

## T.S ELIOT: DELINEATING THE FRENCH INFLUENCES

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### EARLY INFLUENCES

T S Eliot is one of the most fascinating of all modern poets. Spanning over a period of almost sixty years, this literary genius of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century hardly finds any parallel in the annals of contemporary social and literary world. Struggling against the Unitarian upbringing, shunning the so called superpower(s) and their sordid metropolises, rejecting the creed of his upbringing and entering into a world of conflicting theories, he stands like a majestic oak in a shrubbery. Reflecting through his first enigmatic character 'Prufrock', moving on to the maturing 'Gerontion' and finally culminating into a matured prophet of the 'Waste Land' and 'Four Quartets'; the development of T. S. Eliot is not only an interesting episode but a very curious phenomenon.

There are various influences on the personality of a poet; more so that of Eliot who has exhibited a comparatively longer period of growth than any of his contemporaries. The environment of St Louis, a city which was prosperous at the time of his birth had a long and permanent influence on his mind and sensibility but gradually these impressions went through a change over the period of time. It would be appropriate here to quote Van Wyck Brooks, "Probably some of the pride of New England traditions lingered with the family and was imparted to the children. But at the time of Eliot's birth in 1888, New England culture was declining, and the Yankee spirit was not what it had been. The Boston mind, once so cheerful, was full of the sense of last things, as if it hoped for no resuscitation. The literary tradition was exhausted, and the religious tradition, dissolving before the progress of Roman Catholicism,

Jewry and Christian Science, was also in an advanced state of decay." [1]

Gradually the tone and spirit of his poetry becomes mired in disillusionment. Therefore, there is a note of pessimism in Eliot's early poetry; again, it is the result of the environmental settings like the impact of Boston Brahmins, and his obsession with Unitarianism. This is corroborated by the following: "The family background included the extreme form of Protestant rationalism known as Unitarianism, and the philosophies of Schleiermacher, Emerson, Channing and Herbert Spencer were held in high regard." [2]

In his later years Unitarianism had become too much with Eliot and he had to renounce it in favor of Anglicanism which provided him the necessary ground for imagination which was devoid in case of Unitarianism. Athenaum has rightly pointed out that, "Unitarianism to Eliot seems intimately connected with what he calls 'the Boston doubt: a scepticism which is difficult to explain to those who are not born to it. This scepticism,' he goes on, 'is ... not destructive, but it is dissolvent.'" [3]

It is further corroborated in the Book Review of 1927, "In another context, however, he speaks of 'the best aspect of Unitarianism, a kind of emotional reserve and intellectual integrity'". [4]

And yet at another stage in his life, Eliot has himself admitted that "I was brought up outside the Christian Fold, in Unitarianism; and in the form of Unitarianism in which I was instructed, things were either black or white. The Son and the Holy Ghost were not believed in, certainly; but they were

entitled to respect as entities in which many other people believed.”<sup>[5]</sup>

It is therefore, no wonder that he was grappling with his own self to formulate a clear cut ideology. Further complexities regarding his religious views at this stage may be witnessed in his relationship with Anne Dunne, his childhood catholic nurse: “And who knows but that the Irish nursemaid Annie Dunne, to whom young Eliot was greatly attached, was the first to attract him in the direction of Catholicism. At least he still remembers an occasion on which she brought him along to her little Catholic church.”<sup>[6]</sup>

Added to the above is the influence of his businessman father who is known as a staunch supporter of religious adherence which is evidenced by: 'it was tacitly assumed that if one was thrifty, enterprising, intelligent, practical and prudent in not violating social conventions' success was assured.<sup>[7]</sup>

Even though Eliot has so far not been seen in the context of an environmental scenario, yet a closer look at his early and later works reflect his concern, attachment and fascination for the primitive and the elemental forces apart from the above influences of the family environment, parentage and religion. He was also deeply influenced by the historic past of Missouri and Mississippi: 'I feel,' he wrote to a St Louis newspaper in 1930, “that there is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those who have not.”<sup>[6]</sup>

His family also tried to adhere to the past albeit the family and the boy were now taking different tracks for their respective identities. It was a period of great personal toil for Eliot as he had to develop a sensibility of his own in addition to guarding his connection with the family and his surroundings. He says that “The family guarded jealously its connexions with New England; but it was not until years of maturity that I perceived that I myself had always been a New Englander in the South West, and a South Westerner in New England; when I was sent to school in New England I lost my southern accent without ever acquiring the accent of

the native Bostonian. In New England I missed the long dark river, the ailanthus trees, the flaming cardinal birds, the high limestone bluffs where we searched for fossil shell-fish; in Missouri I missed the fir trees, the bay and goldenrod, the song-sparrows, the red granite and the blue sea of Massachusetts.”<sup>[8]</sup>

It is thus seen that the formative years of Eliot's life were not as easy as these happen to be in the case of a young child; his was torn between the present and the past, the family and his own individuality, his own religious views and the family's code of conduct in matters religious and spiritual, and between the closed American climate and the vibrant French culture. Even Harvard could not appease the mind of this young philosopher at that point of time. It was therefore because of the reasons cited above that he had to leave the American shores to find solace in the French city of Paris which was considered to be the most vibrant hub on the globe in matters related to literature and philosophy.

## FRENCH DEBATE

Scholars, critics and present day philosophers – are all wrestling with each other to classify Eliot. One school of thought lays the claim that owing to his upbringing, schooling, and University education, he is an American and is included in the study of modern American poets; while the other school of thought claims that he is a British poet. The latter school grounds its theory on the basis of the fact that Eliot, in his later days had rejected Unitarianism and became an Anglican. Not only this, after having been Christened in a Church in England, he even secured British citizenship and settled in the land of his famous ancestor Sir Thomas Eliot who is well known as the author of ‘Governer’, and for his polite rebuff of Henry VIII when the later had married Anne Boleyn against the decree of the Church at Rome and had even plundered the abbeys and monasteries in England, thus defying openly the authority of the Roman Church. Such a claim and classification of this Nobel Laureate, scholar and philosopher par

excellence not only does injustice to his self but also sometimes seriously questions the parameters of the school of classification itself as Eliot is none of these i.e. he is neither an American nor a British poet according to the philosophical parameters.

A serious and deep analysis of his poetic works shows that he is heart and soul-‘French’. The argument becomes clear by a look at some of the influences on his life and an intensive study of his poems. Therefore, what is required is to investigate the influence of French culture and philosophers on Elliot’s life and works. The proposed paper is an attempt to understand the French influence in Elliot’s works. The French influence in Elliot’s works is evident in most of his works and some of the French influences are mentioned below:

## ARTHUR SYMONS

When Eliot was at Harvard, he came across Arthur Symon’s *‘The Symbolist Movement in Literature’*. It was not that he was completely uninfluenced by the Harvard philosophers who were at that time wrestling to defend the religious truths and spiritual values against the onslaught of Darwinism; but was more drawn towards the French philosophers and literature as is evident from his debt to Arthur Symons to not only have introduced him to the French Poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century but also affected his course of life as is evident in his admission ‘an introduction to wholly new feelings..... a revelation’<sup>[9]</sup>.<sup>10]</sup> Symons definition of Symbolism appealed to him.

Symons technique of revolt against exteriority and scientific materialism entrapped him. “He wrote of Gerard de Vernal- who found his most precious and uninterrupted solitude in the crowded and more sordid streets of great cities- as possessing a state of double consciousness.”<sup>[11]</sup>. Here in, he notices a link between the divergent things and the past- a trend which is not traced in the poetry of his contemporaries like Auden and others. It is perhaps this tendency that makes his poetry enigmatic as the reader has to wrestle with the poetic and literary style which seems to be unconventional by the

British and American standards. In the British poetry, we find traces of this pattern in the poetry of Donne, whom Eliot himself has termed as ‘the first modernist’; and Dr. Johnson has accused him of yoking ‘two heterogeneous ideas together by violence’. But in the case of French literature, we notice that the violence and heterogeneity is entirely absent and in the hands of Eliot who happens to be a remarkable product of French influences, it totally disappears. Thus we feel that the tendency of the homogeneity of divergent ideas is not an indigenous component of British or American poetry but its seeds lie in the genuine French literature for a study of which Eliot had to leave England and America.

Symons was a born Briton; yet he left England to fall in line with the intellectual environment in Paris. He is well known for his close studies on Baudilaire and Verlaine. There is a crystal cut and clear reflection of French tendencies in his poems in the form of subject matter, style, eroticism and the vividness of description. His *Confessions: A Study in Pathology* has had a profound influence on the writer of *Prufrock*. Although, he suffered a psychotic breakdown in 1909 and published very little after that; yet his deep and profound influence on Eliot cannot be overlooked. Eliot was already dismayed by the intellectual hollowness of England and America during this time. The American poetry of his generation represented for Eliot ‘a complete blank’. So, in the year October of 1910, he left for College de France in Paris to satisfy his intellectual urge. He had even decided to settle down and scrape in Paris and write French; but it is still an unanswered question as to why he left Paris to settle down permanently in England! It is perhaps because of this unanswered question that he is been termed as ‘*An Imperfect Life*’<sup>[12]</sup>.

## LAFORGUE

Laforgue too seems to have influenced him deeply. Eliot has admitted it that it was Laforgue to whom he is indebted more than any other poet. It was from him as from Baudilaire that ‘the sort of experience

that an adolescent had had, in an industrial city in America, could be the material for poetry<sup>[13]</sup>. All these impressions are clearly evident in 'Prufrock' and other poems. In fact, it is the image of St. Louis on which he has superimposed London and Paris when he talks about the displaced cosmopolitans and sordid metropolises in his poetry.

Soon after reading Symons, Eliot went through Laforgue's *Oeuvres Complete*, and thereafter, his poetry springs up with an entirely new velocity as is evident in the readings of *Spleen*, *Nocturne*, *Humouresque* and *Conversation Galante*. It was Laforgue's 'interior monologue', and the 'art of dramatizing the most serious ideas as ridiculous' that appealed to Eliot the most and it is exclusively reflected in the opening lines of J. Alfred Prufrock wherein the persona says "Let us go then you and I". We really do not know whom the persona is asking to go along with him whether it is the listener, reader or the speaker, none has been clarified. There is a complete sense of indeterminacy. Manju Jain has pointed out 'Out of seven words, there are three pronouns<sup>[11]</sup>, Even if it is assumed that the persona is speaking to the reader, there is a complete sense of vocal vacuum as the reader is not supposed to ask the question. Thus, it is clear that the persona of Prufrock is an entirely influenced product not only because of his indeterminacy and vocal chaos; but also because of his preferred use of 'Dramatic Monologue' as the medium of expression and mockery of his enterprise i.e. 'The Love Song'.

## GERARD DE Nerval

Gerard de Nerval is another well-known French poet whose influence on Eliot is noteworthy. Although, he was a romantic poet of his age; yet he had influenced Eliot as to how he should incorporate the inescapable solace giving landscape in his poetry. Nerval's friend Theophile Gautier has written a touching account of his life in '*La Vie de Gerard*'. Nerval was born in Paris and his father was a military doctor with the Grande Armee of Napoleon, and hence had to be away from the family because of his professional demands. On one such occasion in the

year 1814, while he was away, Nerval was taken away by his maternal uncle from Paris to the country side of Valois. As a result, Valois was always reminiscent in his mind and is vividly reflected in his work *Chansons et legends du Valois*. As reflected in the *Chansons*, his passion for the spirit world has been juxtaposed with a negative view of the material world, "this life is a hovel and a place of ill repute, I am ashamed that God should see me here."

Eliot found a parallelism of Nerval's life in Jean Verdenal who eventually happened to be a fellow lodger of Eliot in Paris. Verdenal was a medical student. However, he too was not uninfluenced by Laforgue and Maurras as is evident from the presence of Action Francaise and copies of Laforgue in his personal library. Eliot nostalgically recalls his association with him: 'I am willing to admit that my own retrospect is touched by a sentimental sunset, the memory of a friend coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac, a friend who was later (so far as I could find out) to be mixed with the mud of Gallipoli<sup>[15]</sup>. The image of *Lilics* can be found occurring and reoccurring in the *Waste Land* and other poems. So, it is not just Nerval but even Verdenal- the fellow lodger of Eliot at Paris at whose remembrance he is charged with personal emotion, who happens to be instrumental in the shaping of his emotions and attitude.

Like Baudilaire, Nerval too experienced a series of nervous breakdowns, the first one occurring in the year 1841. His biographical Novellas '*Les Illumines, ou les precurseurs du socialisme*' is a powerful concern of a political character. His poverty and disorientation led him to commit suicide on January 26, 1855 by hanging in a gutter. According to Baudilaire "Nerval had delivered his soul in the darkest street that he could find." Nerval's thought had a profound impact on the 'Surrealists' as is emphasized by Andre Breton. Eliot has quoted a line of his sonnet '*El Desdichado*' in his celebrated poem '*Waste Land*'. Henry Miller, an American writer, on his study on Rimbaud writes, 'It is my sincere belief that America needs to become acquainted with this

legendary figure 'Rimbaud' more than ever'- the same holds true for Nerval.

## CHARLES MAURRAS

Charles Maurras- the most dominating theoretician of his time too had an everlasting influence on the mind and personality of T.S. Eliot. He was born on April 20, 1868 and passed on on Nov. 16, 1952. In the annals of literary domain, he is best known as the writer of *Action Francaise*- a treatise on nationalism and political thought which later on became the butt of criticism as it was interpreted as a precursor of fascism by some scholars. However, his influence as a political theorist was tremendous on 20<sup>th</sup> C Europe. Though deaf as a teenager, yet he succeeded in publishing his first article at the age of 17 in the review '*Annales de Philosophie Chretienne*'. He was a staunch supporter of Classicism as opposed to Romanticism. He was highly critical of the elective system prevailing at Harvard during those days. The thin layer of liberalism according him was simply a kind of nuisance. He held Rousseau responsible for all the degeneration that was engulfing the entire Europe at time. He believed in order and hierarchy and felt that the former was not possible without the later. Eliot continued to be a staunch supporter of Maurras. His stated position in the preface to *For Lancelot Andrews* (1928) - was a 'classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo- catholic in religion'- was probably derived from a description of Maurras as the embodiment of three traditions, 'classique, catholique, monarchique,' This formula occurred in the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* of March 1913, to which Eliot was a subscriber at that time.<sup>[15]</sup>

## IRVING BABBIT

Eliot was also not unscathed from the influence of Irving Babbitt who happened to be an American, but is in the category of the scholars who were dissatisfied with the systems of thought that the US and Britain had on board to offer in the realms of philosophy. So, he came to France to study at

'*Pratique des Hautes-etudes*.' Eliot was so influenced by him that he happened to write an essay on him which is entitled as '*The Humanism of Irving Babbitt, a review of Democracy and Leadership*'

## HENRY BERGSON

Bergson, who had immigrated to France at the age of nine, was one of those powerful influences on Eliot that he came to be known as having changed to '*Bergsonism*'. Bergson's views on time, memory, intuition and consciousness had a long lasting impact on the nerves of Eliot. In fact, he expressed 'a longing for the appearance of a philosopher whose writings, lectures and personality will arouse the imagination as Bergson, for instance aroused it forty years ago'<sup>[16]</sup>.

Thus, we see that Eliot is not as claimed by many theorists- a British or an American poet but is an exceptional literary figure of his age who needs to be explored further in the light of the French influences on his life. The dilemma of Prufrock, his inability to speak, his memory of the deceiving maids and sarcasm of the '*light brown hair*' on their arms, his nervous wreck condition, consciousness of his repulsive looks, fear of women in question, paralysis of will, dichotomy between his thought and action, absence of *Objective Corelative* and the phoenician sailor like fear of the mermaids becoming the agents of death and; the vacillation of 'Gerontion' between the past and present, his present state and its futuristic consequences, his tension between hope and despair, faith and betrayal, consciousness of war and its aftermath, and his struggle between matter and spirit, all indicate the influences of Bergson, Arthur Symons, Gerard De Nerval, Baudelaire and Laforgue to name a few. Scholars are struggling to classify Eliot. For one school his upbringing, schooling, and University education makes him American while the other school claims British influence on him. The role of the French culture and philosophy has generally been ignored by the scholars. However, when we compare and observe the French poets it becomes apparent that it is the

French influence that has made Elliot what he is today.

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