

한국 T. S. 엘리엇 학회 독회

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장소: 고려대 국제관 411호

발표: 金洋旬

1. From “Modern Tendencies in Poetry” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*.

[This essay originated as a lecture that TSE delivered on 28 Oct 1919 in the Conference Hall, Westminster, under the auspices of the Arts League of Service, an organization founded in Apr 1919 to “bring the Arts into Everyday Life” and to “establish a closer bond between the Community and the Artist,” as its letterhead states.] (222)

Having thus disposed of half of the responsibility, my business is, I believe, to endeavour to determine what is meant by “modern” poetry, and to trace, among the variety of currents and eddies, what is the line of true poetry, as distinguished from mere novelties. How are we to decide what is really new? In what sense must a poet be “of his time” to be really a good poet? (212)

His personality has not been lost, but has gone, all the important part of it, into the work. . . . There is this same inevitability and impersonality about the work of a great poet. The elements were there to be combined, the work to be done; the great poet is prolonging the work of the people who preceded him, and laying out the work for those who follow him; the greater the poet, the most evident his hand in every line, and the more elusive his personality.

This analogy illustrates two points of resemblance, or two aspects of the same resemblance, between the scientist and the poet. Great poetry is something into which personality is completely *déversée*, and it is something which is a part of Poetry. Not only do all great poets seem to have something in common, but they seem like parts of one Mind, working under different conditions and at different times.

The mature poet, in the operations of his mind, works like the chemist. He is aware, not that he wants to say something, but that there is something to be said. He is aware of a great number and variety of elements which can be combined into new and important compounds: his training has given him knowledge of what the elements have been made to do already, and has made him exceptionally sensitive to what they can be made to do. He is in tune for perceiving new relations, as the scientist is. And just as a scientist may excel more in the analytic, the observing, or the constructive work of science, so a poet may be more gifted either in analysis or in construction. But for either or for both, his is a trained sensibility.

He possesses a variety of feelings to make use of. But in his operation upon them, he is not particularly interested in them because they are *his* feelings; it is only as he is able to regard these feelings as existing apart from him, just as apart as the chemical from the chemist, that he can work them into art. What constitutes the terrible authenticity of Villon's testaments is that he *saw* his feelings, watched them, as coldly as an astronomer watches a comet; and without this cold and scientific observation he could never have given his feelings their permanent intensity.

The personality of the poet or of the artist operates in a way which I offer in a metaphor. The material civilisation of a country is sometimes measured by the amount of sulphuric acid it uses. England and Germany use the most sulphuric acid. Now, for the production of this acid, as of many other important products of industrial chemistry, it is necessary to combine two gases which, if simply placed in the same vessel will not mix. Introduce a bit of platinum, and the combination takes place. The platinum does not enter into the combination, but merely looks on. The operation is called, I believe, catalysis, and the platinum, a catalyst. The artist's mind is a catalyst; it looks on; the gases may have been part of his mind but they are not part of it at the time when he is effecting them to join in exactly that way.

Here a difficulty interposes itself: we know, or think we know, what is meant by progress in science; but is there the same kind of progress in poetry—is there any progress in poetry? I have been leading up to this difficulty. We want to know whether the identity, or analogy, between science and poetry is close enough to throw any light on the changes in poetry from time to time. For we object at once that while past work in science appears of value only because of its being the basis of present conclusions and future discoveries, past poetry retains a permanent value equal and alongside of contemporary and future work. I think that at least this obstacle might be attenuated, from both sides; but it is not at present pertinent to make more than one point. The life of our “heritage” of literature is dependent upon the continuance of literature. (214-15)

I have, up to this point, indicated what I believe to be the attitude and the equipment of the modern poet. His attitude will be at least *analogous* to that of the scientist: and he will include the analytical interest, the interest of curiosity, that is the romantic element, and constructive interest, that is the classical element. To his interests there is no definite bound, either in the study of technique, or in the investigation of feelings, sensations, emotions, and their possible chemical combinations. He may be perceptive of any or all of the ingredients in the modern world, scientific, historical, political, philosophical, provided that what he manipulates is the emotional or feeling co-efficients of these subjects in the human mind. (218)

There are writers much more modern, and trying to do something much more difficult and interesting than this, whose weakness is at bottom the same. They wish to evoke an emotion for which they have not found the sensory equivalent. They may *feel* the emotion, but you cannot put mere feelings into language; the thing is to *cease to feel* the emotion, to *see* it as the objective equivalent for it. And no matter how much more subtle or modern the emotion is than our

rabbit, you must find the formula for it. We might almost work out the James-Lange theory of emotion for poetry: an emotion *is* the physical equivalent. Only, in poetry, some very small event, a dropping of a book, a turning toward the door, a silence, may give the emotion for the literary purpose.

You will find that many of the second rate poets are second rate because of this attempt to deal with emotions direct instead of through the senses. But now, on the other side of the hall, we see a number of poets engaged in a different, and perhaps much more deliberate pursuit. (220)

. . . the poet whom I have represented to you—whom I have drawn, of course, rather larger than life—with his great equipment: he has *something* to offer, which the most intelligent, sensitive and diligent of his admirers a hundred years hence must miss, and which his contemporary public, far less intelligent, sensitive, and diligent, can have: that is his contemporaneity. (222)

2. From “The Preacher as Artist” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*.

3. From “A Brief Treatise on the Criticism of Poetry” in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*.

4. From *The Waste Land*

Falling towers

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

Vienna London

Unreal (“What the Thunder Said”)

I sat upon the shore

Fishing, with the arid plain behind me

Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie
These fragments I have shored against my ruins
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
Shantih shantih shantih

Cf. From "Dimensions for a Novel," in *Prose* by Elizabeth Bishop.

Mr. T. S. Eliot in his essay "Tradition and [the] Individual Talent" speaks in this way of the individual artist's duty to the past:

The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.

Mr. Eliot is of course speaking of the placing of works of art in their place in the line of tradition, but by changing the subject of the paragraph I find it puts into words, exactly, a certain aspect of the novel. Novels as we know them are still fairly linear; they go

along, in some sort of army style; I can think of none to which the march figure could not be applied. We may have halts and retreats and flights in disorder—but that we are moving from one point (usually in time) to another is always certain. The author guides us along this line of march, marshals and directs.

This is Sunday. If I try to think of Friday I cannot recreate Friday pure and simple, exactly as it was. It has been changed for me by the intervening Saturday. A certain piece of work that on Friday I planned to have finished on Saturday I did not finish, so that now looking back from Sunday I discover a certain ironic tinge about Friday evening. Someone came to see me Friday afternoon whom I was delighted to see; but since that time many things have come back to mind and it is impossible to look at the visitor with the eyes of Friday. Saturday will always intervene, and Friday and Saturday will come between me and Thursday. A constant process of adjustment is going on about the past—every ingredient dropped into it from the present must affect the whole. (481-82)

To requote again: “The existing monuments [read moments] form an ideal order among themselves . . .” and, “The existing order is complete before the new work arrives . . .”

Almost, it seems to me, one is born with a perfect sense of generalities. At five years one looks around the dinner table at the cumulative family with as great a sense of recognition and understanding as ever comes later on. There is always an absolute pitch, a perfection to the understanding which may shift, branch out suddenly, or retreat, and yet can never be “improved on.” The existing order is complete; every other is absorbed into it. When you see someone for the first time, in the blank moment just before or during a hand-shake, this knowledge of them slips into the mind and no matter what you may learn of them later this is always the first fact about them: a knowledge of recognition which when compared to the things you may learn later is much the more amazing. The connection between this and my idea of the interplay

of influence between present and past may seem at first a little obscure, but in reality the latter depends directly upon it. I can think of the existing moments which make up their "ideal order" as existing first of all as these moments of recognition. From a vacant pinpoint of certainty start out these geometrically accurate lines, star-beams, pricking out the past, or present, or casting ahead into the future. (483-84)