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T. S. Eliot's Theory of Impersonality and Henry James: a Note

Several critics have explored the influences that have contributed to Eliot's theory of impersonality; the names usually mentioned are Flaubert, Remy de Gourmont, and Joyce, and among more distant influences, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Augustine. David E. Ward claims in a recent article in *Essays in Criticism* that "two important events helped to precipitate Eliot's idea of Impersonality and the complex, tentative, exploratory account of the nature of creative writing which goes with it".¹ These events were, according to Ward, Pound's propaganda for Remy de Gourmont's criticism between 1917 and 1920 and Joyce's theory of Impersonality as expounded in the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in 1917. Among more remote influences Ward mentions Thomist theology and St. Augustine. But apart from tracing influences, critics also point out that at the beginning of the century Eliot was only *one* of the several voices pleading for the impersonality of the creative artist, thus Arnold Kettle in an essay on James Joyce mentions Stephen Dedalus' theory of depersonalization and adds that this reminds us "that Mr. Eliot was not, in 1917, a lone voice calling".² The purpose of this paper is to show that Kettle's claim is true and that apart from Joyce and Eliot, Henry James was expressing similar thoughts on the depersonalization of the artist, on the sacrificial act in which the artist does not impose his personality on his work but rather surrenders it to the medium in the interest of artistic integrity. The similarity between Eliot's theory and Henry James's thoughts will be shown on passages from the latter's prefaces collected in the volume *The Art of the Novel*. Not that comparisons between James and Eliot

¹ *Essays in Criticism*, April 1967, p. 175.

² *The Modern Age*, Penguin, London 1964, p. 303.

have not been made. Leonard Unger, for example,³ makes perceptive remarks on the cosmopolitan setting that appears so often in both writers, he also draws attention to the resemblance between Prufrock and John Marcher in *The Beast in the Jungle*. It is no accident, either, that both Eliot and James were among the major interests of the late F. O. Matthiessen. But to my knowledge no comparison has been drawn between James's thoughts on impersonality and Eliot's famous theory.

Dealing with the necessity of the creative artist to act within a limited field, James says in his preface to *Roderick Hudson* that an artist must be aware of the limits he will draw and within which he will move, or to quote James: "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so".⁴ The artist should observe the self-imposed limits because only in that restricted field will he be able to achieve his proper aim. And this art of finding and drawing limits is an austere exercise in self-discipline; according to James artists "arrive at /the limits/ by a difficult, dire process of selection and comparison, of surrender and sacrifice".⁵ The artist must come to terms with the specific requirements of the work he is creating, he must subdue himself to rigid discipline and exercise self-restraint, or as Eliot put it, writing on the poet, "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality".⁶ Even the crucial terms used in the two passages are practically identical: "surrender" and (self) "sacrifice". And as for James's thought on self-imposed limits and restraint, we can find almost an identical phrase in Eliot's essay on four Elizabethan dramatists: "It is essential . . . that an artist should consciously or unconsciously draw a circle beyond which he does not trespass . . .".⁷ What Eliot means (and James obviously echoes) is that, on the one hand, the artist's personality should not stick out from his work, but that it should be subjected to the requirements of the medium and, on the other, that the artist should not try to copy or imitate reality but accept convention (in Eliot's sense something like pattern or design) as something of overriding importance. Briefly, both the artist's personality and his

³ T. S. Eliot, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1961.

⁴ *The Art of the Novel*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1950, p. 5.

⁵ *Ib.*, p. 6.

⁶ *Selected Essays*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1932, p. 6-7.

⁷ *Ib.*, p. 93.

material should be transmuted, radically changed in the impersonal creative process. Keeping this in mind we can better understand Eliot's complaint about English drama which has always tried to adhere to literal reality:

The great vice of English drama from Kyd to Galsworthy has been that its aim of realism was unlimited. In one play, *Everyman*, and perhaps in that play only we have a drama within the limitations of art; since Kyd, since *Arden of Feversham*, since, *Yorkshire Tragedy*, there has been no form to arrest, so to speak, the flow of spirit at any particular point before it expands and ends its course in the desert of exact likeness to the reality which is perceived by the most commonplace mind.⁸

We shall find similar thoughts and strictures in Henry James. In his preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* he objects to too much factual evidence in art and calls it "the fatal futility of Fact" and "clumsy Life again at her stupid work"⁹ flourishing, of course, to the detriment of art. Several times in his prefaces James complains of too much life in his works — in other words, to paraphrase Eliot, the work is not within the limitations of art. James thought, for example, that in *Roderick Hudson* "the multiplication of touches had produced even more life than the subject required"¹⁰ and in the preface to *The Altar of the Dead* he again mentions "the old burden of the much life and the little art . . ."¹¹

It is because of this need for discipline of art over the chaos of life and the waywardness of emotions that James distrusts the first-person novel; as he says in his preface to *The Ambassadors*, in this novel he has refused to assume the romantic privilege of 'the first person' — "the darkest abyss of romance this, inveterately, when enjoyed on the grand scale . . . Suffice it, to be brief, that the first person, in the long piece, is a form foredoomed to looseness, and that looseness, never much my affair, had never been so little so as on this particular occasion".¹² A little later James stresses that Strether in *The Ambassadors* "has to keep in view proprieties much stiffer and more salutary than any our straight and credulous gape are likely to bring home to him, has exhibitional conditions to meet . . . that forbid the terrible fluidity of self-revelation".¹³ We almost seem to be reading one of the anti-romantic pronouncements by T. E. Hulme or early Eliot. It should also be noted that, compared with the dreaded loose-

⁸ *Ib.*, p. 93.

⁹ *The Art of the Novel*, p. 121—122.

¹⁰ *Ib.*, p. 19.

¹¹ *Ib.*, p. 259.

¹² *Ib.*, p. 320.

¹³ *Ib.*, p. 231.

ness and fluidity of the romantic first-person narration, Strether's "much stiffer proprieties" are "more salutary".

But the closest resemblance with Eliot's theory of impersonality and its best-known formulation in the catalyst comparison comes from James's introduction to the volume with "The Lesson of The Master" as title story. Writing about the "Coxon Fund" story which is to some extent based on Coleridge's biography, James says that he should briefly like to state his views on the possibility of transplantation of a real person into a work of art. As he says — and the whole passage is worth quoting —

What I should, for that matter, like most to go into here... is the so interesting question — for the most part, it strikes me, too confusedly treated — of the story-teller's "real person" or actual contemporary transplanted and exhibited. But this pursuit would take us far, such radical revision do the common laxities of the case, as generally handled, seem to call for. No such process is *effectively* possible, we must hold, as the imputed act of transplanting; an act essentially not mechanical, but thinkable rather — so far as thinkable at all — in chemical, almost mystical terms. We can surely account for nothing in the novelist's work that hasn't passed through the crucible of his imagination, hasn't, in that perpetually simmering cauldron his intellectual *pot-au-feu*, been reduced to savoury fusion. We here figure the morsel, of course, not as boiled to nothing, but as exposed, in return for the taste it gives out, to a new and richer saturation. In this state it is in due course picked out and served, and a meagre esteem will await, a poor importance attend it, if it doesn't speak most of its late genial medium, the good, the wonderful company it has, as I hint, aesthetically kept. It has entered, in fine, into new relations, it emerges for new ones. Its final savour has been constituted, but its prime identity destroyed — which is what was to be demonstrated. Thus it has become a different and, thanks to a rare alchemy, a better thing. Therefore let us have here as little as possible about its "being" Mr. This or Mrs. That. If it adjusts itself with the least truth to its new life it can't possibly be either. If it gracelessly refers itself to either, if it persists as the impression not artistically dealt with, it shames the honour offered it and can only be spoken of as having ceased to be a thing of fact and yet not become a thing of truth.¹⁴

First of all we should note that the type of comparison is identical with that of Eliot; chemical process is taken in both cases for illustration with its suggestions of essential change and fusion into new combinations. Like Eliot, James repeats that no act of mechanical transplantation is possible, what is happening in the creative process can only be conceived "in chemical, almost mystical terms". The outcome must, if it is to achieve the dignity of a work of art, "speak most of its late genial medium, ... the wonderful company it has ... aesthetically kept". Eliot maintains that the result of the im-

¹⁴ *Ib.*, p. 230—231.

personal process is the emergence of something radically new and in James's terms "its final savour has been constituted, but its prime identity destroyed"; therefore it is useless to ask questions about the resemblance to Mr. This or Mrs. That. Essentially this amounts to the same claim as Eliot's catalyst comparison with only a shift of emphasis. While Eliot stresses that the personality of the poet remains unchanged after the creative process, James maintains that the final product has no similarity with the original identity which is practically the same claim but viewed from the opposite angle. That James's comparison between the creative act and chemical process was not only casual or accidental but rather symptomatic of his view of the basic changes taking place in artistic production, can be seen in the fact that he used the same comparison in other places as well. In the preface to *The Author of Beltraffio* James speaks of "the innumerable repeated chemical reductions and condensations" in the process of creating a short story, while in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton* he calls the novelist "the modern alchemist" thus attributing to the artist not only the power of "transfusing" reality but also of performing deeds that cannot be understood or adequately described in rational terms.