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T. S. Eliot's Convictions Concerning the Use of Ideas in Literature

T. S. Eliot seems to me to have been greatly influenced by the scientific habit of mind which strictly departmentalizes the different fields of human intellectual and spiritual activity. His beliefs about the use of ideas in poetry connected with his pronouncements about "pure poetry" seem to give sufficient evidence for this statement. The very notion "pure poetry" implies something purified of all the non-poetical ingredients whether they be "criticism of life" or the ruminative reflective poetry of Tennyson and Browning as against the metaphysical intellectual poetry. It is not unimportant to add that Eliot's most disparaging remarks almost always hit the target in the nineteenth centry. The fault of Tennyson and Browning is that they are reflective poets and that they think, but are not able to feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. Donne was praised because a thought to him was an experience, because it modified his sensibility. There is, no doubt, even a stronger expression of this conviction about the nature of pure poetry in another essay. Quoted, whether in isolation, or read as an integral part of the essay, this statement cannot escape the verdict of giving the impression of being nonsensical.

> In truth neither Shakespeare nor Dante did any real thinking — that was not their job; and the relative value of the thought current at their time, the material enforced upon each to use as the vehicle of his feeling, is of no importance.[1]

Shakespeare and Dante did no real thinking of their own because it was not their job as poets to do so, would be the exact statement. But it does not seem to me that Dante and Shakespeare shared their views on the nature of poetry with T. S.

[1] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, Faber and Faber, London 1961, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca", p. 136.

Eliot, and so they may have allowed themselves the luxury of thinking for themselves now and then. It is for the poets to sing (whatever it means for the moment) and for the philosophers to think, and if they are moralists, to pronounce their judgements on the state of affairs and to criticize. On this level, the above quotation has to serve only this purpose: to show the rather strong impulse in T. S. Eliot to departmentalize the realm of the human mind, and, willy-nilly, in doing this he is in the same boat as Hobbes. The most explicit expression of this impulse seems to be the following:

> The poet makes poetry, the metaphysician makes metaphysics, the bee makes honey, the spider secretes a filament; you can hardly say that any of these agents believes: he merely does.[2]

But to say that neither Shakespeare nor Dante did any real thinking is, at best, an unmeaning statement. It cannot be proved, there is no way of coming to this conclusion. T. S. Eliot must have been inside them to be able to say that. But if we approach the statement from a completely different angle its meaning reveals itself. It is not a statement about Shakespeare or Dante not thinking. It is a statement of what "pure poetry" should be, it is a conviction about the nature of poetry. A pure poet should not think, should not produce ideas. It is not his job. He should turn ready-made ideas into pure poetry just as he should do with any other kind of material. Dante and Shakespeare are a good choice in so far as they are great names that might be taken to represent poetry, and pure poetry at that, the poetry that was later on so defiled with extrinsic intrusions by Dryden and Milton, and then by the Romantics, and then by the worst kind of people — the nineteenth century poets. That seems to me, in short, to be T. S. Eliot's position.

Apart from any other objections to this conviction there is the objection to the normative aesthetics saying what poetry should or should not be. It seems to me to be one of the rarest ironies that in the ages in which art is the most questionable thing, there appears a superabundance of normative criticism. A more subtle irony, of course, is the fact that the people who make it a point of their lives to destroy one set of values, pronouncing them to be merely conventions, should, in their turn, become so normative. The other objection is the fact that the new norms *are* convictions only, whereas they are presented in the guise of very categorical statements. "In truth neither Shakespeare nor Dante did any real thinking — that was not their job". Any conviction is questionable, but one of their unpleasant properties is the fact that they carry a high emotional charge about them, that they expect, as it were, to be taken as

[2] *Ib.*, p. 138.

valid categorical statements. Talking about the probability that Shakespeare deliberately took a 'view of life' from Seneca, and finding no evidence for this conjecture, T. S. Eliot says:

> I think it quite unlikely that Shakespeare knew anything of that *extraordinarily dull and uninteresting* body of Seneca's prose, which was translated by Lodge and printed in 1612[3]

It is evident here that Eliot interrupts the flow of his argument to pass his own bias about Seneca for a truthful value judgement. Following his argument that the value of the thought current at the time in which the poet lives, that is, the material enforced upon him to use as the vehicle of his feeling, is of no importance, Eliot finds an occasion to pass a slighting judgement on Seneca.

> We can certainly learn more from Aquinas than from Seneca, but that is quite a different matter. When Dante says
> *la sua voluntade è nostra pace*
> it is great poetry, and there is a great philosophy behind it. When Shakespeare says
> *As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;*
> *They kill us for their sport.*
> It is *equally* great poetry, though the philosophy behind it is not great.[4]

The valuation of St. Thomas's philosophy against Seneca's is not a real valuation. It is a personal bias for which T. S. Eliot gives his reader no reason whatsoever. The same seems to me to be true of the statement that neither Shakespeare nor Dante did any thinking of their own, and this statement seems to me to be more dangerous because I take it as an oblique way of saying something about the nature of poetry and literature in general.

But then, there is the opposite view as well. In so far as pure poetry is not supposed to serve any purpose, the other kind of literature, professedly, has a purpose to fulfil, the purpose of being "criticism of life". Although the phrase is Arnold's, and although T. S. Eliot attacked this view by attacking Arnold, it seeems to me that this view has been carried to its extreme position by G. B. Shaw, and, that, therefore, I can use G. B. Shaw's expression of it to set it against T. S. Eliot's view of poetry as pure poetry. Still, the reason to choose G. B. Shaw is somewhat deeper than that. In Oswald Spengler's opinion, the philosophy of today, resulting from Hegel and Schopenhauer, in so far as it is representative of the spirit of the age, is the criticism of society *(The Decline of the West)*. As an example of this type of literature Spengler mentions Shaw and analyses

[3] *Ib.*, p. 129. (italics mine).

[4] *Ib.*, pp. 136—137.

in brief his plays *Major Barbara* and *Man and Superman*. At the very beginning of *Man and Superman* Shaw informs his reader that he is at the beginning of a drama of ideas. Apart from this information Shaw implies in the very subtitle of his play (*A Comedy and a Philosophy*) that it is the expression of a philosophy. Needless to repeat that his plays are illustrations of his ideas, set very often at greater length in the prefaces and epilogues to the plays than in the plays themselves. For example, in the Penguin edition of the play *Androcles and the Lion* the preface is 96 pages and the play 43 pages plus an appendix to the play. Shaw is very much in favour of what he calls "philosophic fiction", applying this term to the writings of Ibsen and Tolstoy. Artist-philosophers are being praised by him in comparison with the pure poets who have a good eye for details but are not able to coordinate their observations into a philosophy, because they have no moral purpose. He calls himself, at the end of his preface to *Man and Superman,* a critic of life. His view, carried to the extreme, made him set Bunyan higher, in his estimate, than Shakespeare. The criterion he used was that Bunyan had a purpose with which his characters identified themselves, and that this very purpose, lacking in Shakespeare's characters, made them more vivid and interesting than Shakespeare's. The argument is something like this: Bunyan's characters identify themselves with the purpose of the world as they conceive it, whereas Shakespeare's characters do not see any purpose in the world at large, but have only their private purposes and their private tragedies, so that it follows that the destiny of Bunyan's characters has a deep universal meaning, whereas the destiny of Shakespeare's has not. The artist's only joy in life according to Shaw is to devote his abilities to a purpose recognized by himself as a mighty one. On the contrary

> ... the only real tragedy in life is the being used by personally minded men for purposes which you recognize to be base. All the rest is at worst mere misfortune or mortality: this alone is misery, slavery, hell on earth; and the revolt against it is the only force that offers a man's work to the poor artist, whom our personally minded rich people would so willingly employ as pandar, buffoon, beauty monger, sentimentalizer and the like.[5]

And to avoid all possible ambiguity, and to make his case completely clear, he says:

> But 'for art's sake' alone I would not face the toil of writing a single sentence.[6]

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[5] G. B. Shaw, *Man and Superman,* Longmans, Green and Co., London 1956, p. 23.

[6] *Ib.,* p. 25.

Although being an artist holding a directly opposite view, and an artist who tried to justify his view of art by theorizing about pure art, T. S. Eliot could not resist the spirit of the age. At the beginning of his essay, *The Idea of a Christian Society* he says that his subject here is going to be the organization of values and the critique of political and economic systems. He says, further on, that he considers this to be an urgent and a fundamental problem, and that he tackles it just for this particular reason, although he has to go out of his way to do so, being a poet, and believes that a sociologist or a philosopher would do better with the subject than he himself. The problem being urgent, and the modern times being what they are, he could do nothing else. Well, this is just what Camus says in *The Rebel:*

> ...we ourselves are no longer able to choose our problems. They choose us, one after the other. Let us consent to being chosen.[7]

Social criticism was going to be, according to Spengler's prediction, the theme of modern philosophy, appearing in art forms, plays and novels. G. B. Shaw, so far as I know, was not drawn by any strong impulse to write *l'art pour l'artistic* poems; that would have meant being a "beauty monger". The expression itself shows clearly that he felt very strongly for his cause, and, that in him and in T. S. Eliot we have the representatives of the two opposite views. We do not choose one or the other of the two views by the force of arguments the two men give us to support their views. We choose this or that view because we sympathize with it, because we first believe it and then accept the arguments given to support it as stronger than the opposing ones. And, the other, more reasonable reason, we cannot accept them for arguments, which they are not, but only for strongly voiced convictions.

But then, to wish to departmentalize the activities of the human mind does not seem to be in accordance with what the present moment requires, a synthesis of a sort. The question is why this setting of bounds, giving to the metaphysician the metaphysician's and to the poet the poet's, was so important to T. S. Eliot?

T. S. Eliot's views concerning pure poetry, in so far as they were expressed in his criticism of Matthew Arnold and in the form they took in his essay on Dante, met with some criticism on the part of Lionel Trilling. Trilling's view that literature in spite of everything is forced nowadays to be a criticism of life repeats Spengler's argument only in a less apodictic way.

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[7] A. Camus, *The Rebel*, Hamish Hamilton, London 1953, p. 13.

> Matthew Arnold said of literature that it was a criticism of life. No doubt there is extravagance in the statement. Literature has perhaps not always been, and is not in its essence, a criticism of life. But as the statement refers to the literature of the modern period, it is strikingly accurate.[8]

In his essay *The Meaning of a Literary Idea* Trilling realizes what strong ties exist between literature and philosophy and polemizes with the opposite view as expressed in Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature,* and, apart from them, he mentions Eliot, saying that "the modern feeling about this relationship is defined by two texts, both provided by T. S. Eliot".[9] Trilling's argument is concerned with proving that there has always been an inseparable connection between literature and ideas, and that T. S. Eliot's extreme view is due to his intention of offering "resistance to the nineteenth century way of looking at poetry as a heuristic medium, as a communication of knowledge".[10]

What I am interested in is not so much to prove T. S. Eliot to be wrong. It has been done successfully by Lionel Trilling, but to try to elucidate for myself his views about pure art. For this purpose it is necessary to pass briefly in review Eliot's thoughts on the problem.

Fist, he is opposed to the interpretative approach to literature *(Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca),* because it would imply that there is a particular "meaning" in a work of art that its author wished to communicate. This opposition ends with the statement that the poet's conscious opinions are not important in his art. Eliot evokes all sorts of reasons to support his anti-interpretative attitude. A very old reason is that by interpreting we read our own interpretation into the work of art. Another is a Spenglerian reason (and it seems to me that Eliot is indebted to Spengler in many of his arguments, the indebtedness remaining unacknowledged) that an artist could not possibly be "influenced" by a thinker coming from a different age or country (Shakespeare — Machiavelli) because such an influence is impossible. Two different ages, two different cultures cannot influence each other. This view is at the bottom of Eliot's argument, and it is Spengler's. But his reasons are not important. What is important is his view.

Second, Eliot holds that an idea, a philosophy, has an interest for a dramatist in so far as it can be used dramatically, in so far as it is good for the purposes of drama, as it has some theatrical utility. The assumptions following these are that an

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[8] L. Trilling, *The Opposing Self,* The Viking Press, New York 1955, "Preface", p. xii.

[9] L. Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination,* Mercury Books, London 1951, "The Meaning of a Literary Idea", p. 284.

[10] *Ib.,* p. 285.

artist does not think, does not believe the ideas he makes use of, and that the reader does not have to believe them to be able to appreciate his author's poetry, the view, no doubt connected with I. A. Richards. To appreciate poetry we do not need belief but suspension of belief. The poet's personality is something that should not enter poetry and Goethe is inferior to Dante just because Eliot in reading his poetry feels that "this is what Goethe the man believed", which does not occur to him in reading Dante. And finally, that the only thing a poet could do with an idea was to turn it into pure poetry, to transform it in such a way that it could be felt as immediately as the odour of a rose, that it could be, as it were, sensuously apprehended. A poet's personality is irrelevant to his poetry, he is only a kind of an impersonal catalyst without whom the mysterious magic transformation of everyday material into pure poetry could not be effected. The comparison with chemical processes and catalysts evokes the notion of alchemy and hermetic art, a process of secret refinement which takes place in a melting pot and turns everything into gold. A good poet for Eliot is a "perfect medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations".[11]

With this statement T. S. Eliot comes into the jurisdiction of Ortega y Gasset and his essay: *The Dehumanization of Art.* The argument of his essay being well known I do not have to sum it up here, although I think it necessary to mention just a few facts. First of all comes the fact that the new art, which Ortega calls "artistic art" is difficult to understand. He starts from this point and concludes that there are two components in every art, the human component, the human destinies presented or imitated, the passion and pain of the man behind the poet. When this component, a non-artistic one, prevailed in art, art was very popular, and it was so in the nineteenth century, just the century against the art of which T. S. Eliot so energetically reacted.

> During the nineteenth century artists proceeded in all too impure a fashion. They reduced the strictly aesthetic elements to a minimum and let the work consist almost entirely in a fiction of human realities. In this sense all normal art of the last century must be called realistic. ... Works of this kind are only partially works of art, or artistic objects. ... all they require is human sensibility and willingness to sympathize with our neighbour's joys and worries. No wonder that nineteenth century art has been so popular; it is made for the masses inasmuch as it is not art but an extract from life.[12]

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[11] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, Faber and Faber, London 1961, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", p. 18.

[12] Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Notes on the Novel*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1948, pp. 11—12.

The other component is the artistic component of pure art. It is questionable whether an entirely pure art is possible because it would mean art completely independent of any human element, and "if nobody had ever lived" nobody could have ever written or read, and nobody could have had any frame of reference to use in his writing or reading, a frame of reference, a reality which is supplied by "lived" life. But the sole preoccupation with the human content of the work of art is in principle incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper. Such a reaction against the all too human art of the nineteenth century is the "artistic art" of the twentieth century.

> Even though pure art may be impossible there doubtless can prevail a tendency toward a purification of art. Such a tendency would effect a progressive elimination of the human, all too human, elements predominant in romantic and naturalistic production. And in this process a point can be reached in which the human content has grown so thin that it is negligible.[13]

How is this "dehumanization" effected. We must, so to say, create a distance, an emotional distance between us and the real events of life. In this way we objectify them and turn them into themes of pure observation.

> At one end of the scale the world — persons, things, situations — is given to us in the aspect of "lived" reality; at the other end we see everything in the aspect of "observed" reality.[14]

Turning everything into a theme of observation, or transforming it in such a way that it can be sensuously apprehended without any mediation, is a poetic process, or a chemical process of taking things out of the connections of reality, of existence, and creating new pure relationships between them, relationships that have no object in the "lived" reality. This could be called the musicalization of poetry in the sense that this type of poetry uses its matter, human events, pains, ideas, in the same way as music uses sounds. It ascribes to them a kind of ideal independent being, and tries to establish relationships among them in this removed sphere very much in the same way as formal logic or mathematics establish relationships between their formalized elements. The elements of real life, whether events or ideas, are turned in this way into a kind of language the syntax of which is being called poetry, but to be turned to this language and to its parts of speech, their connections with real life must be destroyed. They are turned into what Santayana calls essences, the term having nothing to do with the phenomenological school of thought. Essences in the

[13] *Ib.*, p. 12.
[14] *Ib.*, p. 17.

sense in which colours and sounds are essences, a kind of sense data.

How is this destruction of connections with real life carried out so far as ideas are concerned? There is a simple way.

> The idea, instead of functioning as the means to think an object with, is itself made the object and the aim of thinking.[15]

That might very well explain T. S. Eliot's statement that the poet, but only the modern artistic art-poet, not Shakespeare or Dante, does not think. That means that ideas are only a kind of sense data, parts of speech of an unknown language the syntax of which is to be his art. This art is not to be interpreted because ideas are not used to direct us to a certain meaning. But this is only the extreme case of "artistic art". It is its ideal, never reached, and which it is impossible to reach because it would be unmeaning. It seems to me, therefore, that it is not proper to say that Shakespeare's or Dante's art are not meant to be interpreted, or that perhaps the more "ideal", in this sense, modern poetry, is not to be interpreted. There is always some meaning that connects with everyday life left even in the most pure poetry or art of any kind.

In insisting that the subject-matter of art must be de-actualized in this sense, I cannot help thinking, that the pure art, in purifying itself of actuality is at least as telling a symptom of the crisis in civilization as the literature of commitment is. Ortega y Gasset says that the spontaneous movement of the mind goes from concepts to the world, but that the modern poet revereses this movement.

> If we now invert the natural direction of this process; if, turning our back on alleged reality, we take the ideas for what they are — mere subjective patterns — and make them live as such, lean and angular, but pure and transparent; in short, if we deliberately propose to "realize" our ideas — then we have dehumanized and, as it were, derealized them. For ideas are really unreal. To regard them as reality is an idealization, a candid falsification. On the other hand, making them live in their very unreality is — let us express it this way — realizing the unreal as such. In this way we do not move from the mind to the world. On the contrary, we give three-dimensional being to mere patterns, we objectify the subjective, we "worldify" the immanent.[16]

The view that in poetry one should only toy with ideas and never take them in earnest so much as to believe or dispute them seems to reveal the pessimism of a person that cannot endure actual life but finds delight in observing the pictures of it, horrible if taken to signify reality, beautiful if contemplated in themselves only.

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[15] *Ib.*, p. 19.
[16] *Ib.*, p. 38.