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T. S. Eliot and the Impersonal Theory of Poetry

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Modernism is a literary movement that shaped English literary studies in tremendous ways since the early 1920's. It started with a humble beginning during the late 1800's, then it flourished extensively between 1910 and the Second World War where the world seemed to be going from bad to worst. The emergence of Modernism was a reaction to what the world was coming to. It was considered a revolution in English literature. Modernism branched out from literary studies including poetry, drama and fiction, and went on to incorporate many other forms of art such as music, paintings and architecture.

It is infeasible to pinpoint one definition of Modernism that the entire world can agree on. It has multiple meanings and definitions depending on the time and place throughout its emergence. Many scholars say there are risks to attempting to come up with one unified definition for Modernism. Some scholars, studied and acknowledged the changes the meaning of the term "Modernism" has known over time and they deem these changes insignificant, because the various definitions of the term remain useful to chronicle the literature made between the first years of the 20th century and World War II.

However, specifying when Modernism began, when it ended, and how it changed is not what is important, what remains fundamental to keep track of is the understanding of the literary works of many artists from the late 19th century and early 20th century.

These scholars and their works help us realize T.S Eliot's role in the movement of Modernism and in shaping this 20th century literary phenomenon that was a direct element in the institutionalization of the English studies as an academic discipline in the 20th century. Thanks to his work in "Tradition and the Individual Talent", a new discipline of reading was founded. No matter how impressive his poetry was to some, to others

it was his literary criticism that is most captivating, because his critical essays shaped people's ways of reading and interpreting their readings of literary history, which was what brought modernist literature into formal curriculums of the educational systems of esteemed universities in both the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

The publishing of T.S Eliot's "The Wasteland" is one of the highlights of Modernism. It is a masterwork where Eliot had the ability to extract the angst the world was going through during the Modernist era, and place it all in that one poem. It was published during troubled times because of the First World War which naturally shifted the atmosphere to a very tense one, where artists had very strong reactions against politics, religion and society as a whole, and it was a time when Eliot believed the western culture was deteriorating and heading towards self-destruction. Human morals were questionable and there was nothing such as "the absolute truth". Faith was lost and having seen the monstrosity of war, the beauty of the world was no longer celebrated the way the Romantics celebrated and embraced it, nothing could sum up this era the way "The Wasteland" could. It is the epitome of Modernism.

Eliot's works may seem "depressing" and "dark" compared to Romantic works, and they were realistically so. As the First World War came and shed light on the horridness of the world, and how inhumane people could be, naturally the writings and the art of the modernist era reflected it. The war had certainly changed Eliot's work. Before the First World War, his works weren't about dreadful experiences or traumas he suffered from, perhaps because he hadn't experienced any worthy of documenting by then, so instead, they were about anxiously waiting for traumas that were inevitably coming.

For example in his poem "Morning At The Window" published in 1914, it was easy to spot in his style of writing that he knew the world was on the brink of a war, and he was probably preparing people for it by describing what it would be like during that time. This of course, cannot be derived from facts because the war hadn't broken out yet, but Eliot had a clear vision of what it would be like.

By 1915, the war had broken out and Eliot had been exposed to it by being left stranded for two weeks in Germany. Eliot doesn't describe this time as

"dangerous" but he recalls how toxic the suspense of anticipating what would happen to him was like. An example of one of his works that mirror some feelings of anxiety is the ambiguous poem: "The Engine", where his style of writing relied on anticipation that would continue on through the war.

Like many others, the war had not been kind to T.S Eliot, and by 1922, a year that was marked by the publication of "The Wasteland". It was noticeable that his poems have come a long way, they were no longer about anxiety only, they were also about religious revelation and it was eye-opening to society, and to how people were allowing the horridness of the world to come into existence. It was this precise period which marked the rise of T.S Eliot as an expressionist of how the world is turning itself to a devastated waste land.

Through his literature, his poetry and critical essays, Eliot played a huge role in the elevation and importance of English Literary Studies in universities during a period where it was questionable whether English was even worth studying in reputable institutions. This was done through his many literary essays and the impact he left on British and American scholars.

He has changed the habits of reading of important audiences, audiences that would have influences on society and the public with their opinions and their take on his writings. He broadened the expectations of the reader for modern poetry; he was the one to make the standards for literature, standards on which his own works were assessed.

Besides his poetry and his impeccable literary criticism, what T.S Eliot is also known for is coming up with the term "Objective Correlative", which is said to be the only way a poet can translate emotions into a form of art; it is when a specific combination of items, words or situations that evoke a particular emotion within a person, these emotions are only awakened when all these items are incorporated together, separately they are sterile, and unable to cause any emotions to erupt.

Objective Correlative is known to be one of Modernism's characteristics. Another significant them there was the "Stream of Consciousness", a term that describes the multiple thoughts and feelings that pass through the mind either simultaneously or immediately one after the other. When this method was incorporated in writing, it gave the feeling to the reader that he's

thinking through the flowing and fragmented thoughts right along with the writer.

Another important characteristic in Modernism is the “Make-It-New”, which is a term that was explored and utilized most by the poet Ezra Pound. It is a method in which ancient ideas or traditions are remodeled and repurposed instead of being forgotten and dropped. Pound himself is known for using this method as he researched old Japanese and Chinese traditions and translated them in the form of poetry, Eliot also used this method by including bits from the works of Homer, Sophocles, Shakespeare and others in his most famous poem “The Wasteland”.

Eliot had pioneering ideas that just might make him the Godfather of Modernism as he made strong contributions to it. Still, there are many others who have had a significant impact on this movement, such as James Joyce, a writer who wrote plays and poetry but he is mostly known for his novels and short stories. His stories mainly focused on individual consciousness, and they had an impact on the way other writers wrote short stories in English literature. He completely changed people’s ideas of what a novel is, what it is composed of and what it is capable of doing.

Another notable name in Modernism is Virginia Woolf. It is safe to say that she is one of the most influential and powerful female writers ever, she was one of the very first people to use the “stream of consciousness” technique in her writings. She was among the first few modernists who were fascinated by the mind of the average person and deemed it important enough to be used as the main subject in modernist art. She was also an avid feminist and used her platform to speak about gender and how female writers were not getting enough recognition in Modern literature.

Ezra Pound is yet another prominent figure in Modernism, one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, he is the mastermind behind the development of the movement of “Imagism”; his works changed the way Poetry was written and received. His talent was unprecedented which led him to edit and shape famous works of other great modernist writers such as Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and T.S Eliot.

Surely Modernism is not what it used to be, and the time for it has long since passed, as much as it would be an exaggeration to say T.S Eliot is the founder of Modernism. Nobody can deny that his contributions were

strong grounds for Modernism in its prime. Together with other Modernist writers, Eliot paved the way for the English language to be one of the world's most powerful languages.

In the first quarter of the 20th century, poetry was centered on the traditions and habits of Romanticism. At the time, poetry was simple, easy and popular, but it was not great or good, and due to these factors, T.S Eliot reacts to Romanticism which led him to form a new literary theory from which all his works have derived. Before formulating his theory of impersonality of art, poetry at the time focused heavily with all metrical, linguistic, and emotional aspects. Eliot wants poetry to be more complex and subtle so as to imitate and to contemplate the era of the time, which was a tremendous breakdown in culture due to the eruption of World War I.

Therefore, for Eliot to react against the favored appeal of poetry of the day, he aimed to cultivate subtlety and complexity in his work. In one of his essays: "The Metaphysical Poets (1921)", he argues that:

"Poets in our civilization must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility most produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning." (Eliot, 1917, p17).

Eliot asserts here that the poet must create new forms of poetry, and cultivate innovative possibilities of words, so as to express new conditions of life and vision at the time.

Earlier in 1919, T.S Eliot first introduced the impersonal theory of poetry in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent". The theory incorporated with how Modern writers should contemplate with literature and art, Eliot asserts that the formula for writing a great poem was not in being personal or to express emotions as romantic poets have done. According to Eliot, the approach to real poetry was the exact opposite of what he romantics¹ did. What Eliot strove for, was what he called: *"The continual extinction of the personality"* (Eliot, 1917, p17), which meant by the suppressing of personal emotions and individuality.

¹ Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Selected Essays. London, Faber and Faber, 1932 ;17

The idea behind Eliot's theory was beyond surrealist art, for him the poet should have an access to all experiences that are common to everyone, because in popular culture, there is no longer a self, no longer a person, but only a vehicle for the collective. And that's what Eliot was trying to do in "The Wasteland", which was to speak through many voices, but none of these voices were his, and all of them were spoken through our literary inheritance.

As of "The Wasteland", the reader won't recognize any distinct speaker, because T.S Eliot has applied this impersonal theory, so to make the speaker anonymous, and collective, so it can speak in many voices and through this, Eliot was attempting to represent an inclusive human consciousness.

This new theory of poetry makes an entire break from the 19th century tradition. It rejects the romantic theory that all poetry is basically an expression of the poet's personality, and that the poet should write instinctively according to his own "inner voice". So, Eliot, in his essay, rejects romantic subjectivism, and instead he focuses on the value of objective standards. So as a reaction against subjectivism of poetry, Eliot upholds his famous theory of the impersonality of art.

According to T.S Eliot, this impersonal theory plays an important role in new criticism. It appeals to the critic not to involve himself in any of historical, sociological, or biographical details about the poet, but instead to focus entirely on the poetry itself as a work of art, completely independent of his personality and emotions and to criticize the text without any reference to its writer. The critic should rather focus on structure, images, its poetic phraseology and other aesthetic qualities. Eliot argues that his theory must achieve a ²complete break from the subjective facet, and lay emphasis on objectivity, which must be criticized on its aesthetic qualities only.

Eliot writes: "*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*". (Eliot, 1917, p21)

In this passage, Eliot argues that the personal aspect of the poet and his

² Eliot, T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Selected Essays. London, Faber and Faber, 1932 ; 21-18

emotions are unimportant in contrast to his poetry. According to him, the poet must do his best to neglect his personality as much as possible, so to alienate himself in his poems from any personal emotions that are strictly prohibited by him. In this, he emphasizes that the poet needs to escape from his own emotions and experiences, so to ensure not to express himself; otherwise, he may make the mistake of turning subjective which according to Eliot is a great fault for the poet to commit. Basically, what Eliot meant to emphasize here is to make the poet respond as a reporter of stories. The reporter should not be affected and the poet should be a catalyst; he affects but he himself is not affected.

Nevertheless; the poet must be as impersonal as a scientist, he should seek to depersonalize all his emotions and passions. Eliot says: *“the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates”* (Eliot, 1917, p18). This means that the personality of the poet is a mere receptacle. In Eliot’s sense, poetry is organization rather than inspiration. The greatness of a poem depends upon the intensity of the process of poetic composition. In this, the emotional aspect of a poem should be different from the personal emotion. Eliot asserts that the emotions of poetry must be complex and refined, even if the emotions which the poet has never personally experienced can serve the purpose of the poetry.

In the first ³part of Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual talent”, he introduces the concept of “tradition” as a substitute to subjectivism and spontaneous self-expression. Through this approach to tradition, he makes the poet or the artist to embody all of his art to the whole literature of Europe from Homer, Shakespeare, down to the present day, so to be taken as an objective authority. For this new concept, Eliot challenges the common belief that an artist’s greatness comes out of his own individuality, but instead it’s perceived through the impersonal elements of tradition, which is a form of collected knowledge and wisdom of the past. Eliot says that a poem needs to incorporate a sense of tradition, or the “historic sense”. With this approach, a poet or an artist is required to develop a whole sense of the great art that’s been written in the past. If it is not, it

³ Eliot, T.S. “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Selected Essays. London, Faber and Faber, 1932 ;14

means for Eliot that great art is not possible without a touch of historical tradition.

In this context, Eliot asserts that an artist does not have to be entirely loyal to tradition, and it is not required of the artist to commit all of his art to the past, which may result into an absurd repetition. But instead, Eliot has much a dynamic conception of the poetic process, which is to divide it into two complements: “The personal elements” and “The impersonal elements”, so through this concept, Eliot suggests that a poet needs to combine and interact these two elements together to form a poem. But, the part of the impersonal elements is where the sense of tradition needs to be applied, and this part must be acquired by the poet through hard work. Eliot writes: *“Tradition is a matter of wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour”* (Eliot, 1917, p14). And as for the definition of historical sense, Eliot argues that: *“it involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its present; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own counter has a simultaneous ⁴existence and composes a simultaneous order”*. (Eliot, 1917, p14) In this passage, Eliot considers poetry to be a craft, which can only be resulted through continuous effort of obtaining a solid foundation of the works of the past.

Thus, as a reaction to Wordsworth’s theory of poetry in his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” (1801), Wordsworth regards good poetry as *“a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling”*, and that poetry has its origins in *“emotions recollected in tranquility”* (Eliot, 1917, p21) Eliot suggests in his impersonal theory of poetry that: *“Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion, it is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality”*. (Eliot, 1917, p21) He later argues that the greatest art is objective: *“The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates”*. (Eliot, 1917, p18) As a conclusion to this theory, the poet has no personality, he is only a medium, a catalyst, which combines and interact impressions and feelings in a variety of ways, but he himself is not affected.

⁴ Eliot, T.S. “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Selected Essays. London, Faber and Faber, 1932 ;14-21-18

⁵ Wordsworth, William. “Preface to Lyrical Ballads”. London, Biggs and Cottle, 1798.

Nevertheless, the dilemma with Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry, as in a poem as large as "The Wasteland", is that all these fragmentations, all these different impersonal voices needed something to hold them together. Common readers are genuinely not happy with accepting disorder, whether in poetry or in life. T.S Eliot himself was not satisfied with disorder throughout his life, he actually longed for order, and for meaning in a way where a truly committed skeptic can. Eliot wrote about what he saw, and what he witnessed in 1920s. It was not one truth, but many different truths, broken up in a fragmented war, but also at the time, Eliot hoped that there might be some order beyond individual experience, a meaning to life that was common and collective. So, that is why in his impersonal theory of art, he found an approach to express and translate all the realities and tragedies that happened during the first world war, and applied it as well in "The Wasteland", where he found a great deal of disorder in a single book.

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