

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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An Apology for Poetry (written 1589)

Sir Philip Sidney.(1554-1586)

The Defence of Poetry (1580)

An Apology for Poetry was created in blank and poetic prose by one of the greatest English poets of the sixteenth century, Sir Philip Sidney. (His sonnet sequence, *Astrophel end Stella*, was composed in the 1580's, and is considered surpassed, as pure poetry, only by Shakespeare's sonnets (1593-1609). *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ca. 1590, was Sidney's most ambitious single work, an idealization of the shepherd's life as reimagined in high poetic transformation. This was a work able enough to attract Shakespeare's own attention, as in the construction of one of the sub plots of *King Lear*. One has to wonder what kind of oeuvre Sidney might have completed had he not been killed in a sword fight at the age of thirty two). His *Apology for Poetry*, written around 1580, was thus a young man's work, and clamors for our astonishment at the width of knowledge, consistency of perspective, and faultless eloquence of the text.

Philip Sidney was born in Kent of a family aristocratic on all sides, lived his brief life in the ambience of the nobility—he was educated at Christ Church, Oxford,--was elected to Parliament at the age of eighteen, served in his twenties various sophisticated diplomatic circles on the mainland of Europe. In the mid 1580's Sidney returned to England, wrote the major texts described above, and married. (His ongoing hyperactive life was to see him engaged, during the years in question, in any number of diplomatic dramas, such as a secret visit in Prague, to the exiled Jesuit priest, Edmund Campion, or a visit to Oxford as host to Giordano Bruno. At the same time he continued his engagement with affairs of state, and in particularly with affairs supporting the Protestant cause in the ceaseless Protestant-Catholic conflicts which were eating up Western Europe, and which reverberate so intensely to us, from just this moment, in the writing of Montaigne. Tragically, Sidney himself was by this time close to his own death which would strike him down by a blow of the sword, fighting in the Netherlands, dying heroically (and with class) as he had lived in his own culture. Mustn't he remind us, as we sketch the portrait of this 'Renaissance' man, the figure whom, in many ways, Castiglione might have modelled, in creating his brilliant and virtually omniscient *Cortegiano*, his courtier.

The Apology for Poetry

Out of Sidney's privileged and highly educated background emerged texts which complemented, in elegance and erudition, his life as a diplomat courtier. The apology for poetry picks up on both a local quarrel—Elizabethan society contained its share of poetry scorners, mockers of an art which seemed locked in traditional styles and locutions, and deeply out of touch with the new realities of Elizabethan commerce, business, and internationalism. Sidney threw himself into this fray with a strong defense of poetry, picking up many of the themes of the Roman poet Horace, who in his *Ars Poetica* (19 BC), both exemplifies and argues for the supreme felicity of the poetic art, and anticipating a nineteenth century essay, Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* (1821) which extracts from poetry the recognition that it is the supreme human expression, and from the poet, that he is the 'unacknowledged legislator of the world.'

Greco-Roman Tales

For the contemporary reader, Sidney may seem to present a daunting barrage of classical literary history interwoven with anecdotes about the ancient Greek poets. Such references, among the literary cultured in Renaissance Europe, were on the whole an available new language, sets of meaning points available to bring up large literary contexts—like the tales of Odysseus or of Aeneas, or the intertwined strands of tragic action that joined Oedipus to Creon to Antigone to Eteocles. Sidney's apology for poetry is in part an apology for this inbred language of poetic discourse, and in part an aggressive plea for attention to the unique and enduring values of the Greek poetic genius..

Poetry and History

The notion of poetry, for Sidney, is of the highest expression of awareness and articulateness. By making ancient Greek and Roman his field of reference, he separates poetry from any effort to describe or account for his own daily, and raises poetry to a consistent effort to see deep meanings in texts and traditions.

Aristotle Poetics

To make this claim Sidney must pick up the challenges addressed to this issue by Aristotle's *Poetics*, that critical theory reference point which hung over all Renaissance efforts to formulate the place of the literary arts in culture. Poetry, Aristotle had argued, was more philosophical than history, because poetry deals with what might have been, the possible, while history deals with what actually happened. (Poetry is an act within possibility, while history is an account of what happened. The validity of this distinction, and the account it gives of history, are both debatable, we would probably intervene here, yet for Sidney, and his time, elite opinion would have been largely behind Aristotle's position. (Historiography was still on a shaky and anecdotal basis, whereas philosophy, to which Sidney preferred poetry, for its opening of being, was still back-held in the traces of medievalism, from which the universities had not yet released it. The true open spirit of poetry, for Sidney, was evident in the great musical poetry of the Hebrew singer, David, and the high risk musical drama of Homer.

Poetry and virtue

The poet particularly deserves our praise, for in fact he not only surpasses the historian and the philosopher, in range and social usefulness, but he leads his fellow citizens in the teaching of virtue. The poet—*vates* (*prophet*) in Rome, *poietes* (*maker*) in Greece—does not affirm or proclaim opinions, but expresses the truth in exaltation. Thanks to that high flowering of mind, that approaches truth directly, the poet is not misled by the desire to please. Pleasure, in the vulgar sense, is in fact that distraction from virtue which poetry most carefully avoids. At which point, as suggested above, Sidney is carefully distancing himself from those, even in his own intellectual culture, who associate poetry with nursery room metrics, childish plays for the ears, just as he is avoiding direct conflict with another contingent of 'poet lovers,' those for whom poetry should be admired as pure provision of amusement. In these counterattacks against the vulgar in poetry, those who want street wise pleasures from the Lady, Sidney includes the vulgar, an increasingly taste-shaping element in Elizabethan society, for whom such gross pleasures as are met with on the stage seem a justification of art in general.

Platonism

Throughout Sidney's discourse run both an admiration for Platonism, and a fear of that perspective. On the one hand Sidney deeply inherits the broad idealism of Plato, his devotion to the beauty which 'never was, on land or sea,' and which was to become the durable on-lurer of western poetry, until in the Romantic movement, with such as Shelley and Keats, that beauty found itself coming aground on mysticism, despair, the kind of loose exaltation the Romantics vanished into in Germany and England—in Novalis, Shelley, or d'Annunzio. A. N. Whitehead's thought that 'Western philosophy is simply a series of footnotes to Plato,' would appear equally applicable to 'Western poetry,' for wherever poetry exalted itself into high vision, from Homer to the present, voices were heard proclaiming the poetry a byproduct of Platonic aspiration.

Sidney's Platonism

Sir Philip Sidney himself, refined and deepened the Platonic strain in English poetry, and did so from a keen sensitivity to the work of contemporaries like Edmund Spenser, or William Shakespeare. He was himself an aetherial but disciplined writer of sonnets. His attention was, as the form required, on dilemmas and resolutions, love called in to save the day. We should close with a sample from Sidney's work as a sonnet writer: the first poem in the 108 poem sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*, and a proving ground for what Platonism means in Sidney's work.

Astrophil and Stella 1: Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show

Sonnet 1

*Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain,—
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,—
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe;
Studying inventions fine her wits to entertain,
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburn'd brain.
But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows;
And others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way.
Thus great with child to speak and helpless in my throes,
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart, and write."*

From the outset, the poet's dilemma is how to express his love his beloved. His 'sunburned brain' requires moisture from others!', 'fresh and fruitful flowers.' Ultimately he grows pregnant with the message he wants to convey to his love, his love for her. He does that by discovering that the message he wants to send is in him all the time. He needed only to free it from himself. The mind's true love could find its way into expression only by being freed from its ideal condition, into a direct statement of itself to his beloved.

Study guide

Sidney was a sonnet writer, and had in common with Ronsard that each was a clever and ingenious craftsman.(Even Ronsard's sassy epitaph for Rabelais is immaculately formal.) What did Sidney gain by extending his sonnets to the number of 108? One could have posed a similar question to Shakespeare! Was the answer that one wanted to give the reader a choice among many ways of viewing choice and loss in love?

What did Sidney defend, in his illustrious *Apology for Poetry*? Was he particularly eager to defend the Platonic tradition—remember the Platonism of his contemporaries, Ficino and Pico?—or was he shocked by what he considered the corroded English of his time, which lacked the sense of the classical tongues and the background of the classical experience? Also to mention, Sidney took out considerable critical venom, in attacking the commerce and industry that was corroding the language of his time in England. He did not think that language should serve the interests of pleasure, but of meaning and beauty.

Aristotle, as you see played a formative role in Sidney's view of poetry This meant that for Sidney, like Aristotle, beauty and virtue were partners. The good poem, like the good tragedy, should demand a morally congruent reaction. Does this seem to you an appropriate expectation to make of a poem? Can a poem exercise respect for virtue?