Sir Philip Sidney and *An Apology for Poetry*

In 1595 Sir Philip Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry* was published, becoming “the first significant piece of literary criticism in the English language” (Richter 132). Sidney (1554-1586) was a model Renaissance man: a soldier, a member of the court, a learned scholar, and a poet. He wrote *An Apology for Poetry* in response to the radical Stephen Gosson’s *The Schoole of Abuse*, which was dedicated to Sidney and questioned the morality of poetry and other forms of literature. While Sidney’s aesthetic principle may appear to be Horation, the essence of Sidney’s theory goes beyond Horace’s aim of teaching and delighting and emphasizes the ability of poetry to move men towards perfection via a Neo-Platonic ideal world created by the poet. This ability of the poet to move men to more virtuous action gives to poetry the role formerly ascribed to scripture and thus reflects a humanistic worldview. Reflective of his humanistic worldview, Sidney’s poetic theory rests on the assumption that man is capable, in and of himself, of doing good. This assumption conflicts with Sidney’s Protestant beliefs, as a main tenet of sixteenth century Protestantism is the belief that man is incapable of doing good and is therefore completely dependant on the grace of God.

Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65-68 B.C.) was a poet during the time of the assassination of Julius Caesar. Although a government clerk, he eventually retired to a farm in the Sabine Hills provided by his patron, where he wrote *The Art of Poetry (ArsPoetica)*, a letter in verse to two aristocratic brothers with ambitions in poetry. In this letter he advises them on how to write successful poetry. From *The Art of Poetry* comes the well-known Horation aim of poetry: to teach and delight. Horace is very pragmatic in his approach. For example, he recommends that iambic pentameter be used in drama “To
make their dialogue heard, even over the noise the audience was making – the rhythm of purposeful action” (Horace 86). He is also very practical in his focus on the audience’s response and ways in which the poet can maintain the attention and approval of all sectors of the audience. His assertion that literature must teach and delight is not based on any lofty principle, but on the need to satisfy the spectators: he says that “Our elders will chase off the stage what is merely delightful; Our young broods will pass up the works that merely make sense” (91). While Sidney affirms the Horation principle that poetry must “delight or enlighten the reader” (19), he is far less pragmatic than Horace.

Near the beginning of An Apology for Poetry, Sidney laments that poetry has fallen from high esteem “to be the laughingstock of children” (Sidney 136) and this he proceeds to give an argument for the value of poetry. Part of his proof consists in showing that poetry has a noble function: “to teach and delight” (139). However, he gives more emphasis to the didactic purpose of this Horatian notion that poetry must teach or delight in order to encourage people to acquire knowledge and thus move out of barbarism, there must be delight in the teaching. Concerning this movement out of barbarism he says: “it must be by having their dull wits softened and sharpened by the sweet delights of poetry. For until they find pleasure in the exercises of the mind, great promises of knowledge will little persuade them that know not of the fruits of knowledge” (Sidney 137). Here is evidence that Sidney moves away from Horace’s pragmatism and focuses on much more than the simple aim of pleasing and audience.

This didactic emphasis by Sidney focuses on a un-Horation, idealistic end. Sidney asserts that of “this purifying of wit, this enriching of memory, enabling of judgment, and enlarging of conceits, which commonly we call learning, under what name soever it
comes 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” (140). The power of poetry lies in its superior ability to
move individuals to this virtuous action.

Sidney looks closely at the roles of philosopher and historian in relation to the
poet. He demonstrates that “the philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the
learned can only understand him” (143) and that the historian, in giving examples of both
virtue and vice, “draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful
doctrine” (142). The poet, however, can select what he wishes from history: “for
whatsoever action, or faction, whatsoever counsel, policy, or war stratagem the historian
is bound to recite, that may the poet (if he list) with his imitation make his own,
beautifying it both for further teaching, and more delighting, as it pleaseth him” (144).
The lofty image selected and portrayed in poetry, particularly epic poetry, “inflames the
mind with desire to be worthy, and informs the counsel how to be worthy” (148). The
representation of an ideal world through the poet, Sidney believes that poetry can move
men to be better, more virtuous individuals, rather than simply teaching.

Sidney’s notion that poetry can move men to virtuous action is a Neo-Platonic
ideal. Plato (427-347 B.C.), the first of the great Western philosophers, raised questions
concerning “the nature of being, the question of how we know things, the purposes of
right action, the structure of an ordered society, the meaning of beauty and love” (Richter
25). Essentially, he is an idealist. Plato, it is true, thought that poetry should be banned
from the city of Athens, as he believed that the poet “is an imitator of images and very far
removed from the truth (Plato 36). Plato devised the theory of the Forms, in which the
Forms are “those changeless, eternal, and nonmaterial essences or patterns of which the actual visible objects we see are only poor copies” (Fieser 49). For Plato, true knowledge consists in grasping the essence of things, that is, the Forms. Knowledge of the Form of the Good is needed in order to live a virtuous life. Because the physical world is a copy of the Forms, the poet “is an imitator of images and is very far removed from the truth” (Plato 36). Art is thrice removed from the Forms and therefore it is a poor medium through which to learn the truth; it is useless in bringing one to knowledge of the Forms. Plato’s Forms essentially function as an ideal world which men must strive to know in order to lead a virtuous life.

Sidney too believed that through knowledge of an ideal world, men progress and become better people. While the philosopher merely speaks of abstract ideals and the historian works with facts both good and evil of this earthly life, the poet can, through a process of selection, project an ideal world which teaches its audience, in a concrete manner, the ideal morality for which they must strive. The poet, Sidney says,

Beginneth not with obscure definitions, which must blur the margent with interpretations, and load the memory with doubtfulness, be he cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for, the well-enchanting skill of music; and with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And, pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue: even as the child is often brought to take most wholesome things by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant taste. (145)
The audience lives this ideal world through poetry and in living this ideal world they are inspired to live of a life striving for perfection and virtuous action. What they learn in the ideal world of poetry, they take into the real world, thus bettering both themselves and the world. Ultimately, for both Plato and Sidney, intimate knowledge of an ideal world leads men to the attainment of right living.

Sidney vastly differs from Plato in giving the poet the role of make rather than the mere role of imitator, and this makes his poetic theory very humanistic. Of all the arts, Sidney asserts that only poetry can create: “Only the poet, distaining to the tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grown in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth fort, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature…” (138). Both the poet and poetry are “elevated to that sacred status: in its very nature it is opposed to worldliness and ‘earth-creeping’ concerns; it is the newly appointed heaven of human invention and endeavour” (Habib 266). In effect, “just as God, the creator of the world, is a maker, a poet, the creator of his own world, is a god” (Rivers 152). This elevation of the individual is characteristic of humanist thought. Habib says of humanism that it implies a world view and a set of values centered around the human rather than the divine, using a self-subsistent definition of human nature (rather than God), and focusing on human achievements rather than on theological doctrines and dilemmas” (230). Abrams affirms this definition, saying that humanists “tended to emphasize the values achievable by human being in this world rather than in the afterlife” (123). Sidney’s emphasis on the ability of poetry, man’s creation, to move men to virtuous action, and thereby perfection, places him solidly in the humanist realm. As Rivers say, “in the humanist view poetry does not simply teach; it
moves men to action, it makes them better, it causes them to imitate the moral ideal embodied in the poem” (154). Men can move men to be better: this assumes the inherent ability of man to do good, rather than a total inclination to evil.

While it is true that many Renaissance humanists where Christians, Sidney is unable to reconcile the differences between his Protestant beliefs and his humanistic thought. During the Renaissance, nearly all “humanists, beginning with Petrarch, attempted to harmonize classical ethics with the practical Christianity of the gospels” (Rivers 128). Consequently, Christian humanist “tended to emphasize the values achievable by human beings in this world rather than in an afterlife, and to minimize the earlier Christian emphasis on the innate corruption of human beings and on asceticism and of withdrawal from the world in a preoccupation with the world hereafter” (Abrams 123). It is this focus that creates a dichotomy between Sidney’s Protestantism and his humanism.

There is no doubt that Sidney professed to be a Protestant. In 1580, because of his Protestant beliefs, he wrote a letter Queen Elizabeth, objecting to her rumoured potential marriage to a Roman Catholic Duke (Greenblatt 947). Geoffrey Shepherd goes farther, saying that Sidney “can be termed a Puritan” and although not necessarily a Calvinist, Sidney had many Calvinist friends across the continent (26). Crucial to the teachings of both Luther and Calvin, fathers of the Protestant Reformation, is the doctrine of total depravity: “Fallen man’s nature has become utterly depraved and corrupt. He is a mass of sin. He retains some vestiges of his original reason, but whereas Adam could freely and of his own effort only choose to sin” (Rivers 107). Also crucial to Protestant doctrine is the fact that “the volume of sacred Scripture passes all other writings” (Calvin 71).
Basically, Man does not have the ability, in and of himself, to choose God and to choose to do what is right. Only the Holy Spirit, working through the Scriptures, can change man.

However, Sidney, in his *An Apology for Poetry*, assumes that man is able to do what is right and is able to choose virtuous action without the working of the Holy Spirit and without Scripture: he affirms that, “no learning is so good as that which teacheth and moveth to virtue, and that none can both teach and move thereto so much as poetry” (150). It is true that he concedes that man has been given this ability by the “heavenly Maker” (139) but nevertheless, he denies the Protestant doctrine of the depravity of man and the supremacy of Scripture. He even talks of Biblical poetry that “did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God” (139) and he also discusses Biblical stories, such as Nathan the Prophet and King David (146). However, he does not give these parts of Scripture any role higher than that of poetry or other literature. In the case of the story of Nathan and David, he speaks of it in the same breath as he speaks of the story of Menenius Agrippa. Essentially he allows poetry to replace Scripture. For Sidney, “It is poetry which most effectively disposes man to overcome his lower nature, thereby offering access into the divine” (Habib 265). It is ironic, as Habib points out, that Sidney uses theological justification in order to prove the superiority of poetry and in doing so he places poetry over theology.

As a result of this notion that man is capable of good, humanists often focus on Christ as an example rather than Christ as an atoning sacrifice. There is a hint of a leaning towards this thought in Sidney, even though he confesses Christ as Saviour, when he says,
Certainly, even our Saviour Jesus Christ could well have given the moral commonplace of uncharitableness and humbleness, as the divine narration of Dives and Lazarus; or of disobedience and mercy, as that heavenly discourse of the lost child and the gracious father; but that his through-searching wisdom knew the estate of Dives burning in hell, and of Lazarus being in Abraham’s bosom, would more constantly (as it were) inhabit both the memory and the judgment. Truly, for myself, meseems I see before my eyes the lost child’s disdainful prodigality, turned to envy a swine’s dinner: which by the learned divines are thought not historical acts, but instructing parables. (142-143)

Sidney ignores what Christ Himself says of the parables: they are more than moral examples, rather, he tells his disciples, “it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Matthew 13:11). These parables allow true Christian believers to understand what Christ calls the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven; they do not merely teach simple morals. Sidney, rather than seeing Christ as the Redeemer through whose saving work men can make a small beginning in living a life of righteousness, sees Christ as mere example of a good moral teacher.

To conclude, Sir Philip Sidney is essentially a humanist who moves away from a Protestant acknowledgement of the depravity of man and the pre-eminence of Scripture towards a more complementary view of man and his ability to do what is good. This humanistic inclination comes from his idealistic view that poetry has the ability to rouse man to virtuous action through the means of a Neo-Platonic ideal world. While Plato
condemns art as being far removed from the truth, his theory of the Forms asserts that there is an ideal world which man must strive to know in order to attain a life of right living. Sidney believes that the poet creates this ideal world through which men learn and are moved to virtuous action, thus validating poetry. Because he is an idealist, Sidney moves away from Horace’s pragmatic conception that in order to maintain the attention of all audience members, poetry must delight and instruct. Instead, Sidney focuses on the didactic, saying that poetry much delight in order to teach. In essence, Sidney fails to reconcile the two streams of thought to which he is dedicated: Protestantism and humanism.
Works Cited


