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## The Strain of Romanticism in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot

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### Abstract

In many of his critical writings, T.S. Eliot claims to be a votary of classicism. This claim notwithstanding, there are strains of romanticism in his poetry as well as in his essays. The present study is directed to highlight this ambivalence with reference to Eliot's critical essays as well as his poetry. The terms 'classicism' and 'romanticism' are too frequently used in the study of literature. There is also a tradition to classify certain periods in the history of English literature as Classical or Romantic. This classification is misleading because no period or poet can claim to be wholly in the tradition of classicism or romanticism. They are two different tendencies which are simultaneously traceable in the writings of an artist, though not in equal proportion. Eliot's leanings towards romanticism are manifest in all his poems, especially in *Four Quartets*.

**Keywords:** classicism, romanticism, ambivalence, impersonality.

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### Introduction

In his preface to *For Lancelot Andrews* (1928), T.S. Eliot asserted that he was a "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (Smidt 28). In all the three domains, Eliot adhered to tradition and authority. For, without this conformity, he maintained, there will be chaos and disorder in life. This accounts for his insistence on abiding by the principles of classicism and drawing inspiration from what has been written in the past, especially in the ancient Greek and Roman literature. Romanticism, on the other hand, says Eliot, is symptomatic of disorder and chaos. Responding to Middleton Murry's objections to classicism,

he says that the difference between classicism and romanticism is "the difference between the complete and the fragmentary, the adult and the immature, the orderly and chaotic (*Selected Essays* 26). He further quotes Murry: "The English writer, the English divine, the English statesman, inherit no rules from their forebears; they inherit only this: a sense that in the last resort they must depend upon the inner voice" (27). To be guided by one's inner voice, retorts Eliot, is tantamount to "doing as one likes" (27). Such an attitude, he implies, will in turn give rise to anarchy in the creative world. This being so, he advocates compliance with the rules and traditions handed down by the earliest masters. But for this adherence, it is inconceivable to produce great art.

Eliot's distaste for romanticism notwithstanding, there are flashes of it in his critical writings. This is testified by his own statement that "a poet in a romantic age cannot be a classical poet except in tendency" (*Selected Essays* 424). Born in an age when the influence of romanticism had not completely died down, Eliot could not remain unaffected by it. As a classicist he shows his distrust in inspiration. The creative process, according to him, is a matter of toil and labour. It calls for perspiration and a good deal of intellectual drudgery. But he reverts his position when he says that the process of poetic composition "is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation" (21). Eliot thus "comes close to accepting the idea of supernatural inspiration" (Smidt 40). In his commentary published in the October issue 1932 of *The Criterion*, he further says that "in the greatest poetry there is always a hint of something behind, something impersonal, something in relation to which the author has been no more than the passive (if not always pure) medium" (Smidt 44). "The hint of something behind," says Smidt, "is actually a half-admission of belief in the divine inspiration of the poet" (45).

Eliot's theory of impersonality is too well-known to reiterate. An artist should be objective and detached in his work. In other words, he should not let his own self intrude into his work of art. For, the reader's interest in a piece of art is not in the personality of an artist but in the permanent and universal truths of life he conveys. This being so, the artist should keep himself apart from his work as much as possible. The mind of the poet, Eliot says, is like a catalyst. As the catalyst remains unaffected during the process of chemical reactions, so it should be with the mind of a poet during the process of poetic creation. All these are fine and good in themselves. But his theory of impersonality is not the whole truth about creative art. It does not stand the test of his own yardstick. About the relation between the society and the artist and its consequent reflection on the work of art, he says, "[t]he tension within the society may become also tension within the mind of the most conscious individual" (*Notes* 23). This is true that Eliot is not subjective like the romantics. Nevertheless, there is a strong feeling among the readers that the

experience of life presented in his poems is that of the poet himself, revealing his attitude and perception of life.

Following the romantic tradition Eliot underlines the emotive origin of poetry. He says that “poetry has primarily to do with the expression of feeling and emotion; and that feeling and emotion are particular, whereas thought is general” (On Poetry 19). In his later essay “The Three Voices of Poetry” (1953), he betrays his romantic leaning. Of the three voices, he is more in favour of the first voice - “the voice of the poet talking to himself” (97). Further in the same essay agreeing with the views of the German poet Gottfried Benn, he says that the poetic exercise provides a sort of catharsis to the poet's pent up feelings and sentiments. The poet is “oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief” (98). Eliot is, in fact, echoing the commonly held notion of subjectivity in romantic poetry.

The spirit of romanticism promotes idealism. The romantics are inspired with an ideal vision of life which is in conflict with the existing order. This being so, they are overwhelmed with melancholy and a sense of dissatisfaction with the values of life obtaining in the society. Consequently, they give way to a note of pessimism. Not only this. Tender-hearted as they are, they are drawn towards the underprivileged in the society. They are also moralists. Their morality is conditioned by the established values of life prevailing in every civilized society. They are averse to the pursuit of materialism as well. Wordsworth complains against his fellow countrymen that they are all preoccupied with “getting and spending” and they have no time to “see in Nature that is ours;” (“The World is too Much with Us” Lines 2,3).

Temperamentally Eliot is inclined towards the values of life that are essentially romantic. In his poems he is a ruthless critic of the modern civilization which, according to him, is spiritually and morally bankrupt. His contempt for materialism is manifest in his description of Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant, as ‘one-eyed’, and ‘Phlebas the Phoenician sailor’, whose death is not followed by rebirth because of his preoccupation with the thought of ‘profit and loss’ (“The Waste Land”). His morality and the spirit of humanitarianism are the fruits of his upbringing. The New England background left an indelible impression on his mind. His father was a strong Unitarian and his mother a literary figure. From both his parents, he inherited what made him a person of strong moral fibre as well as sophisticated literary taste. Added to these, the “young Eliot was more than usually sensitive” (Smidt 6). These early experiences and impressions must have contributed to the shaping of his idealistic personality.

It is too naive to classify a work of art into 'classicism' and 'romanticism'. They, in fact, represent two different attitudes which are simultaneously present in the writings of any author, though not in equal proportion. At some period in the history of English literature the former is dominant while at other the latter is more assertive. But none of the period can be said to be exclusively Classical or Romantic. The eighteenth century is predominantly an Age of Classicism. Nevertheless, there are poets who reflect the spirit of romanticism occasionally. "Belinda smil'd, and the entire world was gay", writes Pope in *The Rape of the Lock* (II: Line 52). This line is highly imaginative- the faculty which was decried by Locke and Hobbes as deceptive and wayward- which shows the poet's sardonic ridicule of emotion in describing the coquetry of Belinda. On the other hand the late nineteenth century is predominantly a romantic period. Wordsworth and other romantics, in spite of their advocacy of romanticism, often reveal classical tendencies. To Wordsworth "[p]oetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". All the same, he does not rule out the role of intellect and conscious effort in poetic composition. This is evident when he says: "Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply" (preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: 165) . In the twentieth century as well there are poets such as W.B Yeats, T.S. Eliot. Auden, Dylan Thomas who, despite their adherence to classicism, could not escape the influence of romanticism in their writings. To quote Walter Pater: "the romantic spirit is, in reality, an ever-present and enduring principle, in the artistic temperament" (100). He further adds: "Romanticism... although it has its epochs, is in its essential characteristics rather a spirit which shows itself at all times, in various degrees, in individual workmen and their work" (105).

Edward Lobb has made a detailed analysis of Eliot's critical essays to show his indebtedness to Romantic critical tradition. He has taken great pains to highlight the parallelism between Eliot's literary thoughts and those of the romantics. Of all the romantics, Eliot is much closer to Keats in his approach to many literary issues. To cite only a few examples, Lobb says that "Eliot's concept of tradition and Keats's view of the usefulness of the past" are alike (64). Both of them look upon the past "as a continuing source of energy for the contemporary poet" (64). Keats' hatred of "poetry that has a palpable design upon us" is very similar to what Eliot said that in a creative art, philosophy should be presented in the form of general truth not as an end in itself. In other words, both are opposed to using philosophy or idea for the sake of propaganda. As for Coleridge, Eliot shares with him much of his ideas on social issues (Kojacky qtd. in Lobb 68). In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1964), he cites Coleridge's famous distinction of imagination and fancy in *Biographia Litteraria* (76-79). Although Eliot did not hold Wordsworth in high

esteem as a critic, there is some resemblance between the two in his remarks on the proper language of poetry. To quote: "Emotion and feeling then are best experienced in the common language of the people. . . . that is, in the language common to all classes: the structure, the rhythm, the sound, the idiom of a language, express the personality of the people which speak it" (qtd. in Lobb70). In spite of the fact that Eliot is the poet of the urban world, there is element of primitivism in his poem which brings him closer to Wordsworth. Lobb cites the example of "Animula" (1929), which depicts the child's psychology (71).

Eliot's poetry is ancillary to his criticism. In other words, his poetry exemplifies his critical precepts. In the guise of Prufrock Eliot reflects the "impact of extreme self-consciousness on a modern mind, much like his own" (Raghavan 119). Prufrock's self-awareness distracts his romantic longings much like his creator. When the protagonist of the poem says:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea.  
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown  
Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (Lines 29-131)

He, in fact, echoes his romantic yearnings for the imaginative world. The drowning into "the chamber of the sea" is indicative of his passion for the "viewless wings of Poesy" (Keats' "Ode to A Nightingale" Line 33) \_ the passion which is essentially romantic. He is awakened from this state of imaginative existence by "human voices", that is, intellect but he again relapses into the same state. Prufrock is every inch a romantic figure. His passions and longings are typical of a person who is after something ideal that he craves for but the conscious-self dissuades him from pursuing this course because of the fear of unsuccess. Prufrock eagerly desires to "have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas"(Lines 73-74). Elizabeth Drew interprets these lines as the protagonist's craving "for uncomplicated animal existence", which may make "a safe haven where his inner universe is no longer disturbed by any tormenting human problems" (Raghavan 119). Prufrock's passion for being "a pair of ragged claws" swimming under the chamber of the sea is indicative of his desire to escape because of the social humiliation as a consequence of rejection.

Prufrock recalls the past "I have known them all already, known them all-" (Line 48), "And I have known the eyes already" (Line 55) which reveals his romantic leaning. There is also sad realization on his part that he has misspent his life: "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons"(Line 51). He then identifies himself with a worm "sprawling on a pin" (Line 57). In such a state of helplessness, he wonders if he can "spit out all the butt-ends of [his] days and ways?" (Line 60). This

is, in fact, an expression of disgust at his inability to change his futile life. His wistful longing for a thing that is elusive, the note of melancholy at the wastefulness of his life, and his escapism: they all typify him as a romantic figure.

Technically *The Waste Land* is in the classical tradition but the inner breath of the poem is cast in a romantic mould. In line with Baudelaire, Eliot is a poet of urban life, but the poem under review opens with a description of Nature: "April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land" ("The Burial of the Dead": Lines 1-2). "The outer landscapes", says Raghavan, "served as objectives-correlative for projecting the emotions of the poet as they did for the earlier Romantics" (121).

The Romantic tradition glorifies the past and condemns the present. *The Waste Land* is structured on the ironic contrast between the past and the present cultures. Like other romantics, Eliot admires the past and detests the present. This parallelism runs throughout the poem. Sometimes it is intended to show difference between the two cultures and at times it is intended to highlight the similarities. In the second section of the poem, "A Game of Chess," the contrast is between love in the past and the present. "The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,"(Line 1) immediately reminds us of Shakespeare's Cleopatra whose love for Antony was of the soul rather than of the flesh. In contrast, the love of other women in this section is stale, lacking the warmth of affection. Such a contrast recurs in this section in the allusion to the love of Ferdinand and Miranda in *The Tempest*- "Those are pearls that were his eyes". It is by virtue of this song that Ferdinand is lured to meet Miranda whose love for each other is again as pure as that of Cleopatra for Antony. But the love of other women here is sterile. There is no reciprocation in their love. The contrast between the Elizabeth - Leicester love and that of the three Thames daughters in the third section, "The Fire Sermon", further reinforces the difference between "Elizabethan magnificence and modern sordidness" (Brooks 156).

*The Waste Land* also illustrates Eliot's dislike of human indignities, his aversion to rabid materialism, his distaste for war and his disdain for sexual waywardness and indiscipline. As already stated, these are essentially romantic features. The romantics are usually inspired by the spirit of humanitarianism and other positive values of life. This is not to say that the classicists are otherwise. But the history of Romanticism reveals that they are more valued by its adherents. Right from Wordsworth to Tennyson and even Arnold, a classicist in his critical essays but a romantic in his poetry, their poetry upholds the human and moral values of life. True to the romantic spirit, Eliot abhors war, sexual anarchy and materialism. For, they are contributing to the disintegration of modern civilization.

More than any other poems of Eliot, *Four Quartets* is very much in the romantic tradition. Nowhere is he so explicit in expressing his personal experiences as in this poem. The subtitles of each of the four poems are named after specific places, "two of them connected with Mr. Eliot's family history" (Gardner 62). *Burnt Norton* is the name of a seventeenth century house in Gloucestershire which the poet envisages as in ruins. Eliot stayed near the house during the summer of 1934, and must have visited its garden, perhaps with some other person. *East Coker* is a Somersetshire village from which, in the seventeenth century, one of his ancestors, Andrew Eliot, went to America. *The Dry Salvages* are a small group of rocky islands near Massachusetts, the place where their ancestors had originally settled. *Little Gidding* is named after a small country church in London. In the seventeenth century Nicholas Ferrar (1591-1637), a saint, with some of his relatives, retired for spiritual devotion to this country church. The visit to these places, familiar as Eliot was with them having family connection with at least two of them, must have kindled the emotions and thoughts that are intensely personal- the fact which runs counter to his theory of impersonality.

*Four Quartets* is thus very much subjective. In this poem, the different parts of which have been written at different times, the poet has recorded his personal experiences and reflections. The stock theme in the poem is that man's salvation lies in his unshakable faith in God and devotion to Him. The earth-bound life cannot give the satisfaction which the spiritual life offers. The poet, therefore, underlines the need to turn towards spirituality which may be had in two ways: by self-abnegation as well as by responding to the nature of external reality. In other words, we can promote spirituality by renouncing the world or by living in this world. The way up and the way down, says Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic Greek Philosopher, are one and the same. To us living in the flux of time, the poet says, there may come a sudden phase of spiritual illumination which is, of course, transient, but, none the less, very satisfying:

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,  
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,  
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,  
The surface glittered out of heart of light,  
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool,  
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty. (BN 1: Lines 36-41)

Eliot's religiosity in this poem as well as in other poems, in the light of what T.E. Hulme says, is symptomatic of his anti-romantic stance. For, Hulme says

You don't believe in God, so you begin to believe that man is a god. You

don't believe in Heaven, so you believe in a heaven on earth. In other words, you get romanticism.... Romanticism, then, and this is the best definition I can give it, is spilt religion. (qtd. in Raghavan, 138)

Hulme thus implies that romanticism and faith in God cannot co-exist. Romanticism demands exercise of imaginative power which runs counter to faith in religion. This is a very specious argument and smacks of bias against romanticism. Hulme was a staunch classicist and, therefore, an inveterate enemy of romanticism. Eliot's poetry negates such a view, although he was a great exponent of Hulme's advocacy of classicism. His unshakable belief in the efficacy of religion to deliver man from the present crisis in every segment of life, does not in any way affect the potency of his imagination and his creative ability. Far from this, this belief in God strengthens his inspiration and imparts poetic flavour to his work. His despondency and despair about the modern civilization should not be viewed negatively, that is, it should not be taken as the expression of his distrust in the efficacy of religion to resolve the contemporary problems. It rather shows his great concern to retrieve the present civilization from complete destruction which is possible only when people turn towards religion. This being so, the protagonist in *The Waste Land* invites the votaries of this civilization to "come under the shadow of the red rock" ('The Burial of the Dead': Line 26).

Eliot's subjectivity is also manifest in his reflection on the relation between art and life (BN V), and in his awareness of his old age (EC II). The materials of art are subject to the flux of time and have no inherently external quality about them. But it assumes greatness and everlasting quality because of the form and pattern the author confers upon it. Eliot is conscious of the difficulties in disciplining words into artistic forms:

... Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
(BN V: Lines13-15)

The greatness of art thus consists in its formal aspect which the author achieves by subjecting himself to strict discipline. This is analogous to spiritual discipline. The union with God, says Eliot, is possible only through disciplined practice of prayer and contemplation. In his reflection on the relation of art with life, he is reminiscent of Keats' *Ode on A Grecian Urn* when he says "as a Chinese jar still/Moves perpetually in its stillness"(BNV: Lines 6-7). Like Keats he believes in the permanence of art and transitoriness of life.



Eliot wrote *Four Quartets* when he was in the late fifties. It is then quite likely that he is thinking of his advancing years in the following lines:

What is the late November doing  
With the disturbance of the spring,  
And creatures of the summer heat.  
(ECII: Lines1-3)

In this section the poet realizes that with the advancing age he is gradually heading towards his end. This is evident from the following lines

Scorpion fights against the Sun  
Until the Sun and Moon go down  
Comets weep and Leonids fly.  
(ECII: Lines11-13)

Everything has its end. This is the inexorable law of Nature. The universe itself is subject to destruction.

Eliot's divided loyalties between classicism and romanticism are thus evident from the above analysis. The inconsistency may be due to the fact that he was simultaneously influenced by the thoughts of various intellectuals of his time as well as those who belonged to the past. These thoughts were often contradictory to each other. While Irving Babbit, T.E. Hulme and George Santayana fostered in him love of classicism, his study of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and interest in Eastern mysticism must have contributed something to his inarticulate romanticism. The revolution, started after the First World War in the realm of poetry, says Cleanth Brooks, has exhausted itself and it is again moving back into the main stream of nineteenth century with emphasis on humanistic values.

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