

T.S.Eliot, Josiah Royce and F.H.Bradley: Problematics of Influence

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Abstract:

In the early stage, during his stay at Harvard, T.S. Eliot was in acquaintance with a number of scholars and philosophers whose influence initiated numerous doubts and speculations in his mind. During the time of his engagement with his doctoral thesis on F.H. Bradley, he was troubled by issues of religion and science over which he had differences of opinion with his supervisor Josiah Royce and his Harvard mentors. The attempt of the contemporary sociologists, the anthropologists and literary thinkers at establishing religion as a purely scientific and objective element was unsatisfactory to Eliot. Even turning towards Bradley's liberal, idealist notion of religion Eliot fails to find an amicable solution. Deviating from the trend of rationalism and phenomenological study, Eliot tries to solve his crises through utmost conformity with a religious faith. This paper tries to examine the complementary and contradictory influences of Royce and Bradley in the early part of Eliot's literary career. How Eliot, by means of acceptance and contradiction of their thoughts and opinions tries to arrive at a conclusion regarding his crisis in faith will be the aim of exploration in this paper.

Key words: religious sensibility, Anglo-Catholicism, Crisis, tradition, Absolute

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Early in his career, from his Harvard days in fact, T.S Eliot shows signs of a preoccupation with poetic form and technique. Eliot is seen reflecting on production of a poetry that can encapsulate the epistemological and empirical complexities around him. In the course of his search for an adequate poetic medium, Eliot examines different European writers such as Dante, Laforgue, Baudelaire, Valery, the English Metaphysical poets, apart from his fellow Americans Poe, Pound, etc. Interestingly however, Eliot while looking for a new poetic principle was also in search of a concrete answer to his problems regarding his religious faith. In other words, Eliot's search for poetic form and faith continue side by side. Eliot's problematic examination of

Christian theology was influenced by Josiah Royce, a Harvard professor of philosophy and his doctoral supervisor and F.H. Bradley, the philosopher on whom Eliot completed his dissertation.

The aim of this paper is to examine the influence of Royce and Bradley in the shaping of Eliot's ideology and most importantly his religious sensibility. How Eliot, by means of acceptance and contestation of their thoughts and opinions tries to arrive at a conclusion regarding faith will be studied in this paper.

Apart from supervising Eliot's doctoral dissertation, Royce has a considerable influence on Eliot's reading. Though Eliot disagrees with Royce over certain philosophical issues such as the notion of error, evil and sin and so on, they agree in certain aspects such as poetic possibilities etc. Both agree on the point that poetry embodies a deeper truth than philosophy. For Eliot, as for Royce, unlike philosophy poetry is emotional and not intellectual and relatively free from the sense of skepticism and doubt.

Some of the ideas in Eliot's poetry and some specific altercations in his critical essays seem to be an outcome of Royce's teaching. For instance, Royce argues "as soon as you try to deny ...propositions, you implicitly reaffirm by your very attempt at denial." The same logic, and almost the same words come out in Eliot's final chorus of *Murder in the Cathedral*:

Those who deny Thee could not deny, if Thou didst

Not exist; and their denial is never complete,

For if it were so, they would not exist.

They affirm Thee in living; all things affirm Thee

In living; the bird in the air, both the hawk and the finch...

Even in some other literary principles, Eliot draws a parallel with Royce. For instance Royce's notion of tradition that revision does not mean destruction echoes Eliot's stress on historical sense. Both Royce and Eliot share a close affinity while showing their tension between the need for order and the fear of being subsumed into a large whole. On the other hand, both Royce and Eliot yearn for an ideal community. According to Royce, there is the need of a practically devoted love of an individual for a community. Royce argues that communities behave as if they are wholes and that they exhibit psychological laws of their own. The members of a community share a common past and have a common expectation of the future and the language, custom, religion etc. are all the product of the community. Eliot echoes the same ideological points later on in his essay '*What is a Classic*' by saying that a community must maintain two things- a pride in what our literature had already accomplished and a belief in what it may still accomplish in the future. However the distinction between them is that Royce has a concern for a pluralistic and multiracial character of America whereas Eliot believes in a homogenous European culture.

However, turning to religion, Royce's epistemological and logical contradictions fail to provide any answer to his bewilderment regarding religion during his Harvard years. Eliot's contention regarding Royce becomes more prominent during 1913-14 when Eliot attended Royce's seminar

in logic based on the theme - 'A Comparative Study of Various types of Scientific Methods'. There Eliot read five papers with a motive of expressing his dissatisfaction with the on-going fashion to synthesize science and religion which was propagated mainly by the contemporary sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists etc.

Royce would like to combine faith with reason. Insight, according to him, would rest on a combination of the empirical, rational and intuitive. He presents interpretation as a third category of knowledge, complementing perception and conception. Royce also examines the American character through such themes in the American experience as the tension between individualism and the building of community or that greedy aggrandizement and moral idealism. In *The Sources of Religious Insight* Royce utters:

...we need not view the religious interest as the result of an arbitrary intrusion from above--as if the gods loved to disturb us and to trouble our peace... Yet just as little need we think of religion as having no concern with what is, indeed, superhuman. Religion is, indeed, our own affair; for it grows out of our personal vision of the transformation that a divinely enlarged power to comprehend, to survey, to harmonise, to triumph over our natural life would give.(28)

Thus religion as Royce perceives is purely an earthly affair without involving any supernatural or divine power. Interestingly, other than defying the existence of God, Royce expresses his inability to affirm God as something out of the common world. God as Royce discerns, is not from above but within us; an entity of flesh and blood like the common human being.

Eliot's discomfort is mainly in such attempt of Royce at reducing religion to the level of an ordinary social science and his probing for a scientific explanation for it. In Roycean sense the entire meaning of religious beliefs and practices, can be exhaustively and accurately described in the purely human and social terms. Eliot's issue is on whether a science of religion was possible. According to him it is impossible. He feels that scientific models by claiming to give objective analysis of religious experience threaten the very existence of religious beliefs. While thinkers like Max Mueller, Tylor and Frazer held that religion is a product of the mind and not something supernaturally revealed, Eliot claims that while claiming to give an objective, scientific definition of religion based on generalization drawn from facts they are giving a philosophical interpretation of those facts.

Eliot rejects Royce's principle that religion is a manifestation of the social consciousness. He sides with Levy-Bruhl while counterattacking the Roycean principle of religious origin. Rather than Royce it is Bruhl who could give a satisfactory solution to his doubts regarding religious origin, the relationship between subject and object, fact and interpretation, the real and the ideal and so on. For Bruhl, the primitive consciousness is not an inferior variety of civilized mentality, as postulated by Spencer, Tylor Frazer etc. The only difference is that it is pre-logical and mystical and is governed by the law of participation. So according to him the difference is a matter of 'kind' but not of 'degree'. He also accepts the opinion that nothing is subjective and objective. Both coincide as we never know the origin of our participation and judgement. Even both Royce and Eliot have contrastive opinions in terms of Christian rituals. As for instance, for Eliot Incarnation is the main aspect of Christianity but for Royce it is the church but not the person or the founder ought to be viewed as the central idea of church.

Royce advocates a study of the phenomenology of religion which would consider the various types of religious expression without much attention to their deeper meaning. Eliot rejects this on the same ground that he has attacked Durkheim as being too mechanistic. Eliot fears that such kind of approach to religion would reduce it to the level of external expression only.

Immediately after attending Royce's seminar, Eliot's aversion towards Royce's philosophical ideology becomes prominent and gradually he becomes more affiliated to Bradley. In June 1913, Eliot came into contact with Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* and embarked upon his doctoral work on Bradley under the supervision of Josiah Royce and from that time onwards Bradley was to become a reasonable source of inspiration for him. In a letter to Lytton Strachey on June 1, 1919, Eliot acknowledges the contribution of Bradley in the following manner:

Anything I have picked up about writing is due to having spent (as I once thought, wasted) a year absorbing the style of F.H. Bradley – the finest philosopher in English- (357, Letters, Vol 1)

Eliot's indulgence with the characters of his early poetry, mainly with respect to the apprehension of the self is affiliated to Bradleian idealism. It is under the influence of Bradley that Eliot's ideology lay embedded in the desire for 'wholeness' in life and art other than propagating a dualistic attitude. Eliot notes that Bradley's approach included doubt and skepticism. He refuses to accept anything or experience as ultimate fact: "Of wisdom Bradley had a large share"; consisting "largely of skepticism and uncynical disillusion" (Selected Essays, 411-12). He further points out that Bradley had a share of "skepticism and disillusion [which] are a useful equipment for religious understanding" (ibidem). Bradley mentions what he calls the "Primitive Credulity" which allows us to be deceived in our lives (408). As he explains, "Our principles may be true but they are not reality. They no more make that Whole which commands our devotion than some shredded dissection of human tatters..."(409). Moreover, he held that "no one fact of experience in isolation is real or is evidence of anything" (415). It follows that Bradley was not content with the so called validity of isolated facts, or with any position as final. He was willing to maintain a certain fluidity to accommodate change if necessary.

Eliot is quite enthusiastic about the Idealist Foundation established by F.H. Bradley. For Bradley, history and even foundation of knowledge and belief cannot exist without preconception. Thus he denies the fact that they are purely objective. According to him, there is no single history which does not derive its individual character from the particular stand point of the author. Eliot appreciates such arguments of Bradley and on the basis of this counterattacks Durkheim's claim that it is possible to eliminate all preconceptions for a scientific study of human behavior. Durkheim's genetic explanation of religion as an alternative fails to satisfy both Eliot and Bradley. For Bradley, the 'original fact' is primarily for history a fallacious inference and Eliot supports this idea and so gives much stress on considering religion as a matter of faith rather than a social evolution.

Discounting Frazer's idea of rationalism, Eliot along with Bradley accepts Henry James' 'the agony of spiritual life'. Though James' idea seems to be more disillusioned and unclear, Eliot accepts it because for him and also for Bradley, disillusion and skepticism are useful equipments for religious understanding. More than that Eliot is also influenced by Bradley's theory of degree of truth and reality.

However, Eliot appears to be uncomfortable with Bradley's idea of immediate experience and the absolute. He opposes Bradley's view on immediate experience as the starting point of knowledge. On the other hand, unlike Bradley, Eliot believes that the absolute is not the ultimate reality; rather it is a state of nothingness. For him Bradley's concept of the Absolute as the all inclusive whole, representative of ultimate reality does not exist at all. Even for Eliot thought precedes feeling and both are not exclusive where as for Bradley it is feeling that comes before thought.

Eliot's notion of God and religion also differs from Bradley. For Bradley the absolute is not God. God is a finite factor and an appearance of the whole. And religion is not God but a link between God and man; a link which is always inconsistent and self contradictory. The absolute, according to Bradley, if attained by man will destroy religion. According to him

If you identify the absolute with God, that is not the God of religion. If again you separate them, God becomes a finite factor in the whole. And the effort of religion is to put an end to, and break down this relation--- a relation which, none the less, it essentially presupposes. Hence, short of the absolute, God cannot rest, and, having reached that goal, he is lost and religion with him."(*Appearance and Reality*, 395)

Eliot denies this principle of Bradley of undifferentiated abstract absolute and ascribes to Aquinas and Dante for attaining an answer to his religious and mystical quest. He accepts Dante's notion of the divine contemplation, and the development and subsumption of emotion and feeling through intellect into the vision of God. He has his reservation about Bradley on the point of the role of the self in religious and mystical experience and on the relationship of the individual to any principle of authority. Eliot's concern is for unification with God but for him that unification does not imply identity with the divine. He believes that the soul may be united with the divine through spiritual discipline. But that unity does not imply identity, absorption or assimilation. Thus he is quite ready to accept man's limitation in front of God and thereby affirms the supremacy of the divine. Most importantly Eliot is quite against the liberal idealist notion of Bradley who believes that man can attain perfection or salvation without the aid of divine grace.

Thus philosophers like Bradley and Royce have a considerable impact on the formation of Eliot's religious ideologies. In fact Eliot's conversion of 1927 to Anglo-Catholicism was a well prepared one stimulated by the ideological implications of these Harvard scholars. Eliot is not concerned with specific denominational creeds; he wishes to discover whether any basic, "absolute" knowledge is possible regarding reality and man's duty. He always insists that knowing and doing are inseparable, so that what man can know and what he ought to do are integral parts of the same philosophic problem. Such introspection on religious and philosophical thinking is well nourished by the ideological propagandas of Royce and Bradley. Undoubtedly Eliot has issues with their philosophy but simultaneously they have tremendous contributions in the formation of his literary and philosophical principles.

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