

Modern Language Association

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Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 94, No. 2 (Mar., 1979), pp. 223-233

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/461887>

Accessed: 02/06/2009 12:28

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Sidney's Feigned *Apology*

ANY ATTEMPT to discuss Sidney's theory of poetic fictions proves to be something of a paradox, since *An Apology for Poetry* opens with a warning not to take theories too seriously. There Sidney compares himself to his master in horsemanship, John Pietro Pugliano, who, not content to teach his young students the practical side of his profession, "sought to enrich [their] minds with the contemplations therein." So mighty does his art appear, thanks to the light of his self-love, that, Sidney observes, "if I had not been a piece of a logician before I came to him, I think he would have persuaded me to have wished myself a horse" (p. 95).¹ Following his master, Sidney opens with a theoretical justification of his own vocation, poetry, but with such a precedent, readers may wonder whether Sidney will persuade them to wish themselves poems (which is, in fact, where Sidney's *Astrophel* ends up in Sonnet 45 of *Astrophel and Stella*).

If the opening of the *Apology* is not paradoxical enough, the *Apology* itself is filled with contradictions and shifts of emphasis. Despite these, it does make certain significant gestures toward theorizing. I argue that Sidney's readers have long mistaken his intellectual affinities because of the oblique and self-conscious way he echoes traditional philosophical and critical positions. A closer view of his performance will, I think, reveal the *Apology* as one of the most daring documents of Renaissance criticism, in keeping with the most original thought of its time.

I

Sidney's purpose seems obvious enough: to justify poetic fictions against the charge that they are unreal and irresponsible fantasies. For the sake of clarity, I begin by dividing my examination into two parts, following the line drawn by Sidney's own argument:

any understanding knoweth the skill of the artificer standeth in that *Idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. And that the poet hath that *Idea* is manifest, by delivering them forth in such excellency as he hath imagined them. Which delivering forth also is not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build castles in the air; but so far substantially it worketh, not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency as Nature might have done, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses, if they will learn aright why and how that maker made him. (p. 101)

What is striking about this defense is that Sidney seeks to justify poetry by turning toward the two extremes it mediates, first to its source in the poet's "Idea" and then to the moral effect it has on the reader's world; it becomes a conduit, leading the ideal to flow into the actual. To understand how Sidney puts his argument together, we must take a closer look at these two extremes and their relations.

First, what is the Idea or "fore-conceit"? Modern critics are nearly unanimous in pointing to it as an example of Renaissance Neoplatonism and/or Augustinianism. The reasons for this are clear: both traditions helped to fulfill a central need for sixteenth-century theorists of the artist's Idea by giving it a fixed ontological basis.² Panofsky's discussion of the revival of Neoplatonism is instructive:

the Idea was reinvested with its apriori and metaphysical character. . . . the autocratic human mind, now conscious of its own spontaneity, believed that it could maintain this spontaneity in the face of sensory experience only by legitimizing the former *sub specie divinitatis*; the dignity of genius, now explicitly recognized and emphasized, is justified by its origin in God.³

Rosemond Tuve thinks this kind of justification is essential to Renaissance poetic theory. The poet, she argues in her influential *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, "simply has

no nervousness dealing overtly with universals." She attributes this confidence to "the pervasiveness of Platonic and Neo-Platonic conceptions of reality . . . imitating Plotinus' ideal form and order."⁴ As Kristeller had previously noted, for the Neoplatonist, the "true poet does not follow the arbitrary impulse of human thought, but is inspired by God."⁵

Sidney seems to need this justification as much as any other theorist. Like the boldest Neoplatonists before him, he praises the poet as a free creator "lifted up with the vigour of his own invention . . . freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit" (p. 100). He is free of nature and of any given subject matter; he does not derive "conceit out of a matter, but maketh matter for a conceit" (p. 120). But in the *Apology*, Sidney tends to regard the protection the Platonic-Augustinian argument would afford as part of a voice that he self-consciously affects, a voice he asks us to think about critically, even as he uses it to provide terms for the poet's creativity.

Sidney's discussion of poetic inspiration, for example, is deliberately tangled and ambivalent. He starts by examining the Roman term for poet, *vates*: he translates this "heavenly" title as "diviner, forseer, or prophet" and says that the Romans attributed the power of prophecy to Vergil. Sidney then gives us two contradictory reactions to this information. First he condemns the Romans for their "vain and godless superstition" (p. 98), and then he tells us they were "altogether not without ground." He softens his criticisms because "that same exquisite observing of number and measure in words, and that high flying liberty of conceit proper to the poet, did seem to have some divine force in it" (p. 99). The poet, then, is not really inspired; his heavenly and divine nature is at best metaphorical. It is an illusion, but an understandable one, based on verbal artifice and the "high flying liberty of conceit." The irony is clear: inspiration is not the *cause* of the poet's conceit but the *effect* that the conceit has on the reader.

Where Sidney does mention poets who were truly inspired by God (David, Solomon, et al.), he is careful to set them apart from "right poets," his subject.⁶ He makes so many motions in distinguishing these right poets from philosophical and historical poets (those who follow

a "proposed subject" instead of their own "invention") that another distinction is easily missed.⁷ It can, however, be deduced easily enough, and it is equally important to his argument. Sidney is interested in a poetic grounded entirely in the human mind, and inspiration would compromise its autonomy. As Sidney tells us later, Plato in his *Ion* "attributeth unto Poesy more than myself do, namely, to be a very inspiring of a divine force, far above man's wit" (p. 130).

Sidney's use of metaphysics can be deceptive. Though he uses its terms to praise the poet's creativity, he then dismisses them before they can compromise the mind's autonomy. The same pattern recurs immediately after the *vates* discussion, when Sidney turns to the word "poet": "It cometh of this word *poiein*, which is 'to make.'" Sidney's use of Greek etymology, like Landino's, serves as an occasion to praise the poet, and Sidney follows with his famous celebration of poetry's golden world and the poet's creation of a new nature. Sidney then defends his claims:

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of Nature; but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that 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, with no small argument to the incredulous of that first accursed fall of Adam: since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it. (p. 101)

Our position in the universe is a gift of God, and we are fitted into a hierarchical series of makers, beginning with God, who surpasses us, and nature, which we surpass. But if the gift explains our capacity, it does not control our use of it or bind it to the fixed order of things. After the *vates* argument, the "divine breath" must be metaphorical, referring to our own efforts to bring forth our own creations, perhaps echoing Scaliger's claim that man "transforms himself into a second deity." We reveal our divinity through our own effort.

But, more important, there is no clear transition from the mind's operations to its transcen-

dental source. Sidney's "highest point of man's wit" is *not* a mystical *apex mentis* directly sparked by the divine. It is the faculty that creates fictions, the faculty that creates another nature and so reveals our divinity to ourselves. In order to demonstrate "erected wit," we must be "lifted up with the vigour of [our] own invention" (p. 100). We know our Ideas, not by tracing them back to an eternal logos, but by making them "manifest, by delivering them forth in such excellency as [we have] imagined them" (p. 101).

Furthermore, the above quotation on the hierarchy of makers is a defense of one possible metaphor, an attempt to show that it is not "too saucy." After his magnificent praise of the erected wit, Sidney tells us:

But these arguments will by few be understood, and by fewer granted. Thus much (I hope) will be given me, that the Greeks with some probability of reason gave him the name above all names of learning.

(p. 101)

All is suddenly qualified as Sidney reminds us that the passage is part of a voice he has assumed for the sake of a few debatable arguments. He is not concerned with establishing their objective validity, and he neither affirms nor denies them. He is satisfied with showing that, at best, they point to "some probability of reason." Indeed, the entire argument for the poet as maker is not so much a *justification* of the wit as a *demonstration* of it. It is a bold "comparison," which, according to Aristotle and Renaissance rhetoricians, is a prime way of exhibiting wit.⁸

II

If the poet is "lifted up with the vigour of his own invention," so too is the reader. Poetry is the best teacher, the "first light-giver to ignorance," and the first study to show us a "pleasure in the exercises of the mind" (pp. 96, 98). The separation of the Idea from a fixed ontology, moreover, makes poetry a special kind of exercise. In a fascinating article, A. E. Malloch argues that, for Sidney, it is only in poetry that reason finds an object properly proportioned to its capacities. But Malloch sees this in a Thomist

light: the fallen world is deficient, while poetry's golden world reveals a "fullness of being," which fully actualizes the act of cognition.⁹ I would argue, on the contrary, that the poetic object is best proportioned to our reason because that object is a projection of our reason. Jacopo Mazzoni made this very argument in Italy, only a few years after the *Apology* was written. The object of poetic imitation is one that is consciously framed to fit the poet's intellectual needs.¹⁰

The more autonomous the poet's Idea becomes, however, the more insistent the need to attach it to something outside itself. And if a metaphysical foundation is lacking, then a practical and ethical application becomes all-important. The function of poetry is to reform the will, as well as to perfect the wit, since "no learning is so good as that which teacheth and moveth to virtue" (p. 123). Using a suggestive pun, Sidney writes, "the poet . . . doth draw the mind more effectually than any other art doth" (p. 115). The poet both depicts the mind and leads it to action. And this brings us to the second part of Sidney's theory, that poetry is justified not only by the brilliance of the Idea but by the way it works in the world, bestowing a "Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses."

Sidney echoes the humanists' rhetorical interpretation of poetry, and following Minturno's transference of Cicero's "teach, delight, and move" from the orator to the poet, he writes that poets "imitate both to delight and teach: and delight to move men to take that goodness in hand" (p. 103). According to Paul Alpers, this is the distinctive mark of Sidney's "golden world." It is not a self-consistent "heterocosm," a "self-contained universe of discourse." Rather, Sidney stresses the didactic efficacy of the poet's moral exempla.¹¹

But if poetry makes a rhetorical address to the reader, it does so only in a way that conforms to Sidney's radical conception of the status of a poet's Idea, a way that Sidney defines by opposing poets to philosophers and historians.

A philosopher claims that, by teaching what virtue is, his discipline makes clear "how it extendeth itself out of the limits of a man's own little world to the government of families, and maintaining of public societies" (p. 105). Ac-

cording to Sidney, a philosopher never extends himself; he is trapped within the closed world of his fellow philosophers: "the philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him; that is to say, he teacheth them that are already taught" (p. 109). A philosopher depends on others coming to him, into his own exclusive world. While pretending to point out the limitations of philosophers, Sidney parodies the circularity of their discourse:

Nay truly, learned men have learnedly thought that where once reason hath so much overmastered passion as that the mind hath a free desire to do well, the inward light each mind hath in itself is as good as a philosopher's book; seeing in Nature we know it is well to do well. (p. 113)

The learned learnedly discuss how it is well to do well, but their terms only point to themselves: "happy is that man who may understand [them], and more happy that can apply what he doth understand" (p. 107). The same charge reappears indirectly, if a bit more cruelly, during a later discussion of love: "some of my masters the philosophers spent a good deal of their lamp-oil in setting forth the excellency of it" (p. 125). Lamp oil, Sidney suggests, is all a philosopher usually "spends" in love. A philosopher fails in teaching and seduction because his definitions "lie dark before the imaginative and judging power, if they be not illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of poesy" (p. 107).

Poetry extends itself into the world in peculiar ways, as Sidney's argument with history makes clear. If philosophy gives us reason devoid of external application, history is caught in the external world, one devoid of any inherent rationality. The historian is "bound to tell things as things were" and "cannot be liberal . . . of a perfect pattern" (p. 110):

the historian, being captived to the truth of a foolish world, is many times a terror from well-doing, and an encouragement to unbridled wickedness. For see we not valiant Miltiades rot in his fetters? the just Phocion and the accomplished Socrates put to death like traitors? the cruel Severus live prosperously?

(pp. 111-12)

Not only is the historian's world one of moral chaos, but history, in recording it, lacks logical coherence. The example of history "draweth no

necessary consequence," and so the historian follows the logic that, "because it rained yesterday, therefore it should rain to-day" (pp. 107, 110). The historian cannot understand the nature of examples and how the mind uses them:

but if he know an example only informs a conjectured likelihood, and so go by reason, the poet doth so far exceed him as he is to frame his example to that which is most reasonable . . . where the historian in his bare *was* . . . must tell events whereof he can yield no cause; or, if he do, it must be poetical. (p. 110)

The poet knows that the mind must work through conjectures and that examples can lead only to "a conjectured likelihood." Thus the poet is freed from imitating things as they have been, the "bare *was*," and is able to concentrate, instead, on the modes of understanding themselves, the lines of connection or consequence that the mind attempts to draw in making sense out of the world. Examples in poetry are framed according "to that which is most reasonable," not according to any external *res*. It is of small importance that the historian can boast of bringing us "images of true matters, such as indeed were done, and not such as fantastically or falsely may be suggested to have been done" (p. 109). The historian knows better "how this world goeth than how his own wit runneth" (p. 105). The poet, by contrast, having no law but wit, can frame examples into purified types of moral ideals: "If the poet do his part aright, he will show you in Tantalus, Atreus, and such like, nothing that is not to be shunned; in Cyrus, Aeneas, Ulysses, each thing to be followed" (p. 110). The poet faces a brazen world, a foolish world of moral disorder that snares the historian in its senselessness, but delivers a golden world, another nature structured by reason.

Sidney is often seen as a Platonist because this theme of reshaping the world echoes Neoplatonic claims, just as Sidney's Idea does. Ficino writes: "What, then does the intellect seek if not to transform all things into itself by depicting all things in the intellect according to the nature of the intellect? . . . the universe, in a certain manner, should become intellect."¹² As in the first part of his theory, Sidney both advances metaphysical claims and refuses to rely on them for protection. If there is any justifica-

tion for the poet's inventions, it must lie in their didactic efficacy.

If we look back to the Idea/Cyrus passage, we can see how insistently Sidney attempts to join his golden world and his didacticism in a bond of dialectical necessity. The poet's fiction, the delivering of the Idea, is

not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build castles in the air; but so far substantially it worketh, not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency as Nature might have done, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world, to make many Cyruses . . . (p. 101)

A poet's effect on the world is as important to him as it is to the world he affects. It is the only way he can grant substance to his creations, the only way he can be sure that his poetry is not a sign of his estrangement. For Sidney suspects, as Danielle Barabaro and others did, that eloquent fantasies must be carefully directed to prevent the teacher of the many from becoming the frenzied and solitary builder of castles in the air (Hathaway, *Criticism*, p. 332).

At crucial junctures in the *Apology*, where Sidney would have found a metaphysical argument most useful, we discover, instead, claims for didactic efficacy. Forrest Robinson, in keeping with his argument that the poet has access to absolute patterns, suggests that the foreconceit is a preverbal mental diagram, which, because of its participation in absolute truth, serves as a universal frame to ensure a uniform response in all readers (*Shape of Things Known*, p. 118). But when Sidney comes to discuss how this frame works, he simply tells us that, when readers of poesy are "looking but for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention" (p. 124). Sidney does not claim that there is any true or universal Idea embodied by, or hidden in, the ground plot. "Invention" carries its full ambiguity here, and we cannot tell whether readers come upon a preestablished meaning or simply create their own.¹³ All we do know is that it ought to be "profitable." We are not guaranteed a fixed unity between speaker and hearer; the most we can aim for is some ethical utility.

A similar development appears in the all-important icastic/fantastic opposition. As William Rossky has shown, the fear of imaginative

distortion was a powerful theme in Renaissance England, and English texts are filled with admonitions to control the imagination.¹⁴ George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589) relies heavily on the Platonic theme of controlling our representations by carefully fitting the mind to objective truth. Despite his earlier echo of Sidney, that the poet "contrives out of his owne braine" without "any foreine copie or example," Puttenham insists that the orderly imagination must represent things

according to their very truth. If otherwise, then doth it breede Chimeres and monsters in mans imaginations and not only in his imaginations but also in his ordinarie actions and life which ensues.¹⁵

The useful life must be "illuminated with the brightest irradiations of knowledge and of the veritie and due proportion of things."

Sidney, by contrast, avoids such Augustinian metaphysics. More decisively committed to poetic feigning, he welcomes the mind's ability to create such new forms "as never were in Nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies" (p. 100). He reduces the icastic/fantastic dichotomy from a metaphysical to an ethical distinction:

For I will not deny but that man's wit may make Poesy, which should be *eikastike*, which some learned have defined, 'figuring forth good things,' to be *phantastike*, which doth contrariwise infect the fancy with unworthy objects. (p. 125)

There is no question here of approximating an image to an external model, of a faithful likeness being opposed to a mere semblance. For Sidney, as for Mazzoni, who actually placed the fantastic over the icastic, this approximation has become too restrictive. But instead of reversing the distinction, Sidney redefines it; "good" and "unworthy" are purely ethical. Thomas Wright was to warn his English audience in 1605 that the distorted imagination "putteth greene spectacles before the eyes of the witte, to make it see nothing but greene" (Rossky, p. 56). But for Sidney, one can never take away the spectacles. All cognition implies some filtering or refraction; we can only hope to control the lenses we use.

But what is this hope based on? As the preceding quotation admits, man's wit has made irresponsible poetry. Sidney hopes by this ad-

mission to answer those who see poetry as a corrupting influence: we should "not say that Poetry abuseth man's wit, but that man's wit abuseth Poetry" (p. 125). This closes one problem but opens a larger one. Poetry depends on the wit, it is born in the foreconceit, and poets follow no law but wit. Without a direct argument of inspiration or illumination, how can we tell whether light-giving poets themselves have the proper light? What is the foundation for their claims? Some critics, borrowing from the rhetorical tradition, argue that good poets must also be morally good, but this only begs the question, rather than answers it.

The problem with Sidney's double justification is that both sides are problematic: Sidney wants to make the kinds of claims that traditionally have been supported by some metaphysic but tries to make them without such support. The poetic Idea, as we have seen, points to perfection only by pointing back to itself. It justifies itself only by repeating its own act of creation.

The other side of the argument, the attempt to translate poetic effects into moral ones, faces a similar dilemma. Wimsatt notes:

Sidney, like most of those who have maintained that poetry is (and ought to be) moral, has not been able to resolve an ambiguity of the word ought as used in the formula. Is this a poetic "ought," or is it in fact only a moral "ought"? In the second sense, "ought to be moral" is a tautology—since moral is what all our works ought to be. (p. 171)

The easiest way out for Sidney would have been to repeat Boccaccio's claims for the unity of poetry and theology or to claim some metaphysical universal at work, as many did who turned Aristotle's "ought" into a moral term (Hathaway, *Criticism*, p. 130). As Sidney's argument stands, it comes close to telling us that poetry ought to be what it ought to be, and like the moral philosophers he parodies, Sidney finds his terms pointing back to themselves.

III

One of the reasons there is such difficulty on both sides of the justification is the paradoxical nature of the poetic fictions that lie between them. Unlike some rhetorical critics, who magi-

cally derived true conclusions from false elements, Sidney tells us:

Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false; so as the other artists, and especially the historian, affirming many things can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies. But the poet (as I said before) never affirmeth. The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes. (pp. 123–24)

Insisting on the fictional nature of poetry, Sidney argues that its essential feature is the poet's "feigning," "not rhyming and versing" (p. 103).¹⁶ Poetry appears to inhabit a special realm of discourse, one that eludes the strict laws of verification. Sidney's claim may not be unique to the Renaissance, but the route by which he arrives at his claim and the consequences he draws from it have an important effect on the way we read the *Apology*, giving us a more general sense of what all discourse implies for Sidney.

Poetic fictions, for Sidney, are the result of a coincidence of conventional opposites. Poetry fuses the two extremes of philosophy and history, as it "coupleth the general notion with the particular example." It is clearly *not* an Aristotelian mean between them, as some Italian theorists have reckoned it on a scale of abstractions.¹⁷ Sidney includes both extremes within the synthesis, which gives rise to an entirely new mode of discourse, one that, he claims, goes beyond conventional limits. It is, in a sense, more abstract than metaphysics, because it is completely free from nature, unlike the "metaphysic, though it be in the second and abstract notions, and therefore be counted supernatural, yet doth he indeed build upon the depth of Nature" (p. 100). At the same time, it is more concrete than history, since its speaking pictures and shining images are able to instruct and move men immediately.¹⁸

There is something unsettling in Sidney's comparison between this special mode and the others. He does not argue the claims of fiction over fact, but he does suggest that *all* attempts to make sense out of the world are based on illusion; poetry is only a special instance of the fictionality that pervades all discourse. The most

casual observation shows that other disciplines use fictions to enhance their effectiveness: lawyers use such fictitious names as "John a Stile" and "John a Noakes" in their cases for the sake of making "their picture the more lively," while chess players call a piece of wood a bishop. So too historians, despite their claims of truthfulness, still give "many particularities of battles, which no man could affirm" and invent "long orations," which historical figures never pronounced (p. 97).

In a profounder sense any attempt at rational communication leads to fiction making. Our only choice is whether or not to acknowledge the pretense. So the historian is described as "loaden with old mouse-eaten records, authorising himself (for the most part) upon other histories, whose greatest authorities are built upon the notable foundation of hearsay." Any art that purports to rest on the foundation of external verities finds that its support quickly disintegrates. Even those who go beyond books to nature find themselves in this vertiginous plight:

There is no art delivered to mankind that hath not the works of Nature for his principal object, without which they could not consist, and on which they so depend, as they become actors and players, as it were, of what Nature will have set forth.

(pp. 99–100)

They pretend to "follow nature" but find themselves on a stage, their words turned into players' lines, their deeds transformed into mere theatrics.

A. C. Hamilton has argued that Sidney's paradox is borrowed from Agrippa's skeptical attack on the vanity of human studies.¹⁹ However much we attribute to Agrippa's influence, whether on the basis of his mocking tone or of his argument that nothing can be affirmed, it is clear that Sidney carries the skeptical argument to its conclusion, that our only access to reality is through fiction and conjecture. As Montaigne writes:

Have I not seen this divine saying in Plato, that Nature is nothing but an aenigmaticall poesie? As a man might say, an overshadowed and darke picture, inter-shining with an infinit varietie of false lights, to exercise our conjectures . . . philosophy is nothing else but a sophisticated poesie.²⁰

Sidney would object, however, that the only real "poesie" is poetry itself. It is the greatest of the arts because it is the only one to realize that it is not anchored to a fixed and objective Truth. Sidney does not let this realization force him back to a passive fideism: poets recognize the necessity of conjecture and so boldly set about inventing their own.

This claim inevitably doubles back to affect the status of the *Apology*. If the only choice is between those who unconsciously live fictions and those who act their own, then Sidney, as the speaker of the *Apology*, makes it clear that he thinks of himself as one of the latter.

At the beginning of the *Apology*, Sidney tells us that he is following the example of John Pietro Pugliano, the master horseman and self-promoter, and that in order to defend his own craft, poetry, he needs "to bring some more available proofs." He is alluding to Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as the "faculty of observing in any given case, the available means of persuasion," and so is signaling us that he is about to adopt the role of rhetorician. Kenneth Myrick's book on Sidney makes clear just how self-conscious an actor Sidney is, as he closely models his work after the "judicial oration in behalf of an accused client."²¹ Sidney, furthermore, seems to remind us continually of the role he is playing. As Myrick demonstrates, Sidney not only follows the seven-part form of an oration as he found it described by Thomas Wilson but does so in elaborate detail, following the recommended subject matter and style for each section and even marking the transitions between them with conspicuous phrases (pp. 54–55).

This is a fitting role for Sidney, considering the highly rhetorical role he imagines for poetry. But the paradox thickens when we realize that Sidney is playing not only the rhetorician but the poet as well. He tells us at the start that he has slipped into the title of poet, and he often demonstrates the appropriateness of that title in the *Apology*. After describing poetry as "feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else," Sidney proceeds to "feign notable images" of the poet's competitors, including the moral philosophers, whom he envisions approaching him "with a sullen gravity," and the historian, staggering under a load of mouse-eaten records. Before they have a chance to speak, Sidney gives

us a notable image of them as hypocrites and buffoons and, in the process, characterizes himself as one who acts out his own theories.

Sidney leads us to recognize his arguments for his craft as examples of his craft by showing us that they are in the same realm of discourse, the realm of feigned images and self-conscious conjectures. I have already mentioned the discussion of the poet as maker as a kind of conjecture. Later, during a crucial argument with those who claim that fictions are mere daydreams or toys, Sidney counters, "if to a slight conjecture a conjecture may be opposed, truly it may seem, that as by him [Homer] their learned men took almost their first light of knowledge, so their active men received their first motions of courage" (p. 127).

There are, of course, advantages to adopting this role. Sidney can demonstrate, even as he describes, the persuasive force of poetry. And by treating his arguments as conjectures, he can arrange a variety of them without strict regard for consistency. He presents us with "something for everyone," aiming different claims at different readers, hoping that all will find something to serve as "an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention." We often find, in fact, running counter to what I have described as the central theory, the testing of more conservative possibilities, aimed at those who may be unhappy with the more daring claims for the poet's creativity. We can see this, for example, in the notion of poetic "fitness."

Early in the *Apology*, when praising the poet's creativity, Sidney argues for the peculiar "reverse adequation" found in critics like Mazzoni. The mind does not fit its concepts to externals but, rather, invents forms to fit its own faculties. Poets are like painters, who, "having no law but wit, bestow that in colours upon you which is fittest for the eye to see" (p. 102). If verse is used in poetry, so much the better, because of the "fitness it hath for memory" (p. 122). But later, when discussing stage productions, Sidney moves far away from the freedom of Mazzoni's idols and closer to the unimaginative literalness of Castelvetro. Unity of place is essential because no audience could believe a rapid change of location. Playwrights are attacked for being too "liberal" with time as well. There must be a correspondence between the imitation and the

action imitated. The play should be "fitted to the time it set forth" (p. 134).

These reversals are not restricted to specific questions of dramaturgy. At one moment the poets are free of the works of nature, not enclosed by its "narrow warrant"; at another, they must rely on the "force truth hath in nature," and their proper effects are endangered if the matter is "disproportioned to ourselves and nature" (p. 136). We may even suspect that Sidney is allowing himself to act out his own ambivalence about the poet's "high flying liberty of conceit." Late in the *Apology*, Sidney tells us that "the highest-flying wit [must] have a Daedalus to guide him," and that this Daedalus has three wings, "Art, Imitation, and Exercise":

Exercise indeed we do, but that very fore-backwardly: for where we should exercise to know, we exercise as having known; and so is our brain delivered of much matter which never was begotten by knowledge. (p. 133)

Sidney more strictly regulates the poet with a firmer objective orientation. The next sentence, in fact, complains, "For there being two principal parts—matter to be expressed by words and words to express the matter—in neither we use Art or Imitation rightly" (p. 133). Sidney does not openly contradict his earlier idealistic claim that the poet "bringeth his own stuff, and doth not learn a conceit out of a matter, but maketh matter for a conceit" (p. 120), but he is clearly suggesting a safer *res/verba* distinction, as used by the Horatian critics to direct poetry outward, toward the solidity of "things."²²

Sidney can take these liberties because of the nature of the *Apology*. But his retreat to more conservative themes does not solve his dilemmas; rather, their conjectural quality serves only to remind us of those dilemmas. The claim that poetry neither affirms nor denies may not have been unprecedented in the Renaissance, but the suggestion that one's own defense of poetry follows the same pattern questions the very possibility of making such a defense.

Sidney's theory requires that he take an affirmative stand somewhere, that he find some first premise from which to deduce his conclusions. Sidney himself makes this need explicit by reducing his argument to a syllogism:

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 Poetry, then is the conclusion manifest that ink and paper cannot be to a more profitable purpose employed. (p. 123)

Sidney makes this statement just after he has given a lesson in logic to the poetry haters, laughing at their argument that “doth (as they say) but *petere principium*” (p. 123). But immediately after his own argument, he undermines the clause on which the entire syllogism rests, “I affirm.” For it is here that he chooses to place the already quoted passage on how the poet “never affirmeth,” unlike the others who, “affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies” (p. 124). Even as he points out the logical mistakes of his opponents, Sidney seems to be deliberately committing his own, making any first premise impossible and so exposing himself to an inevitable infinite regress.²³ To put the matter more simply, if the best the mind can accomplish is conjecture, then its justification is also a conjecture.

Sidney reminds us of this problem in the *peroratio*, or conclusion:

I conjure you all that have had the evil luck to read this ink-wasting toy of mine, . . . to believe, with Aristotle, that they were the ancient treasurers of the Grecians' divinity; to believe, with Bembus, that they were first bringers-in of all civility; to believe, with Scaliger, that no philosopher's precepts can sooner make you an honest man than the reading of Virgil; to believe, with Clauserus, the translator of Cornutus, that it pleased the heavenly Deity, by Hesiod and Homer, under the veil of fables, to give us all knowledge, Logic, Rhetoric, Philosophy natural and moral, and *quid non*?; to believe, with me, that there are many mysteries contained in Poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused; to believe, with Landino, that they are so beloved of the gods that whatsoever they write proceeds of divine fury; lastly, to believe themselves, when they tell you they will make you immortal by their verses.

(pp. 141–42)

The facetious tone is unmistakable, from opening self-deprecation to insistence that we believe the love poet's favorite seduction line. But we also find a summary listing of nearly all the ar-

guments made in the *Apology*, now paraded without distinction. We are conjured to believe arguments that Sidney has made essential, namely, for poetry as a civilizing force and for its didactic efficacy; those he has rejected, such as Landino's for poetry as an emanation of divine fury; and those he has deliberately minimized or ignored, such as the view of poetry as a veil of allegory or as a mystery for the initiated. All are brought out like actors at the end of a play, taking their bows.

Sidney cannot expect that his readers will believe so many conflicting points of view, and the lack of distinction among them hurts their credibility. Even his insistence that we do believe them, when he “conjure[s us] . . . to believe,” is a self-parody, teasing us with verbal echoes of a previous denial: “The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes.”

Myrick, who gives an excellent survey of Sidney's rhetorical strategies, argues that this kind of playfulness adds to the *Apology*'s persuasiveness. It is a sign of Sidney's *sprezzatura*, a “courtly grace which conceals a sober purpose” (p. 298). Sidney does praise the courtier who finds a style “fittest to nature” and who “doth according to art, though not by art,” and contrasts him to the pedant who uses “art to show art, and not to hide art” (p. 139). But Sidney is not that courtier. Little is hidden by the style of the *Apology*. His adopted role is announced as an adopted role, and nearly all his persuasive tricks and witty anecdotes are relished as persuasive tricks and demonstrations of wit. We rarely lose sight of the self-conscious fashioning of the *Apology* and cannot forget that Sidney is, in Myrick's terms, a “literary craftsman” constructing a “literary artifact.”

It would be tempting to conclude that the *Apology* acts out its own argument, that the work itself moves us through images and fictions while praising the power of poetry to move us through images and fictions. But if this were so, there would be no real argument to act out, only a fiction that neither affirms nor denies, taking as its subject still other fictions. The *Apology* requires another *Apology* to justify it, and so on without end.

What the *Apology* does act out are the tensions characteristic of the best Renaissance thought. Sidney's intellectual affinities lie not so much with Ficino and the Neoplatonists as with thinkers like Nicholas of Cusa. Cusa, in his most famous work, *De Docta Ignorantia*, tells us that previous philosophers erred in their attempts to understand the nature of things because of the illusion that the world has some fixed structure. With his doctrine of "learned ignorance," he attempts to free his readers from this mistake by short-circuiting traditional logical categories, teasing his readers with puzzles that lead to a coincidence of opposites. The technique does not free them from illusion but does bring them to recognize its inevitability, allowing them to manipulate it consciously. Cusa calls this free play "conjecture," which encourages the mind to project its own forms of thought—mathematical, symbolic, and metaphorical—onto a world that lacks any inherent rationality.²⁴ Like Sidney, Cusa argues that conjecture, while neither true nor false, has a practical value: it erects the wit and energizes the will, leading man to the Good. It hardly seems necessary to point out that it is often difficult to tell whether we are to take even this claim as yet another conjecture.²⁵

This is the kind of play that is going on in Sidney's *Apology*. Sidney's friend Hubert Languet had little patience with such protracted ambiguities, and Sidney loved to tease him about it. In his correspondence with the older humanist, Sidney praises the joys of mental exercise: "I am never less a prey to melancholy than

when I am earnestly applying the feeble powers of my mind to some high and difficult subject."²⁶ Languet approves of his enthusiasm but is forever warning him not to spend too much time on studies that do not lead directly to a life of action. He recommends Cicero's letters "not only for the beauty of the Latin but also for the very important matter they contain" (p. 20). But he is guarded about those who practice a double translation method, turning Latin into a modern language and then closing the book to translate it back again. This exercise in style is considered useful by some, but it smacks too much of what Languet later calls "literary leisure." Sidney responds:

I intend to follow your advice about composition, thus: I shall first take one of Cicero's letters and turn it into French; then from French into English, and so once more by a sort of perpetual motion . . . it shall come round into Latin again. Perhaps, too, I shall improve myself in Italian by the same exercise. (p. 23)

Like Languet, Sidney wants to direct his learning outward, to energize the will through the wit. That the transition can be made is confidently, even aggressively, asserted in the *Apology*. But for Sidney, there always seems to be another game to be played by the wit, yet another circuit to be made by its self-circling energies, before it can make that transition.

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Notes

¹ All quotations of Sidney are from *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. and introd. Geoffrey Shepherd (1965; rpt. London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1973), hereafter cited as *Apology*.

² For Sidney as a Renaissance Platonist, see F. Michael Krouse, "Plato and Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*," *Comparative Literature*, 6 (Spring 1954), 138–47; William Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: Knopf, 1957), p. 174; A. C. Hamilton, *The Structure of Allegory in the Faerie Queene* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), pp. 15–29; and Walter Davis, *Idea and Act in Elizabethan Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 31, 37. Besides the obvious metaphorical difference, Augustinian illumination is different from Platonic inspiration;

the former deals with the general nature of cognition, the latter with a special poetic gift. But both fulfill similar functions in Renaissance poetics. The argument for Sidney's Augustinianism is derived from Mornay and Hoskins' hierarchy of inner "words," leading to the divine Logos. See *Apology*, pp. 59, 157–58, n.; *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. and introd. Forrest G. Robinson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), p. 17, n. 63; and Forrest G. Robinson, *The Shape of Things Known: Sidney's Apology in Its Philosophical Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972), Ch. iii.

³ Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory*, trans. Joseph Peake (New York: Harper, 1968), pp. 91–92.

⁴ Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical*

Imagery (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1947), pp. 41–42.

⁵ Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Virginia Conant (1943; rpt. Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1964), p. 308.

⁶ See A. C. Hamilton, "Sidney's Idea of the 'Right Poet,'" *Comparative Literature*, 9 (Winter 1957), 51–59.

⁷ This silence is part of Sidney's rhetorical strategy. He wants us to be able to say, as does John Buxton, that "Sidney describes the poet as a combination of vates, divinely inspired seer, and poet, or maker" (*Sir Philip Sidney and the English Renaissance* [London: Macmillan, 1954], p. 4). But Sidney is careful to leave us enough evidence to deduce a more precise set of theoretical distinctions.

⁸ William G. Crane, *Wit and Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1937), p. 14.

⁹ A. E. Malloch, "'Architectonic' Knowledge and Sidney's *Apologie*," *ELH*, 20 (1953), 181–85.

¹⁰ See Allan Gilbert, ed., *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden* (1940; rpt. Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 358–403, and Baxter Hathaway, *The Age of Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1962).

¹¹ See Paul J. Alpers, *The Poetry of the Faerie Queene* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 19–20. Tuve's final chapter in *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* has a brilliant summary of didactic theory, though it depends on some questionable platonizing and an idealized psychology that Sidney rarely, if ever, realized.

¹² Ficino, "Five Questions concerning the Mind," in *Renaissance Philosophy of Man* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 201–02. For an argument that Sidney's notion of poetic feigning may have been influenced by Ficino, see Cornell March Dowlin, "Sidney's Two Definitions of Poetry," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 3 (1942), 579.

¹³ See Murray Wright Bundy, "'Invention' and 'Imagination' in the Renaissance," *Journal of English and German Philology*, 29 (1930), 535–45, and Baxter Hathaway, *Marvels and Commonplaces* (New York: Random, 1968), p. 56.

¹⁴ William Rossy, "Imagination in the English Renaissance: Psychology and Poetic," *Studies in the Renaissance*, 5 (1958), 49–73.

¹⁵ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, facsimile of 1906 rpt., ed. Edward Arber (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 1970), p. 35.

¹⁶ For arguments that Sidney's radical insistence on the poet's free feigning sets Sidney apart from such Italian sources as Scaliger and Minturno, see Cornell March Dowlin, "Sidney and Other Men's Thought," *Review of English Studies*, 20, No. 80 (1944), 257–71, and Hamilton, "Sidney's Idea of the 'Right Poet.'"

¹⁷ For poetry as a mean, see Bernard Weinberg, *A*

History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 31. By contrast, Jacob Bronowski has noted that in the *Apology* poetry appears to be straining in two directions at once, toward liberated ideality and a forced application to the concrete. See Bronowski, *The Poet's Defence* (Cambridge: University Press, 1939), esp. pp. 39–56.

¹⁸ For the argument that Tasso likewise defines a new realm of poetic discourse through a coincidence of opposites, the "intellectual fantasy," see Phillip Damon, "History and Idea in Renaissance Criticism," in *Literary Criticism and Historical Understanding* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1967).

¹⁹ A. C. Hamilton, "Sidney and Agrippa," *Review of English Studies*, 7, No. 26 (1956), 151–57. Similar claims are made in Hamilton's book on Spenser, cited in n. 2.

²⁰ Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. John Florio (London, 1919; rpt. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1938), II, 244–45.

²¹ Kenneth Myrick, *Sir Philip Sidney as a Literary Craftsman* (1935; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 53.

²² Weinberg, pp. 77, 93, 99–100, 158, 801. For later developments of this controlling of the imagination through *res/verba* distinctions, see A. C. Howell, "Res et Verba: Words and Things," *ELH*, 13 (1946), 131–42.

²³ Sidney violates an essential principle of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, on the intuitive acceptance of first principles. From the thirteenth century on, this work, which shows what a body of knowledge should "look" like and deals with the use of syllogisms, became increasingly important in describing an art. See Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random, 1955), p. 312.

²⁴ Of equal importance is Cusa's second major work, *De Coniecturis*, which complements the first. I am not arguing that Sidney read Cusa's works; if he heard of him at all, it was probably from chance comments made by Giordano Bruno. I am interested here more in pointing out conceptual parallels that will help to trace a Renaissance theory of fiction than in ascribing sources.

²⁵ The essential studies of Cusa are in Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (New York: Harper, 1963), and Maurice de Gandillac, *La Philosophie de Nicholas de Cues* (Paris: Aubier, 1942). The best treatment of this paradox in Cusa's thought, however, is in Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Harcourt, 1962), Vol. II.

²⁶ *Correspondence of Sidney and Languet*, ed. and trans. Steuart Pears (London: W. Pickering, 1845), p. 29.