T. S. ELIOT AND THE DOCTRINE OF DRAMATIC CONVENTIONS

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Professor Harry Levin has rendered a service to literary criticism by showing the significance and tracing the history of the term “convention” when applied to literature.¹ He has filled out the unusually meager outline given in the NED and built up a full picture of the origins and ramifications of the term through more than one century and more than one literature. He points out that the word acquired its connection with literary criticism in eighteenth-century France (p. 64), and passed thence into nineteenth-century England and twentieth-century America. One could trace it still further back, and show the origins of the idea in the famous debate between the conflicting claims of Nature and Convention (φύσις and νόμος) in ancient Greek philosophy, which was summed up so neatly much later by Dr. Johnson: “to distinguish nature from custom, or that which is established because it is right, from that which is right only because it is established” (Rambler, No. 156). The latter is the conventional, and it became the object of criticism from the time of Diderot (1770). As Professor Levin says, “French criticism made convention a weapon for offensive and defensive use in contemporary polemics. Anglo-American scholarship made it an instrument for the reinterpretation of great works composed in obsolete forms” (p. 71). And he refers to T. S. Eliot’s reply to William Archer, defending Elizabethan drama on the grounds that its supposed faults are really obsolete conventions. Even before that, of course, Professor Stoll had made convention the main weapon of his attack on Shakespearean criticism, which Professor Levin notes approvingly: “Professor Stoll’s method has proved an effective counterweight to the tenuous psychologizing of the romantics” (p. 71).

In more recent days, T. S. Eliot’s formula has been influential in stimulating important studies of Elizabethan drama. M. C.

Bradbroom and Th. Spencer (to name no others) have written books directly based on Eliot’s pronouncements and have used his concept of convention as a major critical instrument. So that one could think that by this time the quality of the instrument must have been put to the test pretty completely and its efficacy thoroughly proven.

But apparently this is not so. The critical use of “convention” has not met with universal approval. For instance, Miss Bradbrook’s book on Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy (1935), instead of proving illuminating, has been found “confused and confusing, naively dogmatic and at times patently absurd.” Another critic has objected that “it would not be true to say that all we need to know is that Elizabethan drama is conventional.” This is the opinion of Mr. L. C. Knights, one of the foremost foes of traditional Bradleyan Shakespeare criticism. Yet Mr. Knights found that in Miss Bradbrook’s book “one is continually jolted by the contradictions, the different levels of insight displayed,” by its “equivocal attitude,” “mixed quality” and “shifting meanings” of the critical terms used.

Likewise, Mr. Spencer’s use of the term “convention” has been found “misleading” and his concentration on conventional usage has been found sometimes conducive to critical obtuseness. Alwin Thaler, reviewing still another book on Elizabethan conventions—this one on the comic conventions—observed: “even if the term were capable of satisfactory determination in all cases, there would still remain the fact that the exponents of the ‘skeptic’ attitude tend constantly to let their sweeping generalisation turn from details to larger issues of character and motive, and to reduce all things, perforce, to preconceived conventional levels.”

Professor Thaler’s reference to the “skeptic attitude” brings us back to the discussions raised by Professor Stoll. Now Stoll’s use of the term “convention” has been objected to by some critics who cannot fairly be called romanticists, such as Mr. F. R. Leavis, who has observed to Stoll that “when Shakespeare uses the ‘same’ convention as Beaumont and Fletcher, Dryden and Voltaire, his use is apt to be such that only by a feat of abstraction can the convention be said to be the same.” This goes to

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2 W. H. Durham in Modern Language Notes, 53 (1938), 211–12.
7 F. R. Leavis, “Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero,” in Scrutiny, 6 (1937), 279.
confirm the previous charges of “sweeping generalisation” and
critical obtuseness as a result of the use of the term.

Something seems to be very wrong somewhere. Perhaps the
term “convention” has not been used in the right way by these
scholars. This makes it all the more imperative to give a good
look at the term, and try and get at its exact meaning and correct
use. But any attempt to define it meets with the difficulty that
there are several kinds of things which can be called conventions.
There are, first of all, social conventions, then literary conven-
tions, dramatic conventions and stage conventions. We will find
that all these occur, often indiscriminately, in the discussion of
Elizabethan drama by T. S. Eliot and his school, so that it will
be necessary to distinguish with some care between them. We
will begin with stage conventions, since they seem to have a more
limited application and have been lucidly defined by Professor
A. R. Thompson:

In the broad sense a convention, according to Webster, is a
rule or usage based on general agreement. Since the stage
cannot represent everything in a lifelike manner, many sub-
stitutes for a direct mimicry of life have from time to time
come into use. When well established, they are called con-
ventions.

As instances of traditional stage conventions we may refer to
the soliloquy and the aside, as well as the absence of the fourth
wall on the stage. Some of them have been done away with in
modern realistic productions. But even these have their own
conventions:

... it is conventional in them for the actors to face the audi-
ence most of the time, to “balance the stage” by not crowd-
ing all to one side, to speak exit lines on a pause by the door,
and to do many other things which are not natural (p. 109).

To ask the reason for the existence of these stage conventions
is to probe deeply into the nature of the theatre. Some critics
will even tell us that “conventions ... form a code, and are as a
treaty made with the audience. No article of it is to be abrogated
unless we can be persuaded to consent.” But this seems to be
taking them a bit too seriously; they are made to sound like
Rousseau’s mythical social contract, that never was on sea or
land. Professor Thompson says more plausibly that “many con-
ventions are the result of convenience or necessity” (p. 109), and
the next step is to inquire what is the convenience, or the neces-

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8 A. R. Thompson, *The Anatomy of Drama* (California University Press, 1946,
2nd ed.), p. 108.
sity, that conventions are supposed to meet. It appears to me that the necessity generally arises out of some material difficulty on the stage which has to be overcome if the acting is to be seen or heard by the audience. That is the obvious reason why actors usually face the spectators: since space as we know it is three-dimensional, they cannot very well be seen or heard otherwise. And that of course is also the reason for the absence of the fourth wall, the place of which is taken by the proscenium. Since the laws of space prevent us from seeing inside a cube, we have to open one of its sides to make the interior visible. A material difficulty is met by a material change in the stage which may appear unnatural but makes production possible.

Soliloquies, spoken aloud on the stage, are also considered unnatural: people do not usually speak when they are alone, giving voice to their most intimate thoughts; though they may do so under the influence of strong emotion, as Lord Kames pointed out in his Elements of Criticism (ch. 15) defending the soliloquy. More unnatural, perhaps, is the stage aside, which is loud enough to be heard by the whole audience, but not by the other people on the stage. The material difficulty which they both meet is obvious: no audience is a mind-reader, so it could not otherwise be acquainted with the thoughts of the characters, “no better way being yet invented for the communication of thought” than speech, as Congreve remarked in this context in the dedication of The Double Dealer. Again, “exit lines are spoken on a pause by the door” to make them clearly and completely audible: another physical difficulty is met by a customary deviation from normal behavior.

We seem therefore to have reached this conclusion: a stage convention is a stage usage which has been established in order to overcome some material difficulty or some physical obstacle on the stage, which would otherwise make acting impossible. As such, it is purely theatrical: it concerns problems arising only from the material conditions of the stage, and not problems of literary composition. And since there are many different kinds of stages and theatres, they may give rise to different sets of stage-conventions. All conventions are therefore relative: the platform stage requires different conventions from the apron stage. Finally, the violations of verisimilitude are apt to disappear in actual production, absorbed as they are in the interest aroused by the action.

In any case, as Professor Thompson has pointed out, “a device is not strictly a convention until it is generally accepted by audiences” (p. 112). In other words, a device is not to be accepted because it is a convention, but it becomes a convention when it is
accepted. There is therefore no compulsion in it: and it will cease to exist when stage conditions change or when audiences no longer accept it.

It should also be stressed that stage conventions refer primarily to production and not to the play considered as a literary composition. We have seen that the distinguishing trait of the stage convention is its initial artificiality. Take the monologue or aside, for instance: they may be unnatural on the stage, but they do not seem so on reading a play. When the play of *Hamlet* is read as a piece of literature, we do not find any difficulty in accepting Hamlet’s soliloquies. He is Hamlet, an imaginary character in an imaginary situation, and his thoughts are part of the situation. It does not seem unnatural that he should reflect on his problems, or that we should know his reflections, any more than it is unnatural for us to enter into the innermost thoughts and feelings of a character in a novel. When we read a play as we read a novel, even an aside does not bother us: it is another instance of entering into a character’s mind. It is also obvious that all difficulties relating to space, such as the fourth wall, and to the visibility and audibility of real actors on a physical stage do not arise on reading a play. And stage conventions, as we have seen, are called into existence in order to meet material difficulties. It would seem therefore that stage conventions do not have a necessary relevance to the play when considered as a piece of literature.

But there are also certain things called conventions in the sphere of literature itself. Such conventions are more difficult to define. We may tentatively describe them as a feature, or a detail, in a poem or other piece of literature which is repeated or taken over from some previous work. When certain features are taken over by a large number of writers working through a certain period or in a certain trend, these features become a kind of accepted usage, that is, a convention in literature. For instance, around the sixteenth century a large number of writers composed love poems adopting thoughts, emotions, expressions, and even metrical forms from the poems of Francis Petrarch. This fact is called in English the Petrarchan convention. Petrarch expressed frustration and melancholy at the lack of response to his love in the fair woman whom he called Laura: so, many other writers expressed similar emotions with similar phrases in similar sonnets for women who were likewise fair and cold. In his emotion, Petrarch compared the beauty of Laura to a variety of things: her hair was like gold, her neck was like milk, her cheeks were like roses white and red, her eyes were dazzling like the rays of the sun; and so, many other poets said the same
things of their mistresses. Since it is not very likely that so many different poets should all go through the same experience with the same kind of woman and think the same things about her, the whole thing became artificial and conventional in the bad sense, and as such a legitimate object of ridicule and parody.

But it seems essential to distinguish this later stage of artistic degradation from the original experience which is at the source of the whole movement. Petrarch's passion was, for him, a burning experience: it overshadowed his whole life and deeply troubled his conscience, causing a spiritual conflict which he anxiously debated in his Latin works. The thoughts and emotions expressed in his Italian verse arose out of this central fire and made history: his admirers have called him, perhaps extravagantly, the first modern man. He certainly produced the best love poetry that had been composed in Europe for a long while, and enjoyment of it is an experience that was shared by many generations, and can be shared again today by those who take the trouble to read. Now out of this perfectly genuine love for what is a genuinely perfect work may arise the impulse to imitate it. This imitation was practised by a number of good poets, whose quality is manifest in the fact that even while using some of Petrarch's expressions they manage to convey a personality of their own, so that the Petrarchan label is hardly adequate to describe them. Such is the case, for instance, with the poets of the French Pléiade and with the greater Elizabethan sonneteers, such as Shakespeare himself.

But thoughts and expressions, similes and metaphors may be detached from their context and repeated with little or no variation by some scribbler who is simply following a fashion without any feeling or talent of his own. The result will be a purely mechanical composition, with no touch of poetry in it, such as is found in hundreds of mediocre Petrarchan sonnets. Critics of Petrarch are well aware that the first writer to do this was Petrarch himself. He had periods of sterility when all he could do was to imitate himself in his brighter moments. As in the case of Wordsworth, critics have learnt how to distinguish his good verse from his bad, and a similar distinction must surely be made between poets who were imaginatively stimulated by Petrarch and those who merely imitated his manner. The vital importance of this distinction lies in the fact that it involves the discrimination between good writing and bad writing. So if we speak of a tradition as a convention, we must be careful to

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10 See the classic analysis by F. De Sanctis, Saggio critico sul Petrarca, 4.a ed. a cura di B. Croce, 1918, ch. VI.
specify whether it is a living tradition or a purely mechanical imitation.

Let me make this clearer by referring back to our original definition of a literary convention: a feature repeated, or taken over, from a previous work. This feature may be a phrase, a metaphor, a thought, an emotion, or a plot, or a character. Now, when the feature is taken over by a good poet, he makes it an integral part of a new unit: can we then say that it is the same thing? In Mr. Leavis' words—"only by a feat of abstraction," which leaves out what is essential in poetry. For instance, Verdi took over Falstaff from Shakespeare and made an opera out of him: is Verdi's Falstaff the same as Shakespeare's? Indeed, is the Falstaff of the Merry Wives of Windsor the same as the Falstaff of Henry IV? Most people would say he bears little resemblance. At the beginning of his Elegy, Gray takes over a famous simile of Dante's: "the curfew tolls the knell of parting day." It was also taken over by Byron in Don Juan (III, 108). Is it the same thing in the Purgatorio as it is in the Elegy or in Don Juan? Or does it convey different things in each of these very different poems? If therefore a literary convention consists in taking over or repeating something, we must know more about the process involved before we can say anything definite about it: is it merely a repetition, or is it absorbed in a new unity?

This applies also to the so-called dramatic conventions, when this name is given to features which are to be found in many dramatic compositions, such as plots, episodes, incidents, characters and situations. A very long list could be made of them, from the dawn of Western drama in Athens down to the contemporary theatre. The stock dramatic situations have been catalogued in a celebrated book by a French writer, G. Polti (1895), who set their number at thirty-six. A more recent critic, E. Souriau (1950), has brought up the number to 200,000. Traditional characters are so many that they have never been counted: the hero, the heroine, the villain, the confidant, the clever servant, the loyal retainer, the nurse, the braggart, the parasite, the miser, the pedant, the clown, and so on and so forth. And plot devices abound, such as the god from the machine, the recognition of long-lost relations, disguise and mistaken identity, the apparition of ghosts and other supernatural portents in tragedy, etc.

Now, when a play is produced, it may happen that a traditional feature in dramatic composition may correspond to a traditional device in theatrical production, but the two belong to different arts and although parallel are not the same. In particular, a traditional feature in the text may meet with some mate-
rivial difficulty on the stage which is obviated by means of some stage convention: but even here there is a parallel and not identity. This is the case of the soliloquy, which belongs to a hoary literary tradition and which on the stage gave rise, as we have seen, to a stage convention, since thoughts can only be conveyed by audible speech. But on the stage it is not a convention in the same way as it may be in a text; for there, as we have seen, it does not present any intrinsic improbability.

On the other hand, a feature like the ghost in tragedy may be considered intrinsically improbable, or the author may make it so through lack of skill. At this point some critics say:—The ghost is a stage convention, therefore it has to be accepted anyway, and all criticism is out of place.—This seems a deplorable confusion of thought. The ghost is a dramatic convention, in the sense that it is a device taken over and repeated; but it is definitely not a stage convention, which is invented because production must overcome some material difficulty.

And even for dramatic conventions there is that vital distinction between good and bad writing which must not be set aside by any juggling with words. In the wide field of Renaissance tragedy there are many ghosts: most of them, possibly, are just props, but some are genuine imaginative creations, as Mr. Eliot acknowledges the witches in Macbeth to be; and in any sound criticism the latter are not to be confused with the former.

Unfortunately this basic confusion between stage and dramatic conventions is very common. It lies at the root of that criticism of the Elizabethans by Stoll, as well as by Eliot and his disciples, which was found so unacceptable by the critics that we quoted at the beginning. Stoll at one time believed that inconsistencies and contradictions in a character of a play could be smoothed out and vanish on the stage if the author simply appealed to some dramatic convention. According to his analysis, the character of Othello is inconsistent: Stoll cannot believe that Othello could have been deceived by Iago’s slanders. Yet, even in the eighteenth century, Lord Kames considered it psychologically true that a man cannot evaluate evidence clearly when his emotions are involved, and he went so far as to say that Othello’s acceptance of Iago’s calumny shows “more knowledge of human nature that in any of our philosophers” (Elements of Criticism, 7th ed., ch. ii, pt. v).

But Stoll can see in Othello only a “heap of contradictions,” which are not perceived on the stage because Shakespeare has resorted to what Stoll calls the convention of slander: all slander

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is immediately believed in a play. The illusion only lasts as long as we are in the theatre; when we analyse the text, the inconsistencies become glaringly evident to Stoll, and Othello becomes a set of "contradictions . . . reconciled . . . by a conventional mechanism." Stoll is confusing stage conventions, which make production possible, with dramatic conventions, to which an author resorts at his own risk and peril. There is no magic power in them; indeed, to crown poorly constructed characters with a tawdry plot device is to ruin a play. But such apparently Stoll thinks is the case with Shakespeare's great tragedies.

The precedent of Stoll might have been a warning to Eliot; but seemingly it was not. Eliot at the time was concerned with finding an answer to William Archer's strictures against the Elizabethans. In his book on The Old Drama and the New (1923) Archer argued that the old English drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was immensely inferior to the modern realistic drama since Ibsen. The old drama abounded in absurdities, crudities and inconsistencies. Eliot attempted a defence of the old drama by arguing that its defects were merely different conventions, but soon slipped into the charge that Elizabethan drama had the great shortcoming of not being written under a single convention. By convention he seems to mean something which can be positive and productive. He speaks of plays being written by "an individual dramatist, or a number of dramatists working at the same time" within a given convention: "it may be some quite new selection or structure or distortion in subject matter or technique, any form or rhythm imposed upon the world of action" (p. 11). Passing by the rather surprising idea that a poet may delegate to some one else the vital function of form, we may find that Eliot here is indistinctly referring to a theory of art which was fairly current, at the time he wrote, in a number of textbooks. Eliot speaks of convention as "a form to arrest, so to speak, the flow of spirit at any particular point before it expands and ends its course in the desert of exact likeness to the reality which is perceived by the most common-

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13 Cf. Leavis: "tricks or illusions passing off on us mutually incompatible acceptances in regard to Othello's behaviour or make-up would be cheating" (op. cit., pp. 281-82).
place mind" (p. 10). The idea seems to be that the natural tendency of the artist is to produce a copy or likeness of reality, but since obviously art is not that, there must be something that "arrests the flow" and by arresting it, makes it art. The nature of this check or brake, or whatever it is, is purely arbitrary: any "selection or distortion" of form or matter, as long as it is unlike reality. This would make verse a kind of arrested prose and poetry a kind of frustrated common sense, and the great characters of drama would be merely a repressed attempt at portraying commonplace reality.

This curious idea apparently arises out of an incapacity to conceive of any other imaginative process than that of mere realism: Eliot cannot even find a name for its opposite, which he once calls "an abstraction from actual life" (p. 11). But who abstracts what from life? On this point, Eliot leaves us in the dark. But his reputation as a poet has invested his critical writings with a special prestige, and his conception of convention as a productive factor, however hazy and confused, did not fail to impress itself upon younger writers. Under Eliot's influence, whole volumes have been written to collect and extol the conventions of Elizabethan drama. The first is Miss Bradbrook's *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (1935).

Following Eliot, she begins by justifying the inconsistencies and absurdities that critics like Archer find in Elizabethan tragedy by an appeal to contemporary convention. But she ends by making the conventions themselves consist merely of contradictions and absurdities, of "strained coincidences," "rigidly defined types," "rapid and trivial intrigue," "events deliberately exaggerated," "action unnaturally rapid or farcical" and unconvincing disguises (pp. 38, 42, 50, 61-62, 69).

And here is her definition of convention:

A convention may be defined as an agreement between writers and readers, whereby the artist is allowed to limit and simplify his material in order to secure greater concentration through a control of the distribution of emphasis (p. 4).

This is Eliot's definition, with some complications thrown in to no good purpose, for it sounds as if the artist is allowed to con-

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18 *Cfr. also B. L. Joseph, Elizabethan Acting* (Oxford University Press, 1951), pp. 115-16.
centrate his material to secure concentration through concentration. But Miss Bradbrook's vagueness and inconsistencies have been sufficiently denounced by the critics we have already quoted, and it should be recognized that she has a number of interesting things to say incidentally about Elizabethan drama. Her work is an acknowledged contribution to the subject, but it is clear that we do not receive from her enlightenment as to dramatic conventions.\(^{19}\)

Neither do we receive it from Theodore Spencer's book on Death and Elizabethan Tragedy, A Study of Convention and Opinion in the Elizabethan Drama (1936), though it is a much more lucid and sensitive study. The author declares: "The subject of this book was suggested to me by a sentence in T. S. Eliot's essay, The possibility of a poetic drama: 'There is a book to be written on the commonplaces of any great dramatic period, the handling of Fate and Death, the recurrence of mood, tone, situation'" (p. xi). This is what Spencer means by convention: the common theme of death and the ideas, emotions, similes and phrases that cluster around it; and his book is a careful collection of all these things in Elizabethan tragedy.\(^{20}\) Following Eliot, Spencer claims that they have a positive artistic function, though in practice he has to admit that the positive function belongs to the imagination of the individual poet rather than to the common material (pp. 69, 89, 107 etc.). For instance, he attempts to build a theory according to which "granted the poet's native gifts, the more rooted in convention he is, the more imaginative his writing will be" (p. 106), but he has to grant the poet's individual gift of imagination first. The argument that follows is that conventions first of all establish "a common basis . . . between the poet and his audience" (p. 105), and then somehow "are filled with the weight of a convincing emotion" by the poet (p. 107). But later he admits that the conventional material, when absorbed in a new synthesis, is no longer the same: "Frequently these ideas, like the words and phrases, become transformed, and were turned slightly from their previous position to reflect the new situation which they illustrated" (p. 158).

If so, the effort of the critic should be directed towards the definition of the new synthesis: to describe the special features of a play and the individual talent of the author. And in effect

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\(^{19}\) For a more moderate statement on Elizabethan dramatic conventions, see M. C. Hyde, Playwriting for Elizabethans, 1600–1605, (New York, 1929), ch. VII, Conventions: "Those most difficult of acceptance by present day critics are the frequent lack of motivation, the inconsistencies in characterization, and the omission of promised action and requisite scenes" (p. 204).

\(^{20}\) For a critical analysis of a book with a similar theme, see B. Croce, Conversazioni critique, V, 1938, 86–87.
this is what Spencer does in the best part of his book. He reviews the feeling for death in Marlowe, Shakespeare, Chapman, Tourneur, Webster and Ford, and finds that it is different in each: heroic in Chapman, resigned in Webster, decadent in Ford, and "pagan" in Tourneur. In Marlowe the author's attitude varies from play to play; in Shakespeare it is not prominent, being overshadowed by his intense feeling for life.

Here at last we seem to have reached a fruitful approach to literary criticism: the study of the artistic personality of individual writers, as manifested in their work. To collect themes and commonplaces may be useful for a dictionary of quotations or a concordance, but as an approach to criticism it tends to blur individual features and destroy vital distinctions.

We can now see clearly—and this will be our conclusion—that the term convention is extremely vague and covers a multitude of sins. Its most exact use is to denote "stage conventions," which are stage usages established to overcome some material obstacle to production. In literature, conventions as mechanical repetitions of a previously used feature should be sharply distinguished from the creative adaptation of a feature to a new context, in which it is absorbed and transformed. Attempts to confer a more positive artistic function to conventions by Stoll, Eliot and their school seem to lead to blind alleys. As a critical instrument, "convention" is definitely dangerous, for it tends to replace a standard of excellence with what is merely a test of conformity.

21 For a recent re-statement of a similar doctrine, see Y. Winters, "Poetic Convention," in In Defence of Reason (1947, 2nd ed.), pp. 75-89. And for an earlier attack on the term: "The pedantry of our own day has borrowed 'conventions' from history and 'technique' from science as substitutes for the outworn formulae of the past; but there are merely new names for the old mechanical rules; and they too will go, when criticism clearly recognizes in every work a spiritual creation governed by its own law." J. B. Spingarn, Creative Criticism (New York, 1925), pp. 24-25.