

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on any article published in *PMLA*, or on matters of scholarly and critical interest to readers generally. Such letters, if accepted by the Editor, will be sent to the author of the work commented on, who will be invited to reply. The usual rules regarding courtesy and avoidance of personalities will be enforced, and the Editor reserves complete discretion in deciding whether or not to publish any letter. Letters should not exceed 1,000 words of text. Footnotes are discouraged and should be included only when absolutely necessary.

The Consistency of T. S. Eliot in His Theory of Personal Expression

To the Editor:

I want to comment on what I believe to be a mistaken viewpoint in Elisabeth Schneider's very fine article, "Prufrock and After: The Theme of Change" (*PMLA*, 87, 1972, 1103–17)—that T. S. Eliot changes from a doctrine of impersonality to one of personality. At no point in his career does Eliot hold the doctrine of impersonality. Even in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), usually interpreted as a forceful statement of the doctrine, he does not say that the poet does not express his personality, but that the process of creating a poem is not in itself an expression of personality. The creative process is rather a concentration on craft, on "the work to be done" (*Selected Essays*, New York: Harcourt, 1950, p. 11). As Eliot later explains (in "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," 1924, in "Yeats," 1940, and in other essays), the poet expresses his personality indirectly: "No artist produces great art by a deliberate attempt to express his personality. He expresses his personality indirectly through concentrating upon a task which is a task in the same sense as the making of an efficient engine or the turning of a jug or a table-leg" (*SE*, p. 96). In the essay on Yeats, Eliot remarks, "I have, in early essays, extolled what I called impersonality in art, and it may seem that, in giving as a reason for the superiority of Yeats's later work the greater expression of personality in it I am contradicting myself." But impersonality, Eliot explains, means a "general symbol" that expresses the "particularity" of "intense and personal experience" (*On Poetry and Poets*, New York: Farrar, 1957, p. 229). This statement, made in 1940, is an attempt to explain the position on personality and impersonality expressed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." The statement in "Four Elizabethan Dramatists" that the poet "expresses his personality indirectly" was made in 1924. It is not likely, particularly in light of the explanation given in "Yeats," that Eliot reversed

his position between 1919, the time of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and 1924.

Schneider is aware that Eliot has made numerous statements supporting the doctrine of expression: for example, that the "poet starts from his own emotions" (*SE*, p. 117); that the "dramatic action on the stage is the symbol and shadow of some more serious action in a world of feeling more real than ours" (*John Dryden*, New York: Terence and Elsa Holliday, 1932, p. 32); that Shakespeare and Macbeth utter words in unison, "though perhaps with somewhat different meaning" (*On Poetry and Poets*, p. 110); that the "whole of Shakespeare's work is *one* poem . . . united by one significant, *consistent* [my italics], and developing personality" (*SE*, p. 179); that poetic drama gives the undertone of "personal emotion" (*SE*, p. 180); and that the characters in Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* are "projected from the poet's inner world of nightmare, some horror beyond words" (*SE*, p. 166).

These statements, most of which date from 1927 to 1932, are not indicative of a change in Eliot's position but are an extension of the position that he advances in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." When Eliot wrote "Tradition and the Individual Talent," he was concerned with combatting what he considered to be the Romantic doctrine of the direct expression of personality. Eliot argues that the poet "escapes" his personality by concentrating on his craft, by a process of "depersonalization," illustrated by the famous catalyst analogy, in which the detached mind of the poet, separated from "the man who suffers," transforms emotions and images into art (*SE*, pp. 7–8). Eliot does not object to the concept that poetry is emotional or personal, but criticizes Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity" as an "inexact formula." Eliot's escape from emotion is a release, even an "absolution" (*On Poetry and Poets*, p. 107), for the man who suffers. Eliot's main point in the catalyst analogy is that the poem, although initiated by the poet's emotion, is created by a process of fusion or concentration, in which the mind of the poet is detached from the ma-

terials with which it works. Eliot does not oppose the concept of expression of personality, but rather the concept of direct personal expression.

The fact that Eliot is consistent in his belief that poetry is indirect personal expression—an objective structure or “general symbol” that implies the poet’s emotion—strengthens Schneider’s argument that his poetry reveals his own struggles with the problems of personal change—that it is, in fact, disguised autobiography. He did not earlier hold a doctrine of “extinction of personality” and later change to the opposite view. The poet’s personality, according to Eliot, is extinguished in the creative process, but it remains hidden behind the characters’ “actions and behaviour” (*SE*, p. 173). The world of the poet, like that of the dramatist, “is a world in which the creator is everywhere present, and everywhere hidden” (*On Poetry and Poets*, p. 112).

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To the Editor:

In “Prufrock and After: The Theme of Change” Elisabeth Schneider argues that Eliot’s treatment of his religious conversion reveals a preoccupation with “not only what one may change *from* or *to* but with change itself.” While I agree basically with her statement that “the subject has not often been touched on by other poets,” I am troubled by her singling out of Donne’s Holy Sonnet “Batter My Heart” to illustrate her point.

Unless I misunderstand her, she suggests that for Donne (as well as for Gerard Manley Hopkins) God seizes “possession of man’s self and will,” whereas for Eliot the coming to God “is willed within the human self” (p. 1103). But Donne’s sonnet hardly illustrates this distinction. Certainly his images are more violent than any of Eliot’s quoted in the paper, but the essence of Donne’s poem is that God has *not* seized possession of his self and will (see l. 2), that Donne (as the imperative mood throughout the poem indicates) merely wills that God do so. The real distinction between Eliot and Donne is not that Eliot is active where Donne is passive, but that Eliot wills to believe in God where Donne wills to serve Him. In other words, Eliot, unable to presuppose a basic belief in God either for himself or for his twentieth-century reader, must begin at an earlier stage of the conversion process, that is, at the initial stage of willing to believe.

Aside from this one important difference between the two poets, I feel their respective renderings of the Christian’s experience of change may be more similar than Schneider would have us believe. To cite just two examples from her article, she finds remarkable in

Eliot an “acute self-consciousness [which] paralyzes the will and the power to act and feel” (p. 1104); yet one finds a similar self-consciousness in many of Donne’s poems as well (see, for instance, the Holy Sonnet, “Oh, to Vex Me”). Schneider also points out that in *Ash Wednesday* Eliot is “deliberately confessing that his own public avowals are not, or not yet, entirely matched by private belief” (p. 1112); yet Donne’s confession (in “A Hymn to God the Father”), “I have a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne / My last thred, I shall perish on the shore,” could be interpreted in much the same way.

It strikes me as impossible to conceive of “the process itself of subjective change” apart from “what one may change *from* or *to*” (p. 1103). Perhaps if Schneider had demonstrated more fully just how Eliot or any of his readers could handle such an abstraction, the uniqueness of Eliot’s attitude toward change would have been clearer.

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To the Editor:

Elisabeth Schneider’s admirable essay seems to me an important step in the direction of understanding T. S. Eliot’s development as a poet. The following responses are intended as complementary to Schneider’s work; however, my responses come from a different critical angle and lead to slightly different conclusions.

In *Young Man Luther* Erik Erikson describes characteristics of young people whose sense of identity is not yet secure: they wait to be swept away by “a vast utopian view” which somehow never satisfies for long; the prospect of sexual intimacy “arouses at the same time both an impulse to merge with the other person and a fear of losing autonomy and individuation. In fact there is a sense of bisexual diffusion.” “These patients can feel like a crab or a shellfish or a mollusk”—“a pair of ragged claws.”

It seems clear that “Prufrock” speaks from something like the experience Erikson describes, and that *The Waste Land* continues to explore a vision of the world in which sexual intimacy is both obsessively preoccupying and abhorrently threatening. It is probably mistaken to suggest that Eliot was homosexual (as a *TLS* reviewer recently did), but there is certainly a sense of “bisexual diffusion” in Prufrock and in the Tiresian narrator of *The Waste Land*—and it appears reasonable to take this sense as evidence of an ongoing identity crisis that Eliot was trying to resolve through his poetic processes. *The Waste Land* searches for a “vast utopian” alternative to an unacceptable vision of the world, and for a definition of Eliot him-