



ELIOT'S THEORY OF IMPERSONALITY

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ABSTRACT

In the second half of his essay Tradition and Individual Talent Eliot has laid emphasis on the theory of impersonality using the scientific analogy of a catalyst. Catalyst is an agent which takes part in the formations of gases but itself remains unaffected. In the same way the personality of poet should work as a catalyst. It should take part in the creative process but should remain isolated from the entire business. A chemist has pointed out certain obvious limitations in his theory of impersonality saying that his theory of depersonalization is unquestionable but the use of chemical formula by Eliot to substantiate his view is absolutely wrong. Eliot had wrongly said that gas chamber of sulphur and oxygen magnesium filament is put it causes a reaction and gives birth to a new gas sulphuric acid. Eliot is right when he says that the mind of a poet should work as a catalyst during the process of creation but his chemical formula is absolutely incorrect. He should have consulted a professional chemist before formulating the chemical formula. Actually Eliot was staunch supporter of classicism. He defined poetry as an escape from personality. His intention was to oppose Wordsworth's theory of poetry. His theory of impersonality is intended to oppose romantic ideas and pursue objectivity in poetic creation. Although Eliot fails to state that when and how the fusion of gases takes place. Therefore his theory of impersonality is also called mystic theory of poetry.

KEYWORDS: Objectivity, impersonality, depersonalization, catalyst, creativity, escape from personality, spontaneous overflow of feelings, classicist, romanticism.

INTRODUCTION

T.S Eliot is by far the most influential critic of our time. He was not a theorist. He was not a system builder either. He did not formulate a Coherent or systematic theory of poetry. His critical views are scattered over here and there in his astray essays and book-reviews. He claimed himself to be classicist in literature and Catholic in religion. He did not Claim to have pioneered any school of criticism. In his essay Frontiers of Criticism he pronounced that he should not be considered as the pioneer of any critical movement. But there is a unanimity of opinion on the point that new critics have derived a lot from the theorizings of Eliot.

Eliot was not satisfied with the existing critical scenario and has expressed his concern in his essay Function of Criticism. He says,



“It is not better than a Sunday bank of contending and contentious orators who have not yet arrived at the articulation of their differences”

He was extremely critical of existing schools of criticism particularly the archetypal school of criticism led by Maud Bodkin, the historical school of criticism and impressionistic School of criticism propounded by Middleton Murray. He was of the opinion that critics should confine themselves to the work of art itself while making an

evaluation of it and should not venture out side the proper confine of criticism. He was extremely critical of these critics looking for Various autobiographical, sociological and historical facts in course of making the final verdict on the merit of a work of art. It is unlikely to serve any purpose. Thus he did not see any meaning in the critics looking into the laundry bill of Shakespeare while evaluating his dramas. After all what purpose does the laundry bill of Shakespeare serve in the evaluation of his dramas? It would be equally futile or worthless exercise finding out the relationship of Wordsworth with Dorothy whom he had dedicated his Lucy poems while evaluating his Lucy poems. These exercises have caused a great damage to literary criticism in stead of adding substantially to its repertory. In this sense Eliot seems to have developed close affinity with the new critics who preferred not to venture outside the boundary of the critical output. Although Eliot also took the new Criticism for task calling it lemon squeezer school of criticism since in order to count the tree it forgot the groove.

Eliot was the most condescending of all modern critics. Modern critics suffer from personal prejudices. They are idolatrous, unyielding and uncompromising. They are more indulged in arguments and counter-arguments and are not ready to accept their mistakes if at all it is rectified by some one. These polemical arguments which the modern critics have resorted to have done a great damage to modern criticism. Eliot on the contrary has accepted his mistakes and has made necessary changes in his ideas whenever certain errors were pointed out by someone. In his essay Milton I he made a scathing attack on Milton holding him responsible for corrupting English language. In his essay Metaphysical poets Eliot says, "In Seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in from which we have never recovered, was aggravated by the influence of the two powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden"²

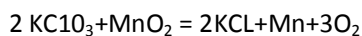
E.M.W. Tillyard, the most celebrated critic Milton vehemently opposed Eliot's remarks on him by adducing some plausible arguments which Eliot readily accepted and in his second essay on Milton he showered bucketful of praises on him expressing solidarity with Tillyard.

In the second part of his essay Tradition and Individual Talent Eliot has propounded the theory of impersonality or depersonalization. Eliot means to suggest that the poet should keep his personality away while writing poetry. It should not involve in creative process directly. It does not have a significant role to play in the poetic creation. If at all it takes part in the creative process it should act as a catalyst. Thus Eliot uses the scientific analogy of a catalyst to substantiate his Views. By this illustration Eliot Manifests that the mind or personality of a poet works as a catalyst at the time of poetic creation. Although it is an aid to poetic creation but it remains unaffected. He takes recourse to the scientific analogy of a catalyst to substantiate his ideas. He says that in a gas chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide, a filament of platinum is put, the two gases will enter into a new combination called sulphuric acid. The presence of catalyst brings about sudden changes in other two chemicals which gives birth to a new gas. In this process the platinum filament remains unaffected. . Eliot had earlier used scientific terminology when he compared poet's mind to a, "receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feeling, phrases, images which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together."³

In the essay Tradition and Individual Talent, Eliot defines poetry as, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, it is not an expression of personality but it is an escape from personality"⁴

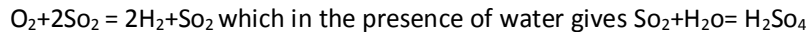
The natural corollary of this critical assumption is, "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him the man who suffers and the mind which creates"⁵

Eliot observes that at the time of creation the mind of a poet works as a catalyst. By catalyst he means the material the very presence of which causes change in other chemicals but which itself does not undergo any change. The process through which this change in other chemicals on account of the presence of the catalyst effected is called catalyst. For example this chemical formula can be taken,



Here $2KClO_3$ is indicative of potassium chloride, MnO_2 is indicative of Manganese dioxide, $2KCl$ is indicative of potassium chloride and $3O_2$ is indicative of oxygen gas. In this example Potassium chloride acts as a catalyst because it causes to transform manganese dioxide into oxygen gas though it itself remains unaffected. This is what he calls theory of depersonalization.

This proposition was objected to by a specialist in chemistry.⁶ The critic says that Eliot's theory of depersonalization is unquestionable but the analogy of catalyst is wrong. The platinum filament no doubt acts as a catalyst but the combination of the two gases will not produce sulphuric acid as stated by Eliot. So Eliot should have consulted some professional chemist before propounding his theory. He also gives the formula of chemical change.



This implies that Eliot haphazardly quoted the chemical formula without looking into its details and validity.

My personal opinion is that Eliot was not a chemist. He was a literary critic so his theory of creative process is not cent percent correct. At the time of creation the mind of the creator works as a catalyst. Eliot Specifically calls it the progress of an artist towards continual self sacrifice or continual extinction of personality.

Actually Eliot was a staunch supporter of classicism in poetry and criticism He was deeply inspired by Greek antiquity and the classical norms laid down by Aristotle. Dante's classical urbanity also appealed him. He insisted that there should be clarity, precision, restraint, simplicity and serenity in poetic creation. He was a die-hard opponent of romantic ideas and approach to life. His anti-romantic temper did not allow him to treat poetry as a platform to express personal feelings and emotions. He was also opposed to Wordsworth's dictum that poetry is an expression of personality or it is an spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity. Eliot insisted that personal ideas must not venture or migrate into the territory of poetry. If at all personal Ideas are to be disseminated it must be manifested under the garb of objectivity. If one intends to infuse personal ideas in one's work it must be intermingled with the problem of humanity so that it no longer remains the problem of the individual. Such a poetry will acquire everlasting importance. It will be applicable for all the ages. It will transgress the boundary of a particular period and acquire universal significance. The poetry of Homer, Hesiod, Dante, Milton and Shakespeare are kept in this category.

Eliot had a great liking for association or synthesis of sensibilities which was badly wanted in romantic poetry. He insisted that there must be fusion between emotion and intellect, mind and heart, meter and meaning and form and content which the romantic poets did not take notice of. They laid stress on feelings and emotions leaving the other aspect untouched and thus the balance between the two was badly disturbed. He praised 17th Century poet John Donne and his school of metaphysical poets for maintaining unification of sensibility where as poets like Shelley were dealt with heavily calling him 'bully' or 'balckguard'.⁷ He did not show any affinity with Shelley since he was a poet of muddled thinking. He also noticed intellectual incoherence in the poetry of Shelley He branded his poetry as vague or obscure. In Shelley's poetry he found nothing but 'bad jingling'.⁸ Eliot puts it,

"Shelley since to have had a high degree the unusual faculty of passionate apprehension of abstract ideas".⁹

One of his predecessors Matthew Arnold too had called Shelley, "an ineffectual angel beautified his wings in the void".¹⁰

Although critics like C.M. Bowra in his book *Romantic Imagination*, A.C. Bradley in his book *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* and Herbert Read in his book *Two Voices of Feelings* have come to the rescue of Shelley. Bowra says that obscurity is the natural outburst of his metaphysical ideas. Bradley also says that every idea cannot be expressed in clear terms. Eliot too has praised Shelley in his poem *Prometheus Unbound*.

Eliot's impersonal theory is no less fallacious and polemical. Had he simply emphasized on the fact that poetry is more than sheer emotionalism it would have been a different matter. The problem crops up

when he outright rejects the role of personality which would have been hardly thought of. The personality of a poet plays an active role during the process of creation. He says, "The business of poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up in poetry, to express feelings which are not actual emotions at all."¹¹

It is very difficult to separate emotion from feeling. Moreover emotions cannot be cut off from personality. Emotion and feeling also do not counter each-other Eliot's account of creative process lands us in a new trouble. He uses a scientific analogy to illustrate his point. Chemical substance kept in a chamber could not combine together to form another chemical compound but in the presence of a catalytic agent they will readily do so. The catalytic agent remains quite unaffected while reaction takes place in chemicals giving birth to a third chemical. But exactly when and how the fusion will take place the poet is completely unaware of. The moment of fusion, which is the moment of creation, is a moment of mystery when the poet's conscious will be rendered unaffected. Thus the argument advanced by Eliot states not only the impersonal theory of poetry but what may be called the mystic theory of poetry. He admits that the moment when disparate feelings enter into a blend of artistic experience remains a mystery. Thus the issue touches the periphery of metaphysics and the treatment certainly stops at mysticism. Use of catalytic image and the agreement that poetry has the life of its own over which the poet has little control indicates sufficiently that Eliot thinks the poet merely as automation, a completely passive creature, a self-moving machine or a tool moved by concealed machinery. In the light of these facts, Eliot's declaration that he was a classicist in literature should be taken with reservation. Eliot no doubt, was a classicist, but ultimately he takes refuge behind romantic concept. This is not the first instance. His early criticism is reminiscent of his uncharitable observation on the merit of an author. His adverse remark on D.H. Lawrence in his book *After Strange Gods* is a sufficient testimony to his stern attitude. He says him, "Wild emotional man suffering from a lack of intellectual and social training."¹²

Lawrence's lost glory was revived by F.R. Leavis in his book *D.H. Lawrence: The Novelist* of giving a fitting reply to Eliot.

Eliot's definition of poetry clearly indicates his proximity to objectivity both in realm of poetry and criticism. But when he adds, "but, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things"¹³ he not only seems to confuse his definition of poetry but also muddles the whole discussion.

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