

T.S. ELIOT AND THE OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE

T.S. Eliot's theory of the objective correlative, which has assumed an important place in modern poetry criticism has been more often discussed than understood. The following discussion attempts to place this perennially relevant concept in perspective and to offer some simple, elucidatory comments on its meaning and application.

The theory first appeared in Eliot's discussion of Hamlet. Puzzled by the faults (as Eliot saw them) in the play, Eliot concluded that the weakness lay in the fact that Hamlet's emotion was in excess of the external facts that had caused it. From this he postulated that "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events that 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 invoked." 1

Although Eliot was not the first to use this concept (Santayana had discussed it as early as 1900) and though he later dissociated himself from it, the term quickly became a locus classicus in criticism and was used by critics as a critical touchstone in the judgement of poetry both early and modern.

To a large extent the "objective correlative" indicates the direction that modern poetry, at that time particularly that of the Imagist school, was taking. It had been commonly held that emotion and feeling would be inexpressible if it could not be projected into suitable discursive language. The comment by Ludwig Wittgenstein that "everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly" sums up this mode of thought. 2

The Imagists, of whom Eliot was one, challenged this exclusive claim for discursive symbolism, maintaining that discursive language could not express the intricate interplay of feeling, expression, memory and fancy as images could. The Imagists claimed that rather than describe an experience, the best way to convey the feeling held was to embody it; to present the experience in such a way that the emotion contained would be distilled into the reader's mind. The "objective correlative", which called for emotion to be expressed in terms of a concrete object, was the obvious suitable formula.

Critics of the movement viewed these ideas with suspicion, seeing that the Imagists would only carry on the excesses of Romantic Symbolism. On the contrary Pound and Eliot felt that the move back towards the concrete would correct the faults of Romanticism. There is in fact a close connection between a correlative and a symbol, the difference between the two consisting mainly of a difference in range of meaning. The symbol is usually employed as a representation of a particular thought or feeling and may have many layers of meaning. The correlative or the imagistic symbol is more concerned with presentation; finding means of realizing feelings and emotions in a concrete way. Whereas in a symbolic poem the symbols used may represent different things at different times, the successful use of correlatives depends on their having the same common denominator, that is, the meaning or the feeling embodied in each one should be the same as all others and should be the emotion that the poet wishes the reader to feel.

This then places a high degree of responsibility on the artist. The successful employment of objective correlatives will depend largely on the sensitivity of the writer to his feelings and experience and his ability to select from them correctly. The experience the poet can choose from may range from chance impressions of life to carefully sought and selected events. Kristian Smidt, discussing this matter, maintains that the effort of objectification must begin with the selection of subject-matter. The poet has to recognize something inherent in his own experiences (or invented ones) that on reception will evoke the intended feeling. 3

T.S. Eliot constantly employs this method of select experience in his own poetry (although Smidt complained that Eliot often resorted to private memories which had meaning for him alone). The "Wasteland" is based on an externalized structure of parallel myths which, though they differ in appearance, stress the dilemma of the human situation as Eliot perceived it. Moreover Eliot often carried the process of objectification even further by selecting a persona such as Tiresias in the "Wasteland" or the old man in "Gerontion" whose situation was entirely removed from his own. F.O. Matthiesson defends this practice, claiming that "by choosing a character apart from his own immediate experience he is able to concentrate entirely, not on his own feelings, but on the creation of his poem". 4 The poet's personal passions become the transmuted material of his poetry by which he can express objective and universal truths in terms of subjective experiences and truths.

Only by finding the right situation and the right persona and distancing them from himself, can the poet be assured of success, which, according to Mathiesson, did occur in Milton's "Samson Agonistes" but not in Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound", where "failure to find an adequate chain of events and a consequent confusion of purely personal feelings with those of the hero leaves the poem vague and vaporous." 5

Poetry of the objective correlative has been criticized on the grounds that the stringing of images together results in poems that are shapeless and aimless. Eliot, however, would reply that a ratiocinative approach to poetry is a far easier task for poets than the use of rigorous intricate and unrelenting logic of images. 6 The process of image making does not allow for any slackening of poetic tension. The poet must be strongly disciplined to ensure that he produces a pattern of co-ordinated images that allow the reader to receive the desired feeling. Moreover Eliot places great emphasis on the need to find the correct rhythm and cadence as these play an important role in the communication of feeling. The tone and tempo of the verse are what penetrate below the area of meaning to affect what Eliot called the "auditory imagination". This was necessary if the poem was to successfully "do its work" on the reader.

Discussion of musical effects in poetry raises the question of the relationship between poetry and music, and is especially relevant to a discussion of the objective correlative. Schopenhauer and Walter Pater are two aestheticians who have been attributed with the notion that "poetry aspires to the condition of music". Sydney Dobell, who died in 1874, gave meaning to this idea and also foreshadowed later doctrine when he remarked that his poetry was written on the principle of music, i.e., a series of combinations that shall produce certain states in the hearer, and not a succession of words which is separately "intellectualated" by the dictionary. 7

The relationship between poetry of the "objective correlative" and music rests on the way in which emotion is evoked. In neither is the poet or composer required to assert feeling or meaning directly. Instead he relies on the movement of rhythms, the tempo, cadence, and in poetry the association of images to produce the feeling. The form of the emotion is followed or embodied within the material but is never actually defined or stated.

This then raises the point of how precisely and with what degree of accuracy an exact emotion may be evoked. Susanne Langer considers this problem in Philosophy in a New Key. She concludes that it is not possible to accurately define feeling in music in a way that it will have the same effect for all. What sounds sad to one may sound happy to another. Thus all that music can really define is the morphology of feeling, i.e., feeling in itself, its structure. Susanne Langer states that music, "has articulation as its life but not assertion; expressiveness but not expression. The actual function of meaning, which calls for permanent contents, is not fulfilled; for the assignment of one rather than another possible meaning to each form is never explicitly made." 8 If this theory is accepted and applied to imagistic poetry then a grave criticism of Eliot's concept is upheld. Poetry which avoids any precise definition of feeling must be content with expressing the morphology of feeling which may have a different impact on different readers.

Some form of rebuttal of this theory may be seen in the argument advanced by Walter J. Ong. Ong maintains that all words projected from a speaker remain, as having been somehow interior to him, being an invitation to another person, another interior, to share the speaker's interior. That is, speech is an invitation to enter in: not to regard from outside. In so far as all works of art are in some measure utterances emanating from the human psyche, they too partake of this interiority. Poetry in so far as it consists of words is but a projection of interiority which the reader is invited to enter. Moreover Ong argues that since words are inevitably connected to objects they can never be purely presentational as music can, they remain to some degree representational and therefore subject to explanation. 9 The implication is that since meaning is more tangible in words, so too is feeling. Ong's theory places a high degree of reliability on the part played by the sensibility and imagination in human understanding, a point which proponents of a single-minded faith in denotative language often ignore.

Whatever the implications of these arguments, it can be fairly readily established that "objective correlatives" are not the only means by which emotions may be expressed. Despite his respect for the use of images and cadence, the majority of Yeats' poems employ the traditional technique of rational, intelligible argument. A comparison between his and Eliot's poems on a similar subject can serve to demonstrate that emotion may be produced and sustained by either method.

Now days are dragon ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
To crawl in her own blood and go scot-free.
The night can sweat with terror as before
We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,
And planned to bring the world under a rule,
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

“Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”

Falling Flowers

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

Vienna London

Unreal

A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings
And bats with baby faces in the violet light
Whistled and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns
and exhausted wells.

“The Wasteland”

Yeats' poem uses images in a framework of logical statement to evoke emotion whereas Eliot's employs a sequence of phantasmagorical images and a long, sustained rhythm of lamenting despair to carry the feeling. Incidentally this passage illustrates the need to hear Eliot's poetry read aloud to achieve the musical effect. Too often criticisms of his poetry have been made by those who fail to appreciate the full effect of the tone before they set about analyzing the images for hidden meaning. The poetry of objective correlatives is often not made to bear close scrutiny, rather the images are intended to transmit a general effect or emotion.

Another concern aroused by imagist practices is for the place of syntax. Donald Davie in Articulate Energy argues the case for syntax in poetry. He claims that the best example of emotion sustained through syntax is evident where syntax is subjective, that is, following the form of thought in the poet's mind as in Coleridge's "Dejection".

"Well! if the Bard was weather wise, who made
The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,
This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
Unroused by winds that ply a busier trade
Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes,
Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes
Upon the strings of this Aeolian lute,
Which better far were mute":

As Davie explains, the rapid transition of feeling here is affecting and compelling just because it is all done in the compass of a single, complex sentence. There is a slide down a long scale of emotion from almost geniality to a desperate melancholy. The syntactical arrangement which allows for the last feeling to be expressed as an after-thought in a subordinate clause to the rest of the sentence conveys the poignant expression that the last admission had been wrung out of the poet unwillingly. 10 The expression of thought in long, complex sentences is a result of Coleridge's belief that it was necessary to maintain the "passion and the passionate flow of poetry". Thought, feeling, and intellectual expression must coalesce. Although no objectification of the emotion, as Eliot would have it, is employed, nevertheless the feeling is clearly transmitted.

Donne's poetry also affords many examples of how poetry may combine difficult intellectual discourse with feeling to maintain an unbroken passionate flow. Eliot himself was against primacy for intellectualism in poetry. On many occasions he revealed a preference for emotion over thought, maintaining that the thought was not important. What was important was that the poet should find an emotional equivalent for his thought. Yvor Winters has taken up this point, arguing that if the poet does not think about his experience he cannot understand and therefore cannot select the emotion which is motivated by this understanding. As Winters interprets it, Eliot's theory of the objective correlative rests on the assumption that the poet is trying to express an emotion and that therefore understanding is extraneous. 11 It is difficult to see

the premise behind this statement, for while it is true to say that Eliot placed more importance on the emotions than on thought, he does not state that understanding is not important. Indeed it would be easier to suppose that in order to objectify his feelings the poet would need to understand their motivation in order to be able to select correctly from his experiences and impressions.

In the essay Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca, Eliot states, that "To express precise emotion requires as great an intellectual power as to express precise thought," which suggests that cognitive aspects are important in the transmission of feeling. 12 What Eliot may have wanted to avoid by stressing the importance of emotion over thought, (and the means by which emotion should be expressed in art), is a separation of thought and feeling, the "dissociation of sensibility" which he felt set in after the seventeenth century. The objectification of thought and feeling into concrete images would make it difficult for such a separation to occur.

Despite the impact Eliot's theory of the objective correlative has had on modern poetry and criticism it should not be blindly accepted as the final word on the subject, but should be placed in context and be viewed critically along with conflicting theories. There are many ways of expressing emotion in art, ranging from the use of symbolic images at one extreme to subjective disquisition by the poet at the other. Whether we accept as Herbert Read says, that poetry should be "discourse crystallized into symbolic images," or the traditional ratiocinative approach is a matter of personal choice. From the evidence it appears that either can be successful in transmitting emotion and that either requires considerable talent in the poet.

Footnotes

1. T.S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood, p.100
2. Quoted by W.C. O'Conner in Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry, p.117
3. K. Smidt, Poetry and Belief in the Work of T.S. Eliot, p. 41
4. F.O. Matthiesson, The Achievement of T.S. Eliot, p.59
5. Ibid, p.58
6. J. Press, The Chequer'd Shade, p.175
7. J. Press, The Chequer'd Shade, p.167
8. Quoted by D. Davie in Articulate Energy, p.17

