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## **Theory of Tradition: Aristotle, Matthew Arnold, and T.S. Eliot**

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### **Abstract**

*In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, T.S. Eliot assigns a definite meaning to the word ‘tradition’. He advocates a comparison and contrast between the past and the present poets with a view to finding out something new and original or ‘individual’ in poetry. He feels that by this comparison alone, one can separate tradition from the individual talent. The idea of ‘individual talent’ seems to emerge from the theory of Imitation by Aristotle. In Aristotle’s theory, the artist in the process of imitation, knowingly or unknowingly, adds something to it which forms the basis for the production of art. And this ‘new’ added in the act of imitation is ‘art’. In Eliot’s theory, while setting a recent poet in comparison and contrast with some writer or poet of the past in order to ascertain whether or not the recent poet keeps within the tradition, there is found to be a great deal different which is new and individual. Eliot defines it as ‘individual talent’. So, the whole idea of ‘individual talent’ seems to have emerged from Aristotle’s theory of imitation. Eliot’s concept is also very close to Matthew Arnold’s concept, who in his Touchstone method, has advocated the lines of poetry under consideration for criticism to be compared with the lines of some great classics. This paper compares the concepts of Aristotle, Matthew Arnold, and T.S. Eliot and tries to find out the similarities among the three concepts by putting them in comparison and contrast with one another.*

***Keywords: Tradition, Individual talent, Imitation, Touchstone method, Mimesis.***

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‘Tradition’ is a word that has been in use for ages, but in English writing it had generally not been spoken of until T.S. Eliot gave it a definite sense and meaning in the twentieth century. In his own words: “We cannot refer to ‘the tradition’ or to ‘a tradition’; at most, we employ the adjective in saying that the poetry of so-and-so is ‘traditional’ or even ‘too traditional’”. Seldom, perhaps, does the word appear except in the phrase of censure. If otherwise, it is vaguely approbative, with the implication, as to the work approved, of some pleasing archaeological reconstruction” (293). Having found the word ‘tradition’ in such a condition, Eliot sets out to use it to suit his own purpose, breathes new life into it and makes it look peculiarly his own.

In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, Eliot assigns a definite meaning to the word ‘tradition’, which in the words of Chandra is defined as: “The aggregate of poetic modes created by the long lines of poets from Homer to the poets of yesterday” (54).

According to Eliot: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone” (294). The poet cannot stand either outside or independent of the tradition and this tradition cannot be inherited, but can be obtained only by great labour. It involves the historical sense, which is “a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together” (Eliot 294), and it is this ‘historical sense’ that makes a writer traditional. It 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 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 294). Eliot wants every poet to be traditional. He wants him to acquire the historical sense and stresses upon the fact that art does not improve. He says that a poet “must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same” (295). Every work of art is unique in itself and any comparison with a view to establishing its superiority or inferiority is meaningless. In “scientific and technological tradition achievements of earlier scientists and technologists can be abandoned except as museum pieces because later achievements have excelled them; in poetry nothing can be abandoned because there is no improvement or superior achievement” (Chandra 55).

The critic should also be aware of this tradition. For the proper assessment and understanding of poetry, the critic should not only be acquainted with the tradition of poetry, but also with the poetry of the more recent even of the living poets, because he feels that “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (295), for “it is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by each other” (295). So, the sense of tradition is necessary for the critic also. Chandra writes in this connection that the “critic must be constantly recalling to his mind every bit of earlier poetry which bears any resemblance of idea, feeling, thought, image, phrase or metre to the poem under consideration. His ears must be alert to any echo from the past” (293).

The very idea of tradition itself has an echo of imitation or mimesis of Aristotle. Eliot says: “If the only form of tradition, of handling down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successors, ‘tradition’ should positively be discouraged” (294). These lines remind one of the famous lines of Aristotle in *Poetics* that “Tragedy is a *mimesis* of a high, complete action” (57). Eliot here seems to be following tradition as a critic, as he himself, knowingly or unknowingly, seems to be imitating Aristotle, whose influence nobody can escape from. For Aristotle, all art is an imitation, for Eliot, it is the following of the tradition. He would not allow repetition but would prefer novelty, for “novelty is better than repetition” (294). It can easily be concluded that ‘tradition’ is only a new name assigned to *mimesis* or imitation. In imitation, Aristotle prohibits servile copying and one finds Eliot also prohibiting it in his theory. The only difference that may be traced out in their theories is that tragedy is an imitation of an action, while tradition is an imitation (not servile copying) of the past writers. But, it may, also be said that Eliot wants the modern poets to imitate the literary

works or writings of the past, i.e., their action. So, in this way also he imitates Aristotle's concept, not directly, but indirectly.

It is not surprising that Eliot's theory of 'tradition' seems to emerge from the theory of *mimesis* or imitation, because he himself was greatly influenced by the "critical writings of Remy de Gourmont, the well known French critic, who 'had most of the general intelligence of Aristotle'. It was he, who first applied the Aristotelian method of comparison and analysis to the elucidation of works of literature, and from whom perhaps Eliot borrows the famous phrase, 'dissociation of sensibility' "(Prasad 238). B. Prasad, in an attempt to cite difference between the neo-classical critics and Eliot, mentions that "while they followed Horace who turned criticism into a set of precepts, he follows Aristotle who merely analyzed works to the point of stating some general truths about them—truths which later ages, including that of Horace, mistook to be laws" (238). So, Eliot seems to have inherited Aristotle's influence through Remy de Gourmont. This fact could better be understood in the words of Wimsatt & Brooks, who confirm the influence of Aristotle upon him when they write: "It represents a return to something like Aristotelian theory" (665).

Eliot's views in the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" also seem to be contradictory. He, in his essay, tries to establish his views on tradition and wants the poet to acquire the historical sense in order to be traditional. He does not want the poet to stand outside the tradition of the literature of the past, and wants him to take the whole western poetic tradition from Homer downwards as one contemporaneous order, but in the second paragraph of the essay, he himself admits that "every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind" (293). This seems to be contradictory. If every nation and race has its own peculiar creative and critical turn of mind, how the idea of tradition can be said to hold correct? The whole Europe is divided into so many nations, and even it is divided into so many races. Each nation and race has its own peculiar creative and critical turn of mind, so a homogeneous tradition of literature cannot be imagined to be forming, because every nation and race has a distinct and different mode of writing and this depends largely upon the location, geographical conditions, history, and psychology of the nation. Its political, social, and economic conditions along with the culture and tradition of the people and so many other factors also would contribute to the creation of its distinct literature, so there must naturally be a difference in their literature also. There might also be a difference in their approach to literature.

One can, at the most, say that despite a difference in the tradition of different countries, these traditions form a tradition of the whole of the literature of Europe and that the tradition of the literature of Europe is a unification of so many diverse traditions of literature of so many countries of Europe. If the above conclusion may be drawn from the statement made by Eliot himself, it may very easily be established and maintained that Eliot himself could not keep this in his mind that his admittance of the fact that every nation has its own creative and critical turn of mind would lead the critics to conclude that what Eliot was talking about was not the literary tradition of the whole of Europe, rather, he was talking about the different traditions of the different European countries forming a

heterogeneous whole. Every poet will have to follow the tradition of some or the other country—generally of his own country—and it would not be possible for him to follow all the traditions of all the countries of Europe, which must be diverse in nature, simultaneously. He will have to show, his affinity with only one country, it may be his own country or any other country, but he cannot find himself following literary traditions of so many countries at the same time. So, Eliot's view seems to be contradictory and, hence, the theory of tradition weakens. The above conclusion also holds correct when applied to criticism also. The criticism of different countries of Europe will also differ with the difference in their creative literature. So, the theory of tradition has its loop-holes within it and it is responsible for its self-destruction.

Further, if a poet writes keeping himself well within the boundaries of tradition, he will definitely become artificial, for in this case he will have to lose his own identity and will have to get it merged into the greater personality of tradition. He will also have to suppress his own feelings and emotions, and would, thus, get himself cut-off from life, and ultimately his writings would be lifeless. Ezra Pound writes in this connection that “no good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old, for to write in such a manner shows conclusively that the writer thinks from books, conventions and cliché, and not from life” (Pound 53). The very idea of poet's writing according to tradition kills the very soul of poetry. Poetry in the words of Matthew Arnold is “a criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty” (261). If it is to be taken as a definition that is to work as a touchstone for Eliot's idea of tradition, it can be said that poetry written under the guidelines laid down by Eliot would not be a criticism of life, but a criticism of poetry itself, because, as has already been stated that if the past influences the present, the present also influences the past, so it is not only the tradition that is the directing force, but the recent and new poetry also makes an impression upon the poetry of the past and helps in a better understanding of it. The recent or new poetry can impart its effect upon the poetry of the past only when it is written independently and does not have any echo of tradition in it. When it has its own identity independent of tradition, it can be put across the past poetry and in the dissimilarity between these two kinds of poetry lies the element which can alter the past as much as it can alter the present. So, following tradition can in no way contribute to the composition of any new poetry. And it can also be said that poetry, according to Eliot's definition, is written merely in order to maintain the great tradition and it serves no other purpose; and even his views are against the aesthetic value of poetry. His ideas make poetry dull, monotonous, and uninteresting.

Furthermore, Eliot is one of the pioneers of New Criticism and his critical writings have contributed a great deal to establish the prestige of new criticism, but he seems to be advocating comparative and historical approach to criticism consciously or unconsciously rather than to be making attempts to establish the neo-critical approach. He says that the ‘historical sense’ must be acquired by every poet, and this forces every critic to keep historical sense as one of the qualities of his critical habits, so that he may analyze a piece of poetry in a better way. To a new critic, a poem is all he is concerned with; he judges

poetry on the basis of its intrinsic qualities and any other considerations are not taken into account, but if Eliot's theory of tradition is kept in mind, every critic will have to, first of all, attain the historical sense and also the knowledge of the past as well as of the contemporary literature, and then and only then, he would be : able to judge a work of art correctly. This very approach cannot be imagined to be belonging to new criticism; and this very notion separates Eliot from the group of new critics, for whom only intrinsic qualities of a poem matter and all other considerations are useless. Eliot, by talking of 'historical sense' and 'tradition' makes himself look different among the new critics. He, then, no longer remains a new critic, but becomes Matthew Arnold of the twentieth century criticism.

Drabble puts it that "Eliot was equally influential as critic and poet and in his combination of literary and social criticism may be called the M. Arnold of the 20th century" (312). His views are more close to Matthew Arnold's than that of Aristotle. In his Touchstone method, Matthew Arnold has advocated the lines of poetry under consideration for criticism to be compared with the lines of some great classics. In his own words: "It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples; to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality, and to say: The characters of a high qualities of poetry are what is expressed there: they are far better recognized by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being perused in the prose of the critic" (269). Eliot also, by and large, expresses the same views when he says that "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone, his significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone. You must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (294). The ideas expressed in both these statements seem to be complementary to each other, for in both the cases, some poet from the past must be conjured up and taken as a touchstone to form the real estimate of a poet's greatness. In Arnold's case, superiority or inferiority of the poetry under consideration could be established by such a comparison and contrast, while in Eliot's views, by such a comparison and contrast, the critic should judge whether or not a particular poet or a particular piece of poetry or a work of art keeps within the tradition. In other words, both air the same views, though in a slightly different manner and words. In both these cases, attempts are made to form the real estimate of the greatness of a poet or his poetry.

Eliot, thus, in the light of the above paragraphs, seems to be a critic who has expressed the views and ideas of the earlier critics in his own words. He, directly or indirectly, seems to have been influenced both by Aristotle and Matthew Arnold in defining his idea of tradition, but while doing so, he has made his definition look different. From Aristotle's theory of imitation, he gets the concept of tradition; and from Matthew Arnold, he takes the idea of comparison and contrast of the work under criticism to some great writer or poet of the past.

It may also be said that he appears to have close affinity with the earlier schools of criticism and not with the new criticism, because his approach is, by and large, romantic and he seems to advocating the use of historical and comparative criticism. He also seems to be

a classical critic from outside when he makes an attempt to formulate rules and regulations for poet and critic and a romantic critic within the soul when he pleads for maintaining tradition in poetry.

Eliot wants a work of art or a poet to be judged by the standards of the past, because, by this method of comparison and contrast and by finding out whether or not some poet or artist remained within the tradition, he wants to form an idea of an artist's or a poet's individual talent. He says that the poet "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"(295). What Eliot tries to do with such comparison is to find out as to whether a particular work of art or a poet has kept within the tradition or not, and also by such comparison and contrast the critic can form an idea of what is really new and individual. This 'new' and 'individual' is the 'individual talent' of the poet or artist. 'Individual talent', thus, is the natural outcome of the theory of tradition.

An artist or a poet has to attain "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 contemporaneity" (Eliot 294).

By attaining historical sense, a writer becomes traditional. When a comparison and contrast between the past and the present poet is made, the new and original or the individual comes out. And by this comparison alone, one can separate tradition from the individual talent. It can better be understood in the words of Eliot himself who writes: "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 it's 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" (295).

The criticism that may be brought against Eliot's views on 'tradition' and 'individual talent' is that he, in the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", has confined himself wholly to the judging of a particular work of art on the basis of its text in order to find out as to whether or not it keeps within the tradition, and by such a comparison and contrast with the past writers or poets, he tries to assert what is new and individual in an artist, poet or a writer. But, by finding only what is new and original, a poet's greatness cannot be judged. Art has to be judged by means of many other parameters also, so other criteria must also be applied to find out the real greatness of a certain piece of art or poetry. Eliot considers newness, originality or individuality, which he has termed as the 'individual talent', as the sole basis for judging the greatness of a poet, but it seems to be an incomplete

way of forming the real estimate of a work of art. Eliot's critical canon is not sufficient enough to critically evaluate a piece of literature. Other parameters should also be considered and applied to form an idea of the actual poetry, 'good' or 'bad'. In his own words: "To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduct to juster estimation of actual poetry, good or bad." (301).

It is reiterated that the idea of 'individual talent' seems to emerge from the theory of Imitation by Aristotle. In Aristotle's theory of Imitation, the artist in the process of imitation, knowingly or unknowingly, adds something to it which forms the basis for the production of art. And this 'new' added in the act of imitation is 'art'. In Eliot's theory, while setting a recent poet in comparison and contrast with some writer or poet of the past in order to ascertain whether or not the recent poet keeps within the tradition, there is found to be a great deal different which is new and individual. Eliot defines it as 'individual talent'. So, the whole idea of 'individual talent' seems to have emerged from Aristotle's theory of imitation.

To sum up, it may be said that the essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" has done a great deal good to new criticism as well as to the new critics, as it has helped them replace the earlier theories of poetry by Eliot's impersonal theory of poetry and also has made them learn that "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (Eliot 297). This very statement has become one of the most important canons for the new criticism by which they judge a work of art and poetry. His conception of poetry "as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written" (297) sums up the idea of tradition, which "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour" (Eliot 294). So, the essay with its concepts and ideas has helped the new critics get equipped better for forming the real estimate of a work of art and poetry.

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