



SIDNEY'S "AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY": A CRITICAL INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT



In my article I want to point out some major facts from Sidney's view on poetry. Conventional reasons why poetry should be highly valued, the universality of poetry, the nature of poetry and its usefulness, discussions of current objections against poetry and Sidney's reply to the critics and remarks on style, diction and versification.

Keywords: Poetry, Divine origin, Prophetic Nature, Vates.

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INTRODUCTION

Sir Phillip Sidney's "An 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 Aristotalianism into England. J.E. Spingarn states:

"The introduction of Aristotalianism into England" was the direct result of the influence of the Italian critics"; and the agent in bringing this new influence to English letters was Sir Phillip Sidney.(268)

His Defense of Poetry, " is a veritable epitome to 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 conception of the temper and principles of Renaissance criticisms."Yet without any decided novelty of ideas or even of expression it can lay claim to distinct originality in its unity of felling. Sidney is the Harold of Neo-Classism in England.

Winsatt and Brooks points out that "The source of Sidney's 'Defence' were classical, but the spirit was not very sternly classical. Sidney sends up



to the joyous fireworks of Italian Renaissance. His colours are enthusiastic, neo platonian, the dual purple gold, the motion soaring. He is essentially a theorist of the exuberant imagination."

WHY SIDNEY WROTE "APOLOGY": AGAINST STEPHEN GOSSON

Basically Sidney wrote his "Defense of Poetry" to refute Stephen Gosson's charges against poetry which he made in his "School of Abuse". Stephen Gosson published his attack on poetry in 1579. In it he came down heavily on poets and the very practice on the arts. He is a puritan. Gosson draws heavily examples from classical literature of Greece and ancient Rome to argue that it was not without reason that Plato banished the poet from his ideal state. As Stephen Gosson says:

1. There being many other faithful knowledges, a man might better spend his time in them than in poetry.
2. Poetry is the "mother of lies".
3. Poetry has a wanton or corrupting influence.
4. Stephen Gosson classed poet with the pipers and jesters and called them caterpillars of commonwealth all alike enemies of virtue.

Reaction was needed, and this reaction was clearly visible with the publication of Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry" (1595). Where he attacks Gosson's view on Poetry and established a valid identity of poetry as a part of literature and also our existence.

THE SPECIAL CLAIMS FOR POETRY MADE BY SIDNEY

Sidney made some special claims for poetry. These claims were based on poetry's divine origin, its prophetic nature, its cultural and social value and its universal appeal.

Sidney mocked at the critic of poetry who spent a great many wandering words in quips and scoffs. They were according to him like jesters and fools. They failed to understand that poetry had been an instrument for making the barbarous nation civilized.

The first claim for poetry is based upon its divine origin. Romans called the poet "Vates" which is as much as diviner, forseeer or prophet. The poet is not only an imitator of nature. He is the maker. God has made him in his own image and has given him

power of creation. And man shows this power in poetry with force of divine breath.

The divine nature of poetry is further suggested by remark of Sydney, "poets are born, not made." "For poetry must not be drawn by the ears, it must be gently led or rather it must be lead which was partly the cause that made the ancient learned affirm it was divine gift and no human skill."

The claim for poetry also is based on its prophetic nature. It doesn't deal with things as they are or as they were. It tells us of things as they ought to be. Poets are rightly termed 'Vates'. They imitate, teach and delight like the prophets sings of virtue.

Poetry has cultural value also. It has civilizing force. Barbarous nation lose their wild temper and become good. It breeds virtue, the inculturation of which makes man cultured.

Poetry deals with universal and has general appeal. Chaucer in his 'Prologue to Canterbury Tales' deals with the universal traits of the 'Knight', 'The Nun', 'The Doctor' etc. He is therefore, read more than any dry historian. Shakespeare, in his 'King Lear' or 'Hemlet' or 'Othello' deals with the universal human emotions and passions and thereby strikes a note in the heart of men of all ages. It is the antiquity of poetry that can be cited as one of the claims for poetry.

Thus Sidney, by showing the universality and charm of poetry gives a defense of poetry and proves that poetry is not a corrupter of mankind. It is purifying and ennobles mankind. It teaches delight and aesthetic charm is irresistible.

I totally agree with Sidney's view that poets are born, not made. For example, the charm which we found in John Milton's "Paradise Lost" is not found in Milton's "Paradise Regained". It proves that poetry is divine gift and poets are born, not made.

FUNCTIONS OF POETRY: ACCORDING TO SIDNEY

According to Sidney all knowledge aims at teaching of virtues. He admits that 'Philosophy' and 'History' also teach virtue but they are not superior to poetry in playing their parts. The Philosopher teaches disputation virtue. He teaches virtue by certain abstracts consideration.

The Philosopher sets down percept and rules by thorny arguments. His knowledge stands



upon abstract and general. But the poet deals with the universal. He produces wisdom and temperance. Sidney concludes that the philosopher teaches but he teaches obscurely. So as the learned only can understand him. But the poet is the food for tenderest stomachs. The poet is indeed the right popular philosopher.

Though William Wordsworth was greatly influenced by Rousseau but the poetry of Wordsworth is more delightful and charming than the Rousseau's philosophy of nature.

The poet teaches much more and in a better way than history. The historian deals with the fact that 'Were' and 'Are' but he cannot foretell the future. The poet on the other hand has all the time for his gamut. The past, present and the future shines in the verse of poets. He is one step ahead of the historian who writes of the past and the present only. He represents the lives of those who have gone before and asks his readers to follow their footsteps. Old age experience goes along with him and he gives the experience of many ages. He teaches by example, but the poet is a moderator. He teaches virtue by percept not by example but by both. He goes beyond the historians. In history virtue is neither rewarded nor is the vice punished. But the poet feigns matters in such a manner that he shows that virtue is rewarded and vice is punished.

The description of World War-II which we find in Rupert Brooke's poems is more realistic than any other history books of World War-II. Poetry does teach much more than philosophy and history does.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Sidney has proved that by nature poetry imitates and its functions – to teach and delight.

He shows that pastorals poetry treats evils of tyranny and beauty of simple life, the elegiac moves rather pity than blame, the bitter iambic rubs the galled minds, the comic imitates the common error of our lives and want a great foil to perceive the beauty of virtue.

I think, Sir Sidney is the father of English criticism just as Chaucer is the father of English poetry. Dr. Johnson's dictum that Dryden is the father of English criticism seems unacceptable. Dryden came later and drew his inspiration from the

English critical tradition established by Sidney. Dryden is very important critic, no doubt but to be just to him we need not be unjust to Sidney. In a sense of Sidney also was living in the time which may be termed 'misty' and like Chaucer he too could see no more clearly than his contemporaries.

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