**“Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1920)**

**By T.S Eliot**

The essay under scrutiny, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, is written by the poet and literary critic T.S Eliot; it was first published in 1919 in The Egoist, a literary magazine, and later on included in T.S Eliot’s first book of criticism *The Sacred Wood* in 1920 (Gallup 27-8). The essay is often considered as the backbone of T.S Eliot’s literary criticism and the pioneering work of New Criticism. It attempts at formulating the relationship between the poet and the literary tradition which precedes them. In his essay, T.S Eliot introduces new concepts and critical ideas which make this essay hard to grasp at first-hand. Therefore, it is the intention of this paper to elucidate and explicate the main points and concepts used in the essay at disposal.

In the first part of his essay, Eliot endeavors not just to define the term “tradition” but also to redefine it. He holds the view that the word “tradition” is often used in a negative sense, especially when it is employed to describe poetry or a poet as being “traditional” or “too traditional”; Eliot further points that tradition cannot be used agreeably except while referring to the science of archaeology. Tradition, for T.S Eliot, is not the slavish and timid imitation of the past; in fact, he asserts that, “[…] if the only form of tradition…consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, “tradition” should [then] be positively discouraged.” (Eliot 43) Moreover, tradition, according to Eliot, is not something inherited, but obtained through great labor and hard effort. Meaning, the poet must work hard and have a great historical sense of the literature of Europe starting from Homer to his own day so as to fit in the literary tradition. Eliot accentuates the importance of history to writing and understanding poetry; and the traditional writer or poet, for him, is that who dwells on both historical senses: the timeless and the temporal. This makes the poet more acutely aware of his/her place in time. Noteworthy, T.S Eliot’s concept of tradition is rather a very dynamic one; that is, it is continuously changing, growing and becoming different from what it is. It is the feeling that the whole body of literature forms one continuous literary tradition. Most importantly, Eliot outlines the ideal role of tradition and its contributions to the creative process; “he considers a knowledge of past literature generally and of his own country's language and literature in particular essential to the poet who wants to write great poetry” (Hennekam 21). For him, a poet does not have his complete meaning alone, but created, of course, in relation to the dead poets and artists. The poet cannot be valued alone, but to compare and contest his legacy to his predecessors. Past works create a sense of order or “tradition”, and it is crystal clear that this order is always being altered by a new work which respectively modifies “tradition” in order to make room for itself (“Introduction: Tradition and the Individual Talent (1920)”). Only those who approve of the form of European and English literature are able to appreciate the fact that “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (Eliot 45). With this being said, it seems clear that T.S Eliot attests to the reciprocal relationship between the past and the present; they both influence each other as much as present and past poets and artists influence one another. Eliot claims that the poet is highly susceptible to be judged by the standards of the past. It is a judgement, however, in which two things are measured by each other. Significantly, Eliot states, though implicitly, that he does not subscribe to the view that poetry requires an amount of profound scholarly knowledge. He seems to be at loggerheads with those who claim that the poet must be a very learned man. In fact, much learning, for T.S Eliot, deadens or perverts poetic necessity (Eliot 47). He alternatively suggests that a great artist, like the example of Shakespeare, is that who acquires only what is necessary for his work. Most importantly, Eliot dwells upon the idea that the poet must develop and procure the consciousness of the past in a way that this development must be progressive throughout his career. At the end of the first part of his essay, T.S Eliot introduces what he calls “the process of depersonalization” and the “extinction of personality”. He believes that a poet must continually self-sacrifice to this special awareness of the past; once the process of depersonalization has been established, we can then say that art assimilates the condition of science by being objective enough. Doing so, Eliot paves the way for his new theory of the impersonality of poetry which is the subject of the second part of this essay.

In the second part of this essay, T.S Eliot places great importance on criticizing poetry in disjunction from the poet; for him, the poet is nothing but a medium for expression. Using the analogy of the catalyst, a substance that makes a chemical reaction happens faster without being changed itself (OED), Eliot asserts that the poet is like the shred of platinum remains unchanged and unaffected by the work they produce. He illustrates that the poet has a repertory of emotions, feelings and phrases from which they select to combine a new form. Nevertheless, feelings and emotions are not the things that render art great, but the nature of the artistic process whereby they are synthesized; the artist is responsible for creating “the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place” (Eliot 49). In this regard, Eliot defines the poet’s responsibility, suggesting that every poet is not supposed to compose poetry which is full of their emotions and feelings, but to subscribe themselves to something more valuable; that is, what other poets and artists have produced in the past. Therefore, it is clear that Eliot champions objectivity in poetry by distancing the poet from his own work, which is in fact necessary for successful composition. T.S Eliot’s stance of poetry is far different from that of Wordsworth who defines poetry as, “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.” (Wordsworth 1); Eliot, on the other hand, defines that “poetry is not the turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.” He directly refutes Wordsworth’s proposition of emotional poetry when he states: “we must believe that ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’ is an inexact formula.” (Eliot 52). Suffice it to say that Eliot’s criticism is opposed to romantic criticism. The personality of the author is not important; the author is aloof from his work, and as such, great poetry is that which remains uninfluenced by the personality of the poet.

In the last part, T.S Eliot sums up the entire discussion. He concludes that the focus should be shifted from the poet to the poetry, and as such, he establishes a close reading of the text and not the personal and historical events relevant to the poet or author. Eliot stresses on the impersonality of poetry which can be achieved only when the poet surrenders himself completely to the work that is to be done.

Clearly, T.S Eliot uses several and diverse sources of evidence in this essay. First, he relies and draws mainly on his personal life experiences as a poet to back up his claims. Second, Eliot supports most of his claims by means of explications and concrete examples; he makes allusions to works of many writers and great thinkers like Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, etc. What makes most of his arguments solid and sound, perhaps, is his close study of texts and the way he provides direct quotations from different literary works without focusing on their authors. Therefore, T.S Eliot was the first to establish himself as a New Critic in both senses: theory and practice; he directs most of his counter-arguments toward the Romantic perception of poetry, especially William Wordsworth and his definition of poetry.

In a nutshell, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is one of T.S Eliot’s most celebrated essays which has great and lasting significance in the history of literary criticism. Through this essay, Eliot was one of few people who could champion and venture the notions of tradition and impersonality in art and poetry. The essay brings forth Eliot’s view of the interplay between tradition and the individual talent which are both necessary in the production of any work of art.

**Works Cited**

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