T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

* One of the major proponents of modernism.
* Won Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.
* Important poems – *Wasteland, The Hollow Men, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, Ash Wednesday* etc.

**Major Ideas**

1. Tradition:

* A writer has existence only as part of the long literary tradition (starting with Homer).
* Tradition is a continuing presence of the past in the present.
* “No poet, no artist of any sort, has his complete meaning alone. His significance is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists...”
* Tradition involves a historical sense. This historical sense makes the poet write with a feeling of continuity of the whole literature of Europe from Homer.
* This idea occurs in the essay “Tradition and Individual Talent”.
* Here, Eliot writes against the notion of the autonomy of the writer, his mind, his emotions etc. (of the Romantics, Aestheticists etc) Against subjectivity.
* Tradition is not simply inherited but is acquired through hard work and understanding. Nor is it simply an imitation of past masters. It calls for an internalization of the past and its creative use in the present.
* The past guides and directs the present. The present modifies the past. A new work by a good artist alters the tradition. That is, a good work adds to the tradition, takes it forward and improves upon it.
* That is, there is a dialogic relationship between the past and the present through the artist.

2. Impersonality Theory of Poetry:

* The idea of impersonality in poetry is a natural continuation of the idea of tradition.
* The artist and his personality are to be subsumed in the tradition and continuity. (This is diametrically opposite to the celebration of the poet etc.)
* Poetry is not a turning loose of emotions but an escape from emotion; it is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality.
* “True progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction.”
* The poet must subordinate himself to the tradition. The tradition and its continuing presence are more important than the personality of the poet or his originality. (The Romantics celebrated this originality in many ways in their privileging of emotions, feelings etc.)
* The poet’s mind is a catalyst for the combining of emotions, thoughts etc. The catalyst remains untouched and unchanged. (Eliot uses the example of platinum in the production of sulphuric acid. Platinum works as a catalyst without itself undergoing any change. According to Eliot, the poet’s mind should be like this.)
* The poet’s mind or personality is the medium for the dynamic tradition. The tradition lives in the mind of the poet. Here we see the crucial role of the artist in the continuation of tradition and thereby culture. Here Eliot is a classicist in the tradition of Arnold. (also Horace?)

3. Objective Correlative:

* According to Eliot, objective correlative is a set of situations, events, objects etc which evoke in the mind of the reader the feelings and experiences intended.
* In the essay “Hamlet and His Problems” Eliot considered *Hamlet* to be an artistic failure because the external situations presented (i.e., the objective correlatives) do not convey or justify the reactions and actions of the characters (especially Hamlet).
* The term gained much greater importance and popularity than Eliot intended.
* Eliot’s poem “The Prelude” is perhaps a very good example of his employing objective correlatives to present isolation, emptiness, desolation etc.

4. Unification of Sensibility and Dissociation of Sensibility

* Unification of sensibility = fusion of thoughts, feelings and expressions.
* Dissociation of sensibility = separateness or lack of fusion.
* In the essay “Metaphysical Poets”, Eliot says Donne and other metaphysical poets are good writers because in their poetry there is this unification.
* After the metaphysical poets there was a gradual dissociation of sensibility, resulting in the decline of poetic quality. This can be seen in the Romantics (except perhaps Wordsworth).
* Thus, when we come to Browning and Tennyson, there is total dissociation. “… and they think, but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose.”

5. Major Essays:

* “Functions of Criticism”
* “Functions of Poetry”

\*\*\* (BJ’s classnotes; typed by Nimidha James; 23/02/2016)\*\*\*