



The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism

T. S. Eliot

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An excerpt from a review in "Poetry," Vol. 17, 1921:

"In view of the hostility to criticism which is characteristic of some American writers, is it not paradoxical that an American poet should publish in London the most stimulating and thoughtful book of criticism of the year?

"Probably one of the most vicious and stupid ideas of pseudo-criticism, one of the most destructive of healthy creative impulses, is the error that art or literature is a matter of mere fashion. The assumption is that a generation is interested—ought to be interested—in the literature of that generation; that all other literature is "dead" and hampering. On the other hand is the pedagogical point of view which accepts the past and is utterly blind to the present. Mr. Eliot's essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, defines carefully his own correct position, unaffected by either the journalistic or the pedagogical error. Let us hear him speak:

" 'If the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged.... Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It 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. The historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal, and of the timeless and 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.'

"How true that is, how just! Those few sentences are at once a statement of an artistic truth and the dispeller of a multitude of errors and heresies. I am tempted to say that no critic since Matthew Arnold has written in English with quite this serene profundity, this power of rightly directing a considerable culture to the literary problems of the present. It is perhaps an unique experience in the life of this generation, to find that we possess a critic of Mr. Eliot's intelligence; a critic with principles, not impressions; a critic whose perceptions have been stimulated by the best literature of the past, whose appreciation of the present is equally keen and just; a critic without fads, personal vanity, or affectation. A critic who has read the books he criticises."

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