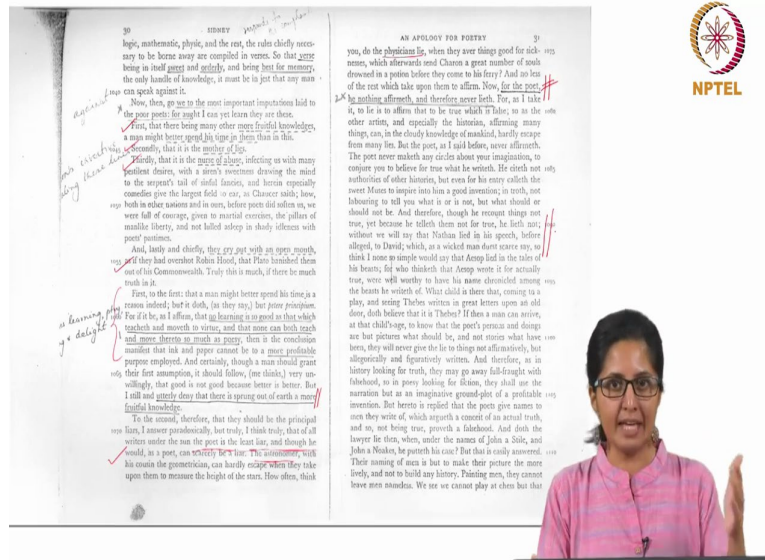


Literary Criticism
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Philip Sydney's "An Apology for Poetry" Session-4
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Hello and welcome to today's session. We continue discussing Sydney's *An Apology for Poetry*. Today we begin by looking at that section which is halfway through this piece of writing where Sydney begins to address the charges which were being leveled against poetry by Stephen Gosson. So, as mentioned in one of the previous sessions itself, this is a response to Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse*. There were three major allegations that Stephen Gosson had raised against poetry.

And this work, this is a work in which Sydney also responds to Gosson's allegations in addition to also situating poetry within a secular humanist framework. He first mentions the first allegation, "first that there being many other more fruitful knowledges, a man might better spend his time in them than in this." Secondly, that it is the mother of lies. Thirdly, that it is the nurse of abuse. "And lastly, and chiefly they cry out with an open mouth as if they had overshot Robin Hood that Plato banished them out of his Commonwealth. Truly this is much, if there be much truth in it."

So, these are the four major points, the first three are sort of allegations against poetry and the fourth one is a rationale, which Gosson also composes by drawing Plato to his side. So, these four are the major postulations in Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse* and now let us take a look at how Sydney decides to respond to it.

He first takes the first allegation, “First, to the first: that a man might better spend his time in a reason indeed; but it doth, as they say, but *petere principium* for if it be, as I affirm, that no learning is so good as that which teacheth and moveth to virtue, and that none can both teach and move thereto so much as poesy, then is the conclusion manifest that ink and paper cannot be to a more profitable purpose employed. And certainly, though a man should grant their first assumption, it should follow, methinks, very unwillingly, that good is not good because better is better. But I still and utterly deny that there is sprung out of earth a more fruitful knowledge.” Here we need to keep in mind, we need to bear in mind that Sydney is addressing a crowd which is also being very, very influenced by the tenets of Renaissance. And that is also a period when the English public is being made aware about the many virtues of knowledge, the many virtues of learning which is not essentially only to seek livelihood.

And they are also going through a phase in history where Renaissance becomes really big in shaping and reshaping their understanding of knowledge, their understanding of virtue and even in redefining their understanding of the purpose of human life itself. So, Sydney is trying to address an audience who is very much influenced by the principles of Renaissance.

And he also places this argument in such a way that it makes sense to them in terms of, you know, the new understanding of virtue, the new understanding of knowledge and even the way in the purpose of human life itself has been refashioned and redesigned during those times. So, this is also an argument, which cannot be refuted in Renaissance England, in 16th century England.

And we realize that during this time, more than anything else, virtue is seen as one of the prime ends of knowledge, one of the prime ends of all kinds of learning. And Sydney here is using exactly that in order to pursue this argument further, in order to state that poetry is something which can teach much, much better, through delight than any other kinds of discipline. And in order support this argument further, he comes to the second point where he makes this compelling argument in favor of the poet.

“To the second, therefore, that they should be the principal liars, I answer paradoxically, but truly, I think truly, that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar; and though he would, as a poet can scarcely be a liar. The astronomer, with his cousin the geometrician, can hardly escape when they take upon them to measure the height of the stars. How often, think you, do the physicians lie, when they aver things good for sicknesses, which afterwards send Charon a great number of souls drowned in a potion before they come to his ferry?”

And no less of the rest which take upon them to affirm. Now for the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth.” 16th century England and also in world history, 16th century is also a time when we witnessed a lot of new inventions and new kinds of knowledges and forms of sciences taking over. So, he is particularly talking about the astronomer and in very sarcastic terms, his cousin the geometrician, and the physician.

These are also the sciences in which a lot of advancement is being made during that time. And we also realize that in 16th century, a lot of things which we have believed as true in terms of science, they have also been toppled over because there is also this realization about science that the moment the premise, the fundamental premise, changes, everything will also undergo a change.

So, here, he is almost mocking at the idea of truth, at the idea of fact, which is seen as more scientific, which is seen as more historic in comparison to what poetry does. And through this argument, not only is he completely decimating the idea of truth and fact and how that is being attributed very conveniently to certain disciplines, such as astronomy or geometry or medicine. He is also trying to state that the poet is someone who does not make any such tall claims.

And look at the example that he gives. It is a very powerful, it is a very intelligent, compelling argument that he makes when he says, the astronomer is bound to tell more lies when he is talking about the height of the stars because there is no way in which these sort of things can be corroborated. And you are talking about 16th century- things were even more underdeveloped then.

And there is a certain premise, there is a certain belief that you have in science as a system in order to process these things effectively. In the same way, things have gone wrong radically in the field of medicine too and, there you even have human lives at stake. And Sydney is positing this question over here that if this be the case with astronomy and geometry and medicine, what is this audacity which makes one feel that the poet is the one who lies.

At least, he says, the poet does not affirm and he cannot lie, we find the power of logic over here. And occasionally in this text even as you read through it, you find he uses the power of rhetoric very, very well. He is a learned man, he knows how to use logic and he also uses the arguments, the charges which were leveled against him, and he uses them and turns them

around in favor of him to pursue the argument that poetry is definitely something which is worth pursuing.

And poetry is definitely something which can be placed at a higher hierarchical level in comparison to all the other kinds of learning and the other forms of systems that one sees around. So, hereby he is completely decimating and totally negating the second argument that the poet is a liar by saying the poet does not claim to speak the truth in the first place. It is not about truth and facts, the poet is actually talking about certain other kinds of experiences which need not be understood on the basis of truth and lies.

And he also gives a lot of examples from their literature, the classical literature that most learned people of those times were also familiar with. We find, as mentioned in the previous sessions too, this entire text is littered with a number of classical references, some of which could be entirely lost on us. But nevertheless, it is important for us to remember that he uses classical literature extensively.

And just when he thinks that it is important to also bring in a theological angle, also bring in Christianity and Bible to this discussion, he always immediately remembers to bring in David's Psalms. So, it is a very balanced kind of logical argument that he places before the Renaissance audience in 16th century England, where he uses fine elements from classical literature. And he also uses a sufficient number of instances from the Bible in order to address, in order to get through an audience which is also predominantly religious.

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The image displays two pages of text from John Donne's 'An Apology for Poetry'. The left page is titled 'DONNE' and the right page is titled 'AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY'. The text on the left page discusses the value of poetry and the poet's role, while the text on the right page discusses the benefits of poetry and the poet's role. A woman wearing glasses and a pink shirt is visible in the bottom right corner, appearing to be speaking or presenting. The NPTEL logo is visible in the top right corner.

Then he goes on to address the third one. “Their third is, how much it abuseth men’s wit, training it to wanton sinfulness and lustful love. For indeed that is the principal, if not the only, abuse I can hear alleged. They say the comedies rather teach than reprehend amorous conceits. They say the lyric is larded with passionate sonnets, the elegiac weeps the want of his mistress, and that even to the heroical Cupid hath ambitiously climbed.”

So, these are the kinds of charges that Stephen Gosson had leveled against poetry, that it also triggers a lot of sinfulness and lustful love, which of course, was seen as completely obnoxious and completely filthy through the lens of Christianity, through the lens of religion. But here also in a very intelligent way, in a very logical way Sydney uses the instances from the Bible, the various instances which talk about lust, which talk about wickedness, which talks about adultery.

He uses those instances to show how there could also be an element of teaching which could be involved in that, that is what he talks about in the section which you can read through later on. And he is also taking this to another level entirely by saying the moment something obnoxious, something wicked, something which is unacceptable is presented through poetry or any kind of art form that need not always necessarily mean that it could have a corrupting influence.

It could also be used as an example to teach people, it could also be used as an instance to expose a wider audience to the range of human behavior that one comes across on a day-to-day basis. And he also uses the idea of abuse in a very logical way. And he uses this example of sword towards the end of this passage, “With a sword thou may kill thy father, and with a sword thou may defend thy prince and country.” So, just like a sword can be used in two different ways to commit murder, and also to defend one's country and one's countrymen, in the same way, it is up to a set of people, a community, a nation, an individual to figure out what to do with the things which they are being exposed to. And here he is opening up this debate to a larger discursive context within which we can also find the emergence of a secular humanist tradition. Where we also find that it is not essentially what is out there which can corrupt a person, but it is also about the various ways in which the situation is responded to, how one appropriates different contexts, depending on one’s situation.

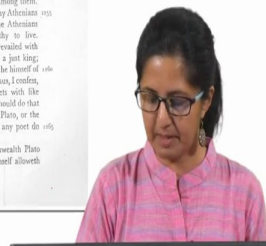
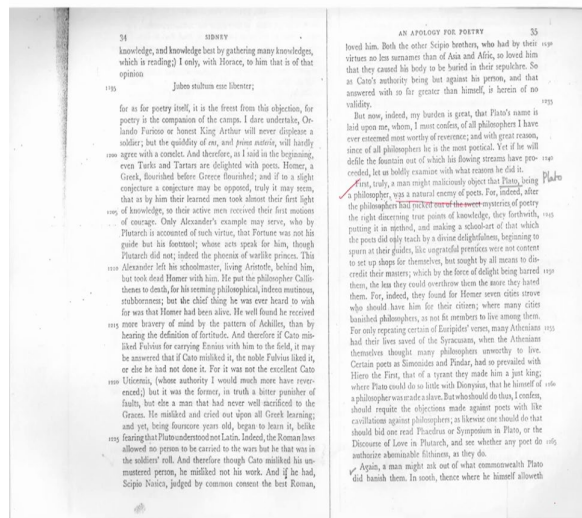
And it is not entirely the poet's fault if a set of people are being trained, as Gosson had put it, to wanton sinfulness and lustful love. And here he is again challenging this audience. Again, let me remind you it is a very rational audience. It is a set of people who really want to

believe in reason, who really want to believe in the power of science, there the human intellect, the power of human decision also assumes a lot of significance.

So, he is also challenging this audience to take decisions on their own, and not to think that something outside, something external, something that a poet writes can have an entirely bad influence on them. So, here by using this power of discretion, by highlighting this power of discretion, he is also telling his audience that, regardless of what you see out there, what you get out there in terms of poetry or what you are being exposed to, through art and literature, you should also have the power of discretion and to decide how to use those materials to which you are being exposed to.

And here, he is doing two things at the same time. On the one hand, he is appealing to an audience, asking them to use their power of discretion. And on the other hand, he is also saying that the poet is actually doing a favor to the society by exposing them to this larger context, to this larger universe of virtue and vice and teaching people how to choose and how to use their discretion.

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So, he now comes to this final allegation and this is where Stephen Gosson had used Plato to push his argument that all poets need to be banished from the ideal Republic. “First, truly, a man might maliciously object that Plato, being a philosopher, was a natural enemy of poets. For, indeed, after the philosophers had picked out of the sweet mysteries of poetry the right discerning true points of knowledge, they forthwith, putting it in method, and making a school-art of that which the poets did only teach by a divine delightfulness, beginning to

spurn at their guides, like ungrateful prentices were not content to set up shops for themselves” and this goes on.

So, here right at the outset, we get a hang of this passage, where Sydney is also indicating to us that he is trying to object this notion that Plato was always seen as a natural enemy of poets. And soon we will see the way in which Sydney turns this argument around in favor of him. And this is how he gives these examples again from Greek and Roman literature in order to prove his point.

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The image is a composite. On the left is a slide with text from 'The Defence of Poesy' by Sir Philip Sidney. The text is in two columns and includes line numbers. A red checkmark is visible at the beginning of the first line. On the right is a video of a woman with glasses and a pink shirt speaking. In the top right corner of the slide area is the NPTEL logo, which consists of a circular emblem with a star-like shape inside, and the text 'NPTEL' below it.

And further down he says, “Again a man might ask out of what commonwealth Plato did banish them. In sooth, thence where he himself alloweth community of women.” So, this is a very powerful argument, that Plato, just like he believed that poet should be banished from the ideal Republic, he also did not give much respect or much agency to women. He also wanted women to be out of any important decision-making scene as far as a Republic or a system of governance was concerned.

“So, as belike this banishment grew not for effeminate wantonness, since little should poetical sonnets be hurtful when a man might have what woman he listed.” So, here you know, he is also trying to say that just because it was mentioned in classical philosophy, it is not reason enough for us to blindly follow anything. He is encouraging a critical approach towards classical philosophy itself.

And here is where we find the power of Sydney's writing, where he is laying out the foundation for a native, literary critical, tradition, an English literary critical tradition. And

this is extremely important when we understand the evolution of literary criticism and also when we try and understand the role that this text played in making things easier in a certain way, in terms of forming a discursive tradition which is more favorable towards a secular humanist outlook.

Which is more favorable towards an approach, which knows the value of literature, knows the value of poetry within the larger historical cultural context. So, I encourage you to read through this section where he talks about Plato and how he makes this argument come around to his favor, to work towards his favor. And in the next session, we will look at how he uses Plato in such a way that his own arguments can be advanced.

And from that, we will also proceed to see how Sydney further cements a native literary tradition, even when there is very little promising art and promising literature in the 16th century, apart from what the earlier centuries had produced such as Chaucer and Gower, Milton and more recently, Spencer. So, we wrap up today's session with this and please take a look at this entire body of writing. This is in terms of the language which has been used here. You can see that it is very laborious and the language is 16th century English.

So, I encourage you to look at this text, strip it entirely off its ornamented language and the pompousness within which language gets situated and go to the kernel of this and pluck it out and try to understand how this begins to make sense in your reading and in your approach. 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.