

Impersonality in the Works of T.S. Eliot

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot is the most important literary critic of the modern age. The present paper deals with the impersonality in the works of T S Eliot as it particularly affects his own work. In the concept of objective correlative his doctrine of poetic impersonality finds its most classic formulation. He believes that since the poet cannot transfer his emotions or ideas from his own mind directly to his readers, there must be some kind of mediation – “a set of objects, a situation, chain of events. A great work of art is nothing but a set of conceptual symbols or correlatives which endeavour to express the emotions of the poet and these symbols constitute the total vision of the creative artist.

Keywords: creative artist, emotions, impersonality, objective correlative, symbols

Introduction

T. S. Eliot is the harbinger of a revolutionary wave of literary criticism in the twentieth century. On poetry his most remarkable contribution is what he himself calls “the impersonal theory of poetry”. In *Tradition and Individual Talent* he stated:

The poet has, not a “personality” to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not impressions and experiences combine in peculiar, unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality. (SE 1932)

Such an “impersonal” conception of art is almost belligerently “anti-romantic”. Eliot holds that the poet and the poem are two separate things. The impersonal conception of poetry focuses attention “not upon the poet, but upon poetry”. It thus emphasizes the art object as such. Eliot believes that this relationship is complex, because the work of art is to be regarded as an organism, alive with a life of its own. He writes in the Introduction to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*,

We can only say that a poem, in some sense, has its own life; that it parts from something quite different from a body of neatly ordered biographical data; that the feeling, or emotion, or vision, resulting from the poem is something different from the feeling or emotion or vision in the mind of the poet. (TSW)

For Eliot, the essence of poetry is metaphor; but the special insights that he brings to metaphor come, not from Chinese picture writing, but from the French symbolist poets of the 19th century and from the English “metaphysical” poets of the 17th. Eliot found in the bold and often strenuous figurative language of the metaphysical poets the necessary means for achieving “a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling”. He saw that the problem of “acceptable” metaphor was continuous with the general problem of poetic unity. Thus he writes in his *Selected Essays*:

A thought to Donne was experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.

Eliot elucidates the theory of the impersonality of poetry by examining, first, ‘the relation of the poet to the past’ and, next, ‘the relation of the poem to its author’. The author must allow his poetic sensibility to be shaped and modified by the past. He must continue to acquire the sense of tradition throughout his career. In the beginning, his self, his individuality may assert itself but as his powers mature there must be greater and greater extinction of personality. He must acquire greater and greater objectivity. The artistic process, according to Eliot, is a process of depersonalization. The artist continually surrenders himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. He must surrender himself totally to the creative work. “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality”. He must forget his personal joys and sorrows, and be absorbed in acquiring a sense of tradition and expressing it in his poetry. Thus, the poet’s personality is merely a medium, having the same significance as a catalytic agent, or a receptacle in which chemical reactions take place. That is why Eliot holds that “Honest Criticism and sensitive appreciation is direct not upon the poet but upon the poetry”. Eliot’s thoughts about an impersonal art arrived at their most celebrated formulation in an essay entitled *Hamlet and his Problems* (1919). Eliot wrote:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (SE)

The notion of an objective correlative puts the emphasis firmly upon the work itself as a structure. Since the poet cannot transfer his emotions or his idea from his own mind directly to his readers, there must be some kind of mediation – “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events”. It is through these that the transaction between author and reader necessarily takes place. This is where “what the author has to say” is objectified, and it is with the shape and character of this object that the critic is properly concerned.

The doctrine of the objective correlative is a kind of summation of what Eliot, along with Hulme and Pound, derived from the theory and practice of the French symbolists. The symbolists had argued that poetry cannot express emotion directly; emotions can only be evoked. Baudelaire maintained that every colour, sound, odour, conceptualized emotion, and every visual image has its correspondence in each of the other fields.

The doctrine of the “objective correlative” places a thoroughly anti-Romantic stress upon craftsmanship; but Eliot, in the way in which he argues it, manages to involve himself in the language of expressionism. This expressionism and the “language of the emotions” have come to a vigorous overhauling by the philosopher Eliseo Vivas.

Eliot has implied that Shakespeare knew in advance the particular emotion for which *Hamlet* was to be the “correlative”, and has implied further that the reader ought to feel this particular emotion too, if the play is to be considered successful. But Vivas contends that is the fact the poet only discovers his emotion through trying to formulate it in words. What the poet “really felt could only be expressed precisely in and through the poem, which is to say that he had to discover it through the act of composition.” It is impossible that the reader should ever feel the same emotion as the poet did, and there is no reason why he should. A poem expresses *less* than the emotion with which the poet began, but it also expresses much more. It expresses “all that which the poet presents objectively in it for apprehension.” Among the elements making up the poem – object,

There are some that we find easier to denote...through the terms which we use to denote emotions. But I see no reason to assume that all else in the poem is put there merely to arouse an emotion in us or to bring about its objective denotation. Surface, formal and ideational elements are all in their own right of intrinsic interest. And while the emotion expressed is also of interest, it is not, and it should not be, of chief or exclusive, interest to the reader. (CD)

Eliot concludes “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”. The impersonality can be achieved only when the poet surrenders himself completely to the work that is to be done. Poetry is a depersonalized organisation of the poet’s emotions and feelings, it is not inspiration.

References

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