

MA (English)

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Semester - II

Paper - CC-7

Unit - III

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

Poetry superior to all sciences :-

Sidney further maintains that Poetry is superior to all sciences. Different sciences have different ends, but the chief end of all sciences alike is to promote knowledge. Poetry may be identified with the mistress-knowledge or architektonike, "the knowledge of man's self" - the supreme knowledge to which all others are subservient. Sidney states that of all the traditional branches of learning there are four more especially which seem to contribute to this mistress knowledge. They are theology, law, philosophy and history. The philosophers lay down general principles to make men virtuous. History on the other hand is concerned with an 'active', rather than a 'theoretical', virtue; it does not teach us by precept or abstract argument; it is supposed to instruct us by particular examples drawn from life which illustrate in concrete fashion what virtue really is. Moreover, philosophy deals with abstraction; is hard of utterance and misty to be conceived; and hence is only a poor guide for youth and appeals only to those who are already learned. "History, again with its concrete examples, presents but a medley of empirical facts, from which general truths and the nature of virtue most especially but dimly and confusedly emerge." While the approach

2

approach of philosophy is theoretical, the approach of history is pre-eminently practical.

Poetry is superior to both philosophy and history because it combines the merits of both. It represents the universal truths bound up with philosophy. Poetry can combine precepts and example. He combines the functions of both, the philosopher and the historian for he can image the abstract concept of philosophy in a concrete individual and human form to make it more attractive as well as effective. Sidney believed that mere knowledge of virtue was not enough. It could be of use when people were led to virtuous action. In this also the poet claims supremacy over the philosopher and the historian. The philosopher scorns pleasure and therefore avoids all emotional appeal, while the historian has to follow the facts so closely that he cannot add any charm to the personages he describes. The poet has no such restrictions. He takes up his material and moulds it according to his taste and presents fascinating picture of it before us.

Objections Against Poetry -

Sidney now examines the current objections against poetry advanced by the puritans. These objections are, according to Sidney, quite trifling, but he answers them because, if unanswered they might appear to many meaningful and substantial. The first objection against poetry is concerned with rhyming and versing. In answering this charge Sidney replies that verse is not essential to poetry. "One may be a poet without versing and a versifier

without poetry.' If speech is one of the greatest natural gifts bestowed on man, Verse which polishes and sweetens it, must be an object of praise. It requires a patient weighing of words and their proper combinations to produce the enchantment of harmony. The four main charges enumerated against poetry by Sidney are as follows:-

- (i) Poetry was useless and a waste of time
- (ii) Poetry was 'the mother of lies', a collection of falsehoods
- (iii) It gave rise to evil fancies and had thus a degrading and enfeebling influence
- (iv) There was a tradition that Plato had banished poets from his ideal state.

Sidney gallantly defends poetry against these charges. He dismisses the first charge by saying that it has been established that poetry is supreme in the teaching of virtue. Regarding the second charge that poetry deals with things untrue Sidney stoutly denies. Astronomers, physicians, historians and others all these, he concedes, inevitably make false statements. But the poet nothing affirms and therefore never lieth, his aim being 'to tell what is or is not, but what should or should not be.' So that what he offers is not fact but fiction; yet fiction embodying truth of an ideal kind. Regarding the third charge that poetry is immoral - the nurse of abuse, that it corrupts men and has an effeminizing effect on the readers, Sidney replies that poets have been companions to camps since times immemorial. The detractors say that the different kinds of poetry such as comedies, lyrics, elegies and heroic poems are all alike, infected with the love theme and its amorous conceits, thus filling the minds of men with 'pestilent desires'. For the sake of

argument Sidney is prepared to grant that a vicious treatment of love had not been altogether absent from earlier poetry; though at the same time he protested that the love theme in itself did not deserve outright condemnation. Finally, Sidney replies to the last charge, namely, Plato's rejection of poetry as it fosters in men an indulgence in fancy and making them disinclined to action. Sidney tries to prove that Plato was not an enemy of poetry. Plato, in fact, objected to the false conceptions of the gods, and the atheism which he found in ancient poetry and also the poets of his time. Plato found fault that the poets of his time filled the world with wrong opinions of the gods, making light tales of that unspotted essence, and therefore would not have the youth depraved with such opinions. In this way, Plato was not against poetry itself, but against its abuse. Then he refers to Plato's description of the poet in *Ion* 'a light and winged and sacred thing'; and says that this was Plato's real attitude to poetry.

After completing his defense of poetry, Sidney examines the reasons of this contempt of poetry. He asks, "Why England, the mother of excellent minds should be given so hard a step-mother to poets, who certainly in wit ought to pass all others..." He thinks that it is so because poetry has come to be represented by base men with servile wits or to men who, however studious, are not born poets. He says that 'a poet no industry can make, if his own genius be not carried unto it.' He says that three things necessary for producing good poetry are Art, Imitation, and Exercise which are lacking in the present generation of poets.

5

Sidney says that few good poems have been produced in England since Chaucer. Chaucer did marvellously well in *Troilus and Cressida*. The *Mirror of Magistrates* also contains some beautiful passages. Earl of Surrey's lyrics also deserve praise. Spenser's *The Shepherd's Calendar* is worth reading. English lyric poetry is scanty and poor. Love lyrics and sonnets lack genuine fire and passion. They make use of artificial diction and swelling phrases.

* Sidney's View on Tragedy :-

Sidney's conception of tragedy is based on the medieval tradition and the views of Aristotle as interpreted by Italian critics. He adopts the medieval conception that tragedy treats mainly of the falls of tyrants and the uncertainty of life. Then he thinks that a tragedy should be full of stately speeches and moral teaching in the manner of Seneca. He emphasizes the need for the observance of the *Unities*. Then he speaks on the treatment of a story for dramatic purposes. In his own words - "a tragedy is tied to the laws of poesy, and not of history, not bound to follow the story, but having liberty either to feign a quite new matter, or to frame the history to most tragical conveniency." There are many things which can not be shown properly on the stage, and according to him, they should be reported. The plot should not begin with a tedious account of the ultimate origin of the story but it should begin with some some principal or significant point which would bring the reader at once to the heart of things.

Sidney's Views on Comedy

Regarding Comedy, Sidney's chief complaint is the prevailing tendency to make comedy little more than rough force productive of empty and fleeting laughter, while his desire is for a more intellectual comedy resulting in delight of a satisfying and lasting kind. "Comedy" he says, "is an imitation of the common errors of life." These errors are represented here in the most ridiculous and scornful manner Comedy has become, says Sidney, almost a crude force which seeks to provoke empty laughter. He draws a distinction between laughter and delight. His contemporaries thought erroneously that there can be no delight without laughter, whereas laughter is neither an essential cause nor an essential effect of delight. The great fault of English Comedy is that it stirs laughter concerning things that are sinful, i.e. wicked rather than merely ridiculous - forbidden plainly, according to Sidney, by Aristotle himself - and concerning things that are miserable, rather to be pitied than scorned. Human follies or errors, rather than human vice and wickedness, or the poverty of men, are the proper themes of comedy. Sidney's ~~delight~~ distinction between delight and laughter is psychological and the most original part of his treatise.