T. S ELIOT’S TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT

Besides being a poet, playwright and publisher, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) has been called "by far the most important critic of the twentieth century in the English-speaking world." He made significant contributions to the field of literary criticism, strongly influencing the school of New Criticism. His critical works may be broadly grouped into three categories namely,(a) theoretical criticism dealing with the principles of literature; (b) descriptive and practical criticism dealing with the works of individual writers and evaluation of their achievements, and (c) theological essays. His critical contributions include- Tradition and the Individual Talent (1919), The Function of Criticism (1923), The Perfect Critic, Hamlet and His Problems (objective Corelative).

His critical essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", influenced the New Criticism by introducing the idea that the value of a work of art must be viewed in the context of the artist's previous works, a "simultaneous order" of works (i.e., "tradition. In the essay, "Hamlet and His Problems", Eliot talked about the notion of "objective correlative". This notion concedes that a poem means what it says, but also suggests that there can be a non-subjective judgment based on different readers' interpretations of a work. Eliot's essays were a major factor in the revival of interest in the metaphysical poets. Eliot particularly praised the metaphysical
poets’ ability to show experience as both psychological and sensual, while at the same time infusing this portrayal with wit and uniqueness.

The essay ‘Tradition and Individual The talent’ was first published in 1919 in the time's literary supplement as a Critical article. The essay is considered an unofficial manifesto of Eliot’s Critical Creed for it contains all those critical principles from which his criticism has been derived ever since. According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, Tradition means a belief, principle or way of acting which people in a particular society or group have continued to follow for a long time, or all of these beliefs, etc. in a particular society or group. The essay is divided into three parts. The first parts give us Eliot’s concept of tradition and in the second part is developed his theory of impersonality of poetry. The short third part is in the nature of a conclusion or summing up of the whole discussion. The word ‘Tradition’ according to Eliot has rarely used us a commendatory term but as a word of construe. He uses ‘tradition’ as a derogatory word.

At the very outset, Eliot makes it clear that he is using the term tradition as an adjective to explain the relationship of a poem or a work to the works of dead poets and artists. He regrets that in our appreciation of authors we hardly include their connections with those living and dead. Although Eliot attaches greater importance to the idea of tradition, he rejects the idea of tradition in the name of ‘Blind or Timid Adherence’ to successful compositions of the past. By subscribing to the idea of tradition, Eliot does not mean sacrificing novelty nor does he mean slavish repetitions of stylistic and structural features.

T.S Eliot is perfectly aware of Matthew Arnold’s notion of historical criticism and therefore distances himself from such the Arnoldian critical stance. He identifies his approach to literary appreciation “as a principle of aesthetics and thereby distinguishes it from Arnold’s “Historical Criticism”. Thus, Eliot offers an organic theory and practice of literary criticism. In this, he treats tradition not as a legacy but as an invention of anyone who is ready to create his or her literary pantheon, depending on his literary tastes and positions. This means that the development of the writer will depend on his or her ability to build such private spaces for
continual negotiation and even struggle with illustrious antecedents, and strong influences. Harold Bloom terms the state of struggle as “The anxiety of influence”, and he derides Eliot for suggesting a complex, an elusive relationship between the tradition and the individual, and goes on to develop his own theory of influence.

In the second part of the essay Eliot argues that “Honest Criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry”. This hints at the actual beginning of ‘New Criticism’ where the focus will shift from author to the text. Eliot here defines the poet’s responsibility. The poet is not supposed to compose poetry which is full of his personal emotions. He must subscribe himself to something more valuable, i.e., what others have composed in the past. Thus, Eliot emphasizes objectivity in poetry. Eliot believes that some sort of ‘physical distancing’, is necessary for successful composition.

He also mentions that the poet has to merge his personality with the tradition:

"The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."

The mind of the poet is a medium in which experiences can enter new combinations. He exemplifies this process as when oxygen and sulphur dioxide are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphuric acid. This combination takes place only in the presence of platinum, which acts as the catalyst. But the sulphuric acid shows no trace of platinum, and remains unaffected. The catalyst facilitates the chemical change, but does not participate in the chemical reaction, and remains unchanged. Eliot compares the mind of the poet to the shred of platinum, which will "digest and transmute the passions which are its material". He suggests the analogy of a catalyst’s role in a chemical process in a scientific laboratory for this process of depersonalization.

Eliot refutes the idea that poetry is the expression of poet’s personality. Experiences in the life of the man may have no place in his poems, and vice-versa. The emotions occasioned by events in the personal life of the poet are not important. What matters is the emotion transmuted into poetry, the feelings
expressed in the poetry. "Emotions which he has never experienced will serve his
turn as well as those familiar to him".

Eliot critiques Wordsworth's definition of poetry in the Preface to the Lyrical
Ballads:

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility."

For Eliot, poetry is not recollection of feeling, "it is a new thing resulting from the concentration of a very great number of experiences . . . it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation."

Eliot defines that:

"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."

For him, the emotion of art is impersonal, and the artist can achieve this impersonality only by and being conscious of the tradition, He is talking about the poetic tradition and neglects the fact that even the poetic tradition is a complex mixture of written and oral poetry and the elements that go into them. It was only in his later writings that he realized that in poetic composition many elements are involved. In his poetic dramas, he sought to broaden his scope. Eliot ends the essay with the reiterated view that the emotion of a work art is impersonal.

Thus Eliot denounces the romantic criticism of the nineteenth century (particularly Wordsworth’s theory of poetry); second, it underlines the importance of ‘tradition’ and examines the correlation between ‘tradition’ and ‘individual talent’ and finally, it announces the death of the author and shifts the focus from the author to the text.

A simple codification of the principles and the methods of T.S. Eliot’s criticism is not possible. It is because he is not a literary legislator in the sense Aristotle is considered to be, As a critic. Eliot has his own limitations. He is neither a
theoretician of art nor a critic of fundamentals. His criticism is not purely academic; nor is it in any way dogmatic.

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