

Literary Criticism
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Philip Sydney's "An Apology for Poetry" Session-2

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Hello, and welcome to today's session where we continue to look at Sydney's *An Apology for Poetry*. So, in the first phase when we started looking at this essay, we saw how this is seen as a daring document of the Renaissance England times and how also Sydney tries to respond to some of the allegations made against the genre of poetry and the kind of things that poetry does during those times. And this was primarily in response to the attack, the very vitriolic attack that Gosson had made against poetry in general.

And this work as we can see, this essay by Sydney, which is also seen as one of the representative works of those times and also seen as one of the earliest defenses of poetry, defenses of imaginative art forms which emerged from and through native English tradition. We find that Sydney is trying to make a case for this genre of poetry and the many things associated with it.

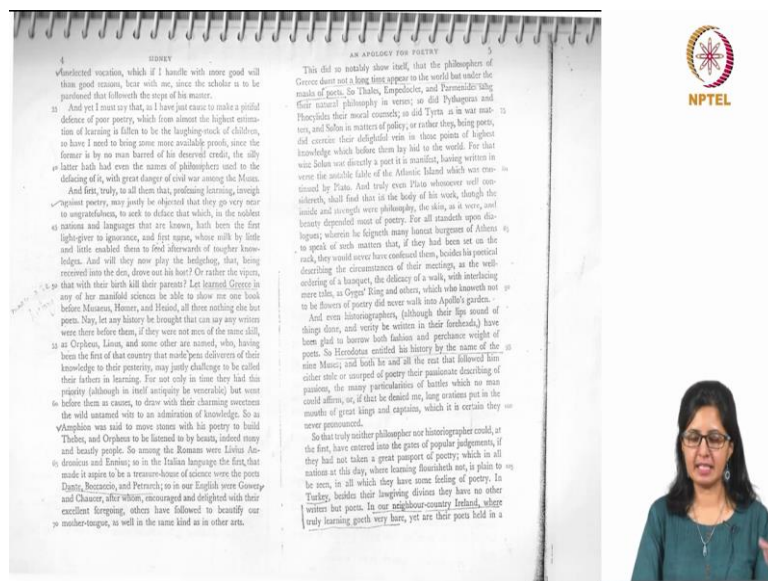
And this is also seen as a work which provides an entry, which enabled an entry into this discourse which also necessitated the need to defend poetry as an art form, poetry as a discipline against the other contesting and rival disciplines such as History for instance. And he is also writing it at a point when poetry is seen as slightly inferior than the other art forms, than the other disciplines and where Stephen Gosson's allegations also come to play a

significant role, where Stephen Gosson had already said that poetry is “the mother of all lies”, it is “the nurse of abuse”.

And also that in alignment with what Plato said during the earlier classical times that all poets should be banished from the Republic, from the ideal state, from the ideal society. So this needs to be read in response to that, and also in a general sense as a defense of this genre, which begins to contribute not to just literary and imaginative art forms, but also to the general functioning and the general well-being of the society.

So, he begins with this anecdote about horsemanship, about his friend, John Pietro Pugliano. And he tells us about the futility of theorization in certain contexts, and from there, beginning with such a sarcastic note, and in a very witty way that is very, very English too, he begins to enter this discussion by first historically mapping the trajectory of the poet, how the poet was seen historically in Greece, how the poet was seen, and situated within the book of the Bible.

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And he gives these very compelling examples of the earlier poets from the classical times and also from the book of the Bible which almost seems like a hard-to-resist or hard-to-contest case. So, what Sydney does over here at the outset of his essays between the first few passages, he is trying to locate poetry as a historical object. He is trying to show us that just like civilization went through many phases, many milestones, this is also one of the ways in which civilization of humanity in general have been evolving.

That poetry was there in everything, regardless of the discipline, regardless of the moral framework, regardless of the religious framework, poetry was always there across all modern civilizations at various points of time.

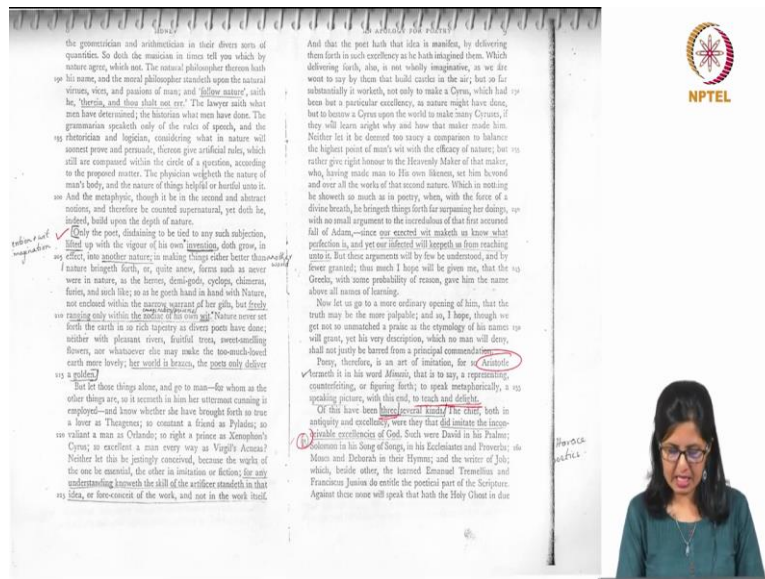
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In one of the passages which we can see over here he talks about the poet as someone who enables the creation and where he translates the Greek word *poiein*-to make. And this is something we will find coming back to us in various forms later. Earlier when we had looked at Longinus, we also saw how the poet who imitates life is not seen as someone who merely imitates but is seen as someone who invents something.

There is a certain originality which is attributed to this act of imitation. So, we find Sidney also drawing upon all these big names from the classical times and he is also trying to situate the function of poetry, the nature of poetry, within that intellectual trajectory.

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He also highlights the significance of nature in producing poetry, the significance of nature in enabling this imitation. In today's lecture, we begin by looking at this certain kind of an equation that he puts together.

Here I read to you from this passage: "Only the poet, disdainful to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demi-gods, cyclops, chimeras, furies, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with Nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit."

Here we find a peculiar kind of equation at work when he is talking about this imaginative faculty that the poet possesses. And here we find that he is trying to say that invention, which is also an extension of imitation, invention, along with wit produces imagination. And this is another way in which, this is one of the native ways in which we find the English critic beginning to talk about the idea of imagination.

And as noted before, in the earlier classical Greek and Roman tradition, there was no particular word assigned to talk about the quality of imagination. Of course, we find imagination being invoked in various ways, but imagination per se, the word per se, was never mentioned. And we find that it becomes one of the central, one of the key ways in which criticism begins to engage with literature.

And with the Romantic times, with the Romantic criticism, we also find that imagination becomes the most central cornerstone in defining this art form itself. So, here, Sydney is trying to tell us that the poet is capable of making, the poet is capable of not just imitating but making another world all together. And this he does, with his capacity to invent, his capacity for originality, combined with his wit or genius, and that results in a proper kind of an imagination.

Here he is even going to another level of elevating poetry slightly better than nature itself. And he, as the Greek Masters also at some point believed in, he also reiterates this point that the poet is perhaps capable of making the world better. As he puts it, "her world is brazen"- he talks about nature, nature's world is brazen. "The poets only deliver a golden". So, the poet becomes situated at a slightly different stature, slightly better stature than what nature has itself.

So, the poet not only imitates, he also delivers it in a more ornamented, more decorated form, nature becomes something else in the hands of this poet, who has this ability to transform what he sees into something infinitely better. And that infinitely better thing also has the power to transform the individual and the society as well. And that is something that the ethical framework of literary criticism from the earliest English times onwards they continue to emphasize on.

Sydney gives a few examples in the next passage to prove his point. And then he begins to focus significantly, very pointedly, on Aristotle himself. "Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word *mimēsis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end to teach and delight." Sydney and many others during his time, they believed in the power of literature, to teach and to delight.

And herein we find the ethical framework, the moral framework within which criticism continues to be rooted in the earlier English critical world. So, we also find that it is also an extension of the liberal humanist approach, the Aristotelian humanism getting enacted upon what later became the foundations of native English critical tradition. And he talks about three different kinds of imitation.

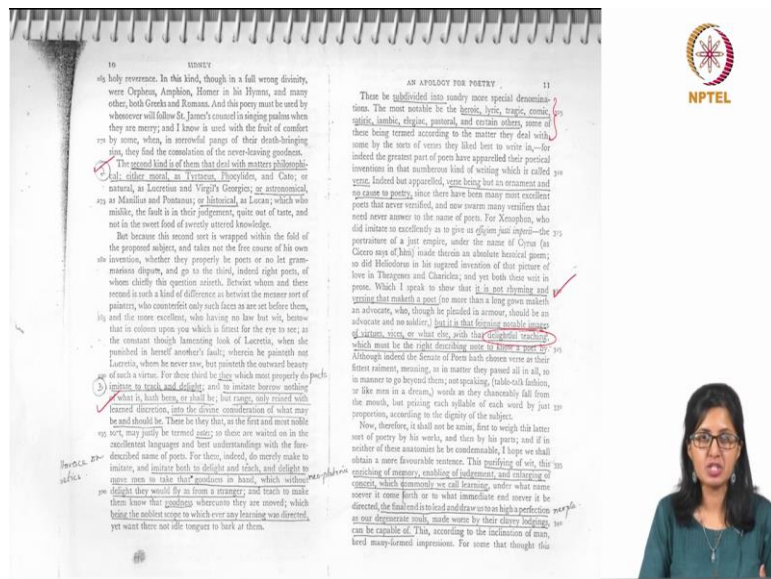
"Of this have been three several kinds"- and here we find Sydney also employing the Aristotelian method of looking at poetry, looking at this imaginative art form with a clinical

detachment and using a scientific process to go through it. And when he is identifying this keenness that Sydney shows in compartmentalizing and in ordering things, it also reflects the scientific bent of mind that the critic in him had.

“Of this have been three several kinds. The chief, both in antiquity and excellency, were they that did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God.” So, that is a first kind of imitation, that Sydney begins to talk about, something that is inherent, that is situated within the religious framework, whatever art form, whatever imitation which imitated “the inconceivable excellencies of God.”

There are a lot of examples that he gives over here. David’s Psalms, Solomon’s Song of Songs, and also Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, Moses and Deborah in their hymns and the writer of Job. And he also gives other examples; here we find him drawing upon the principles that he had perhaps got by reading Horace or from Aristotle’s *Poetics*. He is talking about, he is using this scientific approach, this clinically precise way to talk about literary criticism.

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And he gives extensive examples over here from different traditions- from the divine tradition, from the Christian tradition, from the Greek and Roman literature- which also, as mentioned before, makes this case, a hard-to-refute, a hard-to-resist case. And secondly, he says “the second is of them that deal with matters philosophical, either moral or astronomical or historical. So, the first is a divine framework, predominantly religious framework. The second is a philosophical framework.”

And this is a kind of categorization, the various kinds of differentiations that he gives to imitation. He goes a few steps further than perhaps Aristotle himself in classifying the kinds of imitations, the different methods through which, the different media through which imitation can also work when it comes to any imaginative art form. He continues to give examples.

And if you look at Sydney's *An Apology for Poetry* in its entirety, it is very scholarly. We find the scholar in Sydney sometimes overtaking the critic in him and this entire work is littered with a lot of classical references and a lot of contemporary references. And you would also realize that if one were to undertake a very close reading of this work, you would need an astronomical amount of information about the classical period, about the kind of works which were produced then, the kind of works that the English people were producing during those times and also some other references from French and Spanish traditions as well.

From that he moves on to the third kind of imitation. It is within this that he tries to situate the poet. "For these third be they which most properly do imitate to teach and to delight; and to imitate borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be". And so at this point, when he is beginning to talk about the poet- poet and his art form poetry- that he begins to talk about the functions of a poet as well.

So, what do they do? Unlike the first two types that one spoke about where the objectives were primarily to teach, to instruct, to ensure that there is a proper religious philosophical framework within which human behavior is conditioned. Unlike that, in the third category of imitation within which he locates the poet too, the function over here is to imitate both to delight and teach.

"And delight to move men to take that goodness in hand, which, without delight, they would fly as from a stranger." So, what is this additional quality that this poet brings and that poetry gives to the first two dimensions? This added quality is delight, the ability to delight. So, across various religious frameworks, across various philosophical frameworks from time immemorial, delight or pleasure was always seen as something inferior compared to wisdom, compared to teaching.

So, in all moral and social fabrics, in all kinds of understandings about human behavior, pleasure was never seen as something inherently good. So, here we find the critical tradition

taking a different turn altogether, and taking off, of course, from some of the classical writers and emphasizing this twin quality of teaching and delight. And here he also puts it very poignantly, very succinctly, that, had it not been for the quality of delight, people would have fled from that.

Because what gives this added flavor to the quality of poetry, to the function of poet is this ability to delight and he continues to say, “and teach to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved, which being the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed, yet want there are not idle tongues to bark at them.” And he also encourages us to look at the subdivisions of poetry- the heroic, lyric, tragic, comic, satiric, iambic, elegiac, pastoral, and certain others.

And while talking about these different categories, he also tries to privilege content over form. This is when he says, “It is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet.” He is also daring to say something very significantly different over here. Which is why this document is also known as, it has been mentioned as one of the most daring documents produced in Renaissance England, especially within the field of literature.

He is bold enough to say that it is not really about the rhyming scheme, it is not really versing which maketh a poet and then he goes on to make this comparison with the discipline of history, with the historian which we would come to in a while. “But it is that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by.” A poet is not known, a poet is not identified by the form within which he works.

The identification of poetry, the hallmark of poetry, Sydney tells us at this point of time that, it is not about whether it is going to rhyme or not, it is not about the versification scheme at all. It is about something else. It is about this power to delight. It is about this ability to offer delightful teaching. We continue to see over here that there is a certain way in which neo-Platonic as well as Aristotelian humanist tendencies come to work over here almost simultaneously.

But the emphasis on delight- that is something very, very significant- and it also becomes something like a turning point in the history of literary criticism, in the history of the ways in which we are even taught to look at literature or any kind of imaginative art form. And from

this point onwards what Sydney does is, he is categorically trying to elevate poetry to a different realm altogether.

It is not just about learning, it is about an elevated, a higher kind of learning which also involves delight and it has all kinds of persuasive arguments in place to ensure that people do not flee from this kind of teaching. On the other hand, they are drawn to this sort of teaching because it also involves delight, it also involves pleasure. “This purifying of wit, this enriching of memory, enabling of judgment, and enlarging of conceit, which commonly we call learning.”

Look at the various phrases that he uses to talk about this new kind of learning, which comes along with delight, to teach and to delight. “The final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clay lodgings, can be capable of.” So, there is a perfection that human soul also achieves along with this three neo Platonic in that sense too.

It is very neo-Platonic, we say neo-Platonic to indicate that it also talks about the elevation of souls, it also talks about the purification of souls, about the capacity of art, about the capacity of poetry to edify the human soul. And by extension, work towards the healthy functioning of a society.

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The image shows a woman in a green top speaking in front of a screen displaying two pages of text from a book. The left page is titled "OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF A MAN'S SELF" and the right page is titled "OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF A MAN'S VIRTUE". The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner of the screen.

OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF A MAN'S SELF

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OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF A MAN'S VIRTUE

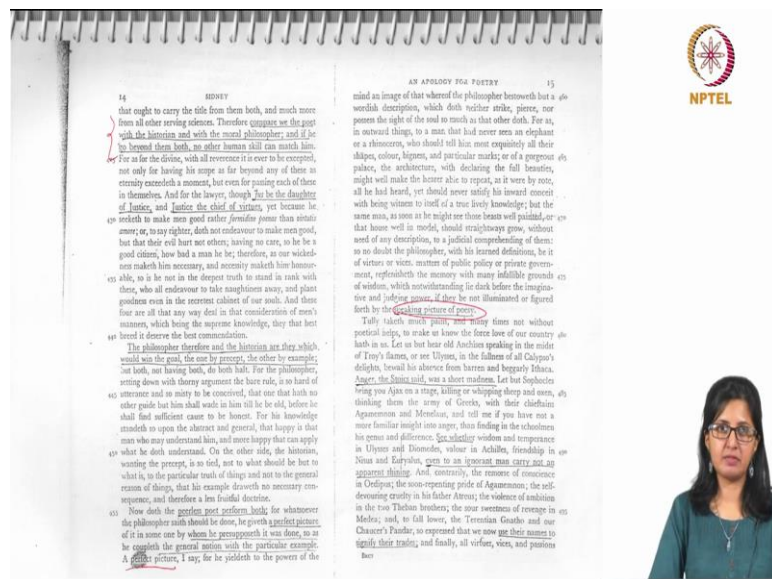
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And he ends the discussion with this almost conclusive statement. “So that the ending end which means the supreme and the final end, the End of all earthly learning being virtuous action, those skills that most serve to bring forth that have a most just title to be princes over

all the rest; wherein, if we can show, the poet is worthy to have it before any other competitors.”

So he almost takes us to a point where he is able to convince his audience that poetry is also about learning virtuous things. And this is something, this kind of learning also happens along with delight. And this delight, this kind of pleasure need not be looked down upon. On the other hand, it needs to be seen at an elevated state, it needs to be situated in a more elevated state as compared to religious learning or philosophical learning.

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The comparison that he draws over here, in terms of the poet, in terms of poetry, it happens in two ways. “Therefore, compare we the poet with the historian and with the moral philosopher.” So, this sort of comparison also helps in this battle of disciplines, because there we are also going through a time, Sydney is also writing during a time when there is a lot of discussion about which discipline or which art form is more superior to the other.

So, there is this hierarchy of disciplines, there is this hierarchy of different kinds of knowledges. And Sydney is trying to position the poet, position the art form poetry as a worthy competitor. And instead of looking down upon poetry, he also encourages others to see it at par with any other discipline where the poet or the art form poetry can compete with others in terms of function, in terms of its delivery, in terms of the techniques which are involved.

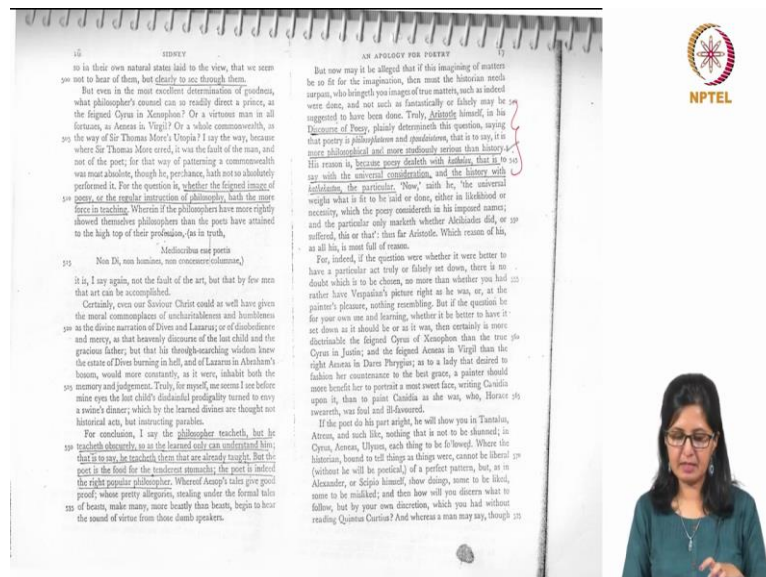
In the following passage, he says, “the philosopher therefore and the historian are they which would win the goal, the one by precept, the other by example.” So, he is telling us in greater

detail about what philosopher does, what the historian does so that he can properly situate what the poet does, too. And what does he say? “The peerless poet performs both.” So, he is comparing on the one hand, he is trying to compare the poet with the philosopher and the historian.

And then continually we can find that in these, in all of these passages he is trying to prove how the poet is far superior to a philosopher or a historian. And he talks about how the poet is the only one who is capable of giving a perfect picture. And this continuous reference to the poet giving a perfect picture. He talks about perfect picture over here and then the picture of poesy. This we find is also in continuation with the classical tradition, if you remember the discussions on *Poetics*, he gives a lot of examples from history as well as from painting.

And that is also one of the ways in which we learn how to simulate one form or the other when it comes to applying yardsticks, when it comes to formulating different valuating principles.

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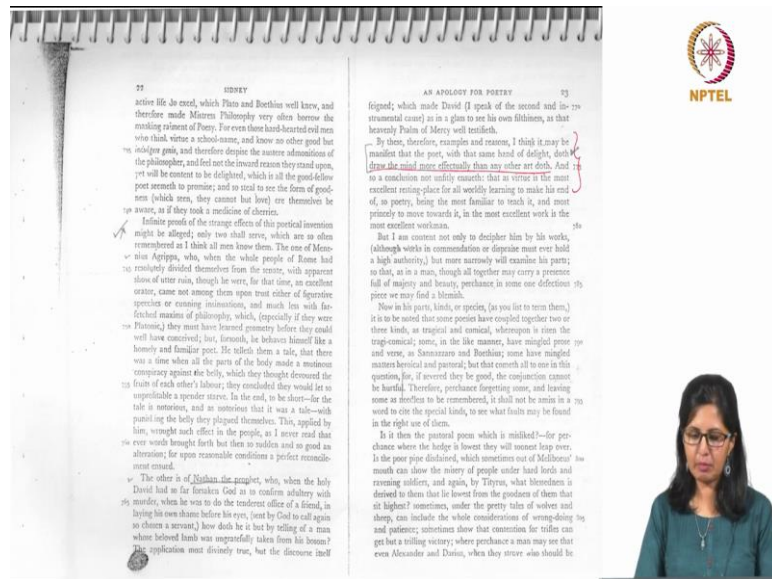
And in the right moment, he also brings in Aristotle again, when he states, “Truly, Aristotle himself, in his *Discourse of Poesy*, plainly determineth this question, saying that poetry is *philosophoteron* and *spoudaioteron*, that is to say, it is more philosophical and more studiously serious than history. His reason is, because poesy deals with the universal consideration, and the history with the particular.”

And look at the way in which the argument is being built over here. Poetry is dealing with the universal, which is again an extension of the many discussions that Aristotle also tried to

invoke in his humanistic approach about the universality of poetry, the universality of any imaginative art form, which also makes it hard to contest.

So, here, Sydney again reiterates that poetry deals with universal things, while history deals with particular things. Here, as mentioned before, he is going a few steps ahead in not just justifying poetry, but also elevating it to a more superior status than philosophy or history.

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Sydney continues to make a very extensive case for the poet arguing that he needs to be placed at a higher status compared to the philosopher and historian. “By these, therefore, examples and reasons, I think it may be manifest that the poet, with that same hand of delight, doth draw the mind more effectually than any other art doth.”

So, he gives a lot of examples, you might at some point find that it also becomes very tiring to follow through these examples from various traditions, from religion, from Christianity in particular from the Greek and Roman classics. And there are a lot of examples, there are a lot of references that this text is almost littered with, that you may find quite exhausting to go through those lists.

But we find that the compelling point that he tries to make is whether you are trying to take the trajectory of religion or the trajectory of philosophy or history, whichever way you go, there is no way in which one can refute the fact that the poet is certainly superior to other artists and other art forms.

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The screenshot shows a video lecture with a background image of a page from Horace's *The Art of Poetry*. The page is numbered 66 and 67. The text on page 66 includes the title "HONEY" and the beginning of the poem: "rock of this world's downfall, the benefit they got was that the silver-tongued man say." The text on page 67 includes the title "AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY" and the beginning of the poem: "mind with desire to be worthy, and informs with counsel how to be worthy." A woman with glasses and a blue top is speaking in the foreground.

And at this point he also begins to respond to the allegations that Gosson had made. He does not mention the name Gosson, he does not even refer to the work *School of Abuse* that Stephen Gosson had produced. But he makes this statement over here, “To the argument of abuse, I will answer after.” Which also tells us that at some level, at various levels, in fact, Sydney's line of defense is in response to the line of attack that Gosson had in his work.

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The screenshot shows a video lecture with a background image of a page from Horace's *The Art of Poetry*. The page is numbered 66 and 67. The text on page 66 includes the title "HONEY" and the beginning of the poem: "rock of this world's downfall, the benefit they got was that the silver-tongued man say." The text on page 67 includes the title "AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY" and the beginning of the poem: "mind with desire to be worthy, and informs with counsel how to be worthy." A woman with glasses and a blue top is speaking in the foreground.

And every now and then, if you look at the structure of this work, it is not divided into different sections, but every now and then, he also does a summing up, there is a recap which you can find over here.

“Since, then, poetry is of all human learnings the most ancient and of most fatherly antiquity, as from whence other learnings have taken their beginnings, since it is so universal that no

learned nation doth despise it, nor no barbarous nation is without it; since both Roman and Greek gave divine names unto it, the one of “prophesying,” the other of “making,” and that indeed that name of “making” is fit for him, considering that whereas other arts retain themselves within their subjects, and receive, as it were, their being from it, the poet only bringeth his own stuff, and did not learn a conceit out of a matter, but maketh matter for a conceit; since neither his description nor his end containeth any evil, the thing described cannot be evil; since his effects be so good as to teach goodness, and delight the learners of it. Since therein, namely in moral doctrine, the chief of all knowledges, he doth not only far pass the historian, but for instructing is well nigh comparable to the philosopher, and for moving leaveth him behind him; since the Holy Scripture, wherein there is no uncleanness, has whole parts in it poetical, and that even our Savior Christ vouchsafed to use the flowers of it; since all his kinds are not only in their united forms, but in their several dissections fully commendable; I think, and think I think rightly, the laurel crown appointed for triumphant captains doth worthily, of all other learnings, honor the poet’s triumph.

This is a paragraph, a long sentence, as you can see it also tells us about the kind of language and diction which was used during that time. And more than that, there is a summing up he does over here, where he states what he had been trying to do in these last few passages, trying to situate the poet from various angles.

And how he proves that if in the annals of history, religion and philosophy, if the trajectory of the poet is laid out so clearly identifying him as the Prophet, the maker and someone who produces delight even while he is teaching, there is no way in which the poet can be discarded. There is no way in which poetry can be degraded. And he also uses this very compelling reference of Jesus Christ himself. Because he also knows that that will address the audience who are already convinced by Stephen Gosson, who also was a Puritan.

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The image shows a video recording of a lecture. On the right side, a woman with glasses and a green top is speaking. On the left side, a scanned page of Sidney's 'An Apology for Poetry' is displayed. The page is annotated with handwritten notes in red and blue ink. The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner of the video frame.

AS AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY

the flowers of it; since all his kinds are not only in their united forms, but in their several directions fully commendable; I think, and think I think rightly, the laurel crown appointed for triumphant captains doth worthily, of all other laurels, 90 honour the poet's triumph.

But because we have ears as well as tongues, and that the lightest reasons that may be will seem to weigh greatly, if nothing be put in the counter-balance, let us hear, and, as well as we can, ponder, what objections be made against this art 95 which may be worthy either of yielding or of opposing.

First, truly, I note not only in these men, but in all that kind of people who seek a praise by surpassing others, that they do prodigally spend a great many wandering words in quips and scoffs, carping and railing at each thing 100 which, by stirring the spleen, may carry the brain from a through- beholding the worthiness of the subject. These kind of objections, as they are full of a very idle casiness (since there is nothing of so sacred a majesty but that an itching tongue may rub itself upon it), so deserve they no other answer, but, instead 105 of laughing at the jest, to laugh at the jester. We know a playing wit can praise the discretion of an ass, the comfartableness of being in debt, and the jolly comradery of being sick of the plague. So of the contrary side, if we will turn Ovid's verse,

Ut laevis sermone promissioque nulli,
96 'that good lie hid in accents of the evil.' Aegypus will be as merry in showing the vanity of science, as Erasmus was in commending of folly; neither shall any man or matter escape some touch of these smiling railers. But for Erasmus and Aegypus, they had another foundation than the superficial part 100 would promise. Marry, these other pleasant fault-finders, who will correct the verb before they understand the noun, and confute others' knowledge before they confirm their own, I would have them only remember that scoffing cometh not of wisdom; so as the best title in true English they get with their 105 corrections is to be called good fools, for so have our grave schoolmasters ever termed that humorous kind of poets.

But that which giveth greatest cause to their railing humours is rhyming and versing. It is already said, (and as I think 110 truly said,) it is not rhyming and versing that maketh poetry. One may be a poet without versing, and a versifier without poetry. But yet presuppose it were inseparable (as indeed it seemeth Scaliger judgeth,) truly it were an inseparable commendation. For if *sermo* next to *ratio*, speech next to reason, be the greatest gift bestowed upon mortality, that cannot be priviledged which doth most pithily that blessing of *sermo* which cometh 115 sibeth each word, not only, (as a man may say,) by his forcible quality, but by his best-measured-quantity; carrying even in themselves a harmony, without, perchance, number, measure, order, proportion be in our time grown odious.

But lay aside the just praise it hath by being the only fit speech for music (music, I say, the most divine stinger of the senses,) thus much is undoubtedly true, that if reading be foolish without remembering, memory being the only treasure of knowledge, those words which are fittest for memory are likewise most convenient for knowledge. Now that verse far 120 exceedeth prose in the knitting up of the memory, the reason is manifest; the words, (besides their delight, which hath a great affinity to memory,) being so set, as one cannot be lost but the whole work falls, which, according itself, calleth the remembrance back to itself, and so most strongly confirmeth it. Besides, one word so, as it were, begetting another, as, be it in rhyme or measured verse, by the former a man shall have a sure guide to the follower. Lastly, even they that have taught the art of memory have showed nothing so apt for it as a certain room divided into many places, well and thoroughly known; 125 now that hath the verse in effect perfectly, every word having his several seat, which seat must needs make the word remembered. But what needeth more in a thing so known to all men? Who is it that ever was a scholar that doth not carry away some verses of Virgil, Horace, or Cato, which in his youth he learned, and even to his old age serve him for handy houses? and

Pentametrum fugit, non gurgulis abest ut.
130 *Dem sitis quinque plures, crebula turba sumus.*

But the fitness it hath for memory is notably proved by all delivery of art, wherein, for the most part, from grammar to 135

And there is a term that he uses right after that. And he is also responding to some of the tendencies of his times, poet-haters, and he is also addressing them and telling them a few things to deal with the kind of attack that Stephen Gosson had launched against poetry and poets in particular. So, with this, we also wrap up this session.

In the next session, we shall be looking at how Sydney places his line of argument within a native English political tradition and how in that process he is also generating something which is not there already, by making this very extensive argument in favor of poetry, in favor of poets. And by comparing the art of poetry with the other disciplines, he is also trying to generate a native critical tradition on which we will find that the rest of English criticism is also based upon. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.