

Aporias of Formalistic Criticism: T.S. Eliot's Two Essays on Milton and Paul de Man's Rhetorical Readings

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Abstract: In the series of critical writings, T.S. Eliot wrote two articles on Milton, "Milton I" and "Milton II". In the first, Eliot criticizes Milton for creating artificial, unimaginative, conventional, vague poetry. Milton is assailed for not contributing to the development of English language and literature. Eliot considers Milton less poetic as Milton prioritized the aural imagery as against the visual and tactile, which are called the essential qualities of the great tradition of English poetry. Milton is accused of disrupting and dislocating meaning in his poetry as he indulges in rhetoric. Excess of music leads to disjunction in the sound and sense, which ultimately results in the discontinuity of the organic unity between the signifier and the referent. Shakespeare, Dante and others are called the poets of the great tradition as they achieved the perfect unity between form and meaning. Eliot reverses his stance in "Milton II" and finds Milton a great, unique poet. To readers' bafflement, Eliot canonizes Milton, in "Milton II" for excelling in those very poetic qualities for the lack of which he was condemned in "Milton I".

Keywords: Rhetoricity, Kantian aesthetics, Tradition, *Vyakta*, *Avyakta*

The criticism as practiced by T.S. Eliot in "Milton I" paradoxically leads to Milton's canonization in "Milton II". It becomes necessary that T.S. Eliot's poetic theory is re-read with a rigour to assess the causes and nature of inconsistencies in which Eliot indulges. This paper attempts to reflect upon the subjective fallacies of various kinds that T.S. Eliot committed while writing "Milton I" and "Milton II". I have taken these subjective fallacies to be the forms of de Manian blindness from which Eliot could not escape, because the inevitable faith in the truth of the materiality of sense is generated in the lived experiences of human life through pure signifiers. Eliot performs in the paradigm of aporias which are the result of his excessive faith in empty signifiers which create the delusions of essentiality. The centrality of T.S. Eliot's argument can be situated in the binaries that he creates between grammatical, referential mode of language and the rhetorical, non-referential mode of language. The organic nature of linguistic medium is so natural with Eliot that he sees complete correspondence between the form and the content. For Eliot language has the ability to convey what a subject intends to, and literary form, in all its manifestations of sign, structure and sound, is purposive and intentional. The idea of reconciliation between the form and the content is so attractive and powerful with T.S. Eliot that it becomes the breeding ground of false methods and models of literary

interpretation. In his celebrated essay "What is Classic" Eliot finds maturity of language and style in the style which is enriched with maximum referentiality. A genius is one who exploits fully the riches of a language (Eliot 1956, 63). The 'common style', as Eliot terms it, is invested with maximum semanticity. Henry James is exalted for his fluid style as it perfectly conveys his kind of meaning and his sense of reality. Henry James's 'involved syntax' represents his intentionality. But 'reality is no part' of Milton's intentionality (Eliot 1956, 142). Even Dryden is superior to Milton. Comparing Dryden with Milton, Eliot says:

Of the two, I still think Dryden's development the healthier, because it was Dryden who preserved, so far as it was preserved at all, the tradition of *conversational language* in poetry: and I might add that it seems to me easier to get back to *healthy language from Dryden* than it is to get back to it from Milton. For what such a generalization is worth, Milton's influence on eighteenth century was much more deplorable than Dryden's (Eliot 1956, 142, italics mine).

James Joyce is also considered a writer of "traditional" greatness because "Joyce always maintains some contact with conversational tone" (Eliot 1956, 143). Shakespeare's permanence and universality is attributed to the fact that there is complete fusion of the form and intent in Shakespearean poetry "... the auditory imagination and the imagination of the other senses are more nearly fused, and *fused together with the thought*" (Eliot 1956, 142, italics mine). Eliot finds the same complete coherence between surface and core in Shakespeare and Dante when he says in these poets "There is no interruption between the surface that these poets present to you and the core" (Eliot 1956, 142). And that is why in these poets "at each reading all the elements of appreciation can be present (Eliot 1956, 142). The grammaticality of the language, the referentiality of the language and the form, the complete correspondence between the poetic intent and its organic form, is the type of genetic model and method which T.S. Eliot creates to judge Milton's poetry. Milton cannot be appreciated fully because Milton's style is basically rhetorical, and, A disadvantage of the rhetorical style appears to be that a dislocation takes place, through the hypertrophy of the auditory imagination at the expense of the visual and tactile, so that *the inner meaning is separated from the surface* and tends to become something occult... (Eliot 1956, 143, italics mine). For T.S. Eliot, fuller poetic appreciation is possible only when there is coherent relationship between the surface and the core, between the form and the content, between the word and the referent. With Milton he finds disruption between the signifier and the referent. And as Milton failed to create new meanings in the signifier, Eliot concludes "Milton writes English like a dead language" (Eliot 1956, 141). This so called death of English language at the hands of Milton prompts Mr. Eliot to indulge in cannibalistic criticism of Milton, because Eliot cannot tolerate the damage that Milton has done "to the English language from which it has not wholly recovered" (Eliot 1956, 145). In "Milton II", Eliot reverses his stance and canonizes Miltonic poetry on those very points on which he

denounced it. Here he finds a perfect organic relationship between the form and meaning. The music which sounded meaningless in "Milton I" becomes 'strongest' in "Milton II", deriving its nutrition from the complete correspondence between the sound and meaning. Eliot says "It (poetry) might also learn (from Milton) that the music of verse is strongest in poetry which has a definite meaning expressed in the properest words" (Eliot 1956, 160). Perhaps this is the "properest" test that Eliot evolves for great poetry. Appropriate subject matter couched in proper words, and accompanying suitable extended structures, larger units of music, suggestive imagery, all serve the purpose of conveying the maximum meaning. It is this purposive and intentional value of Milton's poetry which canonizes him. Milton successfully passes the test of this purposiveness and Eliot raises him to the height and stature that "we must perhaps wait for a great poet before we find one who can profit from the study of Milton" (Eliot 1956, 155).

When Eliot wrote "Milton II", he must have thought the necessity of writing this to correct the mistakes that he had committed earlier. He corrects, of course, but what he corrects is incorrigible. What Eliot considers as insights, are in fact the causes of blindness, which have afflicted the critic community of his type. The inconsistencies in which Eliot indulges perhaps result from his mistake of taking surfaces as core and core as surfaces. When he is dealing with surfaces, he feels the effects of digging deep. True criticism is a creative practice of another type. And, as in the case of all sorts of creativity, true criticism too grows in the moments of crisis. True criticism bursts forth when there is an irresistible urgency to vent irrepressible ideas which have germinated from the extended deep reflections on the ontological status of language and literature. This is the moment of crisis because one starts questioning the meaning and medium both. One cannot avoid the crisis, it has to be faced if one wants to 'dig deep'.

In periods that are not periods of crisis, or in individuals bent on avoiding crisis at all cost, there can be all kinds of approaches to literature: historical, philosophical, psychological, etc., but there can be no criticism. For such periods or individuals will never put the act of writing into question by relating it to specific intent (de Man 18).

T.S. Eliot seems to follow Kantian aesthetics of art forms. He indulges in pleasure, as derived from the formal aspects of literature— words, sentences, rhythm, the texture of imagery, arrangement of sounds, etc. Art is contemplated as beautiful object which, even if it has some social purpose, exists mainly for pleasure. This pleasure principle pervades whatever else may happen. In other words, Eliot's model and method seems to be—do not dig deep, enjoy the form and surface, avoid the crisis which may result from reflecting on the true nature of language and literature. Let me now elaborate the crisis which T.S. Eliot avoided. Earlier I pointed out that Eliot disparaged Miltonic poetry for its rhetoricity. Eliot finds that rhetoric causes disruption between the form and meaning. Eliot uses the term rhetoric' in the sense that Miltonic poetry is overornate and ostentatious, separated from the referential

everyday language. Rhetorical language is opposed to conversational everyday language. Eliot's problems can be identified as that he takes rhetoric to be a disruptive force which separates meaning from the sign. Eliot perhaps overlooks nature of language. Language is essentially rhetorical, it does not refer to anything, it does not originate to make meanings, it is not constant and stable, its origin is temporal and existential, and it exists for its own sake. Rhetoricity does not disrupt the meaning because meaning is outside the language. Even everyday language which is considered to be referential is essentially devoid of any referent. The signifiers are mere signifiers arbitrarily meaning whatever the speaker/listener, writer/reader intends them to mean. Language is devoid of all meanings, it is we who invest meaning in it because we are condemned to what Fredric Jameson calls "the prison house of language". De man has put this damned existence more accurately:

In the everyday language of communication, there is no priori privileged position of sign over meaning or of meaning over sign; the act of interpretation will always again have to establish this relation for the particular case at hand. The interpretation of everyday language is Sisyphean task, a task without end and without progress, for the other is always free to make what he wants, differ from what he says what he wants (de Man 11).

The language of literature is no better. It is impossible for literature to escape the rhetorical nature of language. Eliot wants Milton to do something which nobody, including Eliot, can do. You cannot make language what it is not. Eliot is blind to his own rhetoricity throughout when he composes poetry. I have just taken a few lines to illustrate it:

Because I do not hope to turn again / Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn again
Designing this man's gift and that man's scope
I no longer strive to strive towards such things
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)
Why should I mourn

The vanish power of the usual sign? / (Eliot, "Ash Wednesday" 68)

This stanza sufficiently demonstrates that it is difficult to escape rhetoricity. It seems that Eliot feels assured that he is conveying what he intends to convey. But three repetitions of the same point prove it beyond doubt that the poet is not sure of presence of meanings. We repeat only when we fail in doing something. Eliot's repetitions are clear indications of his failures in conveying meanings as intended by him. Eliot cannot avoid the rhetoricity of language. The two rhetorical questions also suggest that the expressions are rhetorical and the meaning cannot be fixed. The device of rhetorical question is used to make forceful assertions, but they can also be taken as questions seeking replies from the listener/reader. The two uses of the rhetorical question frustrate the very desire to have stable meanings. The conclusion is that language by its very nature cannot give us any stable meaning, it can only delude us, like *Maya*, into meanings. Eliot too is deluded into seeking meanings. "The fallacy of the belief that in the language of poetry, sign and meaning can coincide or at least be related to each other in the free and

harmonious balance that we call beauty, is said to be a specially romantic delusion" (de Man 12). Eliot falls prey to this "romantic delusion" in writing critical interpretations as well as in writing poetry. Literature becomes authentic only when it discovers the mythic nature of language. But for Eliot it is through the formal devices that authentic literature can be created, which will ultimately get assimilated in the great tradition. His theory of impersonality is one such device. To Eliot impersonality in poetry means absence of self expression, negation of personal feelings and emotions, including the psychological concerns. This theory of impersonality is afflicted with the Coleridgean concept of organic relationship between form and meaning. It seems as if literary forms are some kind of vessels in which contents can be poured from the mind who creates them. Words or other aspects of linguistic expressions are not vessels, carriers of feelings, emotions. If words are vessels, they are empty vessels. Impersonality in literature cannot be achieved by avoiding personal emotions and feelings, true impersonality can be achieved only by realizing that language which constitutes literature is neither personal nor impersonal. Language is without subject, so the question of subjectivity is misplaced. Blanchot talking about impersonality in Mallarme writes, "Language supposes for him neither a speaker, nor a listener, it speaks and writes by itself. It is a kind of consciousness without subject" (quoted in de Man 69).

As the formal aspects are not inherently meaningful, they can respond anyway to the intentionality of the interpreter. Literary forms are not objective structures, objectivity of literary forms is fictitiously created by the interpreter. All formal features including the sign are fictitious, and this fictionality is the only reality that a literary writer can aim at. Not realizing the fictional character of literary language, T.S. Eliot is gripped with the irresistible desire to create particular kinds of literary structures and forms which respond to his kind of intentionality. Contrary to T.S. Eliot, who is gripped with the referentiality of the language, Rabindra Nath Tagore in *Gitanjali* questions the referentiality of language and prays for silence throughout the series of 103 Songs. Tagore in song No. 42 prays for freedom from words, as words fail to convey his prayers :

In that shoreless ocean, at thy silently listening smile
my songs would swell in melodies, free as waves,
free from all bondage of words. (Tagore 93)

It is Eliot's intentionality that is responsible for the denunciation and appreciation of Milton and not the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of formal devices as he conceives them to be. If the diction, the involved syntax, the long units of music are meaningless in "Milton I" and meaningful in "Milton II", it is Eliot who performs the trick, as the signifiers and other formal devices are devoid of any meaning whatsoever. Language exists in the void and literature names this void. "Poetic language names this void (the presence of nothingness) with ever-renewed understanding and, ... it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature" (de Man 18). As literary language, like language in general, is devoid of any essence, it always aspires for semantic and sensorial totalizations. But it is a kind of

delusion "... constituted in the mind of interpreter as the work discloses itself in response to his questioning. But the dialogue between the work and the interpreter is endless" (de Man 32). Eliot accuses Milton for not contributing in any positive sense to the tradition of English language and literature. Eliot conceives tradition as a big classical majestic river to which tributaries contribute and from which tributaries flow. This is the so called dynamic conception of tradition. Milton is outside this dynamic conception of tradition as he is individualistic, creating his own principles of writing which respond to his kind of imagination. In "Milton I" Eliot denounces Milton for being individualistic and in "Milton II", he appreciates Milton for being individualistic. It happens because tradition as conceived by Eliot is a misplaced concept. Tradition is contingent, temporal and linguistically constituted concept, devoid of any meaning and essence, much like other concepts in this world. Antonin Atraud questions the concept of tradition as formulated by Eliot when he says "Written poetry has value for one single moment and should then be destroyed" (quoted in de Man 147). So to accuse Milton of creating harmful effects in English literary tradition or for not contributing positively to literary tradition is founded on subjective assumptions. How can we harm anything which does not exist? Eliot's hermeneutic quest for Coleridgean organic unity between form and content leads him nowhere. Whether he speaks for Milton or against Milton, he indulges in inconsistencies which are the result of deeper malady, the malady of mistaking surfaces as core, the malady that originates in aporetic nature of language which in the last analysis is the breeding ground of such kind of poetics. It is a painful to reflect upon the reality of this phenomenal and material world or to reflect upon the reality of language and literature. The questions on origin, the questions on canon-formation, the questions on existence of tradition, the questions on the ontological status of language of literature, will lead to genuine criticism, and also to crisis like situations. And we, including T.S. Eliot, want to avoid crisis at all costs. For us the manifest, the *Vyakta*, is so attractive that the unmanifest or *Avyakta* does not make any sense to us. Eliot read the *Upanishads* in original Sanskrit where two kinds of knowledge given are *Vyakta* and *Avyakta*. It is difficult to understand that Eliot accuses Milton for lacking in conversational idiom and representational appeal. Till we are tied to the dead body of logocentric approach, it is difficult to visualize any authentic criticism. Authentic criticism has difficulties of its own. "Whether authentic criticism is a liability or an asset to literary studies remains an open question" (de Man 81). And the openness of the question is as wide as Eliot's own dilemma—the plight between empirical representationalism and ontological assertionism.

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