CHAPTER- VI

ELIOT'S STYLE
CHAPTER- 6

ELIOT’S STYLE

“Literary criticism”, wrote Lawrence, “can be no more than a reasoned account of the feelings produced upon the critic by the book he is criticizing. Criticism can never be a science: It is, in the first place, much too personal, and in the second, it is concerned with values that science ignores. The touchstone is emotion, not reason. We judge a work of art by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion, and nothing else....”

The detection, therefore, of the nature of one’s style, in criticism as well as in creative work, demands from us a thorough, constant and comprehensive grasp and study, because style is not an external trick or mannerism or superficial decoration imposed from without. Style is like the essence or the fragrance which wholly pervades the flower. It springs from the kind of content, idea, nature of experience, the outlook or the vision, the nature and the temperament that the writer possesses. The hackneyed statement – “The style is the man”- has every grain of truth.

Stories are told of scrupulous writers, like Flaubert, who spent days trying to get one or two sentences exactly right. Command over words is ultimately command over life and experience. Maupassant reports Flaubert as saying: “Whatever, the thing is that one wishes to say; there is only one word to express it, one verb to animate it, and one
adjective to qualify it. Therefore, one must search until one has found them, this word, this verb, this adjective”.

Before we raise the essential points regarding the chief features of study manifested in Eliot’s critical and non-critical prose, it will not be superfluous to dwell a little more upon style itself. Middleton Murry points out in his book, The Problem of Style, that style means that “personal idiosyncrasy of expression” by which we recognize a writer.

*It is certain that no amount of correctness in grammar and composition is enough to make a positive style, even in the sense of technique of expression...Here then we have three fairly distinct meanings of the word “style” disengaged: style as personal idiosyncrasy; style as technique of exposition: style as the highest achievement of literature*”.  

Middleton Murry’s phrase “personal idiosyncrasy” denotes what constitutes the characteristic, individual way of expression, mode, behaviour or gesture in the communication of ideas. We find, in Eliot’s entire prose work, this “personal idiosyncrasy” or the individual mode of writing which is Eliot’s and none other’s. We can recognize and ascribe an anonymous piece of writing to Eliot, if we have studies, and apprehended his other writings: as we know an intimate e from a distance by his peculiar gait, the rhythm of his movement, even when his face is not fully visible to us.

There is a marked difference between the essays of Eliot which were actually delivered as lectures and the essays
not mean to be so. The difference between the two kinds of essays is the difference natural to writing and to speech. But the fact is that the quality of speech or rhetoric, the immediate sense of the audience, the informal tone of the address, the art of convincing, cajoling and persuading the reader is everywhere in Eliot's essays. And one more difference is to be noted between the early essays and the later ones. In the early essays of Eliot, one finds a greater degree of orthodoxy, conviction, vigour, and incisive analysis, and an attempt to see the object as it is. Hence, the early essays have a greater degree of surely than the later ones and are more exciting and persuasive. Eliot says in his essays "To criticize the Critic":

There are errors of judgment, and what I regret more there are errors of tone: the occasional note of arrogance, of vehemence, cocksureness or rudeness, the braggadocio of the mild-mannered man safely entrenched behind his typewriter....

So far I can judge....it is my earlier essays which have made the deeper impression. I attribute this to two causes. The first is the dogmatism of youth. When we are young we see issues sharply defined, as we age we tend to make more reservations, to qualify our positive assertions, to introduce more parentheses. We regard the enemy with greater tolerance. And when we are young, we are confident in our opinions. The second reason for the enduring popularity of some of my early criticism is....that....I was implicitly defending
the sort of poetry that I and my friends wrote. This gave my essays a kind of urgency, the warmth of the appeal of the advocate which my later, more detached and I hope judicial essays, cannot claim".

The style of Eliot is at its best in the essays on the Metaphysical, “Dante”, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, “Poetry and Drama”, and on F.H. Bradley and the Elizabethan dramatists. Eliot is not a “creative” critic like Lord David Cecil, nor a “Romantic” critic like Walter Pater or Arthur Symons. The critical method and style in Eliot’s criticism are generally analytical, incisive, anatomical, scientific and expository.

One of the important features of Eliot’s style in prose is its liveliness. Eliot’s style brings to us a sense of familiarity, of availability, and thus, commands our greater co-operation and goodwill; this quality points, at the same time, to the inner poise and strength of conviction of the writer. Humour in Eliot’s style is a functional weapon that Eliot wields, attacking the fallacious and establishing the truth. Miss M.C. Bradbrook says in here essay that Eliot’s style “works much in terms of negative, and of definition by exclusion”. At the end of his essay, “Wilkie Collins and Dickens” Eliot states that one of the first requirements of either prose or verse is that it should be “interesting”. In his essay on Dryden, he says that “the prospect of delight alone justifies the perusal “of poetry”. He informs us about Charles Whibley that he had the first requisite of a critic: an interest in his subject, and ability to
arouse an interest for it. Eliot performs almost the same task: he makes his prose delightful and interesting through different means – through the conversational tone, humour and wit, and by communicating the note of surprise and the sense of contrast. A piece of lively and interesting prose may be taken as an example:

There is, however, one contemporary figure about whom my mind will, I fear, always waver between dislike, exasperation, boredom and admiration – that is D.H. Lawrence.

My opinion of D.H. Lawrence seem to form a tissue of praise and execration. The vehemence of my ejaculations of dislike are preserved, like flies in amber, or like wasps in honey, by the diligence of Dr. Leavis....Last year, in the Lady Chatterley case, I expressed my readiness to appear as a witness for the defence. Perhaps the counsel for the defence were well-advised not to Put me into the witness-box, as it might have been rather difficult to make my views clear to a jury by that form of inquisition, and a really wily prosecutor might tie me up in knots. I felt then, as I feel now, that the prosecution of such a book, a book of most serious and highly moral intention, was a deplorable blunder, the consequences of which would be most unfortunate, whatever the verdict, and give the book a kind of vogue which would have been abhorrent to the author. But my antipathy to the author remains, on the ground of what seems to me egotism, a strain
of cruelty and a feeling in common with Thomas Hardy—a lack of a sense of humour.\(^6\)

Close examination of this passage shows many qualities which are typical of Eliot’s style. The passage exhibits the firmness and conviction of a viewpoint. Here the tone of conviction is one of the chief sources of the strength of style. The lines delight us but also seem to destroy the opponent’s point of view. They ridicule and belittle. “Like flies in amber, or like wasps in honey, by the diligence of Dr. Leavis reminds us of the process in Pope’s ironical verses. And Leavis’s seriously written book in defence of D.H. Lawrence seems to lose, for a moment, its force, edge and seriousness in our imagination. Though Eliot is usually a man of humility, he is not always without haughtiness: M. C. Bradbrook in her essay has rightly noted the “haughty humility” in Eliot. In this passage Eliot seems to speak from an Olympian height and presents the criticism of Dr. Leavis about Lawrence in a somewhat demeaning light. The word “diligence” beings association of physical labour. By the ironic and witty use of a single sentence, or a word, Eliot is able to petrify or impoverish his adversary. Dr. Leavis does not usually have this fund of humour, the jocular ironic turns and twists of phrases which are a continual delight in reading Eliot’s prose. Dr. Leavis is nothing if not very serious and sombre.

Eliot says that a poet has three-fold problem to solve: he must earn a living, he must practice and perfect himself in writing, and he must cultivate other interests as well:
I do not think any parents have ever brought a child up with a view to his becoming a poet; some parents have brought up their children to be criminals; but for good and loving parents a poet is almost the last thing they could want their child to be, unless they thought it was the only way of saving him becoming a criminal.  

On marks the typical jocular, ironic and ridiculing tone and style in Eliot’s review of Bertrand Russell’s Why I am not a Christian in The Criterion. Eliot first of all quotes Russell’s words:

_We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world – its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties and ugliness, see the world as it is, and be not afraid of it, conquer the world by intelligence and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it._

Eliot makes fun of Russell for his keenness in looking at things “fair and square” and “on standing rather sitting down”. He argues that Russell has wholly unreasoning prejudice in favour of freedom, kindliness and such things. He agrees with him that fear is a bad thing but at the same time he protests that fear has several shades of meaning and the fear of God is quite different from the fear of burglary or bankruptcy. He says that there is good and bad fear of God; the bad way of fearing God is the way that stimulates toxins in the blood, producing horripilation.
Eliot’s style cannot be called, to use Alan Warner’s words, “the gritty style”. Benjamin Franklin once answered his own question, “What qualities should a writing have to be good and perfect of its kind”, by saying that it should be “smooth, clear and short”. Eliot’s style in his best critical essays is one of analysis and elucidation. Remarking, “.....He (Swinburne) uses the most general word, because his emotion is never particular, never in direct line of vision, never focused...” Eliot quotes the line of Swinburne:

*There lived a singer in France of old
By the tide less dolorous midland sea.
In a land of sand and ruin and gold
There shone one woman, and none but she.*

Eliot continues:

.....Swinburne defines the place in the most general word, which has for him its own value. “Gold”, “ruin”, “dolorous”; it is not merely the sound that he wants, but the vague associations of ideas that the words give him. He has not his eye on a particular place.....

In a brilliant critical analysis in “From Poe to Valery”, he writes:

Poe had, to an exceptional degree, the feeling for the incantatory element in poetry, but in his choice of the right sound Poe is by no means careful that it would have also the right sense. I will give one comparison of uses of the same by Poe and by Tennyson...

[Poe’s lines]:
It was night, in the lonesome October
Of my most immemorial year.....

"Immemorial" according to the Oxford Dictionary, means: "that is beyond memory, or out of mind; ancient beyond memory or a record: extremely old". None of these meanings seems applicable to this use of word by Poe. The year was not beyond the memory; the speaker remembers one incident very well.

[The line of Tennyson]:
The moan of doves in immemorial elms.

Here "immemorial", besides having the most felicitous sound value, is exactly the word for trees so old that no one knows just how old they are. 13

Eliot's style is also somewhat rhetorical in the best sense of the term. "The word [rhetoric] simply cannot be used as synonymous with bad writing...Let us avoid the assumption that rhetoric is vice of manner, and endeavour to find a rhetoric of substance also, which is right because it issues from what it has to express". 14

And the element of rhetoric in the prose style of Eliot has no suggestion of verbiage: it calls for insistence and emphasis on the central point- the point which Eliot likes to communicate to the reader with strength, directness and force. The rhetorical manner in Eliot conveys in the end an effect "not of verbosity, but of bold, even shocking...directness".

The language of Eliot's earlier critical essays, though compact is rhetorical, almost in the debater's style. The
compact, method of rhetoric, expansion and elaboration in the earlier essays helps Eliot a great deal in rejecting and negating the conventional, pseudo-Romantic Georgian modes and in establishing new emphases in criticism. The rhetoric in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is not the vice of manner; it is a rhetoric of substance in the sense that it issues from what the writer has to express. The repetition of "the historical sense" in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" beings to the reader the sense of functional rhetoric. Some words sometimes need to be repeated:

\[It \text{ involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call indispensable...and the historical sense involves a perception not only of the past ness of the past...the historical sense compels a man to write not merely...this historical sense which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal...}^{15}\]

In the same manner there is the recurrence of the word "mind" for four or five times in a single line of the same essay:

He must be aware that the mind of Europe – the mind of his own country – a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind – is a mind which changes.\(^{16}\)

Henri Fluchere in an essay says that Valery, compared to Eliot, is too much of a conscious artist, he is far more preoccupied with the way in which he puts a statement than with the statement itself. Eliot’s prose, M. Fluchere continues,
is never more than the best possible way of communicating his thought (exactly what Middleton Murry describes as style) - and does not want to be more.

Eliot’s style process slowly, is often repetitive, and seldom far from easy-going, as an instrument of investigation should be, which should not leave nay stone unturned, any hypothesis untried, and yet reach the conclusion with unerring firmness. Henri Fluchere does not say that Eliot’s is the prose of a purely intellectual writer as a subtle interplay of irony and emotion is felt throughout the pattern of the style, colouring the statements and giving to some of his pronouncements the irrefutability of profoundly experienced truth. Irony, emotional tone and rhetoric are to be noted in the following lines of Eliot taken at random from The Idea of a Christian Society:

The more highly industrialized the country, the more easily a materialistic philosophy will flourish in it, and the more deadly that philosophy will be. Britain has been highly industrialized longer than any other country. And the tendency of unlimited industrialism is to create bodies of men and women – of all classes – detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion in other words, a mob and a mob will be no less a mob if it is well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed, and well-disciplined.¹⁷

M.C. Bradbrook in her essay “Eliot’s Critical Method” raises a few points concerning the critical method and style of Eliot. She notes the difference in tone and degree of force
between Eliot's earlier essays and the later ones. She says that when Eliot established his own style as a poet, some informing power departed from his critical writing. If, for example, the essay "In Memoriam" is compared with that on Messenger, or the introduction to the volume of Kipling's verse with the essay on Dryden; it will be seen that Eliot has withdrawn from his subject: he is no longer so closely engaged. Eliot's method, Miss M.C. Bradbrook continues, is determinate in his style: a neutral style, stripped of emotional phrase and metaphor, though not without powerful resources of tone and inflexion, particularly the ironic. It is expository rather than forensic, and works much in terms of negatives and of definition by exclusion. A series of such qualifications and restrictions:

*His conversation so nicely,
Restricted to what, Precisely
And If and Perhaps and But*

---are to be found in Eliot. Eliot's style works by reservations and implications. In his own phrase, it has "tentacular roots". In the earlier period of his work, Eliot's criticism is criticism proper, devoid of biographical, personal, sociological digressions, devoid also of the residue of such imperfect creative impulses as he finds in some of the criticism of Coleridge and Symons.

What Eliot says about Bradley's style in Selected Essays is true of his own. F.H. Bradley has had a great impact
on Eliot's style. Eliot in the preface to his book Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley writes:

_I can present this book only as a curiosity of biographical interest, which shows, as my wife observed at once, how early my own prose style was formed on that of Bradley and how little it has changed in all these years._

In Eliot's style itself one notices "a curious blend of humility and irony, and an attitude of extreme diffidence about his own work". What Eliot writes about F.H. Bradley is true of himself:

_And... having in mind Bradley's polemical irony and his obvious zest in using it, his habit of discomfiting an opponent with a sudden profession for ignorance, of inability to understand, or of incapacity for abstruse thought..._

Eliot often informs us that he has not the mind or the capacity for abstruse thought or theorizing, but we find in his essays ample theorizing about art, poetry and criticism. We find in Eliot, as in Bradley, the habit of discomfiting an opponent with a sudden profession of ignorance, of inability to understand. M.C. Bradbrook finds Eliot's expression -- "The poem, 'Gethsemane' [by Kipling] which I do not think I understand...." -- tantamount to the implication -- "I expect you think it is simple, but that only shows how superficial your reading is". And almost in a similar manner Eliot tells us
about his inability to understand a stanza of Shelley’s “To a Skylark”:

Keen are the arrows
    Of that silver sphere,
Whose intense lamp narrows?
    In the white dawn clear
Until we hardly see – we feel that is there. Eliot writes about this stanza:

I should be grateful for any explanation of this stanza until now I am still ignorant of what sphere Shelley refers to or why it should have silver arrows or what the devil he means by an intense lamp narrowing in the white dawn.... There may be some clues for persons more learned that I....

The tone of humility is to be found in almost all the prefaces of F.H. Bradley’s books. But true humility is the quality of one who has also solid strength in himself. The man who has enough faith in himself can afford to speak poorly of himself or can dwell on his limitations with serenity and calm. Eliot has written his prefaces to his books exactly in the Bradleyan vein. Eliot says in “Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca” that he has never read a more terrible exposure of human weakness – universal weakness – as in the last great speech of Othello. What Othello seems to him to be doing in making this speech is “cheering himself up” or thinking about himself. Humility, Eliot continues, is the most difficult of all virtues to achieve; nothing dies harder than the desire to think
well of oneself. We may add that to talk big of oneself generally irritates the reader whereas the presentation of one's true position – of strength and of weakness – with humility and submission arouses a receptive, cooperative frame of mind in him.

William Empson records his earliest memory of Eliot in his essay “The Style of the Master”. Eliot, when asked what he thought of Proust, replied, “I have not read Proust”. A week after, a person asked Eliot what he thought of the translation of Proust by Scott-Moncrieff, and Eliot delivered a very weighty and long tribute to that work. William Empson, and others were startled by so much loquacity from “the silent master”. It seemed quite clear to Mr. Empson what Eliot meant when he said he had not read Proust. Eliot did not consider he had “read” a book unless he had written copious notes about it.

The Ethical Studies said F.H. Bradley “did not aim at the construction of a system of moral philosophy”. The first words of the preface to his Principles of Logic are: “The following work makes no claim to supply any systematic treatment of logic”. He begins the preface to Appearance and Reality with “I have described the following work as an essay in metaphysics. Neither in form nor extent does it carry out the idea of a system”. The phrase for each book is almost the same. We find Eliot in the prefaces to his different books writing in the same vein – In his preface to the 1928 edition of The Sacred Wood:
There are, it is true, faults of style which I regret; and especially I detect frequently a stiffness and an assumption of pontifical solemnity which may be tiresome to many readers.

In the preface of 1951 to Selected Essays: I have expanded the original volume of Selected Essays 1917-32, by including a few essays from the now superfluous Essays – Ancient and Modern….But Selected Essays is already bulky enough….On reviewing the contents of the book, I find myself at times inclined to quarrel with my own judgments, and more often to criticize the way in which they were expressed.

Or in his preface to On Poets: In publishing these addresses now, I have not attempted to transform them into what they might have been if originally designed for the eye instead of the ear; nor have I made alterations….and also some of those preambular remarks, and incidental pleasantries, which having been intended to seduce the listeners might merely irritate the reader.

In the preface to The Use of Poetry:

*These lectures, delivered at Harvard University…owe much to an audience only too ready to applaud merit and condone defect; but I am aware that such success as they had was largely dramatic, and that they will be still more disappointing to those who heard them…..*

In the preface to The Idea of a Christian Society:

As I have chosen to consider such a large problem, it should be obvious that the following pages can have but little
importance by themselves......At most this essay can be only
an original arrangement of ideas which did not belong to me
before...That is a task for which I am incompetent.

In the same way, Eliot begins his preface negatively in
Notes towards the Definition of Culture and says that his
purpose is not to outline social or political philosophy. His
aim to help define the word “culture”.

And lastly in his preface to Knowledge and Experience:

*From the autumn of 1915 until the end of 1916 I earned
my living as a schoolmaster....Forty six years after my
academic philosophizing came to an end, I find myself
unable to think in the terminology of this essay. Indeed I
do not pretend to understand it. As philosophizing, it
may appear to most modern philosophers to be quaintly
antiquated. I can present this book only as a curiosity of
biographical interest....*

Eliot’s irony is the weapon of a modest and highly
sensitive man. It is usually part of the texture of Eliot’s style.
At one place in “The Function of Criticism”, irony turns
almost to ridicule:

Why have principles when one has the inner voice? If I
like a thing, that is all I want; and if enough of us,
shouting all together, like it, that should be all that
you......ought to want. 20

Or later in the same essay:

*There is tendency, and I think it is a wiggery tendency,
to decry this critical toil of the artist, to propound the*
thesis that the great artist is an unconscious artist, unconsciously inscribing on his banner the words Muddle Through.\textsuperscript{21}

"Muddle Through" has been capitalized and this emphasis constitutes a pungent criticism of the belief in unconscious art. Persons, who believe that a great artist is only an unconscious artist and has nothing to do with labour and critical toil, are mistaken.

Eliot is critical of the Romantic notion of poetry:

\begin{quote}
When we talk about Poetry with capital P, we are apt to think only of the more intense emotion or the more magical phrase: nevertheless there are a great many casements in poetry which are not magic, and which do not open on the foam of perilous seas, but are perfectly good windows for all that.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Eliot's irony does not remain always limited to tone, inflexion, single word or phrase; at times it takes the form of ruthless chastising. For example, Eliot's style in the essay on Arnold is sharp-edged and hard-hitting. It minutely analyses Arnold's expressions and finds in them a medley of flaw and falsehood. Eliot deflates Arnold's statement —"No one can deny that it is of advantage to a poet to deal with a beautiful world"— by saying that for a poet a beautiful world is not very important and the poet is supposed to see beneath both beauty and ugliness, to see the boredom and the horror and the glory.

Arnold says: "The greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life". Eliot
comments: "Not a happy way of putting it, as if ideas were a lotion for the inflamed skin of suffering humanity." And more: "This seemed to me a striking, dangerous and subversive assertion. 'Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life'. Arnold might have read Lessing's famed Laocoon with a view to disentangling his own confusions".

Eliot is outspoken in praise of economy, precision, and the width of emotional appeal in Dante. He cannot tolerate verbiage or looseness in exposition or expression of ideas in others or in himself.

To guide writers, George Orwell said: "If it is possible to cut out a word, cut it out". Eliot too gives this very advice to writers and poets. As a man thinks and feels, so he writes. If his thoughts are muddled, his style will be muddled. If his thoughts are clear and sharp, his writing will be clear and sharp. "A man's style", wrote Emerson, "is his mind's voice". And he added: "Wooden minds, wooden voices".

The ideal task of a critic is primarily to make us possessed of facts about a work of art and not to make judgment of good and worse, but we find Arnold in his essays on Wordsworth engaged more in talking about the superiority and inferiority of a particular poet than in doing close analysis. Arnold's tone is laudatory and eulogistic and sonorous. Eliot's style when laudatory puts or lays bare before us the fact for being so. We find Arnold using words like "greatness" and "glory" without showing us the cause for such use. Arnold writes in his essay: "He (Wordsworth) is one of the very
chiefest glories of English poetry: and by nothing is England as glorious as by her poetry”. 26

The language of Arnold here, strictly speaking, is not the language of criticism. To say that a particular poem or poetry is “glorious” carries sense only in a vague way.

Eliot’s essay on the Metaphysical poets, though a review, is more analytical. It is suggestive and illuminating:

*On the other hand some of Donne’s most successful and characteristic effects are secured by brief words and sudden contrasts. “A bracelet of bright hair about the bone”. Here the most powerful effect is produced by the sudden contrast of associations of bright hair and of bone.* 27

F.R. Leavis at his best is analytical and critical but too seriously engaged in his work to take care to delight the reader. “Seriousness” is the key word for the temperament shown in his critical essays. Dr. Leavis makes an important point while introducing his book Revaluation “But no treatment of poetry is worth much that does not keep very close to the concrete: there lies the problem of the method”. 28 But one finds in his criticism veiled prejudices and prepossessions. Eliot in his essay *To Criticize the Critic* says about Leavis: “And another critic of importance, Dr. F.R. Leavis, who may be called the critic as Moralist”. 29
REFERENCES
3. To Criticize the Critic, p. 4.
4. Ibid. p. 6.
5. The Sacred Wood.
6. To Criticise the Critic.
7. Ibid.
8. The Criterion.
9. Ibid.
11. The Sacred Wood, p.47
12. Ibid.
13. To Criticize the Critic, p. 32.
14. The Sacred Wood, p. 79.
15. Ibid, p. 49.
18. Knowledge and Experience, p.0.
21. Ibid.
23. The Use of Poetry, p. 2.
24. Ibid. p. 3.
27. Selected Essays, p.283.
29. To Criticize the Critic, p. 3.