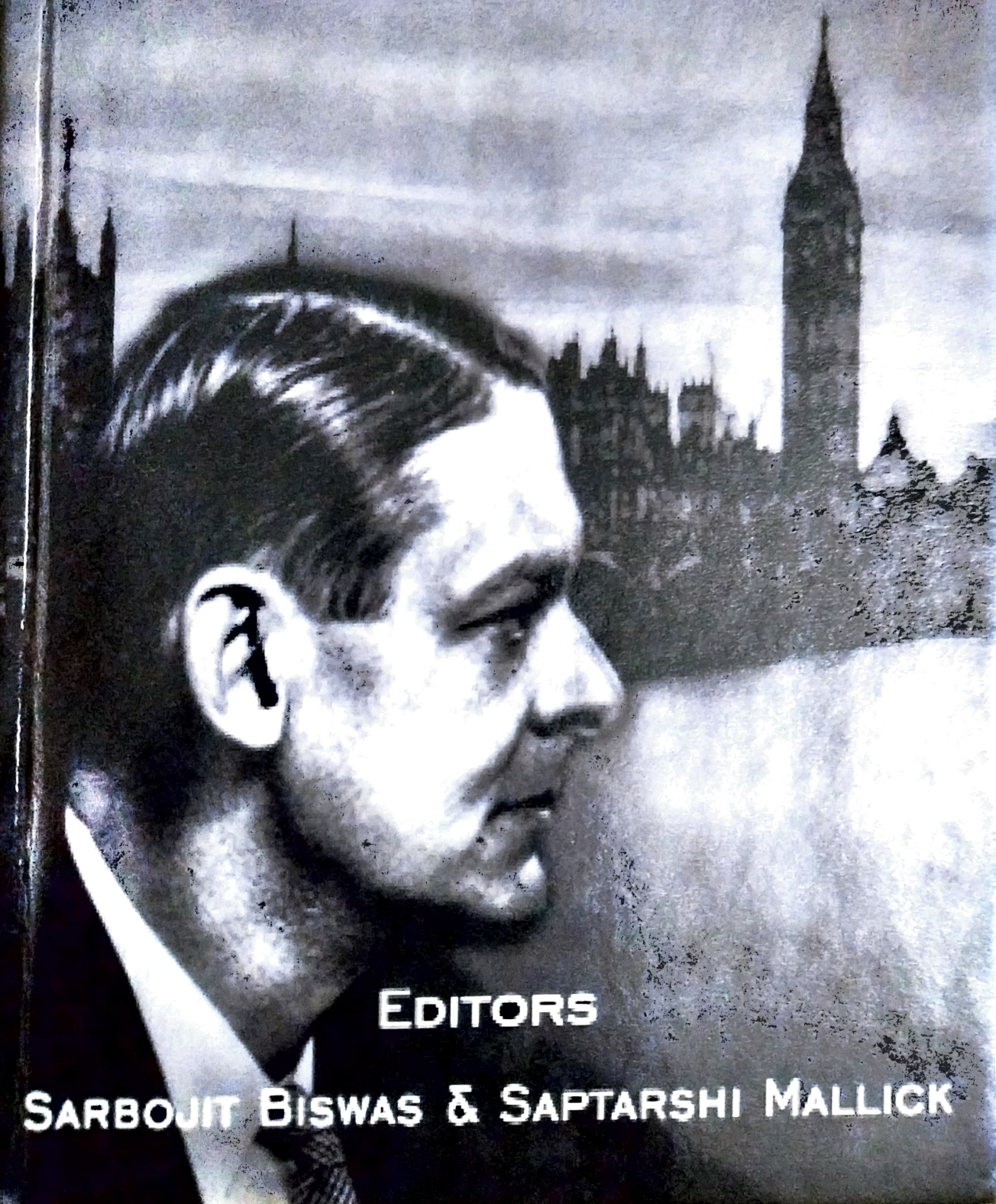


WHERE THE RIVER FLOWS:

A STUDY OF T.S. ELIOT'S CRITICISM



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THE FOUR (ROMANTIC) QUARTETS: TO CRITICIZE THE POETS AND POET-CRITICS

Samrat Laskar

It is a fact well recognized that T.S. Eliot has never been a sympathetic critic of the Romantics. Perceptive and insightful though he may be as a critic, his prejudices against the Romantics are too obvious to give a miss. In his Charles Eliot Norton series of lectures delivered at Harvard in 1932-1933 and published famously as *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism*, Eliot has delivered two lectures on the Romantics — the first is “Wordsworth and Coleridge” (delivered on 9th December, 1932) and the second “Shelley and Keats” (delivered on 17th February, 1933). Both these lecture-essays are marked by Eliotian prejudices against the Romantics but yet, the essays also contain some honest appreciations of the Romantic poet-critics which cannot be negated with impatient haste. In fact, after reading the two essays, we are prompted to make a revaluation of Eliot’s assessment of the Romantics.

Interestingly, in both the essays, Eliot’s primary intention was to criticize the critical acumen of these four Romantic poets. Himself a poet-critic, Eliot was strongly aware of the rich tradition of English poet-critics beginning from Sidney and Ben Jonson to his contemporary Ezra Pound. Eliot has always been interested in analyzing the critical works of poet-critics like Dryden, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Arnold or Pound. He seems to have shared Ben Jonson’s belief, although with lesser degree of conviction that “[t]o judge of Poets is only the facultie of poets; and not of all Poets but the best” (qtd. in Phukan 43). His friend and early mentor Pound was equally dismissive of non-poet critics. He once gave advice to the young poets to “[p]ay no attention to the criticism of men who have never themselves written a notable work” (qtd. in Phukan 44). After Pound, it is Eliot who takes up the matter assuming the differences between the criticism of poets and those of non-poets to be a matter of considerable importance. In “The Perfect Critic”, he emphatically declares that criticism and creativity are “two directions of sensibility [which] are complementary and as sensibility is rare, unpopular, and desirable, it is to be expected that the critic and the creative artist should frequently be the same person” (*The Sacred Wood* 16). Though Eliot was not reluctant to recognize the critical power of non-poet critics like I. A. Richards and Herbert Read, he always implies that the best criticism of poetry comes from poet-critics like Dryden, Dr. Johnson, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Swinburne or Remy De Gourmont. The two lecture-essays should be read keeping this Eliotian belief in mind. It is also not a surprise that while he failed to appreciate the poetic genius of the Romantics, he could certainly find merits in their critical acumen.

The Harvard lectures in Eliot’s own admission are “rapid and superficial” (*The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism* 67) and as he is constrained to take in two Romantic