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Lecture No. (26)

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Eng (Hons.)

DTM / Paper V / Criticism.

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Topic: Tradition and Individual Talent

The Modern Age has so much been dominated by T.S. Eliot that it is often referred to by the critics as the Age of Eliot. Talking about the deep impact of Eliot on the Age Shiv. K. Kumar writes in his book "Three Essays" about his (Eliot's) all round genius: "Eliot's versatility as a writer has sometimes provoked the question — wherein lies his most outstanding contribution? To some commentators, while his poetry is mostly a pastiche of quotations and allusions, and his plays often lapse into abstract philosophical arguments about life, it is only in his critical writings that he comes through with a refreshing clarity of concept and exposition..... He brings to bear on his subject an originality of insight and a wealth of documentary detail which make his central argument almost irrefutable."

The present essay of T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" tries to explain and underscore the importance of tradition and poetic process. In the initial part of the essay a reference to the common tendency of "praising those of a poet's work in which he least resembles any one else" is made. Eliot condemns this tendency in a very emphatic manner as he says: "not only the best, but the most individual parts

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of his (a poet's) work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. Eliot goes on, in this essay, to present to the readers the following three main elements of tradition:-

(a) The Historical Sense

Eliot does not confirm to the idea of "following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes!" He does not consider tradition to be static or passive. It is, according to him, ~~is~~ rather dynamic; it cannot be inherited; it can be acquired only by great labour. According to Eliot it is "historical sense" that assumes the most important place as the inseparable element of tradition. Eliot elucidates this element in the following manner: "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 his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." "This historical sense," he goes on to add, "which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of 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 own contemporaneity."

(b) Conformity between the Old and the New :-

The significance of any creative artist can only be gauged if he is weighed in relation to the other ~~other~~ artists and not when considered alone. This phenomena of being judged vis-a-vis other artists, gets emphasised by Eliot when he says: "when a really new work of art is created, the whole existing order is altered (if only slightly). In this way the past is altered by the present and the present is directed by the past". He further says, "about the new artist as he arrives on the scene, it is his significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. you cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism."

D.S. Eliot is very forthright in his opinion about the churning that takes place in the existing order on introduction of a new work of art. He asserts, "the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole

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existing order must be, if even so slightly, altered;
and ^{so} the relations, proportions, values of each work
of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this
is conformity between the old and the new."

③ Adherence to the main current:-

Tradition, according to Eliot is not a monolithic ideas but like a river with a main current but several tributaries replenishing it continuously. It is not like a lump. ~~But~~
As far as a poet's relation to the past is concerned Eliot opines, "he can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form himself wholly on one or two favorite admirations, nor can he ^{form} himself wholly upon one preferred period. ... 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 he never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same."

Thus, in this essay, Eliot has been successful in describing the individual genius as it stands in relation to the tradition as defined by him. "What is to be insisted upon upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career."

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(concluded)