

A Study of Humanism in T.S. Eliot's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The seventh and last section of Eliot's Selected Essays (1932) contains two essays which throw sufficient light on his idea of "Humanism," though these essays were originally planned as critical reviews of Irving Babbitt's book, *Democracy and Leadership*, and Norman Foerster's brilliant work, *American Criticism*. These two essays, "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt" (1928) and "Second Thoughts about Humanism" (1929), attempt to refute the views of Babbitt and Foerster about this vital doctrine, putting forward Eliot's own formulations about its nature and functions. This article tries to examine what Eliot has to say in these two essays and how he tries to define "Humanism" before we proceed to trace it out in his poetry.

KEYWORDS: Eliot, Poetry, Humanism, Philosophy, Theology.

INTRODUCTION

Eliot begins his first essay by stating that at the centre of Babbitt's philosophy is the doctrine of Humanism, and that Babbitt has lined it up in battle order with religion against humanitarianism and naturalism. However, Eliot begs to differ with the master, and contrasts Humanism with religion. According to him, Babbitt regards Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, and Erasmus as Humanists. The first two of them happen to be founders of religions, while the last two are recognized thinkers of the past. Eliot admits that all humanists have been individualists and intellectuals applying their critical reason to the problems of human life. He points out that Babbitt frequently mentions the importance of "the doctrine of self-control" and "higher will," which render life an act of faith. Babbitt also brings in the question of "Civilization," which can hardly endure without religion, and religion cannot endure without a church (say, the Catholic Church). At the end of the essay, Eliot suggests that all the hopes of humanity cannot be placed on one institution, i.e., the Catholic Church, and that "Humanism" is either an alternative to religion or is ancillary to it.

In the second essay, Eliot concedes that in the past "Humanism" has been allied with religion, but asserts that in the future it can afford to ignore positive religion. Eliot (1951:484) apparently thinks that Foerster is correct in recognizing, the fact that humanism cannot accept "a formal theology" or "aromanticideallsm" indefianceofreason; that unlike religion it "assigns an important place to the instruments of both science and art" and that like religion, it holds "the ethical will as a power above the ordinary self" (ibidem). Foerster's humanism, like religion, enjoins "the virtue of humility," and Eliot comes down heavily upon him for this Eliot remarks that "Mr. Foerster's humanism, in fact, is too ethical to be true" (ibidem), and proceeds to define "Humanism thus: "Humanism depends very heavily upon, the tergiversations of the word "human;" and in general, upon implying clear and distinct philosophic ideas which are not there" (ibidem:485).

Humanism and T.S. Eliot

Eliot's main objection to the theory of Foerster seems to arise from the fact that the humanist makes use of that "supernatural" which he denies. Eliot observes: "My objection is not to Humanism, but to Mr. Foerster for not being humanistic enough; and for playing the games of philosophy and theology without knowing the rules" (ibidem).

Towards the close of this essay, Eliot tries to pinpoint the functions of true "Humanism" as follows: (1) that it does not provide dogmas or philosophical, theories and that it is concerned less with "reason" than with common sense (2) that operating against fanaticism it makes for breadth, tolerance, equilibrium and sanity; (3) that the world can't get on without breadth, tolerance and, sanity in the same way as it can't go on without narrowness, bigotry and fanaticism; (4) that it does not refute anything, but only persuades, according to its unformulable axioms of culture and good sense, and that it is critical rather than constructive and takes into account social and political life, (5) that

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it can inquire about the nature -civilized or otherwise-of particular philosophy or religion;(6) that there is a valuable type of person called "the humanist," (7) that it is no substitute for philosophy and religion; and (8) that it is valid for a very small minority of individuals, whom we may call "intellectual aristocrats" and who are bound together by a common culture. Finally, Eliot agrees with T. E. Hulme who believes in the perfectibility of man and nature, and suggests that both Babbitt and Foerster are nearer to the romantic view of Rousseau than they are to the religious view (which he does not deprecate).

A poet who had read Dante, Donne and the Metaphysicals, the French Symbolists, Irving Babbitt, George Santayana, Bergson, and several other thinkers, inevitably turned to be a humanist in his outlook upon life. Eliot, who was deeply impressed by Babbitt, later differed with him on the subject of "humanism." While Babbitt maintained that "humanism" was an idealistic belief in the goodness of human nature towards creating a sound society by means of rational discipline, Eliot was of the view that there would be no pure "humanism without religious discipline. Eliot knew well that the old world order was changing fast, and that the old European Renaissance had become a spent-up force. The mushroom grows of industries has ushered in an era of commercialism, colonialism and imperialism, eating into the very vitals of simple human values like love, justice, humility, tolerance, equilibrium, sanity, truth and beauty. Eliot was convinced that the present-day universal chaos could be got rid of only when we evolve a fresh code of conduct for ourselves, which should be based on tolerance, mutual trust and understanding.

This is precisely what we find in the epoch-making poem *The Waste Land* (1922), which was written against an atmosphere of destabilization and dehumanization. At its background was the horrible First World War and before its invasion swam the reconstruction of a devastated human society.

I sat upon the shore fishing, with the arid plain behind me, Shall I at least set my-lands in order? (Eliot 1948:65)

But social or even personal reconstruction is not possible until modern man earnestly receives the triple message of the Thunder -"Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata" (meaning "Give, Sympathize, 'and Control") -and practises it faithfully in his life. The term "Datta" does not mean giving alms to the poor; it rather suggests "giving one self away" at a time of emotional crisis when blood is "shaking my heart" (line 402). In a man's life, there are occasions when he has to throw away arguments and hesitations and yield to the dictates of his clamoring heart. This is the summum bonum of human existence (ibidem: 64): The awful daring of a moment's surrender, which an age of prudence can never retract, by this, and this only, we have existed. In his essay on Baudelaire, Eliot (1951:475,478) makes a similar statement: "So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least we exist." This kind of "giving" is essential to perpetrate the human race, for passion or sex is the source of all life. Even the primitive communities understood the importance of "the intercourse of the sexes as a means to ensure the fruitfulness of the earth" (Fraser 1970:179). But since the sexual relationship was considered to be fraught with "many a serious peril," some primitive tribes resorted to "abstinence" and "asceticism" (ibidem: 182,183).

In fact, Eliot allowed only a very restricted use of physical love and sex; that's why most of his protagonists - Prufrock, Gerontion, Tiresias, and the aged woman in "Portrait of a Lady" -do not indulge in fornication and lustful acts, as they are afraid of "disturbing the universe." The fourth movement of "Little Gidding" also confirms it. Here the poet cites the example of Dame Julian of Norwich, the 14th-century English mystic, who after fifteen years of hard spiritual practice came to realize that Love can redeem and elevate man. Evidently, man can't help loving, but he has been granted a choice between the two types of Love -Self-love and Divine Love (Eliot 1971:57): The only hope, or else despair lies in the choice of pyre or pyre To be redeemed from fire by fire And again (ibidem): "We only live, only suspire / Consumed by either fire, or fire." Man lives or dies through his own choice. The first "fire" stands for human passion, while the second "fire" for the Eternal Passion. The poet's meaning is quite clear here -that the transcendent love of God is possible only by renouncing the love of the self. According to Helen Gardner (1949:181), the fires which "have flamed and glowed throughout the poem here break out and declare their nature." The second command of the Thunder -"Dayadhvam" -hints at a commendable virtue to be practised by man, that of compassion and understanding. The modern man has everything power, self, prosperity -but he awfully lacks compassion for his fellow-beings. The poet has actually given a clue to this when he cites Count Ugolino from Dante's *Inferno*, the Count who was thrown into the tower and locked up there, having no contact with the external world. The modern man has also become selfish and egotistic (Eliot 1948:65): each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison."

The worst kind of imprisonment is to be seen around us today when a neighbor does not recognize another neighbor. What Eliot suggests here is the fact that "Sympathy" with one's brethren enables one to break the devilish barriers of self-exile and self-isolation. The Thunder, then, peals for the third time, instructing the gods directly, and the modern men indirectly, to "control" themselves -"Damyata. This time the message of the Thunder underlines the necessity of regulating the heart so far given over to "blood" (impulsive living) and "compassionlessness," both

being linked up with the waterlessness of the Fisher King's land. The well disciplined heart makes the human life go easy in the same way as the boat on the troubled sea, gliding smoothly and safely under the control of expert hands. A heart without discipline meets its calamitous end, but to the controlled heart even the natural elements yield place, This is what we find in the following passage (ibidem):

The boat responded Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
The sea was calm, your heart would
have responded Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
To controlling hands.

This has been called a "great short passage," full of meaning and wisdom. The sagacious counsel of the great Aryanmy this applicable to the entire humanity, for its range is universal. There are no demons and no gods, despite the fact that the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad mentions how gods, men and demons (devah, manusyah, and asurah) once approached their father-preceptor, Prajapati, for instructions to them after their formal education. Prajapati uttered the word UDa" to them thrice separately, exactly as the Thunder roars thrice in *The Waste Land*. No doubt, the message of the Thunder has been given an excellent human touch, since it is man who combine sin himself all the three properties -angelic, human, and demonic. In short, the practice of the three commendable virtues by man will, according to Radhakrishnan (1951: 291), "preserve, promote and enhance the values of life." Commenting on the Upanishadic message, the great philosopher Samkara says, " ... there are no gods or demons other than men" (ibidem:290). Thus, in telescoping the threefold path of deliverance from the tortures of earthly existence into the message of the Thunder, Eliot has wonderfully utilized the Upanishadic setting for the welfare of mankind and rendered it thoroughly human and humane.

The ultimate goal of a man's life is the attainment of peace of mind" The poet has remarkably suggested it by ending *The Waste Land* with "Shantih shantih shantih." Obviously, the Western scholars have usually misinterpreted the term "shantih." According to some, the triple "Amen" of the Christian world is comparable to it, and Eliot (1948:72) notes that it is "a formal ending to an Upanishad," and that it is equivalent to "The Peace which passeth understanding." The term has actually a rich evocative power and suggests a state of mind attained after a complete resolution of all anxieties, disturbances and sorrows. The repetition is deliberate in order to indicate the three-dimensional peace -internal (daihik), divine (daivik), and physical (bhautik) -which has been the vision of the poets through the ages for the all-round progress and prosperity of man. The noted Hindi poet, Goswami Tulasidas, has also envisaged his "Ramaraj" (Ideal State) precisely in the selfsame terms.

A humanist upholds the dignity of man and places him at the centre of all actions and all values. Eliot clarifies his position in this regard when he recognizes the strengths and weaknesses (greed, lust, selfishness, cruelty, and insensitivity) of man, and when he advises him time and again to "make perfect his will." It is "the perfection of will" which enables a man to attain the beauty of life and spiritual regeneration. It is this that renders him "the whole man" and helps create a healthy, happy society. In "Choruses from the Rock" (1952:97), we find Eliot's repeated insistence on what man should do: all men are ready to invest their money But most expect dividends. I say to you: Make perfect your will. I say: take no thought of the harvest, But only of proper sowing. "As one sows, so one will reap" is the well-known saying, which can very well prevent the mad arms race and power rivalry, violence and hatred, extremism and terrorism, bloodshed and butchery, between nation and nation, between man and man. But this is possible only after the perfection of will. In the same Chorus, Eliot once again repeats: The good man is the builder, if he build what is good, That you may take heart. Make perfect your will. There is a "perpetual struggle between Good and Evil," but the good man chooses to side with Good, avoiding all worldly temptations and material accumulations. Eliot is quite clear about what will brighten man's prospects on earth, and says (ibidem:99): We build the meaning: A church for all, And a job for each, Each man to his work.

The Christian poet is out to administer his sermons here, and yet he holds aloft the banner of humanity in unmistakable terms. "An empty mind is the devil's workshop," and so he provides for a job to everyone to drive the devil out. He is also of the view that a man without God is "a seed upon the wind: driven this way and that, and finding no place of lodgement and germination," and that the Higher Religions of the world lead men "from light to light, to knowledge of Good and Evil" (Chorus VII). He visualizes a tug of war going on between the Church and the world and fondly expects that "the Visible Church (will) go on to conquer the World" (Chorus X). This shows that the poet has travelled a long way from "Ash Wednesday" (1930), a poem of prayers to the lord, with a sense of resignation, and the "Ariel Poems" (1927-30), which are five in number deeply saturated with Christian sentiments and contentment. In truth, Eliot never pleaded for a ritualistic and outworn creed; he rather emphasized, like Leo Tolstoy, the establishment of a pragmatic religion which ensured man's unmixed happiness on earth. His prose writings like "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) clearly demonstrate that he favored Anglo-Catholicism and a Christian

Society to flourish within the framework of time-tested European culture and tradition, and that he allowed individual freedom in the pursuit of knowledge and truth.

Here it may be mentioned that the virtues of love, sympathy and self-control, as stressed in *The Waste Land*, cannot be attained without humility and spiritual discipline. Speaking of the significance of humility, Eliot writes in *Chorus I*: "let me show you the work of the humble" (ibidem:98). In the second movement of "East Coker" In *Four Quartets*, Eliot (1971:26-27) underlines the necessity of cultivating the virtue of humility by us:

Do not let me hear of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly, their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession, of belonging to another, or to others, or to God. The only wisdom we can hope to acquire is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

Humility is great in itself and does not generate sharp reactions or counter accusations. This is not a sign of weakness but strength in man, bringing immense tolerance, patience and composure in its train. All humanistic ideas of Eliot lead up to and culminate in spiritual discipline. For the ultimate good of an individual, he even enjoins upon us the practice of self-mortification and austerities. In his "Whispers of Immortality," he says (Eliot 1952:33): "But our lot crawls between dry ribs to keep our metaphysics warm." "Burnt Norton" has the following lines pointing to the possible liberation of an individual subject to his complete abstention from physical and mental movement (Eliot 1971:16): The inner freedom from the practical desire, the release from action and suffering, release from the inner And the outer compulsion.

Eliot's family background and formal education were such as enabled him to develop a highly religious and spiritual temper. To him, the ultimate aim of a man's life is the perfection of individuality, the attainment of sainthood (Eliot 1932:78). He keenly desired the salvation of the individual soul, as may be gathered from one of his notes in the periodical, *The Criterion*: "What ultimately matters is the salvation of the individual soul. You may not like this principle, but if you abjure it, you will probably in the end get something that you like less" (Eliot 1934:454). Of the variants of discipline -spiritual, ethical, political, intellectual-to be observed by an individual, the: spiritual discipline needs utmost attention, according to the poet. In fact, it is the want of this discipline that turns Eliot pessimistic in his earlier poetry, and it is the presence of this discipline that renders him optimistic in his later poetry. From the depressing, dejecting atmosphere of "The love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Gerontion," *The Waste Land*, and "The Hollow Men," it is a long march along the right track to the philosophical certitude and spiritual edification of *Four Quartets*.

The turning point in Eliot's poetic career is the highly devotional piece "Ash Wednesday." By the time' he reaches *Four Quartets*, he is really able to attain perfect poise and harmony. Therein he utters aloud (Eliot 1971:59): And all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well when the tongues of flame are in-folded into the crowned knot of fire and the fire and the rose are one. In this highly poetic passage, the "fire" of divine love and the "rose" of human love are seen working in complete unison -"The complete consort dancing together." The "infolded flame" is the supreme God without form or Brahman without gun as.

We may now conclude that Eliot was a humanist-poet who strove hard to highlight the prevailing chaos and lawlessness, greed and lust, selfishness and arrogance of modern man, and who suggested certain ways and means to cut across these forces of Evil in order to arrive at a life of peace and prosperity, contentment and harmony, compassion and understanding, for him. He kept human interests in mind, and advocated a still better life of morality and spirituality, which alone can apply an effective break to the advancing forces of Evil in the present-day burning world. As a true humanist, he remarked (Eliot 1952:97): The lot of man is ceaseless labor, or ceaseless idleness, which is still harder or irregular labor, which is not pleasant. By such remarks he raised the dignity of man and labor and ultimately the hopes of a better social and political order in the world around, the order that can be attained by a harmonious combination of "pure humanistic attitude" and "religious discipline" (Eliot 1951: 491).

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