

Eliot, T.S. 1957. *On poetry and poets*. Published by Faber and Faber Limited London

“The social function of poetry” (15-25)

Aiming for the social function of poetry as poetry, Eliot dismisses didactic poetry (both morally and informative) and dramatic poetry. Instead he focuses first of all on the obvious function of poetry as poetry: it needs to give pleasure. Secondly, he distinguishes poetry from other art forms by the fact that poetry is based on language. Since language is a local and racial phenomenon, poetry belongs to a certain people with their specific language. In poetry language manifests itself differently than in prose or scientific texts. The latter two are situated in the realm of thought which is a general realm. These general texts can be more easily translated and understood in other languages. Poetry on the other hand, in its nature, is said to express particular feelings and emotions. Thus Eliot states that the nature of poetry is to *feel* in a certain language. In his own words:

“Emotion and feeling, then are best expressed in the common language of the people – that is, in the language common to all classes: the structure, the rhythm, the sound, the idiom, of a language, express the personality of the people which speaks it ... when a civilization is healthy, the great poet will have something to say to his fellow countrymen at every level of education” (19-20).

Eliot states that this emphasis on feelings as the material of poetry, does not mean that poetry does not deal with intellectual content. Indirectly, the poet’s duty is related to the people. Directly, the poet’s duty is related to his *language*; to preserve and to extend or improve it. He opts that the poet can improve his language by discovering new variations of its sensibility. Both in spatial and temporal terms our sensibility of language is subjected to change. In fact, “our sensibility is constantly changing, as the world about us changes” (20). The constantly changing sensibility in relation to language is the reason for Eliot to not stop writing poetry. It is needed to maintain, “our own ability, not merely to express, but even to feel any but the crudest emotions” (21).

To reply to an ever changing world, Eliot pleads for a poetry elite. These people are described as appreciators of poetry, as being independent and as being somewhat in advance of their time or at least having no difficulties with accepting novelty. A nation should have their proper poetry elite that is alive and kicking. Such a scene gives the dead poets new life (a tradition is maintained and continued) and in every living generation, it has at least a small audience. Even though such an elite may be a small amount of people, the idea is: what they re-sensibilise (what sensible variations of language they invent), will slowly and gradually find its way into common language. Through poetry “the speech and the sensibility of the whole nation” is affected (22). Thus the social function of poetry for the whole of the people of the poet’s language, is the capacity to improve that language, to extend it and preserve it.

Even though Eliot emphasizes the empowering quality of poetry for a nation, he stresses the value of variety in Europe and shivers at the idea of unification: “The variety is as essential as the unity” (23). If different people with different languages want to communicate on a spiritual level, it is needed to continue studying foreign languages. How to feel in a foreign language is to understand the people of that language better: “Poetry is a constant reminder of all the things that can only be said in one language, and are untranslatable” (23). After remarking that politicians should be more aware of this, Eliot says:F

“On my side of the line one is concerned with living things which have their own laws of growth, which are not always reasonable, but must just be accepted by the reason: things which cannot be neatly planned and put into order any more than the winds and the rains and the seasons can be disciplined” (24).

This leads him to say that he thinks every country in Europe should continue to have its own poetry. He ends with a sorrowful tone in which an apparent wish to unify Europe is identified. Also he expresses a fearful tone for the possible disappearing of feelings everywhere. Ultimately, he seems to make a comparison between the social function of poetry and religious sensibility:

“Much has been said everywhere about the decline of religious belief; not so much notice has been taken of the decline of religious sensibility. The trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God and man which our forefathers believed, but the inability to *feel* towards God and man as they did. A belief in which you no longer believe is something which to some extent you can still understand; but when religious feeling disappears, the words in which men have struggled to express it become meaningless.” (25)