

## **THE IMPERSONALITY OF ART**

T.S. Eliot shared with J. Joyce the view that the poet should be detached; indeed his central purpose can be described as a search for “impersonality” as he himself called it in his essay *Tradition and Individual Talent* (1919).

Detachment is the counterpoise to his deep sense of unreality, or equivocal reality, in personal emotions.

In the essay he maintains the idea that an order constituted by all past works of art, the tradition, creates a total meaning of a modern work of art. The new work of art, however, modifies the tradition from which he derives its meaning.

## **THE IMPERSONALITY OF THE ARTIST (J. JOYCE AND T.S.ELIOT)**

The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition. It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I shall, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.

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And I hinted, by an analogy, that the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of “personality,” not being necessarily more interesting, or having “more to say,” but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.

The analogy was that of the catalyst. When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

From: T.S. Eliot, **Tradition and Individual Talent**, 1919

in T. S. ELIOT, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, 1922.