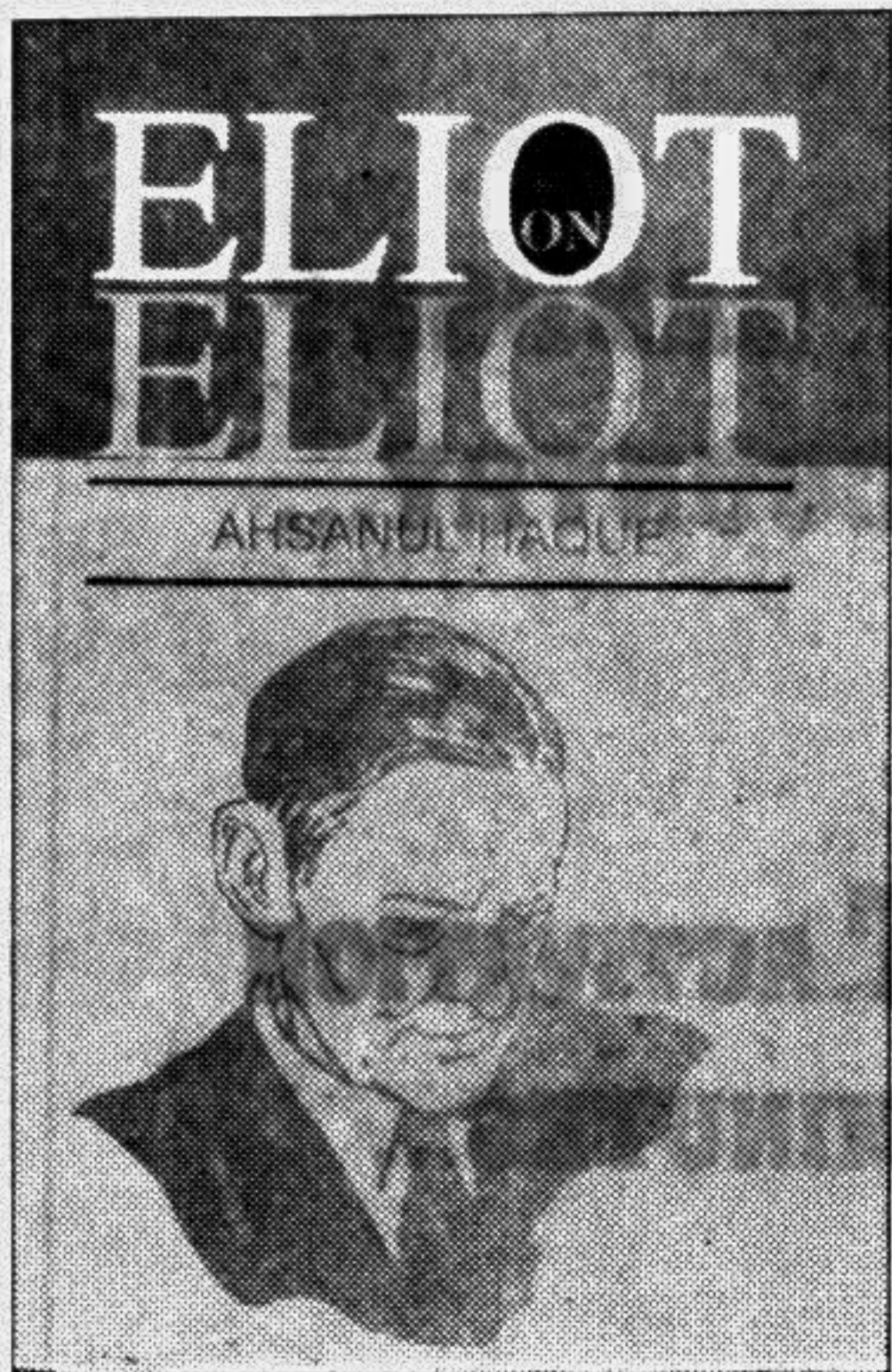


essay

## Making More and More Sense of T.S. Eliot

by Fakrul Alam



Eliot's *oeuvre* or pounced on pronouncements that he made in informal as well as formal contexts to articulate his achievements.

Eliot died in 1965, and the taste for the kind of complex, fragmented, and allusive poetry that he launched through *The Waste Land*, and the interest in the type of verse meditations that he presented as *The Four Quartets* did not last. Nevertheless, the urge to explicate his poems and to represent him to each new generation of readers has continued to find form in a spate of translations, guides, and scholarly treatises. Even in our part of the world, significantly, we have had a more or less continuous record of commentary on Eliot and his works. As Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury has observed in these pages some time back, "in ... literature-minded Bengal Eliot was received with excitement in spite of Rabindranath" who, on the whole, was wary of him as of modernism, or perhaps, paradoxically, "because of him ... Eliot's influence has been wide-ranging, and sometimes, as on the question of tradition, of an unexpected nature." Indeed, even Rabindranath translated one of his poems ("The Journey of the Magi"). Sudhindranath Datta discussed him in his journal *Parichaya*. Bishnu Dey wrote enthusiastically about him and transcribed poems such as "The Hollow Men" in Bangla, and Buddhadev Bosu adopted his critical perspective to attack a precursor poet like Michael Modhusudhan Dutt. As Professor Chowdhury has pointed out, in East Bengal, Hasan Hafizur Rahman's first collection, *Bimukh Prantar* ("The Barren Field"), unmistakably alludes to *The Waste Land* and thereby reaffirms Eliot's presence in our world. In the last ten years, I myself have seen more than serviceable translations of poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and, inevitably, *The Waste Land*, published by my students who, quite rightly, intended to represent Eliot in the poetic idiom of their generation.

Professor Ahsanul Haque's recent book, *Eliot on Eliot: The Early Phase* (Dhaka: University of Dhaka Publications, 1996), can thus be viewed not only in the academic tradition of books which have been attempting to elucidate Eliot's complex poetry but also in the light of our region's continuing interest in the life and works of one of the greatest poets of this century. What Haque has set out to do is assemble all the observations Eliot has made on his own



T. S. Eliot

works in the course of his life and then utilise them to interpret the poems that he published in the first, and arguably, the most important phase of his literary career, till *The Waste Land* made him, as Delmore Schwartz once put it, "an international hero". As Haque explains in his helpful Introduction, although Eliot preferred to present himself as the apostle of impersonality, he often left clues, either deliberately or unwittingly, for the interpretation of his poems. Also, despite the fact that on occasions he "shifted positions and made unexpected revisions and recantations, to the chagrin, sometimes, of his own admirers," just as often he seemed to glance at "issues" in his poetry which were "more vital than commonly suspected." In effect, Haque

wryly notes, "there is a compulsive vein of self-analysis in Eliot," which results, not merely on "Eliot on Eliot", but also on "Eliot on Eliot on Eliot!"

Of course, not all the comments Eliot made on himself was helpful: "Old Possum,"—the name given to Eliot affectionately by friends because of his tendency to play possum (dictionary definition: pretend to be immobile to ward off attention)—could be disingenuous! However, there can be little doubt that Haque is here traversing an exegetical path which can illuminate Eliot's verse in all sorts of ways. Like many a scholar and biographer before him who have been pouring over early drafts of his poems, facsimiles of forgotten editions, verse fragments that he never worked into poems, and comments he

made in letter, interviews, and essays, Haque has devoted himself to unravelling the mysteries which have perplexed his readers with positive results.

Reading Haque's *Eliot on Eliot* thus revealed to me the extent to which Eliot is an American poet, for Eliot had misled many of us by declaring once that he was an Anglican in religion, a Royalist in politics, and a Classicist in literature. It is something of a revelation, too, to find out the city of *The Waste Land* bears the impress of Saint Louis, Missouri, where Eliot grew up, as well as London. All of us have been more or less impressed with the incantatory Sanskrit lines in the last canto of *The Waste Land*, but it is without a doubt a help in the understanding of the poem to have Haque tell us that Eliot once talked about the state of "enlightened mystification" he was left in by the two years of Sanskrit and by his study of Patanjali's metaphysics in Harvard. All admirers of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" must have always instinctively suspected that this poem was largely a self-portrait, but it is fascinating to find out that the poem grew out of an unpublished poem, "Suit Clownesque," where Eliot "sketched himself quaintly" as the firstborn child of the Absolute, turned out neatly in flannel suit. Similarly, all of us have loved this poem despite, or because of, its unheroic, indecisive hero's failure to love, but it is helpful to have Haque analyze the poem in the light of Eliot's own comments about poetry which have a "network of tentacular roots reaching down to the deepest terrors and desires." And even though Haque does not discuss Eliot's politics and religion, he has provided enough evidence from Eliot's own works to make us realise that he was as much a romantic as a classicist by temperament and that his vaunted "impersonality" was a mask to conceal a poet driven by private demons. Haque's conclusion about the extent to which Eliot was a romantic as well as a classicist is a sensible one: "The inception as well as the final form of a poet conforming to Eliot's first and most important voice of poetry is romantic in character; the accompanying workmanship is classical in character."

However, while Professor Haque's *Eliot on Eliot* will be of considerable value to all students of Eliot who would like to see him and his poetry in a clearer perspective, it must be emphasized that the book is by no means original in its approach. What Haque

does is extend the tradition of reading Eliot's poems set by someone like George Williamson in his 1953 book, *A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot: A Poem-By-Poem Analysis*. Haque also incorporates a lot of the information made available in Lyndall Gordon's *Eliot's Early Years* (1977) and *Eliot's New Life* (1988). It is, of course, good to have the readings provided by Williamson and others updated, and Haque is to be recommended for the diligence and meticulousness with which he has tried to make use of all of the information that has come to light recently about Eliot and his poetics, but I cannot help noting that, on many occasions, *Eliot on Eliot* tends to become a kind of digest of what others have said; a sort of *Critics on Eliot*. This is especially unfortunate since Haque does give evidence from time to time that he can be an incisive reader of Eliot's poems and is quite upto probing the crevices in Eliot's poetics on his own and coming up with critically acute statements such as the following: "The baffling fact that the poet does not know what he is going to say until he has said it, is further complicated by the problem that he is not sure whether what has been said is exactly what he wanted to say."

But what mars *Eliot on Eliot* is not its lack of originality — it is obvious to me that anyone trying to understand Eliot will find the book useful and will be thankful to Professor Haque for synthesizing recent scholarship on Eliot — but the production of the book. There are far too many misprints and at places Haque's point is lost because the text has been garbled by the type-setter (the passage on p 136 is one example). I was also put off by way paragraphs are laid out; the convention that is followed may be suitable for business correspondence and conference papers and even some publications, but it is odd to see paragraphs not indented and separated only by extra space between them in a critical book. The form followed for the *Select Bibliography* is also idiosyncratic. Moreover, the book could have benefited from an editorial eye and its condition is proof to me that professional editing is essential for any publication. In fact, if there is one conclusion to be drawn from the state of a book it is this: the University of Dhaka should ensure that books bearing its imprint have been copy-edited and printed carefully so that it can come upto the standard of books published by academic presses in the rest of the world.

art

## Shahabuddin : Behind the Dynamics

by Raziul Ahsan

WHEN I SAW THE PAINTINGS of Shahabuddin in 1979, his scale and images struck me. I vaguely remember the 1973 exhibition. Behind his images and expressions' one can feel the restlessness of a fighter, vibrant and dynamic. The people of Bangladesh won the war and returned from the war fields, but his images did not rest. The inertia of the fighting spirit continued through the images. His monumental figures were strong and full of energy. I have the memory of the work we had in the BUET Library, and as far as I remember, the painting was very big.

Shahabuddin has established himself as an artist, known to paint voluptuous male figures in motion, as we generally associate ballerinas in dance movements to Edgar Degas. Various methods of representing motion were used by the Italian futurists during 1909-1910. The Futurist movement though short lived glorified movement, action and motion. Their manifesto declare, "We shall sing of the great crowds in the excitement of labour, relaxation and rebellion: of the many coloured polyphonic wave-break of revolution modern cities; of the vibration by night of arsenals and factories beneath their violent electric moons; of bridges leaping like gymnasts and barrel-chested locomotives prancing on the rail like gigantic steel horses." Italy in 1909 was stagnant in cultural terms. Professors, librarians and dealers in antiques controlled the codes of cultural outlook. The Futurists declared that "all forms of imitation are to be despised" that "all subjects previously used must be discarded" and that "what was the truth for painters yesterday is falsehood for the painters of today." These references have been made here to understand the background and social situation which made the representation of motion by the artists as a means

to change the social situation. The symbolic movement was against the cultural immobility of Italy at that moment in history. Violent motion was aimed to discard the old and the stale.

Zainul's monumental and popular painting "struggle" depicts a man who tries hard to push a heavily loaded bullock cart stuck in mud. He depicts the crisis moment before the productive motion freed. A tremendous amount of human and animal labour is spent for very low level of useful output. The artist brings to our vision the absurdity of wastage of human power, the crucial moment before final outburst captures the anxiety of the human situation. The deadlock position of the social and historical reality is monumentalised. Shahabuddin has caught our eyes by continuously repeating the icon of human figure in motion. We are familiar with, and we can recognise, his images immediately. Let us look deeply at the kind of dynamics Shahabuddin represents, in his paintings to understand his ideas. I will refer to the plates of the paintings in the book published by Shilpakala Academy, February 1997, on the occasion of his retrospective, for this discussion. The reproduction in the monograph presents his works of the last twenty-five years, after he graduated in from the Bangladesh College of Arts and Crafts. I will consider these works in short to be representative of his artistic pursuit in chronology.

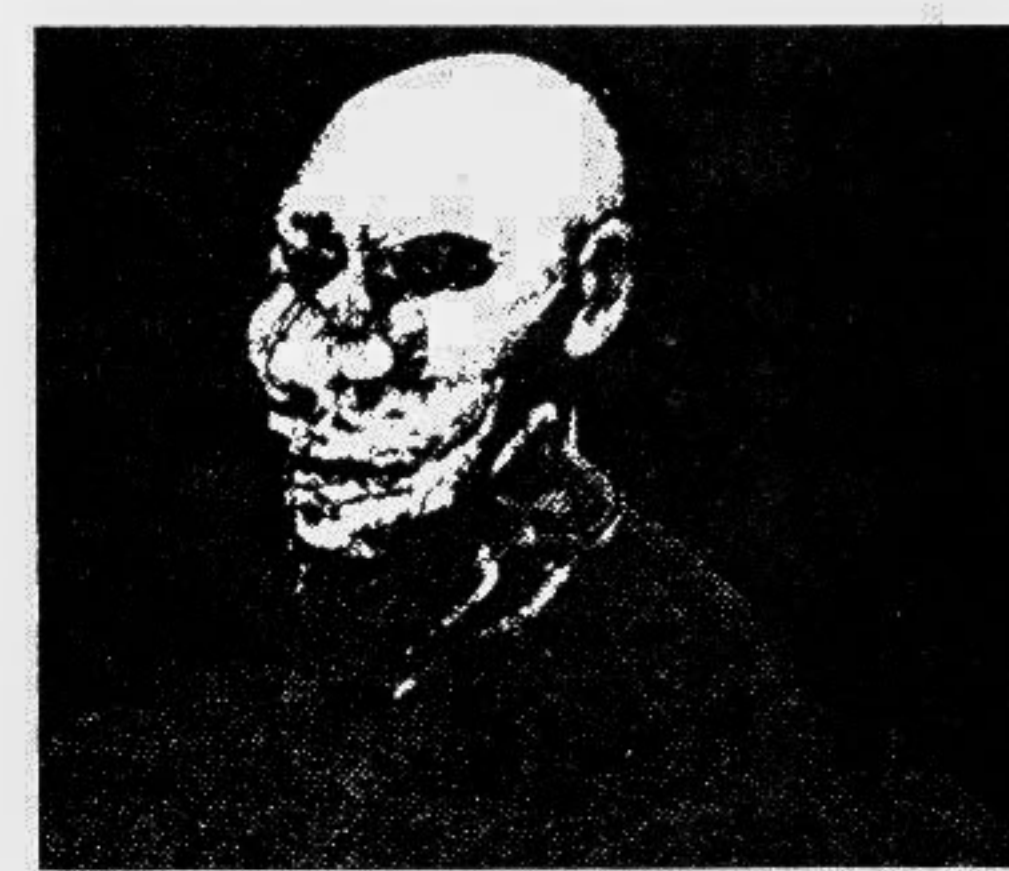
His early works, till 1975, show developing of stages of his skill as a painter in oil and water colour. His subjects are mainly figure and landscape. Influence of Cezanne (Still life Plate 5, Bathing Women Plate 11), Picasso (Wounded Plate 4) is visible, and should be considered natural as it mostly happens to one who explores both horizontally and vertically the inventory of the world art. In 1974 we already see the limb of the figure in Win-



Shahabuddin Gandhi oil 1995

dow (Plate 6) slowly starts to dissolve like the figures in Bacon's paintings. In 1995 when the artist spoke at Shilpan where he was having his solo exhibition he mentioned that back in Paris where he was studying in the middle seventies his friends used to refer to him as a miniature Francis Bacon, the Irish painter, who was coming to limelight during late 50s and early 60s (this I refer from my memory, in addition I also remember him telling that his painting has expressions of tremendous dynamism that is uncommon in paintings of Bangladesh).

The Irish painter Francis Bacon has been superficially referred at times, by some, while discussing Shahabuddin's work. Some of Bacon's painting has the image of distorted voluptuous males, suspended in awkward configuration, which apparently has similarity with the figures painted by Shahabuddin. The similarity can be traced in terms of the surface treatment or colour application of the muscular features of the bodies that appear in Bacon's painting. The artist cannot enjoy such associations if they are not valid. The layman's view of similarity doesn't bring the two artists close, or create grounds, to dis-



Francis Bacon Head of a Man-Study of a Drawing by Van Gogh

cuss them at the same time, for understanding their individual artistic issues. The apparently similar looking bodies were employed for very different purposes.

Here I will touch a little on Bacon's technique and images that I hope indirectly will help the reader to analyze Shahabuddin with their personal views. Bacon deals with images of the monstrous, the deformed, the diseased and scenes of horror. His techniques uses a hot line with the past by combining the grand formal statements of the Old Masters painting with continual awareness of the day to day imagery: police photographs, portraits of political leaders, discarded fragments of newspaper, evocations of the male voluptuousness, the element of irrationality, are compounded together in his works.

"I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory traces of the past events, as the snail leaves its slime. I think the whole process of this sort of elliptical form is dependent on the execution of detail to show how shapes are remade or put slightly out of

focus to bring in their memory traces" — Francis Bacon, *The New Decade*.

Shahabuddin may have learned to put his figure out of focus from Bacon. Learning things or employing technique from Bacon is not the issue, the issue is how the artist uses the thing he has learned and how he synthesizes them for his needs. Bacon directly inscribes his nervous system on to the canvas. His images are turned inside out, bodies are peeled open, organs exteriorized, central nervous system splayed across. His bodies are mutilated by all the signs of excremental culture as the essence of the society typified by the predatory exploitation of the vulnerable by the powerful. Within the same frame of an individual painting or separate frames of a triptych Bacon captures several moments of time simultaneously, by using diverse unrelated subjects compounded together to create images, that move to and fro between the dream and the real, the known and the unknown, clear and the ambiguous.

The period till the beginning of the eighties is his formation years. Paris where he was studying naturally has its presence in his paintings of that time. During this period the figures in his paintings appear rendered in brushwork similar to those of Abstract Expressionist painters. He uses very blurred images leaving out every detail and the chromatrics are more towards the neutral. Various tones of grays lightly fried with oranges, ochre's a bit of blue and red and dashes of white is distributed following academic principles. The figures are already in tension, lacks accuracy in terms of realism, but composition techniques are toward pressuring visual balance. In "Escape" (1978) we see his male figure without clothes, all alone, obsessed, engrossed in muscular drives; the heat and seriousness are enhanced by the use of chromatic symbolism of reds, brown

ochre's, and very restrained use of blue. Structural use of various swirls of tinged whites is used to suggest movement. The social coordinate of the individual and the motivation of the directional motion is not clear. The background is devoid of any realistic suggestion. Dabs of colour applied here and there are specifically employed for correcting the frame. The figure in his format functions, within the geometry of gravitational reality. The age old horizon line and the sky are there with its atmospheric drama. The subject operating within the idioms of conventional space has become a rebel for unknown reasons. A sense of compulsion to moveout from his own usual locus prevails. The figure starts a robust journey, whose premises and vague parameters are created by the artists personal fantasies.

From the beginning of the eighties Shahabuddin uses robust male nudes in various actions as his central subject. The charcoal drawings of static and figures, in motion made during the eighties, are pure exercises in drawings. I will call them exercises because they depict figures in conventional suggestion of landscape where there are trees, horizon, and ground, where there are directional shadows cast in the ground. In these drawings' limbs are drawn, redrawn, corrected, given washes as in conventional drawing exercises. Figures stand in instructed poses and are not in any violent motion as in his oils. The sudden appearance of a bull or a horse in these drawings neither tell a story nor suggest symbolic functions. They are presented as pure figure studies. Maybe they were done to show the artist's capability to produce realistic images alongside the fact that he doesn't use them for his expression in general. Accurate realistic drawing is not used in his works as a general system.

(To be continued)