

T. S. ELIOT'S CRITICAL CORPUS

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All criticism / critical theory readers know who T.S. Eliot was. Vincent Leitch writes,

Eliot is the central Anglo-American poet and critic of the twentieth century. He is the author of the most influential poem, *The Waste Land* (1922), and the most authoritative literary essays and reviews. In the history of modern literary theory and criticism, Eliot belongs with SAMUEL JOHNSON, SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, and MATTHEW ARNOLD among the poet-critics who have defined the critical standards of an era, recast the literary tradition, and established key terms for analysis and evaluation. So immense was Eliot's authority that the poet Dylan Thomas referred to him as 'the Pope' and the critic Delmore Schwartz dubbed him a 'literary dictator.' (Leitch 1088)

T.S. Eliot was born to Sr Henry Ware Eliot and Charlotte Eliot (a poet and social worker) at St Louis, Missouri, USA in 1885. He studied at Harvard, and Irving Babbitt taught him philosophy. Henry Bergson, the French philosopher influenced him. The French symbolism influenced him more. Eliot studied at Sorbonne (Paris) and Oxford later. He settled down in England, securing English citizenship later. Ezra Pound became his literary advisor as much as he was a secretary to W.B. Yeats. Later Eliot worked as a lecturer, and clerk in Lloyds's Bank. He patronized many modernist writers as the director of Faber and Faber Publishers.

Personally, Eliot's marriage with Vivienne Haigh-Wood did not succeed. The despair of Europe also struck him deeply. So, Eliot became disillusioned and his writings including his great poem *The Waste Land* (1922) speak of his grand despair. Eliot was the front-ranking modernist critic of his times. He was an avowed formalist. His entire writings delve in symbolism. Eliot got many awards including the Nobel Prize for literature (1948).

Our first selection, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), begins,

In English writing we seldom speak of tradition. The poise and authority of Eliot's critical voice, hacked up by his masterful performances as a poet, soon made tradition a key topic for poets, critics, intellectuals, and teachers of literature in the academy. Two of the canonical texts of modern Anglo-American literary criticism, F. R. Leavis's *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1936) and Cleanth Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), were expansions of Eliot's ideas about tradition, and many other books (and countless syllabi) were similarly based on the terms that he had articulated.

"The Metaphysical Poets" (1921) is another central work in the history of modern criticism. Almost as soon as it appeared, the difficult seventeenth-century metaphysical poets John Donne, Andrew Marvel, and their contemporaries, whom Eliot described as "more often named than read, and more often read than profitably studied" became models of good poetry. Eliot's essay is condensed in its argument, highly suggestive, and extraordinarily ambitious, in it he deploys the evaluative terms that in the eighteenth-century Samuel Johnson had used against the metaphysical poets ("the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together") to elevate the very poets

whom, his eminent precursor had assailed, insisting that modern poetry *must* be difficult. (Letch 1090)

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The present essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" often anthologized and prescribed in academia is taken from his book *The Sacred Wood* (1920). We often speak of tradition as a derogative term. The French happened to be more critical than the English. But criticism is as inevitable as our breathing. Individuality and self-reliance are counted. The poets are to be evaluated in comparison with both the dead and living poets. Eliot writes,

Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, 'tradition' should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and 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. (Eliot 1093)

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.

Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.

In a peculiar sense he will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past. I say judged, not amputated, by them; not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons of dead critics. It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other. To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art. And we do not quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity. We say: it appears to conform, and is perhaps individual, or it appears individual, and may conform; but we are hardly likely to find that it is one and not the other. (Eliot 1094)

Eliot thinks past cannot be taken up as if a lump, but to be digested with hardwork. Art material is the same, changing its patterns and techniques every age.

But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show.

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition. It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I therefore invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide. (Eliot 1095)

Eliot tells further,

Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry. If we attend to the confused cries of the newspaper critics and the susurrus of popular repetition that follows, we shall hear the names of poets in great numbers; if we seek not Blue-book knowledge but the enjoyment of poetry, and ask for a poem, we shall seldom find it. I have tried to point out the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors, and suggested the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written. The other aspect of this Impersonal theory of poetry is the relation of the poem to its author. And I hinted, by an analogy, that the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of 'personality', not being necessarily more interesting, or having 'more to say', but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations. (Eliot 1095)

According to him, the analogy was that of the catalyst. When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; "nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected: has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum.

Eliot thinks or great poetry may be made without the direct use of any emotion whatever composed out of feelings solely. The point of view which he is struggling to attack is perhaps *related to* the metaphysical *theory of* the substantial unity of the soul: for his meaning is, that the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium.

Eliot does not accept Wordsworth's definition of poetry. Hence poets cannot find new emotions, feelings and ideas, but the same ones. Their business is to blend the emotions and ideas in new patterns and ways. Eliot observes:

The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary Sires and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which in actual emotions at all. Arid emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently, we must believe that 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'⁴ is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, not recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquility. It is a concentration, and a *new* thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. (Eliot 1097)

Eliot's essay speaks of Formalism as important in literature. He stresses on the concepts of objective correlative to make the poem impersonal. This is also called depersonalization theory. Wikipedia observes, "Eliot influenced many 20th century poets, novelists and song writers." (Wikipedia T.S. Eliot p 13 accessed on 22/12/2022).

References:

1. Leitch, Vincent. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: WW Norton Co, 2001.
2. Wikipedia T.S. Eliot p 13 accessed on 22/12/2022.