

J. Hillis Miller: On "General Statements on Eliot"

This is the situation to which romanticism in poetry and idealism in philosophy have brought Eliot. Each man seems destined to remain enclosed in his separate sphere, unable to break out to external things, to other people, to an objective time and space, or to God. All these exist, but as qualifications of the inner world which is peculiar and private to the self.

Perhaps it will be possible to accept this situation and make a tolerable life out of it. Instead of beating futilely against the walls of its prison, the self should turn within, inspect the contents of inner space, and try to reduce them to harmony. Though all things are only modes of the self they do have at least that form of existence. If they can be put in patterned order the self, though still isolated, will be like a little world made cunningly. A world of this sort, the universe squeezed into a ball, may not possess God as the immanent principle of its order, but it may have that secondary form of possession which is called resonance.

The notion of attunement is of great importance for Eliot. It is one reason why he gives so much value to formal design. Pattern is not so much a good in itself as it is a means of reaching the otherwise unattainable stillness at the center. The finite self is hopelessly peripheral, but if its elements can be brought into order they may vibrate, though at an infinite distance, in harmony with the divine pattern. This bringing into order is Eliot's fundamental definition of art. Though art and religion are always to be distinguished, art is not an end in itself. It can take man only part of the way toward salvation, but its reason for being is precisely to take him that part of the way. This it does through an ordering of reality which leads to an artistic stillness oriented toward the divine stillness and echoing it.

This is the meaning of Eliot's most explicit definition of the use of art: "For it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no farther" (OPP, 94). The passage is another version of an ambiguity basic in romanticism from Keats and Shelley to Yeats. Just as Yeats, in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, cannot decide whether the poet "creates" or "reveals" his symbols, so art for Eliot imposes pattern in order to reveal one which has been there invisibly all along. This pre-existent order is shy to reveal itself and can be brought to light only by a created order, the "musical design" (OPP, 80) of art. The pattern in reality may be there already, but it is brought into being for human beings only through art. Art is the Virgil who leads us to the borders of that realm where only Beatrice can lead us farther. Such a notion of art as design vibrating in resonance with the divine stillness is, in "Burnt Norton," admirably expressed in the image of the Chinese jar:

Words, after speech, reach

Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,

Can words or music reach

The stillness, as a Chinese jar still

Moves perpetually in its stillness.

Abandoning his impotent yearning to escape from himself, the poet turns inward to search within his own sphere for the patterns which may grant him an indirect possession of the divine harmony. It may be that the inner world of the isolated ego falls naturally into orderly design.

From *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1965.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Author:

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Criticism Target:

T. S. Eliot

Source URL: <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/content/j-hillis-miller-general-statements-eliot>

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