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Echoes of American life in the poetry of T. S. Eliot

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Abstract
American poetry has emerged assured, mature and easy, standing as it does on a firm footing today because of the rich contributions made by a host of poets, such as Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, E.E. Cummings, Allen Tate, Hart Crane, Robert Penn Warren and Joseph Garcia Villa. Of these poets, T.S. Eliot is definitely the most dominating literary figure of this complex, soulless and industrial age. His multi-pronged artistic activities- as a poet, as a dramatist, and as a critic- fairly sum up the modern age in all its manifestations and multiplicities. In fact, he has wielded immense influence upon the modern poetic consciousness through his alert mind and strong pen. Through Eliot became a British citizen his origins were completely American. It was only in 1927 that he embraced British citizenship as a result of his growing interest in the English church and state. However, until the very end of his life, he remained totally American from inside. Eliot's background and experience remained 'representatively American,' and that his poetry contains reverberations and echoes of America and American life throughout. His allusiveness, objectivity, classicism, unified sensibility, critical insight, wit and irony: All these appeal to us and keep us guessing at his unique talent and poetic sensibility.

Keywords: American poetry, classicism, allusiveness, modernity, sensibility

Introduction

In the comprehensive critical historiography of American literature from the seventeenth century to the modern age, poetry has ever been the attention arresting area. Theoretically it has been pinpointed that the literary personages and critics have been conscious not of the history of the creating poems but rather with the history which poems have created. To Ezra Pound, "Literature is news which stays news." But literary news has always been the news of culture and ethos. In the historical framework, the achievement of American poetry is based upon the achievement of American culture as a whole. The poetry itself is a sensitive study of the poet's particular relation to his culture in order to explore the best possible use of the language which establishes him at the centre.

The poet by sitting at the centre of culture tries to seek or search communications where he adds phenomenal features to the styles and spirit. The poet constantly but critically inquires into the genuineness and comprehensiveness of that style and spirit. The American poets have ever been considered conservatives usually very eclectic in their attitude and articulation. While they are making an effort to clinch at work; their explorations of language have enabled the readers to understand the nature of challenges and threats for the survival and the regular growth of the poetic imagination and sensibility. Their tradition of literature, the tradition their literature makes critically manifests their perennial heroic contribution on the margin of the American sensibility, yet plunging directly to its vital centre. The 'Americanness' is the principal concern and commitment of American poetry which is characterised as its compulsive modernism or more particularly in the twentieth century, a professed form of modernism.

For the first time in its story, American poetry has emerged assured, mature and easy, standing as it does on a firm footing today because of the rich contributions made by a host of poets, such as Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, E.E. Cummings, Allen Tate, Hart Crane, Robert Penn Warren and Joseph Garcia Villa. Of these poets, T.S. Eliot is definitely the most dominating literary figure of this complex, soulless and industrial age. His multi-pronged artistic activities- as a poet, as a dramatist, and as a critic- fairly sum up the modern age in all its manifestations and multiplicities. In fact, he has wielded immense influence upon the modern poetic consciousness through his alert mind and strong pen. His allusiveness, objectivity, classicism, unified sensibility, critical insight, wit and irony: all these appeal to us and keep us guessing at his unique talent and poetic sensibility. He has introduced in poetry new ways of thought, new modes of approach, new patterns of expression, new rhythms and cadences, but all this has done without throwing away the valued Tradition (as Eliot clarifies it in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent").

Eliot once remarked that the American had one very great cultural advantage over the European: he could, if he so wished, *becomes* European; in that process of 'becoming,' he could actually possess more than the European, possess the European culture with a fuller awareness. This is quite precisely applicable to Eliot himself. Breaking upon the Georgian literary scene, T.S. Eliot presented the credentials of a wide-ranging poetic sensibility by incorporating in his poetry not only the 'best' of European culture and literature but also of American mind and training. It is a fallacy not to admit him as an American poet, and even many Americans are prone to this fallacy. But Mr. Conrad Aiken, for one at least, does not think so, as his indirect remark will clarify: "..... He [W.H. Auden] is really no more an American poet than Mr. Eliot is an English one"(XX)

Thomas Stearns Eliot, the seventh and youngest child of Henry Ware Eliot and Charlotte Stearns, was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on September 26, 1888. He came of New England stock, his ancestors having left East Coker, a

Somerset village in England well-celebrated in *Four Quartets* (1943), in the seventeenth century. His father was an active businessman, while his mother was "a woman of keen intellectual interests," whose published work comprised a full-length biography of her father in-law and a dramatic poem on the life of Savonarola. The latter was published in 1926 with an Introduction by T.S. Eliot; it may be safely assumed that Eliot's literary interests were greatly stimulated by his mother. In 1928, Eliot openly acknowledged this fact by dedicating to her his volume of essays entitled *For Lancelot Andrewes.* It was primarily due to her (as also due to Eliot's grandfather) that the family became a seat of cultural training; the sort of cultural training which later let Eliot to remark:

The primary channel of transmission of culture is the family: no man wholly escapes from the kind, or wholly surpasses the degree of culture which he acquired from his early environment. (*Notes towards the Definition of Culture* 43)

Through Eliot became a British citizen his origins were completely American. It was only in 1927 that he embraced British citizenship as a result of his growing interest in the English church and state. However, until the very end of his life, he remained totally American from inside. It is undeniable that "in attitude and tradition, he fits more easily, into the American context than the British" (Pearse 9). Among T.S. Eliot's friendships, the longest-lived attachment to a woman was his connection with Emily Hale (daughter of a Bostonian architect who was also a minister), which began when he was a student at Harvard. Miss Hale (1891–1969) became a teacher of speech and drama, and the pair met during the 1930s in America and England. For decades, Eliot wrote to the lady often and regularly; but the correspondence ended in the late 1950s, when he married Valerie Fletcher. Miss Hale gave her friend's letters to Princeton University, stipulating that they remain sealed until the year 2020. In a new account of Eliot's career as a poet, Ronald Bush offers some piquant reflections on the correspondence:

[These letters] were undoubtedly full of pointed silences. The letters, however, also must have resonated with that special kind of indulgent tenderness that two people assume when they can be attentive without deception. Yet that kind of tenderness has its dangers. That feeling or something like it seems to have impressed itself on Eliot after he broke with Vivien in America. (185)

Bush says that Emily Hale's meetings with Eliot during the years 1932–1935 forced him to "confront one of his most firmly repressed wishes…. [She] beckoned him to start over again, and the thought intoxicated him" (185–186). Bush reminds us that the couple visited Burnt Norton together; and he then examines the poem "Burnt Norton" as a meditation on the longings aroused in the poet by the moments in the deserted garden. Obviously, that garden seemed to Eliot a poignant symbol of the life he had missed; the title asks us to make the bridge. For those who have learned about the presence of Emily Hale in the scene, it is hard to exclude her from the story of the making of the poem. But nowhere in the verses do we meet the least allusion to the lady or the least need to think of her.

In September 1932, Eliot returned to America after a long gap of eighteen years, having accepted the appointment of Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard for 1932-33. Since then onward, he lived for the most part in London, though he took a number of trips back to his birth land, working for a period at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton and teaching at the University of Chicago. In 1948 came the long- awaited recognition to Eliot's genius, and he was awarded the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1953, Eliot was invited to address members of the Washington University at the centenary of its foundation, and began by telling them entertainingly about some of his childhood memories and about the general attitude that prevailed in his house:

The standard of conduct was that which my grandfather had set; our moral judgments, our decisions between duty and self-indulgence, were taken as if, like Moses, he had brought down the tables of the Law, any deviation from which would be sinful.... This original Law of Public Service operated especially in three areas: The Church, the City, and the University.... These were the symbols of Religion, the Community and Education. And I think 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 represent. (*To Criticize the Critic* 44)

Eliot has much in common with Henry James. Prufrock and the old women in "Portrait of a Lady", with their helpless consciousness of having dared and done too little, correspond exactly to the middle-aged heroes of *The Ambassadors* and *The Beast in the Jungle,* realising sadly very late in life that they have been living too cautiously and too poorly. The fear of life, in Henry James, is closely bound up with the fear of vulgarity. And Eliot also fears vulgarity at the time when he is fascinated by it:

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse. Yet he chafes bitterly at the limitations and pretences of the decadent culture represented by Boston- a society 'quite civilized,' as he says, 'but refined beyond the point of civilization.' He has some amusing satiric poems about the old New England ladies, and in one of them he reflects on his way to the house of his Cousin Harriet thus:

.... evening quickens faintly in the street,
Wakening the appetites of life in some
And to others bringing the *Boston Evening Transcript*.....

And "Portrait of a Lady" is essentially a poem of New England Society. There is the aged Lady, who serves tea to friends among lighted candles- 'an atmosphere of Juliet's tomb'- with her dampening efforts at flattery and flirtation through the medium of cultured conversation, and from whom the poet wants to flee:

I take my hat: how can I make a cowardly amends
For what she has said to me? (22)

But he is ever swung between memory and desire, and is always debating with his conscience whether the ideas that rocked him are 'right or wrong.' Similarly, Prufrock in the room where-

.....women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo (22)

wistfully asks himself:

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes.
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? (23)

And he also wonders whether he should not put a question direct to his lady love, but he never gets to the point of putting it.

It has been pointed out by critics that 'Americanism' is linguistically much more conspicuous in Eliot's early works, for instance, butt-ends' in *The Love Songs of J. Alfred Prufrock* is an American phrase, the British equivalent of which will be 'cigarette-ends' or 'fag-ends.' As Eliot's youth was part and parcel of American life, it is but natural that 'Americanism' should have crept in his early writings.

Edmund Wilson is of the opinion that the sterility of *The Waste Land* is "the sterility of the Puritan temperament" (89). Throughout this poem he recognizes the peculiar conflicts of the puritan-turned –artist. But though Eliot's spiritual and intellectual roots are firmly fixed in New England, there is in *The Waste Land* a good deal more than the mere gloomy moods of a New Englander regretting an emotionally undernourished youth. The colonization by the Puritans of New England was merely an incident in that rise of the middle-class which has brought about a commercial-industrial civilization to the European cities as well as to the American ones. The terrible dreariness of the great modern cities is the atmosphere in which *The Waste Land* is cast, and yet *The Waste Land* has another aspect: it is a "place not merely of desolation, but of anarchy and doubt"(Wilson 89).

Four Quartets (1943) is a series of four poems whose titles are derived from various actual places. The scene of the first poem is “Burnt Norton”, a Gloucestershire garden associated with the beauty of childhood; of the second, “East Coker” is a Somerset village whence the poet's ancestors had set out for America; of the third, “The Dry Salvages” is a group of rocks off the Massachusetts coast; and of the fourth, “Little Gidding” is a village in Huntingdonshire, where Nicholas Ferrar, the devout seventeenth-century Anglican, had lived and established his community.

In a sense, these poems complete the circle of life-journey for Eliot's family, which originated in England and shifted to America and back again. If England and America meet in “Burnt Norton”, Missouri and Massachusetts appear in “The Dry Salvages”. On the personal side, *Four Quartets* may be regarded as ‘a series of images of migration,’ which seriously explore ‘time present and time past’ in order to collapse their traditionally accepted meaning; of more generally, as a series of images of history by which time is explored until it reveals the circular journey of man.

“Burnt Norton”, though named after a Gloucestershire manor, I sactually suggestive of the poet's American *Landscapes*. As Eliot continues his spiritual exploration through time and eternity in the poem, the memories of his childhood revive on a visit to a rose-garden. Among several ‘other echoes’ inhabiting the rose garden, there is certainly one of his childhood. For at this particular moment of history, time past (the poet's early association) is revived in time present (his present poetic growth), and time present is recreated in time future;

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present.
All time is unredeemable. (24)

At such rare moments of illumination, when the poet experiences a vision of eternal bliss, the apparent distinction between ‘time past,’ ‘time present’ and ‘time future’ seems to disappear and the poet becomes conscious of the positive force of Divine Love and the simultaneous existence of all times. It is to be mentioned here that in Eliot's poems the memory of his childhood associations is not only frequent, but overpowering. The image of children climbing an apple-tree in an orchard is to be found in “Burnt Norton” as well as elsewhere Herein Eliot writes as under:

Go said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter. (89)

The image is symbolical of innocent bliss, and is an instance of the poet's continual insistence on childhood as the period of immense happiness. One becomes aware of the fact that he feels quite strongly on this subject, and his childhood happiness fits well into our overall picture of his development as a poet of gloom, irony and pessimism.

In “The Dry Salvages”, Eliot speaks forcefully of the river and the sea. While the river is ‘a strong brown god,’ the sea represents many gods and many voices. About the river, the poet writes thus:

His rhythm was present in the nursery bedroom,
In the rank ailanthus of the April dooryard,
In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,
And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.

And about the sea he observes as follows:

The sea is the land's edge also, the granite
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses
Its hints of earlier and other creation:
The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the whale's backbone (102)

In fact, these are the poet's boyhood observations put to a marvelous poetic use at a later stage in his life. By creating his early associations as symbols of time and eternity, Eliot gives them a stamp of permanence as seen in his poetry.

In England, T.S. Eliot made progress and his fame grew slowly but steadily. In 1927, he obtained the citizenship of England and joined the Anglican Church. The recognition of his merit and poetic eminence came in 1948 with the awards of The Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize for Literature. By this time T.S. Eliot had become a famous person and had gained an international standing. When he married Valerie Fletcher, he declared: “without the satisfaction of this happy marriage no achievement or honour could give me satisfaction at all” (quoted in Jain 30). At the close of his life in 1965 he had risen to the fortunate position of a literary figure that summed up an epoch. T.S. eliot died on 4

January 1965. At the memorial service in Westminster Abbey, it was Ezra Pound who paid the most fitting homage to Eliot: “I can only repeat, but with the urgency of 50 years ago: READ HIM” (quoted in Moody 13). In spite of varied influences, Eliot is original in thought and matter. He has integrated what he borrowed from others and turned it into something powerful and remarkable.

Universality rises above the limits of time, space, region, caste, colour and creed. Eliot is undeniably a universal poet of the first grade. He was American by birth, British by professed faith and adopted citizenship, European by lifestyle and habit, and cosmopolitan by his philosophical attitude to life. One has to keep in mind that Eliot has used at least six foreign languages and thirty-five writers in *The Waste Land* alone. Future generations will long remember his unique gifts to English poetry. Eliot is no more, but his inputs to literature remain priceless possessions for humankind. His life consisted of sorrowful events, and so, the excellence of his writing is indivisible from the uprightness of his character. His personal experience of life was ordinary, but the experience conveyed in his works is extraordinary in its force of moral as well as philosophical significance.

Eliot’s background and experience remained ‘representatively American,’ and that his poetry contains reverberations and echoes of America and American life throughout. Eliot had the privilege of being born an American and the advantage of having received a cosmopolitan education and training. His practical prudence and broad-based education helped him a lot in developing “the cosmopolitan mind and a tendency to seek the centre” (*The Sacred Wood* 42) ----the qualities that he attributed to his learned teacher, Irving Babbitt. By dint of these qualities, Eliot has prospered a great deal in his poetry. No doubt, the valuable service that this America-born poet has rendered to the cause of English poetry will ever be remembered by the posterity.

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