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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### T.S. ELIOT: THE THEORIST

# T.S. Eliot: The Theorist

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T.S. Eliot was the most towering and dominating man of letters of the twentieth century. He was a versatile genius who during his long span of productive activity achieved distinction as a poet, playwright, and critic. T.S. Eliot's art of crystallizing his thought in striking phrases has gained for him wide popularity and appeal. Phrases like "Dissociation of Sensibility," "Objective Correlative", and "Unification of Sensibility" have gained wide currency. T.S. Eliot formulated his theories of poetry. The present article investigates the development of Eliot's theory of poetry as a master craftsman, who left on them the stamp of his profound critical sense.

Rejecting the Romantic concept of self expression in art, Eliot established "the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul"<sup>1</sup> which implies that man tends to apprehend the ultimate nature of existence, reality and experience. Explaining what he calls the 'Impersonal Theory of poetry' he says that "the poet had not a "personality" to express but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways."<sup>2</sup>

In his "Tradition and the Individual Talent" he says emphatically that only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from things. And he reiterates this view in, his introduction to Paul Valrey's *Le Serpent* where he writes:

It (*Le Serpent*) is impersonal in the sense that personal emotion, personal experience, is extended and completed in something impersonal – not in the sense of something divorced from personal experience and passion.<sup>3</sup>

Personality and emotion are the necessary prerequisites of impersonality. What a great artist does is to escape, through a process of transmutation, into a work of art, which combines particularity with generality or, to use Eliot's familiar terms, personality with impersonality.

He dismisses Wordsworth's doctrine of emotionalism when he says that "we must believe that emotion recollected in tranquility is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor without distortion of meaning tranquility."<sup>4</sup> His attack on Wordsworth's spontaneity theory of poetry becomes incisive:

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.<sup>5</sup>

It is quite similar to Keats phrase Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after the fact or reason. Negative capability means that there is no ego, self or personality in the case of a poet. A poet according to Keats is the least of an egoist. Like Shakespeare, he claimed to have dissolved his self to become any number of people.

If the reader wants to feel emotion through a poem, he must seek it in the poem and not in the history of the poet, because of the emotion of art is impersonal. Another aspect of the theory is the relation between the poet and his poem. The poet is a "finally perfected medium in which specially or very varied feelings are at liberty to enter into a new combinations."<sup>6</sup> Drawing an analogy from chemistry, Eliot observes:

The poet is a catalytic agent, like a filament of platinum whose presence in a chamber containing oxygen and sulphurdioxide causes the formation of sulphurous acid. This chemical reaction is possible only due to the presence of the filament of platinum; but there is no particle of platinum in the sulphurous acid and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral and unchanged."<sup>7</sup>

He compares the mind of the poet with the filament of platinum:

The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will be the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.<sup>8</sup>

For Eliot, mind of the poet is a catalyst and the process of poetic creation is the process of a chemical reaction. Just as chemical reactions take place in the presence of a catalyst alone, so also the poet's mind is the catalytic agent for combining different emotions in to something new. Suppose there is a jar containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.

These two gases combine to form sulphurous acid when a fine filament of platinum is introduced into the jar. The combination takes place only in the presence of the piece of platinum, but the metal itself does not undergo any change. It remains inert and unaffected.

The mind of the poet is also like the catalytic agent. The personality of the poet does not find expression in his poetry. He must acquire greater objectivity. His emotions and passions must be depersonalized; he must be as impersonal and objective as a scientist. The personality of the poet acts like a catalytic agent in the process of poetic composition.

Eliot's theory of impersonality emphasizes, a poet should transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal. Developed his views on the use of emotion in art in his essay "Hamlet and his Problems", (1919) in which he declared Shakespeare's Hamlet as an artistic failure<sup>9</sup> on the ground that the playwright had failed to objectify or dramatize the feelings of the hero, or in Eliot's own words, Shakespeare did not provide objective equivalent to Hamlet feelings. Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. Now the problem is how to objectify emotion or feeling or state of mind. Eliot's resolution of this problem becomes his technique of objective correlative:

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, chain 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.<sup>10</sup>

What T.S. Eliot articulates in the observation is that a poet should create a pattern of objects, actions, or events or a situation that can serve effectively to awaken in the reader an emotional response without being a direct statement of that subjective emotion.

In *The Wasteland* the idea of sterility has been effectively communicated to us through the objective correlative. The sterility in the poem operates on two levels, namely sexual and spiritual, and the two levels combine in the Grail myth described in Miss Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* which is the chief source of *The Wasteland's* objective correlative. The poet is nowhere present in the poem, the different components which are united by Tiresias. When we read the poem, we stand face to face not with the poet but only a set of images presenting characters in different situations. The objective correlative as a finished produce i.e., not as originally planned by the writer but as actually expressed through images can be identified with the work as a total construction.

In the words of Eliot, "poetry is not the assertion that something is true, but the making that truth more fully

real to us, is the creation of a sensuous embodiment."<sup>11</sup> The job of a poet is to make images of experience real to the readers so that they may also share and live through a few moments those experiences which are recorded in the poem.

Another popular cliché of Eliot is the phrase "Dissociation of Sensibility", and its opposite Unification of Sensibility. By Unification of sensibility T.S. Eliot means a fusion of thought and feeling. Such fusion of thought and feeling is essential for Good poetry. Bad poetry results when there is dissociation of sensibility i.e., the poet is unable to feel his thoughts. Eliot finds such unification of sensibility in metaphysical poets and regrets that a dissociation of sensibility set in the late seventeenth century; there was a split between thought and feeling, and we have not yet recovered from this dissociation.

Eliot seems to have derived his idea of unified sensibility incorporating both thought and feeling from F.H. Bradley who gives "the general idea of total experience, where will and thought and feeling may all... be one."<sup>12</sup> In his essay, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921) he deplores the "dissociation of sensibility" that set in the seventeenth century from which English poetry had not recovered by the time he wrote this essay.

The origin of the dissociation of sensibility may be sought in the emphasis on reason laid by the scientific thinkers like Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes. They were votaries of the scientific method of enquiry and search for the objective truth; personal emotions, desires or imagination were prejudicial to detached observation. The whole intellectual atmosphere was in favour of intellect; emotion was driven away; common attitudes and beliefs were becoming scientific, their assumption being based on verifiable reality which had physical and objective entity. William Van O'Connor penetratingly remarks that for them "such ideals as love or mercy or the values in various moral systems being the product of human imagination are somehow unreal."<sup>13</sup>

Eliot feels that English poetry has been swinging from emotion to intellect and back to emotion, but it could not combine two as to make poetry out of the composite whole of sensibility. When the play of intellect combines with feeling as emotion, we get such a unified sensibility which occurs more frequently in Eliot than in Donne. There are no poetic images, for example, in the following lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" but the play of intellect combined with feeling is quite obvious.

And indeed there will be time

To wonder, "Do I dare"? and, "Do I dare"?

Time to turn back and descend the stair,

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair

They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!"

My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,

My necktie rich and modest but asserted by a simple pin

They will say: "But how arms and legs are thin!"

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?

In a minute there is time

For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.<sup>14</sup>

The amalgamation of disparate experiences that Eliot finds in a poet like Donne is present throughout his early poetry. In his essay on The Metaphysical Poets, T.S. Eliot explains how this fusion of thought and feeling take place:

Tennyson and Browning are poets: and they think, but they do not feel their thought as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an 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 rose of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.<sup>15</sup>

Of the three critical concepts that have been discussed, the theory of the "dissociation of sensibility" has the soundest footing and will interest students of literature longer than the other two concepts. Eliot himself is the first modern critic to draw attention to the celebrated passage in the Biographia Literaria where Coleridge talks about the reconciliation of opposites. It is Eliot of all the critics who best demonstrates how the two components unify. It can be said that Eliot's most significant achievement as a critic is his theory of dissociation of sensibility.

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