



Relationship Between Tradition And Individual Talent As Reflected In T.s. Eliot's Essay “tradition And The Individual Talent”

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Abstract:

T. S. Eliot was a classical in literature. He was the first in modern times to redefine the word 'tradition'. He equated 'tradition' with 'historicity' or 'historical sense'. According to him Tradition is the past and the new (present) taken together. Tradition means both the creative works of writers and the works of critics from the past to the present. It also means, both the individual qualities and the common (traditional) qualities.

TRADITION :

At the outset, Eliot makes a distinction between what is mistakenly called 'tradition' and what really is 'tradition'. He points out that the word tradition was being used in his time, that is, the early 20th century, as an all comprehensive term to include any thing that related to the past. Secondly, he deprecates the use of the word to denote any thing which lacks a past quality. That is, tradition is wrongly or incorrectly and negatively used to denote the absence of a particular quality. Eliot cites the example of calling a writer 'traditional', when he follows a particular ancient or old pattern of writing. So, when anyone follows a new or novel technique or style it is customary to call him 'modern'. Eliot does not accept this interpretation of the word. The word, he thinks is seldom used as one of 'praise', but more often as 'censure'.

Eliot elaborates the idea or implications or connotations of the word 'tradition'. The word ought to be used for both dead and living writers in a sense of compliment. He defines the 'tradition' of a nation's literature, as both the creative mind of writers and the creative thinking of the critics. In other words, a nation's literature is the some-total of the creative and the critical minds. This is the same as saying that just as the literature of a country reflects the mental development of the nation from the past to the present, so also, the critical literature of the country reflects the intellectual, critical and incisive quality of the critics from the past to the present. When we praise a poet or compliment him, we do it more for those qualities or that quality in which he least resembles any others. This unique quality entitles him to be called an individual talent or broadly speaking, a genius.

The earlier meaning of tradition –

1. Tradition was everything belonging to the dead past.
2. Tradition was something condemnatory.

The new meaning of tradition -

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1. Tradition is the past and the 'new' (present) taken together
2. Tradition means both the creative works of writers and the works of critics from the past to the present.
3. Tradition also means, both the individual qualities and the common (traditional) qualities.

Eliot elaborates this idea of individual or personal quality. He says that it is not enough to call a poet great merely by pointing out or discovering how much he is different from others, in his own time and from the writers before him. This kind of assessment does not give the real view of a writer's greatness. If we call his greatness, 'individual talent', then it cannot be considered without knowing how much does the writer belong to the tradition of literature of his country. This means that every writer must be assessed from how much influence of the past writer or writers does the individual writer carry or bear. When we judge a poet in this way, says Eliot, we will not fail to notice that this writer is largely indebted to the writers of the past. For example, Keats' 'individual talent' or his greatness is not merely his 'escapism', or 'pathetic fallacy' or 'indolence' etc; but also, how much he is influenced by the classicals, the Elizabethans and even the Greeks. To take another example- If we take Tennyson as an English writer of quality we must recognize both his particular merits as a Victorian and his place in the whole literature of England. Similarly, we have to judge Browning, Arnold etc; Such a writer should not be judged from his earlier works written in his adolescence (or immaturity) , but from his works written as a matured writer. In this way, we can extend or continue a past tradition into the present. Better, the writer's particular work or his body of writings form an important link in the long and immortal tradition of his nation's literature as well as world literature.

TRADITION AS NOVELTY :

Eliot strikes a new path when he explains the word 'tradition' in another way . He says that 'tradition' does not simply mean, a present writer blindly following or continuing the tradition of the past. He must add something new or fresh. He moves on to call this awareness of the past tradition, by the word 'historical sense'. According to Eliot, historical sense does not mean merely the past literature but the greatness of the past with the greatness and newness of the present literature of the writer, added to it . He makes his famous statement : “historical sense involves not only a perception of the past ness of the past but also of its presence”. This statement needs elaboration. Eliot includes the following elements-

- i) historical sense means the ancientness of the tradition of a nation's literature;
- ii) the past tradition should be continued into the present. This is another aspect of tradition or historical sense.

A writer writing in the 20th century, has the “ generation or age or period (in which he writes) in his bones”. That is to say, he must , first of all, belong to his age; secondly, he must, through his writings, find a place in the long tradition of his own country's or Europe's literature. Only when he belongs to this tradition, can we call him a grate writer. Eliot makes another observation to focus attention on the exact meaning of historical sense or tradition. He says that (a) a writer must posses historical sense, i.e. he must be acquainted with the past tradition in his country's literature.(b) he must also contribute something new or 'novel' to his country's literature. So , historical sense means, also, the 'timeless' quality of literature (tradition), and the 'temporal' or the quality of the poet in his own period or generation. Eliot, then, says that it is the 'temporal' quality and the 'timeless' quality taken together, which is rightly speaking the 'tradition'. If Tennyson is to be judged, our first step will be to see (a) how much and in how any respects he is a Victorian; (b) how much and in what respects he is an English or even European writer. If he fulfils both the criteria , then he is a 'traditional' writer.

NO WRITER IS ISOLATED :

Eliot makes another bold statement about tradition and a writer's relation to it. He opines that no writer or any artist can have his significance or appreciation alone or independent of the literature of his time as well as of his country's past literature. In other words, no writer of the present (however great he might consider himself), can be without even a trace of the influence of past writers upon his writings. This is so, because no individual writer can exist in isolation or independent of his age or the tradition. Moreover, a writer cannot be considered great or significant , unless we asses his merit by constantly comparing and contrasting his work with those of the past writers. This is more or less a reiteration of what Arnold called “ The Touchtone Method”.

Eliot discusses how and in what stages a present work of art attains to a place in the whole tradition of a nation's literature. First and foremost, the work has to posses elements of contemporary trend

or tradition ; secondly, in its comparison with the past works , it must possess a quality or qualities which could easily “cohere” with past tradition. What really happens in such an assessment of a present work of art is that this work which is a 'novelty', that is something exclusively belonging to the present, establishes a new order. This new order or tradition is nothing different from or independent of the old tradition. It only superimposes its newness upon the existing tradition thereby enlivening, refreshing, reanimating the tradition. From this, Eliot draws his conclusion in the form of yet another statement of theory- when a work of art is produced in the present, it alters or modifies the past tradition by addition of novelty; it also, in the process, has imbibed the influence of tradition. That is, “ the present is directed by the past, as well as the past is altered by the present”. This is also the historic sense or the tradition according to Eliot. Eliot throws a caution. He says that by 'judging' a present work of art, he means comparing it and contrasting it with other works of the past, to trace resemblances, points or areas of coherence, but not to say whether the present work is better than or worse than the work of a past writer

TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT :

After his elaborate discussion on the need of judging a present work by past standards or comparing with past masterpieces, Eliot moves on to establishing relationship between 'tradition' and 'individual talent'. Eliot thinks that every literary tradition of a country is the 'existing order' of that country's literature; when a new work arises, there takes place a kind of mental (if not actual) reordering of the tradition as a result of the superintention of the new work. The new work, even if it calls for only a very minor readjustment, the adjustment must be done, says Eliot. Eliot cautions critics that such a judgment of a present writer ought to be made with especial care, deliberation and conviction, for fear that some kind of injustice might result in a careless or haphazard judgment. What the critic ought to remember is that he must suggest or say, emphatically, that a particular writer can fit into the tradition, which is the other way of certifying his quality or value in a nation's literature .

ART NEVER IMPROVES:

Eliot makes one of his paradoxical statements for which he is known. He observes that ' art never improves'. The statement means that in the world of art, no one work is superior to or better than another that has gone before . The reason is that a past writer, though he wrote very little, and established a tradition of his own or formed a sizable share of the tradition, he lived and wrote under different conditions, using or employing different and insufficient materials for writing. Taking this into account, we would rather admire the past writers for their works. That a present writer could express a certain idea in a different way compared to the past writers, only means that his means were easily available. This advantage does not and should not undermine the literature or intellectual qualities of the past writer. So, it is, that art does not improve, but only traces a farther and farther stride in the path of world literature.

TRADITION AND DEPERSONALIZATION :

Eliot concludes his discussion on the relationship between the writer and his tradition (tradition in literature of his country as well as of world literature) by observing that –

- (a)The more the writer matures , the more conscious he will be of the past, that is , tradition.
- (b)The more conscious he is of the past (tradition) the less will he think of himself or his personality.
- (c)The more does he learn to cohere with, or to surrender or sacrifice his personality to tradition, does he realize the greater value or significance of tradition.
- (d)As a result of continual and conscious surrendering or sacrifice or extinction of personality to tradition , a writer moves towards depersonalization or the achievement or attainment of impersonality, which is the hall-mark or goal of any great master.

Eliot's statement that the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice or extinction of personality is what happens from the beginning to the stage of maturity of a writer.

WORK CITED :

Primary Source :

Eliot, T.S. “ Tradition and the Individual Talent ”, English Critical Texts , edited by D.J. Enright and Ernst De Chickera, published by Oxford University press, 1962

In fact tradition acquires a wider significance in Eliot's writing. It involves a historical sense that is really essential for any work of art. This historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of past but also its presentness. This sense compels a poet to write not only being near to his generation, but to the whole of literary tradition starting from Homer. Eliot stands against Romantic poets who think that poetry is spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and personal emotions. Romantic writer says poetry is expression of personality and inspiration. But Eliot says poetry is not so but an escape from personality. But in Hamlet, there is no relation between external situation and the feeling of Hamlet. The madness of Hamlet has no proper relation with his mother's guilt. What does the Greek sentence in T.S. Eliot's tradition and the individual talent mean? Created with Sketch. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567048>. This discussion, Help Translating The Greek in C.S.Lewis' "Tradition and the Individual Talent" - GDN Lounge, arrives at a similar translation: The mind/intellect is something more divine and does not undergo change. The OP misattributes the essay to C. S. Lewis, but we're talking about the same thing. If you don't want to sign up for JSTOR to read the article, you can also read the full essay on the Poetry Foundation website here: Tradition and the Individual Talent by T. S. Eliot. [1] Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent". [2] Intro to Graduate Studies. 4. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) is an essay written by poet and literary critic T. S. Eliot. The essay was first published in *The Egoist* (1919) and later in Eliot's first book of criticism, *The Sacred Wood* (1920). The essay is also available in Eliot's "Selected Prose" and "Selected Essays". While Eliot is most often known for his poetry, he also contributed to the field of literary criticism. In this dual role, he acted as a cultural critic, comparable to Sir Philip Sidney and Samuel...