

T S Eliot and the Concept of Literary Tradition and the Importance of Allusions

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Abstract: *T S Eliot is of the opinion tradition is the historical sense and not the handing down, or following the ways of the ancient blindly. It cannot be inherited. It can only be achieved with great conscious efforts. An artist's personal talent must follow a strong background learning of his culture and literature. When a poet presents a new creation that is characteristically allusive to his past works, the whole literature of his country or nation is positively affected by it. This kind of creative conformity of an individual's talent to his past literary works is what is meant by Eliot's concept of literary tradition. Eliot wanted to see the things i.e. literature in its entirety, but at the same time he never rejected the particular limitations of his own footing and grounding in time and place, that he calls 'individual talent', and in his particularly chosen tradition that composed his self-understanding. This paper discusses at length the concept of literary tradition along with the importance of allusions which are a great means to achieve the maintenance of tradition in literary works. The qualitative analysis of the data has been carried out deductively.*

Keywords: Literary tradition, images, allusion, impersonal, literary works.

1. Introduction

The concept of literary tradition is one of the most fundamental and indigenous critical canons of T S Eliot, which he has elaborated at length in his famous, essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Eliot has redefined the meaning and function of this common word i.e. 'tradition' in a very untraditional manner. He begins the essay with the description of the prevailing meaning of the word "tradition" and then explains the desired meaning, function and importance of the same. Being traditional, to Eliot, is an amalgamation of learning and knowledge from the past writers and works and the incorporation of one's contemporary literary trends along with personal talents.

In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence. 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."

2. Tradition

Such a concept of tradition is significant for the critic as well as for the creative writer. Tradition does not mean a sense of inheritance from some past authors or merely a sense of belongingness to the past. Tradition is a dynamic force. It does not mean standing still. Tradition is the historical sense and not the handing down, or following the ways of the ancient blindly. It cannot be inherited. It can only be achieved with great conscious efforts. Eliot writes:

It (tradition) involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense 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.

It involves a historical sense, which enables a poet to perceive not only the pastness of the past but also its presentness. "Eliot was not wrong to say that literature was a timeless order that was modified by every subsequent work of literature" (Craven, 2001). Eliot (21), in his essay, *The Social Function of Poetry*, explains the benefits of having an updated literary tradition, "One point is of course, that if we have no living literature we shall become more and more alienated from the literature of the past; unless we keep up continuity, our literature of the past will become more and more remote from us until it is as strange to us as the literature of a foreign people."

3. Historical Sense

This historical sense implies the presence of a 'collective mind', which is the consciousness of the whole of Europe. And this collective mind "is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route." This is a fact a poet must be aware of. He must also learn that this mind is much more important than his own private mind. A creative artist, though he lives in a particular

milieu, does work merely with his own generation in view. He does not take his own age, or the literature of that period only as a separate identity, but acts with the conviction that in general the whole literature of Europe from the classical age of the Greeks onwards and in particular the literature of his own country, is to be taken as a harmonious whole.

Eliot's own creative efforts are not apart from his timeless European literary tradition but a part of it. According to Peter Ackroyd (qtd by Lombardo), "Eliot had a sense of tradition and an instinct for order within himself." A writer thus learns to value tradition by acquiring the historical sense, which enables him to feel vividly the times he belongs to, and, at the same time, not to lose sight of that timelessness that belongs to the creative art as a whole. It is the sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of both together. This unity of time is expressed by Eliot in *Burnt Norton* also.

Eliot says that no poet or artist of any kind has his full meaning and significance alone. His importance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his kinship with the poets and artists of the past generations. One cannot value a poet alone. Every poet or artist is to be judged and critically evaluated against the poets and artist of the same form of the past. To Eliot this is a standard of aesthetics, which can be applied on any artist or his work for critical comparison, and it should not be taken as merely an idea of historical criticism. An artist's personal talent must follow a strong background learning of his culture and literature. When a poet presents a new creation that is characteristically allusive to his past works, the whole literature of his country or nation is positively affected by it. This kind of creative conformity of an individual's talent to his past literary works is what is meant by Eliot's concept of literary tradition.

The poet who understands the presentness of the past also understands his responsibilities and difficulties as an artist. Such an artist will fully realize that he most inevitably be judged by the standards of the past. In saying that an artist is finally to be judged by the standards of the past, Eliot does not imply that he is pronounced better or worse than the poets or that the standards prescribed by the previous critics are to be applied in judging their works. This really implies that a contemporary work is to be compared with the great works of the past, and each is measured by the other. To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all. There would be nothing new in it, and it would not be a work of art at all, if a new work of art emerges as successful when compared with and measured by the old masterpieces.

The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe — the mind of his own country — a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind — is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsman. This development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not from the point of view of the psychologist or not to the

extent, which we imagine; perhaps only in the end based upon a complication in economics and machinery.

Kayalis, in his paper, *Mythical Methods of Modernist Criticism: Notes on T S Eliot's Historical Sense*, presented in "Tradition and Modern Workshop", on 28-30 May 2003, spoke on Eliot's historical sense, particularly focusing on "T. S. Eliot's trans historical views, particularly as exemplified in the concepts of 'historical sense' and 'mythical method', and investigated the crucial role these notions, disengaged from their original framework and used rather as universal axioms, played in the shaping of Greek literary culture during the second half of the twentieth century." Besides explicating Eliot's views on the idea of tradition, Kayalis also speaks, in his paper, of how the later critics understood and used the phrase of historical sense to criticize the contemporary works. He gives example of George Seferis who criticized the works Makriyannis and Cavafy especially in the light of this concept of tradition in 1940s.

Thus tradition requires not only the knowledge of the past but also a will to assimilate the best of the past and a desire to relate to the presentness. It requires a ridiculous amount of erudition and effort. He says that there is the distinction between knowledge and pedantry. Some can absorb knowledge; the tardier must sweat for it. Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British museum. What is to be insisted upon is that poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness through out his career. Eliot's efforts to be fully aware of ideas and techniques of his predecessors also helped him develop his own concepts style. Johansen (2000), reviewing Donoghue's *Words Alone*, comments, "Eliot read widely in poetry of other languages: Dante and Virgil to name a couple. He did this, as Donoghue says, in order to access a range of feelings beyond his own."

Critics are of the opinion that Eliot to a considerable extent maintained his efforts to uphold the tradition of his different predecessors. "Eliot mastered the ironic use of meaningful ancient (and Shakespearian) epithets to indict meaningless modern squalor" (Bottum, 26)

Clinton A. Brand (2003) giving his review on Kirk's book *The Conservative Mind* opines on Kirk's observation: "Kirk saw in Eliot a vital link to the past and a promising link to the future." Eliot's attachment with the works and techniques of Dante has been observed so much that Brand (2003) feels free to say: "It is a commonplace that the sequence of Eliot's major poems and the pattern of his life enact a kind of Dantean pilgrimage from the inferno of the modern soul through the purgatorial fires of self-abnegation to a foretaste of paradisaic communion." Here the whole of Eliot's life personal as well as professional has been related with the Dantean work on a corresponding ground. Brand is of the opinion that through this type of pilgrimage Eliot has been trying to find out all the common resources of his European literary tradition and thereby he has stepped forward to the realm of modernity. While Ozick has bitterly criticized Eliot's claims of maintaining any traditional footprints in his works, according to her it was merely personal adverse experience, which led Eliot to compose his poems as they are found at present. However, Brand, refuting Ozick's

disapproval, writes: "that he transmuted his personal suffering into something greater, that he approached through art the reality of a grace beyond the reach of art, that he did so through the enlarging perspective of tradition." Bottum (27) also finds the same fact as that of Brand regarding Eliot's learning from the past. He writes, "In the tortured and sinister politics of post-Elizabethan England, in the tortured and sinister syntax of post-Elizabethan playwrights, Eliot seeks an "objective correlative" for tortured and sinister Europe after World War I." This is a fact the importance of which Eliot himself has mentioned at different places in his poetry and prose:

The past experience revived in the meaning is not the experience of one life only But of many generations (The Dry Salvages, II. 97-99), Cadman (05) concludes that all these critics emphasize to carry on the intellectual, spiritual, historical and ritual norms with all our sincerity and conscious efforts by enriching them with our own positive contribution.

4. The Role and Importance of Allusions Used in Eliot's Poetry

"Allusions may be made to art, music, literature or history. They may suggest an event, a painting, a piece of music, a setting, a famous historical figure, or a myth-- in essence, any well-known or presumably recognizable source" (Scaramella,2003). To understand the preservation and continuation of Literary Tradition, particularly as suggested by T S Eliot, one has to be aware of the use and importance of literary allusions in an author's work. Literary allusions are a great means to uphold something in a current work what has been said years or centuries before it. The term 'allusion' and 'reference' are used interchangeably, which mean the use of a word, phrase, or section in one author's work that is derived from the words of another author, whether directly, or indirectly with some more refinement or delicacy. The writer of *All American: Glossary of Literary Terms* (2006) defines allusion as, "a reference in a literary work to a person, place, or thing in history or another work of literature. Allusions are often indirect or brief references to well-known characters or events." Zuk (2006), talking about allusive characteristics of the novel "Invisible Man", also states the same point of view, "Invisible Man", written with ingenuity by Ralph Waldo Ellison, is a masterpiece by itself, but it also intertwines into every page one or more allusions to previously written masterpieces."

Allusions are often used to summarize broad, complex ideas or emotions in one quick, powerful image. Scaramella (2003) speaks of the particular literary use of allusions. He says, "In the study of literature, an understanding of how language creates meaning is essential. One way that writers heighten or create meaning is through the use of literary allusions." It is not necessary that all the literary works have to use allusions but in case of poetry, the use of meaningful allusions used appropriately does heighten the overall impact of the work. It helps a poet to convey the complex, satirical or allegorical subject matter of his poems, with the economy of words, by using suitable allusions. By the use of allusion a poet can say much more than is expressed in the allusive words themselves, s/he can bring to mind other works in part or entirety. This often enables him or her to tell an epic or

continue an archetypal image or metaphor, while adding his or her own interpretation and contribution to an already powerful literary tradition. Within this tradition, the long standing tradition of Western Literature, most of the themes that have long puzzled mankind have already been explored extensively.

5. Conclusion

Hitherto allusion has been called a literary device or a technique to fulfill its assigned function, but Magedanz (160), looking at the functional significance of allusions, has gone a step ahead. "Allusion is usually considered a literary technique, but relatively little attention has been paid to the notion of allusion as a literary form." He presents his view with especial reference to Eliot's "The Waste Land". He defines allusion as language shared between two works and traces out its history as back as 1960s which marks the rise of Structuralism. He is of the view that allusions bring out a connection between different works or languages, thus, making "a fusing between old and new texts." He further says that a continuous practice of such fusion creates a longer lasting literary tradition that is further carried on in the same style by the participation of writers belonging to the same soil or elsewhere. Eliot has profusely used allusions to practically uphold his concept of tradition in literary works. His concept of tradition has helped sustain almost all the past works right from Greek period to the modern times. It has encompassed the whole of European literature for the readers of today to be aware of at least the best of their past works and traditions. In this regard an adequate reference to the past works, ideas, techniques, characters etc is considered a great help to achieve the desired effect.

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