

T. S. ELIOT AND THE IDEA OF A DRAMATIC LANGUAGE

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In the course of his long literary career, T.S. Eliot returned again and again to the subject of the English theatre. His main concern was the reestablishment of the poetic drama on the modern stage, the starting point being his belief, voiced by one of the characters in his «Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry,» that «the craving for poetic drama is permanent in human nature». The reasons he gave for his insistence on this theme were simple: «First, that the majority, perhaps, certainly a large number of poets hanker for the stage and second, that not a negligible public appears to want verse plays».¹

Though probably better known as a poet and essayist, the situation of the theatre of his time was of serious concern to Eliot who dedicated much of his writing to an analysis and an attempt to improve the form. Inextricably united to these studies was the ancient and, to Eliot's mind, ever-present relation between poetry and the drama. This relation and its consequences were to form a vital part of his critical work.

Eliot arrived at his conception of the theme and nature of the poetic drama through his criticism of the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists. It is in Charles Lamb's *Specimens* where we find the origin of the deplorable separation between drama and poetry or drama and literature. Lamb centered his attention on the poetic qualities of the Elizabethan drama and neglected the function of the plays on the stage. From here arose the modern opinion, rejected by Eliot, that drama and poetry are two separate and separable things. Eliot opposed the distinction drawn between drama and poetry or literature, maintaining that the dramatic element and the literary element are both integral to the play and therefore inseparable from each other. «In a play by Aeschylus, we do not find that certain passages are literature and other

¹ ELIOT, T. S. «The Possibility of a Poetic Drama». in *English Critical Essays: 20th Century*. Ed by Phyllis Jones. London; Oxford University Press, 1933. p. 35.

passages drama; every style of utterance in the play bears a relation to the whole and this relation is dramatic in itself».²

Eliot does not go so far as to affirm, as one of the characters in «A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry» does, that «...all poetry tends towards drama, and all drama towards poetry». He nonetheless recognizes an element of truth in this axiom. The poet has pointed out that much lyric verse is really dramatic in form: «What great poetry is not dramatic?» Looking at it from the other angle, he has also stated that «from the point of view of literature, drama is only one among several poetic forms». He obviously recognizes the poetic quality inherent in the drama and strives to give it emphasis. He views the drama as an art form and seeks to establish the contemporary theatre as such, based on its poetic foundations in speech.³ «I want to show that poetry is a proper form for the theatre; in fact, that it is the normal form, whether you think you like poetry or not».⁴

At the heart of the question of a language suitable for poetic drama lies the conflict between verse and prose. Eliot sees the problem here as being related less to our feelings about the style in which the plays are written than with our conception of the theatre. The poet is aware of, and discusses, the obvious precedence that prose takes in the contemporary theatre. He starts off by drawing «...a triple distinction: between prose, and verse, and our ordinary speech which is mostly below the level of either prose or verse. So, if you look at it in this way, it will appear that prose, on the stage, is as artificial as verse: or alternatively, that verse can be as natural as prose».⁵ The distinction lies in the fact that theatre audiences, either because they make no distinction between ordinary talk and prose dialogue, or because they are able to ignore the distinction when they do, *think* that prose on the stage is natural. Verse on the stage, being noticeably different from ordinary talk, seems more artificial. The situation is thus clear: audiences recognize the verse as verse, but are not always conscious of the prose as prose.⁶ Here we are given Eliot's measure of the dramatic superiority of prose to verse. The determining point is the audience's willingness to accept what it hears as true to life, as well as the playwright's belief that prose captures more accurately the speech of modern man. The dramatic demands of the contemporary stage are the demands imposed by both playwright and audience that want to create and receive a particular illusion from the actions and words placed on the stage: the illusion of life *the way it is*.

² ELIOT, T.S. «Four Elizabethan Dramatists» in *Selected Essays*. London, Faber and Faber, 1951. 3rd edn. p. 110.

³ PELLEGRINI, A. «A London Conversation with T.S.Eliot.» *The Sewanee Review*, LVII, 1949. p. 287.

⁴ ELIOT, T. S. «The Aims of Poetic Drama.» *Adam*, n. 200. Nov. 1949. p. 16.

⁵ ELIOT, T.S. «Poetry and Drama.» in *On Poetry and Poets*. London, Faber and Faber, 1957. p. 73.

⁶ MACLEISH, A. «The Poet as Playwright» *The Atlantic*, CXCIV, Feb.1955. p. 50

Eliot sees this measure as that which determines the superiority of prose for most modern plays. And this same measure also determines for him the superiority of verse on those occasions when he feels that prose is inadequate. He states that «...beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions of our conscious life when directed towards action —the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express— there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus....This particular range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest intensity».⁷

Verse, Eliot claims, belongs to the stage when the drama deals with actions that reach this «fringe of feeling,» not just because verse (or poetry) is capable of expressing these feelings while prose is not, but because when such actions are involved the audience is more willing to accept the verse as the only form proper for the representation.

«In taking verse to drama again and drama to verse, Eliot made a move of complex significance. It was at once a renovation of verse and a revival of the drama. It was a breakaway from poetry conceived too exclusively as the expression of the sentient anarchic individual, and a return to the wider conception of it as a presentation of human actions with their reverberations in human society. And it was a restoration to drama of poetic conventions that intensify its 'degree of form,' to use Eliot's own term. The field of verse is widened; the form of drama heightened».⁸

From this point of view, we can see how Eliot's drama was a continuing search, an unceasing experimentation of the different possibilities he saw available to him, to clear away the useless forms of drama and create new ones. A constant backward look is evident in Eliot's search. It appears that his ideal language is one that «...gathers into itself all the voices of the past and projects them into the future...» in the words of the chorus of *The Family Reunion*. When it comes to choosing among the possibilities for his plays, his first choice is always the primitive: the rituals, the Greek tragedians, the medieval mysteries. Even then, he takes greatly into account the history of the drama in his own country so that the Aeschylean chorus makes use of Anglican liturgy and the Euripidean plot model for *The Confidential Clerk* combines the possibilities offered by the language of the Edwardian comedy.

In the succession of major essays on the drama in which the question of language, specifically that of dramatic verse, is always central, the range of possibilities for a poetic drama can be seen to include music hall and jazz rhythms as well as liturgy conceived as an aesthetic device to concentrate expression.⁹ Then, after twenty years of rejection of the naturalist drama, in

⁷ ELIOT, T. S. «The Aims of Poetic Drama. p. 15.

⁸ PEACOCK, R. *A Poet in the Theatre*. London; George Routledge and Sons, Ltd. 1946. p. 2.

⁹ KENNEDY, A. K. *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language*. London; Cambridge University Press, 1975. pp. 88-89.

«The Need for Poetic Drama», Eliot turns to the possibility of a conversational verse form, capable of expressing everything that has to be said.

Looking at the series of plays, it can be observed that each one is, among other things, a conscious choice from a group of possibilities for the language. For *Sweeney Agonistes*, Eliot adapted the speech heard in the streets and pubs of London, assimilated through the rhythms of jazz, the music hall and the Aristophanic chorus. Later, he utilized the versification of *Everyman* for *Murder in the Cathedral*, mixing in a Christianized chorus of women and two prose passages. His last four plays show the struggle to find the point of intersection between ritual and liturgy and approximate naturalism, between speech out-of-time (the «unsayable» and the «musical order») and the speech of our time («the dialect of the tribe»)¹⁰ In his last plays, Eliot was forced to tackle the problem of relating modern dramatic verse more closely to contemporary speech for two additional reasons. First, because his themes derived from contemporary situations and, second, because a close relation to contemporary speech is suggested by the decorum of these plays.

Andrew Kennedy, in *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language*, believes that «...one way of looking at the evolution of Eliot's dramatic language—impelled as it is by the idea of the language cycle as much as by the specifically new requirements—is to see it as a series of sacrifices».¹¹ To achieve a broadly based convention, such as liturgy, he abandons the subtle allusiveness, the Jacobean-symbolist complexity of his quasi-dramatic poetry; there is no successful equivalent to *Prufrock* or *Gerontion* in the plays. The «floating feelings» Eliot once held up as an ideal for dramatic verse were fixed into the incantatory patterns in *Murder in the Cathedral*. After this had been achieved, Eliot began to move towards «speech within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another». At this point, the ritual and liturgy had been sacrificed for an approximately «naturalistic» verse—a move that entailed his moving from one pole to its opposite.

Eliot's later aims in the development of the language include a search for an «under-pattern», an idea bound up with that of a necessary «double-ness in the action». This applies both to the dramatic action as well as to the language and the expression of emotions «beyond the nameable», linked with his conviction that dramatic poetry «...at its moments of greatest intensity can touch the border of those feelings which only music can express». Ultimately, the poet sought that musical element in a fusion between the dramatic and musical «order» to take the audience beyond the nameable.

With T.S. Eliot it appears as though, probably for the first time in literary history, a dramatist's involvement with language has itself become dramatized. His struggle is one that was enacted in public, through numerous

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 94

¹¹ *Ibid.*

essays and plays. Yet it is a search that he sees continuing, for, as he writes in *East Coker*:

«Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what is there to conquer
By strength and submission, has already been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
To emulate — but there is not competition —
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only trying. The rest is not our business».

