

T.S. Eliot introduced his **Theory of Impersonality** in his landmark 1919 essay, "*Tradition and the Individual Talent*." The theory marked a sharp reaction against the 19th-century Romantic view of poetry, which saw art primarily as an expression of the poet's personal emotions, personality, and lived experiences (famously summarized by Wordsworth as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings").

Instead, Eliot argued that the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice—a continual extinction of personality.

Key Concepts of the Theory

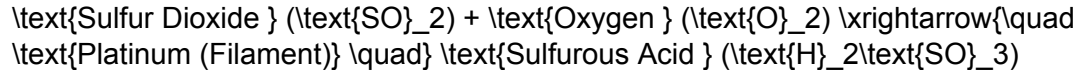
1. The Separation of "The Man Who Suffers" and "The Mind Which Creates"

Eliot famously asserted that the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates.

- The experiences and emotions of the poet's personal life are not directly transcribed into art.
- Personal suffering or joy serves only as raw, unrefined material. The creative mind acts as a medium that transforms these raw emotions into something completely different and artistic.

2. The Catalyst Analogy (The Platinum Filament)

To explain how poetry is created without the intrusion of personality, Eliot offered a scientific analogy involving chemical reaction:



- **Sulfur Dioxide & Oxygen:** The raw emotions and feelings.
- **Platinum:** The mind of the poet.
- **Sulfurous Acid:** The finished poem.

Just as the platinum filament causes the reaction to happen without being affected, changed, or left with any trace of itself in the resulting acid, the mind of the poet acts merely as a **receptacle or catalyst**. The poet's personal identity should leave no signature on the final artwork.

3. Emotion vs. "Art Emotion"

Eliot distinguishes between personal human emotion and the specific **"art emotion"** generated by a poem:

- **Personal Emotion:** Bound to the individual's life, ego, and biographical history.
- **Art Emotion:** A complex, impersonal feeling constructed through word choice, structural harmony, and poetic tradition. A great poem does not need to express intense personal feelings; it can create profound art emotion out of ordinary or seemingly minor elements.

4. The Objective Correlative

Though formally detailed in a later essay ("*Hamlet and His Problems*"), the concept of the **Objective Correlative** is directly linked to impersonality. Eliot argued that the only way to express emotion in art is by finding an "objective correlative"—a set of objects, a situation, or a chain of events that automatically serves as the formula for that particular emotion. Once those

external elements are presented, the emotion is evoked in the reader directly, without requiring the author to state or explain their personal feelings.

Relation to "Tradition"

Impersonality is inseparable from Eliot's concept of **Tradition**:

- A poet cannot create in a vacuum based solely on subjective feelings.
- True originality comes from acquiring the **historical sense**—an awareness not just of the past, but of the presence of past literature (from Homer to the present).
- When a poet surrenders their personality to this collective tradition, their work becomes part of a continuous, living cultural monument.

Significance and Impact

1. **Foundational to New Criticism:** Eliot's theory shifted the focus of literary study away from the biography of the author (biographical criticism) and onto the text itself (close reading).
2. **Modernist Aesthetic:** It defined the anti-romantic, disciplined, and highly structured aesthetic of 20th-century Anglo-American Modernism.
3. **Paradox of the Theory:** Critics often point out that despite Eliot's insistence on impersonality, much of his own poetry (such as *The Waste Land* or *Four Quartets*) deeply reflects his personal spiritual crises, cultural anxieties, and psychological distress—channeled through impersonal technique.