

Eliot and Shelley: *A Sketch of Shifts in Attitude*

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ELIOT's response to Shelley's poetry, at various stages of his evolution, can be seen to register nearly as significant variations as his response to Milton or Donne. Starting with an anti-Romantic dislike of Shelley's poetry and personality he seems in his latter career to have outgrown his prejudices and developed a more sympathetic understanding of and favourable response to Shelley's poetry. But there are complicating factors which make such a statement too much of an oversimplification, as much so as the notion, none too rare, that Eliot, after playing the *advocatus Diaboli* to Milton in his 'Note on the Verse of John Milton', later went on to assume the opposite role of the *advocatus Dei* in the British Academy lecture on Milton.

Fed in his boyhood and early youth like others of his time on the poetry of Shelley as part of his daily fare of poetry, Eliot, on his own admission in 'The Frontiers of Criticism' came under its spell in early life. In this essay, included in *On Poetry and Poets* (p.116) he alludes to the 'keen thrill' given him by Shelley's poetry 'fifty years ago'. But at the start of his career as poet and critic, his characteristic preoccupations and predilections as an inaugurator spearheading the modern movement in poetry and criticism demanded of him a particular strategy of critical thought and utterance. To a greater or less extent under the influence of T. E. Hulme, Remy de Gourmont and the American New Humanists such as Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbit, Eliot cast himself in the role of the leader of the anti-Romantic reaction. This reaction entailed devaluing Romantic currency in poetry and in criticism, by rejecting Romantic literary values and debunking such poets as Shelley. The rise of a 'modernist' sensibility and a corresponding alteration of poetic expression

entailed, in F. A. Pottle's phrase, a 'disengagement with', if not a dislodgement of Shelley; Shelley's concepts and techniques of poetry could not but be counted as a bad influence, to be shunned, on the craft and creed of the pioneering modernist practitioner of poetry and criticism. (Professor Pottle's article, 'The Case of Shelley', originally published in *P.M.L.A.*, LXVII, 1952, and later in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism* (ed. M. H. Abrams) gives a lucid account of modern reactions against Shelley.) It is understandable that Eliot chose to take to Shelley an attitude totally different from that of Yeats, 'the last Romantic', who warmed to the symbolism of Shelley. Eliot's sharp initial reaction against what he thought to be the main weaknesses and excesses of Romantic poetry, particularly against Romantic approaches to poetry and criticism as emotional self-expression, as revelation of personality on the part of the poet and the critic-reader alike, was based on his recoil from Shelley as well as from a prevalent enthusiasm for Shelley as the arch Romantic, the legendary image of poet. The 'Impersonal Theory of Poetry', which he put forward in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', which informs the essays in *The Sacred Wood* (1920), can be described as the fruit of Eliot's reaction to the real challenge offered by poetry such as Shelley's. Yet Eliot's apparent hatred of Shelley was but the obverse of a fascination exercised by Shelley's poetry on him. Paradoxical as it may seem, right from the beginning of Eliot's career, his reaction against Shelley in particular and his own Romantic, Victorian and more immediate predecessors in general was not entirely a reaction *from* or *against*. Although Eliot, doubtless, questioned Romantic assumptions and consciously tried to express an adverse attitude to the Romantics, he must also have assimilated the lessons, positive as well as negative, of the poetry of Shelley, Byron and Coleridge. Unconsciously, he was himself sharing a good deal of common ground with them. It is this truth, if an exaggeration of this truth, that essentially Romantic tendencies lurk behind the anti-Romantic stance of Eliot, which is, in effect, underscored in recent commentaries on Eliot's poetry or criticism such as those of G. S. Fraser, Graham Hough, Frank Kermode, C. K. Stead, Stephen Spender and Richard Foster. Again, it is this paradoxical situation of the early Eliot as poet and critic, let alone the later

Eliot, in relation to the Romantics that has led these contemporary commentators and others such as George Watson, the late Yvor Winters, Eliseo Vivas, and John Casey to discover internal contradictions and logical inconsistencies in Eliot's critical utterances. Once this paradox is isolated and accepted too, it is easy to see how the Impersonal Theory of Poetry could later be stretched and modified by Eliot, notably in his Yeats memorial lecture, to include and at once transcend personality. No wonder that today commentators cannot help seeing Eliot's personality in his 'impersonal' poetry. Ironically enough, Eliot's complex response to poets such as Shelley turns out to be a vivid illustration of the truth of his view about the subtleties of relationships between a writer and his predecessors as well as his thoughts about the inescapability of the influence of the great writers of the past. For that matter, the way in which Eliot and the moderns are assimilated in recent commentaries to the Romantic tradition is itself ample proof of the rightness of Eliot's own speculations about the writer and tradition. The real enlargement of the tradition or the difference made to it by Eliot and the moderns should not be ignored. The simultaneous presence of both break and continuity in the relations of Eliot and other modern writers with the Romantic tradition is somewhat similar to some of the relationships between the Renaissance and the Reformation in England and the persistence of medieval traditions and values. Just as it is impossible to wish away the fact of the Renaissance and the Reformation as though one were an academic and the other a political fiction, so also the anti-Romantic revolt of Eliot cannot be categorically denied. But it is possible to see that Eliot found the influences of Shelley (and of Milton) so overwhelming and irresistibly tempting that in order to escape from them he had to be on the defensive and open an anti-Romantic (or an anti-Miltonic) campaign.

Eliot naturally approached Shelley in terms of the norms and criteria of poetry which he brought to bear on his 'comparison and analysis' of poetry (rather than on his 'understanding and enjoyment', a distinction which indicates a shift from Eliot's early idea of 'the function of criticism' to his later tendency to delimit (or extend?) the 'Frontiers of Criticism'). These norms are implicit in such celebrated pronouncements as those about the

unified sensibility and the objective correlative. By these standards he found Shelley lacking. More than most other poets, Shelley was fond of abstract intellectual speculations in his poetry, and also, at the same time, likely to use his poetry as a means of giving unrestrained vent to his strong emotions and imagination in all their intensity. But, generally, he did not integrate his thought and emotion or his reason and imagination. Eliot found the two tending to fall apart in Shelley, who achieved neither 'the emotional equivalent of thought' nor 'thought felt as immediately as the odour of a rose'. This 'manifest fissure between thought and sensibility' (to employ the phrase which Eliot used of Donne in *A Garland for John Donne* (1931), in modification of his earlier enthusiastic claims for Donne's associated sensibility) which he found in Shelley and which Shelley could not 'bridge in his own way', as Donne did, must have counted as one instance of a lack of integration in Shelley's poetry.

The case against Shelley's poetry as distinct from his beliefs was succinctly presented by Eliot in a review article on Crashaw in *The Dial* in 1928. Eliot was of the opinion that when Shelley 'has some definite statement to make, he simply says it; keeps his images on one side and his meanings on the other'. He remarked about a verse in Shelley's 'Ode to a Skylark' that 'for the first time, in verse of such eminence, sound exists without sense'. This is the same charge, of a want of integration, of a gap between image and theme, feeling and thought, and sound and sense, in short, of a failure to achieve poetic 'realization' or 'incarnation', which Eliot brought against Milton. Such were the grounds of his dissatisfaction and that of the New Critics, with what may be rather loosely termed as the whole tradition of the poetry of statement, of 'assertion', whether Romantic or in the Grand Style. In their eyes the poetry of direct, as distinct from 'oblique', linear utterance constituted the lesser tradition as contrasted with the other tradition of complexity, or irony, paradox and understatement, with what, to adopt Professor Leavis's phrase about the novel, might be called 'the Great Tradition' of poetry. It is not, therefore, surprising that the same charges of being a bad influence, based on an impression of vagueness of conception and expression as well as of a lack of touch with the concrete and the real, should have been thought

applicable to both Milton and Shelley. Eliot missed a semantic point about Shelley's use of the word 'weeds' in 'The World's Great Age Begins Anew' and, therefore, mistakenly charged him with muddled thought and expression, which provoked Robert Lynd in *Books and Writers* to put him right on the matter.

Eliot expressed his distaste for Shelley's poetry in the roundest of terms in his strictures on Shelley's poetry in the *Use of Poetry and Use of Criticism* (1933). Here he concentrated on the vexed question of the relations between poetry and belief in the essay 'Keats and Shelley'. His own conservative inability to 'stand' the revolutionary's political and social views was less important than Shelley's 'Promethean attitude'. Shelley's quixotic idealisms, his notorious moral permissiveness and vulgar sentimentality, made Eliot impatient with his immaturity and incoherence in ideas and ideologies. His chief objection to Shelley rested more on the fact that Shelley's view of life was not 'coherent, mature and founded on the facts of experience' than that it was unsound:

The ideas of Shelley seem to me always to be ideas of adolescence — as there is every reason why they should be — and an enthusiasm for Shelley seems to me also to be an affair of adolescence . . . I find his ideas repellent.

[He] belong[s] with the numbers of the great heretics of all times.

Eliot's verdict on Shelley the man was unambiguously condemnatory; he styled him 'humorless, pedantic, self-centred, and sometimes almost a blackguard'.¹ (A statement which anticipated the critical bigotry of *After Strange Gods*.) The modern game of Shelley-baiting gained momentum with these pronouncements of the master. But the New Critics' assault on Shelley was directed not so much towards his ideas as towards the drawbacks of his poetic personality, his deficiencies of craftsmanship; Professor Leavis, in his characteristic fashion, proceeded to draw moral conclusions from the literary-critical judgments which he made

¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, pp. 87-8. C. S. Lewis refuted the charges of immaturity and incoherence brought against Shelley's beliefs in his 'Shelley, Dryden, and Mr Eliot', *Rehabilitations* (1939), pp. 15-20 and pp. 29-33. Herbert Read, 'In Defence of Shelley', *In Defence of Shelley and other Essays*, almost granted the charges and held that Shelley should be approached as a psychopathological case and that it was all the better for Shelley's poetry. George Gordon, 'Shelley and the Oppressors of Mankind', *The Discipline of Letters*, put the thesis that Shelley's defect was that he was not sufficiently disillusioned. He was employing the same kind of criticism of Shelley's personality as Eliot's.

on Shelley's poetry. The moral conclusions he thus arrived at are ultimately no different from Eliot's diagnosis of Shelley's moral drawbacks. Although Eliot charged Shelley with a misuse or abuse of his poetic gifts, he did not question the presence of these gifts: he, at least, granted Shelley his potentialities. Eliot averred in *The Use of Poetry* that one could 'only regret that Shelley did not live to put his poetic gifts, which were certainly of the first order, at the service of more tenable beliefs'. The implication that, had Shelley lived long enough, he could have fully realized his poetic potentialities can be traced not only in this statement but also in others. For instance, Eliot made the suggestion in 'The Metaphysical Poets' that Shelley just stopped short of a unification of sensibility because he did not live long enough to achieve it. Again in 'The Possibility of a Poetic Drama' (*The Sacred Wood*, p. 62) he suggested that Shelley could have made successful experiments in poetic drama if he had lived longer. This reasoning in terms of the what-might-have-been is uncharacteristic of Eliot, and he seems to have employed it only with reference to Shelley.

In his comments on Shelley after 1933 Eliot exhibited an attitude of approval if not of reverence and a real warmth of response. This shift of attitude is in line with a general widening of his sympathies and taste. The essays collected in *On Poetry and Poets* and *To Criticize the Critic and other Essays* bear witness to Eliot's outgrowing the restrictive and absolutist presuppositions which were characteristic of his early career. He came to acquire what could be described as a more catholic taste, a habit of more sensitive toleration. A turning point in the reorientation and realignment of his taste can be seen in his essay on minor eighteenth-century poetry, where by expressing a liking for late Augustan reflective verse he put the stamp of his approval on the poetry of statement. Eliot's 'classicism in literature' which is best understood in the light of 'What is a Classic?' and 'Virgil and the Christian World' led him to see the virtues of poetry of statement. An evolution can be traced in turn from an exclusive taste for the poetry of irony and complexity to a liking for the poetry of statement (with the 'minimal virtues of prose'). What is more, in a process almost parallel with the actual historical evolution of nineteenth-century poetry from the late eighteenth,

Eliot could go on from his liking for the poetry of statement to an appreciation of the poetry of intensity too.

Other factors are known to have influenced Eliot's later, more favourable response to Shelley. Despite the ambivalences of fascination and resistance caused by polarities of poetic habits, of temperament and of religious and political convictions, one common link between Eliot and Shelley was probably a shared admiration for Dante. The way Shelley could turn his memories of Dante to good poetic account impressed the early as well as the later Eliot. In his 'Talk on Dante' (included as 'What Dante Means to Me' in *To Criticize the Critic and other Essays*, pp. 125-36) in 1951 Eliot paid a tribute to Shelley on this score. He isolated Shelley's 'Triumph of Life' for special praise, and spoke of it as 'one of the supreme tributes to Dante in English, for it testifies to what Dante has done both for the style and for the soul of a great English poet'. It contained 'some of the greatest and most Dantesque lines in English'. 'The Triumph of Life' among Shelley's poems, for this and other reasons, seems to have compelled Eliot's admiration right from the beginning. So early as his essay on 'The Metaphysical Poets', in the course of the famous passage discussing the seventeenth-century 'dissociation of sensibility', Eliot could say with typical overcaution that in one or two passages of Shelley's 'Triumph of Life' there were 'traces of a struggle towards a unification of sensibility'. In his preface to the Italian philosopher Leone Vivante's book, *English Poetry and its contribution to the knowledge of a creative Principle* (1950), Eliot admitted to deriving 'a new and sympathetic appreciation' of Shelley from Vivante's work. It was probably thanks to the views of Leon Vivante and to Eliot's own later evolution as a religious poet, that he was able to see something of a religious poet in Shelley, a perception reached earlier than Vivante's book by Arthur Clutton-Brock, G. Wilson Knight and D. G. James.

Eliot's growing preoccupations with the problem of writing poetic drama in the twentieth century became another point of contact with Shelley. He thought *The Cenci* a prize example of the failure of nineteenth-century poetic drama. He regarded its abundance of derivative Shakespeareanisms as an object-lesson in the dangers and difficulties in the use of 'the third voice

of poetry'. In his own struggle with the problem, Eliot could feel in sympathy with Shelley's.

There is a warm confession about the spontaneous impact which Shelley's lyric poetry made on him in 'The Frontiers of Criticism'. Here Eliot acknowledged the sheer enjoyment and the keen thrill which such poetry could give him, and the fact that such poetry could be understood and responded to 'without explanation'. This is a striking reversal. In *The Dial* review-article in 1928 mentioned above, Eliot had expressed his inability to understand the 'Keen as are the arrows' stanza in the 'Ode to a Skylark' and said 'There may be some clue for persons more learned than I; but Shelley should have provided notes'. Now, however, he was able to say that he could understand and enjoy such lyric verse spontaneously. But it is not wise to postulate any over-neat pattern in Eliot's response to Shelley. In one of his earliest essays, 'Swinburne as Poet', Eliot embedded a warm tribute to Shelley. After quoting these lines

Music, when soft voices die
Vibrates in the memory —
Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heaped for the beloved's bed;
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
Love itself shall slumber on.

Eliot went on to say, 'I quote from Shelley . . . because his song, like that of *Campion*, has what Swinburne has not, a beauty or music and a beauty of content; because it is clearly and simply expressed with only two adjectives'.

Whatever Eliot's early desire to avoid Shelley's influence, the fact remains that he did not disdain to use a Shelleyan reminiscence in the mosaic of echoes in *The Waste Land*. Compare these lines from Shelley's 'Peter Bell the Third' —

Hell is a city much like London —
A populous and smoky city
There are all sorts of people undone

with Eliot's in *The Waste Land* —

I had not thought death had undone so many

A common source for the idea of people being undone by death is Dante's *Inferno*. But Eliot's application of it to Londoners probably derives from Shelley rather than from Dante. In *The Family Reunion* are echoes of *Prometheus Unbound*. These are of the order of the echoes of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* in *The Murder in the Cathedral* and in *The Four Quartets*. Besides, there is a direct quotation put into the mouth of Harcourt-Reilly towards the close of *The Cocktail Party* of the Zoroaster lines in *Prometheus Unbound*.

Another sphere in which Shelley and Eliot would appear to make common cause may be described as a certain mode of reasoning prevalent in the tradition of the great 'apologies for poetry' to which both have made key contributions. The Eliot who once made ironical fun of the apparently tall claim of Shelley about poets being the unacknowledged legislators of the world, was later in 'The Social Function of Poetry', to express a view of the indispensable role of poetry in society which is not dissimilar to Shelley's. The idea of poetry being essential for 'purifying the dialect of the tribe' and for keeping the tools of speech clean, no doubt, is one of the important legacies of Pound to Eliot. In his elaboration of the idea, Eliot attributes to poetry such functions as serving as a cultural conscience or barometer and as essential for the upkeep of non-poetic media of communication in language. Such were the claims made by Shelley, though, of course, the claims were formulated in quite other terms and put across in an altogether different, prophetic or oracular spirit by him.

The ambiguities and fluctuations in Eliot's view of Shelley provide, first of all, an instance in point of the oblique, complex, interacting forces which make up the influence, at once positive and negative, of one poet of stature upon another. How the history and evolution of one influence is related to that of another on the same writer can be seen in the way that Eliot's change of attitude towards Shelley is paralleled by a shift in his view of Milton, and bears an inverse relation to his revision of opinion about Donne. The extent to which a common source of inspiration can affect one writer's response to another is well illustrated in the way Eliot felt drawn to Shelley for the reason that Shelley, like himself, sat at the feet of Dante. The evolution of Eliot's opinions on Shelley is an epitome of the evolution of modern

literary criticism from an anti-Romantic stance to a more tolerant attitude to the Romantics. Above all, it is indicative of the development of taste and sympathy which cannot but occur in a poet-critic of Eliot's stature.

Early One Morning

Early one dark morning
Before the gleaming of
The skyscrapers, she went
To see what sort of shove

Her children needed to
Escape the dawn and see
What sort of world it was.
They did not need her. Three

Animals had seized them,
Were devouring them up.
The mother did not cry.
To see her children *soup*

Was — well, it was just fate.
At least they knew the world.
She closed the blinds and slept.
Outside the flags unfurled.

J. P. FORD