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The Impact of Eliot's Early Poetics on Modern Anglo-American Criticism

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Abstract

Even in modern times, Eliot's early poetics have retained their influence on the transformation and development of Anglo-American criticism. Broadly speaking, Eliot's impersonal theory, his reinterpretation of literary tradition, his rewriting of English poetic history within the theoretical framework of "mechanism of sensibility", and his "objective correlative" greatly affected Anglo-American literary criticism in the 20th century. In the exploration of the impact of Eliot's early poetics on Anglo-American modern criticism and in the pursuit of a better understanding of the important theoretical issues involved in American and English criticism, researchers will find an objective evaluation of Eliot's contributions to criticism to be of considerable utility.

Key words: Eliot; Impersonality; Objective Correlative; Modern Anglo-American criticism

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INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot's poetics have had a profound impact upon the English poetic style, with his early poetics deeply affecting 20th century Anglo-American literary criticism. Through *The Sacred Wood* (1920) and *Selected Essays* (1932), Eliot established a new standard for the transformation and development of Anglo-American literary criticism.

Therefore, to explore the impact of Eliot's early poetics on modern Anglo-American criticism, and to better understand the important theoretical issues involved in American and British criticism, researchers will find it helpful to objectively evaluate Eliot's contributions to criticism.

1. ELIOT'S IMPERSONAL THEORY

From the outset of his career as a literary critic, Eliot's views were essentially consistent with the anti-romanticism prevalent in his time; however, with time going on, his critical position gradually evolved. Before Eliot, T. E. Hulme had predicted that there would be a poetry revolution in the near future when he stated, in an article entitled *Romanticism and Classicism* (1914), "I want to maintain that after a hundred years of romanticism, we are in for a classical revival" (Hulme, 1971). If people say that Hulme forecasted a poetry reformation, then Eliot raised doubts about the representation theory of romanticism, elaborately illustrating his impersonality of poetry in his early paper entitled as *Tradition and Individual Talent* (1917). Eliot emphasized that "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, 1932, p.21). He thought poetry was not the direct representation of life experience, nor the pure expression of the poet's feelings, but the domain of art in which the poet's personality is isolated from his life. As he mentioned, "for my meaning is, that 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. 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." (p.19-20) That meant that the poet's psychological process is isolated from his personality. Feelings, impressions and experience

in poetry differ from the poet's direct feelings, impressions and experience in life. The poet's feelings, impressions and experiences in life are crude and mediocre, but in poetry, they must be produced artistically. Thus, "emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal." (p.22)

It is worthy of note that Eliot compared a "catalyst" to the creative process involved in poetry: when we put platinum into a container with oxygen and sulfur dioxide, these two gases combine to form sulfuric acid, but the platinum remains unaffected and retains its neutrality. The poet's soul of creation is the platinum that can process the poet's experience. Certainly it was not an entirely accurate metaphor, because the poet's soul could not be completely untouched like the platinum, and the creation of poetry cannot be such a simple process of combining elements. However, Eliot's basic idea was quite impressive: poetry was not the direct reproduction of life experience, and the most excellent poems could be created only by the comprehensive processing of one's rough feelings and experience.

1.1 Eliot's Severe Challenge to Romantic Criticism

Since the romantic era, readers have regarded poems as the self-expression of a poet's inner world, and for this reason, poems have either been treated as the pure expression of the poet's emotions or as a product of a poet's unique personality. In this sense, Eliot's theory apparently conflicts with the conceptions of romantic poetry; however, seen from a different perspective, the impersonal theory of poetry has long been in existence, for we can easily find its intellectual presence in the works of S. T. Coleridge, W. Hazlitt and John Keats. For example, Keats once said, "Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutralintellect—but they have not any individuality, any determined Character. I would call the top and head of those who have a proper self-Men of Power" (Keats, 1959, p.257). In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), Eliot not only quoted these words, but praised Keats' letters "are certainly the most notable and the most important ever written by any English poet" (Eliot, 1933, pp.100-101). He improved upon Keats' statement, and elaborated more on the impersonal theory.

Since the creation of poetry was regarded as the field where the poet's personality was dissociated from his life experience, Eliot asserted, "to divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim." (Eliot, 1932, p.22), which indicated a great shift in Anglo-American modern criticism: the research emphasis of literature switched from external research to the analysis of literary works. Although various factors contributed to this major turnabout in the history of literary criticism, there can be no doubt that this transformation fuelled Eliot's early poetry. Moreover, his impersonal theory directly led to

the negation of the Intentional Fallacy analyzed by New Criticism. As we say today, the so-called "Intentional Fallacy" implies an incorrect method by which people explain and evaluate works according to the writer's original purpose. As W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley thought, the Intentional Fallacy was rooted in the Expression Theory of Romanticism, according to which readers must know the poet's motivation and intention before judging his works and then trace his inspiration, sincerity, biography and knowledge. In the view of the New Criticism, once the poetry is born, the writer's intention does not control it. More importantly, we cannot evaluate a work according to the writer's intention. "We argued that the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954, pp.3-4)." Therefore, this theory insists upon the thoroughness of "Textual Criticism".

1.2 Eliot's Emphasis on the Great Constraint of Literary Tradition

Eliot reevaluated the significance of literary tradition. In his view, every poet wrote under the restrictions of traditional literature, since the poet often thought that traditional literature was more important than his own outstanding genius. "The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. The historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional." (Eliot, 1932, p.14). But unfortunately, this sense was nearly covered for the reason that people overemphasized "originality" and "personal ability" in the past. What Eliot wanted to do was to reawaken people's respect for literary tradition at the time when he was attempting to reinterpret the contemporary significance of literary tradition. Therefore, it is apparent that Eliot's concept of tradition is different from the neoclassical criticism that prescribed a blind submission to the practices of the ancients. It also differs from the Romantic theory that equally blindly pursued the new without giving due consideration to tradition. In his opinion, no poem would achieve its full significance if it split entirely from the literary tradition of which it is a product. Indeed, the value of a literary work hinges upon its position within the literary canon. Literary tradition constitutes an ideal system, and any work is an integral part thereof that simultaneously enriches and is enriched by the system. Literary tradition is thus at once a generative and an integrative system whose vitality is continually renewed through the process of ongoing literary creation.

2. ELIOT'S "MECHANISM OF SENSIBILITY"

No critic will accept tradition as something purely abstract, so it doesn't matter whether they disregard or carry forward it. The key challenge is to determine which traditions are to be ignored and which are to be inherited. If we intend to make a detailed inquiry of the connotations Eliot attached to the concept, we will readily discover that he dramatically rewrote the history of British poetry according to his "mechanism of sensibility" and made a reappraisal of the literary tradition.

2.1 The Thoughts and Feelings Highly Integrated in Eliot's "Mechanism of Sensibility"

From Eliot's point of view, the poem should be sensible, sentimental, and the thoughts and feelings should be highly integrated. As he had mentioned in *The Metaphysical Poets* (1921), "In Chapman especially there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling" (Eliot, 1932, p.286). Eliot contrasted the metaphysical poet John Donne with the nineteenth-century poets Tennyson and Browning in order to explain his poetry theory. "Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately 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....in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes" (p.287).

Eliot highly appraised seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets, treated the school which had been neglected for long periods as the heirs of dramatic verse in Elizabethan era, and put it into "the mainstream of the tradition of British poetry". Eliot considered that the Metaphysical poets successfully achieved a high degree of integration of thought and feeling, so they had an important position in English poetry history.

However, the phenomenon of "the separation of emotion" appeared after the Metaphysical poets. Since that time English poetry never fully recovered its original harmonious state. From Eliot's point of view, the separation phenomenon had been intensified because of the influence of the two great poets, Milton and Dryden. The result was either like eighteenth-century poets who tended to stress sense (making language increasingly elegant, but making feeling rougher), or like the romantic poets who paid more attention to sensibility, the result of which was ultimately an imbalance of thought and feeling. In Eliot's later critical works, although his attitude of praise and criticism to some poets had changed and the critical terms were different, his praise of the Metaphysical poets and belittling of the romantics never changed.

2.2 Eliot's Adaptation of British Poetic History

People's view of literature has been formed under the influence of Romanticism for a long time, so we can imagine Eliot's reevaluation of English poetic history has had an enduring impact on modern Anglo-American criticism. For example, F. R. Leavis was keen on the reevaluation of the great tradition in English literature, and his early works *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932) and *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1936) were written under Eliot's influence. Leavis belittled P. B. Shelley for his emotionalism and John Milton for his magnificent style, considering the former's feelings false, while assailing the latter for "Milton seems here to be focusing rather upon words than upon perceptions, sensation or things" (Leavis, 1963, p.49). Cleanth Brooks also drew an outline of English poetic history in his *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939). His evaluation criteria were not far from Eliot's literary tastes.

3. ELIOT'S "THE OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE"

Since Eliot proposed "the Objective Correlative" in his article *Hamlet* (1919), this term began spreading in English and American critics, and became many critics' expressions. But this theory is not easy as people's common comprehension, so we need slightly analysis. Eliot first sharply criticized the critical method in which people were keen on analyzing characters. He thought that Goethe turned Hamlet into Witte, and Coleridge turned him into another Coleridge. Consequently, only a few critics understood that the primary task of a literary critic was to study *Hamlet* as a drama, while the study of the character was only a minor issue. However, when people discussed *Hamlet* as a work of art, the result was also disappointing. In Eliot's view, this drama was far from Shakespeare's masterpiece, and in fact an artistic failure, as this tragedy had been adapted on the basis of Shakespeare's predecessors' creations. Since the unruly material in the original work created a fissure between the presentation of the protagonist's pessimism and the utilization of the original plots, the drama lacked "the Objective Correlative" which could properly express the character's feelings.

Thus, Eliot indicated, "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, a chain of 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" (Eliot, 1932, p.145). In this context, it refers to "the Objective Correlative", which represents the character's feelings in the drama. If there were no objects, situations or events which could

arouse the character's feelings, the character's feelings would appear either weak or strong, without any source. Eliot thought if Shakespeare's successful tragedy didn't lack a proper counterpart, the shortcoming in *Hamlet* was the correspondence of external events and the character's feelings. In his view, Hamlet's pessimism was caused by his mother's remarriage, but his pessimism went far beyond his aversion to his mother, which is quite difficult to understand. He couldn't make this emotion objectified, so he had to put off revenge attacks. In this sense, *Hamlet* had severe deficit in art.

Further, if there had been a schism between Hamlet's pessimism and his mother's remarriage, the divide would have emerged in Shakespeare's failure on the relationship between themes and plots. Therefore, "Hamlet's bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem" (Santayana, 1986, p.50). Thus, the term "the Objective Correlative" has a wider range of application. It refers to the question of not only how the character's feelings correspond to his experience and situation, but how these feelings are presented in the art. In other words, the performance of thoughts and feelings in art should not be overly straightforward, obvious or frank, and one must instead find appropriate objective correlations through situations, events, images, metaphors and symbols.

Viewed from criticism, George Santayana believed that the creation of characters was not the main task of poetry and that the essence of a poem was to express feelings in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900). "The glorious emotions with which [the poet] bubbles must, however, at all hazards find or feign their correlative objects" (Santayana, 1986, p.50). However, Santayana's expression was still too simple, so few people could grasp his intended meaning. Only after Eliot's thoroughgoing elucidation did the theory enter into Anglo-American modern criticism, thereafter being summarized as a basic principle in working with themes in poetry. In fact, we can see that almost all modern critics have agreed on the following point: the poet should not put their thoughts into the poem straightforwardly, because such preaching will deviate from the poetry fundamentally, and finally lead to the abandonment of the art.

On the base of the recognition, Cleanth Brooks constructed his metaphor theory. In *Irony as a Principle of Structure* (1949), he indicated, "One can sum up modern poetic technique by calling it the rediscovery of metaphor and the full commitment to metaphor....The poet wants to 'say' something. Why, then, doesn't he say it directly and forthrightly? Why is he willing to say it only through his metaphors? Through his metaphors, he risks saying it partially and obscurely, and risks not saying it at all. But the risk must be taken, for direct statement

leads to abstraction and threatens to take us out of poetry altogether" (Brooks, 1971, p.1042). In Brooks' view, a poem contains "the principle of indirect statements" in working with themes and "the principle of organic connections" in working with images and statements through the use of metaphor. In *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), Brooks thought we must abandon "the heresy of paraphrase". The so-called "the heresy of paraphrase" means to falsely take the poem as some abstract proposition, or take "prose-sense" of retelling the poem as the primary task of literary criticism. Brooks considered an excellent poem an organic whole, which was made up of many complicated and contradictory elements. As for the whole, we cannot summarize it by using some abstract proposition, and evaluate it by using scientific or philosophical standard because "any good Poem set up against all attempts to paraphrase it" (Brooks, 1947, p.196).

We should realize that to object to "the heresy of paraphrase" is just to deal with the theme of thoughts through images, metaphors and symbols, so we cannot isolate "the content" from "the form" of the poem, or put the rich content down to some abstract proposition. On the contrary, we must always focus on the whole structure of the poem and the internal connection of its elements with the larger context. The main illustration in this respect is Brooks' interpretation of Keats *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. He thought if we isolated the sentence "Beauty is truth, truth is beauty" from the whole context, and only viewed it as a direct representation, it would go against Eliot's "Objective Correlative". However, if we put it into the greater context of the poem as a whole, and recall that the whole poem built on the basis of paradox, that is, the Grecian urn was a quiet girl and a sylvan Historian, we would not criticize it as preaching (p.165).

CONCLUSION

It is worth restating the extent to which modern Anglo-American criticism has benefited from Eliot's early poetry. Generally, through the impersonal theory, Eliot challenged romantic criticism and highlighted the restrictive function of literary tradition. Secondly, Eliot emphasized the high integration of thought and feeling in poetry under the framework of the theory of the "mechanism of sensibility". Thirdly, through the theory of "Objective Correlative", Eliot presented the question how feelings in art objectify and built a new set of poetic theory for reversing the poetic style of frank revelation. Each of these aspects of his work profoundly affected twentieth-century English and American literary criticism and significantly accelerated the development of modern Anglo-American criticism.

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