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English (Hons.)
D-III // Paper V // Criticism

(1)

Topic :- The "Function of Criticism"

The essay "Function of criticism" was written, in fact, as a reply to Middleton Murry who had challenged the opinion of T.S. Eliot as enunciated in his earlier essay "Tradition and Individual Talent". ~~The~~ Middleton Murry had tried to rebutt the views of Eliot in his essay titled "Romanticism and the Tradition".

The essay can be divided in four parts. The first part retraces the opinions as expressed in the essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" and the second part does so about Middleton Murry's essay ~~and~~ and goes on to dismiss those views ^{in the third} briefly. It is in the fourth part of the essay, the concluding part, that Eliot examines the different aspects of the nature and function of criticism.

Here it will not be out of context to refer to Eliot's views about Matthew Arnold which he expressed in his later essay "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism" in which he declares: "from time to time, every hundred years or so, it is desirable that some critic shall appear to review the past of our literature and set the poets and the poems in a new order. The task is not one of revolution but of readjustment. What we observe is partly the same scene, but in a different and more

(2) distant perspective." He further adds: "It is that no generation is ~~is~~ interested in art in quite the same way as any other. Each generation, like each individual, brings to the contemplation of ~~Art~~ art its own categories of appreciation, makes its own demands upon art, and has its own uses of art. Pure artistic appreciation is, to my thinking, an ideal, when not merely a figment."

As far as the the present essay "The Function of Criticism" is concerned, Eliot reiterates the views he had expressed in his earlier essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" — relevant as they are to the present one. In the process he points to the intimate relation between the present and the past in the literary world. The entire literature of Europe, from Homer to the present day, is described as forming a single literary tradition. It is in relation to this tradition, according to Eliot, that individual writers and individual works of art have their significance. This is because the past is not dead but lives in the present as "the past is altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past." It is further stated that when a new work of art appears, the existing "ideal order" is disturbed "if ever so slightly", resulting in a readjustment of values which, again, paves the way for "conformity between the old and the new". Literary tradition, thus, is

constantly changing and growing different from age to age.

As stated earlier, ⁱⁿ the second part of the present essay, Eliot ~~also~~ takes on Middleton Murry's views on classicism and Romanticism for discussion terming his view, that ~~one~~ one cannot be a classic and a romantic at one and the same time, as valid. But, nevertheless, he is quick to differ when Murry makes the issue national and racial one in stating that the genius of the French is classic and that of the English is romantic. Murry further relates catholicism in religion with classicism in literature, for both believe in tradition, in discipline in obedience to an objective authority outside the individual, on the otherhand he (Murry) finds a relation between romanticism and Protestantism with social liberalism — as all of them have full faith in the "inner voice" of individualism. They obey no outside authority; he says, and care for no rule and tradition.

Eliot is quick to dismiss this view of Murry and disagrees with him when he says "the difference between the complete and the fragmentary, the adult and the immature, the orderly and the chaotic" is the same as the "difference between the classicism and the romanticism". He holds the notion of "inner voice" as being nothing but one's individual preference, which, as

a manifestation of "indiscipline", leads to vanity, fear and lust. Murry's view of nations being "naturally" romantic or classical on account of national trait is also not agreed to by Eliot.

Coming to the main theme of the "function" of criticism Eliot says "The critic ... if he is to justify his existence, should endeavour to discipline his personal prejudice and crank - to which we are all subject - and compose his differences with as many of his fellows as possible, in the common pursuit of judgement." He declares "criticism must always profess an end in view, which, roughly speaking, appears to be the elucidation of work of art and the correction of taste."

The function of a critic, according to him, is not to give his own impressions about a work but to supply the reader with the simple fact about a work and leave the rest to the reader himself.

The noted Indian author and critic Shiv. K. Kumar puts in a nutshell the ideas contained in this essay in the following words: "In 'The Function of Criticism' Eliot defines the primary objective of critical endeavour as the 'commentation and exposition of works of art by means of written words'. Even though this may smack of a dictionary or textbook definition, it focusses nonetheless on the salient components of criticism which aims at the 'elucidation of work of art and the correction of taste'."

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