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TWENTIETH CENTURY CRITICAL BIAS CONCERNING THE CHOICE OF A DOMINATING PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCE IN SIDNEY'S DEFENCE

The most important questions that have been asked about Sidney and his work in the course of our century are the following: What philosophical, poetic and other cultural influences can be detected in the it the *Devence*? Is it Platonic or Aristotelian thinking that dominates in it? Is it a masterpiece in its own right or a skilful recapitulation of previous writings? All kinds of answers have been given to these questions.

Spingarn¹ claims that Sidney, in his definition of poesy, relies on Aristotle and on other Continental authors, ancient and modern, like Horace, Cicero, Castelvetro, Scaliger, Minturno Daniello, etc.

Saintsbury², while he partly agrees with Spingarn, never mentions the word "copying."

Atkins compares the two main sources of Sidney's philosophical orientation, Plato and Aristotle. Finding Aristotelianism more influential on Sidney he recognizes the abundance of sources that could have influenced Sidney's work: "... in the central section of the *Defence* Sidney fused together ideas drawn from various quarters, from Plato and Aristotle chiefly, but from Horace, Cicero, and Plutarch, from patristic writings, from Italian and other sources as well."³

Irene Samuel⁴ claims that Platonic ideas dominate the *Defence*. Michael Krouse thinks that we should not look for direct quotations from Ficino's, Pico's or any other Neoplatonist's works to decide if Sidney's *Defence* is Platonic or Aristotelian in spirit.

Krouse thinks⁵ that Sidney applied Plato's argumentation about ethics and poetry to Aristotle's theory concerning the formal aspects of artistic creations:

"The philosopher needs ethical myths no less than cosmological."⁶

Krouse's attitude points forward to further interesting developments in the debate about the philosophical character of the *Defence*:

Plato, however, expelled the poets from his ideal republic, although Sidney believes that he expelled only the bad poets. A group of twentieth-century critics try to find the link between Platonic thinking and Sidney's argumentation.

A. C. Hamilton⁸ justifies Sidney's viewpointing out that Scaliger was the first to return to Plato's classification of poets based on the theory of divine inspiration. Sidney slightly alters Scaliger's doctrine as he considers philosophical and religious verse to be alien from poetry proper, because the poet belonging to the third group "doeth not imitate external nature, but rather its reality, which he perceives in his own mind." The "right poet" brings his "own stuff" and does not rely on impressions coming from the senses.

Krouse and Hamilton are the first who get to the core of Sidney's Platonism.

Reinhard Böhler⁹, when analysing the freefold functioning of teaching, delighting and moving in poetry, tries to convince us that Sidney's definition of "mimesis" is a Platonic definition.

Hamilton thinks that the aim of poetry for Sidney was not only moving or the evocation of catharsis, but that it also supplemented the power of divine grace:

"What poetry presents is a revelation, a vision of the golden world. Since Sidney gives poetry a power beyond moving, which the sixteenth-century Italian critics allowed - it moves upward and so supplements the power of grace."¹⁰

Similarly, DeNeef maintains that for Sidney "the Fall can be reversed through poetry".¹¹

Comparing DeNeef's view to that of Hamilton, who holds that the teleology of Sidney's poetics is to move men to their salvation,¹² Bergvall warns us that the Florentine bias of these quotations "is very rarely questioned, and appears to be accepted as received critical dogma."¹³

A. E. Malloch investigates the functioning of yet another Aristotelian principle in the *Defence*:

"Poetry is a serving science ... it has a private end in itself, and yet is directed toward that mistress knowledge called "architectonic", which consists in the knowledge of a man's own self, his self-knowledge, however, is far from being a private and individual affair."¹⁴

Malloch connects the principle of "architectonic knowledge" with Sidney's interpretation of the "logos":

"The logos (will a small 'l') unifies the secular community as the Divine Logos unifies that Christian community. Hearer and speaker participate equally in the word and it was this fact which prompted the Romans to translate the Greek 'logos' as 'ratio et

oratio'. Therefore, just as poetry initiates and sustains all knowledge, so it also develops and refines language, and so enables language to serve all the arts effectively."¹⁵

Analysing the rhetorical structure of the *Defence*, Kenneth O. Myrick¹⁶ says that it is a seven part oration, although he does not investigate its structural coherence.

For Ronald Levao the *Defence* is almost like one of Stanley Fish's "self-consuming artifacts". In his excellent article, he considers Sidney's use of metaphysics deceptive, because Sidney uses its terms when he praises poetic creativity and dismisses them before they can "compromise the mind's anatomy".¹⁷

Levao thinks that Sidney advances metaphysical claims while he refuses to rely on them for protection and if there is any justification of the poet's invention, it must lie in their didactic efficacy.¹⁸ For Sidney, there is no universal idea hidden in the ground-plot. The mind invents forms to fit its own faculties, as any first premise is impossible. The poet exposes himself to the inevitability of an infinite regress. The *Defence* requires another *Defence* to justify it, and so on without end. Levao finds that Sidney's intellectual appetites lie not so much with Ficino and the Italian Neoplatonists as with thinkers like Cusa, who claims that previous philosophers could not really understand the true nature of things, because of the illusion that the world had some fixed structure.

Levao's conception of Sidney's "deceptive" use of metaphysics has a considerable bearing on my essay, as I am trying to give a general idea of the cultural influences that the reader can trace in the *Defence*. Comparing Cusa's way of thinking to that of the Florentine Neoplatonists, Levao does not say that the Cusanian influence was most significant of all for Sidney. Hiding behind the Poet's mask, Sidney emphasizes the Protean character of literature and manages to maintain his autonomy as a thinker. He takes no account of cultural hierarchies and acknowledges only one imperative, the necessity of defending poetry. The boundaries of time and space are all brought down by the strength of a discursive mind. Platonic ideas do not oust or transcend those of Aristotle, but stand side by side with them. Even Protestantism cannot be considered an overall influence, as it should not interfere with Sidney's acquired role as a poet and a defence-writer.

In J. P. Thorne's article¹⁹ reveals Sidney's poetry was more than just a game of logic, it was a receptacle of ethical norms that can set an example of virtuous action. Therefore, Sidney never became a Ramist.

Alan Sinfield²⁰ thinks that the *Defence* is a significant document of Protestant cultural politics in the late sixteenth-century, but as opposed to Sinfield a think it is not a propaganda piece, as Sidney's basic aim was the achievement of perfection through perpetual self-control.

Buxton²¹ claims that the main concern of Italian humanism was the functioning of the human intellect as it tried to explore man's mental capacities. English Renaissance thinking was concerned with ethical problems right from the beginning. The ideal imitation of reality in Elizabethan poetry had an effect on Romantic spirituality, which, in its turn, brought about an "egocentric" realisation of individual revelation. The Elizabethans were good dramatists, but Romantic dramas are usually still-born.²²

Buxton thinks that Sidney and his contemporaries wrote their works for a learned audience, considering most people to have neither a sense of sound judgement, nor taste.²³

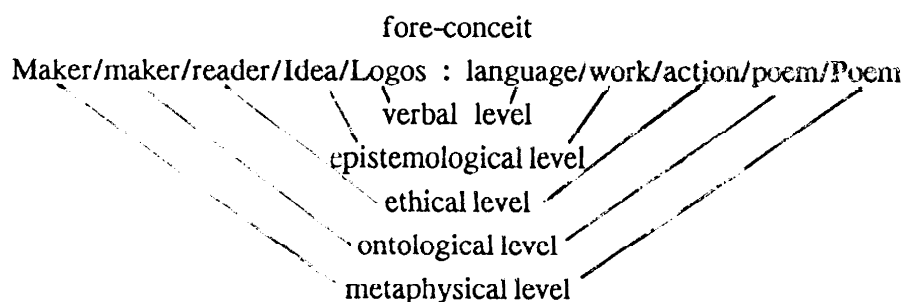
Dorothy Connell²⁴ believes that Sidney was so much aware of the limitations of artistic creativity that he not only discarded the Platonic principle of the "furor poeticus", but also denied the poet's divinity and immortality: "I will speak according to the human conceit."

Forest G. Robinson claims that Platonic ideas are conceived as mental images in the *Defence*. The Poet produces them with the help of poetry's speaking pictures²⁶. Leigh DeNeef avers that the most common critical approach in unravelling Sidney's "enigma" has been the attempt to uncover the literary or historical sources:

"No one would deny that Neoplatonic, epistemological, and Protestant theories lie behind the surface of the *Apology*, but few modern readers would agree that these traditions adequately explain the text as we have it. As a result, we have witnessed in recent years an increasing number of attempts to analyse the work as an autonomous literary artifact in its own right."²⁷

He complains that criticism seems to have severed Sidney's rhetoric from his logic, and critics like Levao and M. W. Ferguson have made the *Defence* more enigmatic than it really is.

Sidney's idea of imitation is of central importance to DeNeef. He sets up the following analogical paradigm:



Maker stands for God and Poem stands for his creation. DeNeef claims that according to Sidney, the poet's task is not the teaching of ideas, but the communication of his fore-conceits to the reader. The poetic conceit occupies a middle position between the text and the idea of the poet. DeNeef refers to Christian faculty psychology in so far as he relies on the Augustinian conception of the word that was in the beginning, the inner, unspoken word innate in the mind, and the outer, spoken word of language. (De Trinitate)

The word is different from, and, at the same time, identical with the logos. As spoken words are more corrupted than their immanent source in the psyche, they can only approach the word of truth by likeness, by analogy, in enigma. All knowledge is metaphoric in its kind, so the standard and value of literary achievement is to be measured by the strength and energy of "moving". What are the criteria of good reading?

1. Readers must always be aware that literary texts are fictitious and metaphoric
2. Poems demonstrate their poets' skill by their "likeness" or "unlikeness" to the fore-conceit
3. Good readers should recognize the poetic idea beyond the work

Bad readers tend either to forget that the poem they are reading is not necessarily a true account of reality or deny its authenticity altogether. DeNeef points out that there is an implicit definition of bad readers in Sidney's delineation of "right" poets.

M. W. Ferguson²⁸ investigates Sidney's apologetic attitude in the *Defence* and finds that several of Sidney's intellectual affinities lie with Freud. Sidney tries to convince his opponents that their objections leave poetic dignity untouched, while they greatly affect their own capacity to enjoy poetry. Sidney is answering threats in the *Defence* attacking poetry from three directions:

1. from history (historical facts are valid, poetry is fictitious)
2. from bad readers (a false interpretation of poetry)
3. from of philosophy (exaggerated ethical demands)

Ferguson compares the *Defence* to Freud's defence of psychology in the thirties, since both writings are concerned with deviations in creative thinking as well as with projects of setting it right. Previous criticism has often tried to find a dominating cultural influence in the *Defence*, while critics like DeNeef and Ferguson have probed into Sidney's logic instead.

DeNeef points out that Sidney's claim for intellectual independence can be explained by his interpretation of creation:

"The poet is a metaphoric Maker, the reader is a metaphoric poet; language is a metaphor of logos, nature is a metaphor of God: ... every second term of every pair is a figuring forth, by the art of imitation of the first term. To say, therefore, that Sidney ontologizes metaphor means that he posits all creativity as productive of metaphor and all creating as metaphoric."²⁹

Ernst Cassirer writes about the heightened awareness of metaphoric creation in the Renaissance.³⁰

Bergvall claims that the emphasis on Platonic and Neoplatonic thinking in the *Defence* "has been a "salutary counterbalance" to an earlier insistence on the Aristotelian inheritance."³¹ Nevertheless, almost every critic, perhaps Levao and DeNeef being the only significant exceptions, detects a dominating cultural influence, either Platonic or Aristotelian, in the *Defence*.

When Bergvall refers to Miles Leland's distinction between Clementine, i.e. Augustinian and Florentine Neoplatonism³², he believes that similarly to Melancthon's writings on rhetoric the *Defence* belongs to the tradition of the former school. It is important that Colet and More sided with the Augustinian line of thought. John Dee may have been the only man of reputation in England, whose interests were clearly gnostic as well as hermetic, and Sidney had a low opinion of him. It seems to be a logical conclusion that there is one dominating influence in the *Defence* and it is Augustinian Platonism. Unfortunately, Bergvall jumps to this conclusion all too hurriedly³³, and forgets that Sidney's writing marks the coming of age of a self-supporting theory of literature. Even when he serves "Protestant cultural propaganda", Sidney transcends this bias. In his estimation of Sidney's interpretation of the Platonic heritage, DeNeef is more careful than Bergvall:

"If Sidney is working in a tradition that is basically Augustinian, regardless of his direct sources, than one might ask why he calls the text metaphoric rather than allegorical or figurative. Both terms have long traditions in defining poetry, particularly in "defences" of poetry. In line with my earlier argument, I can only suggest that Sidney's intentions in the *Apology* is to ontologize metaphor.³⁴ In Italian Neoplatonism, perpetually moving imagination is restricted to the sphere of opinion (doxa) as opposed to real knowledge (episteme). Calvin, however, claims that the imagination is the only uncorrupted instrument of knowledge.³⁵ Empirical knowledge and imagination transform and purify each other. Transcending Neoplatonic gnosticism, Sidney preserves the dignified status of the imagination as the instrument of poetic inspiration. While "infected will" reduces conscience to a state of chaos, "erected wit" of which inspiration is the core, creates a new order of existence on a higher

spiritual level. In Sidney's system of defence, ideas are self-supporting metaphors reflecting the infinite and unattainable beauty of God, and the "skill of the artificer" stands in his capacity to "figure them forth".

In the *Arcadia* a debate takes place between Pyrocles and Musidorus concerning the dubious ethical status of love. Musidorus has not fallen in love yet, so he disapproves of his friend's passionate longing for the beautiful Philoclea. His scornful attitude resembles Bruno's view in *The Heroic Frenzies*, a work he dedicated to Sidney:

"Most illustrious knight, it is indeed a base, ugly, and contaminated wit that is constantly occupied and curiously obsessed with the beauty of a female body."³⁶

Bruno thinks that women should be loved for their virtue only, since "everything in the universe has its own weight, number order, and measure."³⁷ The love of women, however, can be so excessive in men that it can easily take the form of madness. Musidorus charges his friend with falling into the same excess; but his words also contain Sidney's unflattering parody of the false rhetoric we find in Gosson and the Puritans:

"And let us see what power is the author of all these troubles: forsooth love, love, a passion, and the basest and fruitlessest of all passions."³⁸

Musidorus's views on love display the pitfalls and shortcomings of gnostic thinking as well as the contradictions in Bruno's rigid classification of passions. The very fact that Musidorus calls love a "bastard" emotion reveals his confusion of "amor humanus" with "amor ferinus". This false identification of the two loves is not completely alien to Bruno. Then Musidorus propounds something similar to Bruno's doctrine of transsubstantiation:

"... for indeed the true love hath that excellent nature in it, that it doth transform the very essence of the lover into the thing loved, uniting, and as it were, incorporating it with a secret and inward working. And wherein do these kinds of love imitate the excellent, for as the love of heaven makes one heavenly, the love of virtue virtuous, so doth the love of the world doth make one wordly: and this effeminate love of a woman doth ... womanize a man ..."³⁹

Musidorus made his friend angry with his lengthy and tedious speech: it is a sign of a failure on his part to convince Pyrocles. Thus, Pyrocles is fully justified in his self-defence:

"I am not yet come to that degree of wisdom to think light of the sex of whom I have my life, since if I be anything ... I was, to come to it, born of a woman and nursed of a woman".⁴⁰

Women are capable of virtue and virtue "is to be loved" in them.

Pyrocles's last words reflect the utility of love: ... each excellent thing once well-learned serves as a measure of all other knowledges." The end of love is enjoying and love is the life-giving principle in nature.

Sidney's Defence and Twentieth-Century Criticism

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There are, of course, several other examples of Platonic bias concerning Sidney's *Defence*; let me mention the titles of those I have not dealt with separately:

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(I cannot accept Heninger's contention that Sidney moved away from a Platonic to an Aristotelian esthetics.

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37. *ibid.* 62.

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41. *ibid.* 137