

Phillip Sidney as a critic

Phillip Sidney stands as a shining star at the dawn of English Criticism. Before the Elizabethan age, English writers were pre-occupied with the classical principles of Aristotle and nothing of great creative values was produced. But the Elizabethan age witnessed a great thrust of creative impulse in all the branches of art. Great poets and dramatists were born who enriched literature with innovative literary creation. Naturally, different literary controversies came into being, and literary criticism became an important aspect of English literature. Sidney also took part in the literary controversy of the age and strongly expressed his viewpoints on Poetry, Drama and Fiction and style. His *Apology for Poetry* mainly contains his critical viewpoints.

Sidney himself a poet and scholar derived best of the classical and Platonic thoughts and assimilated it with his own learning of the contemporary literature. He applauded the Romans who called poet as prophet and maker or creator. He included all imaginative literature under the head of Poetry. He categorically declares that rhyming and versing do not make a poet. They are just the ornaments of Poetry. However, he opines that verse is a necessary element of Poetry. About the nature and function of Poetry, he follows the Aristotelian lines. He calls Poetry to be essentially an art of imitation and points out its function as being to teach and delight. However, by the imitation he implies something more than copying or a production of the facts of life. What the poet does is either to transmute the real and actual or to attempt at an entirely new creation. To him poetic imitation is a heightening process, an exercise of the creative faculty.

With certain modification, he adopts the traditional classification of Poetry. According to him, there are several kinds of Poetry - religious Poetry, Philosophical Poetry and Poetry which consists of an imaginary treatment of life. But, he pays most attention to the last one and sub-divides it into the

8
affirming the native element in literature.

This English accent of Dryden was the necessity of the time. The new King was more of a French than of an English who wanted to remodel English literature on the French lines and showed apathy for the native elements. Naturally, it was a moral responsibility of Dryden, the greatest man of the letters of the age, to safeguard the honour of English writers. But, Dryden was inspired not only by the nationalistic ideas, but he was also convinced of the greatness of the writers like Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jonson and Fletcher. That is why he writes: "It is not enough that Aristotle has said so for Aristotle drew his model of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides: and if he had been ours, he might have changed his mind." This is really a heroic statement, specially in an age when the neo-classic rules were held in high authority and esteem.

The Essay of Dramatic Poesy is in a form of dialogues between four characters representing four different attitudes to life. Crites, a classicist upholds the superiority of the ancient dramas. Eugenius champions the cause of the moderns but he is not against the classical tenets. Lisideius declares that English dramas are inferior of French dramas. He criticises Shakespeare for looseness of plot construction and for not observing the three unities. Neander, Dryden himself, replies to all these three. He upholds the greatness of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama. He argues that the three gentlemen have failed to understand and appreciate

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(9)

The real ^{spirit} ~~attitude~~ of classical attitude to literature.

Merely the following of the three unities will not make a drama successful. There are other things needed—humour, passion, human character and life-likeness.

However, all the ~~disputants~~ accept the basic definition of a drama that forms the theoretical basis of all discussion: "A just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortunes to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind." Dryden stresses on the life-likeness of the characters portrayed in a drama. He says that a certain character must be in flesh and blood: its humour and passion should be properly portrayed. He stresses on the unity of action, where plot, dialogue and character meet at one point. What is needed of a dramatist is the charact perspective of an artist. He must be able to see the drama from one point, where all the different forces meet and bring out a unified and total effect.

Dryden upholds the use of rhyme in tragedies and strongly supports Shakespeare's non-observance of classical unities. He says that in Comedy rhyme may appear to be unnatural, but in tragedy it is perfectly appropriate. "Tragedy is indeed the representation of nature, but... nature wrought up to a higher pitch." Again "the plot, the character, the wit, the passion, the descriptions are all exalted above the level of common converse, as high as the imagination of the poet can carry them, with proportion to verisimilitude". To conclude, Dryden is the greatest ned-

(10)

classical critic who is both creative and practical. He believes that great literature should first delight and then instruct. He believes in the role of imagination. He is neo-classicist but he is not fastened by any dogma. The flexibility of his outlook is to be noted in all his practical criticism. Together with Fowson, he helps in the institution of Commonsense in English criticism. Lastly, he is the first Nationalistic critic who tries to uphold and unfurl the laurels of Shakespeare in an age when the continental theatre-goer was charmed by the French neo-~~to~~ neo-classic dramas.

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