THE CLASSICISM OF T. S. ELIOT (I)[1]

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The present essay undertakes the tracing of an idea underlying all of Eliot's works: the appeal to an external order, to a principle of higher authority outside the poet's mind. The idea of order is related to and somehow overlaps with the notion of tradition, as both are essential to speak of classicism. My aim is to explain Eliot's classicism by means of this search for order rather than through his more often discussed attitude towards tradition. Going into Eliot's idea of tradition would mean carrying out a survey of the different schools and authors he vindicates in his criticism and was influenced by in his poetry, and this is clearly beyond the scope of the present paper.

This wish for an external order only seldom comes to the surface, and is occasionally made explicit in an essay paragraph or in a few lines from a poem. It is an ideal state which can be apprehended by means of the aesthetic experience, and towards which the practising artist should always strive. The notion of order reflects Eliot's desire for totality and unity and is granted, in the passages where it occurs most conspicuously, a timeless existence. It is the starting-point of his political and social ideas, and partly accounts for the religious vein that led to his conversion in 1927. This principle of order arranges the literary works of the past, through which the writer nourishes his art, into a system. The poet perceives the past as a system, timeless and ideal, by detaching himself from his emotions and feelings through the aesthetic act, creating an order external to himself to which he pays allegiance; in this condition he retrieves the works of dead authors and readjusts them within his present circumstance. Without this sense of order we could not speak of tradition, which in turn implies a processing of the past to fit into the single present moment, and perhaps to set the basis for all our present experience.

This is not an essay on Eliot's idea of tradition as such. The questioning of the literary and cultural tradition, and the final adherence to it, is a recurrent motif in Eliot's work, and was to become crucial to him as well as to other authors.[2] The issue of tradition proper deserves an exhaustive approach which would take us beyond the scope of the present paper. This essay does not undertake to give an account of Eliot's turning his attention to the literature of the past, or to sketch the different authors and periods that merit his predilection. Rather, it is an attempt to describe a particular sensibility through

1.- This article is part of the research I'm carrying out for my doctoral thesis, funded by a postgraduate grant from the "Departament d'Ensenyament" of the "Generalitat de Catalunya".
2.- See: Josipovici, Gabriel, *The World and the Book.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford U.P., 1971, p. xiv: "The relation of the individual talent to tradition is at the root not just of Eliot's art, but of modernism in general."

which Eliot perceives the tradition. Moreover, this peculiar readiness to apprehend and revere an external order is what ultimately gives rise to the idea of tradition, and sets the tradition as a pattern of works and authors of the past that the poet must know. Derived from the notion of tradition is that of classicism; this can roughly be defined as the pursuit of order and external authority on the part of the individual artist, which makes him resign his illusion of originality in order to acknowledge his debt to dead authors. The masters of the past set up a pattern to imitate, a pattern that may already be found in the present to a greater or lesser extent but after which the artist must always strive, because only by its origin in the past can the occurrence of this pattern in the present be explained. This pattern stems from the common assumption that there is a bulk of human experience, timeless and universal, distilled from the life and circumstance of men in all ages, which can therefore be perceived and conveyed by different authors writing in different languages and at different periods of time. Thus the dead authors become classics, and their recovery is an essential condition to give full meaning to both the present and the past. Classicism can also be set, because of its decry of originality and its impersonal view of art, in opposition to Romanticism.

The idea of order is closely connected with the main tenets of the idea of tradition, and both should be considered jointly if we are to reach some understanding of the former. The relation between both is most apparent in the essay of 1919 "Tradition and the Individual Talent," which summarises with great precision and insight the ideas Eliot was to develop, with slight alteration, over his career.[3] The first point that attracts our attention in the essay is what Eliot calls the "historical sense," essential to an understanding of the past and to apprehend the tradition:

> ...the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional (SE, p. 14).

Let us highlight that this bulk of European literature spanning the ages, this "whole," "has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." By implication, past and present are simultaneous, and this ideal order takes us from the historical into the timeless. To round it off, the historical sense, which makes a writer traditional, is a sense both of the timeless and of the temporal taken separately, but also, at the same time, of the timeless and of the temporal together. At first sight, this kind of unity of two concepts defined as opposites may seem a skilful wordplay. The meaning,

3.- "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was first published in book form in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen & Co., 1920, and later reprinted in *Selected Essays* , London: Faber and Faber, 1951). All page references are to *Selected Essays*, hereafter *SE* in text.

however, is very clear. "The temporal" refers to the literature of the past in its historical context, that is, the works of the dead authors who lived in a particular period of time; whereas "the timeless" points to those features in the literature of the past which make the works universal and meaningful in the present. The writer with a sense of tradition will be able to capture the universal in all great literature without ignoring the temporal circumstance in which that literature was produced. He will adhere to the areas of common sensibility shared by the present and the past, and as a result will perceive both the timeless and the temporal as a unified whole and a single aesthetic experience.

Having asserted the timeless order in the literature of the past, Eliot goes on to establish the existence of an ideal community of men of letters, conceived of as a system and viewed diachronically, which sets the basis for the present writer:

> No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead (*SE*, p.15).

To strengthen the diachronical quality of his notion of order, Eliot concludes that he means this "as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism" (*SE*, p. 15). At this point Eliot's formalist vein comes up most conspicuously. So far we have seen how the past impinges on the present; from now on, the chords of the present will ring all through the past. If there is a simultaneous order which places past and present on the same level, in mutual correspondence through the timeless aesthetic experience, then any new creation in the present is felt as something new among the works of the past, and comes to enrich the present literary context as well as the bulk of artistic creations in the past. What is more, thanks to the unity of the aesthetic experience, the notion of time becomes meaningless and both past and present become indistinguishable items in a timeless order. All works of art become a system where the alteration of any of the parts, as well as their introduction into the system, is also an alteration of the whole:

> ...what happens when a work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new (*SE*, p. 15).

The notion of order is obsessive here. First, Eliot clearly states that it is an ideal order. Secondly, he implies that it cannot be modified by *any* works simply because they are new, but only by those new works that give a sense of that order: these are the "really new" works of art. Thirdly, it is complete, and when altered in any of the parts, the alteration also takes place in the whole. Both present and past are thus constituted into a system: not only is the present modified every time the past is updated, but the past itself

undergoes a change as it is recast into the present. This leads Eliot to conclude that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (*SE*, p. 15).

Eliot offers us a dynamic view of tradition. The literary tradition is not a fixed lump of work which will remain unchanged after being perceived by different authors in the present time. Rather, it is a matter of personal perception and a process of constant creation, with the preconception that the past is indistinguishable from the present into which it has been set, and changes with each subsequent present moment. Our evaluation of dead authors is different from their assessment by their contemporaries. Our reading of Dante or of Elizabethan literature, one guesses, recasts the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries into our present world and makes them contemporary with us.

The next development in Eliot's essay on tradition consists in setting up an organicist conception of the literature of the past as a living entity that persists in the present, and to which the poet must surrender his own personality. The poet must be aware of the "main current," namely, "that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same" (*SE*, p. 16). Eliot refers to that main current using a term which is part of the tradition he attempts to recover: the so-called "mind of Europe." The poet should be aware of the mind of Europe because it is also the mind of his own country, and is more important than his own private mind. It is a mind in constant revolution, which lacks the fixity of other ideas: "a mind which changes," and "this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*" (*SE*, p. 16). In this order of things the present enjoys a privileged position as it contains the past and can exert its readjustment, whereas in itself the past can never become reflexive. The advantage of the present over the past is the possibility to include the past and contemplate it through a temporal distance unavailable to the works of the past: "the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show" (*SE*, p. 17). The dead authors persist in the works of the living ones, who find their inspiration in those of the former. Eliot now concludes that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past, and continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career (*SE*, p. 17). This consciousness, Eliot no doubt procured and developed to a large extent in his works, but as has been said above, this is not an essay on Eliot's tradition and its scope does not allow discussion of this issue.

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The essay of 1923 "The Function of Criticism" (*SE*, pp. 23-34) is one of the most self-conscious of Eliot's writings. There Eliot applied many of his ideas from the 1919 essay on tradition to the practice of criticism. For my purpose it is interesting to note that he quotes, at the opening of the essay, the same long passage from "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that we quoted above (*SE*, p. 15). With respect to the passage, Eliot now claims to have formulated a view there to which he still adheres, the central idea of the excerpt being that "the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them" (*SE*, pp. 15 and 23). As we have seen, the passage explains the alteration of the

existing order by the new work, which operates a readjustment in the former, and concludes with the need for a mutual correlation between the works of the present and the past.

Eliot next discloses the reason for quoting himself: his ideas about the artist and the sense of tradition that the artist should have, were generally a problem of order, and the function of criticism, which he now tries to establish, also seems to him to be a problem or order. This is so, he goes on to say, because on that occasion he thought of literature (of the literature of the world, of Europe and of a single country) as a set of "organic wholes," or systems in relation to which individual works of art have their significance (*SE*, p. 23). Let us pay attention to the notion of "organic wholes" and conjecture that behind Eliot's craving for order and unity ("wholes"), there lies an organicist view of the phenomenon of literature and artistic creation in general which can be traced throughout his work. Whether alive or not, the principle of external authority is there for the poet to give himself over to it: "There is accordingly something outside the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position" (*SE*, p. 24).

The principle of external authority can be perceived behind Eliot's ideas about the aims of criticism in the essay of 1923. The end of criticism, he declares, "appears to be the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste" (*SE*, p. 24). Further, the critic should discipline his personal prejudices and cranks and agree with his fellows on "the common pursuit of true judgement" (*SE*, p. 25). (Taste and true judgement are absolutes that may make us frown, but which will certainly appeal to a classical mind.) A third statement is made at the end of the essay to round off Eliot's search for order and absolute values: for the different kinds of critical work he has been discussing, he claims, a common effort is possible "with the further possibility of arriving at something outside ourselves, which may provisionally be called truth" (*SE*, p. 34). Clearly, the pursuit of order and external authority is leading Eliot to a certain dogmatism that will become more explicit in later years. We recognise that "something outside ourselves," but would not call it "truth," even provisionally; and the use of the adverb "provisionally" sounds like an excuse from somebody who is frightened of the radicalism of his opinions.

The issue of "taste" is interesting for our purpose, and we might stop to consider it briefly. As derived from Eliot's writings, taste is an ideal condition, a fixed, unfailing pattern of literary appreciation to which the perception of the artist and critic is subordinated. The building-up of taste is, of course, a matter of properly assessing and assimilating the tradition, or body of preceding works which impinge on the present owing to their universality and success in conveying human experience. The notion occurs at several moments in Eliot's criticism, and appears to be a fairly internalised concept, sometimes taken for granted. This is the case of the essay "What is a Classic?" (1944), where Eliot holds that a period of classic prose is not characterised by conventions of writing or a common style, but by a "community of taste" (which nevertheless remains vague if not undefined).[4] In a later essay, "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956), Eliot drops a hint as to how to obtain taste: "It is in the relation of our

4.- *On Poetry and Poets*, London: Faber and Faber, 1957, p. 57. Hereafter *OPAP* with page references in text.

enjoyment of a poem to our enjoyment of other poems that taste is shown" (*OPAP*, p. 115). The "other poems," of course, stand for the body of past literature that constitute the tradition.

Indeed, the notion of the literary past and present forming a system or simultaneous order does not alter decisively during Eliot's career. The idea is not developed further, but is never effaced either, having been expounded with great accuracy and definition in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." It appears now and then in his criticism and poetry, and with redoubled strength in *Four Quartets* (1940), where it is both the starting-point and the conclusion of the philosophical development of the poem.

Some examples from essays published in different periods of Eliot's life will speak for the continuity of the idea. In the chapter on Matthew Arnold in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), for example, Eliot discusses the need, every hundred years or so, to have a critic who will set out to review the literature of the past "and set the poets and the poems in a new order."[5] The task, Eliot goes on, is not one of revolution but of readjustment, since what we have is the same scene, viewed from a different perspective in time (*UPUC*, p. 108). Also, whereas most critics will parrot the established opinions of other critics, "among more independent minds a period of destruction, of preposterous over-estimation, and of successive fashions takes place, until a new authority comes to introduce some order" (*UPUC*, p. 109).

Another interesting example can be found in "The Classics and the Man of Letters" (1942), collected in the volume *To Criticize the Critic* (1965). In that essay Eliot vindicates the need for both teachers and students to learn some Latin and Greek, since for many generations the classics provided the basis of the educational system that has produced so many English men of letters. This common basis of education, Eliot believes, has gone a long way to give English letters "that unity which gives us the right to say that we have not only produced a succession of great writers, but a literature, and a literature which is a distinguished part of a recognisable entity called European literature."[6] The emphasis is on the *unity* of the tradition of English letters; it appears correlated with the notion of "literature" conceived as a system, and opposed to a mere succession of writers. "A literature" is more than a succession of writers when it can be identified as part of a "recognisable entity," the whole of European literature, of which every national literature is a branch or satellite.

Notes towards the Definition of Culture (1948) contains an appendix called "The Unity of European Culture," consisting of a series of three lectures addressed to a German-speaking audience. This unity, Eliot declares, is provided by a common religion, Christianity, which is shared by all cultures of Europe. But there is another meaning to this unity, as an ideal order achieved through the relation of the different national cultures to each other. Behind the local and national layers of culture, there is a third one, of a universal kind, which unifies them: the idea of a common European

5.- *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, London: Faber and Faber, 1933, p. 108. Hereafter *UPUC* with page references in text.

6.- *To Criticize the Critic*, London: Faber and Faber, 1965, p. 150. Hereafter *TCTC* with page references in text.

culture. This is most apparent when Eliot argues that "in the practice of every art I think you find the same elements: the local tradition, the common European tradition, and the influence of the art of one European country upon another."[7] Again, this order is an outgoing process which leaves nothing along the way. After almost thirty years, we find some of the ideas from "Tradition and the Individual Talent," virtually unaltered:

> And in poetry there is no such thing as complete originality, owing nothing to the past. Whenever a Virgil, a Dante, a Shakespeare, a Goethe is born, the whole future of European poetry is altered. When a great poet has lived, certain things have been done once for all, and cannot be achieved again; but, on the other hand, every great poet adds something to the complex material out of which future poetry will be written (*NTDC*, p. 114).

In "Poetry and Drama" (1951) Eliot mentions an "ideal" towards which poetic drama should strive, and specifies that it is an "unattainable" ideal, which nevertheless provides him with an incentive for experiment and exploration beyond any attainable goal. This is so because "it is a function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it" (*OPAP*, p. 86). Further, beyond our life directed towards action "there is a fringe of indefinite extent," which we can only detect but never completely focus, and which we perceive "in a kind of temporary detachment from action" (*OPAP*, p. 86). Disengagement from action is synonymous with aesthetic experience, through which the ideal order of art can be apprehended. The idea of an external authority in Eliot's later years is that of a mature man who has left behind the radicalism of youth and is at peace with himself, and it contains religious overtones:

> For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no farther (*OPAP*, p. 87).

Towards the end of his life, in the essay "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956), Eliot drops a hint that also recalls the essay on tradition of 1919. He suggests that in all great poetry there is something that remains unaccountable and is of supreme importance. Because "when the poem has been made, something new has happened, something that cannot be wholly explained by anything that went before"; Eliot believes that this is what we mean by "creation" (*OPAP*, p. 112). Here the reference, we believe, is to the poet's sense of tradition and the perception of its "unaccountable" wealth of human experience which the poet can never capture in full, and which allows him to readjust the bulk of experience contained in the past into a new state in the present. The idea, thirty-seven years after "Tradition and the Individual Talent," remains much the same.

7.- *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* , London: Faber and Faber, 1948, p. 114. Hereafter *NTDC* with page references in text.

If the idea of order does not change dramatically in Eliot's criticism, in his poetry it follows a continuous development which we can but sketch here. We move from a failure to connect with the past in the early years, where the whole cultural tradition of the West is questioned and ultimately rejected because of its fragmentation, to the stillness and serenity of *Four Quartets* (1940), in which there takes place a reconciliation of the poet with the past through a commitment to history. In *The Waste Land* (1922) the principle of external authority is realised as a pursuit of unattainable order amid the fragmented remains of a decayed culture. The third question answered by the Thunder in Part V is introduced by the Sanskrit word for "control":

> *Damyata*: The boat responded
> Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar
> The sea was calm, your heart would have responded
> Gaily, when invited, beating obedient
> To controlling hands (V, vv. 418-22).[8]

The reference is, of course, autobiographical, calling to mind Eliot's practice of rowing in his years at Harvard. But the real significance of the passage is at a structural level, in relation to the rest of the poem. In "your heart would have responded / Gaily..." we recognise the element of self-surrender to an external authority through self-control and discipline: "...beating obedient / To controlling hands." This notion of self-control and order is what we need in order to recompose the fragments of a civilisation that lies exhausted and bare. This will is made explicit in the question: "Shall I at least set my lands in order?" (V, v. 425), but its meaning is blurred by three different levels of literary allusion.[9] Moreover, the chaos persists in the medley of quotations that follows, from several European languages, ending up in a resigned acceptance of the dishevelled state of culture ("These fragments I have shored against my ruins," V, v. 430), and an invitation to spirituality through the closing words of an Upanishad.

The thirst for spirituality continues in the poems Eliot published in the twenties, from the hopeless desolation of *The Hollow Men* (1925) to the religious conviction of *Ash Wednesday* (1930). It is well-known that Eliot formally embraced the Anglo-Catholic Church in 1927. From my point of view it is significant that this spiritual journey runs parallel to a final achievement of the idea of order, which allows the poet to connect the present experience with both the personal and the literary past. In this respect, one of the *Ariel Poems*, "Marina" (1930) is a turning-point towards the recovery of the past through the notion of order. In this poem Eliot awakes to his childhood and youth in New England, for which Pericles' recognition of his lost daughter Marina in Shakespeare's play becomes symbolic: "What images return / O my daughter" (*CP*, p. 115). The past is recalled through one's affective memory, involving an aesthetic

8.- *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, London: Faber and Faber, 1963, p. 79. Hereafter *CP* with page references in text.

9.- For the references to the Bible, Dante and Sophocles, see Southam, B.C.: *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*. London: Faber and Faber, 1968.

surrender of the artist's self to a timeless reality located in the personal past. The images that return exhibit a timeless pattern for whose sake the poet resigns his faculties. We find all this at the end of the poem, in some of Eliot's most beautiful lines:

> This form, this face, this life
> Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me
> Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,
> The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships
> (*CP*, p. 116).

And so to *Four Quartets*, the summit of Eliot's poetic art. Here the principle of external authority is of an extremely abstract nature, set in opposition to all that is earthly and concrete. Its perception involves a mystical experience far out of the reach of ordinary men:

> Men's curiosity searches past and future
> And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
> The point of intersection of the timeless
> With time, is an occupation of the saint...
> ("The Dry Salvages," V - *CP*, p. 212).

The pattern is located beyond conventional time and space, itself a purely spiritual essence which cannot be defined as the negative of a concrete substance, thus lingering in the ineffable: "...at the still point of the turning world..." ("Burnt Norton," II - *CP*, p. 191), "...between the being and the unbeing..." ("Burnt Norton," V - *CP*, p. 195), "...the moment in and out of time..." ("The Dry Salvages," V - *CP*, p. 213). The whole development of *Four Quartets* is a theme and variations of that form "living to live in a world of time outside me" which the poet had intimated thirty years earlier in "Marina". It goes through a recognition of the new, timeless dimension outside time, whereby time acquires a new meaning:

> The tolling bell
> Measures time not our time, rung by the unhurried
> Ground swell, a time
> Older than the time of chronometers...
> ("The Dry Salvages," I - *CP*, p. 206).

The "intersection of the timeless with time" is a new dimension where the past ("time") is recovered and turned into a timeless order: that of the aesthetic or religious experience. The newly discovered time operates a reconciliation between the past and the present and prepares the future, as in the well-known opening ("Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past," "Burnt Norton," I - *CP*, p. 189), or in

> Yet the enchainment of past and future
> Woven in the weakness of the changing body,

Protects mankind from heaven and damnation
Which flesh cannot endure
("Burnt Norton," II - *CP*, p. 192),

which leads to the conclusion: "Only through time is conquered" ("Burnt Norton," II - *CP*, p. 192). In this context, timelessness grants us a kind of immortality, if only metaphorical: "...the communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living" ("Little Gidding," III - *CP*, p. 215). The regaining of the personal past approaches the poet to history: "History may be servitude, / History may be freedom" ("Little Gidding," III - *CP*, p. 219). An important development in *Four Quartets* is that the notions of the past and tradition are not merely literary, as in Eliot's early works, but reveal the shift of Eliot's interest towards society and extra-literary values. Now the poet commits himself to history because in the history of his country (England, the land of his ancestors and of his adopted nationality) he finds the timeless and universal:

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England
("Little Gidding," V - *CP*, p. 222).

This awakening to the past had been anticipated, in the first of the *Four Quartets*, by a recognition of the formal pattern that underlies all works of art:

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness
("Burnt Norton," V - *CP*, p. 194).

So far Eliot's idea of order has been discussed, a necessary preconception of his classicism, from a strictly formal point of view, disregarding Eliot's historical circumstance or the context of literary Modernism. The idea, nevertheless, does not come out of the blue, and reveals the influence on Eliot of a series of contemporary authors who went into the building up of his complex literary personality. We leave for a future occasion a discussion of the different contributions from those authors, and the placing of the idea of external order in its appropriate historical and literary context.

NOTE: The final part of "The Classicism of T. S. Eliot" will be published in BELLS VI.