

Tradition and the Individual Talent - CRITICAL SUMMARY

A Manifesto of Eliot's Critical Creed

The essay Tradition and Individual Talent was first published in 1919, in the Times Literary Supplement, as a critical article. The essay may be regarded as an 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 essays. It is a declaration of Eliot's critical creed, and these principles are the basis of all his subsequent criticism.

Its Three Parts

The essay is divided into three parts. The first part gives us Eliot's concept of tradition, and in the second part is developed his theory of the impersonality of poetry. The short, third part is in the nature of a conclusion, or summing up of the whole discussion.

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 part of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."

The Literary Tradition: Ways in Which It Can Be Acquired

This brings Eliot to a consideration of the value and significance of tradition. Tradition does not mean a blind adherence to the ways of the previous generation or generations. This would be mere slavish imitation, a mere repetition of what has already been achieved, and "novelty is better than

repetition.” Tradition in the sense of passive repetition is to be discouraged. For Eliot, Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. Tradition in the true sense of the term cannot be inherited, it can only be obtained by hard labour. This labour is the labour of knowing the past writers. It is the critical labour of sifting the good from the bad, and of knowing what is good and useful. Tradition can be obtained only by those who have the historical sense. The historical sense involves a perception, “not only of the pastness of the past, but also of its presence: 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 continuous literary tradition” He realises that the past exists in the present, and that the past and the present form one simultaneous order. This historical sense is the sense of the timeless and the temporal, as well as of the timeless and the temporal together. It is this historic sense which makes a writer traditional. A writer with the sense of tradition is fully conscious of his own generation, of his place in the present, but he is also acutely conscious of his relationship with the writers of the past. In brief, the sense of tradition implies (a) a recognition of the continuity of literature, (b) a critical judgment as to which of the writers of the past continue to be significant in the present, and (c) a knowledge of these significant writers obtained through painstaking effort. Tradition represents the accumulated wisdom and experience of ages, and so its knowledge is essential for really great and noble achievements.

Dynamic Conception of Tradition: Its Value

Emphasising further the value of tradition, Eliot points out that no writer has his value and significance in isolation. To judge the work of a poet or an artist, we must compare and contrast his work with the works of poets and artist in the past. Such comparison and contrast is essential for forming an idea of the real worth and significance of a new writer and his work. Eliot’s conception of tradition is a dynamic one. According to his view, tradition is not anything fixed and static; it is constantly changing, growing, and becoming different from what it is. A writer in the present must seek guidance from the past; he must conform to the literary tradition. But just as the past directs and guides the present, so the present alters and modifies the past. When a new work of art is created, if it is really new and original, the whole literary tradition is modified, though ever so slightly. The relationship between the past and the present is not one-sided; it is a reciprocal relationship. The past directs the present, and is itself modified and

altered by the present. To quote the words of Eliot himself: “The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.” Every great poet like Virgil, Dante, or Shakespeare, adds something to the literary tradition out of which the future poetry will be written.

The Function of Tradition

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. But this judgment does not mean determining good or bad. It does not mean deciding whether the present work is better or worse than works of the past. An author in the present is certainly not to be judged by the principles and the standards of the past. The comparison is to be made for knowing the facts, all 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. Moreover, this comparison is reciprocal. The past helps us to understand the present, and the present throws light on the past. It is in this way alone that we can form an idea of what is really individual and new. It is by comparison alone that we can sift the traditional from the individual elements in a given work of art.

Sense of Tradition: Its Real Meaning

Eliot now explains further what he means by a sense of tradition. The sense of tradition does not mean that the poet should try to know the past as a whole, take it to be a lump or mass without any discrimination. Such a course is impossible as well as undesirable. The past must be examined critically and only the significant in it should be acquired. The sense of tradition does not also mean that the poet should know only a few poets whom he admires. This is a sign of immaturity and inexperience. Neither should a poet be content merely to know some particular age or period which he likes. This may be pleasant and delightful, but it will not constitute a sense of tradition. 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”. In other words, to know the tradition, the poet must judge critically what are the main trends and

what are not. He must confine himself to the main trends to the exclusion of all that is incidental or topical. The poet must possess the critical gift in ample measure. He must also realise that the main literary trends are not determined by the great poets alone. Smaller poets also are significant. They are not to be ignored.

Works of Art: Their Permanence

The poet must also realise that art never improves, though its material is never the same. The mind of Europe may change, but this change does not mean that great writers like Shakespeare and Homer have grown outdated and lost their significance. The great works of art never lose their significance, for there is no qualitative improvement in art. There may be refinement, there may be development, but from the point of view of the artist there is no improvement. (For example, it will not be correct to say that the art of Shakespeare is better and higher than that of Eliot. Their works are of different kinds, for the material on which they worked was different.)

Awareness of the Past: The Poet's Duty to Acquire It

T.S. Eliot is conscious of the criticism that will be made of his theory of tradition. His view of tradition requires, it will be said, a ridiculous amount of erudition. It will be pointed out that there have been great poets who were not learned, and further that too much learning kills sensibility. However, knowledge does not merely mean bookish knowledge, and the capacity for acquiring knowledge differs from person to person. Some can absorb knowledge easily, while others must sweat for it. Shakespeare, for example, could know more of Roman history from Plutarch than most men can from the 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.

Impersonality of Poetry: Extinction of Personality

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 he 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."

The Poetic Process: The Analogy of the Catalyst

In the second part of the essay, Eliot develops further his theory of the impersonality of poetry. He compares the mind of the poet to a catalyst and the process of poetic creation to the process of a chemical reaction. Just as chemical reactions take place in the presence of a catalyst alone, so also the poet's mind is the catalytic agent for combining different emotions into something new. Suppose there is a jar containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide. These two gases combine to form sulphurous acid when a fine filament of platinum is introduced into the jar. The combination takes place only in the presence of the piece of platinum, but the metal itself does not undergo any change. It remains inert, neutral and unaffected. The mind of the poet is like the catalytic agent. It is necessary for new combinations of emotions and experiences to take place, but it itself does not undergo any change during the process of poetic combination. The mind of the poet is constantly forming emotions and experiences into new wholes, but the new combination does not contain even a trace of the poet's mind, just as the newly formed sulphurous acid does not contain any trace of platinum. In the case of a young and immature poet, his mind, his personal emotions and experiences, may find some expression in his composition, but, says Eliot, "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him "will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates." 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 Eliot, 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. Eliot here

distinguishes between emotions and feelings, but he does not state what this difference is, “Nowhere else in his writings”, says A.G. George, “is this distinction maintained’, neither does he adequately distinguish between the meaning of the two words”. The distinction should, therefore, be ignored, more so as it has no bearing on his impersonal theory of poetry.

Poetry as Organisation: Intensity of the Poetic Process

Eliot next compares the poet’s mind to a jar or receptacle in which are stored numberless 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 Emotion: The Value of Concentration

The emotion of poetry is different from the personal emotions of the poet. His personal emotions may be simple or crude, but the emotion of his poetry may be complex and refined. It is the mistaken notion that the poet must express new emotions that results 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 this 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.

Poetry, an Escape from Personality and Personal Emotions

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 must depersonalise his emotions. There should be an extinction of his personality. This impersonality can be achieved only when 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

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