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Metaphysical Wit in T.S. Eliot's *Gerontion*

Abstract: T.S. Eliot revived metaphysical poetry in twentieth century when he discussed it at length in his essay, 'The Metaphysical Poets' in 1921. He was deeply influenced by the metaphysics and his poetry has it in abundance. Eliot's *Gerontion* can be called a metaphysical poem as it has all the characteristics of the genre. *Gerontion* is written in a form which sounds like a conversation and is religious in tone. The introspection of the narrator makes it a perfect example of "Unification of Sensibility" which Eliot always aspired for. The thoughts and feelings are united in a way which makes it a masterpiece. The poem is ripe with images which make it a "mental painting" of the narrator who is rewinding his whole life from past to present while waiting for his death. The paper scrutinizes the poem on the metaphysical, religious and moral level.

Keywords- *Gerontion*, Introspection, Metaphysical, Religion and Unification of Sensibility.

Eliot is one of the poets who can be called philosopher as well. This status of his rests not only on his poetry but prose as well, his essays on the art of poetry are voluminous. The prolific writer has several critical essays to his credit. From Shakespeare, Milton, Dante and Dryden the list can go on; these authors came under his critical eyes. Among these Donne, and Dante should be considered as formative influences on his philosophical development. Eliot went through the poetry of the 17th century and found out the important characteristic of

metaphysical poetry. The essay, 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921) was published in Times Literary Supplement and till date the essay is considered as a touchstone for metaphysical poetry. Eliot found out the poetry of the 17th century was focused on language mostly, and sensibility of thought was missing from it.-

In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden. Each of these men performed certain poetic functions so magnificently well that the magnitude of the effect concealed the absence of others. The language went on and in some respects improved; the best verse of Collins, Gray, Johnson, and even Goldsmith satisfies some of our fastidious demands better than that of Donne or Marvell or King. But while the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude. (288)

While he accused these poets of dissociation of sensibility he found Donne's poetry on point, "A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility." (287) Donne's metaphysical poetry attracted Eliot to delve deep into the genre. The metaphysical sagacity of Eliot's poetry mainly rests on his own philosophy of "Unification of sensibility". While Milton and Dryden were mainly focused on diction it was Donne whose poems were concerned with sensibility in thought. Eliot's own poetry is also marked with the kind of unification he aspired for as A. J. Smith observes –

T. S. Eliot quietly adjusted his view of wit as he grew more interested in spiritual presence than in the workings of his own mind. In his celebrated 1921 *TLS* review Eliot points out two distinguishing features of metaphysical poetry, which he appears to connect with each other. One is the agile

management of figures of speech, especially those figures which call for the rapid association of unlike objects. The other is the peculiarly close association, if not actual fusion, of feeling and thought, sensuous experience and intelligence, sensation and idea. (4)

Eliot has in throughout his poetry projected the thoughts which were common to all. These thoughts found expression in the form of symbols, myths and images scattered all over his poetry. While Eliot worked very persistently with his literary devices he was equally careful with his themes. His personal life and experiences are always considered to be the reason behind the bent of mind he had. His religious nature and spirituality are considered to be the result of his sad and painful life. In his poetical endeavors he always tried to keep away his personal life and gave way to what was universal, and with his critical and artistic perspective, he found that all around. The universalism in him can be dedicated to Dante whom he considered his philosophical guide. Viorica Patea comments-

Unity and universality are two fundamental concepts of Eliot's thought as well as the hallmark of Dante's work. Throughout his career Eliot's main literary and philosophical concerns were to remain centered on the relationship between intellect and emotions. Loss of unity of feeling and thought accounts for the larger rupture of unity of being, which he believed to be the major cause of our divided culture. Eliot's poetic and philosophical program envisioned the retrieval of this lost unity, which constituted his main preoccupation from the beginning of his career to the end of his life, from the early poems such as "Preludes" to *The Four Quartets*. (15)

'Gerontion' is one of Eliot's poems which draw our attention for being the most obscure of structure and theme. The poem is narrated by an old man who is waiting for his

end. The poem is a quest for self-exploration and an effort to visit past and to find out the evil and good the narrator has done so far. Eliot has given his wisdom here by disseminating the knowledge of life he has. The spiritual dearth of his time has been displayed in these lines-

Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!'

The word within a word, unable to speak a word,

Swaddled with darkness. In the juvescence of the year

Came Christ the tiger (17-20)

The skepticism about religion and God crept into the mind of people when science intervened. Reason took a better hand than spirituality and people started questioning everything. The demand for evidence to prove the truth rose in every sphere including the existence of God. The poet cum narrator felt the increasing disbelief in the world, people ignored the present 'signs' everywhere which proved the reign of God and invited the wrath of God. Just like Yeats' 'Rough Beast', Eliot's 'Christ the tiger' is there to annihilate the world and 'devours' all the wrong doers to establish the reign of God again. The quarrel between faith and skepticism and a guilty conscience are the main themes of the poem.

The metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century had not only sensuous poems but religious ones as well. Patricia Beer while explaining the characteristics of metaphysical poetry writes: "The metaphysical style and method could express religious themes as vigorously and as vividly as it could secular subjects, and the development of religious poetry in the first half of the seventeenth century is one of the most distinguished contributions of the Metaphysical Poets to English verse." (28)

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,

To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk

Among whispers; (21-23)

These lines indicate towards loss of faith in religion as the ritual which carries the implication that Jesus remained there for everyone even after his death is being carried “among whispers”. These whispers are the voices of the insecure feelings and loss of faith which is spreading among the followers. The phrase “flowering judas” indicates that non-believers are spreading everywhere.

The poem can be taken as a vision of desolation as it was intended to be part of ‘The Waste Land’ which Eliot removed on the suggestion of Ezra Pound. Gerontion is also an old man like Tiresias and presents the picture of a disturbed world which has not learnt anything from its past. The poem does not end on a positive note rather it ends in the same way as started, but it has its own moments of truth which stand independent as well as universal, intellectual, spiritual and religious. The poem explains the ugly truth of monetary greed and presents the picture in the form of Landlady whose daily routine makes him disgusted.

The poem is a psychological narrative which is delivered by an old man. The picture of the decay of civilization and humanity has been drawn with expertise. The poem carries a tension throughout the narration; Gerontion represents the humanity stuck between its own dubious decision and desire to be in heavenly abode in the fellowship of the Lord. Their perplexed spirits are split between mundane and devotional. Their own earthly dispositions have taken them away from the directed path and now they are unable to find salvation rather they fear the punishment they are destined to receive. As he announced in these lines: “The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours.”(48)

Eliot wrote this poem at a time in his life when he was at his lowest point. His wife including him was facing serious health problems, and he could not take part in the Great War. His mental and physical energies were failing him just like an old man’s and that

is the reason behind his selecting the narrator as an old man in this poem. The poem opens with the lines which echo his dissatisfaction with himself-

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,

Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.

I was neither at the hot gates

Nor fought in the warm rain

Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,

Bitten by flies, fought. (1-6)

Here the poet is trying to accentuate the idea that he has not gone through any pain to serve his country. The poem is full of thoughts where his conscience condemns him. The voice of ignominy is quite loud throughout.

The wisdom from history is the key sentiment in the poem. Like a visionary Eliot has compared the cycle of events, which took place in past with the effects which affected him now. The revelation here is that one can have the full knowledge of the outcome of his actions but even then it changes nothing and we remain a tool in the hands of our own enticements. As is observed by Elizabeth Drew-

‘After such knowledge what forgiveness? Forgiveness must have an extended etymology here. What has man been given over to, or given up to, or resigned himself to, as the result of experience lived in these terms? The ‘giving’ and ‘forgiving’ are then played out in a series of images suggesting the depraved,’ crooked ways of knowledge(cunning), the ways of self-deception and self-interest, their methods of propagation and why they propagate. Man craves

knowledge (of himself, of truth), but history presents it ‘when our attention is distracted,’ when we are looking in a different direction, or are in a state of conflict, torn in opposing directions. (54)

The inquisitiveness for truth has brought him at a place where realization of faults is prime and loud. The passion required to believe was missing and has brought him at a place where fear is eye-opening and scary. The realization makes him believe that the forgiveness he is looking for, can’t be received so easily, the exploration into own vices and folly has made the fear more life-like.

The uncertainty faced by Gerontion has been put here in the form of a feeling which makes him restless with his own reality. The denial which stops human beings from accepting their erroneous choices comes out in full play. Like a visionary narrator reveals the horrific results of having the knowledge of one’s truth and preferring to delay it. The soul of man is stuck between the two passages which lead to the future from which one takes them to faith and elevation whereas another, to the doubt and degradation. The poem also works on two levels one where an individual is indulged in self-exploration and other where the European culture on a macro level is shaken from its core and is on the verge of disintegrating. Eliot has masterfully mingled the two into one. John T. Mayor has observed correctly-

In “Gerontion”, Eliot “swallowed up” but did not obliterate Gerontion’s individuality, so that his personal sense of failure becomes a way of projecting the one great tragedy, the failure of Western culture that is the poem’s main preoccupation. The failure of the individual and the failure of the culture coincide. Gerontion the individual’s failure to participate in life is both a symbol and a cause of the failure of his world, that is, the world of Western

culture begun by the Greeks: Gerontion (Greek for “little old man”) is the shriveled remnant of the West’s twenty-five-hundred-year old cultural heritage. His own condition and that of his world approximate and intersect. (219)

The mental picture Gerontion paints is the outcome of Eliot’s efforts to bring thoughts and feelings together. The rainless life indicates the barren life of the modern men who repent the sinister ways in which they have led their lives but are unable to revoke the blunders they have committed.

In Gerontion, Eliot has voiced the loneliness, disappointment and frustration of a civilization, which has ushered itself into decay and destruction. The unchristian and irreligious life people are leading brings them restlessness and guilt. The realization that we take birth full of rigor and vitality but we devote in meaningless tasks and never try to make ourselves accountable for ruining it compels us to introspect ourselves.

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