

Coleridge, Eliot and the New Criticism

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Eliot himself being a modern critic admits that New Criticism is derived from Coleridge. Although in "The Frontiers of Criticism" Eliot tries to dissociate himself from these literary practitioners by criticizing the New Critics as "the lemon-squeezer school of criticism"¹ yet he himself has been to a considerable extent important in showing the value of subtle textual study.

The present paper intends to examine the continuity in criticism from Coleridge to the New Critics with Eliot as an important link between the two. The three major critical tenets of Coleridge, namely, organic unity, poetic imagery and reconciliation of opposites were to prove assets to Eliot as well as to the New Critics who used them in both their theoretical speculations and practical criticism.

The idea of organic unity that is the very core of Eliot's theory of tradition and to which the New Critics are indebted can be traced back to Coleridge's concept of organic unity. Coleridge gives the analogy of a plant while discussing his concept of organic unity. Just as in a plant all the parts are organically related to the whole, so too, in literature, all the authors are a part of the tradition even though they possess individual traits. No writer can be studied in isolation from the tradition. In his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" published in *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot holds that tradition should be taken not only in its present context but the past too is equally important. The past is nothing but a part of the whole and this relation between the part and the whole is an organic relation.

Eliot's theory, though different from Coleridge's is unanimous in combating the principle of "separatism" or "individualism". He establishes a theory of unity where "...the relations, proportions, values of each work towards the whole are readjusted"². This theory forms the basis of Eliot's approach to a literary work and it lies in close conformity to that of Coleridge. Eliot's theory of tradition rests on Coleridge's theory of imagination, as it emphasizes an organic relationship between the present and the past.

Like Eliot, Brooks, too, talks about tradition. All the authors, holds Brooks, share in varying degree a certain tradition. In his chapter on Metaphysical Poetry, Brooks like Eliot, idealizes metaphysical poetry. According to Brooks, all the poets share in a considerable degree the qualities that we find in metaphysical poetry.

John Crowe Ransom, one of the key figures and influential New Critics, takes a position which is somewhat in between that of Eliot and Brooks in as much as he believes in a gradual weakening of the metaphysical strain in English poetry during the nineteenth century. Ransom argues, and convincingly, that the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century had the "courage" of their metaphors and used them freely with confidence; the nineteenth century poets were shaky, "half heartedly metaphorical, or content with simile".

The organic approach to a work of art has a tremendous impact on the formalist critics. Cleanth Brooks' comments are particularly commendable and deserve considerable attention. Like Eliot's theory of tradition which implies the principle of organic whole of which the individual talent constitutes the part, Brooks too maintains that no literary work can be judged without reference to the whole.

It has been pointed out that studies in imagery comprise some of the most important innovations in modern critical scholarship, and that unless and until a method which subsumes imagery is discovered, it leads to nothing but some kind of indulgence in "individual fantasies." A poet is great not simply because he is a poet adept in writing but because of his acute power of perception, "of perceiving hidden likeness":

....analogy- likeness between dissimilar things-which is the fact underlying the possibility and reality of metaphor holds within itself the very secret of the Universe.³

The importance of images can be traced back to Coleridge who is considered to be the first critic to understand the organic nature of imagery. Coleridge distinguishes between mechanical and organic images. Images are mechanical when they are used simply for adding grace, for embellishment, so to say. They do not suggest any deeper meaning. For example, "A lily prisn'd in a goal of snow" is a typical example of fancy which brings together mechanically images which seem similar or dissimilar. It just suggests the superficial meaning and the images are not "proofs of original genius". Organic images, on the contrary, are justified by the experience the poet seems to undergo.

Coleridge's theory of poetic image has paved the way for an ever increasing emphasis laid on imagery in modern criticism. Starting with T.E. Hulme, the so-called father of Imagism and Ezra Pound who defined the idea of the image as "a verbal concentration generating energy", and coming down to Eliot and the New Criticism, we find that image has been regarded as a very important constituent of literary art. Much subsequent poetry in English, and even more in the U.S.A. was influenced by this movement.

Eliot's theory of "objective correlative" is to a certain extent an indispensable part of what Coleridge and his twentieth century counterparts like Hulme and others have been emphasizing in the name of image.

Eliot's ingenuity lay in giving metaphor a new name, namely, "objective correlative", but unlike the way Eliot would have liked it the distinction between the two is illusory. Just as an objective correlative arouses the exact feelings which the poet intends, similarly in Eliot's own words, "metaphor identifies itself with what suggests it" and is bound to arouse feelings that the author may like, depending on the abilities of the writer.

The potent force exerted by images on the new critical school needs hardly to be emphasized. Of all the components of a poem the image is the one most calculated to produce the cluster of connotative meanings. Cleanth Brooks asserts the importance of metaphor by saying, 'One can sum up modern poetic technique by calling it the rediscovery of metaphor and the full commitment to metaphor'⁴.

From this statement it becomes clear that metaphor was employed not only by the writers of the modern age but also by those in the preceding ages as it is a "rediscovery", a rediscovery of something that already existed.

To say that metaphor "illustrates and ennobles" is to comprehend only one aspect of its quality. Brooks emphasizes the indispensability of metaphor in as much as he believes that there are certain shades of attitudes or experiences which cannot but be expressed by resorting to the use of metaphor.

Almost equally common is the claim of J.C. Ransom who holds that metaphor is the most important principle in poetry. A detailed account of the importance of imagery has been advanced by Ransom in his essay "Poetry : A Note in Ontology" where he says that "an image or set of images and

not an idea must occupy the foreground of the reader's attention". A poem is constituted of either the "thing" or the "ideas" and the difference between the two is the same as "a thing differs from an idea".

Poetry for the New Critics as for Coleridge and Eliot is essentially a product of imagery. Imagery constitutes the poetic quality which is all pervasive in literature, and not necessarily confined to poems.

The principle of reconciliation of opposites, as outlined by Coleridge in his famous definition of Imagination, comes out in Eliot's discussion on Metaphysical Poetry. Though not clearly stated, Eliot has, by implication, divided poetry into three broad categories- the first kind of poetry is that in which thought predominates, the second kind of poetry is that in which emotion predominates and the third kind of poetry is that in which both thought and emotion are put in proper balance and this has been successfully achieved by the Metaphysical Poets:

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate existence, . . . in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.⁵

Eliot's theory of reconciliation has attracted a good deal of attention of the critics of the twentieth century. While looking at the critical tenets of Eliot we find that he has been mostly "affirming forgotten standards, rather than setting up new ideals." His theory is closely related to that of Coleridge who in his discussion of Imagination demonstrates how this power reveals itself in poetry: "This power....reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities."⁶

The New Critics were greatly influenced by Coleridge's principle of reconciliation of opposites. The critical tenets of the New Critics like paradox, ambiguity, tension and gesture all embody the principle of reconciliation. Their critical monism has contributed a lot to the understanding of the poem's structure by linking up the conflicting ideas into a systematic whole.

The theory of paradox which Brooks enunciates reconciles the "active and passive, more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order"⁷. Whereas unity is deemed the foundation of literary art, paradox is held to be its distinguishing characteristic which brings about this unity by reconciling the opposites. Paradox is as Brooks puts it "...the assertion of the union of opposites."⁸ Led by this principle of unity, Brooks asserts that "the poet attempts to fuse the conflicting elements in a harmonious whole."⁹

Allen Tate also speaks about the proper balance between thought and feeling. He talks about "a deep illness of the modern mind" which is deeply affecting our society. However, Tate maintains that chaotic society is the ideal situation for an artist for it is only in such a situation that he can evolve unity out of conflicting ideas.

The three attitudes that Tate outlines in his essay "Three Types of Poetry" are clearly reflected in three kinds of poetry that he enunciates. The first two attitudes lie in constant opposition, for one is exercised by reason and the other by emotion. But it is the third attitude which is significant for "it is perfect, because it is complete and whole."¹⁰ And this whole emerges by synthesizing the first two conflicting wholes which is accomplished by the Imagination: '...the vision of the whole of life, is a quality of the imagination'¹¹.

Blackmur agrees with the other critics that there should be a proper balance between thought and feeling. this concept of unity or syntheses falls in line with Eliot's concept of reconciliation of opposites. Blackmur maintains that if the poet's emotions are not controlled he runs the risk of becoming hysterical. Thought and emotion balance each other thereby restricting the overflow of any one of them.

Blackmur equates thought with "felt assertion" while analysing the structure of a work of art: 'It may be risked that in dealing with the structure of poetry thought may be taken as felt assertion, irrelevant to critical analysis, but open to discussion with regard to what it permitted the poet to discover in his poems.'¹²

The "felt assertion" is equated with what Blackmur calls "rational imagination" in his essay on D.H. Lawrence, and it is nothing but the unification of thought and feeling.

The idea of reconciliation of opposites re-appears in Ransom's description of structure and texture as well. For Ransom the keyword is texture, and he explains the structure-texture relationship by "employing the image of a living room". By analysing the analogy of the drawing room we find that, by and large, structure is the content and texture is the imagery. If we accept the analogy that the room is a poem, the form of the poem like the decorations on the walls of the room is constituted by imagery. The naked walls are the structure or "logical meaning", the decorations on the wall such as paint, the paper and the tapestry are the texture or "logical meaning" and the two play off against each other to form the poetic meaning. And Ransom goes on to expound that: '...the intent of the good critic, becomes, therefore, to examine and define the poem with respect to its structure and its texture'¹³.

It is evident from the above discussions that Coleridge's critical concept passed through Eliot to the New Critics. Of course, it does not mean that there are no differences between them, but the similarities are so marked that one is inclined to conclude that Coleridge, Eliot and the New Critics form a kind of "organic unity" in which one cannot be viewed in isolation from the other.

Notes

1. Eliot, T.S., "The Frontiers of Criticism", **On Poetry and Poets** (London : Faber and Faber, 1947), p. 113.
2. Eliot, T.S., "Tradition and the Individual Talent", **The Sacred Wood** (New York : Methuen, 1986), p. 50.
3. Caroline Spurgeon, **Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us** (Boston : Beacon Press, 1961), p. 6.
4. Brooks, Cleanth, "Irony as a Principle of Structure", **Literary Opinion in America**, ed. M.D. Zabel, II, p.229.
5. **Twentieth Century Criticism-The Major Statements**, William J. Handy and Max Westbrook (New York : The Free Press, 1974), p. 39.
6. Coleridge, S.T., **Biographia Literaria**, ed. J. Shawcross (London : Oxford University press, 1962), II, p. 12.
7. Brooks, Cleanth, **Modern Poetry and the Tradition** (London : University of North Carolina Press, 1939), P. 40.
8. Brooks, Cleanth, **The Well Wrought Urn : Studies in the Structure of Poetry** (London : Methuen, 1968), p. 173.
9. **Modern Poetry and the Tradition**, pp. 45-46.
10. Ransom, John Crowe, "Three Types of Poetry", **Collected Essays** (Denner : Allan Swallow, 1959),

p.92.

11. Ibid., p.92.

12. Blackmur, R.P., **Language as Gesture** (London : George Allen and Unwin, 1954), p. 106.

13. "Criticism as Pure Speculation", **Essays in Modern Literary Criticism**, ed. R.B. West, JR. (New York : Rinehart, 1952), p. 233.

