

Literary Criticism
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Philip Sydney's "An Apology for Poetry" Session-3

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Hello, and welcome to today's session we continue looking at this text, Philip Sydney's *An Apology for Poetry*. As mentioned earlier, this is seen as one of the most daring literary documents of Renaissance England. And this is also written at a time when England had not yet formulated any sort of critical tradition or critical principles that they could claim as their own. It was also a time when after the introduction of the printing press, we find that a lot of people are writing and there are a lot of poets, there are people who pass off as poets who could be found in England at this point of time.

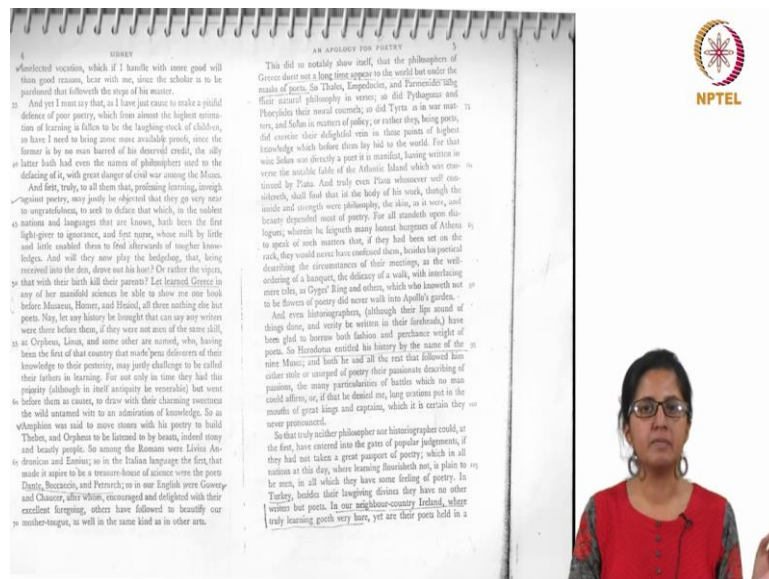
And there is also a period, this is also a period which does not have much respectability accorded to the occupation, the vocation of poetry in that sense. So, Sydney is writing in this context when there is also an allegation. There is also this work published against poetry by Stephen Gosson- *The School of Abuse*- where he locates poetry as “the nurse of all lies”, as “the nurse of all abuses”. And more importantly, he also tries to go in line with the argument made by Plato long back that poets should be banished from his Republic.

So, Sydney's writing comes at that point of time when there is a very, very severe lack of critical principles, there is a severe lack of any identifiable literary tradition in England. So, he comes in as this perfect intervention and for the same reason, he also gets elevated to this

status of being the first ever proper critic in English literary criticism. So, we will also take a quick recap of this text to see what all we have covered so far.

So, he begins with this satirical kind of anecdote, which also talks about the futility of such exercises, whether it comes from the side of Gosson or from himself. And this satirical note, this witty note is very important to situate the tone with which Sydney also introduces literature and the critical principles in relation.

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And there is a way in which he begins to position his argument, Stephen Gosson's argument was predominantly within the framework of the moral conditioning of those times, which is also theologically oriented. And Stephen Gosson, being a puritan priest, he had anchored much of his principles based on church beliefs. And church beliefs were also the popular beliefs of those times.

And though England had moved significantly ahead from the medieval times, which was entirely theocratic for them, we find that even the secular humanist tendencies that England during doing that point begins to display is also heavily influenced by the church beliefs, by the influences of the church. And we also see that at that point of time, in terms of political governance and in terms of the church governance they are both very closely intertwined and that it is hard to separate one from the other.

So, the arguments that Stephen Gosson makes in favor of the moral conditioning of the society and the charges that he levels against poetry in particular, those things do have a very great impact in England during that time, which is the end of 16th century. So, at this point,

when Sydney is countering those arguments, he makes a very intelligent move in not taking Stephen Gosson's name at all.

On the other hand, he takes us through this journey, a historical journey, a chronological journey to situate poetry in its place. So, as we have seen in the previous session, in the first few passages, he laboriously tries to map a history for poetry and he argues that whether you take Greek civilization or Roman civilization, from this classical distant past, you can see the significance that poetry always had with respect to the discipline that one was dealing with.

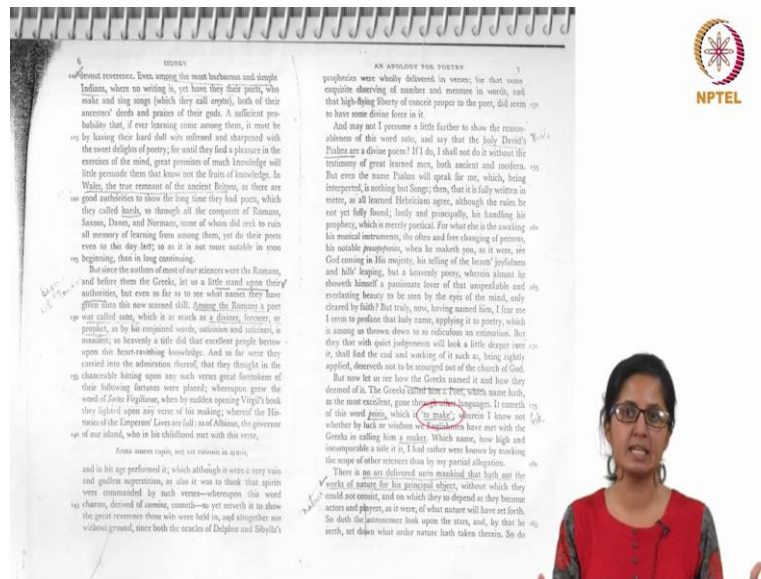
So, this is also an effective way of positioning poetry in this hierarchical line of different disciplines and also trying to showcase that poetry was always already there. It is a historical genre and it is not something that evidently cropped up in the last few decades after the invention, after the introduction of printing in England. It is not something which can be seen as a modern thing, and hence a despicable thing during that time.

On the other hand, it does have a classical footing, it has a very, very respectable footing from the classical times onwards. And what needs to be reiterated at this point is also the fact that during 16th century, classical learning was also considered as one of the highest forms of refined learning in England and most of the learned people of those times, they were very, very well versed in classical texts.

So, we will find that this text is almost littered with a lot of classical references, some of which are not very relevant for us today, and some are also quite out of context and entirely lost on us. So, that said, we find that Sydney is making the right moves in order to address an audience which is equally learned, an audience which is respectable and an audience which also believes in both things simultaneously, one, classical learning and secondly, their belief is certainly rooted very much in Christianity.

So, we will find the significant moves that Sydney makes in order to address these two kinds of audience whose overlaps are also very, very important. And we find Sydney taking us through this journey and giving us examples from different parts of the world to prove that poetry was not something which was alien to classical civilization.

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And having said that, when he comes to line 125, as you can see over here, he also states how the poet also had a divine status in the earlier societies. Here he is also addressing the moral fabric of those times. He is also trying to situate the poet as a moral being, who is not essentially devoid of all kinds of human qualities, all kinds of virtuous qualities. Because that was also one of the arguments, one of the charges that Stephen Gosson had leveled against poetry.

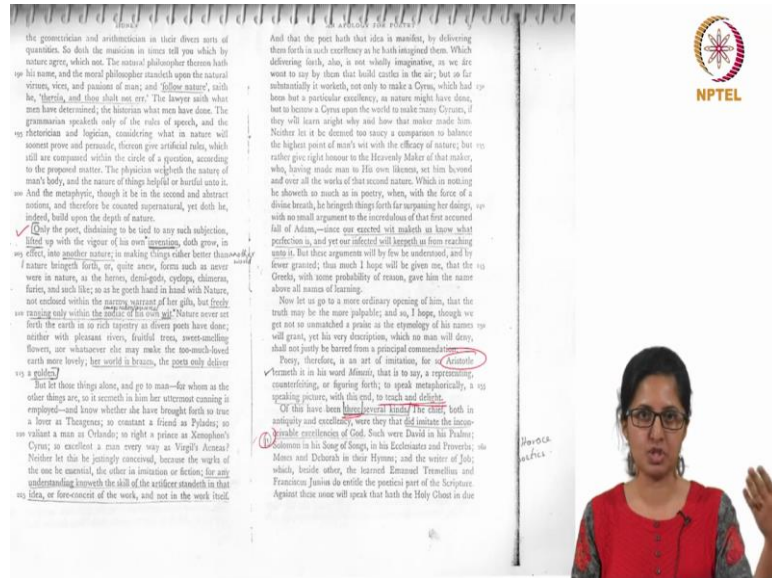
And here, we find Sidney making this very commendable move by introducing Bible into this discussion, which is what we see from line 150 onwards, he talks about David's Psalms. So, if classical learning and if the classical basis of poetry is not an argument which is compelling enough for you, then he is telling us then I have an example for you from the Bible, and how do you refute it.

Even Stephen Gosson apparently cannot refute it, because he is talking about the quality of David's Psalm as a poetical piece. He is talking about the poetical and literary qualities which are embedded even into the holy texts, even in the Bible. And therein he is also elevating the poet to a different status all together by making this compelling argument that poetry is not something that can be taken out of classical learning or out of religion.

And these are the frameworks which are also almost irrefutable, almost undeniable for a learned person in 16th century England. And he is also talking about the poet as someone who invents, someone who makes. He draws upon extensively from the Greek and Roman terms in order to prove his point, in order to pursue his line of argument. Which also again,

draws us to this significant point that he is capitalizing a lot on the significance of classical learning, which was more than irrefutable in 16th century England.

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And from line 200 till 215, there is a theory of poetry, there is a theory of literature, there is a theory of art that he sort of devices. Though he does not use the term imagination, we find that that is the keyword over here. And we find that the word imagination, though it is not used until say the Romantic period, we find that it gets mentioned as an under text as a subtext almost throughout the discussions. But only in the Romantic period, the term imagination gets the limelight that it deserves.

So that said, from line 250 onwards, as you can see over here, Sydney is making another important discursive move, now he is bringing back Aristotle to discussion, he is bringing back Aristotle to prove that the kind of poetry that he is trying to defend, the art form that he is trying to defend, it does have a very proper classical lineage. And herein he is also introducing us to this term, *mimēsis*.

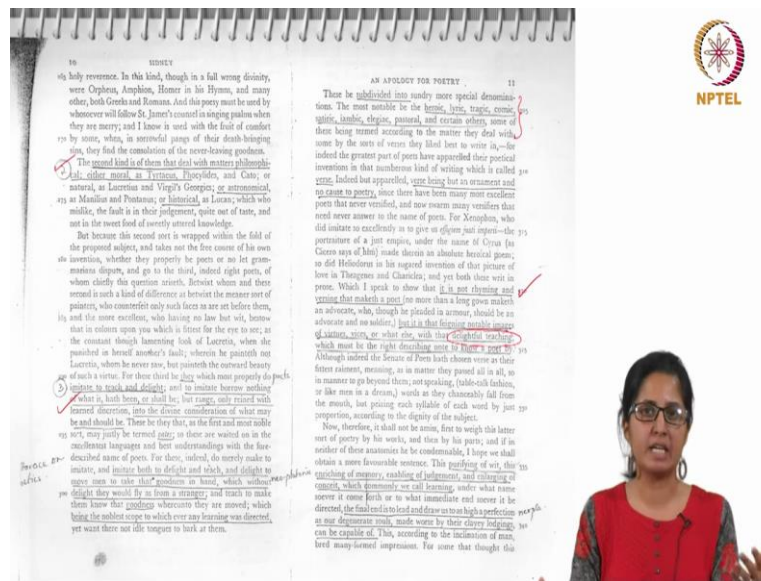
And the way in which he talks about Aristotle over here, the way in which he introduces Aristotle in a very seamless manner, it also shows us that Aristotle was a respectable kind of figure in 16th century intellectual circuits. So, it really made sense when one was making an argument in favor of poetry by quoting Aristotle. So, he evidently talks about *mimēsis* over here and he talks about three different kinds of *mimēsis*, three different kinds of imitation.

This move, this is another very, very important discursive historical move that Sydney makes. It is for this reason that Sydney has been also seen as the first literary critic who gave a sort of

a foundation for English literary criticism, a native literary tradition, a native literary critical principle was sort of, you know, facilitated to emerge at this point.

So, this is what he does, he talks about three different kinds of imitation, we had already taken a look at it, that we are just trying to recap this at this point of time. So, the first one is largely divine in nature. It talks about the pagan gods, it talks about Christianity. So, there is a way in which poetry is being used to imitate the qualities which were primarily divine.

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And the second one deals with philosophical and moral matters, also astronomical or historical matters, it has largely got to do with learning, it has got to do with instruction. So, the first two, we will see that the first is a sort of a divine instruction and for which imitation plays a significant role. The second is that of a classical instruction or a secular kind of instruction. Again, poetry plays a significant role over here.

And in the third kind, this is where Sydney begins to further clarify what he means by poetry and what is the kind of poetry that he seeks to defend over here. In Aristotle's notion of *mimēsis* and in Aristotle's notion of looking at poetry or any art form, in general, this distinction was not really well made. And we also may need to make allowances for this, given that in the classical times there were significant overlaps between and across.

So, here when we come to Sydney's times we find poetry also had a standalone status. It had not yet acquired the kind of respectability that it got in the later times. So, Sydney takes it upon himself to give some kind of respectability to this standalone status that poetry had begun to acquire in 16th century English. So, when he talks about the third kind of imitation,

this is how he goes about it. For these third be they which most properly do imitate to teach and delight.

So, he is bringing in the Aristotelian concepts, also to show that poetry has a standalone status, especially in 16th century England. And this move, this discursive move that he makes is also a very significant foundational aspect in terms of providing a native literary critical tradition.

And when he talks about the third kind of imitation, we then get to know that after having taken us through this chronological historical journey where he situated poetry as an ancient classical thing, where he also gave it some respectability and credibility in terms of situating it within classical learning, as well as within the theological framework, when he talks about Bible and Psalms, he makes his third important move where he gives poetry a standalone status.

And this has also been seen by many critics and many later historians as a very, very important move towards secular humanism. And we also find that in terms of defining the critical tradition it is extremely important to situate poetry as a standalone thing, literature as a standalone thing within the frameworks of secular humanism, away from classical principles of learning and away from theological understandings, within which literature was also framed until that point of time.

And this has also been seen as very, very significantly neo Platonic. Another important thing that we need to note at this point is that Aristotle and Plato, they cease to be seen as two different polarized notions. We find them coming together in a very significant way and in a very useful way in order to situate poetry and different kinds of art forms in a more nuanced stage, especially within the secular humanist tradition.

So, until that point of time, when one was looking at classical learning, Aristotle was seen as the critic, the philosopher, who supported poetry who supported different kinds of art forms. And Plato was used to pursue a lot of criticisms against poets in general, which is what we also saw Stephen Gosson had done in his *School Of Abuse*, the text to which Sydney is also responding to in this work in *An Apology for Poetry*.

So, at this stage of time, we also realize that what Sydney is trying to do is he is trying to bring together Aristotle and Plato in the same discussion, and he is using both to pursue his line of argument that poetry and by extension literature, has the power to move, which is why

it has been seen as a dangerous thing. So, the focus now gets entirely shifted and poetry and literary art forms are given a standalone status and this is something that the later critics do not have to do.

So, what Sydney does at this point is, he is making the ground clear for the future critics so that they do not have to labor this hard in order to place poetry as something significant, something hierarchically very significant in comparison to the other kinds of disciplines and other forms of knowledges, which were also in circulation during their time. So, in the remaining passages, what he does is he is also trying to further compartmentalize and further subdivide different kinds of poetry.

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He is also engaging with poetry as a separate genre and trying to show that there is a historical way in which poetry has always been studied as something very important. So, it is not something which happened in the last few decades ever since the invention of printing. It is not something which happened in the last few decades as part of the Renaissance, which was also influencing England in a big way.

So, this historical understanding, this historical positioning of poetry within a larger framework is extremely important when we look at Sydney's *An Apology for Poetry*. And then when we move on and we reach line 540 we find him using Aristotle again, I will read this excerpt here.

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“His reason is, because poesy dealeth with *katholou*, that is to say with the universal consideration, and the history with the particular.” So, this distinction which Aristotle had made, and we had taken a look at it when we were doing *Poetics*, and we find Sydney further underscoring this.

That poetry and history are two different things and poetry deals with the universal and history with the particular. And this is also a significant move that he makes in terms of countering the kind of hierarchical ordering that was in place during that time. And he is also making another important move by placing poetry as something universal. And again, this can be placed within the discourse of secular humanism, as we will also see in the later sessions.

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So, in the next session, we should take a look at how Sydney very pointedly counters Gosson's three major arguments against poetry. One is that poetry is that poetry is the nurse of all abuses. Secondly, poetry is the nurse of all lies. And thirdly, how Gosson had taken forward the argument in line with Plato's argument that poets had to be dismissed from the Republic.

So, having taken a look at the first half of this essay, where Sydney sets the stage for a discussion on poetry and for having told us how significant it is to look at poetry as a standalone art form, as a standalone discipline, from the following session, we will look at how he counters these three major arguments and also how he positions this in such a context that we also feel the need for a native literary critical tradition to emerge.

So, what Sydney does in this entire piece of work is taking us away from the rigidity of classical learning, he uses it to advance his arguments, but he also manages to take literary criticism, native English literary criticism and native English literary tradition away from the classical rigidities and to give it a separate status all together.

So, from this point onwards, from Sydney's *An Apology for Poetry* onwards, we find that we do not any longer have to refer back to Aristotle or to Plato in order to talk about literature, or any kind of art form. There is a native tradition in place and Sydney sort of formalizes this in various ways. So, as indicated in the previous session, it is not as if Sydney had said a lot of original things and had come compiled it.

There is hardly anything original as we would see in this because this was also the line of argument which was being pursued in various ways during that time. What Sydney does is he makes them come together in a very significant way and he also is able to take it forward in such a way that a foundation for English literary critical tradition is laid. So, with that, we wrap up today's session. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.