WHY DID T.S. ELIOT TAKE UP THE LITERARY FORM OF
POETIC DRAMA?

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In the twentieth century World War I happened which broke up the religious and cultural background of unity completely owing to the political rupture of the nations in Europe. Therefore every nation has come to have quite a different religious and cultural background.

Consequently poetry has faced the literary crisis that it has become the helpless existence which could not be understood by many people. T.S. Eliot has become conscious of this literary crisis more keenly than any other literary person.

Eliot published *The Waste Land* in 1922. This poetry being rich in literary allusions, he added to it some notes himself lest it should be read wrongly, but the common readers would have needed more notes, for without them they could not appreciate and understand the poetic meaning of this poetry.

In the twentieth century the tremendous progress of printing technique and the wide prevailing of education have made the reading public far larger. Accordingly learning has been divided into many parts distinctively in each special field. This division has made it difficult for common readers to appreciate contemporary poems.

In the contemporary times when the religious faith is not widely held, the religious poets can not expect that common readers have the common religious background which the poets have. I think this lack of common religious background has made the common readers' appreciation of contemporary poems more difficult.

Eliot wrote the religious experience and the process of religious sufferings and distresses which spring up from the process of discovering religious truth in his poetry. But in the contemporary times when the religious faith is not widely held, religious poets can not depend upon the common religious imagery and symbolism, for the common readers of contemporary poems appreciate them in the connection and comparison with their personal experiences without the common religious background. Therefore if poets do not use the poetic words and symbols which are connected with the religious faith of common readers, contemporary poets can not expect that their poems can be appreciated. The poetic words which are full of meaning and important to the poets and the readers who have the same religious faith as the poet's, are the meaninglessly pious words to other readers. It would be a dangerous thing to the proper appreciation of contemporary poetry, if the poets expect common readers to make up for the poetic meaning which poets did not
write properly from their experiences.

According to my view, word is the convention with which human being can communicate his thoughts and emotions to each other. But on the contrary, common readers add to every word their private meaning, based upon their view of life and world, and their experiences. Particularly the contemporary people of complicated inner experiences tend to do so, which has made it more difficult for them to appreciate contemporary poems.

Eliot has made great efforts to solve the problem of poetic communication, thinking that he should perform his mission as a religious poet by writing for the miscellaneous readers. Therefore in writing *Four Quartets* he paid much attention to the use of the specially religious words and made tremendous and constant efforts to achieve the poetic communication, for he thought that he made much of the poetic communication of religious faith to common readers. And Eliot attempted to change the poetic style as the means of realizing this poetic communication. Helen Gardner says about this, “Where early style is concise, condensed, and tends towards the cryptic and oracular, the latter is diffusive, repetitive, and tends towards the familiar. The change of style is obviously connected with Eliot’s attempts to write verse drama . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . But the attempts to write verse drama are in themselves a sign of a change in Mr. Eliot’s attitude towards his subject and his public.” (Helen Gardner: *The Art of T.S.Eliot*, p.73)

Poetry has its own independent significance, its own life and its own value only in a poet’s poetic world, but not in other world, where poetry becomes an isolated existence. For when a poet writes a poem, he does not think much of others but thinks of only his poetic world. Accordingly a poem is a very important existence of literary significance to a poet himself, but to other people it is a meaningless existence of less importance. That is to say, a poem has the significance of its existence only in the poetic world. By the great difference of each man’s view of religion and life, poetry has become the isolated existence from common readers more and more, for they cannot appreciate and understand contemporary poetry. This isolation has driven the contemporary poets into economical difficulty. So the contemporary poets have been compelled to take a choice between life and death. That is, the alternative is whether a poet would continue to live a poetic life as a poet which is not and will not be rewarded in this world, or would choose death. This is the contemporary condition of contemporary poets in the literary crisis.

Therefore the only thing that a poet can rely upon as the reward of his poetic labour as a poet, is nothing but theatre. If a poet should succeed in making all classes of audience enjoy the play he could expect that he could contribute to the enlightenment and improvement of society through the artistic medium of poetic drama. That is, if he could keep the interest of the audience for the given hours and give them true poetry through the medium of poetic drama, that is, communicate his poetic meaning to them directly through the dramatic speech of actors in a
dramatic world, it would become the great profit to poets. I am sure that Eliot did not choose and advocate the literary form of poetic drama out of his reminiscent interest towards the poetic drama which flourished in the Elizabethan age but since Dryden perished away, but the contemporary condition of the contemporary poets compelled Eliot to take up the literary form of poetic drama. And the lack of the common background of literary culture compelled him to take it up.

Eliot is originally a traditional poet making much of the tradition of English poetry. This traditional attitude has become the essence of his literary point of view. It means the stratification of meaning and the multiplied associations. That is, one poetic word used in poetry gives many classes of people who read it multiplied meanings and many associations in proportion to the reader's degree of intellectual sensibility.

When a dramatist writes a drama, he can not make little of audience and must think much of communication of meaning to audience. Therefore it follows that a dramatic world becomes a widely artistic world in which audience can think on the common plane through the artistic world of drama.

Now, Eliot took up the literary form of poetic drama as the most proper literary form which is most proper to deal with the contemporary inner problems arising from the contemporary humanism and dilemmas. And Eliot wrote the theory of poetic drama to justify this idea objectively.

It is T.S.Eliot that has established the theoretical and practical foundation of English poetic drama in the twentieth century.