

ANALYSIS OF T.S.ELIOT'S TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT

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ABSTRACT: Tradition and the individual talent(1919) is an essay written by poet and literary critic T.S.ELIOT. The essay was first published in The Egoist(1919) and later in Eliot's first book of criticism The Sacred Wood(1920). While Eliot is most often known for his poetry, he also contributed to the field of literary criticism. In this dual role, he acted as a cultural critic, comparable to Sir Philip Sidney and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Tradition and the individual talent is one of the more well known works that Eliot produced in his critic capacity. It formulates Eliot's influential conception of the relationship between the poet and preceding literary tradition.

T.S.ELIOT'S essay Tradition and the individual talent was first published as an anonymous piece in The Egoist, a London literary review, in September and December 1919, and subsequently included by Eliot in his first collection of essays, The Sacred Wood, published in 1920. That it continues to exert a genuine influence on thought regarding the interrelationship among literary classics, individual artists, and the nature of creative imagination, is a comment on its value. In any case, Eliot was able to let loose in this comparatively short essay- packing virtually every sentence with pronouncements that, in any other context of presentation, might have required far more elaboration and persuasive defense.

Eliot attempts to draw two things in this essay: he first redefines 'tradition' by emphasizing the importance of history to writing and understanding poetry, and he then argues that poetry should be essentially 'impersonal', that is separate and distinct from the personality of the writer. Eliot's idea of tradition is complex and unusual, involving something he describes as 'the historical sense which is a perception of 'the pastness of the past but also of its 'presence'. For Eliot, past works of art form an order or tradition; however, that order is always being altered by a new work which modifies the tradition to make room for itself. This way, in which the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past, requires that a poet be familiar with almost all literary history- not just the immediate past but the distant past and not just the literature of his or her own country, but the whole mind of Europe.

Eliot's second point is one of his most famous and contentious. A poet, Eliot maintains, must self-sacrifice to this special awareness of the past; once this awareness is achieved, it will erase any trace of personality from the poetry because the poet has become a mere medium for expression. Using the analogy of a chemical reaction, Eliot explains that a mature poet's mind works by being a passive receptacle of images, phrases and feelings which are combined, under

immense concentration, into a new art emotion .For Eliot, true art has nothing to do with the personal life of the artist but is merely the result of a greater ability to synthesize and combine, an ability which comes from deep study and comprehensive knowledge. Though Eliot's belief that " poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion ;it is not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality " sprang from what he viewed as the excesses of Romanticism, many scholars have noted how continuous Eliot's thoughts- and the whole of Modernism- is that with the Romantics; his impersonal poet even has links with John Keats, who proposed a similar figure in " the chameleon poet".But Eliot's belief that critical study should be 'diverted from the poet to the poetry shaped the study of poetry for half a century, and while the essay has had many denigrators ,especially those who question Eliot's insistence on canonical works as standards of greatness, it is difficult to exaggerate the essays influence .It has shaped generations of poets, critics and theorists and is a key text in modern literary criticism.

Eliot's essay bears Eliot defining the role of tradition in helping new writers to be modern. This is one of the central paradoxes of Eliot's writing- indeed,much of Modernism- that in order to move forward it often looks to the past, even more directly and more pointedly than previous poets had.This is evident in Eliot's Little Giddings ,where he states, " we shall not cease from exploration/And at the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time".

This theory of Eliot also highlights Eliot's anti-Romanticism stance.Unlike the Romantics idea of original creation and inspiration, Eliot's concept of tradition foregrounds how important older writers are to contemporary writers: Homer and Dante are Eliot's contemporaries because they inform his work as much as those alive in the twentieth century do.James

Joyce looked back to ancient Greek myth (the story of Odysseus) for his novel set in modern Dublin,Ulysses(1922).Ezra Pound often looked back to the trobadelous and poets of the middle ages.H.Ds imagist poetry was steeped in Greek references and ideas.As Eliot puts it " someone said,'the dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.Precisely ,and they are that which we know.

He goes on to argue that a modern poet should write with the literature of all previous ages in his bones as though Homer and Shakespeare were his or her contemporaries. 'This historical sense which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional.And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time ,of his contemporaneity '.

In short, knowledge of writers of the past makes contemporary writers both part of that tradition and part of the contemporary scene.Eliot's own poetry,is simultaneously in the tradition of Homer and Danteand the work of a modern poet,and it is because of his debt to Homer and Dante that he is both modern and traditional. Shakespeare is often considered both a timeless poet(Not of an age,but for all time-as his friend Ben Jonson said) whose work is constantly being reinvented, but is also understood in the context of Elizabethan and Jacobean social and political

attitudes. Similarly, in using Dante in his own poetry, Eliot at once makes Dante modern and contemporary, and himself-by association- part of the wider poetic tradition.

The three divisions of the essay are: first, the concept of tradition, second, the theory of impersonality and finally, the conclusion.

Eliot presents his conception of tradition and the definition of the poet and poetry in relation to it. He wishes to correct the facts, as he perceives it, "In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploying its absence". Eliot posits that though the English tradition generally upholds the belief that art progresses through change-a separation from tradition, literary advancements are instead recognized only when they conform to the tradition. Eliot, a classicist, felt that true incorporation of tradition into literature was unrecognized, that tradition, a word that 'seldom appears except as a phrase of censure' was actually a thus-far unrealized element of literary criticism. For Eliot, the term 'tradition' is filled with a special and complex character. It represents a 'simultaneous order', by which Eliot means a historical timelessness- a fusion of past and present- and, at the same time, a sense of present temporality. A poet must embody 'the whole of literature of Europe from Homer' while simultaneously, expressing their contemporary environment. Eliot challenges the common perception that a poet's greatness and individuality lie in their departure from their predecessors, he argues that "the most individual parts of his (poets) work may in those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously".

Eliot claims that this historical sense is not only a resemblance to traditional works but an awareness and understanding of their relation to his poetry.

This fidelity to tradition, does not require the great poet to give up novelty in an act of surrender to repetition. Rather, Eliot has a much more dynamic and progressive conception of the poetic process: Novelty is only possible through tapping into tradition. When a poet engages in the creation of a new work, they realize a new aesthetic ideal order as it has been established by the literary tradition that has come before them. The art of artistic creation does not take place in vacuum. The introduction of a new work alters the cohesion of this existing order causing a readjustment of the old to accommodate the new. In Eliot's own words, "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it". Eliot refers to this organic tradition. This developing canon as the mind of Europe. The private mind is subsumed by this more massive one.

This leads to Eliot's so-called 'Impersonal theory of poetry'. Since the poet engages in a 'continual surrender of himself', to the vast order of tradition, artistic creation is a process of depersonalisation. Eliot compares the poet to a catalyst in a chemical reaction, in which the reactants are feelings and emotions that are synthesized to create an artistic image that captures and relays these same feelings. While the mind of the poet is necessary for the production, it emerges unaffected by the process. The artist stores feelings and emotions and properly unifies them into a specific combination, which is the artistic product. What lends greatness to a work of art are not the feelings and emotions themselves, but the nature of artistic process by which they are synthesized. The artist is responsible for creating "the

pressure,so to speak, under which the fusion takes place".And, it is the intensity of fusion, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place".And it is the intensity of fusion that renders art great.The poet is a depersonalised vessel, a mere medium.

Great works do not express the personal emotions of the poet.The poet does not reveal their own unique and novel emotions, but rather, by drawing on ordinary ones channeling them through the intensity of poetry, they impress feelings that surpass altogether, experienced emotions.(according to Eliot, it is an escape from emotion).

Eliot, in his essay on Hamlet(1919) presents the phrase "Objective Correlative".The theory is that the expression of emotion in art can be achieved by a specific , and almost formulaic prescription of correlated objective sign.The author is depersonalised in this connection since he is the mere effecter of the sign.And , it is the sign, and not the poet, which creates emotion. Eliot goes on to suggest that in Lady Macbeth's sleep walking speech and in the speech that Macbeth makes when he hears of his wife's death, the words are completely adequate to the state of mind.

According to Eliot, talent is acquired through a careful study of poetry, claiming that "Tradition cannot be inherited, and if you want it, you must obtain it by great labour".Eliot asserts that it is absolutely necessary for the poet to study , to have an understanding of the poets before them(him), and to be well versed enough that they can understand and incorporate the mind of Europe into their poetry.

But the poet's study is unique- it is knowledge that does not encroach , and that does not deaden or pervert poetic sensibility. It is poetic knowledge observed through a poetic lens.This implies that knowledge gained by a poet is not knowledge of facts ,but knowledge which leads to a greater understanding. As Eliot says " Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the entire British museum ".

Eliot says that the word tradition is generally regarded as a word of censure , a word disagreeable to the British ears The english praise the poet for those aspects of his work which are individual and original. This undue stress on individuality shows the uncritical bend of their mind." Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice, we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual part of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously ".

This brings Eliot to a consideration of the value and significance of tradition. It does not mean a blind adherence to the ways of the previous generation or generations. Tradition can be obtained via hard labour, sifting the good from the bad, and of knowing what is good and useful. One who has the historic sense feels that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer down to his own day, including the literature of his own country, forms one unbroken, continuous link.

Emphasizing the value of tradition further, Eliot points out that no writer has his value and significance in isolation. Judging and comparing the present writers or poet's work with the past writers forms the real estimate of their worth. Tradition is dynamic, the past guides the present and is also reformed by the present i.e., a sense of reciprocity exists. Every great poet like Virgil, Dante, or Shakespeare, adds something to the literary tradition out of which the future poetry will be written.

The work of a poet in the present is to be compared and contrasted with works of the past, and judged by the standards of the past. The comparison is to be made for knowing the facts about the new work of art. The comparison is made for the purposes of analysis, and for forming a better understanding of the new. This comparison is reciprocal. The past helps us to understand the present, and the present throws light on the past. It is by this comparison alone that we can sift the tradition from the individual elements in a given work of art.

Eliot now explains what he means by a sense of tradition. The past must be examined critically and only the significant in it should be acquired. A sense of tradition in the real sense means a consciousness of the main current which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. The poet must possess the critical gift in ample measure. He must realize that art never improves, though its material is never the same. The great artistic works never lose their significance.

T.S. Eliot is conscious of the criticism that will be made of his theory of tradition. His view of tradition requires a ridiculous amount of erudition. Knowledge does not mean bookish knowledge and the capacity for acquiring knowledge varies from person to person. Some can absorb knowledge easily, while others must sweat for it. Shakespeare could know more of Roman history from Plutarch than most men can from the entire British Museum. It is the duty of every poet to acquire, to the best of his ability, this knowledge of the past, and he must continue to acquire this consciousness throughout his career. Such awareness of tradition sharpens poetic creation.

The artist must continually surrender himself to some theory which is more valuable than himself i.e. the literary tradition. He must allow his poetic sensibility to be shaped and modified by the past. He must acquire greater and greater objectivity. His emotions and passions must be depersonalised. Thus, the poet's personality is merely a medium (a catalyst). That is why Eliot says "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry".

The mind of the poet is like the catalytic agent which induces changes, remaining unaffected itself. It is necessary for new combinations of emotions and experiences to take place, but it does not undergo any change during the process of poetic combination. Eliot says "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the mind who suffers and the mind which creates".

The test of maturity of an artist is the completeness which he digests and transmutes the passions which forms the substance of his poetry.

Eliot distinguishes between emotions and feelings, though not clearly enough to warrant emphasis on his impersonal theory of poetry. He next compares the poet's mind to a receptacle in which are stored numberless feelings, emotions, etc which remain there in an unorganized and chaotic form till all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together. Thus, poetry is organization rather than inspiration. The poem's greatness depends upon the intensity of the process of poetic composition. John Keats' Ode to Nightingale contains a number of emotions which have nothing to do with the Nightingale. The poet has no personality to express, being merely a medium in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Thus Eliot rejects romantic subjectiveness.

The emotion of poetry is different from the personal emotions of the poet. It is not the business of the poet to find new emotions, he may express only ordinary emotions, but he must impart to them a new significance and a new meaning. Eliot rejects Wordsworth's theory of poetry having its emotions recollected in tranquility. In the poetic process, there is only concentration, a passive one. A bad poet is conscious where he should be unconscious, and unconscious where he needs to be conscious. It is, however, not made clear to that when a poet should be conscious or not.

Eliot concludes "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": only the depersonalisation of his emotions must be there. The historic sense in the poet makes him conscious, not only of the present, but also of the past.

Eliot's theory of literary tradition has been criticized for its limited definition of what constitutes the Canon of that tradition. Harold Bloom disagrees with Eliot's denunciation of the Romantic poetry. Eliot's 'mind of Europe reeks of Euro-centrism, although he supported many eastern works of literature as the Maha Bharata. Eliot was arguing the importance of a complete sensibility. B.P. Sinha writes that Eliot went beyond Indian ideas to Indian forms. Eliot's notion of tradition stands at odds with feminist, post colonial and minority theories.

Harold Bloom presents a conception of tradition differing from that of Eliot. Whereas Eliot believes that the great poet is faithful to his predecessors, behaves in a concordant manner, Bloom, according to his theory of the 'anxiety of influence', envisions the strong poet to engage in a much more aggressive and tumultuous rebellion against tradition. The essays' central premise, as well as its continuing critical value, is, in essence, argument that the creative process is an impersonal process, despite the tendencies of many readers to persist in identifying the speakers of a poem with the poet. Keeping this central premise in mind ought to demystify many of Eliot's pronouncements on similar subjects.

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