

Genre of Genre:

Sidney and Defences of Poetry

Michael D. Moore

At the centre of this essay lies a reconsideration of an elusive spirit lurking amid the conventional classical, medieval, and Renaissance gestures of Sir Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie*. This underlying principle in the Sidneyan strategy seems also to animate other "defensive" interventions in the history of English poetics, and the mostly unspoken or unspeakable grounds for poetry's traditionally privileged place at the centre of a liberal education. It may accordingly have implications for our ambivalence today about the "uses" of literature in a world (and an academic profession) renewing—yet again—the same pattern of impatient suspicion and adroitly evasive *apologia*.

My reason for dedicating to Douglas Wurtele this short excursion in literary and educational theory is in large measure personal. One morning in the mid-1960's Douglas converted me, as sullenly philistine a youth as ever was, to English literature. And, in particular, to the study of poetry. It happened early in a compulsory first-year course in Douglas' own first year of full-time university teaching. The revelation occurred as we concluded our readings in Middle English from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. We paused over the author's later "retraccioun"¹—his famous deathbed repudiation, on moral and religious grounds, of a lifetime's literary effort ("enditynges of worldly vanitees"). With more a nudge than a wink, Douglas acknowledged *en passant* that this manner of leave-taking might (or might not) have

been partly or wholly conventional, having numerous precedents, and being multiple or undecidable in tone, “intention,” or historical status. If so, it might (or might not) invite and reward the same sort of dramatic interpretation afforded Chaucer’s many ironic invocations elsewhere of presumably-familiar tropes, devices, and genres from classical or medieval rhetoric, poetics, and piety. I was enthralled by the hint that there could after all be something important, needful, and deliciously “dangerous” (and yet moral in some ampler sense) in the maddening obliqueness of literature and literariness; in their ambiguous mode of relation to a prepossessing world of practical action, and to ideological and institutional authority, even with respect to “thilke that sownen into synne.”

In the texts we call “literary” or “poetic”—in which we find human experience most searchingly, yet uninsistently, observed in self-disclosing symbolic actions—are the springs of re-imagining ourselves and of individual and social change. In all eras this potential has been condemned, discouraged, or belittled by interests resistant to change or plurality. At the same time, it is also always being enlisted on behalf of one or another particular articulation of change. Both tendencies misconceive or prefer to ignore the paradoxical manner of poetry’s disengaged, even dramatic, manner of affording readers themselves the opportunity for imaginative engagement and critical judgment—moral, political, or otherwise. Poetry’s own emphasis on *mimesis* and *poiesis* and *drama*—representation and making and action—is an eschewing of reducible statement, exhortation, or serviceable abstraction, an indifference to pronouncing the meanings of its own showings. Such opaqueness—in Sidney’s phrase, “the Poet, he nothing affirms” (52)—is what disappoints mistaken expectations of referentiality.²

From ancient times to the present, debate over the nature and value of poetry has eddied around the same two or three implicit issues, altered only incidentally by shifts in cultural circumstances. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose?* To dwell insistently on historical and semantic differences among the literary zeitgeists of the classical, medieval, Renaissance humanist, romantic, modernist, and post-modernist periods is to disperse our sense of radical continuities of concern and of “generic” strategy persisting today. Objections to valuing literary discourse have always originated in anxiety about the “moral” and “practical” implications of its distracting fictionality. The subject matter of literature is patently imaginary—untruthful—and its

affecting manner therefore dangerously conducive to sympathy with fanciful, delusive, profitless, or licentious thought or conduct. The unworldly philosopher must needs deplore wayward poetry's beautiful falsities, the vigilant cleric its libertine temptations from "moralitee and devocioun," and the pragmatic utilitarian its wasteful uselessness.

And yet poetry's detractors also seem to take it for granted that the difference between literary and other forms of verbal discourse must be one of degree rather than of kind. In order to deny poetry any privileged status or perspective, it must be classified as a branch of rhetoric or oratory, distinguishable only in incidentals from instrumental (and professedly moral) varieties of didactic referential exposition or effective persuasion. After all, the idle literary falsehoods would not otherwise be considered worth attacking, or poetry's influence pernicious. Here lies the dissonance haunting the charges brought against literature through the centuries. Poetry cannot logically be *both* elegant irrelevant trifling *and* an instance of language's power to promote or disturb the stability of customary or authorised social values. Indeed, the hostility or impatience of poetry's enemies turns out to be primarily ideological, not moral. The real disagreement is not over relative truthfulness or usefulness. It is the monologic hegemony's resentment of dialogic mischief, of an only ironic compliance, of destabilised or multiplied values, of inclusive imaginings of humanity and humaneness at variance with the controlling authority of its own status, meanings, and purposes.

But the same aporia persists in the defences as well, confirming the sanctioning authority of those values. Although moral efficacy or persuasive advocacy is never advanced as the distinguishing essence of poetry, neither do Sidney's successors dare expressly to disavow so expedient a misconnection with the "useful" arts of eloquence. The generic retort upon suspicion of the moral or practical utility of poetry is to explain that ideally it does impart the desiderated qualities of knowledge, virtue, and common sense, albeit by vividly depicting exemplary images and actions instead of advancing data, precepts, testimony, syllogisms, or enthymemes. Still, careful reading of most defences of poetry, including that of Horace, indicates that the prominent *dulce et utile* formulation is actually advanced as a secondary consideration, after the fact, not as an essential motive or necessary effect in literature.

Sidney's eclectic manifesto, *An Apologie for Poetrie* (c1580), is often cited as a model restatement of the moral argument for literature. In fact, it affords us an example of how ambivalent that line of "defence" can actually be. Eager to revitalise a moribund and pedantic national literature, Sidney nevertheless felt constrained to reiterate too, as far as he honestly could, a mainly utilitarian and moral rationale for its encouragement. He accordingly includes—indeed, features—a virtuoso rehearsal of classical and medieval and sixteenth-century pleadings that the moral instructiveness of literature is enhanced by its delightfulness. That few of these concepts were novelties was noted in assiduous contemporary analyses like that of Sir William Temple, and has been confirmed in countless scholarly articles. It is in those respects a debonaire pastiche of mostly Platonic, Aristotelian, Horatian, and Ciceronian principles, with traces of later continental and English thought on discourse and learning. And it is so charmingly (if not seamlessly) assembled as to cast a kind of rosy harmonising haze over a deliberately "generic" performance that is in more muted matters of detail and implication also a radical utterance. Sidney's whole strategy is, I believe, to confirm the indirectly (or potentially) edifying value of poetry while subtly dissociating its *quiddity* from that of rhetoric. In so doing, he implicitly aligns the lying poets, *pace* Plato, with the truth-seeking philosophers in their ancient rivalry with rhetoricians.

Sidney is, in fact, persistently uneasy about avowing that poetic discourse directly "teaches" anything of paraphrasable meaning or worth, or that its moral bearings can be discerned or valued as "instructive" in the referential, intentional, informative, practical way of preaching, ethical philosophy, or even history-writing. In fact, he says that to be "wrapped within the folde of the proposed subiect," or to look merely for a way of "sweetly uttering" any fixed "knowledge" (including matters philosophical or moral) is to be not "right Poets" (27). Right poetry cannot be the delivering forth of preset themes, supposed facts, doxa, or even prescribable subject matter. That would be at best rhetoric, at worst propaganda. Presumably, then, the right poet means or hopes in some sense to edify, but not to teach any doctrine in particular. Similarly, the presence of pleasing style, figurative language, pathos, personification, fables, and other formal and technical diversions is not a reliable note of right literature. Nothing is commoner, he points out, than to see these methods employed by writers and orators for manipulative advantage. And, when he goes on to mock the sophistries and hypocrisies—not just the dullness—of moral philosophers, Sidney seems again to confirm that right poetry must be understood as

“instructive” in some vastly more subtle sense. Not just indirectly, or in a higher degree, but differently.

Sidney carefully (if unobtrusively) separates incisive remarks on the *nature* of poetry from his more numerous but blander comments on its possible moral benefits. Literature is above all *mimetic*—it apprehends and re-presents, creating a living mental image (picture) in words (26-7). If Aristotle had seemed to say that something natural is imitated, and Plato something imagined, Sidney is again mainly with Plato, if only to insist that poetic representation does not purport to copy or mirror actualities. “The poet nothing affirmeth.” Nor does the *Apologie* suggest that the process or product of mimesis is in itself instructive or that it carries or produces meaning. The immediate end and effect of mimesis is in fact said to be not meaning nor understanding but delight—both the poet’s joy in what is being imagined and the reader’s pleasure, whether the same or different, in contemplating the imitation produced. The delight is described by Sidney in sensory metaphors—sound and sight—the mind’s ear and the mind’s eye.

Closely associated with the delight (or with its intensity) is *energeia* (67)—the power by which delight animates the writer and the reader in some way or other—the *moving* force that draws or pushes, or can “strike, pierce” or “possesse” them (33), stirring them to action or the desire for action. Again, however, being moved into this state of excitation or seeking does not appear to be educational in itself. The emphasis is entirely on “strange effects” (41) on mind and emotion and will. Indeed Sidney emphasises that “mooving is of a higher degree then teaching” (39). Delightful mimesis (literature?) moves us by its very nature, not otherwise: there is “no law but wit” (27). At most, we are moved into a condition of mind hospitable to or desirous of an infusion of moral reflections on richly suggestive picturings of experience, but, by the same logic, we are just as open to the influence of evil ideas and bad examples. This obvious flaw in the teaching-by-delight defence is further acknowledged in the *Apologie*’s invoking that other generic caveat that the abuse of a good thing should not condemn its right use. To the extent that Sidney considers instruction or teaching a function of literature, then, it is as something more subtle and uncertain than commonly supposed.

In a famous sentence Sidney hints (without explicitly claiming) that the power of literature may energise “our erected wit [that] maketh vs know what perfection is,” even though “our infected will keepeth vs from reaching vnto it” (26). But he is afterwards honest enough to ascribe such a function to *all* learning, not just to literature. Nor can poetry be said to be alone in transcending the sciences of “well knowing” and concerning itself also with “well dooing” (30). Sidney acknowledges at some length that historians and philosophers are strong rivals in this regard although poetry may by its nature be a better *mover* than either. Of course, poetry is at an advantage here only in pleasurableness, not in morality.

Things cohere better if the *Apologie* is understood to be assigning all (or almost all) the responsibility for literature’s instructiveness or practicality to readers themselves. The key evidence here is in the sinewy remark that even as readers looking in History books for truth “goe away full fraught with falsehood: so in Poesie, looking for fiction, they shall vse the narration but as an imaginatiue groundplot of a profitable inuention.” Does Sidney not mean here that inventing (*invenire*, finding) anything profitable is, frankly, the reader’s or critic’s task and prerogative? That herein, if anywhere, is the possible *use* of a frankly imaginative narration? That the unexpectedness of discovering some profitable insight for oneself, by reading a fiction, is somehow a better education (e-ducing) than looking for general “truth” in didactic discourses wrongly claiming to inculcate it directly? If so, a right poem is strictly “imaginative”—not rhetorical—offering nothing beyond a stimulating “groundplot” that may or may not activate a reader’s own “invention” towards a moral, useful, or otherwise “profitable” ethos and praxis.

Why might such a text, so produced and so employed, be more edifying than, say, history or philosophy? Presumably by calling more energetically into play a wider range of mental and emotional responsiveness, and by extending almost infinitely the variety and nature of imaginable actions, characters, and situations. In other words, by exercising and cultivating all our intellectual faculties, in exactly the manner John Henry Newman described in identifying a liberal university education with “knowledge for its own sake,” that is, for the sake of the mind itself, free for the time being from any ulterior consideration of moral, social, technical, or professional utility. In *The Idea of a University*, Newman conceded that the product of a right education of this sort might not necessarily be a moral, pious, useful citizen. Education

is one good thing, morality another. As for utility, “though the useful is not always good, the good is always useful.”³

Sidney seems to have valued literature in like terms, as a liberating and informing discourse, and, in the first instance, for its own sake. Such a view can never appeal widely, or to the officialdom of the status quo, or even to other writers, theorists, and critics for whom individual and social responsibility (and inclusive breadth of appeal?) are concerns that cannot in good conscience remain so oblique or uncertain. Like most other “defences,” his *Apologie for Poetrie* is a strategic compromise, not so much a feigned as a realistically equivocal or partial defence of didactic literary theory. It illustrates learned, graceful accommodation with the more or less dominant cultural discourses, in any age, of pragmatism and piety. He was, after all, an active public figure and a puritan himself, just as Newman the secular liberal in education was also a vehement apologist for religious orthodoxy. In each case, the rhetorical challenge in daring to affirm the practicality of impractical things was to harmonise overdetermined discordancies in a mixed audience, while still dexterously respecting actual differences between unlike things.

Such honest, tactful clarity is always needful, perhaps especially so at our own moment and situation in the perennial negotiation of dissonances about literature and higher education. Understanding and support of academic literary study and scholarship has diminished lately, for the usual reason: our supposed impracticality. Coincidentally or not, many within the discipline are turning back to moral (politically engaged) imperatives in austere reconceptions of literature and critical work. *Plus ça change?*

In so hectic a generation, Douglas Wurtele’s has been a voice of informed clarity and balance. Like his beloved Chaucer, Douglas has always contemplated with critical geniality life’s (and institutions’) follies and knaveries. And like the Clerk of Oxenford, he has treasured, embodied, and generously enlarged “lerning” and “heigh sentence,” yet “Gladly wolde he...teche” (20). As a respected scholar, as an award-winning teacher, as a skilful editor, and as a beloved friend, he has been consistently liberal, humane, and *educational* in the fullest sense of the word. Rarely is so rigorous a knowledge of poetry’s engagement with political, religious, ethical, psychological, and philosophical *subjects* or *questions* combined with so joyous an

affirmation of the dramatic openness of its symbolic representation of intellectual, social, and moral experience. To use his own phrase, Douglas Wurtele has “opened out” for all of us many an imaginative groundplot for many a profitable invention.

Wilfrid Laurier University

Notes

1 Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson. 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 265.

2 References are from Philip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie* (London: Henry Olney, 1595; rep. *English Reprints*, ed. Edward Arber, vol. I, New York: AMS Press, 1966).

3 Newman, John Henry. *The Idea of a University*, ed. Martin J. Svaglic (San Francisco: Rinehart, 1960), p. 124.