

# T.S. Eliot : A Critic

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## Abstract

Thomas Stearns Eliot was equally influential as a critic and poet. He combined literary and social criticism. Eliot has suggested that the work of art is to be regarded as an organism, alive with the life of its own. This idea has brought down upon Eliot the charge that he had reduced the poet to an automaton and that he had thus committed himself to the most romantic theories possible. For Eliot, as for Pound, the essence of poetry is metaphor; but the special insights that he brings to metaphor come, not from Chinese picture writing, but from the French symbolist poets of the 19th century and from the English metaphysical poets of the 17th century. The Victorian attitude towards life may be described gradually as one of acceptance of authority. There's not to reason what was as true of the Victorian society as of the Victorian soldier. But there were dissentient voices right from the start -- Darwin's being one of the earliest -- which lent forces to the revolt of the 1890s and this was called for that reason, 'the naughty 90s'. During this last decade of Queen Victoria's reign, some of the most cherished ideas of the age, including those in literature and criticism, were openly questioned. 'Interrogate', it said, 'before you accept.' Shaw was one of the earliest writers of the new century to make it an article of his faith. 'Question! Examine! Test!' These were the watchwords of his creed. Thence, interrogation became the general habit of the age.

## Keywords:

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Eliot heads the list of analytical critics. Dissatisfied with the vengeance of impressionistic criticism, he institutes a scientific inquiry into the process by which a work is produced to account for its effect. As this was the method followed by Aristotle also, Eliot declared himself a classicist in 1928.

Eliot's critical work chiefly consists of essays and lectures, written or delivered from time to time and collected together in book form subsequently. The more important of these books are *The Sacred Wood*, *Homage to John Dryden*, *For Lancelot Andrews*, *Selected Essays*, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of*

*Criticism. Elizabethan essays, and Essays Ancient and Modern.* Eliot stands for orderliness, both in art and in criticism. Eliot, however, finds English criticism, ‘no better than a Sunday Park of contending and contentious orators, who have not arrived at the articulation of their differences.’ The end of criticism being ‘the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste’, ‘here, one would suppose, was a place for quiet cooperative, labour’, with each critic endeavouring to compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of true judgement.’ But English criticism has ever been divided between the contending claims of Classicism and Romanticism -- the former is said to follow the principle of allegiance to an outside authority and the latter of individual liberty ; and as love of liberty is ingrained in English character, it is said further that classicism can have ‘no standing in England whatever.’ This, says Eliot makes the choice between these two modes of writing, ‘a national, a racial issue.’ But it does not settle the question at all, which is ‘not what comes natural or what comes easy to us, but what is right.’

Eliot’s answer is that the right approach to criticism is the ‘classical.’ “Men”, he says, “cannot get on without giving allegiance to something outside themselves.” As the citizen has to give it to his government and the believer to his Church, so the critic has to give it to some common criterion of rightness. But those who stand for individual liberty in art listen to their inner voice only. With no other guide than it, they seek to interpret an author or his work. But how to know what it says is right? There is no external evidence to confirm it. The result often is that instead of facts about the author or the work, which alone can prove what each really is, one is supplied with the critic’s opinion or fancy: ‘Instead of insight, you get a fiction.’ Fact-finding, therefore, -- elucidation and not mere interpretation -- is the function of criticism. And this is best done when the critics have something outside himself to guide him, some standard of perfection to judge a work by, based upon, ‘Tradition and accumulated wisdom of time.’

His approach has also to be similarly objective. To be able to put his finger right at the facts about a work, he must have, first, a ‘highly developed sense of fact.’ Such will preclude the impression of his own opinion on it and, secondly, he should have as his tools ‘comparisons and analysis’, the former to see among other things, how the work modifies past tradition and is itself modified by it, and the latter to see it as it really is. ‘And any book, any essay, any note which produces a fact even of the lowest order, about a work of art, is a better piece of work than nineteenth of the most pretentious critical journalism, in journals or in books.’

And what is true criticism? “Criticism”, contends Eliot, “is about something other than itself.” ‘Interpretation’, therefore, by which the critic puts as much of himself into the work he interprets, as he finds in it, and sometimes even more, is not criticism. It interests by itself, rather than by what it says about the work. The same is true of impressionism -- the exposure of a sensitive and cultivated mind, as of common place, before a work of art to form its true impression. For the impression, so formed, is not of that work alone. It is immediately modified by a multitude of other impressions, received from other sources, with which the mind is already, stored. It is, in other words, the impression of a mind predisposed by former impressions in a particular direction. It is therefore the critic’s idea of the work, rather than a faithful elucidation of it; a new work of the critic’s own, stimulated by the author’s. Eliot also decries, the ‘abstract style in criticism’, illustrated in statements like “Poetry is the most highly organised form of intellectual activity”, which being all emotion and no thought, suggests nothing concrete to the mind; and the dogmatic critic who judges a work of art by some precept Horace or Boileau, he has left his labour incomplete. Such statements may often be justifiable as a saving of time; but in matters of great importance the critic must coerce, and he must not make judgments of worse or better. He must simply elucidate : the reader will form the correct judgement for himself. ‘A precept, such as Horace or Boileau gives us, is merely an unfinished analysis.’ It fights shy of the inquiry that should lead up to it. And for a work to conform blindly to it is to ignore the call of the present altogether, which alters the past as much it is altered by it.

True criticism, therefore, is the institution of a scientific inquiry into a work of art to see it as it really is. It is ‘the disinterested exercise of intelligence,’ such as Aristotle brought to bear on his work. What he did was to analyse a work of art to the point of discovering the principle underlying its composition. The modern critic has to discharge as much. With his attention fixed solely and steadfastly on the work before him, he has to dig deep into it for the law that can account for it fully. This is what a botanist or a zoologist does while dissecting a specimen: he looks not for what is interesting in it, but for the principle that makes it what it is. All other criticism is but the satisfaction of some inner urge of the critic -- some urge which he has not been able to satisfy in any other. It is a new work of art rather than an elucidation of an old one. For this reason, the artist is oftenest to be dependent upon as a critic, his criticism will be criticism and not the satisfaction of a suppressed creative wish -- which, in most other persons, is apt to interfere fatally. There is one more reason: “Probably, the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of shifting, combining constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative. I maintain even that the criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work is the most vital, the highest kind of criticism and that some creative writers are superior to others solely because their critical faculty is superior.” Even those who are supposed to be unconscious artists, may for the same reason be supposed to be unconscious critics, for it cannot be that “because works have been composed without apparent critical labour, no critical labour has been done.” This being so, there can be no better critic of a work than the author himself.

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