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SIDNEY'S *AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY*

Sidney's *An Apologie for Poetrie* (1580–1581) is in many ways a seminal text of literary criticism. It is not only a defence but also one of the most acclaimed treatises on poetics of its time. While its ideas are not original, it represents the first synthesis in the English language of the various strands and concerns of Renaissance literary criticism, drawing on Aristotle, Horace, and more recent writers such as Boccaccio and Julius Caesar Scaliger. It raises issues – such as the value and function of poetry, the nature of imitation, and the concept of nature – which were to concern literary critics in numerous languages until the late eighteenth century. Sidney's writing of the *Apologie* as a defence of poetry was occasioned by an attack on poetry entitled *The School of Abuse* published in 1579 by a Puritan minister, Stephen Gosson. As mentioned earlier, Sidney rejects Gosson's Protestant attack on courtly pleasure, effectively defending poetry as a virtuous activity for the aristocracy (Matz, 22).

Towards the beginning of the *Apologie*, Sidney observes that poetry has fallen from its status as "the highest estimation of learning . . . to be the laughingstock of children." He produces a wide range of arguments in defense of "poor Poetry," based on chronology, the authority of ancient tradition, the relation of poetry to nature, the function of poetry as imitation, the status of poetry among the various disciplines of learning, and the relationship of poetry to truth and morality. Sidney's initial argument is, that poetry was the first form in which knowledge was expressed, the "first light giver to ignorance," as bodied forth by figures such as Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod, Livius, Ennius, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch (216–217). And the first Greek philosophers Thales, Empedocles, Parmenides, and Pythagoras, he points out, expressed their vision in verse. Even Plato used poetic devices such as dialogue and description of setting and circumstance to adorn his philosophy (217). Again, historians such as Herodotus have borrowed the "fashion" and the "weight" of poetry. Sidney concludes here that "neither philosopher nor historiographer could at the first have entered into the gates of popular judgments, if they had not taken a great passport of poetry" (218). His point is that an essential prerequisite of knowledge is pleasure in learning; and it is poetry that has made each of these varieties of knowledge – scientific, moral, philosophical, political – accessible by expressing them in pleasurable forms (218).

Sidney's second argument might be called the "argument from tradition" since it appeals to the ancient Roman and Greek conceptions of poetry and "stands upon their authorities" (219). The Roman term for the poet was vates, meaning "diviner, foreseer, or prophet, . . . so heavenly a title did that excellent people bestow upon this part v: the early modern period to the enlightenment heart-ravishing knowledge" (219). Sidney argues that this definition of the poet was quite "reasonable," as shown by the fact that the Psalms of David are a "divine poem," whereby prophecy is expressed in a poetic manner. Hence poetry does not deserve the "ridiculous . . . estimation" into which it has lapsed, and "deserveth not to be scourged out of the Church of God" (220).

The ancient Greek definition of poetry is even more important for Sidney, providing access into his own view of the connection between poetry and nature. Sidney reminds the reader that the Greek origin of the English word "poet" was the word poiein, meaning "to make" (220). Every art, says Sidney, has "the works of Nature" for its "principal object": the astronomer, for example, observes the stars as ordered in nature, and the geometrician and arithmetician examine quantities as ordered in nature; the natural philosopher examines physical nature, and the moral philosopher considers the natural virtues and vices; the grammarian, rhetorician, and logician expound respectively the rules of speech, persuasion, and reasoning as based on nature. Sidney names here all of the elements of the medieval trivium, quadrivium, and more. His point is that each of these disciplines depends on some aspect of nature, which furnishes the ground of its exploration. The poet, however, is free of any such subjection or dependence on nature: "only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor 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 Heros, Demigods, Cyclops." Rather than being constrained within the "narrow" compass of nature, the poet ranges freely "only within the zodiac of his own wit" (221). As such, the poet's "making" or production is superior to nature: "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry, as divers poets have done . . . Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden" (221).

Sidney is careful to situate this human creativity in a theological context. Though man is a "maker" or poet, his ability derives from his "heavenly Maker . . . who having made man to his own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature, which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry: when with the force of a divine breath, he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings" (222). Sidney goes onto refer to original sin, as a result of which “our erected wit, maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will, keepeth us from reaching unto it” (222). Significant here is the intrinsic connection Sidney attempts to establish between man’s ability to “make” poetry and his status in relation to God. That man is made in the image of God is most profoundly expressed in man’s replication, on a lower level, of God’s function as a creator. It also implies that man is elevated above the world of physical nature (which Sidney calls “second nature”). This God-like activity in man which exalts him above the rest of nature is expressed above all in poetry; it is poetry, too, in its exercise of “wit,” that allows us to glimpse perfection, even as our will, “infected” by original sin, prevents us from achieving it. This ultimately theological aim of poetry is elaborated later in Sidney’s text.

It is clear that if, for Sidney, poetry is higher than nature, his conception of poetry as imitation does not imply a slavish copying of nature. He states that poetry “is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word mimesis, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth: to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture: with this end, to teach and delight” (223). In this definition, Sidney adapts elements from the early modern period Aristotle and Horace to offer his own somewhat broader view of imitation. He suggests that there have been three kinds of poetic imitation. The first consists of poetry that “did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God,” as in the various poetical portions of the Old Testament. The second kind of imitation is effected by poetry that deals with subjects whose scope is philosophical, historical, or scientific, such as the works of Cato, Lucretius, Manilius, or Lucan (223). This kind, Sidney observes, is determined by its field of study, being “wrapped within the fold of the proposed subject,” rather than relying on the poet’s “own invention” (224). It is the final kind of imitation proposed by Sidney that lifts it free of the constraints imposed by Aristotle. This third kind, urges Sidney, is produced by “right poets . . . who having no law but wit, bestow that in colours upon you which is fittest for the eye to see.” These are the poets who “most properly do imitate to teach and delight, and to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be: but range only . . . into the divine consideration of what may be, and should be” (224). Hence the poet is free of dependence on nature in at least two ways: firstly, he is not restricted to any given subject matter, any given sphere of nature. Secondly, his “imitation” does not actually reproduce anything in nature, since his concern is not with actuality but with portrayals of probability and of idealized situations.

The ultimate aim of this kind of poetry is moral: the poet imitates, says Sidney, in order “both to delight and teach.” The object of both teaching and delighting is goodness: by delighting, the poet moves people to welcome goodness; and by teaching, he enables them to “know that goodness whereunto they are moved.” And this, says Sidney, is “the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed” (224). Given these aims of poetry, it is not surprising that Sidney relegates “rhyming and versing” to the status of ornaments: it is not these which produce a poet but, rather, the “feigning notable images of virtues, vices, … with … delightful teaching” (225). However, Sidney sees all learning, and not just poetry, as directed to this final end or purpose: “to lead and draw us to as high a perfection, as our degenerate souls made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of ” (225). All the spheres of learning, he states, endeavour “by knowledge to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body, to the enjoying of his own divine essence” (226). While each of the sciences have “a private end in themselves,” they are nonetheless all directed “to the highest end.” And the “ending end of all earthly learning” is “virtuous action” (226). Many of these statements could have been made by Hugh of St. Victor, Geoffrey de Vinsauf, and many other medieval writers. What is interesting here is that Sidney’s invocation of a theological framework of learning is characteristically medieval; what is distinctly more modern and characteristic of the Renaissance is his alteration of the medieval hierarchy of disciplines, to place poetry at the apex.

Indeed, Sidney’s invocation of the ultimate aim of learning itself has an ulterior purpose: to establish poetry as the discipline most suited to this purpose. The poet’s chief competitors in this regard, thinks Sidney, will be the moral philosopher and the historian. The former will claim that his path to virtue is the most direct since he will teach what virtue and vice are, how passion must be mastered, and how the domain of virtue extends into family and society (227). The historian, on the other hand, will claim that moral philosophers merely teach virtue “by certain abstract considerations,” whereas his own discipline, history, will offer concrete examples of virtue based on the part v: the early modern period to the enlightenment “experience of many ages” (227). Sidney cites a third possible contender for this office of teaching virtue, the lawyer. But he rapidly dismisses the lawyer’s claim, since the lawyer “doth not endeavour to make men good, but that their evil hurt not others.” The lawyer merely imposes upon people to follow the outward form of virtue without changing their inward disposition (228). Sidney summarizes the dispute between the moral philosopher and the historian by saying respectively that “the one giveth the precept, and the other the example” (228). Since both disciplines are thus one-sided, they are both deficient: the philosopher sets down the “bare rule” in difficult terms that are “abstract and general”; the historian, conversely, lacks the force of generalization and is “tied, not to what should be, but to what is, to the particular truth of things” (229). Indeed, since the historian is “captived to the truth of a foolish world," the lessons he is bound to impart will often be negative, showing in some cases how the wicked thrive and prosper (234).

It is the "peerless poet," according to Sidney, who performs both functions: "he coupleth the general notion with the particular example." The poet paints a "perfect picture" of the philosopher's abstract insight, providing an image of what in philosophy is merely a "wordish description" (229). It is poetry which can strike the soul and the inward sentiments by means of "a true lively knowledge." The philosopher's declarations remain dark "if they be not illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of poesy" (230). It is poetry which brings to life all the virtues, vices, and passions, and hence the "feigned images" of poetry have "more force in teaching" than the "regular instruction" of philosophy (231). And, whereas the philosopher teaches "obscurely" such that only learned people can understand him, the "poet is the food for the tenderest stomachs, the poet is indeed the right popular philosopher," as shown by Aesop's fables, which use accessible allegories (231). The power of poetry to move or influence people, says Sidney, "is of a higher degree than teaching . . . it is well nigh the cause and the effect of teaching" (236). For people to be taught, they must first be filled with desire to learn: citing Aristotle's dictum that the fruit of learning must not be merely gnosis (knowing) but praxis (doing), Sidney holds that poetry inspires people to perform what philosophy merely teaches in the abstract (236). Both Plato and Boethius, claims Sidney, were well aware of the power of poetry, and "therefore made mistress philosophy, very often borrow the masking raiment of poesy" (238).

As for the poet's superiority over the historian, Sidney appeals to Aristotle's statement that "poetry is philosophoteron and spoudaioteron, that is to say, it is more philosophical, and more studiously serious, than history" (232). Sidney cites Aristotle's view that poetry deals with the kathalou or universal, whereas history concerns the kathekaston, the particular; the particular is constrained by what actually happened, whereas the universal comprehends actions or words which are appropriate in terms of probability or necessity (232). Sidney even argues that a fictional presentation of a character as he "should be" is preferable to a portrayal of the actual historical character in his imperfection. A "feigned example," he says, has "as much force to teach, as a true example" (233). Since the historian is tied to reality, he is not at liberty to present the ideal pattern of people or events, whereas the poet can "frame his example to that which is most reasonable" (233). Moreover, whatever the historian can relate in terms of true events, the poet can make by his own imitation, "beautifying it both for further teaching, and more delighting, . . . having all . . . under the authority of his pen" (234). the early modern period The emphasis here is on the poet's freedom, which allows him to choose his material, to frame it in an ideal pattern, so that he can present virtue “in her best colors,” setting out his words “in delightful proportion” (234, 237). For all of these reasons, proclaims Sidney, we must set “the laurel crown upon the poet as victorious, not only of the historian, but over the philosopher” (235). Sidney’s tone is repeatedly triumphalistic and persistent in attempting to overturn the conventional hierarchy of knowledge: “of all sciences . . . is our poet the monarch” (236). The irony here is that Sidney uses a theological justification for poetry to dethrone theology and philosophy from their preeminent status. Another reading of his procedure might be to say that, by imbuing poetry itself with a theological function, he furnishes the terms whereby theology might be displaced by poetry. It is poetry which most effectively disposes man to overcome his own lower nature, thereby offering access into the divine: “as virtue is the most excellent resting place for all worldly learning . . . so poetry, being the most familiar to teach it, and most princely to move towards it . . . is the most excellent workman” (239). And yet, for poetry to assume the “monarchy” of learning undermines the very theological framework to which this claim appeals: it is unmistakably a step in the direction of secular humanism.

Sidney now undertakes a defence of the various genres of poetry that shows clearly the moral and theological functions he assigns to this art. Sidney considers heroic poetry to be the “best, and most accomplished kind of poetry” since it both “instructeth the mind” and “most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy” (244). The function of poetry for Sidney, as manifested in these comments, is threefold: to teach people the substance of virtue; to move people to virtuous action; and, underlying these two functions, to impress upon people the transitory and worthless nature of worldly affairs. The poet is historian and moral philosopher, but above all, preacher and theologian.

Sidney now addresses the specific charges brought against poetry. The first is that there are other kinds of knowledge more fruitful than poetry. Sidney states that the greatest gifts bestowed upon human beings are oratio and ratio, speech and reason. It is poetry which most polishes the gift of speech, and it “far exceedeth prose” on two accounts: it engenders delight because of its meticulous ordering of words, and therefore it is memorable. Since knowledge depends on memory, poetry has an affinity with knowledge (246–247). Moreover, since poetry “teacheth and moveth to virtue,” there can be no “more fruitful knowledge” than this (248). The second charge is that poetry “is the mother of lies” (247). Sidney’s famous retort is that “the poet . . . nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth” (248). Unlike the historian, the poet does not claim to be telling the truth; he is not relating “what is, or is not, but what should or should not be.” He is writing “not affirmatively, but allegorically, and figuratively” (249). The next objection to poetry is that it “abuseth men’s wit, training it to wanton sinfulness, and lustful love” (250). The fault here, says Sidney, is with particular poets who have abused their art, not with the art itself. It is not that "poetry abuseth man's wit, but that, man's wit abuseth poetry" (250). Even the word of God, says Sidney, when abused, can breed heresy and blasphemy (251).

The final, and perhaps most serious, charge that Sidney confronts is that Plato banished poets from his ideal republic, some claiming that, as a philosopher, Plato was "a natural enemy of poets" (253). Sidney suggests that Plato opposed the abuse of part v: the early modern period to the enlightenment poetry rather than the art itself: he charged the poets of his day with promulgating false opinions of the gods which might corrupt the youth (255). The dangers of such false belief have now been removed by Christianity. Sidney also cites Plato's dialogue Ion as giving a "divine commendation to poetry," viewing poetry as inspired by "a divine force, far above man's wit" (255–256). He also cites the authority of many great figures who admired poetry, including Aristotle, Alexander, Plutarch, and Caesar (256).

Sidney ends his text with a lamentation, rather than an inquiry, over the impoverished state to which poetry has declined in England. Poetry has become the province of "base men, with servile wits" (258). While he acknowledges that poetry is a "divine gift" and dependent on genius, Sidney bemoans the fact that these would-be poets ignore the need to labour at their craft, a craft whose principles must be "art, imitation, and exercise" (i.e., genius, imitation of the models of earlier writers, and practice) (259). He concludes by admonishing the reader no more to scorn this sacred art, reminding him of his earlier arguments and the various authorities he has invoked. He entreats the reader to believe that "there are many mysteries contained in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, least by profane wits, it should be abused" (269). And he curses those who are possessed of "so earth-creeping a mind, that it cannot lift itself up, to look to the sky of poetry" (270). The metaphor here truly encapsulates the entire thrust of Sidney's text. Formerly, sacred scripture was spoken of in this fashion, as written "darkly," so as to lie beyond the reach of unworthy eyes; in Sidney's text, poetry is elevated to that sacred status: in its very nature it is opposed to worldliness and "earth-creeping" concerns; it is the newly appointed heaven of human invention and endeavour.

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