

T. S. ELIOT

“TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT”

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

Text used: Charles Kaplan and William David Anderson, eds. Criticism: Major Statements, 4th ed. New York: Bedford, 2000.

1. In paragraph 1 on page 404, Kaplan and Anderson discuss Eliot’s contention in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that a new literary work affects earlier works. Summarize this argument.

Eliot contends that all great literary works have a “simultaneous existence” and a “simultaneous” order; therefore, “works of an earlier period are always being altered by the introduction of later works” (404).

2. In paragraph 2, page 404, they present the second importance of Eliot’s essay: The theory of the depersonalization of art. Summarize this position.

Eliot declares that Poetry is “only a medium and not a personality”; it is “not a turning loose of emotions, but an escape from emotion” (404).

3. In paragraph 3 (404-05), what is the third significance of Eliot’s article, according to the editors?

In this essay Eliot states that the critic’s task is “to divert interest from the poet to the poetry.” He thus becomes the progenitor of the 20th century’s New Criticism, which believes in “the close examination of the poem as poem, without regard for biographical, social, ethical, or other frames of reference as sources of judgment” (404-05).

4. On page 405, Eliot begins his essay by questioning whether individualism or tradition is typically more valued in a literary work. What is Eliot’s answer, and why?

In English writing, Eliot says that “tradition” typically appears as a word of “censure” (405). Our tendency is “to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects

of his work in which he least resembles any one else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors." Thus, critics tend to praise a writer's individuality—how he or she differs from other writers.

5. On page 406, Eliot asserts that tradition becomes a more important characteristic of a literary work than individualism when it encompasses "the historical sense" (406) and "simultaneous order" (406). Explain these concepts, citing specific sentences from Eliot. How does "the really new" (406) literary work alter previous literary pieces? (406)

While Eliot concedes that "novelty [individualism] is better than repetition [a naïve use of tradition]" (405), he continues that a deeper consideration of tradition is needed by the successful poet. This sense of "tradition" can be obtained only "by great labour [study]" (406).

Tradition, rightfully considered, "involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which . . . 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 the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional" (406).

Thus for Eliot the poet is a member of a tradition. What the poet writes or can write is greatly tied to what has gone before. A writer will be greatly affected by the ideas going on in his or her society. No poet or artist of any sort can be understood solely in terms of himself or herself.

"The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them" (406). "The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (406).

To sum up, Eliot contends that new literary works are affected by previous works, but they also change those works or how those works are perceived.

6. On page 407, Eliot deals with the Expressive approach, speaking of the "mind of his own country" (tradition) and the poet's "own private mind" (individualism). What point is Eliot making about the poet's education and "erudition (pedantry)"? (407) What compliment is paid to Shakespeare in this paragraph? (407)

The poet must be "aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—[tradition]" is "much more important than his own mind [individualism]" (407).

Eliot anticipates one objection: that for the poet to become absorbed in tradition "requires a ridiculous amount of erudition (pedantry)" (407). He counters that "the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career" (407).

For some this acquisition of tradition can come easily: “Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum” (407).

In essence, Eliot contends, a poet must know what the tradition is within which he or she works. The poet has to be well-read and know what other poets have done before him or her.

7. One page 407, in the third paragraph from the bottom, what does Eliot say a poet must strive to extinguish?

“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” (407). Keats’s idea

Since the poet lives and writes within a tradition, he or she must be impersonal in poetry. Necessarily the poet has to surrender himself/herself to this tradition.

8. On page 407, at the beginning of section II, toward what should literary criticism be directed?

“Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry” (406).

9. Eliot formulates his idea of the poetic process (how a poem is created) in the last sentence of the second paragraph from the bottom of page 408, beginning, “The poet’s mind is in fact” and continuing through the first two sentences of the next paragraph, ending “. . . the fusion takes place, that counts.” How and why does he attack Longinus’s theory of “sublimity” (408)? In its place, what does Eliot contend is involved in the poetic process?

“The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together. . . . For it is not the ‘greatness,’ the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts” (408).

Eliot felt that Longinus’s definition of “sublimity” stressed the feeling or the intensity of the emotion with which a poem deals, not the artistic process of the poem.

A poem is not an expression of the poet’s feelings or of her or his personality. Rather, a poem arises from a fusion of feelings, phrases, and images which the poet has gathered over time and chooses to connect while writing a poem.

10. In the second paragraph of page 409, how does Eliot argue that literary criticism must separate the poet from the poem?

The “poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.”

11. On page 410, what types of emotions does Eliot say a poet should use?

“One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse. The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all” (410). [Emotions=inward sensation; feeling=outward manifestation of emotion]

12. Whose theory or definition of poetry does Eliot attack on page 410, and how? Copy Eliot’s definition of poetry given in the next to last sentence of section II on page 410, beginning, “Poetry is not . . .” (410).

Eliot attacks Wordsworth’s theory, writing that consequently, “we must believe that ‘emotion recollected in tranquility’ is an inexact formula [of the poetic process]. For it is neither emotion, nor 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 . . .” (410).

“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” (410).

13. How does section III, page 410, summarize the major points of Eliot’s essay?

(1) Eliot says that criticism should concentrate on the poem, not the poet: “to divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim” (410).

(2) Eliot says that the poetic process entails that the poet extinguish his or her own personality or individuality: The “poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work . . .” (410).

(3) The poet must embrace the tradition in which he or she writes: Thus the poet must live “in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past” (410).