

AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES OF IMPERSONALITY IN POETRY

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C.G. Jung, in his provocative essay "Psychology and Literature," seems to have denied the general definition of lyric poetry as "the personal expression of personal emotion."¹ He admits that there are personal factors concealed in poetic creation but comments that, in the art itself, the personal idiosyncrasies are not essential. He points out that what is essential in a work of art is that it should rise far above the realm of personal life and speak from the spirit and heart of the poet as man to the spirit and heart of mankind.² This reminds us, certainly, of Wordsworth's famous statement of poetry--"What is a poet? . . . He is a man speaking to men."³ Jung's emphasis, as we can see, is the idea of poet as an artist, not as a person. In this way, the poet is objective and impersonal--even inhuman--for as an artist he is his work, not a human being. This is to say, the poet on the one hand is a human being with a personal life, while on the other hand he is an impersonal, creative process. Jung maintains that

Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him. As a human being he may have moods and a will and personal aims, but as an artist he is "man" in a higher sense--he is "collective man"--one who carries and shapes the unconscious, psychic life of mankind.⁴

In short, if we are to believe in Jung, poetry then is the product of the impersonal or transpersonal unconscious--a term he has used elsewhere--⁵ rather than the result of per-

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1. C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. W. S. Dell and C. F. Baynes (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1933), pp. 152-72.
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
 3. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, Selected Poems and Sonnets*, ed., Carlos Baker (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1954), p. 13.
 4. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, p. 169.
 5. C.G. Jung, "The Personal and the Collective (or Transpersonal) Unconscious," in his *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (New York: World Publ. Co., 1956), pp. 74-89.

sonal emotion. What lives in the work of art is man, not the individual; the experience of the single human being does not count, but only human existence.

What Jung has said, no doubt, is the concept of primordial experience, the experience that has existed since the dawn of culture. This primordial experience, or archetype, or collective unconscious, is universal and magical; it is a mysterious force which animates the life of art and outgrows the poet's personal experience. In other words, artistic disposition involves an overweight of collective psychic life as against the personal. That is why, Jung concludes in the above-mentioned essay, every great work of art is objective and impersonal:

The secret of artistic creation and of the effectiveness of art is to be found in a return to the state of *participation mystique*--to that level of experience at which it is man who lives, and not the individual. . . . This is why every great work of art is objective and impersonal, but none the less profoundly moves us each of all. And this is also why the personal life of the poet cannot be held essential to his art--but at most a help or a hindrance to his creative task. He may go the way of a Philistine, a good citizen, a neurotic, a fool or a criminal. His personal career may be inevitable and interesting, but it does not explain the poet.⁶

T.S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," attacks Wordsworth's "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. . . recollected in tranquillity"⁷ as being an inexact formula. He argues that it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor tranquillity, but a concentration of various experiences, and these experiences are not "recollected." The business of the poet is not to find new emotions but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all.⁸ He further states 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 the personality. To him, the poet has not a "personality" to express but a particular medium, in which impressions and experiences combine in a peculiar and unexpected way. He terms this "particular medium" or "concentration" as *significant* emotion which is impersonal.⁹ That is to say, emotion of the poem itself but not the poet. Eliot's well-known passage runs as follows:

6. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, p. 172.

7. The passage reads: "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind." *The Prelude, Selected Poems and Sonnets*, pp. 25-6.

8. T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1950), p. 9.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is an expression of *significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach his impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious; not of what is dead, but of what is already living.¹⁰

Eliot's point, to be sure, resembles that of Jung's. And his observation of tradition as essential in the creation of poetry is analogous to the conception of archetype, for tradition, like primordial experience, has existed since the beginning of culture. Both tradition and archetype (or primordial experience, or collective unconscious) are "what is already living." They are the present, the past, and even the future. When Eliot speaks of *significant* emotion, we may recall a somewhat similar statement made by him in 1953:

If the poem were exclusively for the author, it would be a poem in a private and unknown language; and a poem which was a poem only for the author would not be a poem at all.¹¹

Though the issue in question is the impersonality of poetry, we should be aware that poetry is primarily constituted by personal elements; after all, it is the poet who writes poetry, not the "innate drive," or "mysterious force," or, to employ a more common term which seems to have the equivalence: "inspiration." Jung has indicated that the poet is the instrument of art which makes him realize its purposes, but such realization requires the personal talent. That is, the choice of materials and images, the arrangement of words and order, all rely on the personal talent, on the poet as a *person*. Eliot's title, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," I believe, seems to imply this. Poet as an artist exists only when a piece of art is accomplished. And before he becomes an artist, that is, a "man" or "collective man," he is a person with "personal peculiarities." And after a piece of art is completed, he may still be a person if his creation fails him to be an artist, as Jung puts it

10. Ibid., p. 11.

11. A lecture delivered by Eliot to the audience of the 11th Annual Lecture of the National Book League at Westminster on November 19, 1953, later published in book form entitled *The Three Voices of Poetry* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 20. Also included in *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1969), pp. 96-112.

clearly that it is the great work of art that is objective and impersonal. In short, the poet who produces good poetry is an artist, else he is not. Or simply, good poetry is impersonal, bad poetry is personal.

In fact we are dealing with the aesthetic process of impersonality in the creation of poetry. I have stated earlier that before a poet becomes an artist, he is a person; and as a person, he possesses personal peculiarities. When his personal peculiarities are being stimulated by the external world, a certain reaction occurs in him; the work of art is the result of setting the reaction in proper words and order. Its value lies in the language he employs, and the uniqueness of the experience he aims to express. One of the powers that drives the poet to write poetry is perhaps dissatisfaction. The poet is always in search of something, in order to gain some degree of satisfaction, or value. We may say that poetry is the product from dissatisfaction to satisfaction. The poet is filled with a moment of gratification when he finally finds an outlet for his "powerful feeling." In the process of artistic creation, the poet begins as a person, when the work is done, he is no longer the same self as in the process of creation. In other words, upon completion of the poem, the poem becomes the poet's child. The poet at this stage separates from his product. We may describe this process as from personal to impersonal. It is personal when the poet is writing poetry; after that, the poem is an independent "living" object with its own characteristic.

When Jung remarks that a poet is one who carries and shapes the unconscious psychic life of mankind, he is saying that during the process of creation, the collective unconscious is the dominant force of the whole business. This might be true, since artistic creation is a kind of psychic activity, and the collective unconscious might intrude the personal unconscious and assimilate the latter. This process is perhaps what Eliot calls "depersonalization." The business of the poet, he says, "is the continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."¹² This conception of impersonality, and that of Jung's, doubtless to say, are like the one Keats makes with his term *negative capability*. The term, in a way ambiguous, appears in a letter to his brothers George and Thomas:

The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth--Examine King Lear and you will find this exemplified throughout Several things

12. *Selected Essays*, p. 6.

dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously- -I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason- Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.¹³

By “negative capability” Keats not only means poetry is objective and impersonal, but thinks of beauty as providing a form of knowledge that cannot be gained by means of “consecutive reasoning.”¹⁴ And his mode of knowledge is not discursive, but the sense of beauty. The poet should have the power to negate himself, to get out of himself by imagination, and to project himself into his object. Keats’s idea of poetry is essentially empathic, and poetic empathy, Richard Harter Fogle remarks,

Is a way of thinking in which the poet seems to project himself into and identify himself with his subject. Some psychologists have thought that empathy is the basis of knowledge: that we perceive only by unconsciously identifying ourselves with the object of perception. However this may be, in Keats empathy is a sensuous imagination that gives life and meaning to bodies and forms. It commences with strong physical sensations, but if it is valuable goes beyond them. We can, of course, notice empathy in poetry only when the poet is skillful enough to convey it.¹⁵

Keats’s ability to fuse and to unify, to concentrate and to contemplate, and certainly to intensify by way of imagination, leads him to declare that “I am certain of the Heart’s affections and the truth of imagination- -What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth- -whether it existed before or not.”¹⁶ Hence the famous equation “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” in the concluding couplet of “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”¹⁷ By beauty Keats means, Fogle further observes, “not the result of excluding the disagreeable, but a fusion

13. “To George and Thomas Keats,” 21, 27(?) December 1817, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 42-43.

14. Hazard Adams, ed. *Critical Theory Since Plato* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), p. 472.

15. Richard Harter Fogle, ed., *John Keats: Selected Poetry and Letters* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. xiii.

16. “To Benjamin Bailey,” 22 November 1817, *Letter of John Keats*, p. 37.

17. *Keats: Poetical Works*, ed. H. W. Garrod (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 210.

of elements that is obtained by intense contemplation and mental activity. Evil, triviality, misfortune, pain-- he reconciles himself to the existence of these by gazing at them fully, fixing upon them intensely."¹⁸ And the mental activity, or the aesthetic process of impersonality in the creation of poetry includes, "The setting sun will always set me to rights-- or if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel."¹⁹

Keats's capability to harmonize, to fuse and to intensify with his subject or external phenomena, is reflected in another letter:

The roaring of the wind is my wife and the Stars through the window pane are my Children. The mighty abstract Idea I have of Beauty in all things stifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness--an amiable wife and sweet Children I contemplate as a part of that Beauty--but I must have a thousand of those beautiful particles to fill up my heart. I feel more and more every day, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds.²⁰

This statement confirms in part what Eliot regards "a continual extinction of personality." The poet has no character, he melts with everything. He has no identity. He is nothing and yet at the same time he is everything. This is probably what Keats has in mind when he praises Shakespeare to be a man of achievement in literature, which he means, to be sure, the objective and impersonal aspect of Shakespeare's drama--that is, without imposing one's personality and judgment on the personae, and without "any irritable reaching after fact and reason." In short, Shakespeare possesses what Keats considers the principal factor of successful composition: the sense of beauty. Shakespeare's drama, like Keats's poetry, does not advance opinions or come to explicit conclusions. It presents good and evil alike, because poetry lives in "gusto", in "relish," not in its morality or philosophy.²¹ Keats maintains that:

As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself--it has no self--it is every thing and nothing--It has no character--it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated--It has as

18. Fogle, p. vi.

19. "To Benjamin Bailey," 22 Nov. 1817, *Letters of John Keats*, p. 38.

20. "To George and Georgiana Keats," 31 Oct. 1818, *ibid.*, p. 170.

21. Fogle, p. viii.

much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no identity--he is continually in for [ming?] --and filling some other Body--The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them unchangeable attribute--the poet has none; no identity--he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures.²²

Keats's theory of *negative capability*, that is, "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason," is later developed by Edward Bullough (1880-1934) in a more lucid way. Bullough calls this aesthetic principle *psychical distance*, and the illustration he offers is interesting:

Imagine a fog at sea: for most people it is an experience of acute unpleasantness. Apart from the physical annoyance and remoter forms of discomfort such as delays, it is apt to produce feelings of peculiar anxiety, fears of invisible dangers, strains of watching and listening for distant and unlocalized signals. The listless movements of the ship and her warning calls soon tell upon the nerves of the passengers; and that special, expectant, tacit anxiety and nervousness, always associated with this experience, make a fog the dreaded terror of the sea (all the more terrifying because of its very silence and gentleness) for expert seafarer no less than for the ignorant landsman. . . . Nevertheless, a fog at sea can be a source of intense relish and enjoyment. Abstract from the experience of the sea fog, for the moment, its danger and practical unpleasantness. . . direct the attention to the features "objectively" constituting the phenomenon . . . observe the carrying power of the air. . . note the curious creamy smoothness of the water. . . and, above all, the strange solitude and remoteness from the world. . . . It is a difference of outlook, due--if such a metaphor is permissible--to the insertion of distance.²³

Bullough's concern here is to transcend the subject-object tradition by emphasizing *psychical distance*, as Keats talks about it in terms of *negative capability*. In the fog example above, Bullough explains that the transformation by distance can be achieved by putting the phenomenon out of gear with our practical actual self, by allowing it to stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends. That is to say, to look at the unusual phenomenon objectively, to be "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without irritable reaching after fact and reason." Bullough stresses that we should treat the "sub-

22. "To Richard Woodhouse," 27 October 1818, *Letters of John Keats*, p. 157.

23. Edward Bullough, " 'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle," in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, Inc., 1971), pp. 754-65.

jective' affections not as modes of *our* being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon."²⁴ Consequently, the empathic experience would not be a normal one, and he points out that the sudden view of things from their reverse, usually unnoticed, side, comes upon us as revelation, and such revelations are precisely those of art, therefore, *psychical distance* is a factor of all art. In short, this involves the poet's attitude towards his materials, and to be "a man of achievement in literature," the quality of negative capability, or psychical distance, or, as Eliot puts it, the ability of continual self-sacrifice and continual extinction of personality, is an inevitable factor.

24. Ibid., p. 756.