

## T. S. ELIOT "TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT" (1917)

Critical Theory Since Plato. Ed. Hazard Adams. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971. 761-764.

Eliot's goal in this essay is to underscore the "importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors" (762) (this is what has traditionally been called 'literary history' and, more recently, 'intertextuality'), and to stress, using an organic metaphor, that poetry is a "*living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written*" (my emphasis; 762). Eliot argues that, as critics, we tend to "insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else" (761). In other words, we "pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man" (761) by dwelling upon the poet's "difference from his predecessors" (761). Eliot's view is, however, that "not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously" (761).

The greatest writers, Eliot asserts, write with a "historical sense" (761) in their bones, to wit, the "perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (761). This 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" (761). As a result, no poet or artist "has his complete meaning alone" (761). His "significance . . . is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (761). It is for this reason that Eliot advises critics that "you must set him, for comparison and contrast, among the dead" (761). Eliot's sexism ought to be obvious from his choice of pronouns.

Eliot's point is that the literary works of an artist should not be considered in isolation but in relation to the tradition which precedes him and which his own work, providing it meets certain self-evident criteria of greatness, in turn perpetuates and simultaneously alters. He argues that 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. The order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted. (761-2).

However, it is simultaneously true that conformity to certain literary norms or "fitting in is a test of its value" (762) for new work. In short, the past is "altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (762).

Eliot argues that the poet must be 'conscious,' therefore, of the "main current" (762) of which he is part at the same time that he must be aware that the literary tradition to which he contributes is not static but ever changing due to efforts such as his own. However, he also suggests that the poet must be aware of the past and his relationship thereto in way that is in fact, paradoxically, unconscious precisely because too "much learning deadens or perverts poetic sensibility" (762). Eliot puts it this way: 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" (762).

The poet must, in short surrender himself to something infinitely more valuable than himself (the tradition), the "progress of the artist" (762) being dependent upon a "continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (762) in the face of Tradition. Eliot attempts to define this "process of depersonalisation and its relation to the sense of tradition" (762) in Part II of the essay by means of a scientific metaphor for the process of poetic creation. Here, he advances an "impersonal theory of poetry" (762) that is in direct contradiction of the expressive theories of Longinus and his heirs in the nineteenth century such as the Romantics. He proposes a novel view of the "relation of the poem to its author" (762) that reflects, in the chemical metaphor which he uses to describe the creative process,

the pervasive admiration for the sciences of the era (the so-called 'modern' period [1900-1945]) in which he lived. Eliot is not a believer (at least at this stage of his life) in what philosophers often call an 'essential self' (a pre-given identity however that may be construed). The point of view, he writes, which he is "struggling to attack" (763) is one "related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul" (763). It is from this point of view that he suggests that 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" (763). He argues that poems do not express the personal feelings and, by extension, the personality of the poet in the way that the Romantics would have it. "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" (764). In fact, the "more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (763).

Using an analogy drawn from the chemical sciences, Eliot suggests that the "poet's mind is . . . a receptacle for storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together" (763). The poet's mind is akin to a "catalyst" (763): Eliot compares the poet's mind to a "filament of platinum" (763) under the influence of which the "elements" (763) of the "emotions and feelings" (763) (these two are compared to the gases oxygen and sulfur dioxide) combine to produce an emotional response in the reader (this is by analogy, the sulfurous acid produced by the chemical action). All this occurs at an unconscious level: there is no question of, in Wordsworth's famous formula, 'emotion recollected in tranquillity.' All Longinian criteria of "sublimity" (9), thus, fall short of their mark: 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 (9). For Eliot, in short, the "emotion of art is impersonal" (764) and the best poetry expresses "emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet" (764). Consequently, according to Eliot, to "divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim" (764) because what he characterises as "[h]onest criticism and sensitive appreciation" (762) are "directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (762).