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Sidney's Definition of Poetry

VIRGINIA RILEY HYMAN

Before arriving at his own definition of poetry as "that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else," Sidney summarizes many other theories of the nature and function of poetry. Contrary to previous critical assumptions, these theories are not simply rhetorical embellishments, but are an integral part of his own definition. Ranging over the whole corpus of literary theory, he continually selects those elements necessary for his own position and rejects or ignores the rest. His definition is, therefore, not only a description, but, corresponding to the older meaning of the term, "a setting of boundaries," "a delimiting." Just as, in the *exordium*, he makes his aim seem modest and rational by contrasting it with Pugliano's exaggerated praise of horses, so in the narration he cites other theories of the nature and function of poetry to indicate his own more rational and modest claim. By using what is necessary for his definition and avoiding the pitfalls implicit in the more ambitious claims for poetry, Sidney proceeds in an ever-narrowing arc until he arrives at the single point of his own definition. The poet, he believes, creates "images of virtues and vices" to stimulate men to "right action." By tracing the series of steps by which he arrives at this conclusion, we can see that his "definition" is the sum of the other theories reduced to their ethical and rational level.

SCHOLARSHIP HAS amply shown Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* to be a compendium of ancient and contemporary poetic theory. The fullest and most recent account of the intellectual sources for Sidney's ideas can be found in Geoffrey Shepherd's introduction to *An Apology for Poetry* (London, Nelson, 1965). But, as Shepherd has pointed out, while Sidney has taken all knowledge of critical theory for his province, his handling of these materials is singular. It is, therefore, perhaps time to move from a recovery of Sidney's sources to an analysis of the use he makes of them. For while many theories are called upon, few are chosen, and it is this act of absorbing and rejecting which constitutes the dynamic unity of the essay. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with all the elements in the essay, an analysis of its first part should perhaps suggest a method of approach for the remainder. For it may be more readily granted that the practical criticism in the second half is based upon Sidney's definition of poetry. It is the purpose of this paper to show how this definition, which follows the exordium and narration, is arrived at, and how these first two parts, rather than being merely rhetorical embellishments,

are integrally related to it. Thus it will be shown that Sidney's definition of poetry is not only a description of its nature and function, but, in the older sense of the word, a setting of boundaries, a delimiting. It is this setting limits to the nature and function of poetry which may account for the essay's singular character.[1]

Sidney's opening mock encomium and his final peroration seem to be made of the same "poetical sinewes" by which he judges poetry. That is, they seem to contain the elements of his central argument. In the beginning Sidney's *Chria* tells how John Pietro Pugliano praised horsemanship and horses by such "strong affection and weak arguments" that, Sidney confesses, had he not been a "piece of a logician" himself, he would have wished himself a horse. He then sets himself to defend that poetry which was once held in high esteem but which has now fallen to being "a laughing-stock of children," and asks pardon if he defends her "with more good will than good reasons," for he is following the steps of his master. Already two points which Sidney will deal with later have been established. First, Pugliano's praise of horses is based upon their usefulness to the state. Second, his claims are so exaggerated and emotional as to render the entire argument absurd. In contrast to Pugliano, Sidney sets himself up as a humbler and more rational defender of that poetry which was once held in *highest* esteem but which has now sunk so *low*. In like manner, Sidney concludes his *Apology* by citing the various exaggerated claims others have made for poetry, but this summary is made in such a mocking tone that it renders such praise of the divine nature of poetry absurd. There is, then, both at the beginning and end of the *Apology* a strong contrast between the emotional and the rational, the exaggerated and the modest, the high and the low, the bestial and the divine, which establishes the middle tone which the body of the essay will take. Because Sidney has established his own character as more modest and rational than Pugliano's, he has led the reader to expect not a panegyric but a reasoned defense. And because he has intro-

[1]In his introduction to the *Apology*, Shepherd clearly indicates Sidney's knowledge of and interest in Ramism, and asserts that this influence is pervasive. It may well be that in setting limits to the nature and function of poetry, Sidney is following the Ramist attempt to assign to each sphere of knowledge only what properly belonged to it. All references to the text of the *Apology* will be to Shepherd's edition.

duced the concepts of the virtues and usefulness of horses, and concluded with the divine aspects of poetry, he has established the two poles within which his argument will range.

The narration, in contrast to Pugliano's subject of horses, deals with the divine aspect of poetry, and, in turn, will be followed by "a more ordinary opening." But within the narration is the same broad sweep. Ranging from a description of the first poets as civilizers and seers, it moves to more contemporary descriptions of the poet's God-like nature in his ability to create and by such creation to move men to political action. But the range narrows as the argument moves toward the "more ordinary opening." The "more ordinary opening" begins: "Poesy therefore is an arte of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it. . ." (p. 101). As C. S. Lewis remarks, "the exact relation between Sidney's account of the poet as maker or ποιητής and the 'more ordinary opening' of him as imitator is not at once apparent."[2] What is clear is that Sidney has once again emerged as the rational arguer, having taken into account the various exaggerated claims made for poetry in the past and in the present. And just as we have seen the elements in the exordium reappear in the narrative, so we find that the elements of the narrative reappear in the definition. It is, indeed, upon these wide-ranging elements in the narrative that the definition rests. Thus it will be necessary to examine in more detail the elements in the narration in order to make the relation between the "first account of the poet as maker and the later one of him as imitator" apparent.

The narration, which begins by giving examples of the esteem in which poetry was once held as being "the first light-giver to ignorance" and as receiving its power from divine inspiration, moves to a discussion of the position of poetry in the world of science. Of all the scientists, the poet alone is free, "disdaining to be tied to any such subjection [to 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 zodiack of his own wit" (p. 100). Contrasting the generating power of nature with that of the poet, Sidney has the latter emerge superior: "Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden" (p. 100). But he drops this comparison and immediately concludes,

[2]*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford, 1954), p. 344.

"But let these things alone and go to man. . . ." After describing how the poet creates the ideal man, superior to that which nature makes, and equal in generating force by making "many Cyruses," he recognizes the impertinence of such claims and concludes, "But these arguments will by few be understood and by fewer granted" (p. 101).

What can be clearly seen is the narrowing scope of the argument. Moving from a description of poets as purveyors of all knowledge and receivers of divine inspiration, to the poet ranging within the "zodiack of his own wit" and purveying only a certain kind of knowledge, the ideal, and within the ideal only that which relates to man, Sidney has taken a series of steps which he reviews by his classifications in the "more ordinary opening" which immediately follows. Dividing poets into three kinds, the divine ("imitating the excellence of God"), the philosophical, and the "right" poets, he states that he will deal only with the last. For it is they who "to imitate borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range, only reined with learned discretion into the divine consideration of what may be, and should be" (p. 102). That Sidney himself is consciously avoiding a defense of the exalted nature of poetry is made clear in his later summary of his arguments. "[Plato] attributeth unto Poesy more then myself do, namely, to be a very inspiring of a divine force, far above man's wit . . ." (p. 130).

If, as Irene Samuels has plausibly suggested, the entire *Defense* is a reply to Plato's banishment of poets from the Republic, Sidney's establishing of himself as a rational man and his limiting poetry to its moral and social functions can be understood.[3] But if this is so, why has he included other theories that as a rational man he can neither affirm nor deny? The answer which this paper will suggest is that Sidney's description of the poet as "maker" counters Plato's charges that poetic images are imitations at a third remove from reality. For, by the time Sidney gives his definition of poetry as "feigning notable images of vices and virtues," the words "feigning" and "images" have lost their pejorative sense and have taken on favorable connotations.

In rejecting the non-rational aspect of poetry Sidney is following the dualism set up by Plato and adopted by sub-

[3]I. Samuels, "The Influence of Plato on Sir Phillip Sidney's Defense of Poetry," *MLQ*, I (1940), 389.

sequent medieval thinkers. Plato had insisted that only the rational faculty could achieve knowledge of immaterial reality, and that aspects of the material world, having their place as images within the irrational part of the soul, were to be controlled by reason. Subsequent thinkers such as the Stoics and Church fathers adopted this view and developed the theory of faculty psychology, in which reason controlled the imaging and remembering functions of the mind. Thus, in rejecting the irrational aspect of poetry, Sidney was allying himself with a strong and conservative tradition.

There was, however, as M. H. Abrams has pointed out, another tradition evolving from Plato along different lines and achieving renewed emphasis in sixteenth century poetic criticism.[4] Beginning as an attempt to relate the sense impressions to the ideal world and to reconcile Plato's reality to Christianity's God, it evolved into a justification for a supra-rational power in man's mind. It is this Plotinian tradition, according to C. S. Lewis, from which Sidney ultimately drew his "Aristotlean" definition of poetry as the "feigning notable images of vertues, vices, or what else. . ." (p. 343). For such a theory justified the "feigning of images" as a God-like action and provided these images with a power to move men to perfection. Characteristically, Sidney selected certain elements from this theory and rejected others. In order to understand what aspects Sidney adopted and to differentiate them from what he rejected, it will be necessary to describe this tradition in some detail.

According to M. C. Bundy, Plato himself in his later works supplied the solution to the problem of the dualism between sense impressions and ideas that he had set up in his earlier dialogues.[5] Basing his theory of Plato's evolution as a philosopher on an earlier study, Bundy sees the later works, especially the *Timaeus* and the *Phaedrus,* as a later, and therefore higher, evolution of Plato's thought.[6] Earlier, in the *Symposium,* Plato had stated that Truth and Beauty, because universal, could not be captured by images. In the *Republic* he asserts that a phantasm is a shadow or impression in the

[4]M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford University Press, 1953). Citations here are from Norton Edition, 1958, p. 42.

[5]M. C. Bundy, *The Theory of the Imagination in Classical and Medieval Thought* (University of Illinois, 1927), pp. 19-59.

[6]W. Lutoslawski, *The Origin and Growth of Plato's Logic* (London, 1897), ch. 2.

mind which is related to the lower part of man's nature, his appetites and feelings, and is, therefore, inferior to the ideas of reason. Later, in Book VI, he describes two kinds of images, one acceptable, the other not. The first kind, what we would term a mathematical symbol, is acceptable because it is an aid to reason. The second kind, the phantasm, is like a reflection in water or a mirror, and has its place in the irrational part of the soul. In the *Philebus* he introduces a third kind of image, used later by Aristotle and the Stoics, the memory image, which is useful as a guide to moral action. In the *Phaedrus,* however, this memory image is re-introduced as the source of our knowledge of heavenly beauty and as the spur to motivate us to seek its source in the divine.[7] Bundy finds another aspect of the mystical faculty in the *Timaeus.* Plato refers to visions received by men in dreams. Ignoring Plato's important provision that such visions have validity only when interpreted in a waking state by reason, Bundy finds in this passage Plato's endorsement of the validity of powers beyond the powers of reason. Of far greater import philosophically, however, is Plato's description of the creation of the world as a series of degenerating mental forms. While Bundy traces the history of the ideas of the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus* as they appear in fragmentary form from the early Christian writers through St. Thomas, finding the first clear synthesis emerging in Dante, more recent scholarship has shown that the fully developed concept which appears in Dante had a much earlier origin.

In *The Medieval Cultural Tradition in Dante's Comedy,* Mazzeo asserts that the fully developed concept appeared in the works of Pseudo-Dionysus, the Areopagite, in A.D. 500. In addition, he asserts that "whatever cultural unity the medieval culture possessed was largely derived from the in-

[7]Although the passage may seem persuasive, one must take into account the context in which it appears. It will be recalled that the speech is addressed to Eros in penance for a previous playful speech of Socrates. It is followed by a closely reasoned analysis on the principles of truth in rhetoric. Socrates himself calls his narrative "a tolerably credible and possibly true though partly erring myth" (p. 311). Elsewhere he asserts that "the composition was mostly playful" (p. 315). It is not surprising, therefore, that this passage has been ignored as a serious attempt to re-instate images above the role to which Plato had formerly assigned them or to raise the role of the passions above the level of reason. Citations to the "Phaedrus" are from *The Works of Plato,* trans. B. Jowett (Modern Library, 1928).

fluence of Dionysus."[8] And since Sidney makes two allusions, rare in English criticism at that time, to Dante, the first citing him as one of the Italian poets who aspired to make poetry a "Treasure house of Science" (152) and the second in the final mocking paragraph, it is perhaps important to see both the theory and the use to which Dante put the theory.

Dionysus sees all things as emanations from the One in a descending order of light. Each of God's creations is a finite mirror image of him (an eikona). Along with this descending order from God through his creatures is an ascending order back to God. Those creatures (men) who receive the perfect image of God (agalma) become spotless mirrors capable of receiving rays from the primal fire. After receiving this divine light, the perfected man can re-ascend the ladder of images to achieve union with the Divine, while freely transmitting his light to creatures lower on the scale of being. Mazzeo sees this ordering hierarchy as resembling "nothing so much as a spiritual Platonic Republic" (p. 28).

Both the advantages and disadvantages of this concept to poetic theory are obvious and can be seen most clearly in Dante. As a pilgrim moving through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, Dante is led by a series of steps with the help of Vergil, Reason, from the world of sense impressions to understanding and thence through love of Beatrice to a divine vision. But at this point, even Bundy admits, the poet can go no farther. He cannot describe the vision except by calling it "light." Dante's example clearly indicates the limits of this kind of vision in terms of poetic practice. Although as a perfected man he can achieve a vision of divine beauty and truth, as a poet he is incapable of portraying it and thereby moving others. Such a poetic conception can go no further; rather it can degenerate into poetic clichés calling upon aid from the Holy Spirit to redress the poet's own insufficiency. Courtland Baker has shown this to be a common practice in Christian poetry after Dante.[9] While such a mystical vision is proper for the saint, it is improper for the "right" poet, for it is too secret, mysterious, and subjective to be communicated.

[8]J. A. Mazzeo, *Medieval Cultural Tradition in Dante's Comedy* (Cornell, 1960), pp. 13-14.

[9]Courtland Baker, "Certain Religious Elements in the Doctrine of the Inspired Poet," *ELH*, VI (1939), 329-338.

Equally incommunicable is the lyric poet's love of divine beauty. Notably absent from this section which attempts to cast poetry in the most favorable light, reference to lyric poetry appears later in the refutation. There Sidney asserts that lyric poetry which attempts to reveal the poet's love of divine beauty lacks *energia* [sic]; it is simply unconvincing. Indeed, he asserts, "if I were a mistress [their writings] would never persuade me they were in love" (p. 137). But while the lyric poet is incapable of describing divine beauty and thus moving the reader to the love of God, he is all too capable of moving him to the love of "this too much loved earth." Reference to this power of the poet to describe natural beauty does appear briefly in the narrative but it is quickly passed over. The reason for this abrupt dismissal appears later in the refutation. There, Sidney has granted his objectors' chief argument. With playful regret he grants, for argument's sake, "love of beauty to be a beastly fault" and agrees that it is in this area that poetry is most often abused. Improper use of "*phantastike* images" "doth infect the fancy with unworthy objects" and "please(s) an ill-pleased eye with wanton shows of better hidden matters" (p. 125).

But if the natural world is not to be idealized by the poet, why is it brought into the narration at all? And why is the idea expressed with such great charm that it seems to emerge as a climax to the narration and stand as the best-remembered and most often quoted passage of the entire essay: "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with 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" (p. 100). Part of the power of the passage can be accounted for by its brevity: the entire passage consists of only two sentences immediately followed by a marked shift of emphasis. "But let these things alone and go to man. . . ." What follows is a description of the power of poetry to create excellent men. The shift from the emphasis on beauty to the emphasis on goodness is abrupt and final. Sidney makes no further reference to the idealized world of nature in the narration. If the reference to beauty has been only a glancing one, one must again ask why the reference is made at all.

The purpose of the passage is, in part, rhetorical. The beauty of this passage concerning nature idealized casts its glow onto the next passage concerning humanity idealized. The delight we feel from the first allows us to accept more readily the moral nature of the second. But the passage is not only meant for delight. Rather, it exemplifies the nature of the "right" poet. Following a passage dealing with the poet's superiority over other scientists in being able to range freely "within the zodiac of his own wit," it asserts the poet's superiority over nature as well. Finding within his own wit the ideal forms of nature, the poet can deliver a golden world. But, while the poet has the freedom and the power to deliver this golden world, he must restrain himself from abusing it. For if we remember the Neoplatonic scale of being, we recall that these ideal forms of nature are lower than the ideal forms of man. They are not only lower, but they are more dangerous to man than mere sense impressions. As the reader of this passage feels, such a golden world can create a bower of bliss which denies and paralyzes action. These are, for all their beauty, "phantastic images" which can "infect the fancy" and draw man away from rational and responsible action. In doing so, they abuse man's nature, as the poet who uses images in this way abuses poetry. The "right poet" employs "images of virtues, vices" to move men to perfect their nature: he creates, as Sidney asserts in the second passage, the ideal Cyrus to make many Cyruses. By referring to the poet's ability to create a golden world of nature, Sidney illustrates the poet's power to move men on this level. By his sudden shift from this golden world of nature to the world of men, he exemplifies the proper action of the "right" poet. As a poet, perhaps Sidney could not forego the temptation to reveal the poet's power to create a golden world of nature. As a rhetorician he might use such a passage as a test of his own powers to persuade. As a theoretician he uses Neoplatonism where it serves his purpose. But as a rational defender of poetry, he quickly turns from the temptation to dwell within this ideal world of nature and returns to the real world of men.

But if Sidney rejects the poet's role in leading men to a vision of divine truth or ideal beauty beyond this world, he grants him a third possibility of greater value: The poet can teach the love of virtue. And since the only knowledge neces-

sary for man is the knowledge of the good, "the ending end of all earthly learning being virtuous action" (p. 104), the poet's role in "feigning notable images of virtues, vices" is the essential one. Thus to the Plotinian tradition exemplified in the *Divine Comedy,* Sidney has set limits. Accepting the belief that man can be led by love to a higher level through the ideal, he limits the ideal to "images of virtues, vices," and its power to draw us only "to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of" (p. 104). The poet can teach the love of virtue, but again this virtue is of a particular nature. For while the Dantean concept is concerned with individual salvation in another life, Sidney's is concerned with the citizen's right action in this. The poet is concerned with "the knowledge of a man's self, in the ethic and politic consideration, with the end of well doing and not of well knowing only. . ." (p. 104). By comparing the poet who has this kind of skill with the skill of the saddler, the horseman, and the soldier, Sidney is emphasizing the poet's usefulness to the Republic. By naming him prince over philosophers or historians, he has indeed assigned him a high position, but the techniques that have led him to this statement are, as he had promised earlier, in direct contrast to those which had led Pugliano's to his. For while Pugliano had attempted to achieve status for horsemanship and horses through elaborations and additions, Sidney has achieved status for poetry by subtractions and diminutions.

But if Sidney imposed limitations upon the Plotinian view as exemplified in Dante, Dante's poem indicated the severe restrictions medieval Christianity imposed upon the poet. For the Christian poet, God is not only the source and goal, but the only artist. If we read his book of Nature and the Bible, we have no need for other artists to teach us the way. Mazzeo quotes St. Thomas Aquinas's dictum that creation is the proper act of God alone as characteristic of the medieval view (p. 159). The artist was "auctour" or preserver of received truth. As such, his "creation" was below that of God's and nature's. This attitude is not very far from Plato's charge that the poet's imitation is at three removes from reality. This concept, along with the Platonic and Christian suspicion concerning sense impressions, left little room for the poet's "feigning." In the sixteenth century, however, as

M. H. Abrams has pointed out, Italian critics began using Plotinian theories to justify their own visions and their proper role (p. 42). Rather than seeing in the Plotinian theory a means toward mystical vision for the spiritual man, they found in it a justification for the vision of the poet. Plotinus had justified the idea in the poet's mind as an image of the idea in the mind of God.

> Still the arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects; for . . . we must recognize that they give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Ideas from which Nature itself derives, and furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking. Thus Pheidias wrought the Zeus upon no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he chose to become manifest to sight.[10]

If reality is mental and creation a series of degenerating mental forms ending in matter, each lower form imaging the essence of the one above it, then man's mind, capable of seeing the essence of all forms in created nature, is closest to God's. It is, literally, the image of God's. The poet's activity, as well as his vision, is God-like. For the poet not only sees, but, like God, creates images of his own ideas. The images projected by the poet, having less matter and more essence, are, indeed, superior to the images in nature. The poet, like God, creates an ordered world of images, and these images,

[10]*Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London, 1926) V.vii, i. This citation is quoted by Abrams, p. 42. Abrams also cites a similar passage from Cicero. It may be argued that Sidney was using the passage from Cicero rather than that from Plotinus. This may very well be, but such an argument does not deny the general prevalence of these ideas in the sixteenth century. Indeed, one critic has asserted that Sidney used the Neoplatonist Ficino's translation and commentaries on Plato. Thus it may be that in this case Sidney's passage is derived more directly from Cicero, as his emphasis on the ability of the images to move the audience may be close to the ideas of other rhetoricians such as Quintillian, his discussion of the "ethick and Politicke consideration" closer to Aristotle, and his very definition of poetry parallel to Minturno's statement, "aut vitia aut virtutes effingunt." According to Shepherd, "the definitions are rich in associations. Nearly every phrase could form a text on which to hang an historical discourse drawing on literary theory and practice for centuries. A writer who used such phrases had his head full of theory and of interpretations whose origins were submerged by repetition" (p. 47). What is being shown in this paper is why some ideas are used among those that were available and why some are modified or omitted.

abstracted from their material aspect, have greater power to reveal the essence of Divine Truth than the images (sense impressions) derived from nature. Thus, "feigning" becomes a God-like action, for it imitates the creation of God. And since the purpose of all creatures is to move toward their true essence, then such an imitation of God's creative act is man's highest occupation.[11]

Such a justification can be seen in a quotation by Scaliger: "Poetry excells all other arts in that . . . the poet represents another nature and varied fortunes, and in so doing, makes himself, as it were, another God."[12] Sidney's comments seem to parallel those of Scaliger:

> Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection [to nature] lifted up with the vigor of his owne invention, doth growe in effect into another nature, in making things either better then Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anewe, . . . so as he goeth hand in hand with Nature, not inclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiack of his owne wit. (100)

But this statement, while similar to Scaliger's, makes one important omission: while Scaliger says that the poet "makes himself another God," Sidney avoids such a statement, and seems to go out of his way to suggest his alliance with Nature, rather than with God. Indeed, he goes out of his way to insist upon the superiority of God: "Neither let it be deemed too saucie a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of Nature; but rather give right honor to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who, having made man to His owne likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature. . ." (p. 101). While he is willing to grant man's superiority to nature, Sidney is

[11]Shepherd goes further in indicating another expression of Renaissance Neoplatonism in the theories of the mannerist painters, Lommazo and Zuccaro. He quotes Zuccaro's description of the role of the Idea in the work of the artist (p. 65-66) and points out its resemblance to Sidney's passage. While he does not indicate the abruptness with which Sidney dismisses this idea, he does say that Sidney does not follow the pure aestheticism to which this theory led Minturno and Castlevetro. Throughout the introduction, Shepherd stresses Sidney's emphasis on the rational activity of the poet and the moral and didactic nature of poetry.

[12]Scaliger, *Poetices libri septem* (4th ed. 1607). This trans. taken from Abrams, p. 273.

unwilling to compare man's creativity with God's. Thus, while both Scaliger's and Sidney's views are in sharp contrast to those of the middle ages, Sidney does not take the final step that Scaliger does. While he adopts the Scaligerian emphasis on the poet's reliance on his own powers, he rejects the implication that the poet is, therefore, God-like. For such an implication is not only blasphemous, but leads to the same kind of exclusiveness for poetry as the Plotinian concept that Dante had employed. For just as the ascent up the ladder of becoming leads to a worship of an ineffable vision of the light of God, so the ascent up the ladder of the poet's world leads back toward the idea within the poet's mind. In insisting on the poet's similarity to nature rather than to God, Sidney can break this reciprocal action. For Sidney, the poet's ideas, like those of nature, are generative. His images, like Yeats's "images that yet / Fresh images beget," are propelled into the world of action. His images are real and useful, for they "beget many Cyruses." The poet's audience will be led to imitate the ideal he has created: they will be propelled outward to their own kind of imitation and creation rather than backward toward contemplation of the ideas in the poet's mind.

But again Sidney must leave this analogy before his reader becomes aware of its implications. For the poet, while God-like in creating images which lead men to love virtue, is also leading them into action and away from direct contact with the Divine idea. Nor is it without significance that the poet creates Cyruses, pagan military leaders, not Christian saints.

What, in conclusion, Sidney has drawn from sixteenth-century aesthetic theory is the notion that the poet has the ability to create images from ideas within his own mind; what he rejects is the exclusive and God-like nature of the poet. This process of acceptance and rejection parallels his handling of the earlier Plotinian theory as exemplified in Dante. From the latter he accepted the ability of the poet's images to move men to virtuous action; he rejected the supra-rational ability of the poet to describe the union with divine Beauty and Truth and thus the need for a divine intermediary or for states of mind superior to those of reason. If one were to formulate the difference between the entire Neoplatonist notion and that of Sidney, one might take the great medieval ladder Mazzeo describes, with its upward and downward

motion, and place it horizontally. Thus the poet, rather than looking upward for inspiration, might look backward to the experience of the ancients, within to his own powers of abstracting and his own knowledge of the Good, and outward, laterally, in projecting these images toward what is possible in his fellow men.

Thus, by a series of hardly discernible steps, through the process of inclusion and exclusion, balancing the exaggerated against the absurd, weighing the old theories against the new, the emotional against the supra-rational, moving his sweep in ever-narrowing arcs, Sidney has arrived at his definition: "[Poetry] is that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else," and then adds the Horatian definition as his amplification. By skillful use of his sources he has changed the connotations of these words so that they might persuade a Plato to restore poetry to an honored place in the Republic. If, by his insistence on its purely moral and social value, he has not succeeded in restoring poetry "to the highest estimation of learning" in which it was once held, he has saved it from its present low repute. If he has not admitted it into the sphere of the divine, he has entered it into the world of men. By the abstracting and judging action of reason he has arrived at a viable definition of what poetry ought to be. The "good will" upon which his reasons are based and the art by which he handles the arguments give life to the theory by exemplifying the active role of the poet in "well doing, and not well knowing only."

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