

## **ENGLISH/ SEM.2/ CC-7**

### **LESSON.1.**

#### **Discussion on the Text : *An Apology for Poetry***

Philip Sidney (1554-1586) was an English poet, courtier, scholar and an erudite critic of the Elizabethan age. He as a critic defines poetry as an art of imitation, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end,—to teach and delight. To him the object of all arts and sciences is to lift human life to the highest altitudes of perfection; and in this respect they are all servants of the sovereign, or poetry, whose end is well-doing and not well-knowing only. Virtuous action is, therefore, the end of learning; and Sidney sets out to prove that the poet, more than anyone else, fulfils this end.

Philip Sidney in his "**Apology for Poetry**" reacts against the attacks made on poetry by the puritan, Stephen Gosson. To, Sidney, poetry is an art of imitation for specific purpose, it is imitated to teach and delight. According to him, poetry is simply a superior means of communication and its value depends on what is communicated.

So, even history when it is described in a lively and passionate expression becomes poetic. He prefers imaginative literature that teaches better than history and philosophy. Literature has the power to reproduce an ideal golden world not just the brazen world.

Stephen Gosson makes charges on poetry which Sidney answers.

The charges are:

**1. Poetry is the waste of time.**

**2. Poetry is mother of lies.**

**3. It is nurse of abuse.**

**3. Plato had rightly banished the poets from his ideal world.**

Against these charges, Sidney has answered them in the following ways-

Poetry is the source of knowledge and a civilizing force, for Sidney. Gosson attacks on poetry saying that it corrupts the people and it is the waste of time, but Sidney says that no learning is so good as that which teaches and moves to virtue and that nothing can both teach and amuse so much as poetry does. In essay societies, poetry was the main source of education. He remembers ancient Greek society that respected poets. The poets are always to be looked up. So, poetry is not wasted of time.

To the second charge, Sidney answers that poet does not lie because he never affirms that his fiction is true and can never lie. The poetic truths are ideal and universal. Therefore, poetry cannot be a mother of lies.

Sidney rejects that poetry is the source of abuses. To him, it is people who abuses poetry, not the vice- versa. Abuses are more nursed by philosophy and history than by poetry, by describing battles, bloodshed, violence etc. On the contrary, poetry helps to maintain morality and peace by avoiding such violence and bloodsheds. Moreover, it brings light to knowledge.

Sidney views that Plato in his Republic wanted to banish the abuse of poetry not the poets. He himself was not free from poeticality, which we can find in his dialogues. Plato never says that all poets should be banished. He called for banishing only those poets who are inferior and unable to instruct the children.

For Sidney, art is the imitation of nature but it is not slavish imitation as Plato views. Rather it is creative imitation. Nature is dull, incomplete and ugly. It is artists who turn dull nature in to golden color. He employs his creative faculty, imagination and style of presentation to decorate the raw materials of nature. For Sidney, art is a speaking picture having spatiotemporal dimension. For Aristotle human action is more important but for Sidney nature is important.

Artists are to create arts considering the level of readers. The only purpose of art is to teach and delight like the whole tendency of Renaissance. Sidney favors poetic justice that is possible in poet's world where good are rewarded and wicked people are punished.

Plato's philosophy on 'virtue' is worthless at the battlefield but poet teaches men how to behave under all circumstances. Moral philosophy teaches virtues through abstract examples and history teaches virtues through concrete examples but both are defective. Poetry teaches virtue by example as well as by precept (blend of abstract + concrete). The poet creates his own world where he gives only the inspiring things and thus poetry holds its superior position to that of philosophy and history.

In the poet's golden world, heroes are ideally presented and evils are corrupt. Didactic effect of a poem depends up on the poet's power to move. It depends up on the affective quality of poetry. Among the different forms of poetry like lyric, elegy, satire, comedy etc. epic is the best form as it portrays heroic deeds and inspires heroic deeds and inspires people to become courageous and patriotic.

In this way, Sidney defines all the charges against poetry and stands for the sake of universal and timeless quality of poetry making us know why the poets are universal genius.

### **Poetry's Superiority over Philosophy and History**

Even a cursory view at Sidney's *Apology* may prove that Sidney has an exalted conception of the nature and function of poetry. Following Minturno he says that poetry is the first light-giver to ignorance, it nourished before any other art or science. The first philosophers and Historians were poets; and such supreme works as the *Psalms* of David and the *Dialogues* of Plato are in reality poetical. Among the Greeks and the Romans, the poet was regarded as a sage or prophet; and no nation, however primitive or barbarous, has been without poets, or has failed to receive delight and instruction from poetry.

Showing the superiority of poetry to history and philosophy Sidney says that while the philosopher teaches by precept alone, and the historian by example alone, the poet conduces most to virtue because he employs both precept and example. The philosopher teaches virtue by showing what virtue is and what vice is, by setting down, in abstract argument, and without clarity or beauty of style, the bare principles of morality. The historian teaches virtue by showing the experience of past ages; but, being tied down to what actually happened, that is, to the particular truth of things and not to general possibilities, the example he depicts draws no necessary consequence. The poet alone accomplishes this dual task. What the philosopher says should be done, is, by the poet, pictured most perfectly in some one by whom it has been done, thus coupling the general notion with the particular instance. The philosopher, moreover, teaches the learned only; but the poet teaches all, and so is, in Plutarch's phrase, "the right popular philosopher." He seems only to promise delight, and moves men to virtue unawares. But even if the philosopher excels-the poet in teaching, he cannot move his readers to virtuous action as the poet can, and this is of higher importance than teaching, for what is the use of teaching virtue if the pupil is not moved to act and accomplish what he is taught? On the other hand, the historian deals with particular instances, with vices and virtues so mingled together in the same personage that the reader can find no pattern to imitate.

The poet improves upon history, he gives examples of vice and virtue for human imitation; he makes virtue succeed and vice fail, and this history can but seldom do. Poetry does not imitate nature; it is the reader who imitates the example of perfection presented to him by the poet. He is thus made virtuous. Poetry, therefore, conduces to virtue, the end of all learning, better than any other art or science.

The basis of Sidney's distinction between the poet and the historian is the famous passage in which Aristotle explains why poetry is more philosophic and of more value than history. The poet deals, not with the particular, but with the universal,—with what might or should be, not with what is or has been. But Sidney, in the assertion of this principle, follows Minturno and Scaliger, and goes farther than Aristotle would probably have gone. All arts

have the works of nature as their principal objects of imitation, and follow nature as actors follow the lines of their play. Only the poet is not tied to such subjects, but creates another nature better than nature herself. For going hand in hand with nature, and being enclosed not within her limits, but only by, the zodiac of his own imagination," he creates a golden world in place of Nature's brazen; and in the sense he may be compared as a creator with God. Where shall you find in life, asks Sidney, such a friend as Pylades. Such a hero as Orlando, such an excellent man as Aeneas?

Furthermore, he defends poetry vigorously against the puritans' charges, and says that it is not the mother of lies; it is the oldest of all branches of learning and removes ignorance. It delights as teaches. Poetry does not misuse and debase the mind of man by turning it to wantonness and by making it unmartial and effeminate: it is man's wit that abuses poetry, and poetry that abuses man's wit; and as to making men effeminate, this charge applies to all other sciences more than to poetry, which in its description of battles and praises of valiant men stirs courage and enthusiasm. Lastly, it is pointed out by the enemies of poetry that Plato, one of the greatest of philosophers, banished poets from his ideal commonwealth. But Plato's *Dialogues* is in reality themselves a form of poetry.

## **CC-7 ( SEM.2), LESSON.2.**

### **The 'Apology' as an Epitome of Renaissance Criticism**

Sidney's 'Apology for Poetry' is a work of genius, a rare and valuable critical document. Among the manifold achievements of Sidney as a critic one of the most important is the introduction of Aristotelianism into England. Says Spingarn, **"The introduction of Aristotelianism into England was the direct result of the influence of the Italian critics; and the agent in bringing this new influence into English letters was Sir Philip Sidney."** His *Defence of Poesy*, "is a veritable epitome of the literary criticism of the Italian Renaissance; and so thoroughly is it imbued with this spirit, that no other work, Italian, French, or English, can be said to give so complete and so noble a conception of the temper and the principles of Renaissance criticism." For the general theory of poetry, its sources were the critical treatises of Minturno and Scaliger. Yet without any decided novelty of ideas, or even of expression, it can lay claim to distinct originality in its unity of feeling, its ideal and noble temper, and its adaptation to circumstance. Sidney is the herald of Neo-classicism in England, but his treatise is also a piece of creative literature romantic to the core. Wimsatt and Brooks emphasise the note of romance in the Apology and write, **"The sources of Sidney's 'Defence' were classical, but the spirit was not very sternly classical. Sidney sends up the joyous fireworks of the Italianate Renaissance. His colours are enthusiastic, neo-Platonic, the dual purple and gold. The motion is soaring. He is essentially a theorist of the exuberant imagination."** His romanticism is also seen in his appreciation of the ballad of Chevy Chase, which he says has always moved his heart like a trumpet. He thus illustrates the dual Renaissance tendency, i.e. the simultaneous presence of the romantic and the classic. Creative literature in the age was romantic, while criticism was mainly classical. As a matter of fact, Sidney's Apology is a synthesis of the critical doctrines of Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Scaliger, Minturno, and a host of other writers and critics. It brings together, and interprets and comments upon, all that was characteristic in the theories of literature, current at the time.

Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* is the earliest attempt to deal with the poetic art, practically and not theoretically. His judgments are based on contemporary literature and show ample of good sense and sound scholarship. It is not merely empty, abstract theorising: apart from the unities, and his dislike of tragi-comedy, his judgments are not governed, to any great extent, by rules and theories. His ultimate test is of a practical kind, i.e. the power of poetry to move to virtuous action. **"The first sign of literary appreciation is to feel; and not the least of Sidney's achievement as a critic was the early recognition of that fact"**—

(Atkins). He has thus contributed to the appreciation of literature in the concrete. His treatise is the key to an understanding of Elizabethan poetry and poetic theory.'

Sidney's practical criticism is constructive and his work contributes a great deal to a better understanding of literary values. He calls attention to literary excellencies of more than one kind. He has enthusiasm for Biblical literature and finds much merit, unlike the other humanists of the day, in the medieval literature. He appreciates Chaucer and the ballad of Chevy Chase. In many ways, Sidney inaugurated a new era in the history of English literary criticism. His treatise is a landmark in the history of literary criticism in England. More truly than Dryden he is the father of literary criticism in that country.

His 'Apology', as mentioned above, is an epitome of Renaissance criticism. In every one of his views, on the nature and function of poetry, on the three unities, on Tragedy and Comedy, on Diction and metre, he represents contemporary trends. Everywhere his work reflects the influence of Aristotle and Plato, of Scaliger and Minturno, and other classical, Italian and French critics: He constantly cites the authority of Aristotle, Horace, and the Italian critics of the Renaissance in support of his views. But this does not mean that it is a mere summary of classical and Italian doctrines. Sidney's originality lies in the skill with which he has drawn upon, selected, arranged and adapted earlier ideas, and then has put forth his own ideas, independently arrived at. He makes use of (a) Italian critics, (b) classical critics, Plato and Aristotle, (c) Roman critics, Horace and Plutarch (d) he also shows the influence of medieval concept of tragedy, and (e) his didactic approach to poetry, is typically Renaissance approach. Poetry was valued not for its delight, but for its moral effect and practical utility in actual life. However, he is original in his emphasis on the transport of poetry. Poetry teaches by moving us to virtuous action. In fact, throughout, his conclusions are his own, the result of reflection and wide reading. What he writes bears the stamp of his personality.

In the Apology, he has (a) boldly faced the traditional objections against poetry, (b) he has claimed for poetry, a high place in intellectual and social life, (c) by his unique vindication of poetry, he has restored it to something of its ancient prestige and meaning, and (d) by his defence of poetry, he brought enlightenment and assurance to his own generation.

His manner of presentation, his freshness and vigour, are characteristically his. His style has dignity, simplicity, concreteness, and a racy humour and irony. It is an illuminating piece of literary criticism; as well as a fine piece of creative literature.

Dramatic criticism in England began with Sidney. To him goes the credit of having formulated, for the first time, more or less in a systematic manner, the general principles of dramatic art. As a French critic writes, Sidney's Defence of Poetry, "**gives us an almost complete theory of neo-classical tragedy, a hundred years before the 'Art Poetique' of Boileau.**" Sidney is unique as a critic. He is judicial, creative and original. Hence the value of his work is for all times to come.

#### **Suggested Reading :**

- 1. Critical Approaches to Literature by David Daiches. (London, 1956).**
- 2. A History of English Criticism by George Saintsbury, (Edinburgh 1911).**
- 3. The Practice of Criticism by D.H. Rawlinson (Cambridge, 1968).**
- 4. The Making of Literature by R.J.Scott-James (London, 1930).**

**Courtesy : Dr. Md. Ejaz Alam**

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