

CHAPTER IV

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The progress of T.S.Eliot as a critic has been noteworthy with his development as a poet. The critical and creative aspects of Eliot are two facts of his integrated personality and the development of this personality may justly be described in Eliot's words as 'the progress of the intellectual soul'. As a critic he was engaged in defending the kind of poetry he was writing or to formulate the kind he wanted to write. Eliot calls his criticism as a workshop-criticism' - 'a by-product of my private poetry-workshop' or 'a prolongation of the thinking' that went into the formation of his verse. His essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent' is not only one of the earlier essays of Eliot but also 'the key to all his later work'. In this regard, F.O. Matthiessen remarks -

'Tradition and Individual Talent' is now as much of a classic as Mathew Arnold's 'The Study of Poetry and putting those essays side by side one can observe that Eliot is equally packed with trenchant remarks

on the relation of present to past, as well as on the nature of poetry itself.¹

This essay laid stress on the special role of the poet, his emotional and mental superiority over other men and at the same time, his effacement before an art which transcends the individual's self-consciousness.

In *After Strange Gods* (1934) Eliot described tradition as rather a way of feeling and acting which characterises a group throughout generations. It involves all those habitual actions, habits and customs from the most significant religious rites to our conventional way of greeting a stranger which represent the blood kinship of 'the same people living in the same place'. Only tradition can furnish a body of vocabulary and a set of images which a traditionless writer searches for a frame of reference in the area of literary activity. Tradition, therefore, is dependent on a special kind of the historical sense ... a perception not only of the pastness of past but of its presence. The past and present are not two disparate segments of time, but two facets of the same organism, ceaselessly conditioning and reshaping each other.

There is a close similarity between Bergson's duration and Eliot's views on tradition. Both of them think that the present can be comprehended in the light of the past. Since, the past cannot be dispensed with and the present is the development of the past, the present in its turn also throws light on the past events.

Tradition, as defined by Eliot, has a close parallel to the development of consciousness in time which Bergson expresses through its analogy with music. Eliot's famous view of impersonality has its roots in the philosophy of art of his own teacher, George Santayana. Santayana is of the view that the pleasure of art is not something personal. It is an 'objectified pleasure' or the pleasure as a constituent of the object.

The role of the critic is to attribute to the 'common pursuit of true judgement' a task undertaken with the possibility of arriving at something outside of ourselves which may provisionally be called the truth. In this regard, Frank Kermode remarks, In Introduction to Selected Prose of T.S.Eliot -

'Eliot's mind was both exploratory and

retentive : it turned to new themes but was always loyal to its past.'²

A doctrine of impersonality is associated with the doctrine of tradition; and together they imply a third imperfectly expressed by the formula 'objective correlative'. In 'The Frontiers of Criticism', he made understanding and sympathy two limits of critical activity. Eliot is the historical critic in the sense that he views art in its total perspective. According to T.S.Eliot as quoted by Dr.Bijay Kumar Das -

'The channel of influence between the tradition of the past and individual poet of the present is not a one-way traffic. If tradition influences the individual poet, he, in turn influences the tradition and the past acquires an every new meaning by virtue of the contribution which the achievements of the poets of the present make to it.'³

Eliot remarks that the denial of higher education to the people at large is not good for 'culture'. Eliot rejects the idea of a democratic system of education which operates in disregard of distinctions of birth and wealth as leading to 'half-education a specifically modern disease. In this

regard, S.S.Hoskot remarks -

'Eliot's idea of education, so far as the bulk of the people are concerned, is narrowly functional.'⁴

In the essay 'The Classics and the Man of Letters' we observe that secondary writers provide collectively and individually in varying degrees, an important part of environment of the great writer. In this regard, Shiv K. Kumar remarks -

'The continuity of literature is essential to its greatness it is very largely the function of secondary writers to preserve this continuity and to provide a body of writings which is not necessarily read by posterity but which plays a great part in forming a link between those writers who continue to be read'.⁵

Eliot denies that Goethe is a universal classic, finds him a little provincial. It is generally supposed that the qualities of a classic - maturity of mind, maturity of manners, maturity of language and perfection of a common style- are most fully realised in the poetry of Pope. But in reality there is no classic age and no classic poet in English. Virgil had

maturity of mind and this maturity of mind is shown in his awareness of history of Greece whose civilisation and culture are closely related to Roman culture and civilisation. In this regard, Shiv K. Kumar remarks -

'Eliot recognises a great literature as more than the sum of a number of great writers. If the traditional order is of transcendent importance, there even secondary writers perform a very useful function as indispensable links between the past and present.'⁶

It is Eliot's rooted assumption that criticism is an aid to his own career as a poet rather than any intuition of a dissociation of sensibility that governs his choices. But in spite of all this, Eliot's critical theory is not without its ambiguities and contradictions. His view 'continual extinction of personality' does not admit of the fact that no creative process or critical interpretation can ever achieve such total self-transcendence. Absolute objectivity is only a tenuous hypothetical concept, not an accomplished reality. It is seen that in his later writings Eliot has come to perceive the critical need for a compromise between objectivity and

impressionism. Nevertheless Eliot's criticism consequently has much of the merits and limitations of criticism and he belongs to the galaxy of poets who are also well-known as critics.

In this regard, Scott-James remarks -

'Mr Eliot is misleading when he says a poet has not a personality to express. Impressions and experiences which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality. True, the impressions and experiences which he exhibits may not be those which he has felt as his own; but the way in which he sees them, however objectively, is and must be all his own, and is wholly determined by his personality. For that reason the critic cannot be indifferent to this all determining force.'⁷

In criticism and in poetry, Eliot is a British Patriot, though he was born in America. In this way, Eliot plays a role as a poet and critic.

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