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Symbolism and T.S. Eliot's Theory of Objective Correlative

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Abstract

*T.S. Eliot, as a literary critic, was profoundly influenced by the symbolists after he read Arthur Symons' book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), an introduction to the French literature. He himself acknowledged afterwards that it was through the study of this book that he got familiar with such great symbolists, like, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Jules Laforgue, and Tristan Corbière. He, as a poet, was influenced by Laforgue in the matter of style, content, and technique, whereas, his spirit was greatly influenced by Baudelaire. He was so much influenced by the critical abilities of Remy de Gourmont that he went to the extent of saying that "perhaps Remy de Gourmont had most of the general intelligence of Aristotle". So, it is apparent that Eliot was profoundly influenced by the symbolists and later on, he derived most of his ideas and concepts from them, especially, from the study of Laforgue. Eliot is so much influenced by the symbolists that he derives most from them—the ideas, the characters, the situations, the moods, the phrases, and even the titles of his works. He is influenced by Laforgue's methods, style, and viewpoints. The term 'objective correlative' itself has the echo of symbolism. He draws symbols from the background of literary tradition. His symbols are prosaic, poetic, grand, material, abstract, metaphysical, and spiritual. The terseness of his phrases is completely found to be in the manner of Laforgue. This paper attempts to establish that Eliot formulated the concepts of 'objective correlative' and 'dissociation of sensibility' under the influence of the French symbolists. Metaphysical Poetry also influenced his writings. The paper also reiterates that some of Eliot's critical concepts were not original.*

Key Words: *Symbol, Symbolism, Objective correlative, Unification of sensibility, Dissociation of sensibility.*

Ian Housby in *The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English* describes 'Symbolism' as "a term specifically applied to the works of late 19th century French writers, who reacted against the descriptive precision and objectivity of realism and the scientific determinism of naturalism" (905-06). Symbolist Movement in France "began with Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (1857) and was continued by such major poets as Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarme, and Valerie" (Abrams 177). In poetry, symbolism was a reaction against the "descriptive precision and 'objectivity' of the Parnassians. The symbolists stressed the priority of suggestion and evocation over direct description and explicit analogy. (Mallarme's dictum

'*Peindre, non la chose, mais l' effect qu' elle produit*'), and to the symbol was ascribed a pre-eminent function of the effort to distil a private mood or to evoke the subtle affinities which were held to exist between the material and spiritual worlds" (Drabble 689).

Ian Housby writes that the symbolists also make an attempt to emphasize the "primary importance of suggestions and evocation in the expression of a private mood or reverie" (906). Symbolism, thus, sought to lay emphasis on the primary importance of suggestion and evocation to express a private mood or reverie. The movement tried to make poetry musical. W.K. Wimsatt Jr. & Cleanth Brooks write that it was an "effort to bring poetry to the condition of music" (93), and also an attempt to reflect abstract and spiritual reality. Symbolism, thus, means connotation. It is a means by which the symbolists achieved their end through suggestions and connotations. It sought to spiritualize literature and find out a relation between the material and spiritual worlds. "The symbol was held to evoke subtle relation and affinities, especially between sound, sense and colour, and between the material and spiritual worlds." (Housby 905-06). The symbolists had a strange amalgamation of spirituality, occultism, abstract and mystical writings. The movement that began in France had a far reaching effect upon the Russian and the English poets and critics, and many others too. "The techniques of the French symbolists, who exploited private symbols in a poetry of rich suggestiveness rather than explicit statement, had an immense influence throughout Europe, and (especially in the 1890s and later) in England and America as well, on poets such as Arthur Symonds, Ernest Dowson, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Dylan Thomas, Hart Crane, E.E.Cummings, and Wallace Stevens" (Abrams 177).

English poets and critics were also profoundly influenced by the symbolist movement and poets and writers like T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Wallace Stevens, and some others pioneered symbolism in English literature.

Symbolists sought to suggest, evoke or connote through images what actually can be described by the means of language. Symbols were used to suggest more than what was possible to express in words. These were used to make an uncommon idea look common. Symbolism did not get confined to poetry only, rather it got spread to other forms of art too, especially, painting. Symbols made poetry more musical with its stress upon rhythm and it, in its turn, lent sweetness to poetry and made it melodious. "A Symbol, in the broadest sense of the term, is anything which signifies something else; in this sense all words are symbols. As commonly used in discussing literature, however, symbol is applied only to a word or a set of words that signifies an object or event which itself signifies something else; that is, the words refer to something which suggests a range of reference beyond itself" (Abrams 175).

Symbolism, thus, through use of connotative language tried to evoke the image of a particular idea by using some external agents. It spiritualized literature and broadened the scope of imagination. It brought to the light the unknown, dark, and mysterious and, thus, brought delight to the readers and embellished the language and style of literature

tremendously. In France, the chief exponents of symbolism were: Stéphane Mallarmé, Remy de Gourmont, Paul Verlaine, Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud, Jules Laforgue, Edouard Dujardin, Charles Pierre Baudelaire, and Marcel Schwob. Mallarmé later on “came to be regarded as the saint and sage of the symbolist movement.” (Wimsatt Jr. & Books 502)

T.S. Eliot, too, became a part of the symbolist movement in England, after Ezra Pound introduced him to the leading and great writers of his age. It is through Pound that Eliot met E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Ford Madox Ford, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, and others, who shaped and moulded his concept of poetry. Eliot was profoundly influenced by the symbolists after he read Arthur Symons’ book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), an introduction to the French literature. He himself acknowledged afterwards that Arthur Symons’ book had affected the course of his literary life in a positive manner. And also that it was through the study of this book that he got familiar with such great symbolists, like, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Jules Laforgue, and Tristan Corbière. He, as a poet, was influenced by Laforgue in the matter of style, content, and technique, whereas, his spirit was greatly influenced by Baudelaire. He was so much influenced by the critical abilities of Remy de Gourmont that he went to the extent of saying that “perhaps Remy de Gourmont had most of the general intelligence of Aristotle” (3). So, it is apparent that Eliot was profoundly influenced by the symbolists and later on, he derived most of his ideas and concepts from them, especially, from the study of Laforgue.

Eliot is so much influenced by the symbolists that he derives most from them—the ideas, the characters, the situations, the moods, the phrases, and even the titles of his works. Marshall Maclulan in his essay “Symbolic Landscape” says that “Flaubert and Baudelaire has presided the great city landscape of *Ulysses*. And Mr. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* in 1922 was a new technical modulation of *Ulysses* the latter of which had begun to appear in 1917. The *Quartets* owe a great deal to (Finnegan’s) *Wake*, as does *The Cocktail Party*” (239). He is influenced by Laforgue’s methods, style, and viewpoints. Hugh Kenner in *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot* writes that “Prufrock is the sort of persona entailed by the viewpoints and methods of Laforgue” (p 20) and adds that the moods which are “affectingly self-constrained, the speaker imprisoned by his own eloquence, committed to a partial view of life, beyond the reach of correction or communication out of which arises the tragic partiality of his actions” (19), are derived from the symbolists.

Eliot tries to express the moods of his characters through ‘objective correlative’, a term that has become Eliot’s trademark. Through the use of ‘objective correlative’, he tries to bring forth what lies hidden in the psyche of the characters and feels that some external agents must be used to express the hidden inner psyche of the characters on stage. The term ‘objective correlative’ itself has the echo of symbolism. “Eliot is most Eliot when not only the words but the situation stirs into life restless symbolic echoes” (Kenner 25). His characters are ‘types’ and not ‘individuals’. They represent the hollowness of the upper class society and upper class people, who hide everything that lies within them behind the mask of self-sufficiency, smiles, teacups etc. The ennui, the boredom, the frustration the neurosis, the affectations – are represented by him through his characters as is evident from

the following lines: "Behind the décor of self-sufficiency—the ready smile, the poised teacup, lies the self; a mystery sometimes an illusion. The Hollow Men are all masks and no inside. The upper class characters in the later plays – *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk*—present social masks which they go to considerable trouble to keep furbished" (Kenner 27). Like the French symbolists, Eliot too is a symbolist in the truest sense of the word. He draws symbols from the background of literary tradition. His symbols are prosaic, poetic, grand, material, abstract, metaphysical, and spiritual. The terseness of his phrases is completely found to be in the manner of Laforgue. It is a device in which phrases and quotations are highly evocative. By using such symbols he is able to link up the present with the past, the material with the spiritual, the mortal with the immortal, the concrete with the abstract, and so on. He also sees the literature of all the countries of Europe as a homogeneous whole and, thus, stresses upon the formation of great tradition of European literature. He frequently draws phrases from the French symbolists especially Laforgue. *The Portrait of a Lady* "is the first Laforguean poem" (Kenner 22), which was based on a real character Eliot personally knew. It shows that he was in the habit of studying the people around him very minutely and closely, and also tried to delve deep into their psyches, so that he might be able to portray their characteristics minutely and precisely. And he does this with the help of symbols. He does not make plain statements, rather he suggests and connotes the images and make them vivid.

Remy de Gourmont influenced Eliot the most. He was stimulated, motivated, and influenced, by his critical writings. Eliot, as a critic, got profoundly inspired by Remy de Gourmont and owes his concept of multiple sensibility to him, as is evident from the following lines by L. N. Salinger who in his essay "T. S. Eliot: Poet and Critic" writes that "What is valuable and suggestive in it, comes, directly or indirectly, from previous critics—the concept of poets' amalgamating power from Coleridge, the concept of multiple sensibility from Baudelaire and Remy de Gourmont" (340).

Birjadish Prasad maintains that It was Remy de Gourmont who for the first time "applied the Aristotelian method of comparison and analysis to the elucidation of works of literature, and from whom perhaps Eliot borrows his famous phrase 'dissociation of sensibility' " (238).

The 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' has vivid and lively imagery, which Eliot borrowed directly from the French symbolists; even some phrases have been derived from them. In the context of the 'Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', Hugh Kenner says that "the phrase 'do I dare disturb the universe?' occurs in an 1881 letter of Laforgue" (21). The effect of the French symbolists especially of Baudelaire upon him can be found in almost all his writings. F.O. Matthiessen in *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* writes that "the details of Eliot's style show everywhere the mark of his responsive mastery of the later symbolists, as well as of the metaphysical, the impression of Baudelaire upon his spirit has been even more profound" (p 18). Eliot has experimented with symbols in his own way and has used symbols to suit his own purpose. It is the effect and influence of the symbolists upon him that has helped him render his vision successfully in verse without the aids of rhetoric or

logical reflection and statement. What Marshall McLuhan says in this regard is worth-noting. He says: "there is in all these works (*The Wasteland*, the *Quartets*, *The Cocktail Party*) a vision of the community of men and creatures which is not so much ethical as metaphysical. And it had been, in poetry, due to the technical innovations of Baudelaire, Laforgue, and Rimbaud that it was possible to render this vision immediately in verse without the extraneous aids of rhetoric or logical reflection and statements" (Brackets mine) (239).

'Objective Correlative', which Eliot formulated in his essay "Hamlet and His Problems", means, "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (100). It is a logical expression of the emotion by using external means in the form of objects, situation or a chain of events. Eliot derives the idea of 'objective correlative' from the symbolists. The principal innovation was that of the "psychological landscape. This landscape, by means of discontinuity, which was first developed in picturesque painting, effected the apposition of widely diverse objects as a means of establishing what Mr. Eliot has called an 'objective correlative' for a state of mind" (McLuhan 239). The landscapes of the *Ulysses*, thus, provide a base for 'objective correlative'. Marshall McLuhan writes that "The openings of 'Prufrock' 'Gerontion' and '*The Wasteland*' illustrate Mr. Eliot's growth in the adaptation of this technique, as he passed from the influence of Laforgue to that of Rimbaud, from personal to impersonal manipulation of experience. Whereas in external landscape diverse things lie side by side"(McLuhan 239). Landscape, thus, may be defined as a "means of presenting without the copula of logical enunciation, experiences which are united in existence but not in conceptual thought" (McLuhan 239).

So, symbolic landscape of *Ulysses* has played an important role in the '*Quartets*' 'Gerontion' and '*The Wasteland*'. The landscape helps the places and things to utter for themselves. No description is required; a symbolical landscape itself is enough to render all that is intended by Eliot. Marshall McLuhan writes that "the effect of Laforgue had been to open Mr. Eliot's mind to the effects of Donne and the metaphysical, so the effect of Rimbaud was to make him mere fully aware of the means by which Dante achieved a zoning states of mind through symbolic landscapes" (240).

'Objective Correlative', thus, is a means by which an uncommon idea is made common which can very easily be comprehended and understood by the readers and the audience. The similarity between the symbolism and the 'objective correlative' becomes apparent when one comes to know that Eliot himself is against the direct presentation of emotions in drama as well as in poetry. The symbolist try to represent the emotions through the use of symbols; it is the juxtaposition of the opposites and evocation of the particular idea, thought or emotion for them, whereas, for Eliot "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an objective correlative" (100). So, 'objective correlative' and symbols may be taken as the one and the same concept, for the objective of both is to evoke or connote an idea or emotion. 'Objective Correlative', in fact, may be taken as an extension of symbols—an extension of the idea contained or inherent in symbolism. It may be said that

some symbols, by now, have become synonymous to the thing or idea or emotion they represent, whereas, 'objective correlative' does not have any such set of evocative words or phrases which could be taken as synonymous to some particular idea or emotion in general. 'Objective correlative' may be a chain of events that could express only one particular emotion, but only one chain of events may arouse or evoke different ideas and emotions in different people owing to their different backgrounds. But, it may be reiterated symbols and correlatives are closely related to each other. 'Objective correlative' seems to have been derived from the symbols, in other words, it may be termed as a further development and extension of symbols.

As has been mentioned earlier that Eliot was profoundly influenced and impressed by Remy de Gourmont, so, it is, generally, believed that Eliot borrowed his idea of 'dissociation of sensibility' from him. As per *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* the phrase— 'dissociation of sensibility' appeared for first time in Eliot's essay—'The Metaphysical Poets' to describe, "something which happened to the mind of England from the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; It is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet" (Drabble 277). It implies a state when thought and feelings are not properly fused in and the poet is unable to feel his thoughts, which results in creation of bad poetry. For writing of good poetry, a 'unification of sensibility' is required, which is a fusion or unification of feeling and thought. It is the union of opposite elements—a synthesis of thought and feeling, of individual and traditional, and of temporal and the eternal. It is the amalgamation of spiritual and material also. Since the idea of 'dissociation of sensibility' was derived from the symbolists, it is not an original concept. Eliot just refined it, gave it a definite meaning and used it. He finds 'unification of sensibility' in Dante, Shakespeare, Keats, Donne and other metaphysical poets, but finds Tennyson and Browning lacking it. According to him 'dissociation of sensibility' leads to creation of bad poetry and 'unification of sensibility' of good. Eliot in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' writes: "To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad." So, Eliot is indebted to Remy de Gourmont for his concept of 'dissociation of sensibility'. Even Ezra Pound somewhere admits that Remy de Gourmont was the man who was the inspiring and guiding force for the English symbolists.

So, it may be very well established that 'objective correlative' and 'dissociation of sensibility' are the terms and concepts which Eliot formulated under the influence of the symbolists. These are not his original concepts. F.O. Matthiessen makes an interesting remark when he says that "it is no longer accurate to think of Eliot's work as new or experimental" (3). He has frequently borrowed ideas for his other critical concepts and theories from the earlier critics. He does not come up with any new ideas or concepts; and it seems that he has earned a lot of his theories by extensive reading of the past writers and critics, and after slightly modifying the thoughts and ideas used them to suit his own purpose. Arthur Symon's book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* had given him a glimpse of the French Symbolists and he made full use of this study and got the ideas,

impressions, and concepts imprinted upon his mind to the extent that when he started penning down his critical works, all these crept into his writings, consciously or unconsciously; he did not have to labour hard for it.

Impression of the French symbolists upon his mind was so profound that he himself became a part of the English Symbolist movement. Ezra Pound in England has certainly played a great role in his development as a poet-critic. Ezra Pound and the English symbolists made attempts to imitate the French symbolists in their writings. Matthiessen writes that "In the years just before the first world war, the speculation of T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound brought a new quickening of life which prepared the way for Eliot's own development" (4). And Eliot developed substantially. He got well-versed in the use of symbols that he went to the extent of inventing his new 'symbol'—the 'objective correlative'. Thus, it can be concluded that Eliot's development as a poet-critic owes much to the French as well as the English symbolists. His reading of Symon's book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* and his association with Ezra Pound and through Pound his introduction to other great writers of the time of England are the two significant events that have proved to be a turning point in his career; and he capitalized on it successfully, and developed and emerged as a great poet-critic of his age. It may also be added that his achievements cannot be undermined simply owing to the fact that ideas and concepts of his critical theories are not original. His greatness as a poet-critic remains unaffected despite the fact that he was not an original critic. But, it may definitely be said that Eliot might not have achieved all that he has achieved in his life and career as a poet-critic, had he not got acquainted with the French and the English symbolist movements.

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