



## T. S. ELIOT'S ESSAYS: "TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT", "FUNCTIONS OF CRITICISM" AND "THEORY OF IMPERSONALITY" - CRITICAL COMMENTS & DISCUSSION

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### ABSTRACT

Thomas Streams Eliot (1888-1965) was an essayist, publisher, playwright, literary and social critic and one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century major poets. The present research work deals with the discussion of T. S. Eliot's views about "Tradition" and his "Theory of Impersonality". This essay discusses briefly Eliot's statement, "No poet or artist of any art has complete meaning alone." It clearly examines Eliot's views on the qualifications and tools of a critic. On the basis of the reading of Eliot's "The Function of Criticism" we describe the qualifications and tools of criticism of an ideal critic. The essay clearly describes, how Eliot's theory of impersonality says, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion, it is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality." We describe the one of the most famous critic Murrey's views on Classicism and Romanticism and discuss his concept of inner voice

### INTRODUCTION

T. S. Eliot belongs to the long line of poet critics beginning from Sidney, Ben Johnson and Dryden to Coleridge and Arnold. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1948 for his outstanding pioneer contribution to present day poetry. Eliot's criticism has been revolutionary in more than one way. It marks a complete break from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic tradition. Eliot reacted against Romantic subjectivism and rejected impressionistic criticism worthless. He emphasizes the value of order and discipline, tradition and outside authority. Shiv Kumar comments that Eliot is a critic in the tradition of Aristotle, Dryden and Arnold "who tried to restore and preserve classical norms of order and discipline in thought and expression." His five hundred and odd essays have had a far reaching influence in the course of literary criticism.

Eliot's essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" was first published in "Times Literary supplement (1919)" as a critical article. It contains all those principles which form the basis of Eliot's subsequent criticism. The essay contains his revolutionary theory of poetry.

His impersonal theory of poetry is a revolt against romanticism. Romantic theory of poetry lays great emphasis on feelings and emotions. It is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. Eliot reacted against this trend and gave his theory of impersonality of poetry. His theory of poetry is complete break from Romantic tradition. He rejects the romantic subjectivity and advocates objective standards.

T.S. Eliot's contribution to English literary criticism is great and highly praise worthy. He brought a great deal of bold and original thinking to English criticism. He has often being compared to

Arnold. In many ways he is similar to Arnold but in many ways he is dissimilar too. In any case, the originality of his ideas cannot be questioned. His ideas on the qualifications and tools of a critic are quite clear.

In the essays like, "The Functions of Criticism", "The Frontiers of Criticism" and "The Perfect critic", Eliot has given the qualifications that a critic must acquire and develop to perform his functions.

Eliot is considered by some to be one of the greatest literary critics of the twentieth century. The critic William Empson once said, "I do not know for certain how much of my own mind [Eliot] invented, let alone how much of it is a reaction against him or indeed a consequence of misreading him. He is very penetrating influence, perhaps not unlike the east wind.

In his critical essay "Tradition and individual Talent", Eliot argues that art must be understood not in a vacuum, but in the context of previous pieces of art. "In a peculiar sense\_ \_ \_ \_ \_ must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past." This essay was an important influence over the new criticism by introducing the idea that the value of the work of art must be viewed in the context of the artist's previous works, a "simultaneous order" of works (i.e. "tradition")

#### DISCUSSION

Eliot's essay "Tradition and individual Talent" contains all those principles which forms the basis of Eliot's subsequent criticism. Some critics have called this essay as the unofficial manifests of Eliot's critical creed. The essay consists of three parts. In the first part, Eliot gives his concept of Tradition. The second part states his theory of Impersonality. The third part is brief and is in the nature of conclusion. Eliot says that the word tradition is generally used in the derogatory sense. It is taken to mean slavish imitation of the past writers. Eliot corrects this notion. He says that the tradition is not 'blind adherence' to the ways of previous generations. Tradition is not something immovable or fixed. It is not hostile to change. It is something constantly growing, becoming different from what is previously was. When a really great work of art is produced, this tradition is modified to some extent, However, little Eliot regards the whole European literature

from Homer down to his own age as forming a single literary tradition. Great artists modified the tradition and pass it to the future.

Tradition, says Elliot, 'cannot inherited.' It cannot be obtained only by great labour. It is the critical labour of shifting the good from the bad and knowing what is good and useful. Tradition can be obtained only by those who have 'historical sense'. This historical sense involves a perception not only the pastness of the past but of its presence'. One who has the historical sense feels that whole literature of Europe from Homer down to his own day including the literature of his own country forms one single whole. He realizes that the past exists in the present and that the past and the present form one simultaneous order. It is like a family tree where the characteristics of the ancestors are present in their grand children. "For any creative writer, the knowledge of tradition is as essential as the breath of human life." It is the knowledge of the historical sense which makes the writer traditional. Eliot makes the famous statement: - "No poet or artist of any art has complete meaning alone."

Thus no writer has value or significance in isolation. His significance is his appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and the artists. To judge the work of a poet or an artist, we must compare and contrast his works with the works of the poets and the artists of the past. Here, we hear an echo of Arnold's famous theory to judge the excellence of the present works with the yardstick of the great writers of the past. But for Eliot this comparison does not mean deciding whether the present work is better or worse than the work of dead writers.

For example, we cannot say whether Shakespeare's "King Lear" is better than Shaw's "Man and Superman" or Backett's "Waiting For Godot."

It is a judgment, comparison in which the two things are measured against each other. An artist must be aware of the fact 'that art never improves through the material of art is never the same'. The comparison is made for the purpose of analysis and forming a better understanding of the new. It does not mean one work is superior or inferior to the other.

Eliot's conception of tradition is a dynamic one. According to this view, tradition is constantly

changing and becoming different from what it was. A writer in the present must seek guidance from the past. Just as the past directs the present, the present modifies the past. Whenever a new work of art is created, the whole literary tradition is modified though slightly. The mind of Europe may change but the change does not mean that the great writers like Homer and Shakespeare have become outdated. It is a reciprocal relation. Eliot is conscious of the criticism that will be made against his theory of tradition. It was to be pointed out that his theory requires much learning and scholarship. However, knowledge does not mean bookish knowledge differs from person to person. Shakespeare, for example, could know more of Roman history than from Plutarch than most man from the British museum. It appears that Eliot's view of tradition is rather exaggerated as seen Lucy point out! "Though tradition is important for art, the conscious cultivation of the sense of tradition by the creative artist is not always necessary."

Eliot's criticism is sometimes (spoiled) massed by his personal prejudices. He called his criticism 'the byproducts of his poetical work ship.' For example, he praises the metaphysical poets, the Jacobean Dramatic Verse and the Italian poet Dante because they are useful to him in his poetic composition. But he criticises Milton and Shelly because of they are of not use to him. Still we must give Eliot the credit of giving one of the most scientific statements on critical theory and creative activity.

The second part of the essay begins with the bold statement! "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation must be directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry."

This statement is aimed at the Romantic subjectivism. The Romantics believed that all art is basically an expression of the artist's personality. Eliot rejects this Romantic belief of 'inner voice' and says that the poet must conform (to obey) to tradition. He must have the 'historical sense'. This historical sense involves a perception, "not only the pastness of the past but of its presence." Eliot takes the whole literature of Europe from Homer down to his own day to be a single literary tradition. It is to this tradition a new writer must conform. In Eliot's view, the artist must continually surrender himself

to something more valuable than himself, i.e. literary tradition. He must allow his poetic sensibility to be shaped and modified by the past. Eliot says: - "The progress of an artist is a continual self sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." It is in this sense Eliot says that honest criticism should be directed upon the poetry and not upon the poet.

In order to explain his Impersonal theory of poetry, Eliot compares the poet to a catalyst and the process of the poetic creation to a chemical reaction. He gives the analogy of the action "which takes place when a bit of finally foliated platinum is introduced in a chamber containing oxygen and sulpherdioxide." This combination takes place only if the platinum is present. Nevertheless, the newly formed substance contains no trace of platinum. Eliot says that platinum has remained "inert, neutral and unchanged". He goes on to declare, "The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum." The mind of the poet is a catalytic agent in the presence of which varied feelings and emotions fuse into a new combination. In the case of a young and immature poet, his personal emotions and experiences may find an expression in his composition. But says Eliot, "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates."

Thus, poetry is organisation rather than inspiration. Eliot scoffs at Wordsworth's famous statement "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility." Poetry, says Eliot, is not an emotional outburst. Nor it is the process that takes place in tranquility. The greatness of a poem does not depend upon the intensity of emotions expressed there in. It the intensity of the poetic process, the pressure under which the creation takes place which counts. It is like the pressure cooker, in which the food is cooked. The taste of the cooked food does not depend upon the make of the cooker. The more intense the poetic pressure, greater the poem... The mind of the poet is in fact a medium, a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases and images. They unite to form new compound. Eliot concludes the argument by saying that poetry is a craft the result of hard labour on the part of the poet.

Eliot does not deny the emotion to the poet.

The poet has a personality. He has emotions. But the poetry is not an expression of his personality. The poet must depersonalize his emotions. Eliot quotes the example of Keats 'Ode to the Nightingale' to distinguish between artistic emotion and personal emotion. Eliot goes on to declare "Poetry is not turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality." This impersonality can be achieved only when the poet surrenders himself to literary tradition. This is possible only when he acquires the historical sense. Eliot says again and again that this historical sense is the awareness of the living presence of dead writers.

Eliot's theory of impersonality gave a new dimension to the process of poetic creation. Both Wordsworth and Eliot were practicing poets. Wordsworth gave his theory of poetry and of the creative process as a justification for the new kind of poetry he proposed to write. Eliot was a critic by profession also. His critical theory has been put forward in a scientific manner. Certain critics have found the tone of Eliot's critical writing rather too aggressive. A. G. George stated that "Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry on the nature of poetic process after Wordsworth's Romantic Conception of poetry." Eliot says, "The emotion of art is impersonal and the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done."

According to T.S. Eliot, an ideal critic must have a "highly developed sense of facts." Eliot believes that this quality is a rare gift and it is slow to develop. By the sense of facts Eliot does not mean the biographical or sociological knowledge. It is the knowledge of the technical details of a work of art such as its setting, genesis and structure etc. It is the knowledge of these facts alone that can make criticism concrete as well as objective. Eliot is against the "lemon-squeezer" school of critics who tried to squeeze every drop of meaning out of words and lines. On the other hand, Eliot has a high sense of praise for "workshop criticism." It is the analysis of his own work of art by the artist. Eliot says that the value of such criticism lies in the fact that its practitioner deals with the facts which he understands and so can also help us to understand them. The true critic, says Eliot, the writer himself

knows the facts about a work of art and puts them before his reader in a simple and easy manner. Connect with the sense of tradition. A critic must also have a highly developed sense of tradition. Eliot believes that there is an intimate relation between the present and past in world literature. The Entire literature of Europe, from Homer to the present day, forms a single literary tradition. The artist must surrender himself to the tradition in order to achieve the meaning and significance. He must realise, artists of all time are united by a common cause.

A good critic must be objective and impersonal in his elucidation of a work of art. He must not be guided by inner voice as suggested by Murry. The main tools of a critic are comparison and analysis. A good critic must have the ability to use these tools in an effective manner. In the process of comparison and analysis, the critic must be methodical and sensitive. He should show the curiosity and intensity of passion of great knowledge. The critic, according to Eliot must not try to judge the present by the standard of the past. The requirements of each age are different and so the principles of art must change from age to age. The good critic must be liberal and flexible in his outlook. He must be ready to correct and reverse his view from time to time in the light of new facts. Eliot says that it is the function of a critic to turn the attention from the poet to his poetry. Eliot means to say that the subject of criticism must be the work of art. It should not be the artist himself. The poet (critic) should criticize the poem and not the man who created it. He says that the function of a critic is not a judicial one. A good critic should not pass judgment on the works of art. He should merely present the facts before the reader. He must allow the reader to make his own judgment.

The critic's function is simply to guide the reader, when a critic compares any present work of art with the past work, it should not be just to tell which one is better or worse. It is just to present the details of both the works before the reader so that the reader can make his own judgment. Thus, the critic can develop the reader's aesthetic sense and intellectual ability. Thus, Eliot's views on the functions and qualifications of a critic are classical. He rejects the subjectivity in criticism.

**CONCLUSION**

Thus, Eliot's views are totally classical. He rejects the subjectivity in criticism. He also ridicules the concept of inner voice. On the other hand, he insists on a highly developed sense of facts, an objective standard and a sense of tradition. Eliot concludes, "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." It must be noted that Eliot does not reject emotions in poetry. He simply emphasizes the fact that the artist must depersonalize the emotions. The impersonality can be achieved when the poet surrenders himself completely to the sense of tradition. Thus, Eliot advocates impersonality in poetry. He clearly rejects the Romantic subjectivity.

A.G. George comments, "Eliot's theory of impersonality of poetry is the greatest theory on the nature of the poetic process after Wordsworth's romantic conception of poetry." Eliot changed the entire course of critical theory and practice and his ideas have great significance.

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