

**J.M.S. COLLEGE, MUNGER**  
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*Department of English*  
**B.A. Part-III, English (Hons.)- Paper-V**

**An Analysis of T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'**

Besides being a poet, playwright and publisher, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) was one of the most seminal critics of his time. 'Tradition and Individual Talent' has been one of his extraordinarily influential critical works. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' was first published in 1919 in the literary magazine *The Egoist* in two parts, in the September and December issues, and later, in 1920, became part of T.S. Eliot's full length book of essays on poetry and criticism, *The Sacred Wood*.

'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) sees Eliot defending the role of tradition in helping new writers to be modern. This is one of the central paradoxes of Eliot's writing – indeed, of much modernism – that in order to move forward it often looks to the past, even more directly and more pointedly than previous poets had.

Eliot begins 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' by arguing it is the poet's treatment of their position within the historic context of literature that demonstrates talent. The essay asserts that the poet should use their knowledge of the writers of the past to influence their work. He states – “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.”

Eliot explains that to write with tradition in mind does not mean imitating, as this would lead to repetition and “novelty is better than repetition”. He defines tradition as something only to be gained by the labour of knowing literature of the past and by being critically aware of what techniques and content is of value. The poet should be aware of the simultaneous order of literary tradition, dating back to the classics. Tradition is the accumulated wisdom and experience of literature through the ages and is, according to Eliot, essential for great achievements within poetry.

Eliot argues that no writer or piece of literature has value or significance when isolated from the literary canon. In order to judge a work of art or literature it must be compared to works

of the past. He believes that tradition is constantly changing due to adding new work to the literary canon. He suggests that the author should conform to literary tradition and be informed by the past, but that by doing so the work of the author modifies the work they have been informed by. It is important for the poet to be aware of their own position within the present but also their relevance in relation to literature of the past. The modern author adds meaning to the traditional text by incorporating its influence into their work. Eliot acknowledges that the new work of art, when original, modifies the literary tradition in a small way. The relationship between past and present is not one-way, the present can alter the past, just as the past informs the present.

Eliot then acknowledges that knowledge of the past as a whole would be impossible. In order to gain a good sense of tradition one must critically examine the past, focusing on works of art that are considered to be of high value. He explains that the definition of a sense of tradition is to be critically aware of trends and techniques which became typical of a particular age, movement or even author, and to have the ability to recognise deviation from this. An author with a good sense of tradition should also be aware that the main literary trends do not come, solely, from the most recognised poets, but they must be aware of trends set by poets of lesser recognition.

Although the work of present poets is compared and contrasted to poets of the past, it does not determine whether the work of the present is better than the work of the past. Standards and principles are recognised to have changed. The comparison is made in order to analyse the new work, creating a deeper understanding of the text. It is only through this comparison the traditional and the individual elements can be determined. Eliot claims that art never improves. He argues that, despite changes in thinking, great writers such as Shakespeare and Homer remain relevant. He recognises that artists work with different materials and their art is a product of different eras, therefore it would be impossible to measure a qualitative improvement in any school of art.

Eliot is aware that questions will be asked about the great level of knowledge that would be required of any one poet in order to meet his understanding of tradition. The essay will be criticised on the basis that there are great poets who did not have the level of education that Eliot is claiming is required. Eliot goes on to argue that it should be the duty of every poet to build their knowledge of the past for the duration of their career. He believes that it is knowledge of tradition that encourages and strengthens the poet's ability to write great work.

Eliot recognises that, at the start of a poet's career, individuality will assert itself, but he notes that it is the sign of an immature poet and that as they continue to write one should lose the sense of the poet's personality within the work they create. The poet should become objective with maturity. This therefore makes it irrelevant who wrote the poem under analysis, the relevance lies in the poem's delivery of literary tradition.

Eliot notes the necessity of the poet experiencing new situations and emotions without any changes being visible in their poetic voice. He states "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him "will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates." He notes that the personality of the poet should not be expressed in their work but should remain unchanged by external factors.

Eliot expresses that poetry may be formed from singular or various feelings, emotions, or a combination of the two. He argues that poetry is in fact the organisation of emotions and feelings rather than inspiration. He believes that the quality of the poetry is not determined by the intensity of feelings or emotions but the intensity of the process of creating and ordering those feelings as part of poetic composition. The more pressure involved in the creative process the better the quality of the end product.

Eliot goes on to note the difference between personal emotions of the poet and the emotion of poetry itself. While personal emotions may be simple, the expression of these emotions may be complex. While it is not the role of the poet to express new emotions, the poet should express ordinary emotions in new ways. Eliot then goes on to reject Wordsworth's theory of poetry that is has "its origin in emotions recollected in tranquillity". He believes that the composition of poetry does not require emotion, recollection or tranquillity, but that original poetry results from concentration on experiences. He also argues that this concentration should not be deliberate but passive. Poetry should be an escape from the poet, not a reflection of them. Eliot is not denying the poet personality but is declaring that the impersonality required to create good poetry can only be achieved when the poet surrenders themselves to the poetry they create.

In part three of the essay, Eliot concludes that the poet is only capable of surrendering themselves to their work if they have acquired a good sense of tradition. "And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living." By this he means that the poet should be conscious not only of their position within the

literary canon of the past but also where they belong in the literature of the present and how their poetry is relevant as a statement of the world in which it is created.

The arguments made by Eliot suggest he is of the didactic school of poetic literary theory, believing that poetry should educate as well as entertain. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' sets out rules to be a great poet. Although he does not go to the extreme of being a neo-Classical critic, his theories do bear some resemblance in that he speaks of the classics being as relevant to poetry now as ever. This suggests that Eliot believes alluding to classical poets can improve the quality of the poetry. While 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' does argue for originality it does so in a way that relies upon literature of the past. This still fits with the understanding of literary modernity as suggested by Ezra Pound's statement "Make it new"; rather than making something completely original, Eliot is suggesting us to take the traditional and make that new by attributing new meanings to what has been expressed.

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