

# Lecture 14: *The Defence of Poesie*

Begin with a basic classical/neoclassical premise:  
that Art is Imitation:

“There is no Art delivered unto 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 & players, as it were, of what nature will have set forth.” (B 956)

But then Sidney qualifies, contradicts (?) this point:

“Only the Poet disdain[ing] to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature: in making things either better then nature bringeth forth, or quite a new, forms such as never were in nature: as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimaeras, Furies, and such like; so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the Zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich Tapestry as diverse Poets have done, neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely: her world is brazen, the Poets only deliver a golden.” (B 957)

What's the problem?

How do you think Sidney resolves it?

Sidney explains the apparent contradiction between the objects of all art and the objects of poetry by identifying poetry with the CREATIVE PROCESS, which expresses the likeness between the Maker and man the maker:

“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 honor 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 sheweth so much as in Poetry; when with the force of a divine breath, he bringeth things forth surpassing her doings.” (957)

POETRY comes from Greek POIEIN, ‘to make.’ (956)

The poet is one who makes—by IMITATION.

What the poet imitates is not the nature that God has made but the process of its making.

As a consequence, poetry is progenitive:  
[The] delivering forth [of the poet's golden world] . . . is  
not wholly imaginative, . . . but so far substantially it  
worketh, not only to make a Cyrus, . . . but to bestow a  
Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses, if they will  
learn aright why and how that maker made him.” (957)

Here's how that creative process works: “Poesy . . . is an  
art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word  
*mimesis*—that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or  
figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking  
picture—with this end to teach and delight.” (958)

**What does Sidney mean by “a speaking picture”?**

We can get at that notion by looking closely at the  
language in which the phrase is embedded. A funny thing  
happened to this passage on its way into print. Sidney died  
in 1586; the *Apology/Defense* was published twice in  
1595—once as *An Apologie for Poetrie* by Henry Olney  
(unauthorized), and a second time as *A Defence of Poesie*  
by William Ponsonby (licensed). The text above is based  
on Olney's version.

Here is what Ponsonby has:

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“Poesie therefore, is an Art of Imitation:  
for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*,  
that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting,  
or figuring forth to speake Metaphorically.  
A speaking Picture, with this end to teach and delight.”

If we re-punctuate the passage to conform with modern usage, we can make better sense of it.

“Poesie therefore, is an Art of Imitation,  
for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*:  
that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring  
forth [*in order*] to speake metaphorically;  
[in other words, a poem is] a speaking picture,  
with this end to teach and delight.”

### How does poetry accomplish that didactic purpose?

According to Sidney, Poetry teaches by delighting. He asserts that RIGHT POETS, follow “the course of [their] own invention . . . They most properly do imitate to teach & delight: and to imitate, borrow nothing of what is, hath bin, or shall be, but range only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be.” (958-59)

In other words: “These [right poets] indeed do meerly make to imitate, and imitate both to delight & 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.” (959)

So the key terms are moving, delighting, & teaching: Poetry is profitable because it teaches, delightfully, in a way that moves us. Poetry moves us by speaking in pictures, metaphorically.

The way poetry moves us to virtuous action is most clearly seen by the contrasts that Sidney draws between the Philosopher and the Historian. In general, the Philosopher gives the rule or PRECEPT; the historian gives the EXAMPLE.

The following passages have been omitted from your anthology (at page 961). They seem to me to cut directly to the heart of Sidney’s discussion:

“The Philosopher therefore, and the Historian, are they which would win the goal [that is, claim supremacy among the teaching arts], the one by PRECEPT, the other by EXAMPLE: but both, not having both, do both halt. For

the Philosopher setting downe with thornie arguments, the bare rule, is . . . hard of utterance, and . . . mistie to be conceived. . . . For his knowledge standeth . . . upon the abstract and generall. On the other side, the Historian wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be, but to what is, to the particular truth of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a lesse fruitfull doctrine.” [2

“Now doth the peerlesse Poet performe both, for whatsoever the Philosopher saith should be done, he gives a perfect picture of it by some one, by whom he presupposeth it was done, so as HE COUPLETH THE GENERALL NOTION WITH THE PARTICULAR EXAMPLE. A perfect picture I say, for hee yieldeth to the powers of the minde an image of that whereof the Philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pearce, nor possess, the sight of the soule so much, as that other doth.”

Poetry ILLUMINATES BY FIGURING FORTH:

“many infallible grounds of wisdom . . . lie darke before the imaginative and judging power, if they be not illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of Poesie.”

More crucially still, Poetry MOVES:

Power TO MOVE is the defining excellence of poetry.

Sidney believes—indeed, his whole argument for the superior virtue of poetry depends on the idea—that “moving is of a higher degree than teaching.” (962)

A poem is a PICTURE (as was said above)  
that SPEAKS METAPHORICALLY,  
in order to TEACH *BY DELIGHTING*, so that we are  
“moved to do that which wee know, or . . . moved with  
desire to know. *Hoc opus, hic labor est.*” (962)

Here’s an example of how this process works, again from a passage omitted from your anthology, at page 963, after “he cometh to you . . . with a tale forsooth” :

“Nathan the Prophet . . . when the holy David, had so farre forsaken God, as to confirme Adulterie with murther, when he was to do the tendrest office of a friend, in laying his owne shame before his eyes; sent by God to call againe so chosen a servant, how doth he it? but by telling of a man whose beloved lambe was ungratefully taken from his bosome. The Application most divinely true, but the discourse it selfe fained; which made David . . . as in a glasse see his owne filthinesse as that heavenly Psalme of mercie well testifieth.” \_ [3

## NOTES

1] *A Defence of Poesie* (Ponsonby, 1595), transcribed by Richard Bear for *Renaissance Editions* at:

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/%7Erbear/defence.html>

I owe my reading of this passage to S.K. Heninger, *Sidney and Spenser: The Poet as Maker* (University Park, PA : Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 223-306 (Ch. 5, “*The Defence of Poesie: Language as Imitation*”).

2] This and the two following passages can be found in *An Apology for Poetry or The Defence of Poesy*, ed. Geoffrey Shephard (London: Thomas Nelson, 1965), 106-107.

3] *Idem*, 115. The story of David’s affair with Bathsheba and his murder (by proxy) of Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, is told in II Samuel 12:1-15. To express the LORD’s outrage at what he has done, Nathan tells David a story about a rich man who killed a poor man’s only lamb. When David exclaims “As the LORD liveth, the man that hath done this thing, shall surely die,” Nathan replies: “Thou art the man” (vv. 5, 7). Psalm 51 is David’s expression of remorse “when Nathan the Prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.”