

# TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT

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Written and published in 1919 in the *Times Literary Supplement*, it is considered to be the unofficial manifesto of Eliot's critical creed, for it contains all those critical principles from which his criticism has been derived ever since. The seeds which have been sown here come to fruition in his subsequent critical essays. It contains three parts. The first part gives us Eliot's concept of tradition, and in the second part is developed his theory of impersonality of poetry. The short, the third part is in the nature of a conclusion, or summing up of the whole discussion,

## PART I

### Traditional Elements : Their Significance

Eliot begins the essay by pointing out that the word 'tradition' is generally regarded as a word of censure. It is a word disagreeable to the English ears. When the English praise a poet, they praise him for those aspects of his work which are 'individual' and original. It is supposed that his chief merit lies in such parts. This undue stress on individuality shows that the English have an uncritical turn of mind. They praise the poet for the wrong thing. If they examine the matter critically with an unprejudiced mind, they will realise that the best and the most individual part of a poet's work is that which shows the maximum influence of the writers of the past. To quote his own words : "Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice, 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.

The word 'tradition' according to Eliot is rarely used as a commendatory term but as a word of censure. It is best applied by English critics for vaguely approving a work of art as traditional (as preserving some antique, out-of-date, literary curiosities of old times, which are yet pleasing to the present age.) Thus, in English criticism, according to Eliot, we have a deplorable lack of that critical insight which views a particular literary work or a writer in the context of a wider literary tradition. The English literary critic does not give due weight and consideration to tradition in evaluating the writers of the past and in the appreciation of the poets of the present. He uses 'tradition' as a derogatory word.

### Importance of Criticism for Creative Activity

Criticism is important for creation itself. It paves the way for, sustains and guides the creative activity. Criticism expresses our

responses to a particular work of art; it expresses the feelings and emotions and intellectual reactions of a reader in relation to the book he reads.

### **The Importance of Tradition to Individual Talent**

Eliot says that the Englishmen have a tendency to insist, when they praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects of his work they try to find out what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of that man. They try to find out the difference of the poet with his contemporaries and predecessors, especially with his immediate predecessors. They try to find out something that can be separated in order to be enjoyed. But if we study the poet without bias or prejudice, 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, their ancestors, assert their immortality forcefully and vigorously. We find the dead poets in the present, poets not in their impressionable period of adolescence, but in the period of their full maturity. According to Eliot, tradition and individual talent go together.

### **Definition of Tradition**

Tradition is not the handing down, or following the ways of the ancients blindly. Tradition is not a blind adherence to the ways of the previous generation or generations. It is different from imitation, or a mere repetition of what has already been achieved. Tradition cannot be inherited. It can only be obtained with great labour. It involves a historical sense which enables a poet to perceive not only the pastness of the past but its presentness. A creative artist, though he lives in a particular milieu, does not work merely with his own generation in view. He does not take his own age, or the literature of that period only as a separate entity, but acts with the conviction that in general the whole literature of the continent from the classical age of the Greeks onwards and in particular the literature of his own country, is to be taken as a harmonious whole. His own creative efforts are not apart from it but a part of it. A writer thus learns to value tradition by acquiring the historical sense, which enables the writer to feel vividly the times he belongs to and, at the same time, not to lose sight of that timelessness that belongs to the creative art as a whole. It is the sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of timeless and of the temporal together. It is what makes a writer traditional. It also makes the writer most acutely conscious of his place in time; by a right valuation of what is called tradition, the writer becomes conscious of his own contemporaneity.

### **The Close Relationship and Interdependence of the Past and the Present**

There is a close relationship and interdependence of the past and the present in literature. The past is as much modified and altered by the present as it modifies and alters the present. For an artist, the relationship between the past and the present is reciprocal. No evaluation of an artist or a work of art is possible if he or it is viewed as an isolated, self-sufficient entity, unrelated with the whole current of

literature. It is only in context of tradition, of the past artist and his works of art, that the excellences and limitations of an artist can be determined. Thus, the evaluation of an artist or a work of art is the assessment of his or its relationship with the artist and works of the past. Only by the process of constant comparison and contrast between an artist and his predecessors we can hope to arrive at the true appreciation. Not only from the viewpoint of historical criticism, but also as an aesthetic principle this holds true.

### **The Relationship of a Poet's Work to the Great Works of the Past**

The poet who understands the presentness of the past, also understands his responsibilities and difficulties as an artist. Such an artist will fully realise that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past. In saying that an artist is finally to be judged by the standards of the past, Eliot does not imply that he is to be pronounced better or worse than the previous critics in judging their works. This really implies that a contemporary work is to be compared with the great works of the past, and each is measured by the other. To conform merely would be for the new work now really to conform at all. There would be nothing new in it, and it would not be a work of art at all. A work may be individual and appear to conform. It will be a fallacy to classify the works of art into the categories of 'individual' and 'traditional'.

### **Literature as a Continuity**

To define more clearly the relationship of the poet to the past, Eliot points out a significant difference between the present and the past. The difference is that "the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show." The poet cannot take the past as something remote from him, static and fixed: the past is not again merely a repetition of previous generations or of the poets or writers of the previous generations which appeal to a poet on his personal estimates, though for a young poet such preferences come naturally. Or an artist may take as his model a particular period of literature which he prefers to others. These, however, each by itself do not represent the real past. The poet has always to keep in mind that the main stream of literature is not represented exclusively by the great names in literature, but is at times expressed through the works of comparatively less known or even obscure poets. In art, the material undergoes kaleidoscopic changes, and the change is not to be confused with improvement. What it really denotes is a development, a continuity, to which even the most minor works contribute something.

Some critics regard the writers of the past as artists remote from them, separated from them by the knowledge which they possess. Eliot feels that the knowledge possessed by the present generation modifies the past, and thus the past is modified by the present.

Some critics oppose the theory that a poet must have a profound knowledge of the past, for, in their opinion, such erudition would only deaden the poetic sensibility. But the acquisition of knowledge by the

poet does not imply the possession of such knowledge as may serve utilitarian ends or may be used for ostentation. What Eliot means is that a poet should continually develop his consciousness of the past, for it is this awareness of tradition that shapes the sensibility, which has a vital part to play in the process of poetic creation.

## PART II

### **Eliot's Impersonal Theory of Poetry**

The artist must continually surrender himself to something 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 continue to acquire the sense of tradition throughout his career. In the beginning his self, his individuality, may assert itself, but as his powers mature there must be greater and greater extinction of personality. He must acquire greater and greater objectivity. His emotions and passions must be depersonalised; he must be as impersonal and objective as a scientist. The personality of the artist is not important; the important thing is his sense of tradition. A good poem is a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written. He must forget his personal joys and sorrows, and be absorbed in acquiring a sense of tradition and expressing it in his poetry. Thus the poet's personality is merely a medium, having the same significance as a catalytic agent, or a receptacle in which chemical reactions take place. That is why Eliot holds that, "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry."

By opposing the Romantic theory of poetry as self-expression, Eliot gave a new direction to literary criticism. Poetry, in his view, is not merely the expression of personality, and the poetic process does not involve mere self-expression. The poetic process is a process of depersonalization: "a continual surrender of himself as he (poet) is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." Further, "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."

By these statements, however, Eliot does not deny personality to a poet. "Only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things." He insists upon the point that the poetic process is the "continual extinction of personality," a surrender of personal emotion to the emotion of art.

Eliot elaborates his impersonal theory of poetry by bringing into focus two important points: (1) As all poetry, whether written in the past or being written in the present, is a living whole, no poem is to be, or can be viewed in isolation as an unrelated identity. Each poem is modified by the poems ever written, and in turn modifies them all. The relation in which a poem stands to other poems by other poets is, therefore, the proper object upon which criticism and appreciation is to

be directed. (2) Another field to be explored by the critical activity is the relation of a poem to the poet himself. To illustrate this point Elliot gives a suggestive analogy from science – the analogy of a catalyst. When oxygen and sulphur dioxide are mixed in a chamber having a piece of finely filated platinum, they form sulphuric acid. It is only when the piece of platinum is present that the combination of oxygen and sulphur dioxide forms the sulphuric acid. However, neither the piece of platinum is in any way affected by this nor does the sulphuric acid thus formed contain any trace of platinum. The piece of platinum, in this case, acts as a catalyst : remaining neutral and unchanged, while a transformation, due to it, has taken place. The mind of the poet also acts as a catalyst : as it operates, either partly or exclusively, upon the experiences of the poet himself. But the experiences or passions are only the material of poetry, the poetic mind transmutes them into new artistic wholes, thus surrendering personal emotion to the emotion of art. We have to realize clearly the distinction between the man who suffers and the mind that creates. The more a poet succeeds in achieving perfection in his art, the more completely separate in him is the man who suffers and the mind that creates. What distinguishes the mind of a mature poet from new combinations out of variegated diverse experiences?

The test of the maturity of an artist is the completeness with which his mind digests and transmutes the passions which form the substance of his poetry. The man suffers, *i.e.*, has experiences, but it is his mind which transforms his experiences into something new and different. The personality of the poet does not find expression in his poetry; it acts like a catalytic agent in the process of poetic composition.

#### Emotions and Feelings

The experiences which enter the poetic process, says Elliot, may be of two kinds. They are emotions and feelings. Poetry may be composed out of emotions only or out of feelings only, or out of both. T. S. Elliot here distinguishes between emotions and feelings, but he does not state what this difference is.

#### Poetry as Organisation

Elliot next compares the poet's mind to a jar or receptacle in which are stored numerous feelings, emotions, etc., which remain there in an unorganised and chaotic form till, "all the particles which can unite, to form a new compound are present together." Thus, poetry is organisation rather than inspiration. And the greatness of a poem does not depend upon the greatness or even the intensity of the emotions, which are the components of the poem, but upon the intensity of the process of poetic composition. Just as a chemical reaction takes place under pressure, so also intensity is needed for the fusion of emotions. The more intense the poetic process, the greater the poem. There is always a difference between the artistic emotion and the personal emotions of the poet. For example, the famous *Ode to Nightingale* of Keats contains a number of emotions which have nothing to do with the Nightingale. "The difference between art and the event is always absolute." The poet has no

personality to express, he is merely a medium in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may find no place in his poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may have no significance for the man. Eliot thus rejects romantic subjectivism.

### Artistic Emotions and their Concentration

The emotion of poetry is different from the personal emotions of the poet. His personal emotions may be simple or crude, but emotion of his poetry may be complex and refined. It is the mistaken notion that the poet must express new emotions that result in much eccentricity in poetry. 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. And it is not necessary that they should be his personal emotions. Even emotions which he has never personally experienced can serve the purpose of poetry. (For example, emotions which result from the reading of books can serve his turn.) Eliot rejects Wordsworth's theory of poetry having "its origin in emotions recollected in tranquillity" and points out that in the process of poetic composition there is neither emotion nor recollection, nor tranquillity. In the poetic process, there is only concentration of a number of experiences, and a new thing results from this concentration. And this process of concentration is neither conscious nor deliberate; it is a passive one. There is, no doubt, that there are elements in the poetic process which are conscious and deliberate. The difference between a good and a bad poet is that a bad poet is conscious where he should be unconscious and unconscious where he should be conscious. It is his consciousness of the wrong kind which makes a poem personal, whereas mature art must be impersonal. But Eliot does not tell us when a poet should be conscious, and when not. The point has been left vague and indeterminate.

## PART III

### Poetry as an Escape

The poet 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." Thus, Eliot does not deny personality or emotion to the poet. Only, he does deny personality or emotion to the poet. Only, he must depersonalise his emotions. There should be an extinction of his personality. The impersonality can be achieved only when the poet surrenders himself completely to the work that is to be done. And the poet can know what is to be done, only if he acquires a sense of tradition, the historic sense which makes him conscious, not only of the present, but also of the present moment of the past, not only of what is dead, but of what is already living.

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Q. 1. Summarise and Discuss Eliot's Views on Individual Talent in relation to tradition.**

Or

**Q. 2. What does Eliot mean by the sense of Tradition and how can it be acquired?**