

A Critical Appraisal of T.S. Eliot's *Tradition and Individual Talent*

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Abstract

It is an established fact that T.S. Eliot was a multifaceted personality who imparted a new depth and gravity to literary criticism. Although his reputation chiefly rests upon his poetry but without any shade of doubt, his contribution in the sphere of criticism cannot be underestimated. His landmark essay is divided into three parts in which he, first of all, he posit that what often makes poetry great is the degree to which it is in conversation with the poetry of the past. In the second part of the essay, Eliot expounds the idea that the creation of poetry is an act of depersonalization. For him, great art is not an expression of a poet's personal emotions but rather an act of aesthetic distillation which is primarily typifies built on his idea of the poet as an impersonal medium.

This paper throws light on Eliot's conviction of the tradition where the personality of pure poetry is evidence of the objective correlative paradigm. This suggests too, that honest criticism and sensitive appreciation of essentially poetry are directed not at the poet but upon the poetry. Eliot's final point is that the poet's sense of tradition and the impersonality of poetry are complimentary.

Key-words: Tradition, value, centralization, emotion, feeling, inheritance.

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Introduction

T.S. Eliot is the most towering and domineering man of letters of the twentieth century. He was a versatile genius who, during his long span of productive activity, achieved distinction as a poet, playwright, journalist and critic. In his critical and creative writings, he generally attacks the metaphysics of substance. Eliot stands in the long line of poets and critics beginning with Ben Jonson, and including such names as John Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Matthew Arnold. Eliot who declared himself "a royalist in politics, an Anglo-Catholic in religion, and a classicist in literature," is also an anti-liberalist and anti-

individualist who attaches great value to tradition and treats poetry as an impersonal art.

Eliot's essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* was first published in *The Egoist* (1919) and later in his book of criticism, *The Sacred Wood* (1920) as a critical article which became the *locus classicus* of modern criticism. It is generally hailed as the unofficial manifesto of Eliot as a critic, and a declaration of creed and these principles are the bases of all his subsequent criticism. In the essay, Eliot discusses some vital problems of literature in a sustained manner. He reorients the term 'tradition' and gives it a wider significance by reconciling tradition with the individual's talent. The idea of tradition, he pleads, is concerned both with literary creation and literary criticism. He challenges the notion that a poet should be praised in proportion to his originality because apart from tradition a poet is mere a phantom. A poet, according to Eliot, must have not only the sense of the past but of its presence also. No poet and no artist has a complete meaning. A poet must, therefore, flow in the main current of literature, but tradition does not mean a blind adherence to the ways of previous generations.

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervision of nobility, the old existing order must be if even so slightly altered as the author says: "Every great poet like Virgil, Dante or Shakespeare add something to the literary tradition out of which the future poetry will be written." (Eliot, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, 41)

The poet's rendition be examined critically and only the significant in it should be acquired so, the sense of tradition does not mean that the poet should know only a few poets whom he admires. A sense of tradition means consciousness "of the main current which doesn't all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations." (Eliot, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, 39)

According to Eliot, a poet must allow his poetic sensibility to be shaped and modified by the past; his emotions and passions must be depersonalized; he must, in other words, be as impersonal and objective as a scientist. The personality of a poet, Eliot insists, is not important; but his sense of tradition is. Thus, a poet's personality is merely a medium having the same significance as the catalytic agent in which a chemical reaction takes place. That is why, the poet holds that "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet, but upon the poetry." (Eliot, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, 37)

In this way, a poet's mind speculates consistently to form emotions and experiences into new wholes, but even in these new combinations there is no sign of the poet's

mind just as the newly formed sulfuric acid does not contain any trace of platinum.

The essay, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, is a frontal attack on the central poetics of English Romantic Poetry which holds that poetry is the product of the poet's inspiration. Contrarily, Eliot compares the poet's mind to a jar in which are stored numberless feelings and emotions which remain there in an organized chaotic form till, "all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together." (Eliot, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, 43)

There is always a difference between the artistic emotion and personal emotions of the poet for example, John Keats' famous *Ode to Nightingale* contains a number of emotions which have nothing to do with the nightingale.

Eliot rejects Wordsworth's theory of poetry having its origin in "emotions recollected in tranquility," (Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, 345) and points out that in the process of poetic composition there is neither emotion nor recollection, nor tranquility. Eliot's virulent attack on the romantic theory of poetry inherent in the fact that "Poetry is not a turning use of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." (Eliot, *Tradition and Individual Talent*, 40).

Conclusion

Eliot's stress on tradition is well founded. A poet can know what is to be done only, if he requires the sense of tradition, the historic sense which makes him conscious not only of the present. The essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* has a great significance in the history of literary criticism. It turned upside down the critical tradition of the whole English speaking world. It brought an end to the Romantic era of both poetry and criticism and marked the revival of classicism of the eighteenth century. The modern age, the fragmented, alienated modern age requires tradition to grow to root itself. Here Eliot's demand of the historic sense in a writer sounds like an emergency all and marks a significant turning point in the received poetics of poetry and literary criticism.

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