

From a poet to a critic: Understanding T.S. Eliot's concepts of Tradition and Individuality through his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*

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Abstract

T.S. Eliot is not only a modern poet, rather he succeeds in establishing himself as a literary critic whose criticism paved the way for the development of literary theory - New Criticism. However, there is a false belief that the critical thought is a hindrance for the creative process. T.S. Eliot has questioned this existing notion and made a remarkable equilibrium between these two presumably antithetical elements. He emphasises the need for critical thought in the creative process of composing poetry which is getting substantiated in the essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* published in the *Sacred Wood*. The aim of this paper is to investigate how Eliot has defined 'tradition' to achieve 'individual talent' for a poet.

Key Words: depersonalisation, history, individuality, impersonality, poet, tradition

The modern age in the history of English literature is marked by the first World War, sense of fragmentation, mourning, disillusionment and disintegration of Europe. Austrian novelist Joseph Roth's novel *Flight Without End* incorporates the themes of the modern age in post World War scenario. It revolves around an Austro-Hungarian lieutenant, Franz Tunda, who is captured by the Russian army in World War I and returns to Europe escaping imprisonment in Siberia. Upon his return to the homeland, he suffers from an identity crisis as the old world he used to know is lost; he cannot adjust himself with the new social and political order of the society. As if it accounts the journey of a man, who is in search of the past in an apparently shattered present. When Tunda asks what is European culture while attending a party, none can provide any satisfying answer:

“‘Religion!’”, said the President, who never went to church.

‘Morality’, said the lady, whose illicit associations were common knowledge.

‘Art’, said the diplomat, who had never looked at a single picture since his schooldays.

‘The European Idea’, said a gentleman by the name of Rappaport cleverly, because vaguely.

The aristocrat, however, contended himself with the remark: ‘Just read my magazine!’”(Roth 116)

Their different answers symbolically point out disintegration, fragmentation of society. T.S. Eliot, one of the pioneers of the modernism in English literature, was determined to reconstructing the European mine, reevaluating the changing European landscape, and restoring a culturally and politically integrated Europe.

Eliot begins his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* by connecting writing with archaeology as both testify to the trace of ‘history’. He considers criticism to be as essential as ‘breathing’ - we shouldn’t even hesitate to question our minds when we are getting emotionally connected with a book. Here, being emotional is not important, rather being critical or analytical about emotion does matter. He considers criticism to be as essential as ‘breathing’ - we shouldn’t even hesitate to question our minds when we are getting emotionally connected with a book. Here, being emotional is not important, rather being critical or analytical about emotion does matter.

Eliot takes a different stance on assessing individuality of a poet. The conventional notion of the critics to judge a poet’s individuality is how much he, in his writing styles, can be separated from the other poets. On the contrary, according to Eliot, the individuality or the best part of a poet lies in the fact that how much a poet has followed the footsteps of his previous poets to compose poetry : “...the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously” (*The Sacred Wood*, 43).

Next, Eliot has attempted to define the idea of ‘tradition’. The tradition, as Eliot describes, cannot be automatically received, but must be procured with hard work- the capacity of knowing history. This ‘historical sense’ includes not only the pastness of the past but also its applicability in the present. A poet should know not only the past literature of his own country, but the literature of Europe since the classical age. In his 1946 lecture entitled “The Unity of European Culture” later published in a collection named *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, Eliot points out the degradation of poetry because of the poet’s lack of knowledge of the literature of other countries following the disintegration of Europe: “As for the first, when the several countries of Europe are cut off from each other, when poets no longer read any literature but that in their own language, poetry in every country must deteriorate” (Eliot 1948, 113). In fact, in Eliot’s own poetry *The Waste Land*, we find the influence of Indian literature when he concludes What the Thunder Said by using the Sanskrit words ‘Datta’, ‘Dayadhvam’ and ‘Damyat’ taken from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. His use of ‘Shantih’ implies that he had to look beyond European tradition to find a word of adequate depth and resonance. Here, we find not only the pastness of the past literature but its applicability and relevance in the modern age.

This historical sense is what makes a writer 'traditional'. This is his concept of seeing literature as an organic whole.

Eliot insists that an individual poet doesn't have any significance by separating him or her from other poets. For proper evaluation, a poet must be compared and contrasted with his predecessors. In fact, Eliot insists on an evaluation of a work of art by comparing the same with the works of his ancestors. Though a poet can be evaluated by the standards of the past, this doesn't denote the standards of the dead critics. It means a judgement when the old and the new are measured in terms of each other. This reminds one of Matthew Arnold's 'Touchstone Method'. The 'ideal order' formed by the "existing monuments" sets the standard, a kind of touchstone for evaluation. He argues that a new work of art necessitates alteration and readjustment of the existing order formed by the existing works. In such a case, the 'present' should modify the 'past' as much as the present is permitted by the past.

Eliot warns that the present poet shouldn't consider the past as mass of substance, for there is no qualitative improvement in art; there may be refinement, development of materials in compliance with the age or ages, but not improvement. He states that 'the mind of Europe'- the collective, organic consciousness of Europe's entire literary, cultural and artistic tradition - is subject to change but this change is not negation but incorporation of the past authors and works of art - be it Shakespeare of the sixteenth century, Homer of the classical age or Paleolithic art and culture of prehistoric age. The present poet should not consider it as the development of his own private mind, but the development of the entire European literary canon.

Eliot warns us of the mishandling of the idea of 'tradition'. As 'tradition' requires extensive knowledge of the past, the knowledge should not be superficial modes of publicity, rather it demands absorption and exposition of knowledge in a rightful manner that contributes to the enrichment of the literary canon. Eliot substantiates his stance by referring to Shakespeare who derived more knowledge of history from Plutarch than those who visited the British Museum for knowing history. It happened due to his absorption of knowledge and exposition of it in his historical plays like *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*.

Eliot then shifts from the role of poets to the role of critics and criticism, "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (ibid 47). Eliot stresses that the poet should surrender himself to a sort of larger authority where he should keep his personality away. Here lies the importance of "theory of Impersonality". Eliot was influenced by classical writers like Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme and Paul Elmer More who did not believe in the human perfection or essential goodness of human beings. In this context, Eliot quotes Hulme's words with approval, "In the light of these absolute values, man himself is judged to be essentially limited and imperfect. He is endowed with Original Sin. While he can occasionally accomplish acts which partake of perfection, he can never himself be perfect... A man is essentially bad; he can only accomplish anything of value by discipline - ethical and political.

Other is thus not merely negative, but creative and liberating. Institutions are necessary" (*Selected Essays*, 430). Moreover, the first World War proved that no human being is perfect and therefore, perfect art can't be expected from an individual artist. The role of the critic is to find out or set the objective standards or principles to evaluate an art.

Eliot is locating two selves within a poet - the suffering self and the creative self. A perfect artist is he who is able to separate his creative mind from the suffering self which indicates that an artist should be 'impersonal' in his artistic composition. For poetry, the idea of impersonality means that a poem should not be the expression of the poet's own thoughts, but be manifestations of an experience or a number of experiences that exist apart from the poet or the creative self. Here, the poet acts as a medium of transmuting the experiences which can be read, felt and understood by all.

Eliot is referring to an analogy of chemical reactions to substantiate the process of depersonalisation. The mind of the poet is a medium in which experiences can enter into new combinations. When oxygen and sulphur dioxide are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they produce sulphuric acid. But the sulphuric acid shows no trace of platinum, which remains unaffected. The catalyst platinum assists in the chemical change, but does not participate in it, and remains unchanged. Eliot compares the mind of the poet to the filament of platinum (the catalyst), which will "digest and transmute the passions which are its material" (ibid 48).

The experiences are of two types: emotions and feelings. Eliot argues that a work of art may be formed out of single emotion or varied emotions; it may be formed of different feelings expressed through various words, situations or phrases; or it may be formed without the direct presence of any emotion. He refers to the Canto XV named *Inferno*, from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where Dante's meeting with Ser Brunetto doesn't present a single emotion but a complex emotional effect generated from varied feelings. Here, the author doesn't express his own personal feelings, rather combines different, multi-layered feelings to create an emotion effect. In fact, it is not the greatness of the emotions, "but the intensity of the artistic process" (ibid 49). The artistic process centers around the murder of Agamemnon and the suffering of Othello that combines or fuses different feelings to achieve an emotion effect upon the readers. The bird Nightingale directly does have nothing to do with the feelings expressed in *Ode to a Nightingale*. It is the artistic process or craftsmanship of Keats that takes the bird as one of the components to illustrate multiple feelings. Moreover, he refers to a passage from Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* which blends and balances positive and negative emotions perfectly. The juxtaposition of two contrary emotions becomes possible only because of the artistic mind of the playwright which is a "receptacle" for "storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images" to form "a new compound" (ibid 49).

Eliot has rejected the subjectivity or the touch of personal emotions of the Romantic poets. Hence, he warns us that the emotion of art should be impersonal as "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” (ibid 52-53). And the artist can achieve this impersonality by surrendering to and cultivating the historical sense, by being aware of the tradition.

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