CHAPTER - I

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In "The Uses of Poetry and the Uses of Criticism"

Eliot writes:

I hold indeed that in an age in which the use of poetry is something agreed upon you are more likely to get that minute and scrupulous examination of felicity and blemish, line by line, which is conspicuously absent from the criticism of our time, a criticism which seems to demand of poetry, not that it shall be well written, but that it shall be 'representative of its age'. I wish that we might dispose more attention to the correctness of expression, to the clarity or obscurity, to the grammatical precision or inaccuracy, to the choice of words whether just or improper, exalted or vulgar, of our verse: in short to the good or bad breeding of our poets.¹

Eliot made the above statement when he delivered Charles Eliot Norton lectures in Harvard, during 1932 -

¹T.S. Eliot: The Uses of Poetry and the Uses of Criticism, (London, Faber and Faber,) p. 25.
Since then, literary criticism, especially the criticism of poetry has advanced in ways and methods which Eliot might not have anticipated or visualised. On both sides of the Atlantic several critical schools have emerged which were indebted to Eliot in one way or the other. During the forties and fifties of the century we never had anything but a scrupulous examination of felicity and blemish line by line, the conspicuous absence of which Eliot seems to deplore in the passage under review. The New criticism associated with Ransom, Tate, Brooks, Warren and a host of others seems to have lost its hold on the academy which seems to rush after the strange theoretical gods who migrated from France to Yale. Set against this rapidly shifting critical idiom and sophisticated methodology Eliot's insistence on the Nature and function of criticism, stated in the citation under focus might appear to be the naive if not conservative. But a second look at the passage we are discussing, makes us think that Eliot wants criticism
to deal more with the craftsmanship of versification than with the versifiers.

That Eliot took poetic craftsmanship as the primary focus of his critical endeavour is a common place of Eliot's criticism. But a close persual of his criticism on various poets and different sorts of poems contained in 'The Sacred Wood': essays on Poetry and Criticism; 'On Poetry and Poets'; 'To criticise the critic' and 'Selected Essays' bring to a central focus his dedication to craftsmanship which he himself acquired with great struggle. This in a way explains Eliot's anti-romantic bias.

Eliot began his career as post-critic with a bang but did not end with a whimper. Meticulous and precise in writing poetry and criticism, he seems to have developed a fine taste for poetic craftsman whose poetry was not popular in the academy. In "The Tradition and the Individual Talent" he certainly explores 'Tradition' not in terms of a periodised history of poetry and movements but in terms of an aesthetic in which
personality and ideology are cleverly devalued. What a poet learns not only from his predecessors but from his chosen masters is given the name 'Tradition'. Instead of using a common term like 'imagination' he often uses the word 'sensibility'. This suggests that craftsmanship is the consequence of sensibility and is rooted in tradition to which a poet should subordinate his ego. Imagination on the other hand smacks up ego and often results in imprecise and bad craftsmanship. It is from this perspective that Eliot develops the idea of 'unified sensibility'. The Metaphysical poets and the Jacobean dramatists have achieved a unification of sensibility which is lacking in their successors. "A thought to Donne was an experience, it modified his sensibility." The preceding statement is elaborated and elucidated as follows: "The poets in question have, like other poets various thoughts but they were, at best, engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalents..."
for states of mind and feeling. And this means that both that they are more mature and that they wear better than latter poets of certainty not less literary ability.\textsuperscript{3} Finding the verbal equivalents for states of mind and feeling or for the unification of thought and feeling may make the poet 'comprehensive', 'allusive', 'indirect' so that he may force, dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. In short a poet with unified sensibility is compelled to acquire craftsmanship and mastery. The opposite of unified sensibility makes the poet direct, so direct that in his anxiety to express himself he loses control over his language. Although Eliot gives Shelley as the best example of this dissociation, implicit throughout his writings is the idea that most romantic poets are not precise craftsman.

Eliot's shrewdness as a critic consists in making use of very well known aesthetic concepts to reinforce

his critical evaluation, if not to justify it. Let us take for example the idea of Metaphysical wit. Quoting Johnson's view that in the metaphysical poetry" the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; Eliot observes that the force of this impeachment lies in the failure of the conjunction. In the metaphysical poetry, according to Johnson, wit consists in the juxtaposition of the opposites. Eliot thinks that the opposites are not juxtaposed but united because in the metaphysicals there is a fidelity to thought and feeling. The metaphysical wit as Eliot interprets it is formulated in his essay on 'Marvell'. It is not erudition nor cynicism, it implies a constant inspection and criticism of experience, it is a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible. It is an intellectual quality which is absent from works of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats on whose poetry nineteenth century criticism has unconsciously been based. In other words when a poet is constantly aware of his own experience and its opposite
there is every chance of his becoming a good craftsman because he tries to reconcile or fuse both. To reinforce this argument, in the same essay, he quotes Coleridge, to reinforce his description of wit and the images in the Coy Mistress. It is one of the profoundest ironies of literary history that a romantic theorist like Coleridge is quoted to defend a theory of wit that structurates Marvell's poem, the quality of which is totally absent in the great romantic poets.

Writing at a time when the anti-romantic ideas of T.E. Hulme were gaining slow but steady approval among the critics, Eliot in a series of essays written between 1917-1921 subtly manipulates his arguments so as to devalue the significance of terms like 'imagination', 'inspiration' and 'personality'. Hulme's targets were not the Romantic poets but the Victorian theorists of romanticism like Ruskin and Peter. As Hulme puts it, "the essence of poetry to most people is that it must lead them to a beyond of some kind. Verse strictly confined to the earthly and the definite (Keats is full of it) might seem to them to be excellent writing, excellent craftsmanship, but not poetry. So much has Romanticism debauched,"
us, that, without some form of vagueness, we deny the highest. 4 Hulme's observation suggests the much felt uneasiness of the post Great war generation about the decadent Romantic poets and critics. Even in Eliot's early essays gathered in 'The Sacred Wood', the principle targets of Eliot's anti-romanticism are Swinburne, George Wemyss and Irving Babbitt. But one critic whom Eliot admired and resented was Matthew Arnold. Several commentators of both Arnold and Eliot have pointed out a close resemblance between the two. Like Eliot Arnold in his own time was very much pre-occupied with the function of criticism. Like Eliot he was not happy with the Romantic poets. Although Eliot questioned Arnold's famous principle that, literature is a criticism of life, he very much resented Arnold's attempt to replace religion by poetry. He seems on the whole to have approved the Arnoldian notion of classicism. In 'The Study of Poetry' Arnold greatly admires Dante and thinks that the quality of Dante's "In la sua Volontade 'e nostras pace ...
(In his will is our peace)\(^5\) is totally absent in Chaucer, and we know what Dante means to Eliot. But what is more significant than the resemblance between the two critics is the strategy Eliot employed to counteract the influence of Arnold in the academy. Arnold never bothers about the seventeenth century poets except Milton though he was not a great enthusiast of romantic poetry he often felt that there was a great difference between poetry and prose. Eliot on the other hand believes that good verse is as good as good prose and that there is not much difference between the two. Applying the differentia between prose and poetry to Dryden and Pope, Arnold finds them lacking in poetic power and considers them 'classics of English prose'. Applying his criteria to the same issue, Eliot emancipates them from the Arnoldian stricture and rehabilitates them in such a way that, F.R. Leavis sees a net work of verbal connections, which he calls the line of wit.

Extending from the metaphysicals to Pope, as we have discussed these points in the following pages, suffice it to say here that the early criticism of Eliot has radically altered our perception of continuity in English poetry.

Nowhere do we come across in the corpus of Eliot's criticism, Eliot illustrating his theoretical principles by fully analysing a single poem of any length. We don't also come across Eliot talking about the creative act like the romantic theorist, for example, Coleridge. From the start Eliot seems to have felt that a poem is not an inspired utterance. His theory is represented by his famous catalyst analogy. Accordingly to the analogy the poet's mind is detached and the materials of the poem like feelings, emotions and thoughts are fused because of an internal pressure. A successful poem is not the poet's personal expression but an expression that is a result of the fusion of various elements. As Allen Austin observes "Eliot contrasts his theory of the creative process to Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquility'.
His objection is not to Wordsworth's concept of poetry as the expression of emotion, but what Eliot believes to be the inaccuracy of Wordsworth description of the creative process. Whereas Wordsworth emphasizes the poet's spontaneous emotion, Eliot emphasizes the poet's fusion of experiences—the intensity of the pressure which fuses the images and emotions. 6

It is in this context that the theory of 'objective correlative' assumes significance and relevance. We have suggested at the appropriate pages in the following pages, how and why, Eliot drops all these terms, when he talks about the creative process.

In the following pages we have tried to isolate some of the well known concepts of Eliot's poetics and tried to suggest their overall significance when Eliot applies them to a specific case or a text. We have purposefully avoided the discussion of Eliot's views on

the Poetic Drama, for the very simple reason that it would involve us in a discussion of the form and technique of Jacobean plays. Since our attempt is very modest we have brought to a central focus some of the ways in which Eliot tried to reconstitute the poetic tradition and thereby increase our awareness of the significance of a few poets who have not only altered the poetic idiom but also nurtured the sensibility that could respond to their poetry.