CHAPTER - IV

RELIGION AND POETRY
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In the foregoing pages we have discussed Eliot's views on various critical concepts like the dissociation of sensibility, unified sensibility, wit, imagination and fancy, and which poets possessed them and to what degree they modified their poetic outlook and practice.

In the following pages we shall try to assess Eliot's views on religious poetry, and what importance Eliot gives to the religious poets, and why he appreciates certain type of religious poets. First of all Eliot talks about the way or sense in which religious literature can be understood. The religious literature can be classified into three categories. The first and the foremost is the religious literature, as we speak of historical literature or of scientific literature. It has been raised to that status of literature because of its style. The writers who belong to this category, whatever may be their purpose of writing; religious, historical or philosophic, have made their writings delightful and enjoyable. So unconcerned with their primary object of writing, we are able to enjoy the works because of their language. The Bible and the works of Jeremy Taylor are good examples.
The second category is in 'devotional' poetry. Eliot believes that this type of devotional poetry or religious poetry is a "variety of minor poetry." Poets like Vaughan or Southwell have a restricted vision of the subject matter, but they do not treat the whole subject in religious spirit. Their poetry is the product of a special religious awareness, which may exist without the general awareness we expect of a major poet, like Dante. But in some the general awareness may have existed but the preliminary steps representing it may have been suppressed and the end product produced. So it is difficult to discriminate between the poets with the general awareness and the poets of genius with a special and limited awareness.

The third type of religious literature (relation that religion has towards) is the writing of those who sincerely advance or forward the cause of religion. This may come under propaganda. These writings do not deal with the relation between the Religion and literature. But of all these three senses of religious literature, we as students of Eliot's criticism, are interested in his views on devotional poetry. In his essay on Richard Crashaw Eliot says,
Crashaw is a devotional poet, because the word religion is greatly abused. Even devotional poetry is something which we enjoy, though we do not enjoy it as the members of that particular religion. He also points out that for a great majority readers devotional poetry is a minor sort of poetry.

He further elaborates the idea of minor poetry in his essay "what is minor poetry"? He says that minor poets have a special appeal, let it be the poet's personality, or of the subject matter, or of a particular quality, of wit, or pathos. Eliot feels that the difference between major and minor poets is not whether they wrote long poems or only short poems. Eliot says "the important difference is whether a knowledge of the whole, or at least of a very large part, of a poet's work, makes one enjoy more, because it makes one understand better, any one of his poems. That implies a significant unity in his whole work. One can't put this increased understanding altogether into words."\(^1\)

Here Eliot does not consider George Herbert as a

minor poet. He appreciates him as a major poet. He feels that Herbert has that unifying personality. The spirit of Anglican devotion is pervasive throughout his verse. Eliot feels that whenever he is reminded of Herbert it is not a few poems from the anthologies that come to his mind but the whole work of the poet, inviting comparison with his contemporaries. Eliot feels that Herbert does not belong to certain period or age. We need not worry about his racial background, or the thought, except for the Elizabethan setting. He says, "what we get, when we proceed from those of his poems which we read in anthologies, to read his entire collection, is a repeated pleasure, the enjoyment of new beauties and new technical variations, but no such total impressions. We cannot say, with him, that the whole is more than the sum of its parts."² And at the same time considering Herbert as a major poet he says that "a major poet is one of whose work we have to read a great deal, but not always the whole."³


³Ibid., p. 48.
Eliot feels that it is rather difficult to judge the genuineness of a poet immediately. By the time he starts writing the poet would not be having that wide reputation, and once he has achieved the reputation he will be no longer read. The problem we face is we cannot get anything fresh. Eliot makes a passing remark on Gerard Manley Hopkins. So we are in a fix unable to judge the genuineness of a poet.

In short he leaves the problem of major and minor poets and poetry to the reader. He believes that the pattern of English poetry will not be the same for two people. Hence there would be as many major poets as an intelligent reader may like to feel. Even a particular poet may be a major poet to one and minor to another.

He compares the two major poets Dante and Milton in his critical essays and tries to discuss some of their problems. Discussing Milton he feels that Milton was handicapped by his blindness, even while he was writing his "Paradise Lost." He totally lacked the visual imagination and like Shakespeare was unable to infuse new life into
his words. His language was totally scholarly and devoid of feeling. So Milton in developing his own style was at a certain disadvantage. He had to be more keen about sound patterns or what Eliot called "the auditory imagination". Milton was forced to cultivate the rhetorical style. As a result of this the auditory imagination was exploited at the cost of the visual and the tactile, resulting in the separation of the inner meaning from the surface. This necessitates a number of readings of the text before the text is fully understood. The text has to be read in two different ways, one is for the sound and the another for the sense. And "Shakespeare, or Dante, will bear innumerable readings, but at each reading all the elements of appreciation can be present. There is no interruption between the surface that these poets present to you and the core."4 We have, incidentally, the same opinion expressed by Johnson in his life of Milton. Eliot himself makes a reference to his 'Life of Milton' when he speaks of Milton's language as a stylized language.

In the earlier essay on Milton Eliot felt that it was largely Milton's language that becomes an obstacle. But in his later essay on Milton the idea is a bit different. Eliot feels that there had been an antipathy towards Milton as a man in his first essay. This was because of the civil war in which Milton was a symbolic figure. 

Eliot is of the opinion that if viewed through the glass of a civil war Miltonic works would look distorted. Milton as Eliot felt was a sound free churchman and hence our prejudices against him might make our judgement of his poetry biased to the judgement. Keats passed on Milton, "Life to him would be death to me," Eliot says "Keats voiced the very inmost of the English genius." To pass under the spell of Milton is to be condemned to imitate him. It is quite different with Shakespeare. "Shakespeare baffles and liberates; Milton is perspicuous and constricts." Eliot felt that Milton had made the writing of the epic impossible.


6Ibid., p. 150.
with such a giant as Milton before him, it is difficult for any poet to attain those standards and hence it is difficult for others to write an epic. Anything written in that style tends to become an imitation. Eliot feels that basically Milton's influence has been bad and fundamentally Milton is a master whom one should avoid. He says, "In writing these sentences I failed to draw a three fold distinction, which now seems to me of some importance. There are three separate assertions implied. The first is, that an influence has been bad in the past; that is to assert that good poets, in the eighteenth century or nineteenth century, would have written better if they had not submitted themselves to the influence of Milton. The second assertion is, that the contemporary situation is such that Milton is a master whom we should avoid. The third is, that the influence of Milton, or of any particular poet, can be always bad, and that we can predict that whenever it is found at any time in the future, however remote, it will be a bad influence. Now, the first and third of these assertions I am no longer prepared to make, because detached
from the second, they do not appear to me to have any meaning." 7 But the fact remains that though Eliot pays lip service to Milton's greatness and his creative powers, he finds fault with Milton for evolving his own language for his own poems. So the stand he has taken earlier remains throughout though there is some sort of variation.

The main problem here is Milton too could have been discussed as a religious poet. There is definitely more of the Christian element in Milton than in any other poet. Why Eliot is prepared to consider minor poets as devotional poets, and Herbert as a major poet? It seems Eliot has certain reservations about Milton. How can we explain this? We can offer an explanation in that Eliot wanted to write poems for which he had no models in English literature down from renaissance to Elizabethan and Edwardian poets. In Milton he found a great giant with whom he had to come to terms, so that his views of dissociation of sensibility, craftsmanship and impersonality may have a wider publicity.

Though he refers to Milton as a master who had conservative powers, there is an implicit contrast between Milton and Dante in his essay on Dante. Perhaps Eliot is very when he says "what I have in mind is that Dante is, in a sense to be defined (for the word means little by itself), the most universal of poets in the modern languages." He justified this comment by saying (that Dante is the most universal of all in the modern languages) that the universality of Dante emerges largely because of his visual imagination. And Dante's allegory has this quality. And the allegory is not an Italian custom but an universal method. And the greatness of Dante is that his poetry is understood very easily. Dante is a great poet to Eliot because his attempt is to make us see what he saw. He brackets Dante and Shakespeare and there is no third between them because they are the poets of universality. Here again the emphasis is on impersonality. Eliot says, "In writing of the Divine Comedy I have tried to keep to a few very simple points of which

I am convinced. First that the poetry of Dante is the one universal school of style for the writing of poetry in any language. There is much, naturally, which can profit only those who write Dante's own Tuscan language; but there is no poet in any tongue—not even in Latin or Greek—who stands so firmly as a model for all poets. I tried to illustrate his universal mastery in the use of images. In the actual writing I went so far as to say that he is safer to follow, even for us, than any English poet, including Shakespeare. My second point is that Dante's 'allegorical' method has great advantages for the writing of poetry: it simplifies the diction, and makes clear and precise the images. That in good allegory, like Dante's, it is not necessary to understand the meaning first to enjoy the poetry, but that our enjoyment of the poetry makes us want to understand the meaning. And the third point is that the Divine Comedy is a complete scale of the depths and heights of human emotion; that the purgatorio and Paradiso are to be read as extensions of the ordinarily very limited human range. Every degree of the feeling of humanity, from lowest to highest, has, moreover, an intimate relation to
the next above and below, and all fit together according to the logic of sensibility".  

It is significant to note that Eliot admires in Dante not the logic of imagination but the logic of sensibility. Dante has the capacity to visualise and is a remarkable example of unified sensibility. It does not mean that Eliot forgets the religion and literature of other poets. But devotional poets are different from Dante. We may conclude by saying that whatever may be the surface classification of poets and poems Eliot uses to classify the argument, he always endorses the proposition that the first business of a critic is to consider poetry as poetry, though poetry may have other uses and significance. In this way he confirms the modernist view that a poem is an object which is sustained by its own logic, may be of imagination or sensibility, which in turn brought into critical theory such concepts like heresy of paraphrase, intentional fallacy and affective fallacy.