspect of criticism, the so called "problem of beliefs," acquires relevance and significance. In the early criticism of Eliot we come across a number of sharp observations on the poetry and personality of Shelley. Although a noticeable change is there in his later criticism towards Shelley, Eliot's views have influenced a critic like F.R. Leavis, whose chapter on Shelley in *Revaluation* did a permanent damage to Shelley's reputation as a poet.

Exploring this aspect of Eliot's criticism further, we may say that, the flexibility we notice in his assessment of individual poets is modified by his
own experience as a poet. Reverting to the ideas of impersonality, in his essay on Yeats, he enlarges the scope of the concept and makes it so inclusive as to accommodate a poet like Yeats who is entirely different from him in character, ideology and technique. In a very crucial passage in his critical writing he says:

I have, in early essays, extolled what I called impersonality in art, and it may seem that, in giving as a reason for the superiority of Yeats's later work the greater expression of personality in it, I am contradicting myself. It may be that I expressed myself badly, or that I had only an adolescent grasp of that idea—as I can never bear to re-read my own prose writings, I am willing to leave the point unsettled—but I think now, at least, that the truth of the matter is as follows: There are two forms of impersonality: that which is natural to the mere skilful craftsman, and that which is more and more achieved by the maturing artist. The first is that of what I have called the 'anthology piece', of a lyric by Lovelace or Suckling, or of Campion, a finer poet than either. 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 of it a general symbol. And the strange thing is that Yeats, having been a great craftsman in the first kind became a great poet in the second (emphasis added)\(^3\)

The foregoing passage not only demonstrates the courage, conviction and candour of a fine student of poetry but the insight of a mature poet. The parenthetical clause in the passage, 'I am willing to leave the point unsettled' suggests that he still holds the view that art is impersonal but is prepared to submit it to a more scholarly scrutiny. From start to finish, craftsmanship is one of the outstanding qualities of Eliot the poet. We may not be wrong in saying that one of the meanings of tradition as Eliot formulated it in his seminal essay is the awareness and mastery of the craftsmanship

of poets whom a practicing poet likes and makes his own. But now he modifies it by saying that this may help a poet in writing good poems but not poems that are great poetry in the sense that they form a network of symbols which orchestrate a profound vision. We may say that to this order Eliot's early poems belong. Rightly they have become popular anthology pieces.

Eliot's second view of impersonality has its source in the maturity of a poet who can generate "a general symbol" out of his intense personal experience. By paying a complement to Yeats as the very best example of the second kind of impersonality Eliot perhaps unconsciously comments his own mature poem, The Four Quartets. The Four Quartets, apart from its very sophisticated compositional skill, dramatises Eliot's struggle to achieve an impersonal statement of his own aesthetic and religious convictions.

Eliot seems to have kept his options as a critic always open. Unlike most critics he seems to re-evaluate his own criticism whenever he had an opportunity. For example, in his preface to Elizabethan Dramatists, he
humorously remarks, "the Hamlet, of course, had been kept afloat all these years by the success of, the phrase 'objective correlative' - a phrase which, I am now told, is not even my own but was first used by Washington Alston." This popular critical idiom has become a significant critical tool for the new and practical critics to analyse poems. As one analyst of Eliot's criticism notes; "Even when the doctrine of objective correlative is agreed upon as the essence of Eliot's poetics, opinions are widely divided about its exact implication. For Cleanth Brooks, 'Objective correlative' means "organic metaphor," for sister Mary Cleophas Costello, "the intensity of meaning structure," Elisco Vivas takes it as a vehicle of expression for the poets emotions; Allan Austin treats it as the poetic content to be conveyed by verbal expressions. Such diversity of opinion does not necessarily reflect 'confusion' on the part of Eliot. Indeed, it testifies most eloquently to

the varied interests and concerns of his commentators and the variety of the principles which they had introduced for the purposes of interpretation, refutation or approval.\(^5\)

While the above observation clearly demonstrates the way in which critics make use of a particular principle to defend their own interpretive exercises, it suggests that the idea of objective correlative in explaining the creative activity of a poet is of immense significance. In Eliot's criticism of poetry the idea of objective correlative appears in various guises. In a much later essay, "Johnson as critic and poet," Eliot observes, But they reinforce my doubt, whether Johnson was the right man for satire. Johnson was a moralist, and he lacked a certain divine levity which makes sparkle the lines of the two great English verse satirists. Indignation may make poetry, but it must be indignation recollected in tranquility, in London.

I feel that a feigned indignation is presented, instead of a real indignation being recalled. In the satire of Dryden, as in a different way in that of Pope, the object satirized disappears in the poetry, is hardly more than the pretext for poetry. With Dryden, the man ridiculed becomes absurdly gigantic; and Pope's noxious insect becomes something beautiful and strange.\(^6\)

In the preceding observation on Johnson's "London", suggest that, dislike or indignation in and by itself doesn't constitute a poem. The subject's intricate complexities and subtilities have to converge on a suitable image that structures a poem. In the same essay commenting on Goldsmith's the deserted village Eliot says: "In Goldsmith's poem, the art of transition is exemplified in perfection. If you examine it paragraph by paragraph, you will find always a shift just at the right moment, from the descriptive to the meditative, to the personal, to the meditative again, to the landscape with figures, to the delineation of individuals (the clergy men and school

master) with a skill and concision seldom equalled since Chaucer. These parts are properly proportioned.  

This seems to imply that structure or properly proportioned parts in a poem is hard to achieve without a proper objective correlative. The foregoing discussion makes one point clear. Whenever Eliot talks about poems he focuses the attention on the language of the poet and his skill in using language to concretize a complex of feelings. If the poet is a "better craftsman" he will discover a suitable image which may be called the objective correlative of the poem. If a poet deviates from the language and the idiom of his contemporaries and evolves a special language of his own to dramatize his themes he may sometimes fail to fuse his thought and feeling.

Greatly influenced by the late nineteenth century French symbolist aesthetic, Eliot had introduced the idea of dissociation of sensibility and gave an unexpected twist to history of English poetry. Frank Kermode in the penultimate chapter of his book, Romantic Image analyses the

whole concept and concludes that "the theory of the
dissociation of sensibility is, in fact, the most
successful version of the symbolist attempt to explain
why the modern world resists works of art that testify
to the poets special anti intellectual way of knowing
truth." As we have noticed earlier Eliot is not dog-
matic but very urbane, in the sense that he subjects his
earlier views to a rigorous scrutiny later. Although
the academic critics have exploited the idea of dissocia-
tion to down grade the English Romantic poets in order to
make "the twin compasses of John Donne" the touchstone of
all poetry, Eliot doesn't seem to bother about it in his
later criticism because he had achieved what he wanted
to achieve. That Eliot who championed the privacy of
intellectual posture both in creative and critical activ-
vity and is prepared to admit the significance of intui-
tion and imagination, is amply demonstrated by the follow-
ing passage:

8 Frank Kermode, The Romantic Image (London, Fontana
"In a poem which is neither didactic nor narrative, and not animated by any other social purpose, the poet may be concerned solely with expressing in verse—using all his resources of words, with their history, their connotations, their music—that obscure impulse. He does not know what he has to say until he has said it; and in the effort to say it he is not concerned with making other people understand anything. He is not concerned, at this stage, with other people at all, only with finding the right words or, any how, the least wrong words. He is not concerned whether anybody else will ever listen to them or not, or whether anybody else will ever understand them if he does. He is oppressed by a burden which he must bring in order to obtain relief. Or, to change the figure of speech, he is haunted by a demon, a demon against which he feels powerless, because in its first manifestation it has no face, no name, nothing, and the words, the poem he makes, are a kind of exorcism of this demon. In other words again, he is going to take all that trouble, not in order to communicate with anyone, but to gain relief from acute discomfort; and when the words are finally arranged in the right way—or in what he comes to accept
as the best arrangement he can find—
he may experience a moment of exhaustion,
of appeasement, of absolution, and of some-
thing very near annihilation, which is in
itself indescribable. And then he can say
to the poem: Go away! Find a place for
yourself in a book—and don't expect me to
take any further interest in you. 9

The passage under review is the only direct state-
ment on the creation of poems. Ironically enough we don't
see in this passage any reference to the unified sensibi-
licity, wit, objective correlative, impersonality which we
usually come across in his essays on poetry and poets.
This doesn't mean that Eliot repudiates his own critical
rules or thinks that they have out lasted their use. As
Graham Hough rightly says, "In effect he is showing that
that criticism, for all its seriousness and patience, is
to some degree external; it applies to the more outward
and accessible areas of the poet's activity. The climate
of Eliot's earlier thinking had been permeated with a dis-

9 T. S. Eliot, The Three Voices of Poetry, On Poets
and Poetry (London, Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 98.
trust of the inner voice; and indeed what is appealed
to hear is still not the inner voice - it is the inner
silence. In his earlier formulations he had been perhaps
excessively willing to stop short of any traffic with the
unconscious; but in this passage he drops his garb and
says plainly that it is in this inarticulate region that
the poets conscious activity begins." Graham Hough's
comments make us think of what Eliot says in the East
Coker:

And so each venture is a new beginning/ a ride on
the inarticulate/ with shabby equipment always deteriorating/
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling/ undiscipli-
nical squads of emotion.

Graham Hough, "The Poet as Critic" in The
Literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot, ed., David Newton-