

ELIOT'S AFTER STRANGE GODS: CONTRAPUNTAL READING IN RELIGION & CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The critical authority of T.S.Eliot is dominant in the twentieth century English literature that abides by the modernist trend of high culture, idealism, homogeneity, classicism, the search for a unified structure whole. *After Strange Gods* (1934) gives full reign to his idealistic and centralized vision. For Eliot poetry deals with actuality, to which Cleanth Brooks adds the approach of "imaginative sympathy." In this series of three lectures, which were delivered in the University of Virginia, Eliot deals with his high-browed Catholic morals of "one race" and the necessity of a common religious background against the postmodern view of pluralism and multiculturalism. Eliot has given his opinions about the interpretation of 'Tradition.' He thinks that 'tradition' should not be associated with dogmas or fixed taboos that do not change with the passage of time and the change of circumstances. His approach to the past is neither emotionally nostalgic nor complete denigration. Eliot has spoken favourably about 'novelty' which can be the inclusion of certain new ideals instead of repeating our predecessors blindly. Tradition adheres both to the sense of past and present simultaneously, to accept the timeless and to modify the temporal may be the expertise of a great writer. Eliot also suggests that the past and the present have a reciprocal relationship. If the past can be modified by the present, the present can also be influenced by the past. This complementary approach to the dialectics of the past and the present can be applied to the dialectics of community/ individual, impersonal/ personal, universal/ particular.

Keyword: - Culture¹, Tradition², Multiculturalism³, Intertextuality⁴ etc....

1. THE CRITICAL AUTHORITY OF T.S. ELIOT

The critical authority of T.S.Eliot is dominant in the twentieth century English literature that abides by the modernist trend of high culture, idealism, homogeneity, classicism, the search for a unified structure whole. *After Strange Gods* (1934) gives full reign to his idealistic and centralized vision. For Eliot poetry deals with actuality, to which Cleanth Brooks adds the approach of "imaginative sympathy."ⁱIn this series of three lectures, which were delivered in the University of Virginia, Eliot deals with his high-browed Catholic morals of "one race"and the necessity of a common religious background against the postmodern view of pluralism and multiculturalism. To quote Eliot:

The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate.ⁱⁱ

Such blatant, orthodox morals led to the withholding of Jewish immigration under the American legislative acts of 1921 and 1924. Eliot was accused to be an anti-Semite by critics such as Anthony Julius especially in his book, *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* (1996). Eliot stated that it is reasonable "to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable."ⁱⁱⁱ His condescending attitude towards the Jews is revealed in 'Gerontion.' He has contemptuously compared Jews to rats in the poem, 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar.' In ASG, Eliot firmly puts forth the idea that a prerequisite for a 'healthy society' is 'homogeneity'. For him the mingling of cultures, traditions and religions was unacceptable. In the post-modern era of growing multiculturalism, this view of

this talented member of literati would be discarded as blasphemous and a far more aggressive reaction would be expressed than the fulminations observed in 1934. Most critics of Eliot have reacted negatively to his anti-Semitic leanings and several have pointed to the evidence in his poems.

Eliot has given his opinions about the interpretation of 'Tradition.' He thinks that 'tradition' should not be associated with dogmas or fixed taboos that do not change with the passage of time and the change of circumstances. His approach to the past is neither emotionally nostalgic nor complete denigration. He thinks that we should maintain our communication with the past to build a stable future but it is not advantageous "to indulge a sentimental attitude towards the past."^{iv} As morals are sometimes relative especially in the postmodern world, Eliot sensibly admits that besides the fundamentals, the beliefs of a particular time might be obsolete in another age. Eliot has spoken favourably about 'novelty' which can be the inclusion of certain new ideals instead of repeating our predecessors blindly. Tradition adheres both to the sense of past and present simultaneously, to accept the timeless and to modify the temporal may be the expertise of a great writer. Eliot also suggests that the past and the present have a reciprocal relationship. If the past can be modified by the present, the present can also be influenced by the past. This complementary approach to the dialectics of the past and the present can be applied to the dialectics of community/ individual, impersonal/ personal, universal/ particular. Tradition is the perpetuation of the attitude of a group that pervades specific generations, "a way of feeling and acting," that is stored in the unconscious minds of individuals. If tradition is associated with feeling, orthodoxy deals with the psychological process in a way that complements each other.

Eliot begins with an absolute denouncement of any form of liberalism in Catholic religion or in the government regulations. This stern approach for Eliot is a pre-requisite for moulding an elite tradition. He was against the notion that any society can harbour two potentially different religions and cites the example of the anomaly between Judaism & Christianity. To quote Eliot, "to renew our association with traditional wisdom; to re-establish a vital connexion between the individual and the race; the struggle ...against liberalism," should be the purpose of great writers. The idea of "secular humanism," a term used by Christopher Dawson, which later transmuted to a more popular coinage, "Humanitarianism," was against Eliot's verdict of homogeneity of religion and culture. The connection between ethnicity and culture, ethics and literature has been a polemical subject between Eliot and some of his wisest friends like Irving Babbit. The three sections of the lecture discuss the crucial questions: whether it is mandatory for books to have a moral focus, can any piece of literature be described as diabolical? Should men of letters deliberately cultivate differences from others (the society) and proclaim individualism?

Eliot in the course of his lecture has chosen a plethora of writers, especially those belonging in the twentieth century and has given his arbitrary judgments on their standards of literary acumen. How far they have abided by the tradition and moral orthodoxy seem to be the primal concern of Eliot. The imagination of the writer has also been narrowly compartmentalized between, "moral imagination," and "diabolic imagination," and he makes a contrastive reading between various writers like Hardy, Lawrence, Yeats, Pound, Katherine Mansfield, James Joyce, George Eliot, Swinburne, Gerard Hopkins and Meredith with Baudelaire and Villon. Eliot has shown a perpetual quest for a centralized control of religion, culture and even religion. He explains in the initial stages that the society brings out the best in man. Instead of settling in a favourable climate men should try to adapt themselves to meet the challenges of uncongenial environments. He has also taken the concept of 'economic determinism' as the governing principle in the life of modern men. Throughout the course of his lecture he has given various reasons to cling to the importance of 'tradition' and 'orthodoxy.' He has arbitrarily commented on a gamut of twentieth century writers by considering whether they conform to the nexus of tradition and orthodoxy. Sometimes Eliot's theories or declarations are in conflict with his practical demonstrations. He declares in his lectures that tradition should not be used to assert one's superiority over the comparatively less favoured people. However, his writings show condescending attitude against Jews at several occasions, at times in form of direct statements, at other times through sly metaphors and innuendos. He has referred to his critics like Dr. Paul Elmer who had noted the discrepancies between his verse (the praxis) and his theories as mentioned in his critical writings. Eliot, in his defence says that while his prose is about 'ideals', his poetry is related to reality. Critics like Randall Jarrell stated in *The Third Book of Criticism* that Eliot was one of the most subjective poets which sheerly goes against his theory of 'impersonality.' The whole essay shows his focus on Classicism and orthodoxy against Romanticism and heterodoxy. Eliot also questions the critics' prerogatives to label the writers into two groups like the Classicists and the Romanticists. While the postmodernists believe in the concept of "intertextuality," Eliot has opined that no writer holds the complete meaning if studied in seclusion. Contemporary writers must be juxtaposed with the writers

of the past; a new work of art affects the reading and analyses of the previous works as well. The postmodernists do not differentiate between the Romanticists and the Classicists on the basis of timeline but rather it depends on the approach, tone and the diction of the writer.

1.1 Concepts of Tradition & Orthodoxy

Eliot's Second lecture resumes his notions on the concepts of 'tradition,' and 'orthodoxy.' These terms for Eliot are not limited to theology or religion but rather associated with social environments and literary contexts. He says that a writer reveals lack of tradition in two ways: by manifesting exaggerated individualism and by defying all grand narratives or unanimously accepted rules in a social context. He comments that it is diabolical to cherish such deviations. He appreciates Milton's *Paradise Lost* as an exemplary text that connects literature with Catholicism. Most of his comments favour writing with a purpose. Reading for pleasure seems to be a weird idea for Eliot. In this lecture he contrasts three short stories 'Bliss' by Katherine Mansfield, 'The Shadow in the Rose Garden,' by D.H. Lawrence, and 'The Dead,' by James Joyce. The common theme that runs through the plot of these stories is how romantic euphoria fades very quickly in the face of reality or specifically, the theme of disillusionment. Eliot thinks that Mansfield's story is limited to show the wife's disillusionment and the change of feelings in her mind rather than concentrating on its "moral and social ramifications." Eliot opines slyly on Katherine's 'feminine' skill to satisfy the readers with this minimal material. Though, the plot of D.H.Lawrence's 'The Shadow in the Rose Garden' deals with the feelings of both the husband and the wife, yet Eliot does not find any moral fervour in it. Eliot also considers how Joyce deals with the connotations of love as an unrealized experience in his short story. The sublime realization that love transcends the boundaries of life and death is undoubtedly a comprehensive theme. He condemns Lawrence of being the 'perfect example of a heretic' and commends Joyce of being 'ethically orthodox'.

1.2 Relationship between Language & Culture

Eliot also discusses how language and culture are interspersed while giving examples from the Chinese author Confucius and the German authors like Kant and Hegel. Eliot also mentions that he had spent two years in the study of Sanskrit to understand Indian philosophy. To quote Eliot:

...Their (The Indian philosophers') subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys...^{vi}

It is interesting how Eliot notices the influence of 'Brahmin and Buddhist thought' on European philosophers like Schopenhauer, Hartmann and Deussen. Cosmopolitan inclinations and eclecticism are condemned by Eliot and he speaks about Irving Babbit's leanings towards the teachings of Confucius, to express this. He says that without being acquainted with Chinese culture and society in some depth, it is not possible to include a Chinese philosopher's ideas. We must however give Eliot the credit for mentioning his own experience while he studied *Patanjali*' metaphysics. He agrees that his attempt was hampered because his psyche was steeped in American and European philosophies.

2. ELIOT & CHRISTIANITY

He thinks that human existence tends to become more ephemeral when the writers write without the notions of 'Original Sin' and without the mandatory nature of struggle. Eliot goes on to mention that the concept of the Original sin has all but disappeared from literature and as a result, literary work has lost touch with reality and the characters therein are artificial and pictures of falsehood. He propounds the idea that when characters suffer the throes of a dilemma between good and evil and right and wrong, do they come out as real life-like people with real blood flowing through their veins. Eliot criticizes Ezra Pound of creating such unreality in his work and of assimilating undesirable characters in his portrayal of a hell which is completely devoid of the three essential factors-The Aesthetic, The Humanitarian and The Protestant. Eliot is of the view that if ones hell is so bereft, likewise his heaven will be equally deficient. In reference to W.B. Yeats, Eliot is of the opinion that he was somewhat confused and 'in search of a tradition' because of the assault of his deep religious feelings, the influence of poets he associated with, the fact that he was born in Ireland but brought up in London, his interest in occult and much else. All these factors affected his work and the resultant poetry was 'artificial'. Furthermore, Eliot comments on Yeats' fabricated 'supernatural world' as having no concept of good, evil, holiness or sin and equates it to how D.H. Lawrence looked at mythology. However he Eliot commends Yeats because of his resorting to writing austere poetry later and his shedding of the unnecessary trappings. Eliot ends his penultimate lecture by mentioning the

poetry of Hopkins and Meredith and rounds off by reiterating how the absence of an adequate tradition hampers the creations of literary writers. He has also justified the fact that poetic revelations in a state of trance cannot be always adequately connected with practical experiences. Eliot thinks that the intensity of passion as revealed in the poetry of Gerard Hopkins does not suffice the requirement of devotional poetry.

In the third lecture Eliot deals in detail with 'the history of Blasphemy,' its ramifications in the twentieth century world. He feels that in these circumstances few souls are affected by the sin of faithlessness of concerned rigorously with the consequences of blasphemy. At the beginning of the final lecture with an emphatic declaration of his disappointment at the way blasphemy is interpreted. He says that a large dose of humour may allow one to condone blasphemy and Eliot regrets the lack of faith which renders even blasphemy watered down and inconsequential. Eliot says that only a believer can blaspheme adequately and 'literary genius and profound faith, joined in a mind in a peculiar and unusual state of spiritual sickness'^{vii} can succeed in this. However, he also says that the absence of faith takes the sting out of any blasphemy and renders it impotent in its ability to cause harm. The fact that the sense of good and evil has almost been obliterated, the following blasphemy is trivial and without real evil.

2.1 Reader-Response Criticism & Eliot's views

Despite these views of Eliot it must be taken into account that the twentieth century novelists were conscious not to impose their personal views and opinions on the readers. This style which is opposed to the writer's self-aggrandizement terminated into reader-response criticism of the twenty-first century. Though Eliot appreciates George Eliot as a 'serious moralist,' yet he censures her individualistic attitude. Thomas Hardy is specially noted by Eliot for his strength of personality that is unfettered by any objective circumstances. The swings in the moods of the characters are reflected through the vivid portrayal of the landscapes. Eliot comments that Hardy is interested to portray the human emotions rather than the human minds. His characterization depends on "emotional paroxysms." For Hardy writing may be an act of relieving strong emotions; however Eliot does not comply to this approach at least theoretically. In this context Eliot also deals with the controversial topic whether human beings reveal their real selves in the moment of emotion or whether contrarily emotions bring humans to a state when they lose their actual identities. Passion may reveal only a part of the human character at special moments; however it is not a comprehensive portraiture. Sometimes it exhibits certain depravities because of a momentary lack of reason, in a state of rage which is also a kind of emotion. Undoubtedly, passion makes the characters of Hardy full of vitality and therefore popular. Next, Eliot shows some flexibility and allows Austen, Dickens and Thackeray of being orthodox but censures George Eliot for imposing her personality in her creation and of ignoring a sense of morality. Thomas Hardy, on the other hand, according to Eliot was full of 'self-expression' and often 'carelessly' and largely focused on landscape rather than on the human mind. He believes that Hardy was obsessed with emotions and that the characters he created were often brought to life through the expression of emotional outbursts. Eliot refers to the two novels *Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* as examples of masterpieces wallowing in emotionalism which might be construed as Hardy's seeking some sort of release of his own imprisoned emotions. Eliot's cold criticism of Hardy was a reaction to the latter's 'rejection of religious beliefs'. However, it is unfortunate that Eliot did not make any comment about Hardy's poetry. Although the writer was no more when the lectures were delivered, in the past many years, Hardy had been writing poetry. Some critics of both Eliot and Hardy have found similarities in their views about the unpredictability of 'moments of illumination' that may come to a writer and were both concerned about 'quality of time'. Eliot's most scathing criticism is directed towards Lawrence who he believes is without a 'sense of humour', has a misleading sense of 'intuition' and is guilty of 'sexual morbidity'. He is sanguine that such an undesirable cocktail is a result of a poor religious background and Lawrence's dislike of what Eliot calls orthodoxy. He denounces Lawrence and almost declares him a rudderless ship, without exposure to tradition or any form of guidance and thus faced with a muddled up view of good and evil. According to Eliot, Lawrence is incapable of 'self-criticism', is unschooled, fraught by prejudice, pompous, unnecessarily passionate and spiritual to the extent of being 'spiritually sick'. He also puts forth the idea that only the sickness in one would relate to Lawrence's work and this, Eliot says, is because the ability to know the difference between good and evil is so limited that anything proclaimed as being spiritual is lapped up by all and sundry like thirsty individuals.

2.2 Social Criticism

This extensive discourse on social, literary and religious criticism is more extensive rather than intensive, more polemical rather than comprehensive. He makes pointed comments on concepts of tradition, orthodoxy,

heresy, blasphemy, liberalism, romanticism and much else. With the precision and keenness of a practiced surgeon, Eliot used the scalpel of his brain to articulate his views. These three lectures express a pronounced denigration of liberalism both in literature and in religion. He also raises the question of morality in literature. A limited number of copies were printed of the three lectures and no further editions were printed thereafter. The reason of this is not entirely clear. Nevertheless, a plausible explanation for this could be the fact that Eliot laid down an extremely volatile and controversial condition for the survival of tradition, especially Christian tradition and a strong undercurrent of his anti-Semitic views were enunciated explicitly through these lectures. Despite this inclination in Eliot, it is hard to deny that the time of the delivery of the three lectures was an era of growing dissent in the minds of people. The period between 1918 and 1934 was when people were moving on from one Great War and soon the ominous clouds of another were gathering on the firmament with thunderous surety. There was an unprecedented degradation of values and Western tradition was being held ransom. Revolutionary political ideas of Democracy, Fascism and Communism were steadily spreading in Europe. The Nazi Party was gaining popularity and power in Germany with its marked anti-Semitic connotations. In his book 'T.S. Eliot: Anti Semite?' Bradley J Birzer says that although Eliot made that one comment in ASG about Jews, an important critic, Herbert Read said that in all his conversations with Eliot, he never heard the latter make a comment which could be accused of being anti-Semitic. Moreover, Eliot never allowed his Virginia lectures to be reprinted. One can say that probably Eliot believed that Jews as a community were deeply entrenched in and defensive of their traditions, culture and religion and he also noticed the absence of this same conservative instinct in his own community and thus the resultant antagonism. Eliot was firm in his belief that a multi-ethnic and multi-religious community cannot be expected to create great works of art. In ASG Eliot's opinion about any kind of debate is fairly clear. He believes it to be counter-productive and declares it to be acrimonious. The corner stone of any literary work, according to him should be tradition and orthodoxy. He denounces cosmopolitanism as being opposed to tradition and firmly believes liberalism has taken a heavy toll by chipping away significant parts of tradition. Tradition for him, however, does not only have a single dimension. It has good and bad elements and essentially is changeable. It must be woven into the fabric of literature and if not, a very narrow and limited kind of creation will result, one absolutely without any adherence to rules. Eliot, however, shuns a frivolous adherence to orthodoxy or tradition without first relating to the contemporary context. The writer who does this will do so at his own peril and will end up being a mere entertainer who will enjoy temporary adulation and permanent neglect. Orthodoxy for him is an important ingredient which will surely bind the society. Eliot makes a reference to his essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in which his concept of tradition is presented as a reaction against 'romantic subjectivism and emotionalism'. Tradition for him is something of value which, although born or evolved in the past, has great relevance in the present. It is inherent in our existence and is a major force which infuses the accumulated values of the past, into the present. It is larger than life and a writer must 'surrender his personality' to it. This is imperative, according to him, in a society worm eaten by liberalism. Tradition for Eliot is not a dogma. Neither should it be static. It evolves through generations. Tradition is an all-inclusive phenomenon, encompassing 'actions habits and customs'. He opposes the derogatory sense attached to this most valuable component of human existence. With the mention of a metaphorical tree in ASG, which sheds its leaves in fall, he says there is no sense in lamenting the loss after all is lost. At the same time, Eliot gives his listeners the hope of the same tree being lavished with new foliage soon. He also urges his listeners not to 'cling to old tradition' and to associate it with things 'immovable'. Eliot acknowledges the transitory nature of tradition and accepts that it gains or is deprived of meaning with time and also emphasizes the need to interpret tradition with intelligence.

3. ELIOT & MULTICULTURALISM

Eliot, in ASG, as a New Englander, hails the difference that he noted when he ventured into the state of Virginia. According to him, tradition elsewhere has been 'effaced' by the advent of foreigners. Eliot's extremist ideas become quite apparent when he declares the civil war having been the 'greatest disaster'. Industrialization is a bane, according to him and he believes this has caused the 'invasion of foreign races'. The economic activities which have caused the decadence of society and as a result, of tradition, are 'god before whom we fall and worship'. His views about the fast growth rates and economic policies which bring about the movement of vast masses of people from foreign shores, is quite apparent. He condemns this mixture of peoples and cultures and accuses it of creating confusion and above all of a growing distance from what he believes to be traditional thoughts, ideas and values. He categorically negates the infusion of cosmopolitan flavour in society. Eliot was convinced that the mixture of cultures brought about the degradation of society. Multiculturalism which welcomes with open arms and more importantly, with open minds, a heterogeneous mix and which is against discrimination of any kind and probably is the best atmosphere for all minds to reach a high level of maturity through diverse experiences was not

desirable, according to Eliot. He had entrenched himself in the absolutism of Anglo-Catholic Christianity and believed that from religion emerged culture and if the former was ignored, the latter would suffer destruction. Eliot was born in an Anglo-American family. He observed the alienation which was spreading alarmingly like a relentless virus through the veins of the community. The aftermath of the World War which resulted in progress in purely material terms and the ruthless and uninterrupted rise of technology on a flimsy foundation devoid of values was recipe for disaster according to Eliot and other likeminded writers of his time. His poem 'The Wasteland' very clearly portrays this. Eliot writes 'the waste sad time stretching before and after'. He launched upon a quest to look for solace in Henri Bergson, Eros, Aestheticism, Humanism, Idealism and even Buddhism to effectively counter this unacceptable encroachment. He even showed interest in the teachings of the Baghavad Gita and the Upanishads. In this he was influenced by Irving Babbit and Paul Elmore More. The fact that he went so far as to mention characters from Hindu mythology in his poem 'The Dry Salvages' shows the extent of this influence. To quote Eliot:

Or whatever event, this is your real destination.

So Krishna; as when he admonished Arjuna

O the field of battle...^{viii}

4. CONCLUSIONS

To complement Eliot's strong advocacy of homogeneity and a common religious background and his thorough disdain for tolerance, are his views on orthodoxy. He considered it to be a very basic tenet. Eliot took the extreme position of declaring heterodoxy to be equal to heresy and openly hailed Christian tradition and Christian orthodoxy. Liberalism, he is quite convinced leads to the stripping of all the essential elements of religion like faith. Eliot makes a reference to some essays that he had written in which he had mentioned his faith in politics, religion and literature. He clarifies that the three are not of the same level of significance to him and neither are they intrinsically interconnected in his beliefs. Faith therefore should not be related either only to 'political principle' or to 'literary fashion'.

Eliot brings his lectures to a conclusion expressing his concern about the weakening of tradition and faith in writers and poets. This tendency, he believes is as harmful for the writer as it is for the reader. Moreover he reemphasizes the need to promote a tradition which is evolving continuously and is connected to orthodoxy. The stamp of an artist or a writer's personality, irrespective of whether he is good or bad, on his work, should be diluted and always evaluated.

At the end, I must allow myself a moment of speculation about how Eliot would have reacted to current period when the world is steadily becoming small with the active trends of feminism, multiculturalism, pluralism and relativity. In a world preoccupied with the growing material needs of ballooning populations and where economic growth is a compulsion rather a choice, Eliot would have started being despondent and disillusioned, but his inherent astuteness would have allowed him to appreciate the change. Like his brand of tradition, which he had promoted with so much animation and which needed to evolve lest it became stagnant, so would have Eliot adapted his views and finally applauded the evolution.

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ⁱ Please refer to the website <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/t-s-eliot>> viewed on 25 Jan. 2014.

ⁱⁱ Refer to the text

<http://www.archive.org/stream/afterstrangeegods00eliouoft/afterstrangeegods00eliouoft_djvu.txt> |viewed on 25 Jan. 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Refer to the text

<http://www.archive.org/stream/afterstrangeegods00eliouoft/afterstrangeegods00eliouoft_djvu.txt> viewed on 25 Jan. 2014.

^{iv} <http://www.archive.org/stream/afterstrangeegods00eliouoft/afterstrangeegods00eliouoft_djvu.txt> viewed on 25 Jan. 2014.

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^{vi} <http://www.archive.org/stream/afterstrangeegods00eliouoft/afterstrangeegods00eliouoft_djvu.txt> viewed on 25 Jan. 2014.

^{vii} ibid

^{viii} T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets, 'Dry Salvages,' <<http://allspirit.co.uk/salvages.html>> viewed on 25 Jan. 2014.