Literature, a Filament of Platinum—Several Books about ‘Tradition’

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Panel: Most Important Book . . . (II)
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—Several Books about ‘Tradition’

Whenever ‘tradition’ is discussed, T.S. Eliot’s essay Tradition and the Individual Talent has been, whether positively or negatively, the kindling. The old proposition that tradition is not inherited but acquired also originated in the same source. Eliot uses an analogy comparing the mind of a poet to the shred of ‘platinum’ in his theory of tradition. When a fine filament of platinum is placed in a chamber that contains oxygen and sulfur dioxide, sulfurous acid forms, and this chemical reaction is only possible in the presence of a catalyst called platinum. What is interesting here is that the sulfurous acid made by this process contains no trace of platinum and the platinum itself also is not changed in any way.

This analogy of ‘platinum’ focuses on what kind of ‘medium’ a poet can become in creating poems as new, complex objects by combining diverse experiences and emotions, rather than focusing on what ‘personality’ a poet has. As Eliot writes in Tradition and the Individual Talent, “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”

Here, it would not be wrong for us to say that ‘extinction of personality’ refers to continually perceiving where one stands within the flow of tradition, or having a ‘historical sense.’ The tradition that Eliot speaks of appears, at first glance, to be a time-transcending impersonal order, but he, too, assumes an ideological position that is formed through a specific historical process. In other words, Eliot asserts the theory of impersonality in order to criticize the liberal ideology of the middle class and recover the organic order based on aristocratism.

In Literary Theory, Terry Eagleton criticizes the ideological limitation of Eliot:

“This arbitrary construct, however, is then paradoxically imbued with the force of an absolute authority. The major works of literature form between them an ideal order, occasionally redefined by the entry of a new masterpiece. The existing classics within the cramped space of the Tradition politely reshuffle their positions to make room for a newcomer, and look different in the light of it; but since this newcomer must somehow have been in principle included in the Tradition all along to have gained admission at all, its entry serves to confirm that Tradition’s central values.”

Eagleton also criticizes Eliot’s method of safeguarding authority, claiming the method results in ‘conservatism’ in politics. What can be reaffirmed through this is the fact that no opinion on ‘tradition’ can ever have an authority that transcends history, but rather, each opinion is made and formed by a subject with particular ideological tendencies.

In Korea, the ‘debate on tradition’ raged throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and we can see that the concept of Eliot’s ‘tradition’ had an undeniable influence on the debate. Of course, it exerted positive influence in that both the position that advocated succession of tradition and the position that advocated cutting off tradition perceived tradition not as a simple accumulation of the past inheritance but a ‘present past’ which is formed through a constant interaction between the past inheritance and the present. However, because Eliot’s theory of tradition was not understood as a part of the whole ideological topography of British and American criticism, but rather as a theory received only in the abstracted dynamics of the words ‘living tradition,’ the debate on tradition in the 50s and 60s never could truly go beyond the abstract sphere.
Perhaps a debate on the issue of ‘tradition’ already contains, within the concept itself, the danger of ‘abstraction.’ Edward Shils defines tradition in his book *Tradition* as follows: “Tradition—that which is handed down—includes material objects, beliefs about all sorts of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions.”

Shils’ definition not only establishes tradition as a value transcending classification that merges all things, but also describes it as something that has strong actual substance, regardless of whether that substance is visible or not.

Eric Hobsbawm, however, claims that ‘tradition’ was artificially invented for a certain purpose but has been imbued with invariable authority, and should be distinguished from ‘custom’ or ‘convention,’ which are variable and do not possess much symbolic function. He also argues, in regard to tradition which has become formalized and ritualistic through repetition of its connection with the past, that the ‘origin’ or ‘process’ of its formation must be critically reconsidered. In addition, he points out in *The Invention of Tradition* like this:

“ ‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.”

And he explains that even ideas such as national flag and national anthem are merely new symbols and images that were ‘invented’ in modern times in order to personify the nation. Therefore, ‘tradition’ is a kind of ‘historical invention,’ a product of modernity, created as an image that integrates one’s own period into that of the past.

Hobsbawm’s approach to tradition not only is helpful in breaking down the absolute authority that ‘tradition’ has enjoyed until now, but also enables us to perceive the issue more objectively and comparatively in the historical context that gave birth to specific traditions. Furthermore, by allowing us to distinguish artificially ‘invented traditions’ created by specific groups or authorities with ideological purposes or viewpoints, the approach makes it possible for us to criticize them.

This critical work regarding ‘tradition’ is not restricted only to issues of historical or social studies. In literature as well, without fundamental criticism of previous ‘literary tradition,’ it is difficult to expect the birth of any new works. Moreover, we must continually examine the justification and literary usefulness of not only traditions that have already become entrenched, but also the numerous ideologies and literary viewpoints that want to become the tradition of their own times. The sense of balance that stays alert to the historical realities of one’s own times but does not dogmatize a particular position, along with the ability to innovate – these are the powers that will enable literature to become that ‘filament of platinum.’