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**“Poetheory” in *A Defence of Poetry* by Sir Philip Sidney: *Ut poesis theoria***

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Never trust the theorist. Trust the poem. Can such a crude variation on a pattern once famously set by D.H. Lawrence constitute a sound starting point for the analysis of *A Defence of Poetry*, by Sir Philip Sidney, as a characteristic sample of the vast body of subtle theoretical work which poets have been known to conceive and draft over the centuries<sup>1</sup> ? The spontaneous answer is bound to be no, since the purpose of this paper is neither to write back against the “Empire of Theory” nor to align oneself with the haters of theory, the *misotheorikoi*, to coin a phrase quite in-keeping with Sidney’s compounding verve. Poetry needs theory, whether poetry be a “craft or sullen art”, to quote Dylan Thomas this time<sup>2</sup>. If it is a craft, the need is probably less intense, but no poet, however crafty, would stand to gain from his/her rejection of the kind of close and attentive scrutiny which is one of the *raison d’être* of theory. Should it be an art, if only for the sake of relieving its sullenness and making it more companionable, less “seule” (in the words of poet and theorist Michel Deguy), theory has an important part to play, and few would dispute the fact, both on an a priori and a posteriori basis, that the kind of metapoetical thinking produced by poets has proved particularly rewarding and insightful—all the more so as the forms it has taken have tended to be engagingly various, innovative and inspiring. A case in point being Shelley’s extraordinarily uplifting *Defence of Poetry* (pub. 1843, composed 1821) which no lover of poetry, be he/she anti-romantic in his/her assumptions, can afford to overlook.

However, on second thoughts, accepting the bold proposition *cum grano salis*, or with tongue-in-cheek flippancy, might prove more challenging—and more

entertaining into the bargain. Is it not the case that Sir Philip Sidney's contribution to theory comes in the form of *An Apology/A Defence of Poetry* (pub. 1595) that begins by warning its readers not to take theory too seriously, proves largely ambivalent about its own professions of faith in poetry and goes out of its way to praise a type of poetry (virtuous, earnest, martial, heroic) that is openly at variance with the kind of verse he was writing (playful, hyperbolic, lyrical, pastoral, with little metaphysical content)? The "split" or discrepancy is clear, argues Katherine Duncan-Jones, because Sidney "wrote so lucidly both as a theorist and as a poet" and because the critical theory available to him demanded that poetry should be earnestly directed towards moral edification (D-J 68) – whereas in most of his poems his young protagonists slip into idle ways, fall in love and become engaged in futile pursuits which leave them more or less bitterly conscious that they are wasting their heroic potential<sup>3</sup>. Katherine Duncan-Jones claims that Sidney would have given away all his poems as mere "ink-wasting toys", for a more serious piece of writing: "no doubt he hoped to go on write his *Aeneid* or his *Lusiads*, his *Franciade* and his *Faerie Queen*" (D-J 79). No doubt? Though plausible, the assumption remains highly subjective and largely hypothetical, and the course followed in this paper will be to look at (his) theory from a different angle: rather than focus on the body of ideas articulated in Sidney's *Defence* (a task frequently underdone and which generally concludes on the lack of originality of those ideas, however brilliant the synthesis may have been<sup>4</sup>), instead of lamenting the gap between the theory and the poetry, why not look for points of convergence and mutual influence between the two and focus on the theorizing gesture itself, fraught with irony, and to be construed as an outstanding performance on the part of a poet "freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit" (78).

### Poetology

That *A Defence of Poetry* should lay the foundations for a type of poetry so openly at variance with Sidney's own practice of the genre should indeed prompt one to trust his poems better than his theory. A poetological, or metapoetical, poem, "Loving in truth", the first in *Astrophil and Stella* (AS), constitutes the ideal introduction to the sonnets that follow, in terms of form and content:

Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,  
That she (deare she) might take pleasure of my paine, --  
Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know,  
Knowledge might pitie winne, and pitie grace obtain, --

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,  
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertaine,  
Oft turning others leaves, to see if thence would flow  
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunned-burn'd braine.

But words came halting forth, wanting Inventions stay;  
Invention, Natures child, fled step-dame Studies blowes;  
And others feete still seem'd but strangers in my way.

Thus, great with childe to speake, and helpless in my throwes,  
Biting my trewand pen, beating my selfe for spite,  
'Foole', said my Muse to me, 'looke in thy heart and write'.

It highlights the highly rhetorical nature of Sidney's poetry, his clever handling of puns ("leaves", "feete") and tropes (confer the paronomasia: "biting"/"beating"), his mock-scholarly treatment of the (traditional) debate opposing *inventio* to inspiration—so much so that, while supremely engaging, and in-keeping in every aspect with the requirements of *captatio benevolentiae*, one wonders to what extent it really differs from the production of Sidney's contemporaries as regards the issue of sincerity, and its alleged centrality? If the "truth" of the speaker's feelings is professed at the outset of the collection, and posited as a moral prerequisite that suffers no contestation, does it not follow that the whole of the remaining sonnets and songs are to be construed as poetic padding, as a supreme instance of beating about the bush (and not just of oneself "for spite")? Such a sustained chewing of the pen over so many protracted lines and sonnets (108 in all, plus 11 songs), when the facts are supposed to be plainly established, can only point in the direction, if not of mendacity, at least of art and artifice. With the example of Shakespeare's own sonnets in mind, one thinks of the theatre, with its sustained play on dramatic utterances and fictitious personae. When Sidney, posturing as Astrophil, the lover of stars and of Stella, casts himself as a pregnant woman, "great with child to speak", and ascribes to the writing of poetry the pains of confinement, he is indeed acting, at least acting out a theory that, while unoriginal, is humorously foregrounded. A

theory that is sustained throughout the collection, forming a sequence (within the sequence) of sonnets explicitly concerned with the issue of writing (AS 19, 34, 35, 44, 45, 50, 58, 94)—to be read as “applied poetics with an idea at the back of Sidney’s mind”, in the words of Richard Lanham<sup>5</sup>, the idea in question being, of course, to convince the addressee of the sonnets, Penelope Devreux, of Astrophel’s love for her, but beyond that, since Astrophel, who is no more than a mere persona and need not be identified with the author of the “tale”, to convince the readers of Sidney’s love of poetry. In that light, the invitation extended by the Muse to look into one’s heart in order to write, far from adumbrating a romantic cliché<sup>7</sup>, is more than echoed in the scintillating poeticity of the sequence, with its dazzling display of ever renewed tropes, images and rhythms. A theory, last but not least, that ties in with so much of what stands, however “halting” and “wanting”, in *A Defence*, and which, in view of the “paine” endured by his “trewand pen” as having something to do with Sidney’s recent instance of having bitten... the dust, owes a great deal to circumstances.

### **Topicality**

The first major piece of literary criticism in the English language<sup>8</sup> begins in a stable at the Court of the Emperor Maximilian II in Vienna, more precisely in the Manège run by the illustrious John Pietro Pugliano, who “with great commendation occupied the place of an esquire in his stable” (73). It begins as Philip Sidney’s position was *unstable*, for reasons, both public and private which I shall not go into. Suffice it to say that, having lost the superior position he had sought to occupy, due to the recent birth of Robert Dudley, he represents himself as having “slipped” from the saddle (73)—into the position of a courtier, completely reliant on the Queen for his advancement, and seeing nothing of the kind come his way. And into the position of a poet, hardly a better fate, owing to the numerous charges levelled by poet-haters (79), poet-whippers (98), “back-biters” (97), pleasant “fault-finders” (100), “smiling railers” (100), “wrong-speakers” (110) and various other “ass-brayers” (108) for whom the name of poetry is “odious” (99)—if only because of its associations with effeminacy within a largely manly culture. As Kevin Pask has decisively argued, one of the *raison d’être* of the *Defence* was to reconcile the duties that befell upon the

traditional aristocracy with the literate skills of the court society, poetry being one of them, if not the *primus inter pares*. The aim was indeed to re-establish poetry as the mediator of the aristocracy and the school. At the end of *A Defence*, poetry is restored as the “absolute monarch”, thus returning Sidney to the saddle. Time and age matter too: the work was conceived at a time when warfare, the traditional calling of the aristocracy, was being woefully neglected, under Elizabeth’s relatively pacific foreign policy. Hence the tongue-in-jowl vindication of horses and men, of horsemanship and poetsmanship – “For poetry is the companion of camps” 105 –, so as to *manage*<sup>9</sup> the resolution of Sidney’s uncertain status: by crowning poetry, he allows the triumph of the servant over the master, of the horse over the noble horseman.

What’s more, the period, as argued by Sidney, was allegedly marked by an unprecedented decline in poetic standards (“so stumblingly after Chaucer” 112). In view of the calibre of some of his contemporaries (Spenser is mentioned in *A Defence*), the point is arguable, all the more so as the *Defence* (probably composed in the years 1580-1584) was published in 1595, in the middle of one of the most flourishing – *mirabilis* – decades in the entire history of English poetry, which may have accounted for a further gap, or “split”, between the actual state of the poetic art and its perception at the hands of an apologist bent on denouncing gross “abuses” which may have been more imaginary than real<sup>10</sup>. Likewise, in his perception of the historical “situation”, Sidney finds the age particularly, and specifically, harsh towards poetry and “the poor poets”(101). Never has England been “so hard a stepmother to poets”, he claims, somewhat over-emphatically (110). Now, while it may be observed that poetry has always been ostracized, infinitely more so than any other genre, and that no period of history has been other than “dürfttig” for “Dichter<sup>11</sup>”, there is no gainsaying that the attacks prompted Sidney to posture as *Agonistes*, vehemently refuting the charges levelled against poetry, in behalf of a doctrine of “action” longing for a time when poets were “rather doing things worthy to be written, than writing things fit to be done” (105). He took on his adversaries one by one, waged war against the imputation that poets are guilty of “softening” their readers, by breeding “pestilent desires” in them, by way of “a siren’s sweetness drawing the mind to the serpent’s tail of sinful fancies” (101). Countering the attacks,

Sidney rose to the occasion and is indeed seen “at his most dazzling verbal best, arguing by affirmation, concession, denigration, denial, authority, and what have you<sup>12</sup>”.

### **Irony**

To what extent is theory compatible with humour or irony? By way of anticipation, Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* (1821, 1840) began as a light-hearted reply to his friend Thomas Love Peacock’s magazine article, *The Four Ages of Poetry*, which humorously argued that the best minds of the future must turn to economic and social sciences, rather than poetry. In his vindication of the role of poetry in a progressive society, and of the notion of imaginative literature within an industrial culture, Shelley warmed to his subject and wrote with mounting conviction and enthusiasm—thus gradually quelling every attempt at being nothing else but intensely and seriously committed.

For Renaissance scholars, being dead-earnest was considered to be harmful to one’s demonstration, and wit was a frequent ingredient of gravity. The *Defence* opens in the career, as was said. Sidney begins by distancing himself humorously from the swagger of Pugliano, from the bombast of the self-commending egotist who overstretchs himself in the defence of his calling. “Strong affection and weak arguments” (73), is the verdict, begging the question: can this be bettered, with the answer lying in the reversal of Pugliano’s humourless inflationary rhetoric, which works as the perfect foil—calling in return for modesty, sincerity, rationality. At least in theory... Shifty in the extreme, the enunciative stance of the *Defence* endorses what it purports to invalidate and qualifies what it pretends to dispraise. To put it metaphorically, Sidney rides two horses at the same time. He speaks straight from the horse’s mouth, being a poet, in spite of the fact that Sidney will not be let himself be talked into wishing himself “a horse” (73). Indeed, the *topos* of horsemanship is not restricted to the Exordium. It can be seen to infiltrate and contaminate the whole demonstration, when the metaphor of the saddler’s art points to the two ends of the *Defence*: the theoretical and the practical<sup>13</sup>. For the readers of *Astrophil and Stella*, this would not (have) come as a surprise, since so many sonnets (41, 49, 53) harp on the

issue of riding as writing and one in particular dwells on the setback suffered by the rider at the hands of his “Wand”, his “saddle art”, his spur—when love and desire inflict a crushing defeat on the rational skills on which the noble chevalier prides himself so much<sup>14</sup>. And Sidney does *not* speak straight: a) because of the resort to the sustained conceit of treating poetry on a par with horsemanship b) because of the reliance on irony, and its constant slipping from assent to dissent, and vice versa.

English poetry, he contends, is more than a little “awry” (119) and is in need of being set right again. It is this oblique perception that seems to justify Sidney’s trust in the obliquity of irony and its dual and apparently self-defeating processes:

--one that draws attention to the writer’s shameful want of desert (111), as a “sick” member of a profession that has done so little of late to correct its “barbarousness” (97), that harps on the infirmity of the present discourse, and feels sorry for the “more time lost” in running so long a career on the subject. Confessing to having never desired the title of poet and neglected the means of securing it, Sidney comically bestows upon himself the oxymoronic dignity of “paper-blurrers” (111), thus further disqualifying his enterprise.

--the other reverses the trend and completes the volte-face which the less deceived among his readers knew was coming from the start, by showering some of the most extravagantly lavish compliments ever imagined on poetry, making of his *Defence* a most immodest proposal, outpuglianoing Pugliano himself, as it were:

as virtue is the most excellent resting place for all wordly learning to make his end of, so poetry, being the most familiar to teach it, and most princely to move towards it, in the most excellent work is the most excellent workman (94).

At the end of the day, it seems, the self-demeaning *eiron* has turned into an *alazon*, dwelling “upon superlatives” (121), a metamorphosis that leads the reader, also “a piece of a logician”, to surmise that the *Defence* contains more than its fair share of “strong affection and weak arguments”! While it is to the credit of the theorist that he should lend himself so easily to such self-made accusations, it must be stated that there are limits to irony. When Sidney voices his desire to contribute to the “Redress of poetry”, his tongue is no longer in his cheek. He means business. His unequivocal

aim, indeed, is to redress poetry not so much as a “supreme fiction” (without which, in the words of Wallace Stevens, we are unable to conceive the other world the Neo-Platonist poet turns to incessantly), but “*as poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means*”<sup>15</sup> (Heaney 6).

## Poetheory

It is not just literal or allegorical horses and horse-riders that move “freely within the zodiac of their wit”, it is the whole shape of the *Defence* itself, geared, as was suggested, towards the putting of horses through their paces, which is made to accommodate a contest between several competitors, fighting for the prize, in some grand tournament:

Wherein, if we can, show we the poet’s nobleness, by setting him before his other competitors. Among whom as principal challengers step forth the moral philosophers, whom, methinks, I see coming towards me with a sullen gravity, as though they could not abide vice by daylight, rudely clothed for to witness outwardly their contempt of outward things, with books in their hands against glory... (83)

Prior to banning the philosophers from his Republic of letters (thus scoring a sweet revenge on them) and prior to conferring the laurel crown and the title of “moderator” (84) on the poet’s brow, Sidney portrays his adversaries as vividly, as spectacularly, as offensively as can be. Bad faith is part and parcel of the conjuring trick pulled by the “speaking picture” of poetry – “with its end, to teach and delight” (80). If theory is to make any impression, it will have to perform differently and dissociate itself from the gravity of philosophers, which does not mean that thoughts and conceits will be absent from the picture. This clearly calls for a new implicit injunction, a new species of writing: *Ut poesis theoria*, formed on the well-known Horatian pattern of *ut pictura poesis*. The *Defence* tentatively explores, if not the likeness of poetry and theory, at least their in-betweenness, the overlappings between the two, the way the latter meshes in with the former, and the former is made to take after – and improve – the latter, thus forming a tight bond, a virtually undistinguishable common ground, which, in view of its relative novelty, is anything

but a commonplace, being more like a vantage point, a belvedere, from which to contemplate poetry: *Theapoesis*. Making the most of the chiasmic closeness of two syllabic clusters (*oe/eo*), the o slipping into the e, and vice versa, I suggest creating a portmanteau word for the occasion: *poethery*, which would leave the intermediary *th* free for the place of the divine, or the token presence thereof, since Sidney only pays lip service to the belief, common at the time, that poetry is of divine origin.

One of the lesser justifications for the continuity between poetry and theory would probably be the unrealized allusion in the text either to Pegasus, the winged horse, or to the Centaur, when the head of a man is grafted on the body of a horse. Indeed, the winsome attributes of poetry find themselves grafted on a body of ideas, creating a dramatic, by which is meant spectacular, instance of hybridity – incidentally, generic hybridity is everywhere in the *Defence*: when oratory strays across to poetry, much to the feigned dismay of Sidney (119); when poetry mixes with comedy to enhance its didactic purposes (116); when different genres are said to be “coupling” (94); when poets are branded and faulted, by Sidney himself, for performing *quodlibet* (112); last but not least, when gender boundaries are crossed, Sidney jumping under the skin of women so as to better inveigh against the insincerity of so many love poems, including no doubt his very own (117).

A more essential justification resides in the fact that *S’s Defence* was prompted by the need to take a close look at the way in which poetry looks at itself, as it were. The occasion comes late, and there is cause for wonder that it should have been delayed for so long, but when it comes, there is no mistaking the reflexive urgency, the need for critical self-examination. Two-thirds into the essay, within what is clearly labelled as a “Digression”, as if none of this really mattered, one reads:

Marry, they that delight in poesy itself should seek to know what they do, and how they do; and specially look themselves in an unflattering glass of reason, if they be inclinable unto it (111).

The term “glass” stands out. Indeed, images of sight, of looking at notions through or via a mirror, abound in the *Defence*, and it is only fair to suppose that they were called for by the etymology of those “contemplations” (5) which Pugliano promised to enrich the minds of his students by. Theory, in Greek, means contemplation,

speculation, mental view. It is used to express the experience of life as one « who watches a play, a show ». To theorize is to focus one's attention on one thing exclusively and experience it through the eyes of the mind (or of the soul, in the case of theology).

The promotion of poetry posited by the *Defence* demands the demotion of philosophy, the most contemplative of all intellectual disciplines. Philosophy is not alone in being demoted: divines, lawyers, historians are ruthlessly dismissed. But philosophers are most viciously targeted. As if philosophy and poetry were mutually exclusive. When poetry acts (77), works (78), philosophy contemplates, "obscurely" into the bargain. The disjunction between two activities of the mind so frequently and organically associated in a massive body of Western critical thinking, all the way from Plato to Badiou, to take a broad and unorthodox view, is quite outstanding. The declared bias against philosophy, which takes on satirical proportions in the text, might be ascribed to Sidney's sceptical persona, or could be construed as yet another display of Renaissance wit, or simply endorsed for the sole sake of showmanship. Indeed it should be conceded that the thespianism of poetry makes a dashing contrast with the alleged pedestrianism of philosophy. Not that the case is a fair one, intellectually speaking, but fairness seems to be the least of Sidney's concerns when his sights are set on style and persuasion (to be found in "divers smally learned courtiers" more "than in some professors of learning" 118).

Unencumbered by previous theories – he cites Aristotle as one enlists an ally in a common fight, but no excessive respect transpires from his minimalist tribute: "Aristotle writes the *Art of Poesy*; and why, if it should not be written?" (109) –, Sidney proceeds offhandedly, cavalierly, it will be presumed. The *Defence* exhibits most emphatically its intellectual recklessness when Sidney swiftly disposes of Plato's formidable authority and no less daunting charge against poets. Stating at the outset how great the burden lying before him is – how is one to refute some of the poetry-whipping arguments voiced by the "most poetical of all philosophers" (107)? – he gracefully, and cheekily, dismisses the ban of poets from the City as a mere trifle, contradicted by so much of real substance in the dialogues, and ends with a bang, feigning to reverse the charges against he "who attributeth unto poesy more

than myself do, namely, to be a very inspiring of a divine force, far above man's wit" (109). Touché, is the only word that comes to mind. Poetheory, to summarize, is only valid as an art in so far as it conceals its speculative juices, its intellectual boldness, its penetrating conceits, "according to art, though not by art", for "using art to show art" (119) grossly abuses the latter. *Ars (theoriae) celare artem*, as it might be paraphrased. Indeed, if words or phrases such as *ease* (applied to the English language, 119), "easily overcome", "so easily and so justly confirmed" (109), abound in the *Defence*, only the gullible will be deceived into believing that Sidney is being complacent about his responsibilities as a poetheorist.

Indeed, two major conceptions stand out, in view either of their daring formulation, or of their thought-provoking content and lasting impact. Now whether Sidney was the first to produce them or not is not vital to my hypothesis. The first touches on the notion of *mimesis*—and its famed flexibility, which Sidney exploits to the full, stretching it to its very limits, and possibly even past them, since it is made to cover all kinds of imitations, from the faithful reproduction of appearances to the implementation of universals, which was the aim of Aristotle, and which implies a great degree of understanding (seeing with the mind's eye), or the manifestation of ideal images of reality in the mind of the poet, as is the theory of the golden world, which demands a genuine act of vision to become manifest. The passage is a famous one and deserves to be quoted:

Only the poet, disdainful to be tied to any such subjection (as befalls the physician or the metaphysician), lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in many things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature (Heroes, Demigods, Furies, Cyclops, Chimeras, and such like); 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. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich a tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, not whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden. (78).

The text, reflexively elaborating on its own beauty-enforcing and beauty-enhancing potential, builds on the superiority of gold over brass to deliver a brazen-faced

encomium of poetry for which there seems to be no limit, except, possibly, that set by the author of the *Defence* when he berates “gilding” as a form of excessively self-interested praise. Shelley’s own idealistic *Defence* is clearly, and superlatively, indebted to it, when it states that

Poetry turns all things to loveliness: it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed... It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of the presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes. (Shelley 698)

At first sight, Sidney’s own poetry would seem to confirm the theory: “in Stellas face I reed/ What Love and Beautie be, then all my deed/ But Copying is, what in her Nature writes” (AS 3). But irrespective of the fact that compliance with theory and observance of sound virtuous principles do not necessarily produce good poetry<sup>16</sup>, the reality of Sidney’s practice is only *partly* mimetic, in the ideal sense of the term, as it will address itself to the challenging co-presence, amidst the “rich tapestry” of Nature, of “shades and light”:

When Nature made her chief worke, *Stellas* eyes,  
In colour blacke why wrapt she beames so bright?  
Would she in beamie blacke, like painter wise,  
Frame daintiest lustre, mixt of shades and light ? (AS 7, 1-4).

While the resolution of Sonnet 7 remains conventionally rhetorical, the question denotes on the part of Sidney a growing awareness of the need to devise an alternative to *mimesis*, that would take the form of what the poet and critic Michael Edwards calls *anaktisis*, construed as a specifically English approach to poetry, which aims at transforming (rather than “transmuting”) reality while respecting its less than “golden” autonomy and without demeaning its all too real humbleness and more than “mixt” beauty:

Dans une telle poétique, les reflets et les ombres, qui servaient à Platon de comparaisons pour dire la condition secondaire de notre réel, qui ne serait que le reflet ou l’ombre d’un Reflet idéal, deviennent plutôt les signes – grâce à leur capacité de changer les aspects du monde selon les lois mêmes du monde, d’exister entre

le monde visible et un monde mystérieusement autre – de l'œuvre  
de la poésie, de la répétition créatrice de la parole poétique.  
(Edwards 14)

The second strong pronouncement comes in the form of a vibrant vindication of fiction: since the poet “never affirmeth” (102) (repeated twice), he “lieth not” (103). In poesy, one looks but for fiction, Sidney writes, which leaves ample room for an ‘imaginative ground-plot’ to be “manured”, “tilled” and garnered, to use some of his eclectic and always very earthy metaphors. The “great passport” of poetry (75) thus legitimates all kinds of imaginative departures and ventures, in the name of (poetic) truth. The paradox is a pleasant one, for when Sidney states that the poet is “the least liar of all writers”, is he not affirming, thus contradicting himself? Paradoxical, again, is his affirmation that poetry is the greatest of all arts as it is the only one to realize that it is not anchored to a fixed and objective Truth. Sidney objectively creates the conditions whereby one “conjecture” belies the other (106) so that the logical premises of his theory are ultimately denied: in the Peroration, he urges us to “believe” poets, and that can only be a self-parody in view of his earlier claim that the poet “never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes” (102). As such, the *Defence* would require another *Apology* to justify it, “and so without end” (Levaio 145). Theory requires indeed that one take an affirmative stand somewhere, that one establish some premises from which to deduce one’s conclusions, but since Sidney makes his own logical mistakes, he makes any first premise impossible. Claiming to plead the case of poetry in general, he insists on not speaking for individual poets – but soon breaks his own rules (89), etc. Is the case a hopeless one, or could it be that we are missing “the right use of the material point” (117) and should be looking at the problem from a completely different angle?

The purely speculative “matter”, one feels, is being increasingly supplanted, not by the ornamental or the decorative, which would go against Sidney’s strongest beliefs, but by such a felicitous turn of phrase, “words set in delightful proportion, either accompanied with, or prepared for, the well enchanting skill of music” (92), an enticing “cluster of grapes – that full of that taste, you may long to pass further”

(92)" – such a "manner", in short – as will prompt or trigger an immediate response in the reader, largely on emotional, sensual, grounds, out of sheer impatience with the dry, slow and largely ineffectual teachings of philosophers. Reading the *Defence* is like attending a show, a play. Confer the "Peroration" in which many different ideas of poetry step forward as so many finely dressed personae and take a final bow, some of which were validated by the theorist, some invalidated, and a third category never even mentioned. It is like watching at close quarters what happens when poetry, its procession or pageant of fine figures and beautiful tropes (*theory*, again)<sup>17</sup>, its fondness for punning (choler/colour 118), its rhythms, are brought to bear on a central core of ideas and conceits of the mind – so as to transform the latter by capitalizing on the ability of the former to "draw" (94) i. e. to paint and to entice, to move, since moving is clearly hailed as the essence or design of poetry, its end (91). While he can be very critical of "figures and flowers" (117), of "similitudes in certain printed discourses" (at the hands, no doubt, of the Euphuists 118), of alliterations for the sake of alliterations, highly critical, too, of words "so far-fet" that they may seem "monsters" and "strangers" to "any poor Englishman (117) – Wordsworth would later stigmatize a similar penchant under the phrase "poetic diction" –, Sidney is not above resorting to his own clever figures of speech ("the pain of a pen" 111 = paronomasia). But inconspicuously, as it were, for Sidney is figurative, without ever cutting a figure:

For poesy must not be drawn by the ears; it must be gently led, or *rather* it must lead – which was partly the cause that made the ancient-learned affirm it was a divine gift, and no human skill<sup>18</sup>. (111).

The smooth way in which Sidney moves from the past participle (*led*) to the infinitive (*lead*) is also indicative of his ease at modalizing, modulating (*rather*, italics mine) his own statements – barely concealing in the process the complete reversal undergone by the process (from passive to active). *Epanorthosis* is never supposed to convey so radical an alteration, thus proving the (sweet) forcefulness of the poetheorist. Building on the polysemy of the verb (see above), he intends to *draw*, first and foremost, on the infinite resources of the language (as a congenial and conducive medium to poetry). Sidney's *Defence*, slim as it is, is an attempt to encompass and

embrace the whole width and breadth of the English language, its appealing impurity (“mingled” 119), its precious want of grammar (“it needs it not, being so easy in itself” 119), its ravishing simplicity. Being unburdened by “the cumbersome differences of case and gender”, it may even be called prelapsarian (predating, as it were, the curse of the “Tower of Babylon”). Sidney praises above all its ability to enable “compositions of two or three words together... which is one of the greatest beauties can be in language” (119). Indeed, the language of the *Defence* teems with compounds which constitute the hall-mark of Sidney’s style, in prose and poetry alike: to act “poetically” (89) is thus to be full of “virtue-breeding delightfulness” (120), to steer clear from “the dull-making cataract of Nilus” (120) and “so earth-creeping a mind” as cannot hear “the planet-like music of poetry” (120). That the English language should be “most fit to honour poesy and to be honoured by poesy” (120), besides demonstrating that grammar, after all, *does* matter, has to do with its supreme ability to accommodate prosody in ways that reconcile accent and length, quantity and rhyme, the ancient and the modern. To prove his point, Sidney cites three types of rhyme (masculine, feminine and trisyllabic): *due: true; father: rather; motion: potion* (120). None of these pairs was fortuitously selected: the *truth* of feigning poetry has just been *duly* established; the power of poetry is to beget, to *father* (“though you be *libertino patre natus*, you shall suddenly grow *Hercula proles*” 121) and to *qualify* (see below); as for the three syllables of *potion* and *motion*, they are at the core of Sidney’s ethical and pragmatic approach to writing, as should appear below.

Gathering momentum, the “Peroration” rebounds on the closing lines of the “Digression”, in which Sidney feigned to apologize for having “enlarged much too much” on mere trifles. What follows is enlargement writ large, as it were, or, more academically framed, a “poetics of dilation”, of “spacious joy”, in line after line of escalating vehemence, of aggrandizement (not self-aggrandizement, it will be noted, but of the “ever-praise-worthy Poesy” 120)<sup>19</sup>. In sight of the stable, Sidney gives free rein to his galloping horses and releases the anaphoric impulse : the verb “to believe” is repeated six times in a row, the clause ‘This doing’, five times, “no more”, three times, “if you”, twice. Pace, cadence, rhythm, all convey the sense of an exhilarating

frisson, as one feels the elation, the ease—close to *jouissance*—of a poet in full command of his sentence-proffering powers<sup>20</sup>. It sounds and reads as if Sidney had quaffed an intoxicating *potion* and was drunk with “the authority of his pen<sup>21</sup>” (89), with the rush of his irresistible *kinesis* or *energia* (117). This is “driven” and exalted writing that looks forward to Thomas De Quincey’s “impassioned prose” and which, in the words of Wordsworth, but Coleridge and Shelley would surely concur, speaks to the same organs as poetry, “the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance, their affections are kindred and almost identical, not necessarily differing in degree” (Wordsworth 876). And the fact that all kinds of very different conceptions of poetry are summoned up pell-mell at the end, enlisted as it were, irrespective of their heterogeneous nature and their at times mutually exclusive import, far from diminishing the impact of the demonstration, further augments it. Indeed, concerning the conception that Sidney claims for himself—“there are many mysteries contained in poetry, which of purpose were written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused” (111)—, it would strike even the most profane reader that it is the least likely to characterize his *ars poetica*, there being no mystery contained in all his writings, including the *Defence*, other than the miracle of “black ink” —confer the “inky tribute” (111), the ink-wasting toy”(121)—and its enduring capacity to “still shine bright<sup>22</sup>”. Such a (renewed) blatant contradiction only goes to prove that the subject matter is accessory, being subordinate to the drive, the passion, the fire of the poetic transport itself, *motion*, in brief.

In Shakespearean sonnets, the gist of the piece is frequently contained in the final distich, full of pith and wit. Here, the coup de grace of the *Defence* comes about toward the end of the “Peroration”. To round off his emotional blackmail, delivered half in jest, half in earnest, Sidney deals the fatal blow: after the sweet medicine of cherries (93), the bitter lethal one of poison—of *potion* (*i. e. pharmakon*): “yet so much curse I must send you<sup>23</sup>” (121)—eight monosyllabic words, close in sound, and forming the shortest and deadliest of offensive weapons. Ruthlessly undercutting the mounting inflation of his own extravagantly superlative eulogy, Sidney soberly restricts himself to the exact and minimal quantity of gall required (no more, no less, just the right amount) in the meting out of justice, and its power of passing life and

death sentences. His confidence in the charm, the magic (preferably black) or, as we would say nowadays, the performative powers of language, culminates in the resort to imprecation, a favourite device with playwrights (Seneca and Shakespeare, among others), in view of the death-wish it delivers and inflicts (cf. “rhymed to death”, “to hang himself”, “when you die” 121). In so many unminced words he brandishes the prospect that is most offensive to each and everyone’s vanity, the threat of being forever bypassed by favour, reputation, fame, of remaining unrequited in love and unremembered in death:

that while you live, you live in love, and never get favour for  
lacking skill of a sonnet; and, when you die, your memory die  
from the earth for want of an epitaph. (30-31)

Which brings me to my conclusion, in which I’ll be ending as I began, with the story of a slip. Unlike the first, the last occasioned the death of Sir Philip Sidney, lover of horses and of poets. Mortally wounded on the battlefield, his fall was beyond mending, however movingly and massively elegized it may have been. With the posthumous publication of *A Defence of Poetry* in 1595, however, his implicit wish was finally fulfilled—that he should remain immune from the fatal infection attending the poets whose memory has died from the earth, not for lacking skill of a sonnet, but for want of a theory.

True to the illustrious model formulated by Castiglione in his famous *Book of the Courtier*, the end of the *Defence*, its *ne plus ultra*, would appear to be theorizing without appearing to do so. Indeed, sprezzatura, “an art that does not seem an art”, a courtiers’ distinguished asset and privilege, be it in the field of fencing, horse-riding, writing, etc., demands that one “avoid affectation and practice in all things disdain or carelessness, so as to conceal art, and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it... for obvious effort is the antithesis of grace” (Castiglione 66-68). Self-conscious to a certain point, never quite overlooking the rational side of things, despite logical contradictions in his reasoning on many occasions, Sidney’s both “sweetly and properly” (119) penned text clearly bears the mark of the maker of poetry (a redundant phrase, it will be conceded), one for whom promoting the genre supposes demoting himself as a poet—a supposition

belied by every line he writes! That the theory in question takes after poetry – *ut poesis theoria* – and distances itself from philosophy should not deflect us from its intellectual sophistication. Not only has its fantastical “want of desert” proven particularly deserving but it has shown great resilience too. Whether it did set a more or less binding precedent for future poetheorists is an issue that exceeds the scope of this paper. Let it be suggested that Sidney’s *Defence* looks forward to Shelley’s own, and its electrifyingly lyrical strains, more than it does to the philosophical disquisitions introduced by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*, whose unmethodical miscellany is always on the verge of drowning its subject – the poetics of criticism, or the theory of poetry and of criticism rolled into one – under “*hard thinking and hard reading*” (Coleridge 488). Judging however from several of the illustrious names of apologists mentioned in this paper, it may safely be assumed that poets can be trusted, after all, for acting as the best legislators – albeit “unacknowledged” – of their craft or art...

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>"Never trust the artist. Trust the tale", D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 1923.

<sup>2</sup>"In my craft or sullen art", Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, 106.

<sup>3</sup> It takes the "Radical Reading" of *Astrophil and Stella*, by Thomas Roche Jr., to reclaim the "moral vacancy" at the heart of the sequence and to contend that Sidney teaches morality by

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negative example: "Go, and do not likewise" – like Astrophil whose reason has given way to his will and whose desires finally lead to despair ("Astrophel and Stella: A radical reading", *Sir Philip Sidney An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, 185-226).

<sup>4</sup> It is generally assumed that *A Defence* is a classic statement of Renaissance literary theory, bringing together many of the learned commonplaces of Renaissance criticism (on the nature of imitation, the problem of defining nature, the injunction that poetry should serve moral ends), less notable for its originality than for the insights it gives into the critical controversies of the period: "a veritable encyclopaedia of Renaissance humanism, a synthesizer, not a trail-blazer", Vincent B. Leitch, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 324. Ronald Levaio might be the exception that confirms the rule in his praise of *A Defence* as "one of the most daring documents of Renaissance criticism", "Sidney's Feigned Apology", *An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, 128-146.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Bernard Hoepffner in his Preface to *Sir Philip Sidney Astrophel et Stella & Défense de la poésie*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Confer AS 45: "Then thinke, my deare, that you in me do reed/ Of Lovers ruine, some sad Tragedie, / And of not me, pitie the tale of me".

<sup>7</sup> On the lines, say, of Alfred de Musset's (in)famous declaration: « Ah! Frappe-toi le coeur, c'est là qu'est le génie/ C'est là qu'est la pitié, la souffrance et l'amour", *A mon ami Edouard B.*, 1832.

<sup>8</sup> There had been previous essays by Thomas Elyot (1530), Thomas Wilson (1553), Stephen Gosson (1579), George Puttenham (1589), but neither of them had the ambition and the in-depth analysis of Sidney's *Defence*.

<sup>9</sup> To manage is "to train a horse in his pace; to put through the exercises of the manège", but also "to bring over to one's wishes by artifice and flattery", and, often ironically, "to be so unskilful or unlucky as to do something", O.E.D.

<sup>10</sup> In that respect, the contrast is striking with the closing paragraphs of Shelley's *Defence*, in which the author considers himself to be blessed to be living in "the present state of the cultivation of Poetry", "among such philosophers and poets as surpass beyond comparison any who have appeared since the last national struggle for civil and religious liberties", in an age which he rightly knew to be "memorable in intellectual achievements" (Shelley 700). In many ways the Romantic age was hailed as a second Renaissance.

<sup>11</sup> Keats voiced the same bitter complaints towards his fellow countrymen and so did Shelley. Confer Christian Doumet's explanation for such an enduring ostracism, *Faut-il comprendre la poésie ?*, 112-115.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Story Donno, "Old Mouse-Eaten Records: History in Sidney's Apology", *An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, 166.

<sup>13</sup> "even as the saddler's next end is to make a good saddle, but his further end serves a nobler faculty, which is horsemanship, so the horseman's to soldiery, and the soldier not only to have the skill, but to perform the practice of a soldier" (83).

<sup>14</sup> "He sits me fast, how ever I do sturre, / And now hath made me to his hand so right/ That in the Manage I my self delight" (AS 49, l. 12-14). Sidney was bound to be a horse-lover, a *Philipos*, if only because of his Christian name, *Philip*, a pun which is obliquely alluded to in the *Defence* (97).

<sup>15</sup> The other type of "Redress" favoured by Seamus Heaney is more political in spirit, dealing with the redress which places a counter-reality in the scales, a reality which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined "within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation" (Heaney 3-4). In that light, the redress advocated by Shelley in his *Defence* is resoundingly political, unlike Sidney's, as confirmed by Denis Bonnacase in his preface to a recent translation into French of Shelley's poems (*Oeuvres poétiques complètes*, tome 1, 5-19).

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<sup>16</sup> “True, that on earth we are but pilgrims made, / And should in soule up to our country move : / True, and yet true that I must Stella love” (AS 7).

<sup>17</sup>« ça peut commencer par une figure, au sens ici de trope en général, une tournure de la langue qui se met ici en ses atours, se tournant et contournant et *chantournant* précieusement. (...) Ma langue se met en frais, se hausse et se rehausse, pour m’attirer à elle par sa beauté, énigmatique par la frappe poétique de ses sentences, par les « devinettes » intimes de sa voix qui n’est la voix de personne, profondément familière et profondément dérobée – à elle seule l’inquiétante étrangeté du plus proche » Michel Deguy, 44.

<sup>18</sup> One recalls Keats’s axiom: “ That if poetry does not come as naturally as leaves come to a tree it had better not come at all”. Letter to John Taylor, 27 Feb. 1818 (*The Letters of John Keats*, vol. I., 238-39).

<sup>19</sup> Confer Jean-Louis Chrétien, *La joie spacieuse : Essai sur la dilatation*, Paris : Minuit, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> « La phrase met en rythme une force. Ni l’origine ni la nature de cette force n’intéresse la littérature. Cette force l’intéresse seulement dans la mesure où elle s’oriente vers la profération. (...) La force engagée dans la formation d’une phrase n’est que l’élan de la profération. », Pierre Alfieri, *chercher un phrase*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> To be assessed, critically if need be, in the contrasted light of “certain swelling phrases which hang together like a man that once told my father that the wind was at northwest and by south, because he would be sure to name winds enough” (117).

<sup>22</sup> Confer the final distich of Sonnet 65 by William Shakespeare : “O none, unless this miracle have might : / That in black ink my love still shine bright”. Confer AS 19 by Sidney: “My verie inke turnes straight to Stellas name”, l. 6.

<sup>23</sup>An octosyllabic line or tetrameter (quantitative verse) that scans x / / / x / / /, so as to grant maximum weight to the indictment. This being echoed in the more classically iambic pattern of “that while you live, you live in love” (121).