

The Impersonal Theory of Poetry in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” by TS Eliot

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Abstract: Eliot, an important poet, playwright, and literary critic of the nineteenth century in the United States, was the founder of Western modernism. He pioneered the modern poetic criticism. His practice of modernist poetry is the transition from traditionalist poetics to modernist poetics in the 20th century. His famous poetics theory declaration “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is an immortal classic in the field of poetics theory, in which he proposed the concept of “Traditional,” the theory of “Impersonal” poetry, “Objective Correlative,” and so on. All had a profound influence on the 20th-century poetry creation. This paper aims to analyze and discuss the important “Impersonal” theory from the three aspects of its connotation, the relationship between “Personality” and its intertextuality with New Criticism, so as to further understand Eliot’s poetic concepts.

Keywords: Eliot; “Tradition and the Individual Talent”; Impersonal theory; Poetics

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1. Introduction

“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.”——“Tradition and the Individual Talent” by TS Eliot, 1919.

“Tradition and the Individual Talent” is a distinguished essay written by American well-known poet and literary critic TS Eliot in 1919. This essay was first published in *The Egoist* in 1919 and later in Eliot’s first book of criticism, *The Sacred Wood* in 1920. It was also compiled in Eliot’s *Selected Essays* and *Selected Prose* ^[1].

Although Eliot is best known for his poetry, he also made a great contribution to the field of literary criticism. As a modernist poet and critic who held an important position and influence in the modernist movement of the 20th century. His poetry theory pioneered new criticism and served as an intermediary for the transition from traditional poetics in the 19th century to modern poetics in the 20th century. He was a poet-critic, like Sir Philip Sidney and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is one of the most significant critical articles, which formulates his influential conception of the relationship between the poet’s individual talent and the literary tradition that precedes them. It has shaped generations of poets, critics, and theorists and is a key text in modern literary criticism ^[2].

Tradition is something that only has a wide range of meanings. It is not inherited. It contains the consciousness of history, which is both for permanent consciousness and temporary consciousness, and the combination of the two. It is this consciousness that makes a writer traditional. At the same time, this consciousness makes a writer most keenly aware of their position in time and their relationship with contemporary times; and poets, no artist of art, can have their complete meaning alone. His importance and our appreciation of him is to appreciate his relationship with past poets and artists. One cannot evaluate him alone, one needs to compare him with his predecessors. The relationship between a poet and the past is that he cannot treat the past as a chaotic mess, nor can he train himself solely on one or two writers he admires privately, nor can he train himself solely on a particular period he particularly likes^[3].

In this essay, Eliot put forward and analyzed three important points, the concept of “Tradition,” the theory of “Impersonal” poetry, and “Objective Correlative.” Among them, the theory of “Impersonal” poetry is the most salient one and has laid Eliot a pioneering position in the field of New Criticism. This paper tries to analyze this important theory from three aspects, its connotation, the relationship between “Personality,” and its intertextuality with New Criticism in order to have a better understanding of Eliot’s poetics^[4].

2. Connotations of the Impersonal Theory

The Impersonal Theory is not only an aesthetic pursuit of modern poetry, but also the embodiment and practice of Eliot’s original views on tradition, order, and historical sense. In order to attenuate the inclination of the opposition of subjectivism influenced by romanticism in the 19th century and objectivism and put them together in a dialectic way, this theory was put forward by Eliot. He proposed to use traditional culture and artistic order to suppress the overflow of individualism and abuse of romance since romanticism^[5].

The theory of “Impersonal” poetry contains two major points. On the one hand, the inditing of poetry should follow tradition, that is, poets should have traditional sense and be put into tradition to be compared and judged. On the other hand, poets themselves should avoid “personality” as possible as they can when indite a poem. Individual is part of the history of human civilization and only being put into history can find vitality, strength, and value^[6].

Firstly, in Eliot’s view, to achieve impersonality in poetry, a continual surrender of the poet himself or self-sacrifice is critical and thus he becomes a current carrier of history and tradition. However, the poet is not playing a passive role but is treated as a bridge to the future for he carries the features of both past and present. Secondly, in the theory of “Impersonal” poetry, Eliot advocated that poets forsake “personality,” as he said in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” “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.” He opposed the view of romantic criticism characterized by turning loose of personality and overflowing emotion. In his point of view, criticism should be objective and dispassionate. He based the norms of criticism on an external authority, which consists of the tradition of literature and culture and the order of art. Let literature works be judged by the standards of the past and follow the tradition but not the rules shaped in the poet’s heart. This point of view is often regarded as an omen of New Criticism in Europe and America^[7].

3. Non-individualization and individualization

At the year of 1800, in the preface of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth said, “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” that marked the beginning of the

Romanticism, which was characterized by its emphasis on intuition, emotion, imagination, and individualism as well as glorification of nature and the individual creativity. It emphasized the important role of the subject and took the view that the individual is the decisive force for self-liberation and freedom and subjective consciousness should be brought into full play. The expression of the individuality and emotions of the poet determines the value of the poem ^[8].

Romanticism overemphasized the role of the individual and expressed emotions excessively. In this case, the theory of “Impersonal” theory, as a refutation, tried to advocate objective criticism. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” he said, “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.” The emotions advocated by romantic poets in the past were denied, poets were no longer the embodiment of the value of poetry and they were just playing the role of intermediary. An analogy of catalyst was adopted here to illustrate the poet’s intermediary role. Oxygen and carbon dioxide form sulfurous acid when mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum. Platinum is indispensable in this chemical reaction for only the platinum is present can the combination happen, however, during the formation of the new compound, platinum itself is unchanged and there is no trace of it in the newly formed compound. The mind of the poet is just like a catalyst, in the presence of which emotions and feelings unite to form a new compound, the poetry. “Great poetry may be made without the direct use of any emotion whatever: composed out of feelings solely.” Poetry is not a direct representation of the poet’s experience but a reconstruction of the experience elements of emotions and feelings implanted in the mind of the poet. The poet’s mind is a container with a variety of feelings, emotions, images, and impressions ready to be transformed. “The poet has, 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” ^[9]. In the way that the poet turns ordinary emotions into complex novel and unique aesthetic experiences, the process of depersonalization is carried out and poetry is separated from the poet and becomes an objective unit. It is just as he said, “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.” In his view, “depersonalization” is a vital process in poetry inditing, in which the subjectivity and individuality are eliminated and the poet “imitate” the world with a more inclusive and objective way. In many of his extraordinary poems, such as *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*, the subject, to some extent, goes into hiding and the protagonist in the poetry is not a given individual as I or Who but become inconclusive. Fragmented modern Western civilization is presented through techniques such as imagery, allusions, and stream of consciousness ^[10].

4. The Impersonal Theory and New Criticism

In the middle decades of the 20th century, as a formalist movement, New Criticism predominated in the field of literary theory, which derived its name from John Crowe Ransom’s book *The New Criticism* in 1941. With an emphasis on close reading and particularly of poetry, from the aesthetic point of view of the symbolism, it regarded the work as an independent and objective symbol, a self-sufficient organism insulated from the outside world, called “organic formalism.” It considered that literature is essentially a special form of language. The task of criticism is to analyze the text of the work and to explore the interactions and hidden relationships between the various parts. For the purpose of reverting the focus of literary studies to the analysis of the text itself, New Critics tried to avoid the responses of the readers and the subjective intentions of the poet and exclude the contexts of culture and history as well as moralistic bias during analysis ^[11].

In Eliot’s theory of “Impersonal” poetry, he advocated restraining the poets’ subjective initiative and that they should renounce the pursuit of individuality to make the poetry itself a “synchronic order” where the poet

and tradition grow out of one another. It opposes the romantic criticism view that emphasizes individuality and expresses emotion as the starting point but advocates an objective and calm view of criticism, which has always been regarded as the precursor of New Criticism in Europe and America. In spite of his own denial, it is disputable that his insistence that poetry must be impersonal greatly influenced the formation of the New Critical canon. In his critical essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," those two quotations are in the case. "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry." "To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad." He put the focus of literary studies on the inside of literature, laid emphasis on the structure and tension within the works, and concentrated on textual research ^[12].

Although Eliot's theory and New Criticism are inextricably linked, they also have some differences. They both focus on the text form, nevertheless, Eliot's formal ontology is incorporated into a broad traditional context, which is a diachronic objective criticism paradigm different from the New Criticism that is synchronic, aiming at the exploration of the scientificity of the text. New Criticism treats text as a fixed and closed entirety, completely independent from the external environment. Thus, literature studies become procedural, standardized, and instrumental. Superfluous attention to form and exorbitant abstraction of text make the work become quite mechanical, consequently. After its period of prosperity, New Criticism was on the wane. On the one hand, the theory of "Impersonal" poetry is in the traditional context, in which the past, the present, and the future are closely connected and it is inevitable to take the standards of the past into account when interpreting a text. As Eliot said, for the poet, "You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead." The poets and works of different ages are in a connection, correlating, and confirming each other, constituting an organic whole of European literature together. On the other hand, Eliot's Impersonal theory does not totally reject the role of the poet or deny emotions. Instead, the impressions, emotions, and experiences are presented through "Objective Correlative," which is a special expression that transcends individual emotions and sublimates them into ordinary emotions ^[13].

5. Conclusion

Poetry is not about indulging emotions, but avoiding emotions, not expressing individuality, but avoiding individuality. Eliot emphasized the need for poets to "indirectly express" their personality and emotions, and to refine their personal emotions to express a more universal human emotion. This also requires poets to handle the relationship between uniqueness and universality, complexity and singularity. Literary research should return to "poetry" itself, and "literary tradition" is the standard and value of literary criticism. Poets should be examined within the overall literary history and tradition, and the value of a poet's work should be judged by whether it meets past standards, rather than whether it has individuality ^[14].

In Eliot's view, tradition and historical consciousness are personal talents that writers must possess, which not only do not hinder but also greatly promote their creativity. Writers should not only have sufficient literary tradition literacy, but also be able to allow this literacy to take root, sprout, and thrive in their current creations. Compared to others, the latter has a new-era atmosphere and is more important, because the latter means projecting literary classics from the diachronic axis to the synchronic axis, which means transforming them from a diachronic form to a synchronic form. Fundamentally speaking, this projection and transformation, whether for individual writers or the overall era, is a reciprocating dialogue and continuous game between historical resources and synchronic structures, and is a process of repeated selection, arrangement, and combination. Only when this projection and transformation are effective, the "past past" will truly become

the “present of the past,” and “for permanent consciousness” will become “for temporary consciousness” and blend with it. Only through this projection and transformation can literary tradition truly integrate into the synchronous structure of contemporary literary and artistic development, become a living existence, and pave the way for creative transformation and innovative development at a higher level ^[15].

Transferring interest from the poet to poetry is a commendable attempt: as a result, criticizing true poetry, whether good or bad, can receive a relatively fair evaluation. Most people only appreciate the expression of sincere emotions in poetry, and some can appreciate the excellence of skills. But few people know when significant emotions are expressed, and the life of these emotions is in poetry, not in the poet’s history. The emotions of art are non-personal. If a poet does not fully entrust himself to the work he is engaged in, he cannot reach a non-personal level. He will not know what work to do unless he lives in a moment that is not only present but also past, unless he realizes that something is not dead, but already alive.

“Tradition and the Individual Talent,” one of the most distinguished critical essays of TS Eliot, is a representative work of modernist literature. In his paper, the three concepts of “Tradition,” the theory of “Impersonal” poetry, and “Objective Correlative” echo and constrain each other. The theory of “Impersonal” poetry, especially, has a great impact on various critical theories after it. Through the analysis of its connotation, the relationship between “Personality,” and its intertextuality with New Criticism, we have a deeper understanding of Eliot’s poetics and a better interpretation of modernist literature.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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