

Tradition and Individual Talent (1919)

-Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965)

Born in America,
settled in London in 1915,
Nobel in 1948.

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About the Essay

- First published in 1919 in the Times Literary Supplement as a critical essay.
- The essay can be considered as summery of Eliot's all major the critical thoughts.
- The essay has three parts:
 1. First part deals with concept & importance of 'tradition' & 'Historical Sense'; and 'individual talent'.
 2. Second part deals with 'the theory of Impersonality', definition of poetry & criticism over Wordsworth's 'emotions recollected in tranquility'.
 3. Summery of the essay

Tradition Vs. Individual Talent

- Individual Talent: new, different & original aspects of a poet
- English people commits mistake by praising individual and original aspects in poetry. It is prejudiced and uncritical turn of mind. (Eliot- as classicist, not Romantic) literary history as Classicism vs. Romanticism
- Knowing Tradition: literary tradition is the knowing of the past writers/ poets & acquiring good things from them. It is:
 1. Recognition of the continuity of literature.
 2. Ability of judging the significance of the past writers in present age.
 3. This ability to judge is achieved through painstaking effort.
- ❖ Acquiring tradition means, accumulating wisdom and experience of ages, which is essential to become a great & noble poet.

- **Literary Tradition** is:

1. Not blind adherence to the previous generations
2. Not slavish imitation or passive repetition; ‘novelty is better than repetition.’
3. Not inherited, but obtained by hard labour and **‘Historical Sense’**.

‘Historical Sense’ is “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.”

- It makes a writer traditional.
- The new writer becomes aware of his own place among past and present writers.

Tradition is Dynamic

- Tradition is not fixed; it is constantly changing, growing and developing (going ahead).
- Present writer must seek guidance from past writer; so, in a way, he continues the tradition.
- The relationship between past & present is (reciprocal) - “just as the past directs and guides the present, so the present alters and modifies the past.”
- Every new and original element in literature (without forgetting tradition) modifies literary tradition.
- Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, etc modified / added something to it.
- No writer is significant in isolation; without comparing & contrasting his works with works of past & present writers.

Function of Tradition

- Is to compare & contrast the works of present writer with past.
- This is done **not** to decide whether present work is better or worse.
- No work should be judged by the principles & standards of the past.
- Comparison helps analyzing & better understanding of new work.
- Past helps to understand present, & present throws light on past.

Sense of Tradition Means:

- It doesn't mean to know every details from past & present; neither it is desired / expected.
- It neither means to know about few nor famous nor admired writers.
- A writer must confine himself to the main & permanent trends in literature; and not temporary.
- A writer must examine the past critically, & only significant in it should be acquired.
- Often, Smaller poets are also significant; so, they should not be ignored.

Works (literature): their Permanency

- A book (Literature) is neither high / good nor low / bad.
- The difference in two books is only in the use of material for subject.
- Ex. You can not say, Shakespeare's work is better than any other writer's.

Theory of Impersonality in poetry

Extinction of Personality

- A writer must surrender his personality to tradition.
- A writer must be objective as a scientist. For this, he must extinct his personality.
- In the beginning of a writer's career, there may be an expression of his self in his work/book.
- But, the more one practises, the less he expresses his self in his work.
- His emotions & passions must be impersonalized by forgetting his joys & sorrows.
- He functions like a “catalytic agent”.

Poetic Process = Chemical Reaction

- Oxygen + Sulphur Dioxide + Platinum = Sulphurous Acid
- Emotions + Experiences + Poet's mind = Poem
- Poet like platinum is necessary, but remains neutral & unaffected during this process.
- The product does not contain any trace of Platinum / poet.
- **Definition:** "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." - Eliot

Poetry as Organization

- In poet's mind, a number of feelings, emotions, experiences, etc are stored; as we store things in a jar.
- These feelings, etc are in chaotic form, until they are not organized into poetry / order.(after concentration)
- “thus, poetry is organization rather than inspiration”.
- The more “intense” the poetic process, the greater the poem.

Artistic Emotion & Concentration

- Personal emotions may be simple or crude;
- But artistic emotions may be complex or refined.
- A poet must not try to find out new emotions to express, rather give new meaning & significance to the ordinary emotions.
- The Emotions may be personally experienced, or not experienced(secondary- reading, etc).
- In poetic process, there is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor tranquility (only chaos). But only concentration of number of experiences.
- This concentration is neither deliberate nor conscious.

- Difference between good and bad poet is that a bad poet is conscious where he should be unconscious & vice versa.
- Wrong consciousness makes a poem personal.
- Eliot doesn't tell where should be conscious & where not.

Conclusion:

- Mature art / poem must be impersonal.
- To achieve this impersonality, the writer must acquire 'sense of tradition' / 'historical sense'.

Thank You