

PROBLEM OF UNDERSTANDING
AND ENJOYMENT
IN AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

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While describing the essential function of literary criticism Eliot, about two decades ago, gave an explanation of the nature of aesthetic experience also. In 1923 he conceived the function of criticism as "the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste"¹ ; and in 1956 he 'simplified' this statement to put it 'more acceptably to the present age' by saying 'to promote the understanding and enjoyment of literature'.² In his first statement he had to guard against the impressionistic critics and proposed that true criticism is not to offer only one's immediate experience obtained in literature. The critic needs an organization of the immediate experience, even of greater diversity, into a system of perception and feelings — a critic should be engaged in the organization and reorganization of his own aesthetic experiences for the purpose of arriving at an ultimate 'pattern' and 'order'. Thus the form-oriented classicist aimed at an organization of different individual tastes (i.e. immediate experiences obtained from literature), differing from each other because of two factors : personality of the individual and the 'group personality' of his time into a common 'pattern' ; and this is what he meant by correction of taste.³

But in later years this intellectualization of literary criticism became so varied and immense that the critics crossed the frontiers of criticism and their works became anything other than *literary*. Hence Eliot felt it necessary to modify his idea of literary criticism in 1956. And in doing so he stressed that the only duty of the critic is to enable the reader to appreciate

literature properly ; appreciation meaning here *understanding* and *enjoyment* of literature. In stating the function of criticism he thus described the nature of aesthetic experience. Both the words used here expressing the nature of aesthetic activity have already been used by Eliot elsewhere in some other context : "...a very large number of people, I believe, have the native capacity for enjoying some good poetry : how much, or how many degrees of capacity may profitably be distinguished, is not part of my present purpose to enquire. It is only the exceptional reader, certainly, who in the course of time comes to classify and compare his experiences, to see one in the light of others ; and who, as his poetic experiences multiply, will be able to understand each more accurately. The element of enjoyment is enlarged into appreciation, which brings a more intellectual addition to the original intensity of feeling. It is a second stage in our understanding of poetry, when we no longer merely select and reject, but organise. We may even speak of a third stage, one of reorganisation ; a stage at which a person already educated in poetry meets with something new in his own time, and finds a new pattern of poetry arranging itself in consequence."⁴ Understanding is here a broad mental activity which comprises three stages — enjoyment, appreciation and criticism or organisation of a common pattern. Enjoyment means an 'intensity of feeling' — an emotional activity — and when added with an intellectual exercise it becomes appreciation. But in the present context enjoyment is purged of its mere emotionality and without being an element of the broader activity understanding appears to be synonymous with it or becomes its significant necessary co-activity or perhaps the position is just the reverse of the former : enjoyment appears as the main function of aesthetic experience of which understanding is the necessary co-activity. Both of the activities being simultaneous it becomes impossible for Eliot to distinguish them or to point out any order of their occurrence. "I do not think of *enjoyment* and *understanding*". he says, "as distinct activities — one emotional and the other intellectual. By *understanding* I do not mean *explanation* though explanation of what can be explained may often be a necessary preliminary to understanding. To offer a very simple instance, to learn the unfamiliar words and the unfamiliar forms of words, is a necessary preliminary to the understanding of Chaucer ; it is explanation ; but one could master the vocabulary, spelling, grammar and syntax of Chaucer — indeed to carry the instance a stage further one could be very well informed about the age of Chaucer, its social habits, its beliefs, its learning and its ignorance — and yet not *understand the poetry*... It is certain that we do not fully enjoy a poem unless we understand it ;

and on the other hand, it is equally true that we do not fully understand a poem unless we enjoy it. And that means enjoying it to the right degree and in the right way....”⁵ If understanding is not purely an intellectual activity some sort of intellectuality in form of information, reasoning and explanation etc. is very much involved in the process of this activity ; and, likewise, if enjoyment is not purely an emotional activity it refers to the very act of tasting literature when all the intellectual activities in understanding are transmuted into an organised experience. As the “poetic originality is largely an original way of assembling the most disparate and unlikely material to make a new whole”⁶ so also in the aesthetic perception of a connoisseur the intellectual and the emotional aspects are merged into a unique whole. Eliot, however, tries to maintain a balance between the subjective and objective aspects of aesthetic experience : “To understand a poem comes to the same thing as to enjoy it for the right reasons — one might say that it means getting from the poem such enjoyment as it is capable of giving : to enjoy a poem under a misunderstanding as to what it is, is to enjoy what is merely a projection of our own mind”⁷ ; and again : “...as for the meaning of the poem as a whole, it is not exhausted by any explanation, for the meaning what the poem means to different sensitive readers.”⁸ If on the one hand no critic can assert that this or that is the only meaning of a poem, on the other hand each variety of meaning must also be justified. And this justification undoubtedly needs “knowledge and experience of life”. There is nothing called pure literature in isolation from other branches of human thinking and experience. Literature, in fact, forms an organic part of human experience as a whole. “Poets have other interests besides poetry — otherwise their poetry would be very empty : they are poets because their dominant interest has been in turning their experience and their thought (and to experience and think means to have interests beyond poetry) — in turning their experience and their thinking into poetry.”⁹ So the critic who is interested in nothing but literature “would have very little to say to us for his literature would be pure abstraction...he must have other interests, just as much as the poet himself, for the literary critic is not merely a technical expert, who has learned the rules to be observed by the writers he criticizes : the critic must be the whole man.....”¹⁰

One thing is clear from the above discussion that however clear may be the idea of Eliot about aesthetic experience, he grapples with the words like *understanding* and *enjoyment* to express the idea verbally. Understanding may not be purely an intellectual activity capable of conveying any cognitive

meaning about artistic creation, may not aim, so to say, at giving us any knowledge of truth or falsehood, it does nevertheless have a sort of cognitive function in so far as it keeps us informed about the events of the phenomenal world such as Coleridge was addicted to opium or Chaucer used particular forms of spelling and syntax etc. ; and enjoyment is something different from it in not referring to such functions. There is, again, difference between the phrases like 'to enjoy' and 'to get enjoyment from' — the first being an activity directly connected with the object, say poetry, and the second an object derived from a source (i.e. poetry). Eliot admits that he fails to communicate his idea about the nature of this difference because of the limitations of language. But how are the two terms — *understanding* and *enjoyment* related? Are they synonymous? Eliot inclines toward such an idea, but is unwilling to assert. Then how are they related? Causally? or referentially? Use of two different words would be meaningless in the former case and the simultaneity of their operation will negate the possibility of either a causal or a referential relation, as cause and effect and referend and referred operate in succession. So the meaning and role of *understanding* and *enjoyment* remain indistinct in Eliot's writings and is left off ultimately, under the pretext of limitations of language. Centuries ago Sanskrit critics in India engaged in vigorous debates on the nature of aesthetic experience faced the same problem as of T. S. Eliot. They unanimously agreed that there is nothing as pure poetry. The subject matter of poetry being the affairs of the three worlds — Earth, Heaven and Hell. Poets have to know a lot about history, philosophy, grammar, lexicon, sociology, economics, politics, laws, astronomy, astrology, architecture, *Sāmdrikas* containing the symptoms of horses, elephants and swords etc. and what not? In a word the whole range of objects and activities that constitutes human life as a whole is to be experienced by a poet. All this jumbled up is not of course poetry. The diverse experiences are to be transmuted into an organic whole by the 'genius' of a poet which is unborn as the subtlest form of poetic power — a distinguished type of perceptiveness found only rarely as a result of the experiences of previous lives. The principle of transformation is propriety, the success of this transformation depending upon continuous efforts according to the advice and instructions of the established poets and upon repeated reading of the masterpieces of literature. The requirements of a successful literary composition are, then, three in number : (a) poetic genius (the very seed or starting point), (b) knowledge of the whole universe and (c) continuous efforts and exercise. ¹¹

A true critic, likewise, needs these factors, genius being in his case

contemplative or *bhāvayitri* (that in case of a poet is *kārayitri* or creative)¹² and the critical method involved is *tasting* (or *āsvādana*) which is a direct sense-contact with the work of poetry. That is to say a poet tastes poetry as he tastes, for example, a glass of *prapāṇaka* or *sarbat*. He has nothing to do with the character, biography, personal likings and dislikings, peculiar habits or hobbies or range of reading of the poet. No Sanskrit critic has ever tried to investigate whether *Kālidāsa* was polygamous or Bhavabhūti was frustrated in his personal life, or whether there is any historical background (such as Samudragupta's conquest) behind Raghu's conquest in *Kālidāsa's* great epic. Nor was a critic only a technician to analyse the lines and words of each stanza to squeeze out all the possible meanings by applying the principles of figures of speech. They rather declared that excellent poetry is possible even without any use of figures of speech, the only source of poetic excellence being a type of suggestive meaning (*vyaūjanā*), other factors enhancing its beauty though.¹³ If, again, no meaning was exhaustive or the only meaning to be found in a poetic composition, any meaning, just out of one's fancy or liking cannot be also suited to it : the meaning should be justified duly. Thus Sanskrit critics discarded, to use the words of Eliot, criticism by explanation of sources lemon-squeezing criticism and impressionistic criticism. The other type of criticism, which was primarily Eliot's own, as he admits, namely workshop criticism was not practised by the Sanskrit critics. There were, of course, critics who were poets also. Bhojarāja (11th C.) and Viśvanātha Kavirāja (14th C.) may be cited as examples. But they did not start their career as critics writing on poets only whom they appreciated or whose works influenced them in their poetic compositions. Sanskrit critics were to a great extent free from bias because their method was mostly theoretical, that is they referred to individual poets only as examples in analyzing their theories. But this does not mean that they were incapable of criticism of individual poets or this method was unknown to them. Commentators on different works of poets were partly exercising this method : partly because they were not writing directly on authors, but they were believing that the picture of an individual poet will automatically emerge out of the analyses of his different works. Though Mallinātha did not write a critical book on *Kālidāsa* his commentaries on the works of this poet sufficiently make us aware of *Kālidāsa's* poetic value. The theoreticians are busy in analysing the poetic work in general and the reader's relation to it or, in other words, the nature of aesthetic experience. Once they are clear to us it is easy for us to judge an individual poet.

Now the question is : how to explain this tasting or *āsvādana* or *carvaṇā* ? The Sanskrit words used refer, as we have said, to a direct sense-object contact. Hence aesthetic experience is first of all a kind of direct perception (*sākṣāt-kārapratītiḥ*) which does not admit of any other means of knowledge such as inference, testimony or analogy etc. and this results in enjoyment as in case of a man tasting a glass of *sarbat*.¹⁴ Though we say — perception results in enjoyment, it does not mean that perception and enjoyment are related as cause and effect operating in succession ; here perception is itself enjoyment though they are used separately in way of abstraction. To say ‘I taste a glass of *sarbat*’ is the same as to say ‘I enjoy a glass of *sarbat*’. It is not that tasting is the means of enjoyment as in the statement — ‘I get enjoyment from or by tasting a glass of *sarbat*’. So the proper statement in case of aesthetic experience is — I enjoy or taste a poem or a piece of work of art, enjoying and tasting being synonymous. This is how the Sanskrit critics could overcome the limitations of language which trouble Eliot in distinguishing the meanings of the phrases — ‘to get enjoyment from’ and ‘to enjoy’ as the statement ‘one gets enjoyment from poetry’ differs from ‘one enjoys poetry’.

The next question : how to account for the meaning of understanding and its role in enjoyment. Sanskrit critics concluded after age-long debates on the nature of aesthetic experience that it is a transcendental experience of which tasting of *prapāṇaka* is only an ordinary example. As in *prapāṇaka* all the ingredients like sugar, cheese, honey and spices lose their individual identity and are tasted by a man as a unique whole so also in a poem or a drama characters (*vibhāva*), their activities (*anubhāva*), gestures, dialogues and drifting thoughts etc. are dissolved into an organic whole when enjoyed by a reader or audience. The audience of Bhavabhūti’s *Later Story of Rāma*, for example, require knowledge of Sanskrit and Prakrit languages, the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* etc. for its enjoyment ; but it cannot be said that they are the cause of enjoyment because even knowing them fully one may not enjoy the play. In fact, aesthetic experience is no knowledge — no cognitive function at all. The whole of the necessary intellectual background of the audience is so dissolved in the feeling of ecstasy that the cognitive consciousness is simply lost. No audience thinks : ‘I know the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. So I am enjoying this play.’ Aesthetic experience is far from even the contact of any knowledge other than the experience itself. Viśvanātha Kavirāja best summarizes the nature of *rasa* : “Rasa, an organic whole, self luminous, bliss and consciousness, free of the contact of any other thing to be known (than itself only), twin of the Brahman-consciousness (of the yogin) is tasted only

by some (qualified) connoisseurs (having innate experience, knowledge of the activities and nature of both static and moving things of the whole universe — persons of a very high intellectual and emotional capacity so to say) when the state of pure consciousness rises in his mind.”¹⁵

Now the relation of the poetic object i.e. the character etc. (*Vibhāvānubhāva vyabhicāribhāva*) of a poem or drama and this (aesthetic) experience is not that of cause and effect or that of manifest (*jñāpaka*) and manifested (*jñāpya*). Because an effect exists even after the destruction of the cause, but no aesthetic experience continues when the aesthetic object is removed, say a dramatic performance is over or a poem is read. Nor does the object manifest the experience as light luminates an object (a jug for example) which exists before the light illuminates it; because prior to the reading of a poem or witnessing a drama *rasa* does not exist in the connoisseur. Mamma distinguishes this experience from yogic perception, for a yogin perceives things without any sense-contact whereas aesthetic perception needs the contact of eyes and ears. Besides, a yogic experience is only self-perception while the aesthete perceives a piece of art, an object of the phenomenal world.¹⁶ Viśvanātha somewhat assimilates this experience with the yogin's on the ground that both are supermundane. Nevertheless he is aware of the difference and describes it as the *twin* of the Brahman consciousness, not exactly the same.¹⁷

But even after saying all this when one obstinately insists that the aesthetic object and experience are related as cause and effect, because without the knowledge (*jñāna*) of the characters no aesthetic perception is possible and the enjoyment or tasting (*ānanda* or *upabhoga*) follows this *knowledge*, thus giving an idea that an intellectual activity is the cause of aesthetic experience and the critic cannot waive out the problem of the co-existence of cause and effect (in a way that of *understanding* and *enjoyment*), Viśvanātha boldly argues that the Vedantins will solve this problem by referring to the Vedic texts that Truth, Knowledge and Bliss co-exist in Brahman¹⁸ or in the experience of Brahman. Though in way of abstraction it is said that the knowledge of Brahman (that is by understanding of Truth and Nescience) causes perennial Bliss, in reality the knowledge of Brahman is itself Bliss as both the cognition and the experience occur simultaneously. So also in aesthetic experience *jñāna* (knowledge or understanding) and *ānanda* (enjoyment) are synonymous for their simultaneity of operation, though only in way of abstraction we say that the knowledge of character etc. (*Vibhāva* etc.) precedes the enjoyment of a play.

Thus the Sanskrit critics were very confident in solving the problem of

of understanding and enjoyment and in doing so they faced no limitations of language by using a single word i.e. *tasting* (*āsvādana* or *carvaṇā*) that denotes both the functions. It was, however, quite natural for Eliot to feel confused in fusing these mental functions into a single experience as the language he uses and the people to whom he speaks are both incapable of conveying and conceiving respectively the essence of the Vedantic thought.

Notes and References —

1. "The Frontiers of Criticism", collected in *English Critical Essays, Twentieth Century*, Second Series, London, 1958 P. 49
2. *ibid.*
3. cf. "What taste is, I suppose, is an organization of immediate experiences obtained in literature, which is individually modified in its shape by points of concentration of our strongest feelings, the authors who have affected us most strongly and deeply. It cannot be had without effort, and without it, our likings remain insignificant accidents. To be immediately and without effort pleased by Donne is easy for some people, to be in the same way moved by Shelley is easy for another ; the difficulty lies in that process which is not of abstract thought, but which is an organization of feeling making possible, not only to appreciate Shelley in one mood and Donne in another, but the inclusion of even greater diversity into a system of perception and feeling." "Eliot, The Education of Taste" — *Athenaeum* No. 4652 (1919) P. 521. See also Fei-Pai Lu, *T. S. Eliot, The Dialectical structure of his Theory of Poetry*, The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966. PP. 95-103.
4. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, London, 1933 PP. 18-19.
5. "The Frontiers of Criticism", *ECE* P. 50
6. *ibid.*, P. 40
7. *ibid.* P. 50
8. *ibid.* P. 48
9. *ibid.* P. 51
10. *loc. cit.*
11. Mammāṭa's *Kāvya-prakāśa*, I, 3.
12. Rājasekhara, *kāvya-mīmāṃsā* IV. See for details, Sukla A. C., *The Concept of Imitation in Greek and Indian Aesthetics*, Calcutta, 1977, PP. 239-241.
13. Viśvanātha's *Sāhitya Darpaṇaḥ* Chap. I.
14. A type of drinking mixture famous in India.
15. *SD* III. 2.
16. Mammāṭa's *Kāvya-prakāśaḥ* ed. by V. S. Siromani 5th edn. Varanasi 2031 Sambat PP. 75-76 ; 110-112
17. "Brahmāsvādasahodaraḥ", *SD* III. 2.
18. "Satyaṃ jñānamānandani Brahman" *Taittirīyopaniṣat* III. 6 comp. with II. ; *SD* III. 81 ff. See Haridās Siddhānta Vāgiśa's com., his edn. Cal. 1875 Śak. PP. 87-88.

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