

## **SIR PHILIP SIDNEY AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY (1595)**

Sidney's argument is divided into several sections and subsections. In order to make sense of this immensely long but important essay, you should read those sections marked by an asterisk (\*) below and in the order given:

1. **From "Now then we go to the most important imputations laid to the poor poets" (p.154) to "... Plato banished them out of his commonwealth." (p.154):** Sidney's brief listing of the four main criticisms directed against poetry \*
  - a subsection devoted to providing brief answers (expanded considerably in the other sections listed below) to these criticisms: from "First, to the first, ..." (p.154) to "... the clear springs of poesy." (p.158)
2. **From "Among the Romans a poet was called *vates* ..." (p.144) to "... a principal recommendation." (p.146):** Sidney's response to criticism #2 – his view of the poet as prophet and 'maker' of things, and poetry as a form of imitation \*
3. **From "Poesy therefore is an art ..." (p.146) to "... have a most just title to be princes over the rest." (p.147):** Sidney's response to criticisms #1 and 3 -- his views on the beneficial moral impact of poetry \*
  - there is also a not unimportant subsection devoted to a defence of the various genres of poetry--pastoral, elegy, comedy, tragedy, lyric poetry, heroical (epic): from "By these, therefore, examples and reasons ..." (p.151) to "... yielding or answering." (p.154)
  - there is also a brief subsection devoted to a defence of the usefulness of rhyming and versification in poetry: from "Those kinds of objections ..." (p.154) to "... any man can speak against it." (p.154).
  - there is also a long and somewhat tedious section devoted to the failures of English poetry by recounting English literary history up his time: from "But since I have run so long ..." (p.158) to the end (p.162)
4. **From "Wherein we can show the poet's nobleness ..." (p.147) to "... Psalm of Mercy well testifieth." (p.151) and from "And first, truly, to all them that professing learning inveigh against poetry ..." (p. 143) to "... scourged out of the church of God." (p.145):** Sidney's response to criticism #4: his defence against Plato's call to banish poets from and only retain philosophers and other serious learned people in his ideal state by :
  - outlining the pedagogical superiority of poetry to both philosophy and historiography where the teaching of morality is concerned: from "Wherein we can show the poet's nobleness ..." (p.147) to "... Psalm of Mercy well testifieth." (p.151) \*
  - stressing the inherently poetic nature of philosophy, historiography, and the Bible: from "And first, truly, to all them that professing learning inveigh against poetry ..." (p. 143) to "... scourged out of the church of God." (p.145)

(All references are to the version of Sidney's essay found in Hazard Adams, ed. Critical Theory Since Plato.)

From “Now then we go to the most important imputations laid to the poor poets” (p.154) to “. . . Plato banished them out of his commonwealth.” (p.154):  
 Sidney’s Preview of his Argument

Here, Sidney briefly lists the four main criticisms directed against poetry. Some argue, he writes, that it is:

- less important than “other more fruitful knowledges” (154),
- the “mother of lies” (154),
- the “nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires” (154), making many nations, including Britain, effeminate and unmanly, distracting its men from more manly pursuits like war, and
- it was banished from Plato’s ideal state.

From “Among the Romans a poet was called *vates* . . .” (p.144) to “. . . a principal recommendation.” (p.146)  
 Sidney’s Response to Criticism #2: Poetry does not Aim to be Mimetic

Here, Sidney defends poetry against what is, philosophically speaking, an epistemological attack: he responds to the second criticism that poets are liars by asserting that one thing poetry can never be accused of is lying:

the poet . . . nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, . . . 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. . . . [I]n truth, not labouring to tell you what is, or is not, but what should and should not be. And therefore, though he recounts things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not. (155)

Gesturing towards Aristotle’s distinction between the probable truths conveyed by fiction and the historian’s attempt to depict what actually transpired, Sidney argues cleverly that poetry never claims, as history does, to be telling the truth about the particulars of what actually happened. It never conceals the fact that it is only fiction. Hence, he argues, “of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar” (155).

Sidney acknowledges that, at least to some degree, poetry is a form of imitation: he defines poetry as an “art of imitation” (146), that is, as a “representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture” (146). He points out that the English word ‘poet’ is derived from the Greek word ‘poiein’ which means ‘to make.’ Every knowledge “art delivered to mankind” (145) has “nature for its principal object, without which they could not consist” (145). However, he argues that the poet is more than merely a ‘maker’ or replicator of things, that is, someone who holds a mirror up to nature and is something akin to a prophet, a point of view that anticipates the views of the Romantics in the nineteenth century. He argues that it is not accidental that the ancient Romans gave the poet “so heavenly a title” (144) as prophet (the Latin term for which is ‘vates’). This title was bestowed by the Romans, he contends, due to the “heart-ravishing knowledge” (144) which poetry furnishes the reader. Rather than merely mirroring nature, the poet, “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” (145). Nature, he contends, “never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done” (145): her “world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden one” (145). In short, where the other arts “receive, as it were, their being” (153) from nature, he claims, the poet “only bringeth his own stuff, and doth not learn a conceit out of matter, but maketh matter for a conceit” (153). From this perspective, the poet qua demi-god, in an act of microcosmic creation analogous to God’s creativity on a macrocosmic scale, offers for our consumption an improved version of the imperfect world which he finds around him.

Sidney contends that to makes these claims on behalf of the poet is not to blaspheme because God

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

divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings. (145)  
 This is, he points out, no mean accomplishment given the fact that even though “our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it” (145).

From “Poesy therefore is an art . . .” (p.146) to “. . . have a most just title to be princes over the rest.” (p.147):

#### Sidney's Response to Criticisms #1 and #3: Poetry Serves a Didactic Function

Here, Sidney responds to the first and third, essentially moral, criticisms of poetry (i.e. concerning its uselessness and negative moral impact) by stressing its beneficial moral impact. He defines poetry in a Horatian way as functioning “to teach and delight” (146) (poetry ought to be, Horace, like Plato, urged, both *utile et dulce*). What distinguishes poetry from other forms of writing is not the rhyming or versification but “that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching” (146). Poetry does not merely hold a mirror up to nature as it really is but seeks to improve upon it in order to act as an example to mankind: for this reason, poets

do imitate to teach and delight, and to imitate borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be, and should be. . . . [F]or these indeed do merely make to imitate, and imitate both to delight and teach, and delight to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger, and teach, to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved: which being the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed. (146)

Poetry performs, he argues, a very important pragmatic or didactic function:

This purifying of wit, this enriching of memory, enabling of judgement, and enlarging of conceit, which commonly we call learning, under what name soever it come forth, or to what immediate end soever it be directed, the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of. (147)

Evidently reading from a Christian perspective Plato's view that the soul is a prisoner in the dungeon of the flesh, Sidney's point is that poetry is capable of enabling the soul to return to its natural element. Its effect is to induce men “to know, and by knowledge to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying his own divine essence” (147). However, knowledge alone is not enough because action on the basis of such knowledge is even more important: the goal of poetry is the “knowledge of a man's self, in the ethic and politic consideration, *with the end of well doing and not of well knowing only*” (my emphasis; 147). The “end of all earthly learning” (147) is ultimately “virtuous action” (147).

Sidney devotes a subsection to a defence of the various genres of poetry (what he calls its “sundry more special denominations” [146] or “parts” [151]): pastoral, elegy, comedy, tragedy, lyric poetry, heroic (epic). He also devotes another subsection to a defence of the usefulness of rhyming and versification (metre) in poetry: placing ‘oratio’ [or rhetoric] almost on par with ‘ratio’ [the use of reason or logic], he argues that the former functions to “polish” [154] speech while the regularity of the latter helps the reader to remember things better. He also devotes another long subsection to the failures of English poetry by recounting English literary history up his own time.

From “Wherein we can show the poet's nobleness . . .” (p.147) to “. . . Psalm of Mercy well testifieth.” (p.151)

and from “And first, truly, to all them that professing learning inveigh against poetry . . .” (p. 143) to “. . . scourged out of the church of God.” (p.145):

#### Sidney's Response to Criticism #4: Poetry Ought Not to be Banished

Here, Sidney responds to the fourth criticism that Plato called for poets to be banished from his ideal state in two ways. He devotes, firstly, an important subsection to outlining the pedagogical superiority of poetry to both philosophy and historiography where the dissemination of moral knowledge is concerned. Poetry is, in “moral doctrine, the chief of all knowledges” (153). Poetry is superior to other forms of knowledge because, firstly, even though philosophy operates “by precept” (148) and is keen to define

ideal codes of moral conduct, it is “so hard of utterance, and so misty to be conceived” (148) because the philosopher “standeth so upon the abstract and the general, that happy is that many who may understand him, and more happy that can apply what he doth understand” (148). History, on the other hand, operates “by example” (148) but therein lies the problem: the historian “is so tied, not to what should be but what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine” (148). In short, even though he tries to give us moral guidelines, the philosopher confuses, rather than clarifies, because his arguments are so complex. On the other hand, the historian loses his audience in a wealth of facts and particulars and, in his role as documenter of what actually happened in the past, is unable to use his material to set an example of how people ought to behave.

By contrast, the poet is “peerless” (148) because he “doth . . . perform both” (148) these functions:

whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he giveth a perfect picture of it in some one by whom he presupposeth it was done; so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example. A perfect picture I say, for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that where of the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description: which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other doth. (148)

Equally importantly, it is in poetry that one sees “virtue exalted and vice punished” (150). For poetry, he writes, “ever setteth virtue so out in her best colours, making Fortune her well-waiting handmaid, that one must needs be enamoured of her” (150) as a result of which the long-suffering of Ulysses becomes an example to be followed. By contrast, “if evil men come to the stage, they ever go out . . . so manacled as they little animate folks to follow them” (150).

By contrast to the poet, the historian, “captived to the truth of a foolish world, is many times a terror from well doing, and an encouragement to unbridled wickedness” (479). By contrast also to the poet, the philosopher loses his reader with his tedious argumentation the words of which “lie dark before the imaginative and judging power, if they be not illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of poetry” (148). However, Sidney argues, poetry has always “moved” (151) men’s “hearts . . . to the exercise of courtesy, liberality, and especially the exercise of courage” (151) by virtue of the poet’s power to make nature “his own, beautifying it both for further teaching, and more delighting, as it pleaseth him, having all, from Dante’s heaven to his hell, under the authority of his pen” (150). The poet “doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it” (151). Poetry is like the proverbial sugar-coated pill which men need if the “winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue” (151) is to be effected. Men are moved to virtue by being exposed to the “right description of wisdom, valour, and justice” (151). Otherwise, they might “swear they be brought to school again” (151). In other words, poetry is not just ‘utile’ but also ‘dulce.’

Sidney also stresses, secondly, the inherently poetic nature of philosophy, historiography and, even, the Bible. Not only is poetry the most ancient form of learning which the earliest thinkers used as a means of introducing difficult ideas to the unlearned, but both philosophers like Plato himself and historians make use of the devices of poetry in order to effectively communicate their message. In so arguing, Sidney strikes at the very heart of Plato’s attempt to distinguish between philosophy and literature, a distinction dear to the heart of philosophers even today still enamoured of the rational ideal of scientific objectivity and suspicious of the subjectivity of the arts in general. From this point of view, to banish poetry implies that it is also necessary to banish philosophy.