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A Reading in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”

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ABSTRACT

The first seeds of New Criticism as an objectivist approach to literature emerged in the 1920s at Vanderbilt University as a result of literary debates about methods and methodologies of reading, led by theorists and critics such as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and others. Their discussions resulted in the publication of *The Fugitive* (1922); one of the main founding writings of New Criticism. They were widely influenced by each other as well as other theorists, among which was T.S. Eliot who noticeably shaped the movement’s literary theory, namely through his theory of “depersonalization” of art which stresses the idea of “métier of poetry” and thus the study of art as art, independently from historical background, external social conditions, biographical details, temperament of the author, as well as its psychological and moral effects on readership. This article scrutinizes T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent’s contribution to the New Criticism debate on close reading; a theory that emphasizes generating meaning through explaining the text’s implications and establishing connections between its internal verbal and figurative components.

KEYWORDS: New Criticism, objectivist, art, depersonalization

Introduction

“Tradition and the Individual Talent” is one of the early and most eminent critical essays of the twentieth century, written by the modernist and pioneering literary critic T.S. Eliot, in 1921. It was first published, with other articles such as “Hamlet and his Problems,” “The Perfect Critic,” “Imperfect Critic,” and “Blake” in 1920, in his collection of essays: *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, and then was published in his book of critiques *Selected Essays*, in 1950.

This essay introduces Eliot as the major founder of new criticism¹; a literary trend that stressed the ambiguity of literary works in the light of their impersonality, and celebrated close reading, denying any relevance of meaning in the outer sphere of the text. Such a trend was highly influenced by late 19th-century criticism, especially the Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold (1822- 1888) most known for his objectivist approach to criticism and literature initiated in 1860, which would become later the foundation of new criticism. He is accredited to be the first modern critic and even the critics’ critic.

The article’s title introduces the general atmosphere of the work; its affiliations, and major arguments. The first notice to make is the order of the two constituents of the title: “Tradition” in the first part, and then “The Individual Talent,” which implies the writer’s celebration of tradition, and his emphasis on its importance; it precedes talent and then shapes it. Such classification stresses the noticeable influence of the previous works on the individual works of art. Tradition is

introduced without being preceded by any article. It is not ‘the’ tradition about a unique, specific, and firmly established and fixed in time, nor ‘a’ tradition, and thus one particular tradition that imprisons the artist and limits her/his creative horizons, but rather ‘tradition’ with its universal dimensions and continuity of its existence on the axis of time.

The use of “and” implies an opposition between the various preceding works considered masterpieces, what is newly written by successors, and who can be regarded as a disciple; “Tradition” vs. “The Individual Talent.” Meanwhile, this suggests a sense of continuity of the past in the present time. An adjustment and reproduction of previous works which, in turn, lead and shape novel creations.

The essay is logically organized. It is divided into three parts. The two first parts are equal in length and they show an equal interest on the part of the writer. This can be measured by the same intensity of arguments, whereas the third is a short one. The first part sheds light on the connection established between the poem, as a new work of art, and previous works. It shows the relationship between tradition and individual talent. The second part dehistoricizes tradition, arguing for the impersonal theory of art by making this time connection between art and the artist, while the third part is a concluding section.

The two opening paragraphs introduce the essay as a defense and a justification of tradition. The essay opens by condemning the English writer’s and critics’ tendency to neglect and deny the role of tradition in the reformulation and accommodation of art in the light of culture, or as the writer refers to: “the pleasing archeological reconstruction”, and then deploring their negative attitude towards it. The writer makes this quite explicit in his first sentence: “In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its

¹ New Criticism traces back to the publication of John Crowe Ransom’s *The New Criticism* 1941 and was approved as a theory and practice prominent in American literary criticism by the 1960s. The movement began informally in the 1920s at Vanderbilt University in discussions among John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and other theorists from abroad, such as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, and William Empson. Founding writings of New Criticism are *The Fugitive* (1922), *The Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929) as well as T. S. Eliot’s essays which have noticeably shaped the movement’s literary theory, namely through the study of art as art, independently from historical background, external social conditions, biographical details, temperament of the author, as well as its psychological and moral effects on readership. The New Critic’s main role is to close read the text, generating meaning through explaining its implications and establishing connections between its internal verbal and figurative components. That’s what the French school has long named “Explication de texte.” For more details, please see Abrams, Meyer H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* [1957]. Cornell University, 1999. And Dobie, Anne B. *Theory Into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (3d Edition). Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2012.



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name in deploring its absence.” (71), and mainly by saying “Seldom, perhaps does the word appear except in a phrase of censure.” (71)

Thus, from the very beginning, the reader can feel the writer’s reproaching tone for the English critics and artists for their inability to recognize the importance of the past, and their refusal to confess its contribution to their existence as artists, by emphasizing the importance of “find[ing] what is individual”, as says the writer, “what is the peculiar essence of the man [...] the poet’s difference from his predecessors [...] and to find something that can be isolated to be enjoyed.”(71) Then, in the last lines, the writer articulates clearly his thesis, claiming that unless traditionalized, talent cannot be individual.

The closing paragraph serves as a summary of the whole essay. It confirms the thesis statement and connects both aspects of Eliot’s impersonal theory of art introduced in the two first paragraphs; the relationship between the poem and other poems, as well as the poem and the poet.

In a coherent order of arguments, and by using clear and simple language, the writer, in his essay, proves to be classicist in his approach to literature, by celebrating tradition and depicting its importance in the formulation of relevant works of art, in the sense of continuity and fusion of the present and the past, and also by introducing the theory of “depersonalization” of art which tends to objectify the text and disassociate the writer from it, giving much importance to the work of art as a class of its own, from which stems meaning, rather than the meaning intended by the author. The article then adopts the tone of rejecting and reproaching the modernists’ tendencies towards personalizing art, despising tradition, and considering it as a blocking force to creativity. This was mainly the romantic approach to literature.

Real criticism, argues Arnold, is a patient flexible exercise of curiosity: trying to literature is built on the foundation of the past, urging modern writers and critics to go back to ancient literary works to get guidance and inspiration. However, the central and most controversial questions would be: amid tradition, how does talent become individual? How can ‘new’ art claim its novelty? Is it possible?

After initiating the continuity of literary expression, and the impossibility of disassociating the individual talent from tradition, as well as being aware of the misinterpretation of the concept of tradition, the writer stresses that he is not denying the importance of talent and thus the individual’s creativity, affirming that “novelty is better than repetition.” (71) He argues that tradition does not mean repetition, and then relates it to the historical context:

The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his 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. (72)

Two key expressions in Eliot’s claim are: “simultaneous existence” and “simultaneous order.” They emphasize the simultaneity of the past and the present, which implies the “timeliness” and the universality of literature and its tradition, and, at the same time, stress the continuity of the past in the present time, or as expressed by Eliot “the present time of the past.” This refers to the idea that the works of the predecessor’s guide and shape “new” ones. They are masterpieces that have the authority to determine the relevance of any creativity, yet are modified by new works of literature.

This would be much more explicit by the writer’s assumption: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone.” (72) Meaning in this context refers to reputation; a distinguishable place in the saloons of literature, and thus a relevant existence which cannot happen by isolating oneself and attempting to disconnect the present time from history, as the artist should be aware of this past and the mechanisms of its evolution to be allowed creation. Hence, the new work cannot be new until it has completely absorbed tradition.

Nevertheless, another argument represented by Eliot is that the material of art never improves art itself, by using the metaphor of the monument to refer to the existing tradition, and, thus, he stresses that the present, “the new”, is nothing but a modifying agent to the past; “art never improves, but [...] the material of art is never quite the same.” (73) A striking example of this is while reading Shakespeare’s works with their complex language and deep philosophy, one does not go back physically to the renaissance period, but rather they experience the present time through the text’s esthetics.

The preceding paragraph which starts with “I am live,” includes a very important expression: “The métier of poetry.” It argues the writer’s formalistic approach to art. Art is structure and technique and has nothing to do with feelings as was used to be in the Romantic period. Then, as was mentioned earlier, art is not an inherited instinct as it needs “great labor” to be mastered. This confirms the idea that the artist should not disassociate his work from tradition, and emphasizes the complementary relationship and the reciprocal influence of the past and the present.

The writer intends to mention the expression of “métier of poetry” to introduce the other aspect of his impersonal theory of art, or in other words of his depersonalization of art; a theory that was previously introduced by Matthew Arnold who adopted a negative attitude towards emotionalizing literature and criticism, and claimed disinterestedness in the outer sphere of the text in “The Function of Criticism at present” (1865)- published in *Essays in Criticism* in which Arnold argues for the need for new wise criticism in England, and then generated by new critics such as W.K.Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley in “The Intentional Fallacy,” joining Eliot’s idea of the irrelevance of meaning outside the text and the unimportance of the writer’s intentions, stressing the meaning of words on pages and thus the text as its spokesperson.



Arnold affirms:

I said: "Of the literature of France and Germany, as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort, for now, many years, has been a critical effort; the endeavor, in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it is." I added, that owing to the operation in English literature of certain causes, "almost the last thing for which one would come to English literature is just that very thing which now Europe most desires-criticism;" and that the power and value of English literature was thereby impaired. More than one rejoinder declared that the importance I here assigned to criticism was excessive, and asserted the inherent superiority of the creative effort of the human spirit over its critical effort. And the other day, having been led by an excellent notice of Wordsworth to turn again to his biography, I found, in the words of this great man, whom I, for one, must always listen to with the most profound respect, a sentence passed on the critic's business, which seems to justify every possible disparagement of it. (1)

Arnold initiates his argument about literary criticism by stressing the need for and importance of criticism in English Literature, as the prevailing tendency was to privilege the creative effort over the critical one. He criticizes Wordsworth's disdain of criticism "hold[ing] it [...] very low, infinitely lower than the inventive [...] If the quantity of time consumed in writing critiques on the works of others were given to original composition, of whatever kind it might be, it would be much better employed; it would make a man find out sooner his level, and it would do infinitely less mischief." (1)

The concepts of "disinterestedness" and "depersonalization" would mark their continuity with Shklovsky²'s notion of 'defamiliarization' (ostraneni) which supports his theory of the artfulness of the object, favoring the device of language over symbolic images and arguing that it is only through the textual device that the artfulness could be revealed. 'Defamiliarization' has been used to make the familiar object unfamiliar so that the value of the object is uplifted and the artfulness becomes clarified. He states in "Art as Device" (1919): "By defamiliarizing objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and laborious." (6)

The scientific analogy of the chemical experiment is very significant in the essay. It shows the author's confirmation and stress on his objectivist approach to literature, and then the idea of art's depersonalization. For Eliot, literature is nothing but a reaction between the artist's feelings and emotions represented in the analogy of Oxygen and Sulphur dioxide, but

this cannot take place only and only if Platinum- which stands for the poet's mind, exists. Paradoxically, it stays unaffected by this reaction; it remains "inert", "neutral", and "unchangeable." (74) A noticeable argument in this context is the following:

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. (75)

Then, the focus should be on Art itself and not on the artist; the text, and not the author, for the latter's ideas and feelings are combined and reacted upon to produce the piece of work. The important is craftsmanship, and this recalls the idea of "métier of poetry;" a métier that demands the artist's techniques and skills, adopted from his awareness and understanding of tradition that serves the refinement of her/ his talent.

There is then a diversion from the artist to art and from the subject to the object of literature. The function of criticism is to nourish creative art and guarantee its continuity, as it creates a suitable environment and provides the necessary materials through which the artist can forge ahead. It prepares the necessary space for the success of creative art.

To reach the text's meaning, the text should be treated as an independent object. Objectivity then extends to the process of reading texts which should be out of the writer's personality, since art is a mere "concentration [...] a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation," (76) and since it is not "a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion," (76) A striking proof of the irrelevance of the existence of the artist within the work of art and the independence of meaning is "Beowulf," the well-known poem, the author of which is unknown, but that continues to exist and to get multiple interpretations.

Conclusion

"Tradition and the Individual Talent" claims thus T.S. Eliot's critical authority which stems from his wide scope of thinking, his deep logic, and its coherence, the easiness of the language used which transits from one argument to another, and the clarity which challenges the present day's literary tradition most governed by the overuse of symbolism, similes and complex style as well as language. Eliot gains authority and reputation through the legacy of his high skills of criticism, and also mainly by the introduction of new concepts and problematizing them. He has initiated the theory of depersonalization of art and hence raised the critical issues of the relationship between art and the artist, as well as the multiplicity of art's forms.

² Viktor Shklovsky is one of the most prominent Russian formalists. In "Art as Device" (1917), he defines art as a means of experiencing the process of creativity. Its purpose is "to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition." (6), stressing the artfulness of the object rather than the object itself. "Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artifact itself is quite unimportant." (6) Russian Formalism originated in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the 1920s. The leading figures of this school are Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum, and Roman Jakobson. The term "formalism" was applied derogatorily by the movement's opponents, due to its focus on form and technical devices, then it had become a neutral designation. The formalist school was restrained by the Soviets in the early 1930s, which caused its shift to Czechoslovakia to join the Prague school (Prague linguistic circle) led by Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukarovsky, and René Wellek. Russian formalists' theories are based on Ferdinand de Saussure's structural theory of language. They were thus closely correlated with the structuralists, flourished mainly in the 1950s and 1960s. From a Russian formalist perspective, literature is a specialized mode of language; a systematic set of structural and linguistic components to be analyzed. It is a poetic language based on aesthetics. It totally differs from prosaic language; practical language, the main function of which is to communicate through extrinsic references. Shklovsky (1917) defines poetic language as "impeded [language], distorted speech [...] structured speech." (7)



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