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"16th Century Criticism"

The prose of English Renaissance includes many works of English criticism - works greater in number than in value. The criticisms are not original but the critics were inspired by the ideas of the continent which themselves were based on antique ideas. The critics of the period were not adaptable to the changed and changing circumstances of their time and very rarely wrote a treatise which had a bearing on the great works of the day. According to Leagouis "A criticism, which ignores contemporary work is almost an abstraction". There was no critical work worth the name till the middle of the sixteenth century. It is with the revival of learning due to Renaissance that Greek and Latin critical works became available to them and the English scholars applied their mind to this branch of literature. The first three critics from Cambridge known as 'Tutor Trio' were the

First regular critics. They were Sir John Cheke, Roger Ascham and Thomas Wilson. Sometimes they are called 'Cambridge School'. They were scholars of the classics and at the same time were devoted to native tongue also. Hence, their criticisms have two trends in them (i) adoration of classics as model and guide and (ii) advocacy in connection with the purity of native tongue. "Sum of this opinion," says Cheke, "that our own tongue should be written clean and pure, unmingled and unmingled with borrowings of other tongues, wherein we take no heed betimes, ever borrowing and never paying, she will be faine to keep house as a bankrupt." Ascham is of the same opinion. In the preface to his 'Toxophilus' he has emphasised the ~~need~~ need to write "English matter in the English tongue for English men". This attitude of Ascham can be gathered from

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'The Schoolmaster',
one thing that we find in his writing is his depreciation of the faculty of appreciation. He is against poetry and even prose romance. We may say that he is opposed to purely imaginative work. This is a sign of intellectual limitation but in no case a misfortune to have the matter-of-fact conservative tendencies of A. Schem. Thomas Wilson's critical treatise entitled 'The Art of ~~Rhetoric~~ Rhetoric' is an important work. The book is based on Cicero and Quintilian. In this book the writer advocates plain prose style divorced from over-old and over-strange words which he termed as "inkhorn terms". One of the reasons why these writers paid much attention to prose style is that at that time English prose was still in infancy. One critical question of the period was concerned with the use of language in poetry and drama. The critical tastes differed on

this point. The problem was whether to use native language as exemplified in the mysteries, the miracles, the moralities and the interludes or to use classical language of the Greek and Latin plays. On the one hand there were Chaucer, Ascham, Wilson, Marlowe and Shakespeare and on the other stood Harvey, Spenser, Campion, Sidney and Ben Jonson. The critics stood in two groups but the common thing among them was that they were all patriotic in their attempt. In the words of Melancthon the former group "loved Rome but London better" and the latter group sought to turn "London into Rome". The latter group argued that if Rome could rise to literary glory at the time of King Augustus, England could also rise to climax of literary glory under the benign rule of Queen Elizabeth I. The controversy was settled by the public and the audience who accepted native language. This was an

initial triumph of the native over the foreign, Sidney and Spenser were not loyal to their statements. They favoured classical metres but used English metres in their poetry.

one important question that dominated the age was concerned with morality in literature.

In Gascoign's "Notes of Instruction" we find important criticism on the subject of prosody. He warned against the misuse of accent. Spenser was also guilty of carelessness with regard to accents. Stephen Gosson in "The School of Abuse" spoke against secular literature especially poetry which, according to him, was "mother of lies". It is really surprising that a man who himself was a scholar and a versifier had spoken against poetry. He finds classical poetry tainted with "loose paganism".

"The School of Abuse" prompted Sir Philip Sidney to write "Apo-

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logic for 'Poetrie'. Gosson had dedicated his 'Abuse' to Sidney whose 'Apologie' was a reply to Gosson's attack on poets and poetry. Sidney defended the poets by taking recourse to old classics and classical ~~writers~~ writers like, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Plutarch and Virgil simply because of the absence of English critical authorities. Sidney thought English literature cheap not because of lack morality but because it was mediocre, weak, ridiculous and without art. A ~~great~~ great deal of controversy had arisen with regard to the question of rhymed and quantitative verse in the world of criticism of the day. William Webble spoke in favour of classical metre in his book entitled "Discourse of English Poetrie" while on the other hand the writer of 'Arte of English Poesie' held the balance. Thomas Campion spoke against rhyme in his 'Observations in the Art of

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English Poetic. Samuel Daniel's 'Defence of Ryme' is taken to be the first reasonable aesthetic criticism in England. His criticism throws light on his sense of justice coloured with breadth of vision and sanity unknown to the persons of his time.

The end.

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