



TWENTIETH CENTURY CULTURAL ETHOS AND ELIOT'S RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in 1888, at St. Louis, in the state of Missouri, the United States of America. Eliot himself told an audience at St. Louis, in 1953, that the 'original law of public service', which inspired him as a child, 'operated especially in three areas: the church, the city, and the university'. He further explained that for him the church meant the Unitarian church of the Messiah the city was St. Louis, and the University the Washington University. 'These', Eliot elaborates, 'were the symbols of Religion, the Community and Education'. He comments that 'it is a very good beginning for any child, to be brought up to reverence such institutions, and to be taught that personal and selfish aims should be subordinated to the general good which they represents'.

In this respect, his mother's lines, written for the Wednesday Club of St. Louis, of which she was a member, may also be quoted to underline the bent of mind and the social situation which Eliot inherited. :
Though culture may be our corner stone,
We cannot exist for culture alone
In scholarly retreat.

These lines very significantly suggest the cultural ethos at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Eliot was gathering the first impressions of his life as a lad growing into a man. Really the circumstances were so challenging that no conscious and conscientious person could elect or afford to retire to a 'scholarly retreat', for nourishing or enjoying culture in the most restricted sense. He had to notice or was bound to be affected by, the state of the society, in general, as it obtained or was evolving at the time.

A sort of 'international anarchy' was prevailing. The climax of a century of expanding political democracy in France and America and Britain was new level of hysteria and irresponsibility in politics. As the nineteenth century ended, the 'man-in-the street came into his own as a product of industrialism-plus- democracy, curacy which the twentieth century rechristened the common man'. His entry into his political and cultural inheritance was heralded by an outburst of raucous patriotism and a cult of brutal impatience'.

Sensationalism, vulgarity and violence characterized the spirit of the time. The World War I was, historically speaking, the culmination of the Nineteenth Century. The idea of a 'war to end war' was belied. True the peoples of western hemisphere had abolished or diminished many-age-long evils the sin of slavery, the crime of ruthless exploitation, the distress of destitution, the plague of epidemics, the ills of bigotry and ignorance, But, inspite of so much visible 'progress' and 'improvement' other might evils had descended upon them. : 'the drab squalor of mining and industrial cities, the ravages of the country side, the menace of mass unemployment, the terror of economic crisis, and the rightfulness of scientific war'.

The root of the trouble was that the old implicit ends of Liberalism, the dominant philosophy of the Victorian era, were no longer enough. There was a quest for a new morality, a new and more adequate set of moral values. On the other side, the rise of the urban, industrial workers to political power and to a new degree of organisation made a new kind of demand on society

and the state the whole pattern of life had undergone a change. Scientific , Industrial and technological wonders like gramophone, telephone, wireless telegraphy, and cinema, together with bicycle, motor-car, aeroplane had now become a familiar part and parcel of the modern civilization. Feminism and socialism grew into not only current fashions but dominant forces of the time. In his attempt to adjust himself mentally with these phenomenal changes, man generally lost his faith in any established religion and code of morality.

T.S. Eliot responded to this challenge with his insistence on the conscious cultivation of a sense of tradition. However, Eliot's response to the particular cultural ethos of the twentieth century was motivated by a great personal integrity. Although as rising modern poet he was held to be a leader of the rebellion against all the shackles of the past to be a leader of rebellion against all the shackles of the past, he chose to champion the cause of 'orthodoxy'.

He visualized the role of ' the perfect critic' as one who, 'absorbed in the present problems of art' 'wishes to bring the forces of the past to bear upon the solution of these problems'. As a poet also, he was very much concerned to 'shore' up and conserve the 'fragments' of 'the WasteLand' of Europe, against all the 'ruins' of time. He was all for the preservation and promotion of composite European culture, comprehending and transcending all the provincialities of regions, nations and groups. Although the Christial faith had lost ground, the ethical and moral code of Europe was still Christian But, in the last hundred years, things came to 'such a pass that in literature itself christian morality was questioned, opposed and even abandoned. It is this last stage of cultural deterioration in the western society that roused Eliot to take up the challenge of his age.

Eliot opposes 'romanticism' of all types and spheres, whether it be of the Romantic Revival of early nineteenth century, or that of the Georgians in early twentieth century, or belong to the humanistic perfectionism suggested by the Renaissance and Reformation. All this gave rise to a 'dissociation of sensibility', which led to the disintegration of European culture. He wants to restore man to his pristine glory and significance, as a religious, responsible, disciolipned and moral being. Eliot believes that the artist must be aware that the mind of Europe, the mind of his own country, is much more important than his own private mind.

The lost sense of community and a sense of unreality and purposelessness of the modern world preoccupied Eliot's poetry. So he resolved to 'rediscover authentic human values, and to oppose those forms of stagnation which in each generation man invents for his own country.' In a radio broadcast in October, 1944, Eliot declared that it was inevitable that the man of letters would always be "in a certain sense in opposition. He should be jealous to preserve the tradition of the culture of his people and of Europe. : 'But in so doing the must constantly find himself opposed to current tendencies and popular values. All great literature is, in one aspect, a criticism.... of the society in which the author lives. If he is not to criticize, he must remain silent."

Thus, when the western culture was breaking loose from its Christian tradition, Eliot rose and strove to bring it back to its moorings. He sought to restore the balance between the spirit and the matter. His ideal was a unified sensibility and an integrated personality.

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