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A Study of The Rock by T. S. Eliot.

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ABSTRACT

Chapter I of this thesis is just a brief account of the genesis of The Rock: brief for fear of reproducing what has already been ably said before by Mr E. Martin Browne in his book The Making of T.S. Eliot's Plays. In this section the pageant and music-hall revue, which were the vehicles for this vaguely propagandist work, are treated, and what is so strangely important about the music-hall form of entertainment is that Eliot was very much attracted to it. This chapter, although it just sets the scene, shows the author working at a much more superficial level than ever before.

Chapter II deals with the importance of Eliot's socio-religious thinking relative to The Rock in the 1930s. The authoritarian nature and very rigour of his orthodoxy may have been partly the reason why The Rock and After Strange Gods were never republished, but the important point is made clear, through these views on Christian orthodoxy and tradition, that Eliot was to be admired as perhaps the only poet and intellectual of great standing in England in the 1930s who gave his allegiance to something wholly outside himself. In addition, what is made explicit in this chapter, and held implicit throughout, is that Eliot was no turncoat who now gladly and facilely embraced the succour of Mother Church as some critics would have us believe. What is made plain is that this relatively new convert was finding a via media between facile hope and pointless despair - hence the very discipline and rigour of his Anglo-Catholic affirmations.

Chapter III is about the requirements of the medium in what ~~was~~ in fact the first time Eliot had moved beyond a coterie audience. The demands and limitations are listed as criteria against which The Rock can only be measured; and although the choruses may be the first bad poetry Eliot had written, it is made clear that he was conscious of the seeming hollowness of ecclesiastical utterances. It may seem paradoxical that Eliot, in this propaganda setting,

was actually trying to wring the neck of rhetoric, and the moral is even enforced by his inclusion of a verse-sketch which clearly shows an adulteration through rhetoric.

Chapter IV reverberates on the two preceding chapters in its delineation of a return to a purified yet traditional language as well. Although the nobility of language from biblical books is still there, Eliot was for the first time using a democratic, and non-hieratic, language of ordinary man. There is a new distrust of the cunning and rhetorical, **as** contained in the 'objective correlative' of before, and the author is attempting a personal atone through what seems to be an authenticity and sincerity of tone.

The Rock could conceivably exist without the choruses at all but they are important, unlike the prose episodes, because they were written without the various collaborators.

Chapter V attempts, very briefly, to establish that The Rock was not a propagandist's hackwork but that the author was consciously groping for new forms of prosody and dramatic techniques preparatory to his later plays and poetry and, as such, the work is seen in the perspective of an important stage midway in Eliot's career as an artist and thinker.

PREFACE

The Rock was the first of T.S. Eliot's commissioned religious plays and it was primarily written for performance at Sadler's Wells Theatre, Islington, London from 28 May - 9 June, 1934, on behalf of the Forty-five Churches Fund of the Diocese of London. After its first publications in England by Faber and Faber and in the United States by Harcourt Brace and Company, the author allowed the work to go out of print and for it to remain an occasional piece, except for the ten choruses which have been republished within his Collected Poems.

This thesis is not intended to be a patient elucidation of this forgotten text, but much rather its point and purpose is to study the work in relation to T.S. Eliot's own poetic, dramatic, critical and social writings and, by scanning its before and after, to endeavour to find some continuities, links and a perspective. As for the supplementary elucidation there are three most helpful books: E. Martin Browne's The Making of T.S. Eliot's Plays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Grover Smith's T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays: A Study in Sources and Meaning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); and B.C. Southam's A Students Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1969) - these all contain useful guides, especially the former work by Martin Browne who collaborated with the author to write The Rock, and the latter work by Southam not only bears the Imprimatur of Faber and Faber, but was also prepared with the authoritative advice of Mrs Valerie Eliot whom the author thanks in his 'Acknowledgments'.

This thesis will also attempt to show how and why the man considered to be the most sophisticated and major British poet of the twentieth century, accepted of his own volition, a pedestrian and unpretentious duty to his faith to express his own personal and idiosyncratic views about church and society. What is more, it seems incongruous but interesting that this particular author should have conveyed these ideas, not through highly wrought and intensely allusive methods as he was wont, but that he did so by taking instead merely an

ad hoc improvisation of the village pageant from the past, and a type of revue which was enjoying some popularity in England at the time. Not only does such a concatenation seem strangely regressive to T.S. Eliot but, moreover, this cosmopolitan poet expressed through them a sectarian apologia for High Anglicanism.

The Rock, therefore, shows Eliot working at a shallower level than ever before, in what was his first work written outside a specifically literary, coterie audience. Nevertheless, this thesis will endeavour to show that The Rock was still the work of a major and subtle mind grappling with severe limitations and then transforming them. There is still a continuity of the author's concerns and motifs from his earlier writings and, even within the strictures of a provided scenario, the poet was able to give this pageant-play a distinctly Eliotic flavour. Yet conversely, this thesis will be somewhat like a biological field trip and it will show how the ecology is changing in Eliot's work. His earlier habitat of extreme human self-enclosure is now markedly gone and it will be shown that there is a more humane and positive concern filtering through in The Rock.

All quotations will be taken from the Faber edition of The Rock which was first published in England in 1934 but, for the sake of convenience, the ten choruses will be numbered corresponding to those reprinted in Collected Poems 1909-1962.

I wish to thank Mr. Peter Alcock for his suggestions and corrections which he has so kindly and patiently advanced for the preparation of this manuscript. His help with the text and his knowledge and supervision have been an immense help. I should also like to thank Professor R.G. Freen for his introducing me to T.S. Eliot's poetry some years ago.

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Here is a place of disaffection...

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