Philip Sidney's Poetics in the Context of Ancient and Continental Examples

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ABSTRACT

The study deals with the main tenets of Philip Sidney's poetics on the basis of The Defence of Poesy *and his poetry (mainly* Astrophil and Stella*) in the context of Elizabethan considerations of the classical aesthetic concepts (especially that of Aristotle and Horace) and some of the Renaissance continental examples. Sidney's* The Defence of Poesy *represents a fundamental step in establishing poetry as the creator of its own world, its so-called second nature, and points out poetry's ability to create figures and imitate reality; thus the main value of poetry lies in creating clear rhetorical images of moral truth. So Sidney's poetics plays an important role in establishing English poetry as a device of the national cultural and social autonomy.*

I.

> The noble Sidney with this last arose,
> That heroë for numbers and for prose,
> That throughly paced our language, as to show
> The plenteous English hand in hand might go
> With Greek and Latin […].[1]

The Renaissance poet[2] is perceived as a complex figure in the Elizabethan context, an ideal person – not just the creator of fictional worlds, but an excellent rhetorician, morally firm and an intellectual, learned in art and literary culture. Poesy then is not just an initiator of delight: it sets forth a moral example (important for its social and political impact), provides a source of education to readers and cultivates a national (as well as, in these times, a *popular*) language.

Philip Sidney himself fits the above description: he was a well-educated poet, a courtier with good manners and an important aristocrat, soldier, envoy and politician.[3] All these roles seem to shape Sidney's concept of poetry and *The Defence of Poesy*, his important treatise that established the role of poetry in a general sense as well as on a national level as a strategy for dealing with ancient and contemporary examples. However, Sidney did not intend for his work to be printed,

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1 Michael Drayton, "To Henry Reynolds, of Poets and Poesy," in *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism,* ed. Alexander Gavin (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 293–294.

2 The word *poet* is used here in the widest sense of *creator* (of fiction), relating to the original greek term *poiein*.

3 During his travels as an English envoy, he supposedly also met Thaddaeus Hagecius ab Hayek, probably in the first half of the year 1575, on returning to England via Brno, Prague, Dresden and Heidelberg. Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Chronology," in *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxi.

thereby earning a reputation among the widest scope of readers. Quite the contrary, his works existed only in manuscript during his lifetime and circulated among his inner circle of friends, colleagues and upholders. Only after his death thanks to his family and friends were they published.[4]

There are two possible reasons for this: in the context of the artistic Renaissance competition of imitating classical and contemporary examples, English written poetry may have been considered too provincial.[5] Alternatively, and most likely, Sidney engaged in a wide range of social and political activities, in which he moved in high aristocratic circles. Therefore, he was financially secure, which meant that he had no need to publish poetry as a means of earning money or the patronage of a rich sponsor.

As will be shown further, the first reason has very little to do with Sidney's perception of poetry's task. In contrast, Sidney's urge to create results from two rather personal reasons: on a public level, to legitimate poetry and to show its benefits in presenting a moral and useful of dealing with social and religious conflicts of the time; and on the private level, to vent his experience of a passionate unrequited love through his poetry (as Sidney himself indicates in his verses).

Thus, Sidney's social status is important if we are to properly understand his concept of poetry and his motives for writing, given that he was ambitious not just in the field of literary culture but also in the political sphere. As Warwick's and Leicester's nephew, Francis Walsingham's son-in-law and Queen Elizabeth's envoy,[6] he was an active figure in Elizabethan politics and intellectual debates and his foreign trips developed the more cosmopolitan aspects of his thinking.

In his poetics he was not a pure theoretician or philosopher. His thinking was rather shaped on the basis of debates with his friends, scholars, intellectuals and poets; thus, his work is inseparably related to his life and his theory to practice. *The Defence of Poesy* is not a systematic treatise, but more likely an emotional speech which combines various sources of inspiration and which does not depend on copying any examples. His poetry then was not created on the basis of the strict application of any rules, but rather in reference to an excitement produced by the poet's sincerity, no matter how stylised.

II.

Omne tulit punctum, qui miscuit utile dulci, / Lectorem delectando pariterque monendo.[7]
Ut pictura, poësis.[8]

In Elizabethan poetics, two contrasting tendencies can be traced. Firstly, Elizabethan poetics is stimulated by classical and contemporary (French, Italian) literary models. Secondly, this fact results in a competition with these models, because English authors accent that English poetry and the English language are best suited at imitating classical models. This fact emerges from the more

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4   Alois Bejblík, "Astrofel a Stella," in *Astrofel a Stella* (Praha: Odeon, 1987), 147–163; Zdeněk Stříbrný, *Dějiny anglické literatury* (Praha: Academia, 1987), 134–136; Gavin Alexander, "Introduction," in *Sidney's The Defence of Poesy' and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism,* ed. Alexander Gavin (London: Penguin Books, 2004), liii, liv.

5   Alexander, *Introduction,* xxiii.

6   Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Introduction," in *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), viii-ix.

7   Horatius, *O umění básnickém* (Praha: Academia, 2002), 47, 343–344.

8   Horatius, *O umění básnickém,* 49, 361.

complex project of establishing and cultivating the English language, the professionalisation of English literary culture and the pursuit of proving their literary, political and religious independence from Europe. Sidney's *The Defence of Poesy* and his poetics as such are crucial in this pursuit, as his collection of poems *Astrophil and Stella* actually contain the first sonnets written in English. Indeed, *Defence* is considered the first attempt to establish poetics in English language.[9]

Thus, the relocation of classical poetics and its rules was neither realised without proper purpose nor too rigidly. Classical criteria were modified to correspond with the specifics of Elizabethan social conditions and English cultural and political needs. Elizabethan poetics is inspired by classical authors in the context of these two aspects in particular. Firstly, Elizabethan poetics also works with the concept of *mimesis* (or *imitatio*). Secondly, it draws on the close connection between poetics and rhetoric.[10]

It is important to point out that the notion of imitation as used today includes several interpretations intertwined in early modern considerations of poetics. Gavin Alexander frames imitation firstly as a representation (*mimesis*), secondly in the context of literary models (*imitatio*) and thirdly around a readerly, behavioural imitation, which he calls *emulation*.[11]

Some of the Elizabethan puritan critics (e.g. Gosson) condemned poetry, namely in the context of the third mentioned connotation, i.e. a readerly imitation.[12] Although Queen Elizabeth tried to rein in the puritans, Reynolds from Oxford called for the outright closure of theatres in his lampoon from the year 1599, with the puritan's effort finally resulting in the relocation of theatre buildings from the City of London to Southwark. Thus, it is obvious that any arguments for an apologia for poetry are sought rather in the context of the first two meanings of imitation.

The interpretation of imitation as *mimesis* draws on Plato's and Aristotle's concept. Nevertheless, Sidney's perception of poetry is closer to Aristotle's kinder consideration of the inventiveness and purpose of the arts. While, according to Plato, art-as-mimesis has no direct relation to reality (the world of ideas), i.e. art merely represents ideas,[13] in Aristotle's poetics the acceptance of art's mimetic role emerges. Poetry, according to Aristotle, arises from natural causes and distinguishes man from other creatures, as man is born with the ability to imitate through melody and rhythm; moreover, mankind possesses the ability to learn and derive pleasure from imitation.[14] In contrast to Plato, Aristotle's *Poetics* is quite rigid in prescribing the rules of imitation and in defining the distinction between tragedy and comedy. The effect of poetry is not considered on the basis of its precise analogy of reality, but is appreciated through the measure of aroused pleasure and emotions. *Mimesis* then is not perceived as an exact imitation but as a representation

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9   More to Sidney's importance for the English literary culture see Duncan-Jones, *Introduction*, xvii. Katherine Duncan-Jones compares Sidney's contribution to English language to the Petrarca's importance for Italy (Duncan-Jones, *Introduction*, xvii). See also Alexander, *Introduction,* lv.

10 Both aspects are explicit in Sidney's *Defence* as well. Alexander claims that some of the Renaissance literary works (for example, Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*) can be seen as the representation of a rhetoric opportunity (Alexander, *Introduction,* xxxvi-ii).

11 Alexander, *Introduction,* xxxiv.

12 That is, the poetry as an ungodly and immoral enterprise leads to the imitation of ungodly and immoral behaviour.

13 Platón, *Ústava* (Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2003), 305–314.

14 Aristotelés, *Poetika* (Praha: GRYF, 1993), 9–10.

of reality: neither is it dependent on analogy or accurate reference to reality, nor is its measure connected to truth but probability.[15]

The second interpretation of imitation as *imitatio* is also based on Aristotle's poetics (as man learns himself through imitation of things, as mentioned above) but also on the works of Cicero, Seneca[16] and Horace's *Ars Poetica*.[17] Horace's poetics inspired the Elizabethan poetic works in these two aspects particularly. Firstly, the arts are regulated by general rules and natural talent is also required. Formal perfection is just as important as the power of aroused emotions.[18] The poet should be self-disciplined; however, he should write legibly and educatively at the same time.[19] Secondly, but of primary importance, poems are understood as speaking images[20] and the task of the poet is defined as *prodesse ac delectare* (to be useful in educating and to entertain).[21] In this respect, they correspond very well with the social and educational function of poetry. Both of these aspects can be clearly found in Sidney's *Defence*. Nuttall claims that, in Sidney's case, the emotions aroused by the poet are "motors of moral behaviour."[22]

Furthermore, if the task of poetry is defined this way, i.e. if poetry is supposed to arouse delight, emotion and knowledge, it has to be really convincing and compelling. So, in comparison with classical poetics, even poetry is related to rhetoric. This close connection is not just the result of the inspiration of classical authors, but one which emerges from the whole context of the Elizabethan educational system of *grammar schools* and universities. In fact, the aim of *grammar schools* (also Shakespeare visited one of them in Stratford) was to learn to read, write and speak Latin, to study classical poets (including Latin composition in all genres by memorising selected phrases and learned dialogues) and to imitate writing styles (most often those of Cicero, Virgil, Ovid or Horace).[23]

All these tenets are displayed in Sidney's *Defence*, which is not a systematic theoretic (or philosophical) work but rather an emotional speech that defends poetry as an autonomous form of knowledge essential for the Common wealth[24] and as a source for the reinforcement of English literary culture and society.

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15 Compare Aristotelés, *Poetika* and Zofia Mitoseková, *Teorie literatury* (Brno: Host, 2010), 39–40.

16 Alexander, *Introduction,* xxxii-xxxiii.

17 Although Aristotelian and Horacian traditions are similar in appreciating the educational function of poetry and the emotions aroused by poetry, it is sometimes difficult to identify which one inspired the Elizabethan authors of poetics (moreover, they are rarely explicit in their quotations).

18 Horatius, *O umění básnickém,* 13, 15.

19 Horatius, *O umění básnickém,* 15, 47.

20 Horatius, *O umění básnickém,* 49.

21 Eva Stehlíková, "Slovo k Horatiově poetice," in *O umění básnickém,* 70; Horatius, *O umění básnickém,* 47.

22 Anthony David Nuttall, *Why does tragedy give pleasure?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 18.

23 Peter Mack, *Reading and Rhetoric in Montaigne and Shakespeare* (London – New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 2.

24 Robert E. Stillman, *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), vii.

III.

> Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or quite anew, forms such as never were in nature.[25]

Sidney's *The Defence of Poesy* was published in 1595 soon after the unauthorised edition of *An Apology for Poetry* was withdrawn from circulation.[26] Sidney's sources of inspiration are quite rich and diverse but his allusions to classical models are not always clear and explicit. The work is meant for learned readers (those familiar with the history of poetics, classical authors and contemporary intellectual debates and interests) and its allusiveness is often rather cosmopolitan.[27]

Sidney's poetics is based on the concept of *mimesis* (more in Aristotle's than Plato's understanding) and on the concept of poetry as *speaking pictures* inspired by Horace as well as its appeal to the social effect of poetry. We can assume Sidney was acquainted with Plato's *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* and some rhetoric treatises by Cicero and Quintilian. According to Robert Stillman, Sidney cannot be easily labelled as an Aristotelian or Platonist, since his epistemology is a "syncretically brilliant compromise between the Aristotelian and the Platonic, showing how 'imitation' assumes new meaning."[28] Nuttall assumes that Sidney acquainted himself with Aristotle's *Poetics* thanks to Giacopo Zabarella during his journey to Italy.[29]

Since Sidney was not an academician, preferring the success of oration to the accuracy of imitation, he worked with classical models quite autonomously and freely. Besides, some of his inspirational sources were rather informal. For example, he drew on the intellectual debates of his like-minded literate friends, which meant he did not necessarily need to work with original classical sources. Nonetheless, Sidney's range of knowledge of classical examples as well as of contemporary issues and discussions in England and Europe (e.g. Italy, France and Spain) are indisputable. Stillman sees the unique quality of Sidney's poetics in its scope, which includes the knowledge of traditional poetics as well as the new hermeneutics (drawn from the ideas of Melanchthon, whom he met in Vienna).[30]

In this context, the power and eloquence of poetry is given an important role in both the religious and political spheres. Stillman claims Sidney shared with those from like-minded intellectual circles (Languet and Mornay) the idea of natural law and poetry as a device to free rulers from their wickedness. Thus, "poetry *must* work to undo tyranny because history and philosophy *cannot*."[31] However, the genre of allegory cultivated by Sidney confuses the fields of history and poetry.[32] Again, Sidney did not intend to elaborate a perfect theory; rather, he focused his poetics

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25   Philip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," in *The Major Works,* 216.

26   Gavin Alexander, *Introduction,* lv. See also Duncan-Jones, "Chronology," in *The Major Works,* xxiii.

27   More on Sidney's cosmopolitanism in Stillman, *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism,* 28.

28   Stillman, *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism,* 109.

29   Nuttall, *Why does tragedy give pleasure?,* 15.

30   Stillman, *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism,* viii; Robert E. Stillman, "The Scope of Sidney's *Defence of Poesy*: The New Hermeneutic and Early Modern Poetics," *English Literary Renaissance* 32, no. 3 (2002): 356–357, 384.

31   Stillman, *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism,* xii-xiii.

32   More will be shown further.

on cultural and social practice. Sidney "locates his discourse not in relation to a history of poetics […], but instead he fashions his defense more pragmatically by comparing poetry as a species of knowledge to rival sciences."[33] Therefore, although the question of Sidney's exact inspirational sources cannot be easily answered, his efforts at fusing the various sources and disciplines, along with his moderate and open-minded restoration of classical models, were of an unquestionable and original character.

Sidney begins his defence by telling a story. While at the Emperor's court, a man gives him a commendation of horsemanship. He succeeds thanks to theoretical and practical arguments but primarily on the basis of affection and example.[34] Sidney composes his defence through impressive rhetoric and instead of a logically elaborated treatise he composes his poesy on the basis of poetic candidness drawn from personal experience. Sidney follows his opening story and states the arguments from the field of poetics' theory and practice and persuades his readers more with his rhetoric and stylistic brilliance than with the coherent composition of a defence.

Sidney elaborates six principal issues in his defence, as will be elaborated further: the definition of poetry as part of human knowledge, especially in its relations to moral philosophy and historiography; the concept of poetry as the art of imitation and the creation of *speaking pictures*; the creative power of poetry to form *another nature*; the moral and social function of poetry; the response to the main critical arguments against poetry and finally a brief comment on the role and condition of English poetry. It is worth noting that these issues are not discussed systematically one by one as Sidney's form of emotional speech and literary style suggest.

First of all, Sidney intended to establish the position of poetry among other disciplines (particularly historiography and moral philosophy). He also tried to demonstrate that poetry stood out among the other sciences. Sidney asserts that the first philosophers like Parmenides, Thales and Empedocles "durst not a long time appear to the world but under the masks of poets" and wrote their works in verses, and even historiographers "borrow both fashion and perchance weight of the poets."[35] Sidney thus defines poetry as relying on "ideal rather than material or historical models."[36] Poetry becomes the moderator which includes both historiography and philosophy, transcending both at the same time.[37] Moral philosophy achieves its goal through rules and precepts, historiography by example; but poetry is able to fulfil the moral task better than the rest.[38] Since poetry, as it is closest to human nature, is the most capable of moving the reader towards *virtue*.[39] Here, he sees the essential importance of poetry: where other forms of learning rely on *nature*, poetry can surpass it; where philosophy provides propositions and precepts, poetry explains them and, moreover, provides a "lifelike instance of the beautiful and the good."[40] Stillman

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33   Stillman, *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism,* 30.

34   Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, 212.

35   Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 5.

36   Nandra Perry, "*Imitatio* and Identity: Thomas Rogers, Philip Sidney, and the Protestant Self," *English Literary Renaissance* (2005): 391.

37   Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, 221.

38   Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 221–226. Sidney enumerates the reasons that support poetry's predominance.

39   Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 228.

40   Alexander, *Introduction,* lix, lx.

calls attention to the crucial role of the distinctive intellectual *scope* of poetry, which is different from other disciplines.[41]

Sidney frames poetry as *an art of imitation*. However, "imitation" is not understood as a naive and simple imitation, but rather as a creative *representation*.[42] Poetry creates *speaking pictures* to *teach and delight*. Sidney claims poetry includes three general kinds of imitation: the first imitates the "inconceivable excellencies of God", the second "matters philosophical [and] moral" and finally the *right poets* who create fictions.[43] Sidney compares the first two kinds to painters "who counterfeit only such faces as are set before them, and the more excellent, who having no law but wit"[44]. He again elaborates the Horatian concept of poesy as *speaking pictures.* As Sidney points out, poetry is not defined be means of versifying, but by creating fictions: "Verse being but an ornament and no cause to poetry, since there have been many most excellent poets that never versified, and now swarm many versifiers that need never answer to the name of poets".[45] Sidney's poetic discourse, with its moral, almost sacred appeal, differs from that of other Elizabethan authors. According to Campana, Sidney's visuality, which derives from the Aristotelian tradition of moral clarity, or *éthos*, is confronted with Spenser's vitality and energy, or *pathos*.[46] Thus Sidney's preference for poetry over other areas of learning draws from poetry's metamorphic power, the poet's ability to articulate the fruits of his imagination.[47]

This leads us to the next argument in favour of an apologia for poetry: the creative power of art is similar to divine potency. Sidney reminds us that the classical understanding of the poet as *vates* originated in the Greek concept of poetry as *making* (*poiein*).[48] The poet's imagination, in Sidney's conception of it as we have seen, must surpass the law of nature.[49] Sidney returns to the platonic concept of *second nature* as well, giving "right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker [i.e. the artist, poet], who, having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of second nature".[50] Thus, imitation plays a sacred role in restoring the relationship between "maker" (man) and "maker of that maker" (God).[51] The parallel between the poetic and godly power of creation must have been readily understood by Elizabethan readers, not just because of the general familiarity with the classical works of Plato and Horace but also because of the commonly used metaphor of *theatrum mundi*.[52]

In summary, Sidney's poetics is an exceptional sort, especially for its resourceful construction of the moral and social function of poetry, which becomes the chief argument for its apologia. The

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41 Stillman, *The Scope of Sidney's* Defence of Poesy: *The New Hermeneutic and Early Modern Poetics*, 355–356.

42 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 217.

43 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 217–218.

44 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 217–218.

45 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 218. Compare Philip Sidney, "Astrophil and Stella," in *The Major Works,* 233.

46 Joseph Campana, "On Not Defending Poetry: Spenser, Suffering, and the Energy of Affect," *PMLA* 120, no. 1 (2005): 36–38.

47 Compare Stillman, *The Scope of Sidney's* Defence of Poesy*: The New Hermeneutic and Early Modern Poetics*, 383.

48 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 214.

49 Perry, Imitatio *and Identity: Thomas Rogers, Philip Sidney, and the Protestant Self*, 391.

50 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 9.

51 Perry, Imitatio *and Identity: Thomas Rogers, Philip Sidney, and the Protestant Self*, 392–393.

52 It is worth mentioning Calderón's *Theatrum Mundi* and Jacques' famous speech in Shakespeare's *As You Like It.*

moral function of poetry is based on this idea of poetry as being able *to teach*.[53] Poetry's function pertains to tragedy as well as comedy and becomes the very argument against the accusations of poetry being immoral: "Only thus much now is to be said, that the comedy in an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one."[54]

Since every image of an action lifts and enlightens the mind, the image of nobility encourages us to desire it and teaches us how to achieve it: "For, as the image of each action stirreth and instructeth the mind, so the lofty image of such worthies most inflameth the mind with desire to be worthy, and informs with counsel how to be worthy."[55] Poetry therefore becomes a compelling force, a perfect device to arouse delight, emotion and knowledge.[56] Sidney refers to the poet's capability of representing the particular ideas of virtue and vice, which are in fact the mirror of his own moral and philosophical education: his righteousness, virtuousness and religiousness.[57] It becomes clear not just from the poetry itself, but particularly from the poet that they contribute to the establishment of a moral example through the representation of virtue and what he calls the *doctrine by ensample*.[58] These are much more convincing than austere, explicative moral prescripts. In this way, the *speaking pictures* of virtue and vice are able to form and change how people think.[59]

Sidney summarises the main arguments of the apology: "Since, then, poetry is of all human learnings the most ancient and of most fatherly antiquity, as from whence other learnings have taken their beginnings; since it is so universal that no learned nation doth despise it, nor barbarous nation is without it; since both Roman and Greek gave divine names unto it, the one of 'prophesying,' the other of 'making,' […] since neither his description nor his end containeth any evil, the thing described cannot be evil; since his effects be so good as to teach goodness, and delight the learners of it; […] I think, and think I think rightly, the laurel crown appointed for triumphant captains doth worthily, of all other learnings, honor the poet's triumph."[60]

He concludes his oration with an enumeration of the substantial objections against art and poetry. Firstly, there are objections against rhyming and versifying; secondly, "man might better spend his time", because there are "many other more fruitful knowledges" and poetry is the "mother of lies" and "the nurse of abuse"; thirdly, poetry destroys the action of preferring imagination, while it is more appropriate to "doing things worthy to be written, than writing things fit to be done" and finally, objections of philosophers against the poetry as a deceptive and prejudicial matter.[61]

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53 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 218.

54 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 230.

55 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 231.

56 According to Alexander, he was inspired by Plutarch's *How the Young Man Ought to Study Poetry*. (Alexander, *Introduction*, lxii.).

57 Stillman, *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism,* 116.

58 These ideas are very common in Elizabethan poetics, e.g. in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* as well. In his dedicatory epistle Spenser refers to Aristotle's advice to represent moral examples, but he also knew Sidney's concept. (Edmund Spenser. "The Faerie Queene," in *Edmund Spenser's Poetry*, ed. Hugh MacLean and Anna Lake Prescott (New York – London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 1–2. See also p. 492).

59 Stillman, *The Scope of Sidney's* Defence of Poesy: *The New Hermeneutic and Early Modern Poetics*, 384.

60 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 232.

61 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 233–239.

Sidney deals with them as follows. Firstly, rhyming and versifying are not the main attributes of poetry; however, he appreciates verse and rhyme for their harmony and proportion which stimulate our memory. Certainly, man might spend his time better, but poetry teaches us and moves us to virtue better than other modes of learning.[62] If some detractors call poetry the *mother of lies*, they accuse it unjustly, since poetry affirms nothing and cannot be a liar: "the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth."[63] And if they call poetry the *nurse of abuse*, it has to be said *man* abuses the poetry, not poetry the man. Furthermore, the fact that a thing can be abused does not entail that the thing is wicked as such.[64] The objection which says that poetry destroys the action is, according to Sidney, "plainest homeliness" and might be used against all modes of learning.[65] He then deals with the objections of philosophers, especially Plato. Sidney claims poets do not create deceptive opinions; they rather imitate opinions already induced. Thus, "doth Plato upon the abuse, not upon poetry."[66]

At the very end of his apology, Sidney devotes himself to English poetics and verse by reasserting the social and political task of poetry in establishing national autonomy: England as the "mother of excellent minds, should be grown so hard a stepmother to poets; who certainly in wit ought to pass all others, since all only proceedeth from their wit, being indeed makers of themselves, not takers of others."[67] It is worth noting that Sidney unconventionally puts the English cultural and political autonomy above the accurate imitation of classical and contemporary examples. Sidney is sure about the potential of the English language in establishing a national culture, since "our tongue is most fit to honor poesy, and to be honored by poesy."[68]

IV.

> You that with allegory's curious fame
> Of others's children changelings use to make,
> With me those pains, for God's sake, do not take;
> I list not dig so deep for brazen fame.
> […] But know that I, in pure simplicity,
> Breathe out the flames which burn within my heart
> Love only reading unto me this art.[69]

Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* establishes the foundations of his poetics and his intentions. It is possible to imagine his poetics as a carefully built house: the theory consists of the concept of poesy as imitation and "speaking pictures" and forms stable ground floor of the whole building. On the next level, we find the moral task of poetry as a *doctrine by ensample* which forms the basis of representing

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62 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 233–234.

63 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 235. For example history is the worse liar in this context. It is worth nothing Sidney claims a traditional argument dealing with truth-value of fiction.

64 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 236.

65 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 237.

66 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 239.

67 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 240–241.

68 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 249.

69 Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella,* 163–164.

a moral example of virtue. The last level (contingent to the previous ones) consists in the practical social effect of poetry, which uses this moral example in everyday life. Likewise, Sidney's poetics results in practice, his poetry (namely *Arcadia* and the collection of sonnets *Astrophil and Stella*) is bound to this social impact as well.

It is possible to find the main principles common for both, his poetics and poesy. Firstly, cultural and linguistic autonomy against the rigorous imitation of classical and continental examples is claimed. Secondly, he prefers "naturalness" over artificiality in poetry. Thirdly, virtue that refines love is presented. And finally, an establishment of the poet's social and artistic status on the basis of versifying is discussed.

Sidney deals with these topics in *Astrophil and Stella*, first published in 1591 (that is five years after his death) with a foreword written by Thomas Nashe.[70] Astrophel represents the poet himself and Stella, his lady in real life – the famed beauty Penelope Devereux, later Lady Rich, the sister of Lord Essex and subject of a divorce scandal. Spenser is very explicit here, since he refers to "Lady Rich" (with the connotation of wealth as well) in precise terms.[71]

The sonnets are built on the basis of a highly conventional motif of unrequited love, although transformed into unique and authentic poetry. Besides, Sidney deals with other more serious and more general topics in the work. Sidney's poems resonate naturally with the demand of the time: he writes about an unreachable and indifferent lady, he talks about his tears and torments which change a sunny day into a dark night and his life into an exile of the soul. Indeed, these conventional topics and metaphors rather prove he is perfectly able to imitate classical examples in the English realm, inasmuch as the English language is perfectly suited for this kind of poetry. Likewise, Sidney employs the conventional concept of melancholy.[72] Trevor asserts that scepticism becomes the main symptom of an intellectual melancholy in the Renaissance.[73] Contrarily, Sidney's melancholy in his sonnets resembles a sorrow of the love-tormented soul:

> The curious wits, seeing dull pensivene
> Bewrayitself in my long settled eyes
> Whence thessame fumes of melancholy rise
> With idle pains, and missing aim, do guess […][74]

So the others discuss, whether Sidney's sadness is caused by excessive reading and studying (as is common among intellectuals and scholars) or by unfulfilled ambition.[75] However, Sidney negates all of the reasons by declaring:

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70 Duncan-Jones, *Chronology,* xxiii.

71 Bejblík, *Astrofel a Stella,* 153–157.

72 Trevor claims that Renaissance poetry is the important source of the concept of melancholy as such, because poets perceived themselves chiefly as a wide-ranged intellectuals. (Douglas Trevor, *The Poetics of melancholy in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2).

73 Trevor, *The Poetics of melancholy in Early Modern England,* 4–5.

74 Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella,* 161.

75 Many examples can be found also in Shakespeare's plays: an intellectual melancholy and scepticism in *Hamlet*, a melancholy without reason in the character of Graziano in *Merchant of Venice* or a melancholy as a result of an excessive studying in the character of Jacques in *As You Like It* and in the character of Adrian de Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

> O fools, or over-wise: alas, the race
> Of all my thoughts hath neither stop nor start
> But only Stella's eyes and Stella's heart.[76]

In fact, Sidney's melancholy follows from his unfeasible desire for Lady Rich as well as from his unfulfilled social and political ambitions.[77] Besides, it is difficult to distinguish between his authentic emotion and the conventional role he plays.[78] Although Sidney is opposed to those who intend to accomplish their social ambitions on the basis of poetry, his own poetry to a certain degree consists in the rhetoric performance on the border between exploiting fashionable and conventional examples and displaying poetic sincerity. Sidney's uniqueness is expressed differently, namely in emphasising that the originality of a poem is dependent on its emotional effect and also in the ironic detachment from the very conventions he uses.[79]

A compelling example of Sidney's irony is found in his 45th and 59th sonnets. In the latter, Sidney sarcastically glosses Stella's compassion with invented love stories. He mocks the absurdity of her feelings, as she prefers to weep over the illusion rather than embrace true affection, concluding: if you prefer fiction to reality let us pretend my love is a fiction as well:

> Then think, my dear, that you in me do read
> Of lover's ruin some sad tragedy:
> I am not I, pity the tale of me […][80]

The tone increases in the 59th sonnet in which Sidney uses a highly original analogy between him, the poet, and the dog who is in Stella's favour.[81] Sidney again reveals the absurdity of Stella's behaviour, since she rather kisses the witless dog than the cultivated poet. He teases her that he should get rid of his wit to gain her love:

> Yet while I languish, him that bosom clips,
> That lap doth lap, nay lets, in spite of spite,
> This sour-breathed mate taste of those sugared lips.
> Alas, if you grant only such delight
> To witless things, then love, I hope (since wit)
> Becomes a clog) will soon ease me of it.[82]

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76 Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella,* 162.

77 Compare Duncan-Jones, *Introduction,* ix, xv.

78 Alois Bejblík talks about the effect of "an ilusion of an authentic testimony." (Bejblík, *Astrofel a Stella,* 163).

79 Sidney's and Shakespeare's sonnets have a certain subjectivity and poetic sincerity in common, although Shakespeare's subjectivity assumes different forms – allegorical, disguised, only visible 'behind the curtain' to a select inner circle. Moreover, the effect of an affected revealing of the poet's inner feelings is part of Shakespeare's strategy.

80 Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella,* 170.

81 Maura Grace Harrington points out the irony of the analogy which introduces wit to the poet's hopeless situation. (Maura Grace Harrington, "Astrophil the Super Dog: Sidney's Astrophil and Stella, Sonnet 59," *Explicator*, 2007, 130–132).

82 Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella,* 178.

Sidney's poetry follows his poetics in two aspects in particular. Firstly, he prefers poetic sincerity and emotional authenticity over rigorous imitation of classical and fashionable examples: "Look in thy heart, and write."[83]

He refuses to blindly follow timeworn, conventional examples or to exploit hackneyed patterns devoid of invention or emotion:

> You that do dictionary's method bring
> Into your rhymes, running in rattling rows;
> You that poor Petrarch's long-deceased woes
> With new-born sighs and denizened wit do sing:
> You take wrong ways, those far-fet helps be such
> As do bewray a want of inward touch:
> And sure at length stol'n goods do come to light.[84]

Equally, it is petty to struggle for poetic reputation, to become famous and popular as well as to carefully follow those more foolish in the imitation of classical examples; to strut in borrowed plumes:

> Nor so ambitious am I, as to frame
> A nest for my young praise in laurel tree;
> In truth I swear, I wish not there should be
> Graved in mine epitaph a poet's name:
> Ne if I would, could I just title make,
> that any laud to me thereof should grow,
> Without my plumes from others' wings I take.[85]

Nevertheless, it is worth noting this attitude derives from the context of Sidney's high social status, which enables him to ignore the monetary side of the matter and to concentrate on both the social task of the poetry and the moral role of a poet. However, Sidney's emphasis on the originality and independence of the poet's invention (which induces us to imitate a moral example) should be appreciated, since his contemporaries stubbornly defend their monopoly on blank verse and the formal, precise imitation of the classical style. Sidney, on the other hand, sees the value of poetry principally in its capacity to move (unlike Spenser or Puttenham, for example).[86]

Secondly, Sidney incorporates the moral task of poetry (learning by the representation of a clear moral example) into his poems. Although his sonnets deal with love above all, he teaches us that virtue literally "bends that love to good" at the same time:

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83 Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella,* 153.

84 Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella,* 158.

85 Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella,* 201.

86 Compare e.g. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn, Introduction to *The Art of English Poesy* (London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 23–24.

Not by rude force, but sweetest sovereignty
Of reason, from whose light those night-birds fly,
That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so.
[…] So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,
As fast thy virtue bends that love to good.[87]

Only poetry is able to move us to virtue through beauty and delight and to show us that virtue is the goal of all our efforts:

That virtue, if it once met with your eyes,
Strange flames of love it in our souls would raise;
But for that man with pain this truth descries,
While he each thing in sense's balance weighs,
And so nor will, nor can, behold those skies
Which inward sun to heroic mind displays.[88]

Thus, the nature of Sidney's poetry supports the principal goals of his poetics, that poesy is among all forms of learning the best suited to move the soul to virtue through the beautiful and delightful images of moral example, playing its important role in society. Since he prefers the originality and authenticity of emotion to the rigorous imitation of foreign examples, he establishes the national and cultural autonomy in which poetry plays the crucial role.

Sidney died at the age of thirty-one on the 17th October 1586 of gangrene twenty-six days after he was shot in the thigh during the Battle of Zutphen.[89] By that time none of his work had been published, although his contemporaries depicted him as the ideal figure of aristocrat, courtier, poet, and the embodied Astrophel:

Was never eye did see that face,
Was never ear did hear that tongue,
Was never mind did mind his grace,
That ever thought the travel long:
But eyes, and ears, and ev'ry thought
Were with his sweet perfections caught.[90]

Nevertheless, the concept of his poetry has laid the foundations of Elizabethan poetics in accordance with Sidney's initial intention: to establish English poesy as the crucial device of a national and cultural autonomy, since English is "most fit to honour poesy, and to be honoured by poesy."[91]

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87 Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella,* 182.

88 Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella,* 162.

89 Duncan-Jones, *Chronology*, xxiii.

90 "Three elegies on Sidney from the *Phoenix Nest*, 1593," in *The Major Works,* 322. An Elegy, or friend's passion for his Astrophil: written upon the death of Sir Philip Sidney, Knight and Lord Governor of Flushing.

91 Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy,* 249.

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