



The impersonal poet: T.S. Eliot's modernist approach to poetic creation

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot is one of the most influential poets and literary critics of 20th century. He is regarded as one of the key figures of Modernism. His critical writings played a significant role in shaping modern theory of poetry. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) is an essay which was first published in *The Egoist* and later in Eliot's first book of criticism, *The Sacred Wood* (1920). In this essay he describes about the theory of impersonality. Eliot rejects the romantic conception of poetry as the direct expression of the poet's personal emotion. The poet must surrender the personal self and allow the poetic mind to act as a medium through which diverse experiences are synthesized into a new artistic whole. Eliot's famous analogy of the poet's mind as a catalyst explains this process. This theory is closely associated with objective correlative. This paper examines the aspects of Eliot's theory and evaluates its significance in modern literary criticism.

Keywords: T.S. Eliot, impersonality, modernism, objective correlative, literary criticism, catalyst

Introduction

Like Dryden, Coleridge and Arnold, Eliot belongs to the ranks of the creative critics of those critical writings are illuminated by their poems and the poetical works give greater value to the critical theories. Eliot criticism as pound has pointed out is not dead academicism and pedantry. It is a criticism aimed at the rejuvenation of writing at new creation.

"Tradition and Individual Talent" was first published in 1919 ^[2] in *Time's Literary Supplement*. This essay is considered unofficial manifesto of Eliot's critical creed. It forms the basis of all his subsequent criticism. The essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" has three parts. The first part of the essay deals with the aspects of tradition. The second part of the essay deals with the theory of the impersonality of poetry. According to Eliot, Tradition and Individual Talent cannot exist isolated from tradition. A poet does not take his own age or the literature of that period as a separate identity but acts with the conviction that it in general the whole literature of the continent from the classical age of the Greek onwards and in particular the literature of his own country is to be taken as a harmonious whole.

Eliot says the emotion and passion of a poet must be depersonalized. The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates. Eliot's depersonalization of the poet is a new receptacle. The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.

Eliot rejects the romantic conception of poetry as the direct expression of the poet's personal emotion. The poet must surrender the personal self and allow the poetic mind to act as a medium through which diverse experiences are synthesized into a new artistic whole. In the essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" Eliot says: "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."

To Eliot, the view of poetry as an expression of the poet's personality often leads to several critical fallacies. The process of poetic creation is therefore not a process arising as the expression of self but as one involving the surrender of the self.

Impersonality and the Poetic Process

Eliot does not deny personality of a poet; on the other hand he insists upon the point that the poetic process is the conversion of personal emotion to the emotion of art. The mind of the poet acts as a catalyst; it operates upon either partly or exclusively upon the experiences of the poet himself. Feelings and emotions are the elements which enter the presence of the poet's mind acting as a catalyst. Thus the poet's mind is a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases that unite to form a new compound.

The poetic mind as a medium does not therefore represent something passive. Both consciously and unconsciously, it transforms the feelings, emotions and sensations into artistic whole. However, the personal emotions of the poet are not to be confused with the emotions of art.

Relationship between Theory of Impersonality and Objective Correlative

Eliot's theory of impersonality is closely associated with his "theory of objective correlative." In "Hamlet and his Problems," Eliot says emotions of art should be expressed through set of objects and events. This theory implies the theory of impersonal art and implies that greater emphasis should be laid upon the work of art itself and structure. Eliot's theory of objective correlative says that it is not possible for the poet to transfer his emotion and idea directly to his reader; he objectifies them in a set of objects, situations, a chain of events. In his essay on the Metaphysical poets Eliot attempts to judge the metaphysicals by his theory of objective correlative and draws the conclusion that they were at least engaged in the task of finding the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feelings. Therefore Eliot's theory of

objective correlative and the impersonality of art form the most significant aspects of his classicism. The inconsistency in Eliot's theory of poetry has been criticised by different critics on various grounds. Eliot's essay suggests that emotions and feelings are two important components of poetry, but thoughts and ideas and intelligence are given no place as substance of poetry. Again Eliot uses the word emotion in the terms of feelings aroused by the actual experience, while feelings are associated with words and images. According to Eliot the poet's mind acts on a catalyst while either under the stress of an emotion or without any emotion, the creative process is active. Even if the poet's mind is to be regarded as a medium, it is difficult to recognise with Eliot that the beliefs, thoughts and assumptions of a poet are not to be reflected in his works.

Conclusion

As a critic, Eliot occupies a unique position in the history of modern literary criticism. His emphasis on tradition, impersonality, and objective correlative provided new dimensions to twentieth-century criticism. His critical theory has exercised considerable influence on the study and evaluation of art. His insistence on avoidance of all generalities and abstractions and on looking closely at the objective itself, his efforts to substitute the impressionistic method in criticism by a strict critical method have made valuable contributions to literary criticism.

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