

THEORY OF IMPERSONAL ART

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The purpose of this essay is not to trace any history of the idea of impersonality in art, nor does it aim at offering any 'final solution' of the problem. It proposes to make an attempt at clarifying some of the intricacies in the views of the latest pleader of this theory by throwing some light through the arguments of the ancient Indian critics.

I

In continuation of the anti-romantic movement of Hulme and Pound, in rejection of the romantic concepts that poetry expresses the personal feelings and emotions of the poet, that the poet the creator is very much present in his poem the creation, that there are specific emotions, feelings and subject-matter suitable for poetry and analysis of poetry needs an analysis of the 'genius' of the poet Eliot gave a final shape to the modern classicistic idea of the impersonality of art i. e. the poet is as impersonal as the scientist and poetry is a sort of inspired mathematics "which gives us equations for the human emotions."¹

In spite of the highly eclectic character of Eliot's mass of critical writings and a number of knotty and confusing critical phrases and jargons it is not difficult to summarise systematically the basic ideas of his poetics from some major portions of his writings, particularly his essays "Tradition and the Individual Talent", "The Metaphysical poets", "Perfect Critic" and "Imperfect Critic" and the essay on *Hamlet*." Tradition and the Individual Talent gives us the key-note to his critical assumptions which he tries to justify in other essays. He stresses two points there : a poet is not an isolated individual, as no other individual is, from others of the society or country or from the humanity as a whole. Each and every moment of the immemorial and unending Time is

1. Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of the Romance*, London 1910 p. 5.

interdependent; thus past is not buried in the dead past, nor is future something new and uncertain. Past, present and future are in a way causally and logically related though without losing the significance of each moment in the eternal flux of this Time. Thus a poet as an individual and as a part of his tradition must be assessed simultaneously at the time of judgment.

The second point deals with the material, the process and finally with the nature of poetic creation and thereby of all artistic creations in general.

The material for all art is emotion, but it is not the personal emotion of the artist. Logically, it follows from Eliot's major assumption stated above that as the artist is not an isolated person from the whole tradition, the emotions that are the materials of his art cannot be also strictly personal. They must be impersonal in the sense that they must represent the emotions of the whole tradition (the typical emotions) of which he is an organic part. Thus the romantic view, that the poet directly expresses his own personal emotions i. e. his experiences of sorrows and miseries, happiness and suffering, is rejected by Eliot. He terms his impersonal emotions as *significant* emotions.

Now the poetic process or the method of artistic operation: it is neither a *recollection* of the emotions in tranquillity, nor a *spontaneous overflow* of powerful feelings— thus straightly a rejection of the Wordsworthian formula. The artistic operation involves three principles— the principles of correspondence or transmutation, coherence and comprehensiveness.² This operation takes place in mind; but unlike the romantic critic Eliot disbelieves in the substantial unity of soul or mind i. e. the suffering mind of the poet cannot be identified with his creative mind; hence there is no question of *recollection* of the poet's personal sufferings and joys. Mind is a medium— a medium of operation. The diversified feelings and emotions of the poet are identified here (principle of comprehensiveness) and, all the parts being integrated into a whole (principle of coherence), are finally transformed into completely a new thing which is poetry (principle of transformation). Though there is some affinity of this operation with the romantic concept of the Secondary Imagination there is nothing mystic in it. The operation is just a technical one quite common in chemical sciences. Mind of the poet is a catalyst which itself being neutral and unchanged like a filament of platinum, which combines oxygen and sulphur dioxide into sulphurous acid, transmutes the

2. F. P. Lu, *T. S. Eliot ; The Dialectical Structure of His Theory of Poetry*, Chicago, 1966, Chap. 2.

raw material of poetry (i. e. emotions neither powerful, nor something new or specific, just ordinary ones). Emotion thus transformed is *significant*, is impersonal, and when expressed in the form of a poem (or art) has its life in the poem itself, not in the history of the poet.

But how to express this transmuted emotion in the form of art ? “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an objective correlative”³; 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.”³

Eliot’s ideas about the impersonality of art and particularly his theory of ‘objective correlative’ have been variously criticized by critics like René Wellek, Susanne Langer, Ranson, Praz, Eleseo Vivas, S. E. Hyman and others. But the Indian thinkers, who debated on a parallel problem centuries ago, would have raised the following points : Eliot is not precise as regards his idea of emotions and feelings i.e. whether they are the states of our mind— permanent or transitory and in what way they are related to experience. Sometimes emotion, feeling and experience appear synonymous and interchangeable ; at others the distinction is rather confusing and inconvincing : that emotion signifies the responses of the poet’s mind to the external and internal stimuli which furnish the poet with the raw material which he transforms in poetry ; and feeling stands for the responses of the poet’s mind which originate not in the external or internal stimuli but are occasioned by the study of literature. Secondly, the poetic process i.e. the transformation of personal emotions into the impersonal poetic emotions is also obscure. Without giving any logic of this transformation Eliot gives an analogy which may be very alluring, but is surely invalid. A living human mind can never be as neutral as a filament of platinum which is simply a piece of lifeless matter ; and this analogy from chemical science is incapable of explaining a sensible affair like the process of poetic creation. Besides, why should art approach the conditions of science at all ? Finally, the method of objectification of the impersonal emotion and its implication that aesthetic enjoyment necessitates the evocation of this (impersonalized ?) emotion in the connoisseur appear misleading from its application to one of the master-pieces of world literature (*Hamlet*) judging it as an artistic failure.

3. Eliot, *Hamlet* (1919).

II

In Indian aesthetics, too, emotions (*bhāva*) are the materials of poetry, drama, music and all other arts ; and poetry is the objectification of the impersonalized emotions of the poet. This means that : (1) emotions will transcend the personal afflictions or interest of the poet himself i.e. it must belong to all so that (2) others will take interest in them without being personally attached to them because of their generalization or impersonalization (*sādhāranya*). (3) This generalization takes place as none—neither the poet nor the reader—takes any utilitarian interest in these emotions their causal efficiency (*arthakriyākāritva*) being lost. This is known as the transformation of *bhāva* (personal emotion) into *Rasa* (impersonalized or generalized emotion) or poetry through a medium which is a complex of character, their actions and transient emotions or feelings (*Vibhāvānubhāvavyabhicārisamīyogah*).⁴

This needs a little elaboration. Emotions are defined by the Indians as mental states (*cittavṛtti*) which may be of two types—permanent or primary (*sthāyī*) and transitory or secondary (*vyabhicārī*) that depends upon the former. Permanent emotion is defined as ‘the emotion which is not swallowed up by other emotions whether friendly with it or unfriendly, which quickly dissolves the others into its own condition like the salt-sea, which endures continuously in the mind, ...’⁵ The permanent emotions are nine in number—Love, Mirth, Sorrow, Anger, Courage, Fear, Aversion, Wonder and Serenity. The transitory states of mind accompany the durable states emerging from it and being again submerged in it and they cannot endure for any length of time without attaching themselves to one of the durable states. They are as many as thirty-three in number like Indifference, Doubt, Jealousy, Pride, Inertia, Patience, Passion and Shame etc.

It appears that the transitory emotions may be roughly identified with the feelings of western psychology though the permanent emotions are something different from the emotions. They are the qualities and activities of both sense and intellect and they form the whole of one’s experience inherited or rather evolved biologically from last lives and are on constant modification and purification until their final extinction when one achieves liberation sacrificing all his desires sensual or intellectual. The Sāṃkhya exegetes plead for a subtle

4. Bharata, Prose after *Kārikā* 31. 5. Dhanañjaya, *Daśarūpaka* IV 34.

body, or an ethereal form the material of which is ego (*ahamkāra*) that contains these primary emotions as conditioned by the activities (*karma*) of a man. This ethereal form is the substratum of all the essentials that a man inherits from his continuous tradition (*saṁskāra*) from time immemorial, from the very day of his birth—soul's confinement in a corporeal body. Thus the permanent emotions differ in their degrees and intensity from person to person though they are the same in kind—a combination of three *guṇas*, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

The root of the poetic process is only one permanent emotion (out of nine) or an emotional complex when a single emotion is predominant. The process involves a stimulant which strikes a particular emotion in a man with strong sensibility. When thus struck, the man who is called a poet, expresses that emotion in language which again *evokes* the same emotion in another man who reads the poem. Two points are to be noted carefully here (1) there may be a personal element in the poet's being struck by the stimuli, but the moment the poet attempts at expression of this emotion it must be impersonal as it loses its personal attachment with the stimuli or with the effect thereof. Otherwise expression would be simply impossible. Commonsense will prove that a lover who is over-whelmed by the sorrow due to the death of his beloved cannot express his emotion in poetry. The Indian critics would not agree with Wordsworth that a recollection of the emotion in tranquility will explain logically this state of impersonality. Recollection of a powerful emotion may rather sometimes move the man much more than before. The only logical explanation of such impersonalization is that the stimulant losing its causal efficiency lacks the utilitarian impact upon the poet. The loss of causal efficiency is proved by the fact that instead of moving the poet blitherly an emotion like sorrow gives him a wholesome pleasure. The reason of the striking of the stimulant is not its personal relation with the poet but the poet's extraordinary sympathetic power. It is this sympathy (*sahādayatā*), the root of all aesthetic appreciation which makes the poet's emotion roused by the stimuli and the reader's emotion evoked by the poet's expression of the emotion.

The second point to note is that the intensity and degree of the movement of the emotions of the poet and the reader may vary from case to case as the traditional modification (*saṁskāra*) of their emotions are necessarily different. Hence the impact of the same stimuli will strike different poets with varying intensity and again the intensity of the same emotion in the readers will also vary accordingly.

Abhinavagupta (10th C) gives a very brilliant analysis of this poetic process in his commentary on the *Dhvanyāloka* of Ānandavardhana.⁶ The origin of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the great Indian epic written by the first Indian poet, sage Vālmīki is the lamentation of a he-crane for the death of its she-bird due to shooting of a hunter at the time of their erotic meet. The sage of the purest heart noted it and was deeply touched by the sorrow of the bird for which he cursed the hunter to remain unhappy for ever in his life. Thus the permanent emotion in this sage struck by the lamentation of the bird is sorrow (*śoka*) and, when expressed in language, this emotion is manifested as poetry (*śloka*), the central theme of which is the separation of the hero and heroine ending in pathos.

Abhinavagupta asks : whose sorrow is manifested in poetry ? is it the poet's personal emotion ? and answers in the negative. It is not the personal emotion of the sage poet ; had it been so, there would be no question of poetic activity obviously because a man personally afflicted by sorrow cannot write poetry. The lamentation of the bird of course stimulated the permanent emotion of Sorrow in the sage-poet. But Abhinava suggests that an artist's observation is different from others' in so far as his is an impersonal or detached but sympathetic one. The artist observes things and events as if he is witnessing a drama. Hence he is always compared with a yogin in Indian aesthetics because both of them observe and experience the worldly phenomena indifferently without any personal involvement (*tāṭasthya*). They share others' sufferings and happiness by an identification (*tādātmya*) with others which is based on sympathy only.

A step further : it is not also the sorrow of the bird that they identify with. The bird is only an instrument of this stimulation. Through the bird's sorrow they identify with the emotion in its universal form.

It is very interesting to note here that according to Abhinavagupta a poet himself is primarily an aesthete who first relishes the events of the world-drama and then only expresses this relish in his poetry. In the above case the hunter opens the drama by hunting the bird. The he-bird is the principal character (*vibhāva*) who expresses its permanent emotion of sorrow by lamentation, its symptom (*anubhāva*) and the sage perceives the whole scene as the audience of this drama. The sorrow of the bird touches the sage and being sympathetic *hṛdayasamvādi* he identifies his emotion with that of the bird and thus by this process of generalization *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* the identified (or *generalized* or *impersonalized*)

6 Op. cit. I. 5.

permanent emotion (*sorrow*) of the sage is transformed into *Karuṇa rasa* (or tragic joy) which he relished himself; and when it became abundant it overflowed in the form of poetry (*śloka*) being regulated by the compositional principles of prosody etc. ⁷ Thus the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* is the verbal manifestation of this generalized (or depersonalized) or aesthetic emotion of sorrow (*Karuṇa rasa*). It is by the same process, again, that the reader's permanent emotion of sorrow is evoked and generalized (or depersonalized) which he enjoys finally.

Two questions may be raised here : (1) is then the reader's enjoyment of poetry inferior to that of the poet as it is twice removed from the perception of the world-drama or, in other words, as it is an enjoyment of enjoyment? (2) If emotion is the source of poetry, should its intensity and degree condition that of the creation and enjoyment of poetry? That is to say, can we admit that a poet with more powerful emotion of love can write love poems better than others and, similarly, a reader with intense passion can enjoy it better than others? Abhinavagupta would answer that though the reader perceives through the perception of the poet it does not mean that his enjoyment will be inferior to the other's. The intensity of the enjoyment depends upon the intensity of *Samskāra* and upon the degree of identification or generalization of the emotion concerned. Thus the reader's enjoyment may be even sometimes more than the Poet's while less at others. As the poet as well as the reader enjoy the same emotion there is no question of any removal of this enjoyment. Similarly, the answer to the second question is that the creation and the appreciation of art do not depend only upon the intensity of an emotion. The more powerful factor being identification and generalization of the emotion by the power of 'sympathy *sahṛdayatā* it is meaningless to say that a lusty man can write and enjoy love poems or a buffoon can write or enjoy comedies or a hero can write and enjoy heroic poems better than others.

The method of impersonalization of emotion in Indian aesthetics is, then, based on logic and common psychology. There is little mysticism of the romantic and symbolist thinkers or any scientific technicality of the modern classicists in it. Though the Indian thinkers talked of a poetic genius (*pratibhā*) it meant a power of varied perception and ability for novel creations and the idea of super naturality (*alaukikatva*) of the poetic genius differs from Coleridge's

7. *ibid* ; see also *Abhinavabhāratī*, VI. 15 and the same on *rasasūtra* for a detailed analysis of the manifestation of *rasa*.

sense of the term. Art is supernatural in the sense that all the natural phenomena— emotions, ideas, impulses and events when transformed in art in their generalized form lose their causal efficiency or the power of personal affliction. Love loses shame, its immediate reaction, aversion hatred and sorrow pain ; and all in their impersonalized form give the poet and the reader a wholesome joy.

III

Some Indian scholars have paralleled Eliot's idea of 'Objective Correlative' with the idea of *rasa* "The emotion here is *Rasa*, the set of objects, the *vibhāvas*, the situation their patterned, organised presentation and the chain of events include not only the episodic stream but also the stream of emotive reactions of the characters to them the *anubhāvas* and the *Samcāribhāvas*." ⁸ But the first objection to such view is that *vibhāva*, *anubhāva* and *samcāribhāva* must be taken together as a complex whole to produce *rasa* where as Eliot's Oc does not demand such a complex. For him, it appears, any one of the three— objects, situation and a chain of events—may serve the purpose. Besides, a set of objects may be a parallel for *vibhāva*, a situation for *uddīpana*, but a chain of events is is never a parallel for the Indian idea of *anubhāva* and *vyobhicāribhāva*. Abhinava gupta's idea of the relishable (*āsvādayogya*) state of the impersonal emotion in the poet which he expresses in poetry and similarly its evocation of the same impersonalized emotion in the form of *rasa* in the reader is foreign to Eliot and other propounders of the theory of impersonal art in the west. Abhinava's analysis of the problem is far more subtle and precise than Eliot's.

Eliot's application of the objectification of the impersonal emotion to the judgement of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Abhinavagupta would argue is a great failure. Eliot's arguments against the success of the play are :⁹

(i) Hamlet (the man) is dominated by an emotion of disgust which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the external facts that have to express it.

(ii) Hamlet's disgust is occasioned by his mother, but his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it ; his disgust envelops and exceeds her.

(iii) It is a feeling which he cannot understand ; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action.

(iv) The poet Shakespeare did not understand the experience which he wanted to express. It is the buffonery of an emotion which he could not express in art.

8. Krishnachaitanya, *Sanskrit Poetics*, Bombay, 1965 pp. 19-20. 9. *Hamlet* (1919).

And Abhinava's answers to these arguments would have been :

(i) No emotion as such is inexpressible, nor is it in excess of the facts. The truth is that in poetry facts etc. do not state the emotion directly. They suggest it by indirections. This point needs a little elaboration : Ānandavardhana pleads for an indirect way of expression or the suggestive use of language (*pratiyamānārtha* or *dhvani*) as the soul of poetry.¹⁰ Words have two meanings (a) the etymological or direct meaning used in all informational statements such as in history, philosophy and in all sciences (b) and the indirect meaning which is otherwise called *dhvani* (or *Vyañjanā*). When the direct statement is subordinated to the new oblique meaning the impersonalized mental state or emotion emerges into view. Take for example, two expressions regarding the reaction's of maidens on hearing the talk about their marriage—

“When there is a talk of bridegrooms, maidens hold their heads down in bashfulness but there is a perceptible thrill in their bodies, which indicates pleasure in listening to such conversation and their willingness to the proposal (*spṛhā*).”

Here the reaction, the willingness of the maidens being directly stated is just an information where the poetic value is negligible. But in another case in Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhavam* when Pārvatī listens about her marriage from sage Aṅgīrā in front of her father the same reaction of her is stated indirectly.

“As the sage made this proposal, Pārvatī, who was sitting beside her father, hang her head down and began counting silently the leaves of the lotus she was playing with.”

Her hanging down of head and absorption into a trivial occupation are suggestive of her willingness and rapture at the prospect of being married to the great Lord Śiva whom she loves and adores so much. This is the type of expression necessary for poetic emotion.

(ii) Hamlet's mother, who caused the emotion of disgust in him may not be an adequate equivalent or means of expressing this emotion. There is no need that the cause or stimuli should be the means of expressing the emotion.

(iii) *Rasa* or aesthetic emotion does not require a clear understanding of an emotion or feeling in the *vibhāva*. Confused feelings and emotion can be

very well transmuted (or generalized) aesthetically when expressed obliquely. Anandavardhana gives a very striking example of such type.¹¹ Knowing that the husband has been attracted by some other lady and has already enjoyed her and guessing again the state of agitation and anxiety in her husband for a meeting with his beloved the wife is in a confusion whether she should request her husband to cut off all his relations with the beloved or should tolerate this extramarital love of her husband. This confused feeling has been very successfully suggested in her speech.

“You go (to your beloved). Let me alone suffer from long sighs and lamentations. You have betrayed me, but I don’t want that you should also suffer, like me, for your separation from her.”

Though the wife allows her husband for his meeting with the beloved, her intention is not so for how can a wife tolerate willingly the free love of her husband? Nor can she refrain him from going also, because when he has already betrayed her, how can she expect that he would care for her request? Rather she would feel more offended if he avoids her request again. Thus a confused feeling is not beyond the poetic expression, rather it enhances the poetic beauty *Camatkāra* when expressed through suggestion.

(iv) In *Hamlet* Shakespeare fully understands the emotion that he wants to express. It is aversion of Hamlet which is strengthened and enriched by other mental states and has been fully revealed to us by the significant actions *anubhāvas* and drifting thoughts (*sañcāribhāvaso*). Prof. S. C. Sengupta, a very renowned Shakespearean critic of India has very brilliantly exposed that Shakespeare has very successfully projected Hamlet’s aversion largely through this *dhvani* i.e. through Hamlet’s character— his sporadic activity, his deep disgust, his subtle but confused logic, through the descriptions of the court of Elsimore, situations in Denmark, Hamlet’s encounter with the ghost and Ophelia etc.¹²

IV

All this having been said, an important point of argument raised by T. S. Eliot for the readers and critics of poetry still requires examination : “Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry.”¹³ In spite of the fact that poetry is the manifestation not of

11. *ibid* gloss to I. 4. 12. Sengupta, *Aspects of Shakespearean Tragedy*, O. U. P. Calcutta, 1972, p. 158 ff. 13. *S. W.* p. 53.

