

Tradition and Depersonalization

—An Interpretation of "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

Fenfen Xie

Guangdong Songshan Polytechnic College, Shaoguan, Guangdong, 512126, China

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.26549/jetm.v1i1.298>

"Tradition and the Individual Talent" written by Anglo-American poet and literary critic Thomas Stearns Eliot is one of the most important essays of the school of New Criticism. As the title of this essay suggests, it discusses the relation between literary tradition and the poet as well as that between poet and poetry; moreover, T. S. Eliot puts forward his famous "Impersonal Theory" of poetry in his essay. "Tradition" and "Impersonal Theory" are main topics of this essay.

"Tradition and the Individual Talent" is divided into three parts by its author. The first part begins with Eliot's conception of tradition and attitudes of the English towards tradition. According to Eliot, "tradition" is a special and complex term. First, "tradition" represents a "simultaneous order," by which Eliot means a historical timelessness – a fusion of past and present. Second, it contains a sense of present temporality. Eliot challenges a common perception that a poet's greatness and individuality lies in his departure from his predecessors. Rather, Eliot argues that "the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (1093).

According to Eliot, tradition cannot be inherited, so poets must acquire a historical sense in order to obtain it. The historical sense enables the poet to write not only for readers of his own generation "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 si-

multaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (Newton 50). The poet with the historical sense is able to write both from a perspective of history as well as that of the present. Because the poet is closely related to his predecessors, people should not value him alone but compare and contrast him and the dead poets (Eliot 1093). Eliot states that "...the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past", which means new works of art have to conform to the old ones and at the same time the old works are influenced or altered by their successors (1093).

The poet cannot avoid being judged by "the standards of the past" (Eliot 1093). When "conformity" is mentioned, it not only means that new works must accord with the old works but also indicates that the old are influenced or altered by the new. Whether new works coincide with "the standards of the past" or not is "a test of their value" (Eliot 1093). If the poet wants to progress, he must put himself in a ceaseless depersonalization. Eliot raises a famous analogy to illustrate the role of the mind of the poet in his creations at the end of the first part.

The second part mainly concerns Eliot's "Impersonal Theory" of poetry. Eliot holds that great works do not express the personal emotions of the poet. He compares the mind of the poet to a catalyst in a chemical reaction, in which the reactants are feelings and emotions that are synthesized to create an artistic image. Although the mind of the poet works as a necessary element for the produc-

tion, it is unaffected by the process. The poet's mind stores emotions and feelings which will "form a new compound" when all the necessary elements are present (Eliot 1096). It is the intensity of fusion instead of that of emotions and feelings that lead to the appearance of the fusion. In this view, Eliot rejects the theory that art expresses metaphysical unity in the soul of the poet. He declares that "...the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium..." (Eliot 1096). The poet is merely a medium which combines emotions and feelings and then delivers the combination without expressing personal emotions.

Eliot opposes seeking for new human emotions in poetry. He declares that the duty of the poet is to use the ordinary emotions to compose poetry "to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all" (Eliot 1097). Eliot holds that consciousness and deliberation are necessary for the writing of poetry most of the time; therefore, the poet should avoid conveying personal feelings and emotions to readers, so poetry is an escape from emotion and personality (1097).

The third part of the essay is a conclusion. Eliot asserts that "the emotion of art is impersonal" (1098). In order to achieve this impersonality, the poet must depersonalize himself continuously. In addition, he must have a historical sense which enables him to connect the past with the present.

Eliot gives a novel and persuasive interpretation of "tradition" in "Tradition and the Individual Talent". Although poetry of Eliot is considered innovative, he defended tradition in his criticism and regarded himself as a traditionalist (Newton 50). He claims that tradition involves the historical sense and an ideal order. Tradition cannot be inherited, so the poet has to strive for it (Eliot 1093). In order to obtain tradition, the first thing the poet must acquire is the historical sense. The original interpretation of tradition put forward by Eliot is based on his historical conception. "Time" is a continuous whole in which human beings and literature exist. For this reason, literary tradition is passed down and influencing new works. It is necessary for the poet to acquire a clear understanding of the pastness of the past and the presence of the past so that he can grasp the real meaning of "the historical sense". Although old works live in the past, they are still widely read and frequently mentioned by posterity. This makes they also exist in the present.

Eliot asserts that English tradition cannot be separated from the wider European tradition (Newton 51). This means that the poet needs to set tradition both in a historical and a cultural context to understand it comprehensively.

The historical sense requires the poet to write not merely for his contemporaries "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). Because history never halts, tradition lasts. In this sense, this historical sense is a historical timelessness. The tradition carried by old works affects new works, therefore the historical sense can be interpreted as a sense of present temporality. The poet should adhere to tradition and at the same time take the present into consideration, so the historical sense becomes a synthesis "...of the timeless and of the temporal..." (Eliot 1093).

The second element of tradition is an ideal order. An ideal order of artistic works is accompanied by the historical sense. Now that the poet writes with a perception of the pastness of the past and the presence of the past, he cannot be an absolute individual who is admired only because he is himself (Eliot 1093). Eliot argues that we must set the poet "...for contrast and comparison, among the dead", which indicates the poet cannot be valued alone (1093). Tradition is not an unidirectional matter, so it not only means conformity of new works to previous works but also suggests the alteration of old works brought by new ones. An ideal order forms because of conformity of new works and alteration of old works. In other words, new works are not completely new and old works do not always remain the same. The poet must be valued through contrast and comparison with the dead poets because of the close relationship between his works and those of his predecessors.

Based on his conception of tradition, Eliot declares that "...art never improves, but the material of art is never quite the same" (1094). Greatness and individuality do not lie in the poet's difference from his predecessors, but in the parts where timeless faith of the dead poets dwells. In this view, art develops but never improves. People still read works of Shakespeare after hundreds of years because they convey an essential human emotions which instruct and guide people of different generations. Art changes without abandoning immortal truth and greatness; however, themes and technique of expression of artistic arts vary as societies and people's minds are changing.

Eliot's impersonal theory is put forward against romantic subjectivism and individualism (Newton 50). Eliot criticizes Wordsworth's idea that good poetry is "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and maintains that poets should convey impersonal feelings to readers (Newton 51). Tradition brings norms for works of arts. Conformity

of new works to previous works enables new ones to fit in with the existing order whereas the order is altered to remain complete. Only works which can become a part of the order are regarded significant. In order to create immortal works, the poet must depersonalize himself and adhere to tradition. Therefore, the poet is inevitably valued by contrast and comparison with his predecessors. He won't be considered great unless he can stand evaluation "by the standards of the past" (Eliot 1093).

Eliot uses a chemical reaction to illustrate the production of poetry. He compares emotions and feelings to oxygen and sulfur dioxide, while the mind of the poet is compared to platinum. Platinum serves as a catalyst which causes the combination of oxygen and sulfur dioxide. Emotions and feelings exist in all people's minds, but not all these emotions and feelings can combine to become poetry. This production needs a "catalyst"—the mind of the poet. In this view, the poet is a vessel storing emotions and feelings, which remain still until all necessary elements emerge to form a production (Eliot 1096). The poet has no personality to express. What he has is only a medium in which he combines feelings and images in "peculiar and unexpected ways" (Eliot 1096). The more perfect the poet is, the fewer personal emotions are expressed in his poetry, which means that poetry is far from the real expression of personal emotions and feelings of the poet. The duty of poet is not to seek new emotions but to make use of his mind and intellect to synthesize and process his personal emotions (simple, crude or dull) so as to convey feelings "which are not in actual emotions at all" (Eliot 1097). Poetry conveys feelings which do not exist in the real world, so it is "an escape from emotions" (Eliot 1097). It does not express the personality of the poet; therefore, it is also "an escape from personality" (Eliot 1097).

Eliot concludes that criticism should focus on the poetry but not the poet. This conclusion comes from his impersonal theory of poetry. Poetry is impersonal, so critics must divert their attention from the personal poet to the impersonal poetry. According to Eliot, the poet appears different in daily life and literary creation. The poet ignores himself and devotes himself to tradition which is more valuable and significant in order to convey common emotions of human beings. Consequently, people cannot find any trace of the poet's personal life and experience in poetry. If people concentrate on the poet instead of the poetry, they can only get some information about the poet as an individual but not anything useful of the poetry.

Eliot is a traditionalist in criticism. "Tradition" and "Impersonal Theory of Poetry" are two novel and influential notions put forward by this representative figure of the school of New Criticism. He contends that the poet must write with a historical sense and insist on tradition; moreover, the poet should not express his personality in poetry. "Tradition and the Individual Talent" rebuts romanticists' theory of personification and theory of talent. Eliot reinterprets tradition and endows it new connotations, which lead people back to tradition. Impersonal theory topples the idea that "poetry is an expression of the poet's emotions and feelings" and urges people to direct their criticism and appreciation upon poetry but not the poet.

References

- [1] Eliot, Thomas S. Tradition and the Individual Talent[C]. The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. 1092-1098.
- [2] Newton, K.M., T.S. Eliot Modern British and Irish Criticism and Theory: A Critical Guide[M]. Ed. Julian Wolfreys. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006. 49-56.