The Contemporaneity of T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Thought

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Abstract

This essay shows that The Warter Land and Eliot's critical essays about literature and society were not only significant for the modern poetry and social criticism but they were and they are still very important for the art and criticism of the twentieth century.

The 19th century ended and the 20th century began with the vision that science could give the answer for everything. Darwin's evolutionism, Marxism and Freud's discoveries of the unconsciousness were the theories in vogue. In spite of all those points-of-view, there was a great search for something new in life and in art, something to believe in. There was no more ground for the romantic poetry and its view of life.

Then, The First World War came and brought a devastation in Europe. After it, the devastation remained in the innerself of the educated people, the sense of spiritual emptiness took the heart of the intelligentsia by assault, and it was with this background that the new forms of art and criticism came to light.

Modernism is a very difficult movement to be analysed and classified because it dealt with a host of tendencies. It was also characterized by the experimentalism which goes from the use of the icons to intertextuality passing by the futuristic ideas and so on.

T.S.Eliot was a poet and a critic who was born in the United States but made his home in England. He had great influence on his generation and the followings. In his most famous critical essay Tradition And The Individual Talent, he pointed out how poetry should be composed:

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The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe, from Homer, including all the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence, a simultaneous order. - No poet and no artist has his own complete meaning alone. You can not value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. (1975, p. 39).

In 1922, Eliot published The Waste Land according to that point-of-view. It is considered the most important poem of the 20th century literature in English.

The Waste Land is a poem of 400 lines divided into five parts: The Burial of the Dead, A Game of Chess, The Fire Sermon, Death by Water and What The Thunder Said. It was written fragmentarily in order to present the descriptions in a kaleidoscope movement. It is full of quotations from 35 other writers, especially from Shakespeare and Dante and its epigraph was dedicated to Ezra Pound ('il miglior fabbro') who revised it for Eliot. He also used seven different languages and the theme of the poem is the spiritual emptiness of the Post-First World War Europe with its material way of life and the lack of belief in anything.

In spite of this poem allows different interpretations, this essay will stress only in terms of its comparison with the romantic poetry.

The poetry of Romanticism provides a remarkable comparison with that of the Wast Land. The romantic period brought a new vision of poetry whose the main feature was not to reflect universal nature but, as pointed out by William Redmond, ‘to express the feelings and intuitions of the poet who was considered a man with a superior sensibility’. This conception contrasts with Eliot’s one because he did not admit that poetry has the mission of stating truth about life, religion, etc. He thought that ‘poetry is the task of finding verbal equivalents to thought’. Eliot, in opposition to William Wordsworth, claimed for an impersonal poetry.

In Wordsworth Daffodils is possible to see the presence of the ‘I’ of the poet in a process of personalization while Eliot presents an impersonal poetry in The Burial of The Dead using a process of a deep and clear description.

I wandered lonely as a cloud that follows on high o’er valles and hills when all at once
I saw a crowd a host, of golden daffodils:
Beside the lake, beneath the tree, fluttering
and dancing in the breeze.

April is the cruelest month, breeding
lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain. Winter
kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dead tubers.
Summer surprised us, coming over
the Strausbergersee with a slower of rain; we stop in the colonade.

Wordsworth thought that poetry should be composed in a state of excitement using the incidents of common life and the rude speech of rural people as raw material and he also thought that ‘poetry is an overflow of powerful feelings’. Eliot, on the other hand, had a completely different point-of-view. According to his critical essays, the composition of poetry should be an escape from the personal attitude and he thought that ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ was an inexact formula. Eliot insisted that poetry could not be an outcome of an inspiration and that it would be composed under reflection and hard study, in other words, based on culture and tradition, and these postulates are clear in The Waste Land with its rich language and those fragments of intertextuality from other thirty-five authors, especially from Shakespeare and Dante as it was pointed out before.

In order to contrast the statements above, it is interesting to observe the common things presented in Wordsworth’s Intimations of Immortality like ‘the growing boy’ and ‘he sees it in his joy’ in opposition to the cultural aspects that Eliot presents in A Game of Chess with its quotation from Shakespeare’s The Tempest and the parody of a popular song called The Shakespearean Rag:

Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing boy
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy

I remember those are pearls that were his eyes
“Are you alive or not? Is there nothing in your
head?" O O O O that Shakespearean rag - it is so elegant...

The romantics thought in nature as something original, the teacher of moral and the residence of God. It was common among them to humanize the elements of nature as we can see in the piece of Wordsworth's Poem:

The birds around me hopped and played, 
their thoughts I can not measure: -
But the last motion which they made
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

T.S.Eliot, in opposition to the romantics, presents nature in The Waste Land in a descriptive way in order to show the diseases of human being's soul, then, it is completely far from the Wordsworth's view.

Another point of contrast between The Waste Land and the romantic poetry is the question of the rhymes. While the romantics used to rhyme the verses, for instance, in Coleridge's The Ryme of Ancient Mariner the abab scheme, among others was used. Eliot preferred a kind of blank verse with free metrification which is nearest of those of the Elizabethan poetry like Christopher Marlowe's The Passionate Shepherd to his love.

Water, water, every where, 
and all the boards did shrink; 
Water, water every where, 
Nor any drop to drink.

Come live with me and be my love, 
And we will all the pleasures prove 
That hills and valleys, dales and fields 
Woods or steep, mountain yield.

The comparison between Tennyson's poetry and Eliot's one provides us with the clear vision of the difference between the romantic poetry and the modern one expressed in The Waste Land. In Break, Break, Break, Tennyson presents the sea in a vague way. It is presented only in the sound of the verses and as a place where the poet mourns for a dead friend. In contrast with Tennyson's sea, Eliot describes the Thamis river in detail with clear images of the decadence of modern London displayed by the sordid aspects of the river.

Break, Break, Break
At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!
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But the tender grace of a day that is dead will never come back to me.

The river sweats oil and tar
The barges drift with the turning-tide:
Red sails wide to leeward, swing on the heavy spar.
The barge wash drifting lags
Down Greenwich reach past the isles of dogs.

In spite of being an opponent to the romantic aesthetic, T. S. Eliot shared many points with one of the most remarkable and polemic poets of the romantic period: Edgar Allan Poe.

As well as Eliot, Poe rejected to use poetry in order to save the world. As Eliot pointed out in his essay The Three Voices of Poetry, the poet can be only interested in express through poetry and his aim can be only an aesthetic exercise. Poe also stated in his Philosophy of Composition that the main purpose of poetry is beauty. Then, they are near each other in this aspect.

Another opinion shared by them is that poetry should be composed under a hard, accurate study and under a deep reflection. Poe in his explanation of how he wrote The Raven, which is his most famous poem, said that it has not a single word used by chance and that all the poem has a mathematical frame, and T. S. Eliot, coincidently, said that there is no one lost word in The Waste Land.

Both had influences from the giants of the Western tradition and they were also concerned in changing and expressing the individual experience into the universal one. At least, the influence of Edgar Allan Poe came to Eliot via the French symbolist poets like Mallarmé and especially the author of The Flowers of Evil - Charles Baudelaire.

From poetry to theory, Eliot’s ideas remain update if we take into account some theoretical postulations of the most important scholars of the Postmodern Humanities: In The Orientalism, Edward Said (one of the scholars of the Postcolonial theory) advocates that the Western scholars who worked for the Empire produced a distorted vision of the Orient through a discipline created by the main Western universities which was called ‘Orientalism’. According to Said, the European scholars who lived in the East looked at the Eastern People and their culture with previous prejudice and they did not pick up the real ‘essence’ of those cultures.

Eliot in his Notes Toward The Definition Of Culture said:

The anthropologist may study the social system, the economics, the arts, and the religion of a
particular tribe, he may even study their psycho-logical peculiarities: but it is not merely by observing in detail all of these manifestations, and grasping them together, that he will approach to an understanding of the culture. (1962, p. 41)

Eliot is also conscious of the importance of the Eastern culture for the development of the European culture and the poet himself studied ancient Indian languages and their philosophy and he also said that Eastern culture had a great impact and influence on his own work:

There is a question asked at this point, and which ought to be answered. What of the influences from outside Europe, of the great literature of Asia? - In the literature of Asia is great poetry. There is also profound wisdom and some very difficult metaphysics; but at the moment I am only concerned with poetry. I have no knowledge whatever of the Arabic, Persian, or Chinese languages. Long ago I studied the ancient Indian languages, and while I was chiefly interested at that time in Philosophy, I read a little poetry too; and I know that my own poetry shows the influence of Indian thought and sensibility. (1962, p. 113)

One of the main postmodern postulates is that there is no originality in a literary work or, at least, this originality is quite difficult to be apprehended because the traditional aesthetic was linked to the mass-media, ecology, computation and many other forms of language and expression. But, if we look deeply at Eliot's essays, we shall find the same points-of-view already stressed:

And in poetry there is no such thing as complete originality, owing nothing to the past. Whenever a Virgil, a Dante, a Shakespeare, a Goethe is born, the whole future of European poetry is altered. ... but, on the other hand, every great poet adds something to the complex material out of which future poetry will be written. (1962, p. 114)

Eliot's view of the historical sense was so advanced for his time that it gained ground in the present Literary Theory as in Edward Said's Culture and Imperialism:
Even if we were to allow, as many have, that the United States foreign policy is principally altruistic and dedicated to such unimpeachable goals as freedom and democracy, there is considerable room for skepticism. The relevance of T.S. Eliot’s remarks in “Traditional and Individual Talent” about the historical sense are demonstrably important. ‘Are we not as a nation repeating what France and Britain, Spain and Portugal, Holland and Germany, did before us? And yet do we not tend to regard ourselves as somehow exempt from the more sordid imperial adventures that preceded ours? Besides, is there not an unquestioned assumption on our part that our destiny is to rule and lead the world, a destiny that we assigned ourselves as part of our errand into the wilderness?’ (1993, p. 55)

In order to finish these brief considerations about Eliot’s work, it is important to state that The Waste Land and his critical essays about literature and society were not only significant for the modern poetry and social criticism but they were and they are still very important for the art and criticism of the twentieth century by and large and they allow the name of T.S. Eliot to be included among the main poets and critics of literature of the English language in all times.

Bibliographical Notes
