

Tradition and the Individual Talent | T.S. Eliot

T.S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' is one of the most enduring pieces of criticism of the 20th century. It was first published in 'The Egoist' in 1919, and later, in his collection of essays 'The Sacred Wood', published in 1920. The essay has three parts: the first part talks about Eliot's idea of tradition; the second part, his theory of impersonality; the third part sums up the work. The immediate objective of the essay is to define poetic value and originality with the ultimate goal to reconcile 'tradition' and the 'individual'.

The central thesis of the essay is the defense of the role of tradition in the making of a modern writer. This is one of the central paradoxes in Eliot's writing and modernism - that in order to move forward, it often looks to the past. Eliot wishes to correct the fact that, as he perceives it, *"in English writing we seldom speaks of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence."* He notes the tendency and the prejudice to praise a poet in the parts that are *"individual"* and unique, and declares that if we let of this prejudice we will find that the most individual parts of a poem *"may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously"*. With this apparently paradoxical statement, Eliot hints at is what he calls the *"historical sense"* of the poet. For Eliot, a modern writer must not only realize the *"pastness of the past"* but also its presence. This compels the writer, according to Eliot, to write with his contemporaries while also embodying *"the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country"* that has a significant existence simultaneously. This, of course, reflects his own practices as a poet, and he was not alone in this aspect: James Joyce utilized ancient Greek myth in his works; W.B. Yeats turned to Irish myth and folklore for his earlier poems. This historical sense of the writer, according to Eliot, helps them progress forward. Thus, the term 'tradition' is imbued with a special and complex character. It represents a *"simultaneous order"* by which Eliot means a historical timelessness – a fusion of past and present – and, at the same time, a sense of present temporality.

This dependency on tradition, however, does not require the poet to forfeit novelty. Eliot has a much more dynamic and progressive conception of the poetic process: novelty is possible only through tapping into tradition. For Eliot, all the works that have already been written form an ideal order, but it is *"modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them."* The introduction of a new work alters the cohesion of this existing order, and causes a readjustment of the old to accommodate the new. The inclusion of the new work alters the way in which the past is seen. In Eliot's own words, *"What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it."* Eliot refers to this organic tradition, this developing canon, as the *"mind of Europe."* Eliot insists that the poet must *"develop or procure the consciousness of the past"* and

continue to develop it throughout his career. This also highlights Eliot's anti-romanticism. Unlike the Romantics' idea of original creation and inspiration, Eliot expresses how important older writers are to contemporary writers. From this particular approach to poetic creation, Eliot derives his theory of impersonality.

Eliot asserts that artistic creation is a process of depersonalization, and the mark of a mature poet is the *"continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."* Thus, the mark of a mature poet is not their personality, but how finely tuned their mind is to work as a medium where various feelings enter into new combinations. Eliot sees the mind of the poet as a catalyst which combines impressions and experiences in unique and complex ways. While the mind of the poet is necessary for the production, it emerges unaffected by the process. What lend greatness to a work of art are not the feelings and emotions themselves, but the nature of the artistic process by which they are synthesized. The artist is responsible for creating *"the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place."* And, it is the intensity of fusion that renders art great. Great works do not express the personal emotion of the poet. The poet does not reveal their own unique and novel emotions, but rather, by drawing on ordinary ones and channeling them through the intensity of poetry, they express feelings that surpass, altogether, experienced emotion. Thus, *"poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion"*. This is more or less a direct riposte to William Wordsworth's statement that *"poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"* and his whole conception of the process of poetic creation in general.