

Shailesh Ranjan
Assistant Professor
Dept. of English
Maharaja college, Argy

M.A. (English)

Semester - II

Paper - C.C.-7

Unit - III :-

Topic : - Philip Sidney : An Apology for Poetry - I

An Apology for Poetry is one of the finest creations in the history of English criticism. It is written by Sir Philip Sidney, the most memorable figure of the Elizabethan Age. As a writer, Sidney is known by three principal works, all 'The Arcadia', 'Astrophel and Stella' and 'An Apology for Poetry', all published after his death. The most important contribution of Sidney, however to the world of letters is his distinguished critical tract, An Apology for Poetry. It is indeed an epitome of Renaissance criticism. It deals with his views on the nature and function of poetry, on the three unities, on Tragedy and Comedy, on Diction and metre.

Sidney's An Apology for Poetry is a class of its own, altogether different from earlier critics. It was first published posthumously in 1595 in two separate yet more or less identical editions by two printers. The one which was brought out by William Ponsonby was called The

Date _____
Page _____

Defense of Poesie: 'An Apologie for Poetrie' is the title of the work brought out by Henry Olney. Sidney was greatly influenced by the Italian renaissance writers. Before the renaissance, the critical vision was shrouded in darkness. Sidney took a bold step to emerge from this medieval darkness into light. He wrote the first treatise on literary theory using humanist concepts. One thing that we should remember about Sidney's Apology is that even though it is a brilliant work, it is more synthetic than original. In other words, most of the ideas that he conveys in this defense, have been said before by Aristotle, Horace and others. Yet what Sidney brings to it is an incredible polish. He has selected, adapted from many sources in order to arrive at his own conception of poetry.

The immediate occasion which called forth Sidney's commendable defense of poetry was the virulent attack on drama and poetry launched by Stephen Gosson in his *The School of Abuse* (1579). It was unauthorizedly dedicated, to Sidney and questioned the morality of poetry and other forms of literature. Apology was written in the sixteenth century renaissance literary climate that was concerned about aesthetic problems regarding the object and purpose of poetry itself. Thus unlike Thomas Lodge's *Defense of Poetry* (1580), Sidney's Apology is much more than a reply to

Giasson. He proceeds to give an argument for the value of poetry and its social significance also.

← Antiquity and Universality of Poetry! →

The first section of Sidney's essay is concerned with the antiquity, universality of poetry. From the earliest times poetry is held in the highest esteem. Poetry is the mother of all knowledge - the first light giver to ignorance in all nations and languages; the earliest Greek philosophers and historians, says Sidney, had really been poets; and, moreover, poets from the first had flourished in all the countries of the world.

"Poetry, in the noblest nations and languages that are known, hath been the first light giver to ignorance, and first nurse, whose milk by little and little enabled them to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges."

He also tells that the earliest Greek philosophers and historians were really poet -

"Let learned Greece, in any of her manifold sciences, be able to show me one book before Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod, all three nothing else but poets. Nay, let any history be brought that can say any writers were there before them, if they were not men of the same skill, as Orpheus, Linus and some others are named, who, having been the first of that

Country that made pens deliverers of their knowledge to their posterity, may justly challenge to be called their fathers in learning So in our English were Gower and Chaucer. ”

Sidney then calls our attention to the reverence paid to the poet, first, by the Romans who had called him vates, a 'prophet', or seer, a person who had the god given power of seeing in to the life of things, and secondly, by the Greeks who had honoured him, with the name of 'poet' that is, maker or 'creator' - a description suggestive of divinity, and therefore above all others. Naturally, nothing can be higher in the hierarchy of human understanding than this faculty of making.

← Nature and Function of Poetry ! →

Sidney defines poetry in a very rational terms. According to him poetry is essentially an art of 'imitation' in accordance with Aristotelian theory, and that its function, as stated by Horace, is to teach and delight. To quote his own words

— “ Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation for so Aristotle termeth it in his word Mimesis, that is to say, a representing counterfeiting or figuring forth: to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture: with this end, to teach and delight. ”

Then Sidney comes to the nature of poetry itself and treats first of poetry in general and then of its different forms. He includes all imaginative literature under the head of

poetry. Even the early writers of history used the manner of poets. Herodotus had all the qualities of a poet. Same was the case with Xenophon. His political romance of Cyrus, as well as Herodotus's "Nine Cruses" were really heroic poems or epics. Even Plato was a poet, those who failed to see in his "Dialogues" flowers of poetry did never walk in to Apollo's garden.

By 'imitation' Sidney implies something more than mere copying or a reproduction of the facts of life. He has described the poet as a 'maker' and therefore he either transmutes the real, or attempts an entirely new creation. The world created by a poet, says Sidney, is better and happier than the world of Nature, because it is idea of beauty, goodness and virtue. It will be seen here that there is not much of difference between Sidney and Aristotle. According to Sidney the poet treats solely of things as they ought to be and according to Aristotle the poet's material consists of 'things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be.' Apart from this, both agree that in poetry we find something more than mere representation of real life, and that it expresses truth of the highest, that is of an ideal or universal kind. But according to Sidney, the poet inspired arrives intuitively at glimpses of an ideal and perfect world, by Aristotle the poet is held to take a philosophical view of things as they are, thus arriving

at the universal through the particular.

← Kinds of Poetry →

After having discussed the nature of poetry of poetry in general, Sidney then proceeds to analyse several kinds of poetry. There are three broad division of poetry. Sidney follows Scaliger and Minturno in classifying all poems in to religious, philosophic and poetic. Of religious poets Sidney notes David, Solomon, Moses and Deborah in their Hymns; and the writer of Job. Among the classical poets he notes Orpheus, Amphion and Homer in his Hymns. These poets have primarily a religious interest and hence could not be treated as purely poetical poems. Among the philosophical poets he notes Tyrtaeus, Phocylides, Cato Lucretius, Manilius, Pontanus, Lucan and others. He commends them for their delightful teaching, but since they had treated of things as they were or are, Sidney is conscious of some inconsistency in his theorizing.

The third group consists of poets who treat life imaginatively. They could be termed as the right type of poets. Of this kind of poetry there are various sub-divisions or kinds - the heroic, lyric, tragic, comic, satiric, iambic, pastoral and others. This classification is based partly on the subject-matter, and partly on the metrical considerations.