

# Re-reading “Tradition and the Individual Talent” —From the Perspective of Continuity between Impersonality and Personality—

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“What happens is a 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” (*SE* 17)—this is one of the best-known pronouncements in T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In this essay, he proposes a theory which explains how art should be created by an impersonal artist. Following his argument, poets should not express their own personality; rather, they should be like a neutral “catalyst” (*SE* 18) causing a chemical reaction that fuses different types of things and then generates a new material. This formulation has been generally taken as his own model of an ideal artist; this widely-held assumption has until comparatively recently prevented critics from focusing on more personal aspects of his work. He was regarded as an elusive and mysterious figure who had succeeded in erasing his personality quite consciously.

Yet especially since the publication of the drafts of *The Waste Land*, much of the most influential criticism has not focused on Eliot’s impersonality. For example, anti-Semitism (Ricks and Julius), possible homosexuality (Miller) and his marriage with Vivienne (Seymour-Jones) provided focal points through which we could reconsider Eliot’s “personal” life.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of these studies, Eliot’s frequent references to “personality” in his essays have attracted the attention of critics. Lawrence Rainey, referring to Eliot’s less well-known essays, offers a fresh image of an Eliot who is so preoccupied by “[f]erocity, intensity, violence” (*Revisiting* 51).<sup>2</sup> From this viewpoint, indeed, we can see a glimpse of a highly volatile personality even in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Eliot ends its second chapter as follows: “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who

have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things” (*SE* 21). The first thing which one notices is the basic principle of impersonality is announced through the denial of any direct “expression of personality,” but the next sentence “those who have personality and emotions . . .” seemingly exhibits a contradictory idea of the poet. How can this “personality and emotion” be linked to the impersonal theory of art?

As critics have observed,<sup>3</sup> many of Eliot’s essays contain multiple inconsistencies. For example, in “Blake” (1920), he insists that it is “the acquisition of impersonal ideas” that “obscure what we really are and feel, what we really want, and what really excites our interest” (*SE* 319). The term “impersonal” has clearly negative meaning here. In a footnote to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, he says that “I refuse to be drawn into any discussion of the definition of ‘personality’ and ‘character’” (35). His reluctance to discuss “‘personality’ and ‘character’” probably implies his own embarrassment about this entangled issue. In his late years, he even admits the latent contradiction within the impersonal theory and slightly modifies it, classifying impersonality into two distinct categories: that of “the mere skilful craftsman” and of “the maturing artist” (“Yeats” *SP* 251). How can we interpret this inconsistency?

What I wish to attempt in this essay is to find consistency in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” by reconstructing the impersonal theory. Impersonality and personality have been often regarded as opposing components, but in fact, a careful reading of Eliot’s essays concerning music hall, revue and ballet, will urge us to interpret the impersonal theory in terms of the continuity between impersonality and personality.

The music hall artist Marie Lloyd passed away in 1922. She was such a great performer that ten thousand people attended her funeral and Eliot was also her admirer. One may feel it strange that he was attracted by her, for it seems to contradict his stature as high modernist. But recent studies have proved that his work was deeply involved with popular culture at that time and that he was even inspired by it.<sup>4</sup> David Chinitz, re-evaluating Eliot as an artist who tries to connect elite art to popular art, argues the relation of both these terms is now being recontextualised in the age of modernism.<sup>5</sup> Actually, Eliot had a wide variety of concerns throughout contemporary culture, which were

most openly expressed in a serial publication in *The Dial*, named “London Letter.” He comments on Lloyd as follows: “There was nothing about her of the grotesque; none of her comic appeal was due to exaggeration; it was all a matter of selection and concentration” (*The Dial* December 1922 661). Central to this description is the analysis of her elaborate performance as based on “selection and concentration.” He also finds other attractive features in her persona: saying that she is an “expressive figure,” he insists that her stage-presence enables her working-class audience to collaborate with her and create a special bond between them (*The Dial* December 1922 662).<sup>6</sup> What is characteristic of her is the highly skilled mode of performance, as a representative of working-class culture, which attractively invites her audience to participate in the act.<sup>7</sup>

In another “London Letter,” Eliot wrote a column “*Music-Hall and Review*.” He begins it with an introduction of Lancashire, where music hall had prospered considerably. Following that, he refers to specific individuals, such as Marie Lloyd, Nellie Wallace, Little Tich, and George Robey. They have, according to him, a special feature rooted in the region: “Lancashire wit is mordant, ferocious, and personal” (*The Dial* June 1921 687). What is notable is the reference to their powerful and vehement style of performance, but of greater interest to us is the deployment of the term “personal” with a positive meaning. “Lancashire wit” is, he says, founded on “a comedian of strong personality with an audience quick to respond with approval or contempt” (688). Being “personal” is not the target of reproach in this article. Moreover, it may be surprising that in a subsequent passage on music hall performers Eliot extolled Ethel Levey as “the most aloof and impersonal of personalities” (*The Dial* June 1921 688). This description suggests that her success on stage was based on effacement of her personality. But why does Eliot place such a high value on both personal and impersonal performer? Before answering these questions, I would like to refer to some other essays, in which he applies the word “impersonal.”<sup>8</sup>

The term “impersonal” is also used in his essays concerned with ballet. From around 1920 to 1930, he repeatedly comments on ballet-dancers, showing his abiding fascination with their mode of performance. In “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry” (1928), he says “[t]he ballet is valuable because it has, unconsciously, concerned itself with a permanent form” which is

supported by “a tradition, a training, an askesis” (*SE* 47).<sup>9</sup> Eliot finds in ballet a certain type of “form” supported by its rigid discipline. More specifically, among ballet-dancers, Léonide Massine is particularly special for Eliot. He belonged to Ballets Russes, an extremely popular group at that time, which had attracted Bloomsbury members since the 1910’s.<sup>10</sup> In “Dramatis Personae” (1923), Eliot says that Massine possesses “the most completely unhuman, impersonal, abstract” quality and therefore “belongs to the future stage” (*Criterion* April 1923 305). This captures Massine’s indirect mode of performance, which reminds us of the description of Levey (Shimada 2004a 36). Eliot also contrasts a conservative style of performance to Massine’s dance: it is “the difference between the conventional gesture of the ordinary stage, which is supposed to *express* emotion, and the abstract gesture of Massine, which *symbolizes* emotion” (*Criterion* April 1923 305). While the term “express” suggests the direct representation of emotion, the term “symbolize” implies a more intricate relationship.<sup>11</sup> His performance is not “realistic” (*Criterion* April 1923 305) as in our daily lives, but it is an art form that has been highly polished for the stage.

Yet what attracts our attention is the implication of “symbolisation of emotion,” for “emotion” seemingly has a strong link with personality and even functions as the primary source of the power of Massine’s performance. To see the full meaning of it, we need to turn our eyes on other essays. In “Philip Massinger” (1920), he says:

Marlowe’s and Jonson’s comedies were a view of life; they were, as great literature is, the transformation of a personality into a personal work of art, their lifetime’s work, long or short. Massinger is not simply a smaller personality: his personality hardly exists. He did not, out of his own personality, build a world of art, as Shakespeare and Marlowe and Johnson built. (*SE* 217)

In Eliot’s view, Massinger deserves to be ranked as an “inferior” writer: while Marlowe and Jonson can make their art derived from their own personality, Massinger cannot do that. This would appear to suggest that great art ultimately depends on the artist’s personality. Referring to “Phillip Massinger,” Eliot says in a letter that art is not “*any* ‘complete and precise

expression of personality’,” and that “transformation,” not “expression,” is the essential point in creation (*Letter* 1:387). It can follow that, as Amy Koritz argues (140-1), it is personal material that is “transformed” into impersonal art: following his suggestion, even if there is a considerable personality possessed by the artist, it is drastically changed into impersonal art in the process of creation. If considered in this way, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” reveals the same principle as in “Philip Massinger”: “For it is not the ‘greatness’, the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts” (*SE* 19). Initially, it might seem that Eliot displays antipathy to emotion itself, but, on closer analysis, he merely emphasizes the “greatness” of the transforming “process” here. That is, he does not deny the existence of personality itself, but has an antipathy to “a sort of raw material for art” (Koritz 141-2).<sup>12</sup>

Here let us return to the question why Eliot values the “personal” performer. From the perspective of this “process” we can find an answer to it. As seen before, the valuation of Lloyd is derived from her elaborate performance as the proper representative of the working class and from her ability as performer to collaborate with her audience.<sup>13</sup> These points invite us to see that the “personality” is not directly based on her own subjective identity. Kyoko Shimada argues that in “Tradition and Individual Talent” the term “personality” is used for showing immaturity but in *The Dial* it is used for showing mastery, skill and art (2004b 130). That is, even if her attractiveness seemingly is based on such performance, it is not directly expressive of herself; it has been already “transformed.” Here it is important to recall this sentence: “there was nothing about her of the grotesque; none of her comic appeal was due to exaggeration; it was all a matter of selection and concentration.” It describes the meticulous artistry in her performance which only pretends to be natural. It depends on her elaborate skill, not her own personality. We can compare it to his other essay about the ballet-dancer: modern ballet, he says, is “more sophisticated, but also more simplified, and simplifies more; and what is needed of art is a simplification of current life into something rich and strange” (*The Dial* August 1921 215). From this passage, we can see a clear process whereby trivial things in daily lives are transformed into an art. Especially, the term “simplification” reminds us of the

passage in Marie Lloyd's "selection and concentration." It can follow that both are needed to be "transformed" into the arts through the process of performers cutting down on unnecessary ornaments. Thus, we can find an underlying consistency<sup>14</sup> in this essay, despite the apparently inconsistent usage of words.<sup>15</sup>

From this viewpoint of artistic process, we can find the same principle in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (*SE* 21). It can be interpreted that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion" means that poetry should not be created without any proper form; and the next sentence "but an escape from emotion . . ." implies that there is no denial of emotion or personality itself.

The meaning of the term "escape," however, is unclear. Especially, the last sentence "But, of course . . ." leaves room for a variety of interpretations. As Brian Lee puts it, it may be interpreted "as a boast": "it is only people like me, who have (strong) emotions, a (strong) personality, who are really in a position to tell the rest of you, who don't have these things" (62). Eliot's writing style is, as has often been said, "didactic." His usage of metaphor is effective for creating various vivid images, but it fails to provide us with a specific meaning in the argument. We need to read this sentence again: "What happens is a 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." Here "surrender of himself," "self-sacrifice," and "extinction of personality" seem to be offered as exact synonyms but in fact they have considerable difference of nuance.<sup>16</sup> Rainey, pointing out the lack of "analytical clarity" in his essay, says as follows: "'self-sacrifice' invokes saintly renunciation, while 'extinction' suggests a species of suicide, and 'escape' simultaneously implies that personality is a prison and carries undertones of evasion" ("Eliot's Poetics" 302). The multiple connotations of Eliot's term are achieved at the expense of a more mundane accuracy.

Yet in the phrasing "escape from . . ." the preposition "from" implies the movement of transformation from personality and emotion to impersonal art;

that is, they function as a source of impersonal art. One may find clearer such movement in a relatively minor essay “The Modern Tendencies of Poetry” (1920).<sup>17</sup> It has been often compared to “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” since they have considerable similarities in terms of the adoption of scientific metaphor. Paralleling scientist and poet, Eliot states: “The great scientist submerges himself in what he has to do, forgets himself” (*Shama’a* 10). It reminds us of the impersonal theory which we have observed. But what is of particular interest is this sentence: “His [scientist’s] personality has not been *lost*, but has *gone*, all the important part of it, into the work” (*Shama’a* 10-1; my emphasis). It shows that personality does not disappear but enters into the production itself, even if in impersonal work we cannot find the traces of personality so easily.

Let us look at this passage in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways” (*SE* 19-20). The theme is the impersonality of the poet as a “medium” which plays a role in this transformative process. In this sentence, we can see that in the mind of poet “impressions and experiences” are merged into new art. After this, Eliot continues: “Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality” (*SE* 20). At first sight, one may read this as stressing the discontinuity between personal elements and impersonal art. But I would like to insist that it is such a personal composite that leads to creation of art. Although we cannot know to what extent personality remains present within impersonal art, the linkage between personality and impersonality is suggested here.

The theory which Eliot expounds is based not on the negation of personality, but on an artistic process through which personality loses most of its original form. The ideal poet shown in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is an artist who can transform his personality into impersonal art. Behind the outstanding metaphor of science, there is a hidden transformative process in his argument which we often overlook, unless we carefully focus on this structure. Given this argument, I would like to conclude that “Tradition and the Individual Talent” should be re-read in terms of the continuity between

impersonality and personality. It is not an either-or decision to become a personal or impersonal writer; the genuine artist must know the transformative process from personality to impersonality.

We have been looking at “Tradition and the Individual Talent” from several points of view. The point whether Eliot is an impersonal or a personal poet has been discussed by many critics, but in this essay I attempted to reconstruct the relationship between impersonality and personality. Through reading his essays concerning contemporary culture, I argued that Eliot never denies personality itself and that it rather functions as a pivotal point for creation of art. More specifically, we saw that, according to his explanation, personality is “transformed” into an impersonal art. As he explains it in his essays, ideal art is achieved through the transformative process from personality to impersonality. Thus, I tried to find the consistency in his impersonal theory, which is generally considered as inconsistent. Finally, I re-read “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” focusing on how the transformative process is shown in this essay.

\* This is a revised version of the paper read at the 26th annual Conference of the T.S. Eliot Society of Japan held at Osaka Gakuin University, 10th November 2013.

## Notes

### Abbreviations

*SE* *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951)—third English Edition.

*SP* *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, Frank Kermode (ed.) (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975)

1 As for the summary of previous research, I referred to Ronald Schuhard (71-2).

2 Rainey continues to point out Eliot’s curiosity about “the strange, the surprising, the fantastic, something very near to parody” (*Revisiting* 51).

3 For example, see Yvor Winters (460-501) and Maud Ellmann (2-9; 41).

4 For example, see “Wilkie Collins and Dickens” (*SE* 460-70). In this essay, Eliot even values “melodrama” (*SE* 460).



5 I referred to Kyoko Shimada (2004b 114-5). Michael North, for example, says that “[i]t is not simply a matter of arguing that modernists were more positive in their attitudes toward mass culture than is usually assumed, but rather of suggesting that this relationship is more complex because mass culture is more complex” (208).

6 We can put this image of the collapse of the working class in the context of “music hall lament.” For example, see Barry Faulk.

7 Richard Badenhansen argues about Eliot’s work in terms of “collaboration.”

8 As for the comparison of personality and impersonality in his essays, I am greatly indebted to Shimada’s works.

9 This physical movement can be associated with the one of Gordon Craig. For example, see Shimada (2004a 38-9; 2004b 125-8).

10 For example, on their reception of the Russian Ballet, see Susan Jones, who also compares Eliot’s impersonality to Massine (see, for example, 105-6). In addition to this, she argues about the importance of the dance image in *Four Quartets* (223-49).

11 After several sentences, Eliot links the stage to “ritual” (*Criterion* April 1923 305).

12 Shimada also refers to this point (2004b 130).

13 In “Romantic Englishman, the Comic Spirit and the Function of Criticism” (1921), he even says that Lloyd can “provide fragments of a possible English myth” (*Tyro* 4). Her stage-persona allows the recovery of an “English myth,” though, according to him, it is only “fragmentary” (*Tyro* 4).

14 Attempts to find consistency in Eliot’s essays are seemingly rare, but, for example, Sanford Schwartz argues about it (18-9). Schuhard also connects personality and impersonality with many references from Eliot’s essays (70-6).

15 There is still room for discussion concerning the significance of the music hall, revue, and ballet. As Koritz acutely points out (141), Eliot distinguishes male from female artist or elite from popular art, though Chinitz challenges this assumption in *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003).

16 Brian Lee also distinguishes “self-sacrifice” and “extinction of personality,” seeing the former as “religious” and the latter as “scientific” (48-9) and he points out that Eliot tends to argue “without having given any kind of description” (55).

17 Schuhard, quoting this essay, mentions the relationship between personality and impersonality (74). Peter White, comparing it with “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in the context of publication process, proposes a new importance for the latter’s influence on the former. Recent criticism, as far as I know, often focuses on the background and context of this essay in modernism. Hannah Sullivan provides a clue to consider this essay as “unserious” (73) by focusing on the “illocutionary context” (76) of the publication. According to her, the scientific metaphor he adopted had the surreptitious meaning of “a playful toying with the conventions of Dora Marsden’s own writing style” (76).

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## 編集後記

READING 第35号をお届けいたします。今年は19世紀後半から20世紀はじめの60年間という、比較的短い期間に発表された三つの作品に関する力作が揃いました。ご高評、ご指摘等、お寄せいただけましたら幸いに存じます。

ご多忙中にも関わらず、例年より短い期間中に、熱心にご査読いただきました先生方に、心より御礼申し上げます。また、今回も多大なご尽力を賜りました七月堂の皆様に心から感謝申し上げます。

### Corrigenda

#### Works Cited:

- p.48 Delete “Eliot, T.S. ‘The Beating of a Drum.’ *Nation and Athenaeum* 34.1 (Oct. 1923): 11-2.”
- p.48 Add “Eliot, T.S. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*. London: Faber and Faber, 1933.”
- p.49 Add “White, Peter. “‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ Revisited.” *RES* 58.235 (2007): 364-92.”

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