

TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

"Tradition and The Individual Talent (1919)" is from his collection of essays– *The Sacred writing (1920)*. It is one of Eliot's major critical documents. It has given new insight into the trend of writing poetry, into the nature of criticism, the author, and the literary tradition. It evaluates "tradition" and "individual talent" in the trend of writing work of art. The author argues that poetry is impersonal. It avoids the expression of personal emotion. In fact, poetry portrays emotions, but different from personal emotions. In personal life, one may have agonies or not, but yet we find he or she writes some agonies as if they were his or her own. The essay also argues one more fascinating point that the creation of a major work of poetry alters the history of poetry. The poetry of the past affects poetry of succeeding periods, and similarly, poetry of the present can affect and alter the poetry of the past.

KEYWORDS: Writing Poetry, Tradition, Emotions & Criticism

INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot and His Works

Thomas Sterns Eliot (1888-1965) has been one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century. He was a poet, literary critic and a playwright. This great literary figure was born in St. Louis, Missouri. Yet most of his life he passed in London. He studied at Harvard, Paris and Oxford. He worked as a director in the English publishing firm of Faber and Faber. He worked as a post of clerk in a Lloyds bank in London. He took British citizenship in 1927. He was editor of different literary journals such as *The Criterion* and *The Egoist*. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

T. S. Eliot has been regarded with high honor by both English speaking nations America and Britain. The world has given equal honor for his contribution in English literature. *Prufrock and Other Observations* which have established him as a distinguished poet. A satire on fashion, the corruption of human attitude, Loss of religious faith, parodies of social manner are some of the subjects of his poems. Traditional rhythms, abrupt shifts and sudden parodies are some major features of the style of his poetry. *Murder in the Cathedral (1935)*. *The Cocktail Party (1949)*. *The Confidential Clerk (1954)* is some plays by which he has established himself as an important playwright. He is better known for his essays on criticism. *The Sacred Wood (1920)*, *Selected Essays (1932)*. *The Use of Poetry and The Use of Criticism (1933)*. *After Strange Gods: A primer of Modern Heresy (1934)* is some important and critical works which have much impact on modern trend of criticism.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS: TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT

Tradition

Tradition means passing of beliefs or customs from one generation to the next. Traditionally refers to a type of

things that are practiced for many centuries. "Tradition" is a general and usual belief or custom. It is a human conduct in general and in common. It is not bound to any single conductor time. "A tradition" is a particular practice or belief. It is a particular code or a set of conventions. It is specific and belongs to a person or class. "The tradition" is also specific.

Eliot starts the essay with the term to describe so usual trend among us by referring any poetry to the past. We often like to say the poetry of so- and - so is "traditional" or "too traditional" which sounds very offensive to the poet. This term also implies somehow the archaeological reconstruction. Hardly any man likes his work to be called by the adjective. We do not hear the work referred by "the tradition" or "a tradition". It is really very interesting that people (or rather critics) like to relate the recent work with past, but they do not identify the specific poet of poetry or relevance.

Every nation, every race, every culture has its own creativities and critical turn of mind. Not being wise, we argue that others are more or less critical than us. It is necessary to remind ourselves that "criticism is as inevitable as breathing." No one resists all those things that have aroused in mind after reading or seeing something. Criticism of criticism is also in practice.

In the process of criticism, we have a trend to find something individual, rather a peculiar thing, something quite different from the poet's predecessors. We satisfy ourselves with the novelty of the poem- either in style or in content, but if we approach a poet deeply without any prejudices and with the knowledge of the past, we can see that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be related to the works of the dead poets. This is the cause not only in the period of adolescence of the poet, but also in the period of full maturity. Eliot says-

"One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without his prejudices we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."

Eliot argues that the tradition is never good if that is handed down to immediate generation in a blind or timid adherence to its successes. This tradition should be positively discouraged. What does he mean by "positively discouraged"? Surely, he does not approve if "tradition" has been taken directly and blindly and without labor. He doesn't say that "tradition" is bad. It has much significance and probably it is hardly possible that one can write without the influence of tradition. It has been seen that many such simple currents soon lost in the sand. Most usually people favor new things, novelty, rather than repetition or old work written in the same form or revised again. Eliot means to say that it'd be better not to have old work repeated. If it is so, it will fail soon. One must labor hard to inherit "tradition". Eliot sows significance of "tradition" in the following words-

"Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor."

Historical Sense and Tradition

Tradition involves historical sense, and historical sense, in turn, involves a perception. The historical sense is very indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year. Alexander Pope says that a critic must have a sense of history because it is the knowledge of history that makes one able to judge any literary work. It is very interesting that Eliot says that the historical sense is indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year. He might have been telling us that the historical sense is required for maturity. I heard a pop-singer say that she would like to be a classical singer at the age of forty-five. In fact, the age of maturity has much effect on the experience of a person. Such a person keeps knowledge of past and present. He says that "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but also of its presence. A man with historical sense writes with the knowledge of the past as well as of the present. A man's writing with historical sense is traditional. According to him-

"The 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."

Timeless is the never ending past and the temporal signifies the present or the contemporary. One must have a sense of past or present or both together. History records past and it relates to present. Therefore, it is necessary to have a sense of both times. The writer naturally becomes traditional.

Furthermore, Eliot writes that "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. We cannot value him alone." We must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. This is a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. It is not absurd that the present is directed by the past. Usually it is seen that a building that has been recently built besides an old building affects the old one, too. The landlord of the old building brings some changes to it so that the old can be competitive with the new one. Old institute is always effective to give directions to a new institute. Similar case is with poetry, too.

In a peculiar sense a poet will be aware of the past. He must be judged not saying that he is good or bad. Neither he should be judged by the old principles set by old critics. Eliot says that it is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other. The work is set in the test to judge the value how one is similar or dissimilar to another.

Eliot guides us to a very intelligent fact of the relation of the poet with the past. He says that-

- The poet must not consider or take the past as a lump or a whole;
- He should not confine himself to one or two admired works; and
- He should not confine himself to a certain preferred period.

He gives reasons by saying that

- First is inadmissible because the past, or the history, is never a whole;
- The second is an important experience of youth because only young are more eager for private admirations; and

- Third is possibly pleasant and highly desirable because a poet is usually more affected by a certain preferred period of literary importance like the Metaphysical period, Age of Renaissance, Romanticism, etc.

It is also remarkable that a poet must be quite aware of the obvious fact that *art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same*. It means to say that a glass (art) is same but the content or water (material) is always changing. A poet's mind is same but the experience is never quite the same. Art originated in a period is usually the same, but the subject matter of the art is usually changed. The process or the method of art may remain same in different periods or generations, but the materials like experience and feelings may be different because the context changes according to the changing time. Eliot has found differences between the present and the past, too. The conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way, but to some extent the past doesn't show its awareness of itself.

Education for Practice of Poetry

Most people claim that they know more than the dead writers, but it is true that they know about them, too.

It is believed that, for the practice of poetry, one must have a good amount of education. Eliot makes objection, saying that much learning deadens or perverts poetic sensibility. A poet ought to know as much as he needs for receiving skills and materials. Some people absorb knowledge easily, whereas some have to labor hard for it. Shakespeare received knowledge from Plutarch's history book. He derived several stories and characters like Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra. Most people could not have knowledge of the whole British Museum as much as Shakespeare got from single person Plutarch's work. Eliot emphasizes that a poet must have historical sense. He insists that a "poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career."

Depersonalization / Analogy of Catalyst

We must notice that a person is not important. His work is our target of interpretation. It must not escape our study. An artist is recognized by his work and the artist is not subject of recognition. Therefore, the person must sacrifice his personality while creating works of art. He emphasizes on a continual surrender of personality. "The progress of an artist is continual self- sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." A poet must vanish himself only just to create a new personality, but this personality will be about the work of art. The poet himself dies his work of art is born. We should be more concerned with the creation rather than with the dying or dead personality of the poet.

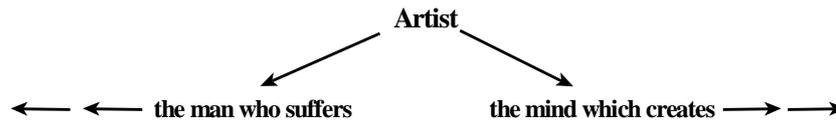
Continual surrender of the poet is a process of depersonalization. Depersonalization is the avoidance of limited, personal involvement in the work. It refers to the transcending personal limits. A poet knows that tradition cannot be inherited and if he wants to obtain it, it is possible only by great labor. He labors hard being conscious about the past and present and the result is transcendence. He overcomes the conditions of past and present and brings out better work of art. Transcendence is, in fact, overcoming the personal limits.

Eliot writes that "it is in the depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. He presents an analogy- an action in which a small piece of pure platinum is introduced into a chamber in which there are oxygen and sulfur dioxide. It so happens that when the platinum is presented in the chamber of two gases, oxygen and sulfur dioxide there is an action and they form sulfurous acid. The platinum acts as a catalyst. A catalyst is an element that brings other elements into action, but it remains inert, neutral and unchanged. It is quite interesting that the platinum itself is apparently unaffected and neither there is any trace of platinum in the new form- sulfurous acid. The mind of the poet is

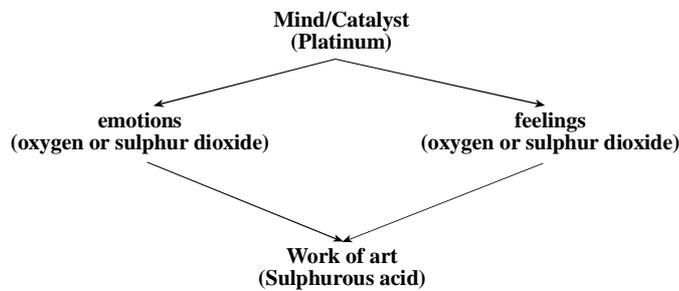
also a piece of platinum. It is inert, neutral and unchanged, whereas it brings action into the experience, emotions and feelings. Experience, emotions and feelings are materials which are mixed, given certain shape and changed into a new form- work of art. Eliot differentiates the man who suffers and the mind which creates the following words-

The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

We can study the difference from the following chart-



Similarly, Eliot's analogy of depersonalization can be described in the following chart just to see how a catalyst (mind) works-



Eliot discusses that honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry. Unfortunately, most critics base their criticism on the "poet" rather than "poetry". It is same when we see that a man looks at the name in one corner of a painting and appreciates that the painting is beautiful. Very ironically, he does not have a glance over the painting itself. The other aspect of this impersonal theory of poetry is the relation of the poem to its author. He believes that the medium, in which the poet has been composed, is worthy of our appreciation. When the question of the medium arises, mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature poet. Certainly, the mind of mature poet can present a more finely perfected medium in which special or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.

Elements of the Catalyst

It is an experience that is reacted or brought into action by the transforming catalyst. The elements of the experience, or the elements that work and are transformed by the catalyst, are of two kinds- emotions and feelings. An experience that has been acquired from the effect of a work is different from the ordinary experience. World, characters, events of a work of art are different from ordinary ones. All of them are created out of words, structure, pattern or medium. Emotions and feelings are produced from particular words, phrases or images. A work of art may be formed out of one emotion or may be a combination of several. It may be formed out of various feelings produced by particular words, phrases or images. Poetry may be made out of emotions and feelings together or out of either. Great poetry may be made without the direct use of any emotion whatever composed out of feelings only. For example, in canto XV of the *Inferno*, a section in the *Divine Comedy* by Dante, an Italian poet Bruetto Latini has been presented with considerable complexity of

detail. This section is a working up of the emotion evident in the situation, and the effect of the emotion has been produced by the detail. Still the last quatrain gives an image, a feeling attaching to an image, which comes differently from the complexity of detail. It sounds as if the image were probably hanging in the poet's mind, and when the proper combination comes to the image, he adds to the detail. Emotion and feeling are combined to create the great poetry. The poet's mind is only a container. Eliot writes-

"The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together."

Medium and Personality

There is a remarkable statement that Eliot makes about the medium. He says that it is not the "greatness", the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure under which the fusion takes place, is important. The artistic process is the medium which is also a base of literary works. Usually a work of poetry may have a definite emotion, but the intensity of the poetry is something quite different from whatever intensity, in the supposed experience it may give the impression. John, Keats's *The Ode to the Nightingale* has number of feelings which have nothing particular to do with the nightingale. Yet the attractive name of nightingale and its reputation can be seen serving to bring the feeling and bird together.

Eliot has attacked the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul. It refers to the theory that the soul is one with God and free of the quirks and accidents of personality the metaphysical theory refers to 17th century's English poets who blended emotion with intellectual ingenuity. He denies that there is substantial unity of the soul. This unity means that man's soul is one with God. "Personality" has nothing to do with the particular medium of poetry. He says that the poet has not a "personality" to express. The poet has particular medium in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provided by particular events in his life, that the poet is any way remarkable or interesting. The emotion in poetry can be a very complex thing quite different from personal ones.

Eliot presents few lines of a passage from *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607) by English playwright Cyril Tourneur (1580-1626) in which he shows how there is a combination of positive and negative emotions. There is an intensely strong attraction toward beauty and an equally intense fascination by the ugliness which is contrasted with it and which destroys it. A number of feelings have relation with the emotion.

Poetry-Escape from Emotion

The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. Emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Eliot goes against William Wordsworth, who has said that poetry "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility. He says that we can't believe that poetry is emotion recollected in tranquility". "There is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor without distortion, tranquility. There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious. Both errors tend to make him "personal". 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. Eliot, concludes that the emotion of art is

impersonal, the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done, and for it he must be conscious of the past and present.

Eliot's Rhetoric

T. S. Eliot is himself alert with a sense of history, of English literature. He says that present works may modify or alter past works as much as the past works due to the present works. Eliot's consciousness towards tradition and the individual talent has resulted in the formation of the intelligent literary criticism. He usually defines a term and continues his analysis of the term. He makes the argument and gives his own conclusion. He is seen sometimes concerned with tradition, then with individual talent next with experience or emotion and finally with the conscious or unconscious mind. Every point has been given with special attention and ended with the conclusion. It is interesting that single issue has been illustrated in every paragraph. He moves carefully from point to point. Allusions to Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth have added historical sense to the text.

One interesting style he has used in the text is the use of pithy maxims or aphorisms. There are several memorable sentences or phrases used in the text. Such remarkable sentences can't escape from eyes of readers of criticism-

- Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative but its own critical turn of mind.
- The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.
- Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion.

Eliot is able, like Francis Bacon, to produce more meaning from few words. His criticism of critics is noteworthy for all kinds of readers, especially of literature.

CONCLUSIONS

Eliot presents views that a poet's mind works as a catalyst and experiences are the materials of the combination. For an experience as materials, he gives two other elements- emotions and feelings – which, he believes that “emotion recollected in tranquility” is an inexact formula. He says that there is a great deal in the writing of poetry which must be conscious and deliberate. 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. The emotion of art is impersonal. The poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.

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