

## T. S. Eliot as a poet in exile

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Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) is said to be a poet whose mentality was ambiguously torn between the intellectual climate of the new continent and that of London in old Europe. Eliot's ambiguous feelings toward the wilderness of the new continent where he had spent his childhood days is discreetly depicted in his poems in various symbolic ways. If the reader takes it for granted that Eliot is a traditional Christian poet, there is a danger of missing this hidden message of the poet's inner voice indicating his past as an inhabitant of the new continent. However, some readers might ask why it is necessary to consider Eliot's dilemma as an expatriate poet. Edward W. Said (1935-2003) makes a significant remark on exile in "Reflections on Exile":

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.

But if true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture? . . . Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees. In the United States, academic, intellectual and aesthetic thought is what it is today because of refugees from fascism, communism, and other regimes given to the oppression and expulsion of dissidents. The critic George Steiner has even proposed the perceptive thesis that a whole genre of twentieth-century Western literature is "extraterritorial," a literature by and about exiles, symbolizing the age of the refugee. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Here Said points out that western literature has to a great degree been supported by a long succession of exiles and emigrants. Those who left their mother countries out of choice may have a deep insight into human society at large, because they can see objectively what takes place in their surroundings. They may have passed through many hardships in their mother countries. T. S. Eliot is one of these exiles out of choice who acquired a skill for sensitive articulation through his own strenuous efforts to cope with culture change. It is worth taking account of Eliot's divided mentality between New England and Britain in order to fully appreciate his poems.

Lyndall Gordon discusses the importance of the American origins of Eliot's poetry. She writes:

In his last years Eliot returned more often to his native country, and in the last important interview, the *Paris Review* interview of 1959, stressed the American origins of his po-

etry: ‘ . . . in its resources, in its emotional springs, it comes from America.’

He was born in St Louis in 1888, to a New England family that was highly conscious of its descent from the Puritan settlers of the seventeenth century. The Mississippi River and the childhood summers on Cape Ann, Massachusetts, were later to provide some ‘essential moments’ of his poetry.<sup>2</sup>

General readers have to be extremely perceptive to appreciate the following passage in “The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock (1917):”

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,  
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,  
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys. . . .

One might readily say that the fog connotes something melancholic and dismal. However, it can also be argued that Eliot evokes the fog of St. Louis where he spent his childhood through the fog in the poem. It can be seen that the movements of the yellow fog symbolizes a cat, which might have foreshadowed his famous musical *Cats*. Eliot’s American roots can also be found in his later poetry. For example, it is possible to speculate about Eliot’s infant days while reading these lines in “The Dry Salvages:”

In the smell of grapes on the autumn table,  
And the evening circle in the winter gaslight.  
The river is within us, the sea is all about us;  
The sea is the land’s edge also, the granite  
Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses  
Its hints of earlier and other creation:

The river is, for Eliot, the Mississippi River. It was on its banks that he turned his thoughts toward various folklores and legends in his childhood.

Eric Sigg discusses the influence that the Mississippi River had on Eliot’s imagination.<sup>3</sup> Eliot seems to have spent a period of his life recalling the ferocity of the big river during his childhood. Sigg points out that the great river flooded several times during Eliot’s childhood, with high waters in 1892, again in 1897, and most notably in 1903.<sup>4</sup> Sigg further explains:

In 1930 Eliot wrote that “the big river” made “a deep impression on me; and it was a great treat to be taken down to the Eads Bridge in flood time.” Although a city dweller, Eliot had not forgotten the “brown god.” About ten miles north of St. Louis, the Mississippi receives the silt-laden Missouri. Twain relates how Parkman called the Missouri “that savage river,” which “descending from its mad career through a vast unknown of barbarism, poured its turbid floods into the bosom of its gentle sister.”<sup>5</sup>

One might say that *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) gave him an inspiration to depict the scene of “The Dry Salvages.”<sup>6</sup> The poet seems to look back on his childhood days through his writing of poetry. This idea is argued for in Gordon’s passage.

. . . In ‘The Dry Salvages’ (1941), Eliot took up the challenge of autobiography. To do this, he sank back into the past to extract the defining scenes: the childhood on the long-

est river; the youth sailing his precarious course through the granite teeth of the rocks offshore from Cape Ann – in particular the treacherous Dry Salvages, rocks which are hidden at high tide. The name, it is said, derived from the fact that the dangerous, partly -hidden rocks reminded settlers of the red men – the ‘savages.’<sup>7</sup>

Gordon notes that Eliot’s affection for his childhood experiences appears from time to time even after his conversion to Anglicanism in 1927.<sup>8</sup> This is because Eliot could not shed all his puritan background inherited from his ancestors. It is possible to see an American landscape in the poem of ‘Marina:’

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands  
What water lapping the bow  
And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the  
fog  
What images return  
O my daughter.  
. . . .  
What seas what shores what granite islands towards my  
timbers  
And woodthrush calling through the fog  
My daughter.

The poetic motif both in ‘The Dry Salvages’ and ‘Marina’ is that of the sea and shore. The fog in ‘Marina’ is important for indicating Eliot’s spiritual heritage in America. Gordon’s interpretation of this is:

. . . Eliot’s poems of 1927–30, *Ash-Wednesday* and ‘Marina’, move towards the New England shore to recover not a geographical place but its meaning, its moral ideal: ‘the unread vision in the higher dream’. In ‘Marina’(1930), this higher dream comes as a call through the New England fog. The poem revives the ancestral voyage. . . .<sup>9</sup>

It can be said that Eliot had an inseparable relation with the spiritual climate of New England. The puritan heritage he received from his grandfather must have given him a strong spiritual grounding as an American poet. Gordon discusses in detail what aspects of America were indestructible in Eliot:

He once said that he felt at home in America as it had been before about 1830. What that date meant to him must be a guess. It was soon after that his grandfather left Boston for the frontier. It was then, too, that the civilized élite of the Eastern seaboard lost its power in the bitter election of 1828, when John Quincy Adams fell before the ruder, less cultivated Andrew Jackson. Was Eliot still resisting the impact of Jacksonian democracy – more Western, more individualistic – a hundred years on? Or did 1830 represent some subtler change – the fading of the last traces of Calvinist piety before the cheery optimism of a new age of self-reliance? . . .<sup>10</sup>

Gordon also stresses the austerity of New England Puritanism which insists on sense of penitence to relativize the success of life: the Anglican church is much more tolerant concerning the consciousness of penitence among its worshipers.

. . . for success lay not so much in formal measurement of sin but in the quality of peni-

tence: it had to be desperate and uncertain enough to prove genuine abasement. Formal confession in the Anglican church was, for Eliot, too mild a ritual. His scrupulousness demanded more unflinching introspection, severer chastisement. In any case, public confession was well beyond the requirements of entry into the tolerant Anglican church of which Eliot actually had little immediate knowledge at the time of his conversion in 1927. It was conversion itself that drew him: through that experience, he could revive the strenuousness of the New England divines for whom it was not enough to profess faith. For Eliot, too, it was not enough to try to repeat 'For Thine is the Kingdom'. These words must pierce the prospective convert, must annihilate his rotten self. In Puritan New England grace must come unsought to a soul wrestling with sin, as Eliot wrestled with the devil of the stairs.<sup>11</sup>

Eliot converted from Unitarianism to Anglicanism in 1927. Eliot depicts his swaying state of mind in 'Journey of the Magi' which came out in that year:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death.  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the end dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.

Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism left his state of mind stable; however, his strict religious heritage still sometimes unconsciously appears in his poetry. According to Gordon:

Eliot's move from America to England gave him a peculiar detachment from all environments, a universal foreignness which was the obverse to his strong feeling for certain locales, like Gloucester, Massachusetts. As he shed his American youth, he cultivated the front of an Englishman – and yet sudden American allegiances would surface.<sup>12</sup>

The ending of *The Waste Land* (1922) is hallucinatory and intense with its reverberating chants. It is as if Eliot's own self suddenly appears at the ending section.

Fishing, with the arid plain behind me  
Shall I at least set my lands in order ?  
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

Eliot seems to be away on an imaginary voyage to the New England shore from where he can sit still and look idly back at the opposite side of the ocean, Britain. It might be said that Eliot has a bicultural eye trained through the puritan discipline he received during his childhood. As Sigg says:

Eliot's earliest poems quietly register the American tendency to associate culture with what is foreign: Hamlet, Michelangelo, Chopin, a Dresden clock, "cauchemar!" Genteel

taste prefers its art not only ornamentally dead – Eliot disdains it as “bric-a-brac” – but also imported from offshore. (Both preferences make it reasonable for a young American artist to leave a society doubly prejudiced against what he produces.) Another import, ethnic violence between Greeks and Poles, locates “Portrait of a Lady” in an American city.<sup>13</sup>

Eliot seems to sneer at a genteel scene in “Portrait of a Lady” in illustration of what Sigg is saying in the following passage:

Among the smoke and fog of a December afternoon  
You have the scene arrange itself—as it will seem to do—  
With ‘I have saved this afternoon for you’;  
And four wax candles in the darkened room,  
Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,  
An atmosphere of Juliet’s tomb  
Prepared for all the things to be said, or left unsaid

It is reasonable to think that Eliot has in mind the snobbish society in New England where he spent a part of his youth. Sigg discusses:

Eliot summarized cultural gentility by saying that “the society of Boston was and quite uncivilized but refined beyond the point of civilization.” Although not all of them found it there, nearly every American poet and writer of his generation left for Europe in search of living art. Even as Eliot settled in London, however, his poetry drew life from another, different America, one at odds with both religious and genteel piety.<sup>14</sup>

It can be said that the childhood days of T. S. Eliot were divided between St. Louis and Boston. The poet further deepened his multisourced insights through the composition of his poems. Sigg comments:

. . . as an anonymous banker and well-known poet and an American in London, Eliot led a double and a quadruple life. Speaking of the “sources” of his poetry, Eliot acknowledged that “in its emotional springs, it comes from America.” His attribution by no means refers to American literature, several of whose major authors Eliot seems not to have read until adulthood, if then. His family, its past, and its moral atmosphere; people in the household; memories of the landscape; the dominant cultural forms, those of popular entertainment; the accents and rhythms of speech; and United States history: these “emotional springs” made Eliot and his poems products of America.<sup>15</sup>

Although Eliot struggled to be an English poet in Europe, his unconscious use of American landscapes put a dynamism into his poems. It could be argued that Eliot as a poet in exile was able to acquire and convey a keen insight into human life as a representative of his contemporaries.

## Notes

1. Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp.173–174.
2. See Lyndall Gordon, “The American Eliot and ‘The Dry Salvages’,” Edward Lobb (ed.) *Words in Time* (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), p.38.

3. See Eric Sigg, "Eliot as a product of America," A David Moody (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.24.
4. Ibid., p.25.
5. Ibid., p.24.
6. Ibid., p.25.
7. Gordon, op. cit., p.38.
8. Ibid., p.39.
9. Ibid., p.41.
10. Ibid., p.40.
11. Ibid., pp.40–41
12. Ibid., p.39.
13. Sigg, op. cit., p.19.
14. Ibid., p.20.
15. Ibid., p.28.