CHAPTER - III

IMPERSO\NALITY AND POETRY
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In the preceding chapter we have discussed Eliot's early criticism which highlight his seminal ideas and which operate in his assessment of poets and poetry throughout his career. In this chapter we shall try to analyse his opinions on objective correlative and impersonal theory of art, which are closely linked and which have become popular among students of literature and criticism.

We must go back to his earlier critical essay to grasp his idea of Impersonal theory of art. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' speaking about depersonalisation of art Eliot says what personality means in relation to a poet. Eliot says "the point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of substantial unity of the soul: 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 a 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.¹ Eliot further elaborates this idea when he says, "there is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him 'personal'. 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."² Eliot always felt that "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality".³ Eliot feels that there must be


²Ibid., p. 21.

³Ibid., p. 17.
a complete surrender of a poet's personality in order to write a good poem.

Eliot views on the process of creation of poetry are expressed in the same essay, where he says, "The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together." So "the mind of a mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of 'personality', not being necessarily more interesting, or having 'more to say', but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations." Eliot says that a poet's mind is a perfect medium in which the fusion of thought and feelings takes place. In this theory


he tries to elaborate how the impressions cease to be merely personal when they have been 'fused' into new wholes. In some way this fusion is at the same time a 'transformation'. It is a transmutation of the feeling and thought, an experience; the private experience becomes public, impersonal. This is exactly found in the metaphysical poets according to Eliot when he speaks about them in his essay "the metaphysical poets". "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. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza and these two experiences have nothing do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes."6 For a poet every experience is

a contribution towards his poetry, and at the same time
his mind is constantly amalgamating his experiences.
His sensibility is altered by his wide reading which
in turn alters his thought. The poet experiences are
unified or always forming new wholes.

Eliot gives us his theory of externalising the
emotions of the poet. The idea of how experience is
objectified in poetry is discussed in his earlier essay
"Hamlet" where he talks about "the objective correlative."
Eliot does not define the concept, he gives examples of
it. He says, "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." But though there are methodical
difficulties with objective correlative, Eliot has not

7T.S.Eliot, Hamlet, Selected Essays, (London,
Faber and Faber, 1951), P. 145.
talked about it else where except in "Hamlet." After "Hamlet" we can see this juxtaposition of personality and poetry, objectivity and poetry in many of his essays. In his essay on 'Metaphysical poets' he says how the verbal equivalents for the various states of mind are to be found. These verbal equivalents or objective correlates of a poem shows poet's maturity. He says that the metaphysical poets are at best, "engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling. And this means both that they are more mature, and that they wear better, than later poets of certainly not less literary ability."

A good poet need to find the exact verbal requirements for the different states of his feelings, and thought. He must try to transmute these feelings and thought into a poetic whole. This objectification of poetry is clearly

brought out in his essay on Marvell where he says,
"It is more than a technical accomplishment, or the
vocabulary and syntax of an epoch; it is, what we
have designated tentatively as wit, a tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace. You cannot find
it in Shelley or Keats or Wordsworth; you cannot find
more than an echo of it in Landor; still less in
Tennyson or Browning, and among contemporaries Mr. Yeats
is an Irishman and Mr. Hardy is a modern English man—that is to say, Mr. Hardy is without it and Mr. Yeats is
outside of the tradition altogether." This type of
objectification we have in Metaphysical poets, they
knew the art of depersonalization and could make their
experience impersonal that is what Marvell does in his poems.

A poet employs a number of images to objectify
his feelings and emotions. Marvell does it in his poetry

9T.S. Eliot: Andrew Marvell, Selected Essays, (London,
Eliot says "this voice speaks out uncommonly strong in the Coy Mistress. The theme is one of the great traditional common places of European literature. It is the theme of O Mistress mine, of Gather ye rose buds, of Go, lovely rose, it is in the savage austerity of Lucretius and the intense levity of Catullus. Where the wit of Marvell renews the theme is in the variety and order of the Images." Eliot admires his high speed. He comments on his 'vegetable love' in "Coy Mistress." The image is not fanciful. 'It is a structural decoration of a serious idea'. And this is the way how poetry becomes objective.

Speaking about the objectification Eliot says that the sophistication is not only in language but also in meaning. He compares the Elizabethan and Jacobean poets to the later poets and clearly shows how though the language has become more and more sophisticated the


11 Ibid., p. 296.
meaning has become more and more crude. Eliot voices this in his essay on Marvell: "It is a quality of a sophisticated literature; a quality which expands in English literature just at the moment before the English mind altered; it is not a quality which we should expect puritanism to encourage. When we come to Gray and Collins, the Sophistication remains only in the language, and has disappeared from the feeling. Gray and Collins were masters, but they had lost that hold on human values, that firm grasp of human experience, which is a formidable achievement of the Elisabethan and Jacobean poets." 12

Language alone cannot objectify a poem. Feeling also must be fused along with it. Sophistication of language alone does not help. There must be a blend of the language and feeling. This, the Elisabethan and Jacobean poets possessed. Added to this they had a firm grasp of the human values through their experiences which the later poets missed.

Eliot thinks that Coleridge also wants poetry to be objective but not subjective. He quotes Coleridge on imagination in order to strengthen his views on Marvell's wit "this power .... reveals itself in the balance of reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities, of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement ..." The images in 'the Coy Mistress' satisfy the definition of Coleridge. Marvell achieves the objectivity by keeping the opposites in balance. But Eliot ironically feels that in spite of his elucidation of objectivity in poetry he has not properly defined it. He says, "the quality which Marvell

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had, this modest and certainly impersonal virtue—whether we call it wit or reason, or even urbanity—we have patently failed to define. ¹⁴ We are not able to exactly define this and still we lack an exact definition of this.

Eliot feels that suggestion and denotation must go together. In a successful poem there is a harmonious blend of these two. It does not happen successfully in Dryden and Swinburne. "For Dryden, with all his intellect, had a common place mind. His powers were, we believe, wider but no greater, than Milton's; he was confined by boundaries as impassable, though less straight. He bears a curious antithetical resemblance to Swinburne—Swinburne was also a master of words, but Swinburne's words are all suggestions and no denotation, if they suggested nothing, it is because they suggest too much. Dryden's words, on the other hand, are precise, they state immensely, but

their suggestiveness is often nothing. 

Speaking of the fusion of the various experiences, the transmutation and transformation of the various feelings and emotions, and how they are unified into new combinations and as wholes Eliot says in his essay on Ben Jonson that "The artistic result of Volpone is not due to any effect that volpone, Mosca, Corvino, Corbaccio, Voltore have upon each other, but simply to their combinations into a whole."  

He presents the idea in a different way. The objectivity alone would make the work of art a classic. When a work of art has become totally objective than alone can it again the status of a classic. When the work has impersonality, when the poet can totally surrender and extinguish his personality the work assumes a classicality and significance. He speaks about this in  


his essay on Baudelaire "compare with the costumery
of Baudelaire the stock of imagery of the Vita Nuova,
or of Cavalcanti, and you find Baudelaire's does not
everywhere wear as well as that of several centuries
earlier; compare him with Dante or Shakespeare, for
what such a comparison is worth, and he is found not
only a much smaller poet, but one in whose work much
more that is perishable has entered."17 The perishable
quality is one that is associated with the personality
i.e. to say Baudelaire is associated with a certain age
i.e. represents an age. He describes the problem when he
further remarks "It must not be forgotten that a poet
in a romantic age cannot be a 'classical' poet except
in tendency. If he is sincere, he must express with
individual differences the general state of mind - not
as a duty, but simply because he cannot help participating

17 T.S. Eliot, *Baudelaire, Selected Essays*, (London,
Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 424.
in it. For such poets, we may expect often to get much help from reading their prose works and even notes and diaries; help in deciphering the discrepancies between head and heart, means and end, material and ideals.\(^{18}\) This is because of certain personal conflicts. Personality contaminates poetry. It does not make the poem attain a state of timelessness.

Swinburne is impersonal in his poetry. But his language is morbid. So according to Eliot "they are identified in the verse of Swinburne solely because the object has ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment. In Swinburne, for example, we see the word 'weary' flourishing in this way independent of the particular and actual weariness of flesh or spirit. The bad poet dwells partly in a world of objects and partly in a world of words, and he never can get them to fit. Only

\(^{18}\text{T.S. Eliot, } \textit{Eusdenlair}, \text{ Selected Essays (London, Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 424-425.}\)
a man of genius could dwell so exclusively and consistently among words as Swinburne. His language is not, like the language of bad poetry, dead. It is very much alive, with this singular life of its own. But the language which is more important to us is that which is struggling to digest and express new objects, new groups of objects, new feelings, new aspects, as, for instance, the prose of Mr. Joyce or the earlier Conrad. Their prose has a poetic quality about it. They have the experience of objectivity. Eliot speaks of Tennyson in one of his essays and recognises him as great poet. Eliot admires Tennyson's technical gift; and appreciates his poem, *In Memoriam* because of its technical accomplishment. He also lauds the craftsmanship in this poem where every word has to be studied. He voices it when he says "Tennyson's surface, his technical accomplishment, is intimate with his depths; what we most quickly see about Tennyson is that which moves between the surface and the

depths, that which is of slight importance. By looking innocently at the surface we are most likely to come to the depths, to the abyss of sorrow. Tennyson is not only a minor Virgil, he is also with Virgil as Dante saw him, a Virgil among the shades, the saddest of all English poets, among the Great in Limbo, the most instinctive rebel against the society in which he was the most perfect conformist.”

Here also we have the discussion of the impersonality and objectivity in poetry. We find that Eliot still holds the view that personal experience by itself does not make poetry and does not help the poet to organise into a poem. There is a constant reference throughout the essay and in all his essays that some how personality should be withdrawn from poetry. Hence Eliot says, "In Memoriam can, I think, justly be called a religious poem, but for another reason than that which made it seem religious to his contemporaries. It is not religious because of the

quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt. Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience.\textsuperscript{21} This view of the poem as an object, something that is the result of the verbal craftsmanship, Eliot maintains throughout. Referring to Kipling as a ballad poet, he says, "We can only say that Kipling's craftsmanship is more reliable than that of some greater poets, and that there is hardly any poem, even in the collected works, in which he fails to do what he has set out to do. The great poet's craft may sometimes fail him; but at his greatest moments he is doing what Kipling is usually doing on a lower plane—writing transparently, so that our attention is directed to the object and not to the medium. Such a result is not simply attained by absence of decoration—for even the absence of decoration may err in calling attention to itself—but by never using decoration for its own sake, though, again, the apparently superfluous may

Eliot feels that Kipling had achieved the stage of depersonalization in his poetry. Later again commenting on Yeats as the greatest craftsman he says about impersonality: "I have, in early essays, extolled what I called impersonality in art, and it may seem that, in giving as a reason for the superiority of Yeats later work the greater expression of personality in it, I am contradicting myself. It may be that I expressed myself badly, or that I had only an adolescent grasp of that idea - as I can never bear to re-read my own prose writings, I am willing to leave the point unsettled - but I think now, at least, the truth of the matter is as follows. There are two forms of impersonality: that which is natural to the mere skilful craftsman, and that which is more and more achieved by the maturing artist. The first is that of what I have called the 'Anthology piece', of a lyric.

by love lace or suckling, or of campion, a finer poet than either. The second impersonality is that of the poet who, out of intense and personal experience is able to express a general truth; retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol. And the strange thing is that Yeats, having been a great craftsman in the first kind, became a great poet in the second. 23