



TS Eliot's Poetic Theory of Impersonality in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The Noble Laureate Thomas Streams Eliot, a versatile poet-critic, gave a new dimension to English literary criticism by the remarkable gift of crystallizing his thoughts in striking and trenchant phrases. His well-known essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" is generally taken as a manifesto of Eliot's critical creed for containing all the key-principles of his critical vein. The present paper aims at discussing Eliot's view that the poetry is an organisation rather than inspiration and the poetic process is the process of fusing the disparate experiences and emotions into a new whole. Eliot's critical theory of impersonality in poetry, a modern expression of his literary classicism, rejects the romantic subjectivism and emphasizes the value of objective standard in poetry.

Keywords: Catalytic agent, classicism, emotion, impersonality, intensity.

Introduction

Thomas Streams Eliot (1888-1965), one of the most towering and dominating literary figures of the twentieth century, proved his forte as a poet, playwright, journalist and critic. The Noble Laureate Eliot, a versatile genius acclaimed widely, gave a new dimension to English literary criticism by the remarkable gift of crystallizing his thoughts in striking and trenchant phrases appreciated also by critics like Bell, Wimsatt and Brooks. Watson comments on Eliot's revolutionary criticism that he made English criticism look different but not in a simple sense and explains that the purpose of Eliot's criticism as well as his poetry is "that of escaping from the objective self into a world of objective values. He offered it a new range of rhetorical possibilities, confirmed it in its increasing contempt for historical processes and yet reshaped its notion of period by a handful of brilliant intuitions" (186). Eliot, a classicist in literature and modern representative of literary classicism, has strengthened the reaction against romanticism and paved the way for the rise of neo-classicism.

Eliot's Essay "Tradition and Individual Talent"

Eliot is the only English critic who closely resembles Aristotle in his objectivity and scientific attitude. In his essay "The Perfect Critic", Eliot firmly considers criticism and creation as complementary activities, "It is fabulous to say that criticism is for the sake of creation or creation for the sake of criticism" (The Sacred Wood 192). Eliot propounded his theory of poetry in his well-known essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" which was first published in "Times

Literary supplement" (1919) as a critical article and was taken as a manifesto of Eliot's critical creed for containing all the key-principles of his critical vein. The essay consisting of three parts expounds Eliot's views on the nature of poetry and the poetic process along with the concept of tradition and forms the basis of his subsequent poetry and criticism. It underlines, "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (Enright *et al* 297). Eliot's critical theory especially the impersonal theory of poetry is a modern expression of his literary classicism. Rejecting the romantic subjectivism, he emphasizes the value of objective standards and advocates his poetic theory of the impersonality in this essay.

Eliot's Theory of Impersonality in Poetry: A Discussion

Eliot's theory of poetry marks a complete break from the nineteenth century romantic tradition which professes that art is an expression of the artist's personality and that an artist basically works according to his own inner voice. He recognizes that the unrestricted liberty gives only "fitful and transient bursts of literary brilliance" and feels that inspiration alone may result in eccentricity and chaos. He rejects the romantic concept of 'inner light' calling it the most untrustworthy and deceitful guide. Maxwell rightly observes that Eliot disregards the romantic fallacy for it "has resulted in destruction of the belief in central authority to which all men might owe allegiance, in objective standards by which men might agree to judge art and in any aspiration other than the shifting of personality through which adult, orderly art might be created". Hence, Eliot rejects romantic subjectivism in

favor of his theory of impersonality in poetry with classical connotations.

Eliot believes that the artist must continually surrender his self or personality to something which is more valuable than his self i.e. the literary tradition and must allow his poetic sensibility to be shaped and modified by the past. His self or individuality may assert itself in the beginning but as his powers mature, there will be greater extinction of his personality. His emotions and passions should be depersonalized as the sense of tradition is more important than his personality. Eliot views the literature of Europe from Homer down to his own day as a single whole and pleads that English literature is an integral part of the great European literary tradition. For Eliot, the personal and impersonal elements interact and fuse together to form a new thing known as a poem. He writes, "The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done" (Enright *et al* 301). He also asserts that a poet should develop or sustain the consciousness of the past. He regards poetry as more a craft and arrangement in excellent words and metre than mere inspiration or recollection. To get perfection, a poet should forget *all* his personal joys and sorrows, absorb his self in acquiring a sense of tradition and express it in his poetry.

The poet's personality is a mere medium having the same significance as of a catalytic agent in any chemical reaction. The poet's mind or self is a catalytic agent in the sense that it helps in combining different emotions into something new. A catalyst plays an important role in completing the chemical reaction but it remains unaffected. Similarly, a poet's creative mind completes the poetic process but his own emotions must not be reflected in his work. To interpret more clearly, Eliot gives an example of the role of platinum in making sulphurous acid which remains "inert, neutral and unchanged" (Enright *et al* 297) during the whole process. Similarly, the poet's mind is constantly forming emotions and experiences into new wholes but the new combination does not contain even a trace of the poet's mind. Eliot illustrates, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition" (Enright *et al* 296-7). In the work of a young and less mature poet, personal experiences and sentiments may be expressed but Eliot explains, "... the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (Enright *et al* 297). The maturity of an artist can be judged by the completeness with which his self digests and transmutes the passions which form the substance of his poetry.

Eliot further compares the poet's mind to a jar or receptacle saying, "The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together" (Enright *et al* 298). Eliot's view implies that the poetry is organisation rather than inspiration and the poetic process is the process of fusing the disparate experiences and emotions into a new whole. The greatness of a poem does not depend upon the intensity of emotions but on the intensity of the process of poetic composition needed for the fusion of such emotions. Wimsatt and Brooks observe that there has been hardly a critic writing in English since seventeenth century who has so firmly changed the poetic theory from the axis of 'pleasure versus pain' to that of 'unity versus multiplicity'. Eliot finds poetry like the pressure cooker in which the taste of the cooked food

depends upon the process of cooking rather than on the brand of the cooker. Poetry is neither an emotional outburst nor it is the outcome of tranquility.

Eliot points out Dante's treatment of the episode of Paolo and Francesca in which the artistic emotion evoked by Dante is different from the actual emotion. The intensity of poetry is different from the intensity of emotion in the situation. The actual and artistic emotions may be approximate to each-other as in the case of Othello where the poetic emotion is the emotion of the protagonist himself. For Eliot, there is always a difference between the personal and artistic emotions and this difference between art and event is always absolute. Keats's "Ode to Nightingale" contains a number of emotions which have nothing to do with the nightingale. To quote Eliot, "the poet has not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, . . . in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways" (Enright *et al* 299). Eliot rejects romantic subjectivism completely because in such poetry, impressions which are important for the man may find no place and those which become important in it may have no significance for the man. Thus Eliot favours the impersonality or extinction of the personality of a poet in his creations.

Eliot makes a clear distinction between the emotion of poetry and the personal emotions of the poet. Personal emotions may be simple or crude but the emotion of poetry is complex and refined. For Eliot, "The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones, and in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all" (Enright *et al* 300). The duty of a poet is to impart a new significance and meaning to ordinary experiences and emotions. It is not necessary that these should be his personal emotions and even emotions which he has not experienced can serve the purpose. Eliot rejects Wordsworth's theory of poetry which has "its origin in emotions recollected in tranquility" and emphasizes that there is "neither emotion, nor recollection, nor . . . tranquility" (Enright *et al* 300) in the poetic composition. The poetic process is, as A G George rightly illustrates in *Critics and Criticism*, a process of concentration rather than of recollection and poetry is the result of a concentration which is neither conscious, nor deliberate. A bad poet is usually unconscious about where he ought to be conscious and where he ought not to be and this consciousness of the wrong kind makes a poem personal. The process of concentration which is helpful in giving shape to many new things is a passive one but still there are many elements which are conscious and deliberate.

Eliot opposes romantic theory of poetry and believes that a mature poet prefers to refrain his own feelings and emotions from his work and gives place to only those feelings and emotions which are essential for the writing. Against Wordsworth's concept of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", Eliot points out, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Enright *et al* 300). In fact, Eliot does not deny personality or emotion of the poet, he rather stresses the need of depersonalizing emotions to create great works. This impersonality can be achieved only by surrendering completely to the work and through an extinction of the poet's personality. In Eliot's words, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Enright *et al* 296). The impersonality can be achieved by acquiring a sense of tradition which makes the poet conscious of, to use concluding words of "Tradition and Individual Talent", "not merely the present, but the present moment of

the past ... not of what is dead, but of what is already living” (Enright *et al* 301). A. G. George sums it up as the theory of dynamic traditionalism in which the continual surrender and continual depersonalization of the artist makes the artistic process possible. Precisely, the depersonalization of emotion is the key to Eliot’s theory of impersonality in poetry.

Shortcomings in Eliot’s Theory of Impersonality

Eliot’s theory of impersonality is not without its defects as there are many points which create confusion. Some critics have labelled Eliot’s critical concepts as ‘a big hoax’. Eliot writes that experiences and emotions stored in the mind combine to form a new whole at a particular moment but does not explain what that particular moment is. Nor does he describe those elements which set off the poetic process. It seems that Eliot’s theory of poetry despite all his classism has a touch of the romantic mysticism. Further, it is impossible to separate completely the personal and the artistic emotions. While writing poetry, howsoever impersonal the poet may be, his personality is reflected in words, syntax and metre. Moreover, Eliot’s theory turns a poet in a lifeless and impersonal mechanical being.

Conclusion

Eliot’s theory of poetry which distinguishes between individual experiences and general correlative cannot be ignored completely. His theory cannot be taken in a strict literal sense but the essence of it should be captured. The relevance of his theory in modern context is beyond doubt as many modern poets are indebted to T.S. Eliot for his theory of impersonal poetry and poetic process. Critics like Eliot work ‘as guides and not as commanders’ thereby fulfilling the true purpose of criticism. Even Indo-Anglian poets like A.K. Ramanujan follow Eliot’s impersonal theory in giving a sense of universality to their personal experiences. Despite its shortcomings, Eliot’s theory of poetry and poetic process with classical leanings is greatly relevant in the modern age. A.G. George elucidates Eliot’s impersonal theory of poetry as the basis for a new criticism and further appreciates it as the greatest theory on the nature of poetic process after Wordsworth’s concept of romantic poetry. “Tradition and Individual Talent”, in fact, gives a new dimension to English poetry and criticism as well and serves a great purpose in English literature as a whole by enunciating the theory of impersonality in poetry through which the poet-critic Eliot emphasizes to depersonalize the emotions and thus to negate the personality of the poet in his creation. Eliot’s discussion on the nature of poetry and the poetic process became the basis of new criticism with great significance and deep influence.

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