Objectivity and Subjectivity in Eliot`s Critical Theory

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January 2011
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Contrary to the general accepted opinion, Eliot`s critical theory is not governed only by objectivism but it represents a development from an extreme objectivism to a needed critical subjective point of view over the work of art. Eliot`s critical development during time has its own causes and personal goals which cannot serve to the pursuit of the objective truth.

I

T.S. Eliot was claimed to be the founder of New Criticism, he was known as the literary critic who managed to change the cannon of literary taste at the beginning of 20th century by imposing his doctrine of the objective correlative and his impersonal theory in the art of the poet. There was no difference between the poetic and critical theory for him as Eliot himself admitted that “his criticism was essentially a function or by-product of his poetic enterprise”. Still, these two critical literary concepts were considered pernicious and have inspired polemical discussion among other critics.

In spite of the two maintained concepts, Eliot`s poetry represents a personal belief and contains a significant aspect of subjectivity. The subjective In Eliot`s critical theory is but a development from the author`s identified theory of objectivism.

In 1856 John Ruskin complained that ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ are “two of the most objectionable words that were ever coined by troublesomeness of metaphysicians...No words can be more exquisitely, and in all points, useless”. Although problematic and vague, these notions are crucial for the critical analysis and they are defining two opposite points on a scale of varying degrees of dependence on the personal. Therefore the objective is what is independent of the individual human mind, its beliefs and wishes whereas the subjective expresses personal feelings and prejudices. In Eliot`s critical theory the objective concentrates on the object, that means the literary work whose text is independent from the author`s psychological state and the reader`s impressions but this doctrine proves to be an intentional and affective fallacies.

II

Eliot`s early critical theory (1916-1927) admitted strongly that only objectivity was essential and valid criticism and the impersonal, objective and constituted facts were imposed as the model of science to fallow in criticism but as time was passing, due to Eliot`s growing maturity and change of his critical interests, it is noticed that the importance and the value of subjectivity won a more and more acceptance and recognition in “the relation of poetry to the spiritual and social life”. Actually, the subjective view was present in Eliot`s mind even in his early and strongly objectivist critical theory.

Still, in 1916, his first year as a professional critic, Eliot establishes the importance of objectivity and impersonality as the “gift of detachment” and later as “the disinterested exercise of intelligence” which regards “solely and steadfastly at the object”. By 1919 Eliot was maintaining that “critics are impersonal people...and avoid intimacies with authors”. In the 1920 article, “The Perfect Critic”, he criticises the
subjective approach of the impressionistic critics, Symons and Pater, and complains about Coleridge’s biased criticism in his own personal and emotional metaphysical interest. He maintains that “a literary critic should have no emotions except those immediately provoked by a work of art – and these are...perhaps not to be called emotions at all”. The point in common between Eliot and Arnold is “to see the object as it really is” for achieving “a pure contemplation from which all the accidents of personal emotion are removed”. The adequate critical attitude towards a work of art is “to detach it from ourselves, to reach a state of pure contemplation” and the aim was “to establish a criticism which should be independent of temperament.”

The main tools which sustained Eliot’s impersonal objectivity in “The Function Of Criticism” (1923) were restricted to facts “outside the individual” and objective methods of comparison and analysis for Eliot believed that “the critic should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudices and cranks...and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible in the common pursuit of true judgement”. Therefore his critical goal was to reach an objective judgement “something outside of ourselves which may provisionally be called truth”.

But the arise of subjective view on criticism makes itself noticed in Eliot’s essay “The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism” (1932) when the author publically condemns pure objectivism and detached, impersonal appreciations. He sees now his previous theories as an impossible ideal to put in practice “the appreciation of art is an affair of limited and transient human beings existing in space and time” because such impersonal objectivity would deplete our experience of poetry and the value we derive from it, since these require that we engage the poem with our self and entire personality and Eliot quotes that “a deliberate effort to put out of mind all...convictions and passionate beliefs about life,...you are in danger of seeking from poetry some illusory pure enjoyment, of separating poetry from everything else in the world, and cheating yourself out of a great deal that poetry has to give to your development”. So, there must be personal convictions because otherwise it is senseless “what you get in the end by this process is...but a mere unrelated heap of charming stanzas, the debris of poetry rather than the poetry itself” and the poetry becomes a message transmitted by its author towards which “if you adopt no attitude, you will tend to evacuate it of all significance”. Seen as a whole, one poem is related to the changing needs of its author and influenced by society so its appreciation is not entirely timeless.

Another definition which reflects Eliot’s affective, personal criticism on the meaning of poetry is found in one of his last important essay “The Frontiers of Criticism” (1956): “the meaning of the poem as a whole... is what the poem means to different sensitive readers...a valid interpretation must be at the same time an interpretation of my own feelings when I read it”.

As a conclusion, Eliot’s critical theory underwent a complete development. From a radical objectivist stance he accepts the necessity of the subjectivist dimension both over the role of poetry but also over the function of the literary critic who “is not merely a technical expert, who has learned the rules to be observed by the writers he criticizes: the critic must be the whole man, a man with convictions and principles, and of knowledge and experience of life”.
Although Eliot was regarded more for his impersonal objectivity theory, the fact that he finally embraced the role of the subjective and the personal in the tradition of poetry it is encouraging for the defenders who sustain the personal and subjective response in criticism.

But Eliot’s critical conversion is full of paradoxes. On one hand, he never admitted that his earlier criticism was wrong and misguided and, on the other hand, the impersonal objectivity theory still remained more powerful and superior than his literary critical notions of the later years. These paradoxes could be explained basically through the difference between practical criticism and critical theory. In fact, Eliot did not practice what he theoretically sustained. He only formulated his early critical concepts in function of his own personal needs and ambitions as a young aspiring poet praising the Metaphysical and Elizabethan poets because they provided him a useful influence on the type of poetry he could and wanted to write while despising the Romantics because they were unhelpful to him in his writings and did not suited to his own interests. Eliot himself justifies his early personal needs in the essay “To Criticize the Critic” (1961) by admitting that: “in my earlier criticism, both in my general affirmations about poetry and in writing about authors who had influenced me, I was implicitly defending the sort of poetry that I and my friends wrote” and twenty years earlier in “The Music of Poetry” (1942), Eliot was maintaining the same principles so, in his critical writings, he “is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing, or to formulate the kind that he wants to write. Especially when he is young, and actively engaged in battling for the kind of poetry which he practices, he sees the poetry of the past in relation to his own: and his gratitude to those dead poets from whom he has learned, as well as his indifference to those whose aims have been alien to his own, may be exaggerated”.

T.S. Eliot formulated the early critical impersonal objectivity theory in function of his personal and ambitious needs as a poet and, since he had already achieved having success and the recognition of his ideas by other critics, it seemed that later his criticism was more detached or disinterested from his poetic aims. Yet, For Eliot, the best critic had always been the practicing poet who had to battle for his own poetry to gain acceptance for “the artist is...oftenest to be depended upon as a critic; his criticism will be criticism, and not the satisfaction of a suppressed creative wish – which, in most other persons, is apt to interfere fatally” and not just an informed but detached observer of the ideal order of poetic tradition interested in the common pursuit of true judgement.

In defending his critical ideals of objectivity and disinterestedness (“The Perfect Critic” and “The Function of Criticism”), Eliot defends that “a critic must have a very developed sense of fact”, he makes no difference between a critic and a poet by saying that “the practitioners have clarified and reduced to a state of fact all the feelings that…. [other critics and lovers of poetry] can only enjoy in the most nebulous form” and argues that only the poet-critic who is dealing with facts and poetical technique is able to transform poetry “into something precise, tractable, under control”. Still, Eliot seems to ignore that the practicing poet will not use his knowledge objectively and disinterestedly to reach the absolute true judgement but to creating a piece of art. Although much defended in the early years, Eliot finally abandons the objectivism for
to maintain a consistent critical theory on the subjective role of the practicing poet-critic who intrinsically is personally involved and not disinterested or detached.

As a final conclusion, besides reaching the objective truth, there are other valid goals which follow the acceptance of a new style of poetry in literary criticism. The acceptance of Eliot’s critical subjectivity did not mean that criticism have to be totally subjective, neither purely impersonal and objective but a mixture in between because both subjective and objective are two poles on a scale of varying degrees of dependence on the personal.