

DULCE ET UTILE:
SIDNEY'S CONTRADICTORY POETIC THEORY

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Adam Smith's contradictions are of significance because they contain problems which it is true he does not resolve, but which he reveals by contradicting himself.

(Karl Marx, Theories of Surplus Value)

Despite its faultless rhetorical structure and bright defence of the excellencies of *poesy*, Sidney's poetic theory poses a good number of questions which cannot be answered without invalidating some of the nodal axes upon which the logic of its argumentation seems to rest. It has only been recently that critics have endeavoured to set out a new reading of the *Apology* focusing their efforts upon the elucidation of the ambiguities and paradoxes inherent in the text and leaving aside the search for the Platonic and/or Aristotelian influences which can be traced back to it.¹ Undoubtedly, Sidney's text is fraught with inconsistencies: loose terms, vague definitions and a good number of contradictory statements pervade the document from the very beginning. It is precisely our task here to point out how some of these contradictions seep back into the semantic structure of the discourse and how they operate in the rational formulation of Sidney's theoretical postulates. Broadly speaking, the *Apology* can be said to be articulated into three major principles:²

Principle 1: Poetry can be defined as a mimetic discourse, i. e. as a discourse based upon the observation of reality for imitation.

Principle 2: The central aim of this imitative discourse is to teach and delight.

'Dulce et Utile':
Sidney's Contradictory Poetic Theory

Principle 3: The distinctive feature of poetry in opposition to other mimetic languages is its fictional nature. In contrast to the so-called scientific discourses, literature does not provide an accurate representation of reality which can be submitted to factual verification. In poetry, fact is always replaced by fiction.

Out of these three general principles Sidney constructs a poetic theory which clearly belongs in the classic tradition; a theory which aims to be a rational exposition of the nature of the poetic discourse and, simultaneously, a logical defence of its virtues. However, Sidney's *Apology* is far from being a coherent treatise for the sole reason that it is a contradictory discourse which leaves open too many central issues and invalidates many of its propositions. Behind the seemingly perfect arguments and carefully demonstrated principles which the text displays, there invariably lies a counter-argument and a counter-principle which substantially modify or utterly contradict the initially asserted formulae. The result is very often a clash of meanings, and the reader who has closely followed every step of the argumentative text is inevitably compelled to reshape his/her conclusions on it. Thus, each of the three principles mentioned above is accompanied with a restatement which either contradicts or undermines/rules out its meaning. It is this juxtaposition of mutually exclusive propositions on the nature of the literary discourse that converts Sidney's poetics into an essentially paradoxical treatise, subject to multiple readings and always open to critical discussion, rather than a catalogue raisonné of the uses of poetry.

Let us see how the three principles operate and how each of them is completely contradicted in the course of the argumentation.

PRINCIPLE 1
THE *MIMESIS* PRINCIPLE

Early in the *Apology* Sidney gives a rather traditional definition of the difficult yet essential question, "What is literature?" in the following terms:

Poesy 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 speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end, to teach and delight. (25)³

What Sidney does here is simply rewrite the old Aristotelian formula of poetry as a discourse based upon the imitation of the "real" world. To write a poem simply consists in drawing an object from nature and embodying it by means of language, the outcome being an artistic product. An erotic poem, for example, would be the translation of one's individual experience of love into a verbal message subject to certain formal rules. This mimetic transformation of X1 (Real Object) into X2 (Literary Image) in this way becomes one of the defining features of the poetic discourse in question. This means that any literary production must have the natural world as its only possible referent. In other words, a rose can only be a part of a poem insofar as it becomes a mimetic reflection of a hypothetical real one. No art is possible without this nexus to reality:

There is no art delivered to 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 and players, as it were, of what nature will have set forth. (23)⁴

Up to this point there seems to be no difficulty. The Mimesis Principle put forward by Sidney can easily be interpreted as a reformulation of the Thomist/scholastic conception of literature as a mimetic reflection of reality, a "copia mundi" in the strictest sense. Most importantly, this relation of dependence upon nature is so strong that it simply cannot be broken. To do so would inevitably imply the violation of one of the fundamental mechanisms of poetry. Sidney seems to be acutely aware of this. His famous distinction of the "icastic vs. fantastic" kinds of poetry is based precisely upon his fear that poetry should lose contact with reality and build "castles in the air." He holds firmly to the belief that fantasy can only distort our perception of reality and lead us to deceptive images of the world:

*'Dulce et Utile':
Sidney's Contradictory Poetic Theory*

For I will not deny but that man's wit may take poesy, which should be eikastiké (which some learned have defined: figuring forth good things), to be fantastiké (which doth contrariwise, infect the fancy with unworthy objects [...]). (54).

Finally, it is this capacity of the imaginative power to create true or false representations of reality that converts poetry into a moral double-edged weapon. Sidney, however, gainsays this subjection to reality which true poetry must fulfill when he draws a clear-cut opposition between "the brazen world of Nature" and the "golden world of poetry":

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers 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 one. (24).

If according to the initial definition poetry is "an art of imitation", that is, a mimetic discourse which provides a faithful representation of the real world, how can Sidney now reduce the referential domain of poetry to a non-existent idealised vision of nature? The contradiction is all too obvious. The external world has ceased to be the obligatory point of reference of the poetic discourse. Poetry is by no means a mirror of nature. If there is such a thing as a "speculum" in literature it is definitely warped since what is reflected is no longer a realistic picture of nature but a distorted image of it. The mimetic device turns out to be inoperative: idealisation takes the place of imitation. To convert the brazen world of nature into a golden one now becomes the poet's essential motto. Moreover, not only does the poet provide an idealised vision of the natural world but he may even create a nature of his own. Unlike other discourses based upon the observation of the external reality, poetry arises/emerges as the only language capable of doing away with this submission to a pre-existent natural object.

Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any 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 [...]; so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. (23-24, emphasis added).

What Sidney is vindicating here is the autonomy of the poet to create a discourse of his own. A discourse which cannot have any thematic restrictions whatsoever and which can without restriction alter the order of the world. This means that poetry is not conceived of as an objective discourse, whose aim is to provide factual information about the world, but as a subjective discourse defined by the autonomy, freedom and independence of its creator. Not surprisingly, Sidney places poetry in a position closer to philosophy and history than, let us say, physics and astronomy. Unlike scientific discourses, poetry is not submitted to a mimetic depiction of the world, in the sense that it is not interested in reproducing "what is" or predicting "what shall be": "Poets only "range [...] into the divine consideration of what may be and should be." (26).

Like philosophy and history, literature pursues a subjective as opposed to objective vision of reality. This incipient division which is drawn by the Renaissance epistemology between subjective (i. e., pertaining to the subject) and objective ones (i. e., those concerned with the object or natural world)⁵ leaves poetry in a difficult position within the bourgeois construction of knowledge. If the aim of the objective discourses is to provide factual and empirically verifiable information of nature, defined for practical use, then poetry and other subjective discourses are assigned to an under-privileged position. Poetry does not provide objective truth and it is of scarce value for the advance of the empirical knowledge of reality. It is not surprising that Sidney's defence of poetry should be based upon criteria that are completely different from those that legitimise the scientific objective discourses. If the latter are constituted upon the basis of a truthful observation of nature, then poetry either alters or entirely modifies the external world. And if science aims for an objective comprehension of facts, then literature not only rules out the mimetic

*'Dulce et Utile':
Sidney's Contradictory Poetic Theory*

principle of copia but also substitutes the golden rule of the scientific discourses -"what is"- for the poetic formula of "what should be."

THE *DULCE ET UTILE* PRINCIPLE⁶

Any attempt to legitimise a discourse must include a vindication of its aim. We have previously pointed out that in the case of poetry this task seemed far more difficult, simply because the poetic discourse had been excluded from the domain of objective knowledge. Since factual truth is out of the scope of the said discourse, its purpose cannot be to further the information about nature. In his axiomatic definition of *poesy* Sidney does not hesitate to endow literature with a double aim: "to teach and delight." The purpose of the literary discourse must therefore be both didactic and recreative. The first problem that we should address is what to teach. This does not seem to be difficult to answer. A good number of pages of Sidney's treatise intend to prove that poetry is a moral discourse whose fundamental aim is to teach virtue.

However, the end of poetry is far from being merely didactic. It does not consist only of reading a particular moral code as a treatise of moral philosophy would do. Sidney enlarges the initial proposition of neutral didacticism and converts it into the much more complex formula of "moving the reader into moral action." The end of the poetic discourse is, then, not primarily pedagogical but rather fundamentally pragmatic: the result is an active response which transforms the reader into an agent who puts the learned virtues into practice as opposed to the passive apprehension of a catalogue of virtues.⁷

Thus, literature, according to this principle, demands that the reader should assume a particular pattern of behaviour: it forces him/her to act and not simply to learn. Poetry generates a specific praxis. Sidney embraces the prominent position that literature occupies in the hierarchical arrangement of sciences. If "the ending end of all earthly learning [is] virtuous action" and if poetry reveals itself as the most appropriate discourse to yield ethical patterns of behaviour, then the poetic discourse necessarily turns into a kind of moral coordinator of all sciences. Given that all the objective discourses may lose sight of the moral sense which must by definition guide any kind of learning, the new function of poetry is to supervise the moral state of knowledge at any given moment. In other words, its aim is no other than to remind the scientist

that the final goal of human learning is "well-doing" -and not only "well-knowing". The end of poetry is, as can easily be seen, far more complex and significant than the one indicated by the initial principle, "to teach and delight". Sidney has not only converted poetry into a discourse which can generate moral praxis. By converting it into a moderator which curbs the measureless advances of sciences and which infuses the process of learning with a moral meaning, he has also justified its position within the structure of human knowledge. Seen from this perspective, the question of the usefulness of the poetic discourse cannot ever be put to the test.

THE *FICTION* PRINCIPLE

One of the most distinctive features of poetry is, undoubtedly, that it is constituted not as a truthful discourse but as a fictional one. This division of discourses into factual, non-factual and fictional is closely linked with the birth of the bourgeois category of "objective truth" which comes into being by the end of the sixteenth century. Indeed, from a scholastic point of view, a literary discourse could not be thought of as fiction. Literature could only be seen as a human attempt to reinterpret the divine message which God had wisely concealed in the sublunary world. And, since this attempt was primarily guided by God, it could not be diverted from truth. To deny this maxim would involve accepting that the discourse in question is not subject to God's ways, that is, to admit that poetry may be false and, ergo, devil's work. It is precisely these two particular accusations (poetry as a "sinful fancy" and poetry as "the mother of lies") that Sidney is forced to refute in his *Apology*. The first of these imputations -poetry as byword for sinful fantasy- is disproved by Sidney's debate of the moral function of poetry as discussed above. The second charge, nevertheless, is much more difficult to refute. Poetry having been completely excluded from the realm of objective discourses, its aim cannot be to convey objective truth. And given that the only possible alternative to the representation of facts seems to be the expression of falsehood, Sidney has to resolve this theoretical "impasse" by resorting to the concept of fiction, fiction being the only concept which seems to overcome the truth/falsehood dichotomy:

*'Dulce et Utile':
Sidney's Contradictory Poetic Theory*

[...] the poet never affirmeth. The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes. He citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entry calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention; in truth, not labouring to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be. (52-53).

Thus, if poetry does not pursue truth, it cannot pursue falsehood either. The reader is fully aware of this when reading a poem. He does not expect it to contain any factual statement so he cannot be deceived in the least. In this sense, literature is free of the dangers of error inherent in the formulation of truth-value propositions. Sciences, however, can convey falsehood even when their end is precisely to convey truth:

The astronomer, with his cousin the geometrician, can hardly escape, when they take upon them to measure the height of stars. How often, think you, do the physicians lie, when they aver things good for sickness, which afterwards send Charon a great number of souls drowned in a potion before they come to his ferry? And no less of the rest, which take upon them to affirm. Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. (52).

This concept of fiction as the framework of poetry reinforces both the liberty of the poet to build up a world of his own and his independence from the actual order of nature and her ever-verifiable facts. Fiction is seen, then, not only as a useful tool for reshaping the world from whatever position the poet adopts, but also as the principle that justifies the poetic representation of a non-existent idealised reality ("what should be") as opposed to the factual expression of an objective truth ("what is").

When Sidney puts forward his theory of drama, however, the starting definition of fiction ("an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention") and the initially held idea that the poet should be free of the works of nature are totally rejected. Curiously enough, what is now prescribed is that playwrights

should create a tragedy or a comedy which is not set apart from the natural rules of time and place. In fact, their alterations of the logical spatio-temporal order are strongly attacked because they cannot be made credible to the audience.

Unity of time and place is therefore acclaimed as the only possible basis for a play that does not divert from a nature-oriented model of theatrical representation. The seemingly boundless realm of fiction is now reduced to a very narrow notion of drama. It is surprising that the poet must now bear in mind a poetic principle that had been previously rejected. The play must adjust itself to a criterion of truthfulness: that which cannot be believed as true by the audience must not be set on the stage. On the same basis, fantasy must be dropped out of literature, not only due to its negative moral effects but also because fantasy can only come "of things most disproportioned to ourselves in nature" (68).

Thus we have seen how the three basic axioms that Sidney formulates in his poetic theory -namely those we have called the mimesis principle, the "dulce et utile" principle and the fiction principle- become paradoxical in their argumentation to the extent of modifying and/or contradicting the initial epigrammatic formulae contained in their theoretical definition. We have pointed out how natural imitation is substituted for idealised representation in the mimesis principle; how the didactic and recreative ends of poetry ("to teach and delight") are transformed into a pragmatic aim ("to move the reader into moral action"). Finally we have observed how the concept of fiction interferes with the criterion of natural truth that Sidney's dramatic unities of time and place imply.

NOTES

1.- For the elucidation of some of these ambiguities, see A. Leigh Deneef's excellent article "Rereading Sidney's Apology" *JMRS*, 10 (1980), 155-191. Deneef puts forward an interesting way of reading the text. He deconstructs Sidney's poetic theory into three pairs of elements which are analogically related to one another. On a primary level, Deneef speaks of "God

'Dulce et Utile':
Sidney's Contradictory Poetic Theory

and the world of nature, God's Book" as the macrocosmic paradigm which inspires the microcosmic relationship between the poet and his poem. God has created the world of nature and the poet's function is to interpret it by means of his work. On a lower level, the reader's relation to the literary text must be analogically identical to the poet's way of looking at God's creation. He must also decodify the meaning concealed by the poet in the chain of linguistic signs of the poem and give a pragmatic response to it. Thus we find three pairs of interrelated elements:

1. Maker (God) ---> Poem (Nature).
2. Maker (poet) ---> poem (literary work).
3. Reader ---> action (moral response).

See also Ronald Levaio's article for a detailed analysis of Sidney's theoretical paradoxes in "Sidney's Feigned Apology" in *PMLA*, 94 (1979), 223-233.

2.- Needless to say there are other important categories and axiomatic principles governing the structure of Sidney's poetic theory. For instance, we have overlooked the epistemological problems inherent in Sidney's definition of the metaphorical function of the poetic language ("speaking picture"). Similarly, we have agreed to consider the question of "fore-conceit" and the long-held critical discussion on it as a secondary issue. We have chosen these three principles instead of others, partly because we believe they constitute the core of the Apology, and partly because their argumentation gives vent to Sidney's most daring conclusion on the nature of the literary discourse.

3.- All references to the "Defence" are from J. A. Van Dorsten, ed., *A Defence of Poetry* (London: Oxford, 1966).

4.- This narrow conception of literature as a discourse which must faithfully represent the world as we know it seems to be a commonplace in the long history of poetic theory. Art and Truth are clearly two interdependent yet antithetic elements in the different bourgeois attempts to categorize the nodal axes of the literary creation. The problem always lies in the fact that the second term of the equation -Truth- is invariably identified with an objective representation of reality, rather than with a subjective construction of it. Sidney is initially forced to resort to the *Mimesis* Principle to justify the formula Art=Truth, though he will later invalidate this equation by substituting its second term for "idealised representation". Three centuries later, John Ruskin will recover the traditional formula when he puts forward his aesthetic theory of Art as a truthful reflection of reality. To Ruskin, "the first and leading element of Art [is] the observation of fact". Its duty is to be "the interpreter and discoverer of Truth" and its "primal aim is the representation of some natural facts as truly as possible". See other theoretical conclusions that Ruskin postulates in his treatise "The Two Paths" (1859), (London: George Allen & Sons, 1907).

5.- This clear-cut distinction between discourses which are useful for the advance of objective knowledge and discourses which can only be of some use for the private sphere of the self reaches its climax in the eighteenth century. It goes without saying that the most important consequence of this epistemological division between these seemingly opposed discourses is the exclusion of literature from Truth and the irremediable loss of its social recognition as a useful discourse.

6.- The catch phrase "Dulce et Utile" which we have chosen to term the principle that the function of literature is "to teach and delight" has been taken from an interesting essay on literature written by William Hazlitt in his work *The Plain Speaker. Opinions on Books, Men and other Things* (1826), ed. W. Carew Hazlitt (London: George Bell & Sons, 1903).

7.- If we had to classify Sidney's *Apology* according to Allen Preminger's taxonomy, we would have to include it in the group of pragmatic theories. Sidney lays too much emphasis on the end of poetry and grants the reader a very prominent position in this regard. It is finally the reader who justifies the true function of the literary discourse and who determines its authentic meaning. Thus, as long as a piece of writing arouses a response in the reader, there can be no doubt about its poetic nature. See A. Preminger (ed.), *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (Princeton, New York: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 203-214.