

Impersonal theory of Art or Tradition and the Individual Talent ①

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T.S. Eliot

Part - A

T.S. Eliot is regarded as one of the most versatile and influential writers of the present century. As a poet, critic and playwright he has exerted such an impact on the literary scene of this century that often this age is known as the age of Eliot. Eliot's critical works consist mostly of essays and lectures, written or delivered from time to time and collected together in book form subsequently. The more important of these books are: *The Sacred Wood*, *Selected Essays*, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, *Elizabethan Essays* and *Essays Ancient and Modern*. Among his several essays *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1917), *The Function of Criticism* (1923), and *The Frontiers of Criticism* (1956) are the most influential. In fact what he expounded in the first two essays continued to be his most characteristic critical stance, subject only to minor modification or elaboration in his subsequent writings. On the basis of the above three essays Eliot has built an impressive critical edifice of critical theory which is amazingly comprehensive in scope and reference.

In the year 1929, Eliot startled the world by declaring himself a royalist in politics, a classicist in literature and an Anglo-Catholic in religion. For a poet who had drawn so much from the French Symbolist poets of 19th century, it was certainly an incongruous claim to declare himself a classicist. Moreover his own poetry had done a lot (with an appeal for romanticism, if it stands for freedom) to free modern poetry from the fetters of Victorian classicism. Nonetheless, his classical sympathies have been accepted now,

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at least in the field of criticism.

As a classicist Eliot stands for the depersonalization and objectification of art and poetry. In his earlier writings he had expressed his view that the end and means of poetry should be objective, and not subjective. The essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' becomes the confluence of all his views expressed earlier in this regard. Eliot holds the view that a poet and his poem are two completely different things. He says "The feeling or emotion or vision resulting from the poem are something different than the feeling, or emotion or vision in the mind of the poet." He elucidates this view by examining firstly the relationship of poet and the past tradition and secondly the relation between the poet and his poem. By his examination he finds that in the both cases there is depersonalization or impersonality of art and the artist, which is quite essential for every creative work.

Expressing his view on tradition Eliot says that past is never dead. It lives in the moment of the present. The presence of past tradition is very much alive in the creative work of a poet or an artist. If we approach a poet with an open mind we shall very often find that "not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously." Borrowing idea from 'the touch stone method' and 'the historical sense' of Arnold, Eliot speaks of the continental consciousness and the

national consciousness to which a poet is always linked. Eliot says that every poet and the artist must be conscious of the historical sense and must know that he is a part of the long stretched tradition and not an ^{isolated} individual writing only in the moment of the present. About the historical sense Eliot says "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity." So it is not only the individual talent of the poet, but ^{also} the influence that tradition imparts upon him, has considerable significance in the creative process. In this process, ~~both~~ the individuality of the poet and the sense of tradition, both, constantly interact and amalgamate. It is a mutual give and take of what the poet gives of his own and what he takes from the tradition. But while in giving he asserts his individuality, in taking he has to repress it. And since he has to take from the long line of illustrious dead, there is a continuous self-sacrifice of the poet,