AN APOLOGY FOR POETRY

(*or* THE DEFENCE OF POESY)

Sir Philip Sidney

revised and expanded for this third edition

by R. W. Maslen

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Manchester University Press

MANCHESTER AND NEW YORK

distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave

First edition published 1965 by
Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd

Second edition published 1973
by Manchester University Press
Reprinted 1977, 1979, 1984, 1989

Third edition published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

Distributed exclusively in the USA by
Palgrave, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

Distributed exclusively in Canada by
UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall,
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 0 7190 5375 7 *hardback*
ISBN 0 7190 5376 5 *paperback*

Third edition first published 2002

10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed in Abode Garamond fonts by Max Nettleton FCSD
Typeset by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain
by Bell & Bain Ltd, Glasgow

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first thanks should go to previous editors of Sidney's *Apology*, especially Jan van Dorsten and Katherine Duncan-Jones, from whose notes I have learned much more than I could put into practice here. My thanks to Professor Gerald Hammond of the University of Manchester, for mentioning my name to Manchester University Press in connection with this project; and to my colleagues in the department of English Literature at the University of Glasgow, especially Professor Willy Maley and Dr Donald Mackenzie, two of the best and most generous scholars a student of the Renaissance could have the good fortune to work with. My greatest debts of gratitude are these: to my colleague Robert Cummings, whose help, constant encouragement, and encyclopaedic knowledge have made a difficult task a little easier and a great deal more pleasant, and whose hand will be found in all the best new notes to this edition; and to my wife Kirsty, who has worked with me on every sentence.

Geoffrey Shepherd dedicated his edition of the *Apology* to the memory of C. S. Lewis. I would like to dedicate this second version of that edition to the memory of John Fowler, teacher and friend; and to Kirsty and Bethany, with love.

ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout the Introduction and Notes, books listed in the Bibliography are referred to by the name of the author or editor and the date of publication. For example: Duncan-Jones 1991, 73, refers to Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet*, p. 73. Exceptions are listed below.

Ad Her.	*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, ed. Caplan (Loeb Library)
CP	*Classical Philology*
EETS	Early English Text Society Publications
ELH	*Journal of English Literary History*
HLB	*Huntington Library Bulletin*
HLQ	*Huntington Library Quarterly*
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
JHI	*Journal of the History of Ideas*
JWCI	*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*
Misc. Prose	*Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten
MLN	*Modern Language Notes*
MLQ	*Modern Language Quarterly*
MLR	*Modern Language Review*
MPh	*Modern Philology*
NA	*The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (The New Arcadia)*, ed. Victor Skretkowicz
NQ	*Notes and Queries*
OA	*The Old Arcadia*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
Olney	Olney's text of the *Apology*
PL	*Patrologia Latina*, ed. Migne (quoted by volume and column)
PMLA	*Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
Ponsonby	Ponsonby's text of the *Apology*
PQ	*Philological Quarterly*

RES	*Review of English Studies*
SEL	*Studies in English Literature*
SP	*Studies in Philology*
Tilley	M. P. Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs of England in the 16th and 17th Centuries*

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Only texts directly relevant to the study of the *Apology* or of general importance for its understanding are listed here. To save space I have not listed articles. The essay collections contain some of the most important of these, others can be found in the notes and bibliographies of books, and several are mentioned in the Notes and Introduction to this edition. There are many modern texts of the *Apology*; I have listed only a few of them.

All Shakespeare citations are taken from the Oxford edition, edited by Gary Taylor and Stanley Wells, listed below under 'Other Primary Texts'. References to classical texts are to the Loeb editions, except where stated. The Loeb translations have in most cases been modified to make the sense clearer.

Editions of Sidney's works

Cook, Albert S. (ed.) *The Defense of Poesy, otherwise known as An Apology for Poetry* (Boston, 1890)

Duncan-Jones, Katherine (ed.) *The Defence of Poesy*, in *Sir Philip Sidney*, Oxford Authors (Oxford, 1989), pp. 212–50

——. *The Old Arcadia*, The World's Classics (Oxford, 1973)

Duncan-Jones, Katherine, and Jan van Dorsten (ed.) *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney* (Oxford, 1973)

Evans, Maurice (ed.) *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (The New Arcadia)* (Harmondsworth, 1977)

Feuillerat, Albert (ed.) *The Complete Works of Sir Philip Sidney* (4 vols, Cambridge 1912–26; rev. 1962)

Pears, S. A. (ed.) *The Correspondence of Sir Philip Sidney and Hubert Languet* (London, 1845)

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Robertson, Jean (ed.) *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (The Old Arcadia)* (Oxford, 1973)

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Shepherd, Geoffrey (ed.) *An Apology for Poetry or The Defence of Poesy* (London, 1965)

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Woudhuysen, H. R. *Sir Philip Sidney and the Circulation of Manuscripts 1558–1640* (Oxford, 1996)

Yates, Frances A. *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century*, Studies of the Warburg Institute, XV (London, 1947)

——. *The Art of Memory* (Harmondsworth, 1969)

Zandvoort, R. W. *Sidney's Arcadia* (Amsterdam, 1929)

INTRODUCTION

Introducing *An Apology for Poetry*

Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* – also known as *The Defence of Poesy* – is the most stylish and seductive work of literary theory written in the Renaissance.[1] According to its own definition of the word, it is a poem in prose, conjuring up the verbal picture of an ideal poetry as imagined by a poet – Sidney himself – and urging, wooing, reasoning and joking with its English readers in an ebullient effort to convince them of poetry's superiority to all other branches of learning. But it is also, unexpectedly, a confession of failure. Sidney tells us he wrote it when the reputation of poetry was at its lowest ebb, and acknowledges that there is good reason for the contempt in which it is currently held. Since ancient times, he claims, poetic practice has rarely lived up to its theoretical potential. With a few honourable exceptions, English poems in particular have always been of poor quality, and they are worse now than ever. Most modern English poets resemble disease-ridden whores, who offer their less than pleasurable commodities for cash to the highest bidder without a thought for the more important social ends they should serve. Sidney himself, he admits, shares their diseases. *An Apology for Poetry*, then, is both a celebration of the limitless capacity of poetry as it might be and a diagnosis of its lamentable condition as it is. And both celebration and diagnosis are couched in terms that vividly evoke the central concerns of late sixteenth-century European politics. It is, among other things, a controversial political document, a daring intervention in international affairs which more or less covertly criticizes the government of the day for its foreign and domestic policies. And in Elizabethan England such criticism carried considerable risks for the critic.

[1] Sidney does not seem to have given his essay a title. The alternative titles by which it is usually known are those of the two first editions, *An Apology for Poetry* published by Henry Olney and *The Defence of Poesy* published by William Ponsonby. Both appeared in 1595.

For Sidney, poetry does not have to be verse, confined to the rules of rhythm or metre, as many of his predecessors insisted it should be. Instead he defines it as fiction: writing, speech, or song which makes no claim to represent things or people that exist or once existed, but which fabricates attractive verbal images or gripping stories that appeal equally to the intellect and the emotions, with the aim of stimulating their recipients to action. As a result poetry crops up everywhere. It manifests itself in the form of anecdotes, fables, and parables which lend persuasiveness and clarity to philosophical arguments, political speeches, or religious teachings. It occurs in history books, in the form of imaginary speeches put into the mouths of historical characters to give substance to a particular version of the past. It invades scientific treatises, in the shape of comparisons or analogies demonstrating the practical application of scientific theories. And it fills the fields and the city streets with song: the hymn, the ballad, the lampoon and the prophecy are all the province of the poet. Poetry is a mode of thought inseparable from the condition of being human, and this, in Sidney's view, is what makes it worth studying.

Above all, the *Apology* argues, poetry is the most efficient persuasive force available to human beings. The poet is the man (in the *Apology*, though not in Sidney's other writings, he is always a man) who exploits the resources of language most freely and fearlessly for what he considers the common good – or for the good of his class or political faction. Poetry, in other words, is useful, and its usefulness makes it dangerous. No text asserts the danger as well as the delight of poetry more eloquently than Sidney's. The reasons for this will I hope become apparent in the course of this introduction.

We do not know exactly when the *Apology* was written.[2] It was probably begun after December 1579, when Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender* was printed, since Sidney refers to Spenser's text as one of the few good English poems published in recent years (110/17ff.), and it was presumably finished before Sidney set off to fight in the Netherlands in 1585, the year before his death. Most scholars assume it was written in the earlier part of this period, during the winter of 1579–80. This is largely because of the literary climate at the time. *The Shepheardes Calender* was published along with a detailed commentary by a friend of Spenser's who signed himself E.K.: it was dedicated to Sidney, and it represented the most sustained effort so far in literary history to set up an English poem as worthy of comparison with ancient and modern poetic achievements on the European continent. Earlier in 1579 another important text was published: *The School of Abuse* by Stephen Gosson, which describes itself as 'a pleasaunt inuective against Poets, Pipers, Plaiers,

[2] For a full discussion of the date see *Misc. Prose*, 59–63.

Jesters, and such like Caterpillers of a Commonwelth' (Gosson 1974, 69). Gosson's eloquent attack on the malpractices of modern poets and playwrights was dedicated to Sidney, like Spenser's poem, and caused enough of a stir in London to warrant a second edition, three counter-attacks on behalf of the stage, and a defence of the *School* by Gosson before the year was out.[3] It seems reasonable to suppose that Gosson's and Spenser's texts might have stimulated their dedicatee Sidney into writing down his own thoughts on the right and wrong uses of poetry.

As we shall see, *The School of Abuse* in particular seems to be echoed throughout the *Apology*, especially in the section on contemporary English poetry.[4] It shares with Sidney's text a formal rhetorical structure, an often bantering tone, and a refusal to meddle with deep theological issues (it is a *pleasant* rather than a solemn invective). More seriously (and the interplay between wit and seriousness is common to both), Sidney's and Gosson's texts share the conviction that they are being written at a time of crisis in England's national identity, when England stands on the verge of losing its independence either to foreign powers or to foreign cultural values. This conviction would also have been shared by many other Protestant Englishmen in 1579, when Elizabeth I was being courted by the Catholic heir to the throne of France, the Duke of Alençon. One man, Philip Stubbes, had a hand cut off for saying so in print. For all its claims to universal applicability, *An Apology for Poetry* can be read, if we wish, as an oblique response to the immediate threat posed to English nationhood by Elizabeth's projected Catholic marriage.[5] Certainly it is everywhere concerned with the historical circumstances of its own production: and some knowledge of these circumstances is helpful if we are to understand it.

Some knowledge of Sidney's career is helpful, too.[6] From its first sentence the *Apology* declares its intimate involvement with the life of its author. It was written, he tells us, to vindicate what he calls his 'unelected vocation' (81/27) – the poetic career he never intended to pursue – from its many detractors, and it is disarmingly honest about the self-interest that motivated its composition. Every stage of its argument is peppered with phrases that remind us we are reading a writer's biased observations rather than a set of impartial assessments: 'I think', 'I hope', 'I fear me', 'I know'. Such phrases arise, of course, from Sidney's thorough ground-

[3] See Gosson 1974, introduction.

[4] For detailed accounts of Gosson's possible influence on the *Apology* see Arthur F. Kinney, 'Parody and its Implications in Sydney's Defense of Poesie', *SEL* 12 (1972), 1–19; Gosson, 1974, introduction; and Herman 1996, chs 1 and 2.

[5] For Sidney's involvement in the Elizabethan project of 'writing England' see Helgerson 1992, introduction, and Hadfield 1994, ch. 5. My discussion in this introduction is especially indebted to the latter.

[6] We are fortunate in having two excellent recent biographies of Sidney: Duncan-Jones 1991 and Stewart 2000.

ing in the art of rhetoric – often defined in the sixteenth century as the art of persuasion – which occupied a central position in the educational curriculum of early modern Europe. Teachers of rhetoric took the spoken word as the model for all written discourse, and so inculcated in their pupils an acute sensitivity to the respective social and ideological positions of writer and reader, speaker and audience: a sensitivity essential to the public performances of lawyers, preachers, and politicians.[7] But Sidney's repeated use of the first person invites us to remain unusually alert, as we read, to the particular prejudices and assumptions that determine the course of his discussion: and a glance at his life may furnish some important clues as to the direction he is coming from.

This is not to say, of course, that the relationship between the *Apology* and Sidney's life is unproblematic. From time to time Sidney's persuasive strategies involve him in self-evident contradictions, some of which were pointed out to him by his secretary, William Temple, in a logical analysis of the *Apology* written in the mid-1580s which remains a remarkable testimony to the skills in close reading cultivated by educated Elizabethans (Temple 1984). And Sidney himself discourages us from taking the *Apology* at face value, or from believing that he understood what he wrote in the *Apology* to be 'true' in any simple sense. Poets like the author of this essay, he explains, do not deal in truths or certainties – indeed, the 'cloudy knowledge of mankind' renders all such dealings dubious (103/11–12) – but only with 'what should or should not be' (103/17), the moral and emotional imperatives to which, the poets claim, their imaginations give them access. Sidney's favourite word is 'truly' (it occurs at least thirty-four times in the *Apology*), but he invariably uses it to signal the contingent status of truth, to announce the approach of a particularly contentious or opinionated utterance: 'Truly, as me seemeth' (89/34), 'truly I imagine' (100/10), 'It is already said (and, as I think, truly said)' (101/24), 'Truly, this is much, if there be much truth in it' (102/32), and, most trickily of all, 'I answer paradoxically, but truly, I think truly, that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar' (103/1–2) – a sentence that reaches giddy heights of complexity, especially if we remember that the man who writes this is himself a poet, and therefore scarcely the most trustworthy witness as to the poet's trustworthiness. There is a slippery quality in Sidney's writings which should put us on our guard whenever we are tempted to make grandiose statements about his intentions or convictions. Whether we regard this quality as infuriating or exhilarating will depend on what we expect from our reading. *An Apology for Poetry* offers us an unrivalled opportunity to scrutinize our expectations as readers – perhaps even to revise them.

[7] See Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford, 1988), especially ch. 5, for a lucid introduction to the Renaissance study of rhetoric in schools and elsewhere.

brother, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, entertained the hope of achieving royalty through a still more splendid marriage, to Elizabeth I herself. When Sidney was born in 1554 his godfather was Philip II of Spain – at that time king of England by virtue of his marriage to Mary Tudor – and until about 1580 he was the legal heir to the vast fortunes of his uncle the Earl of Leicester. Philip's education was superb: he went first (with Greville) to one of the best schools in England, Shrewsbury, and afterwards to Christ Church, the most splendid of Oxford colleges. Then, at the age of eighteen, he set out on an astonishing three-year tour of Europe which took him to France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Prague, and Vienna. Everywhere he went he met politicians, scholars, artists, printers, and princes, and was received with the respect and attention due to a rising star: a young man who could be expected to play a major role in international politics. Metaphorically at least, from this point in his life Sidney was seen, and possibly saw himself, as a prince in waiting. It is as a prince – Alexander the Great – that the Protestant scholar Théophile de Banos addresses him in a letter;[11] and it is as a 'princely spirit' that Greville describes him in the *Dedication*,[12] and Sir Walter Raleigh remembers him in his epitaph of 1593.[13] He might even have achieved genuine princely status: at one stage William of Orange seems to have wanted him for his son-in-law.[14] But this prince never came into his inheritance. Apart from a single diplomatic mission to Prague in 1577, Sidney was never given a position of political responsibility of the kind his education was designed to suit him for – at least, not until his appointment as second-in-command of the English forces in the Netherlands in the last year of his life. Even his knighthood was not his own: he was knighted in 1583 to enable him to act as stand-in for a German prince who was to be awarded the Order of the Garter *in absentia*. He slipped into the title of knight in much the same way as he slipped into the title of poet: by default.

By the time this happened he had slipped out of another, more valuable title. His uncle the Earl of Leicester had got married secretly in 1578 to the widowed Countess of Essex; and in 1580 or 1581 the birth of Leicester's son Robert ousted Sidney from his position as his uncle's heir apparent. During the period between these two events another episode took place which reminded Sidney of the distance between his 'Great expectation'[15] – the hopes he had of achieving eminence in the political and military spheres – and his actual status. In 1579 a quarrel broke out between him and the Earl of Oxford, who was a member of one of the

[11] Duncan-Jones 1991, 70.
[12] Greville 1986, 38.
[13] Duncan-Jones 1989, 326–7.
[14] See Duncan-Jones 1991, 132ff.
[15] *Astrophil and Stella* 21, line 8 (Ringler 1962, 175).

is such that though the wound be healed, the scar remains' (*Misc. Prose*, 9). Eight years later he invoked the same proverb in his *Defence of Leicester*, implying that, however ineffectual slanderous assaults on a person's private conduct might be, the scars they left behind remained indelibly inscribed on the defendant's body and mind, serving as a constant reminder of the vulnerability of even the most immaculate reputation (*Misc. Prose*, 130). Long before he died in 1586, as a result of a wound received on a battlefield in the Netherlands, Sidney had learned what it was to feel embattled in the field of Court politics, and had received inward scars of a kind which were particularly difficult to treat.

Fulke Greville seems to have been right in one sense at least, when he said that Sidney did not write his imaginative works to give 'any account of himself to the world'. None of Sidney's poetry or prose was printed before his death,[19] and, although some of his poetry circulated in manuscript from the 1570s onwards, access to his literary texts was seen in his lifetime as a privilege granted only to a fortunate minority of readers. His father's secretary Edmund Molyneux wrote of his prose romance the *Arcadia* that 'few works of like subject hath been either of some more earnestly sought, choicely kept, nor placed in better place, amongst better jewels than that was; so that a special dear friend he should be that could have a sight, but much more dear that could once obtain a copy of it' (Duncan-Jones 1989, 312). The first version of the *Arcadia* – begun perhaps in 1577 and finished in 1580 – survives in eleven early manuscripts, and three more at least are known to have existed; Greville describes it as 'common', that is, widely known (*OA*, vii). By contrast, the *Apology* does not seem to have got much beyond the circle of his immediate family and friends until the mid-1590s.[20] This, at least, is the implication of Henry Olney's preface to his 1595 edition of the *Apology*.[21] Olney tells us that certain 'great ones' – among them presumably Sidney's sister Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke – have 'interred this blessed innocent' (that is, the defence of poetry) 'in themselves', and that he expects to be attacked for his presumption in making himself the first 'bewrayer' of the defence to the public, through the medium of print, without their permission. Before 1595, when two editions of the *Apology* were brought out within a few months of each other, the only people we know of who had certainly read the essay were Sidney's sister, his private secretary William Temple, and his friend Sir John Harington, who made use of it in the preface to his translation of *Orlando Furioso* (1591).[22] If the *Apology* is in some sense Sidney's 'account

[19] With the possible exception of two sonnets; see Woudhuysen 1996, 210.

[20] See Woudhuysen 1996, 234.

[21] Printed at the beginning of the Notes in this edition.

[22] Woudhuysen speculates that Penelope Rich may also have owned a copy. For all these associations with the *Apology* see Woudhuysen 1996, 234.

of himself', a defence of his reputation to match his defences of his father and uncle, he did not deliver it to the world in general – unlike his defence of Leicester, which he prepared for publication.[23] Sidney seems to have kept a close eye on manuscripts of his defence of poetry, for reasons we can only guess at.

Perhaps it gave him pleasure at this unhappy stage of his career – during the early 1580s – to maintain control over his own literary creations, given the strict limitations of his control over his public affairs. After Sidney's quarrel with Oxford in 1579, Elizabeth I referred to both men as her 'creations' and stressed a monarch's need to keep her subjects under a tight rein (Greville 1986, 40). Sidney's older contemporary George Puttenham developed this notion of the monarch as the poetic 'creator' of her subjects in his treatise *The Arte of English Poesie*, published in 1589. For Puttenham, the Queen of England was the 'most excellent Poet' alive, 'making in maner what ye list, the poore man rich, the lewd well learned, the coward couragious, and vile both noble and valiant' (Puttenham 1936, 4–5). Elizabeth, that is, was able to make anything she liked of the human material she had in front of her. For Sidney, on the other hand, the best of poets was capable of a great deal more. 'Only the poet,' he writes, 'disdaining to be tied to any . . . subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature . . . Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden' (85/17–27). Elizabeth is part of the sordid brazen world which exists beyond the poet's pages; practitioners of the 'princely' art of poetry disdain to be tied to her subjection. Elizabeth came to be known to her admirers as Astraea, the classical goddess of Justice;[24] but poets are capable of recreating the Golden Age when (according to the Roman poet Ovid) the *real* Astraea lived on earth. Within the confines of the *Apology for Poetry*, at least, Sidney was a *bona fide* prince, with a very much larger territory (and a great deal more power over it) than Elizabeth possessed in England. Elizabeth's was a little monarchy, Sidney's imaginary country was a vast one.

Greville referred to the revised version of Sidney's great romance, now known as the *New Arcadia*, as 'this extraordinary frame of his own commonwealth' (Greville 1986, 10), a rival for the celebrated imaginary commonwealths of Plato (the *Republic*) and Sir Thomas More (*Utopia*, first published in 1516). But the *New Arcadia* is a deeply troubled work, portraying a Greek princedom run by a disastrously over-cautious pacifist:

[23] See *Misc. Prose*, 124.

[24] See Frances A. Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1975).

a state which, like England, is under constant threat of assault from its neighbours, and which briefly succumbs to assault from within. The claim of being Sidney's 'own commonwealth' might more reasonably be made for the *Apology*, since the text explicitly sets itself up in opposition to the attack on poets in Plato's *Republic* (**106**/42ff.), and insists that More's *Utopia* is a poetic failure (**91**/20–5). Indeed, the *Apology* is through much of its length a brilliant fusion of the most important imaginary ideals that were current in the sixteenth century: from the ideal prince, as exemplified in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, to the ideal orator, as delineated in Cicero's *De oratore*; from the ideal courtier, a chimera pursued through the pages of Castiglione's *The Courtier* (1528), to the ideal teacher, a figure made familiar in England by Roger Ascham's celebrated treatise on teaching Latin, *The Schoolmaster* (1570). For Sidney, the poet is the only mortal who has imaginative access to all these disparate ideals and who has the power to make them both visible and attractive to his fellow mortals. And he is also the only one capable of making an ideal state for these ideal figures to occupy. Such an imaginary state may not yet exist on paper, but the *idea* of such a state may be entertained by poets, as the example of More's *Utopia* shows: 'for that way of patterning a commonwealth was most absolute, though [More] perchance hath not so absolutely performed it' (**91**/23–5). Whatever limitations poetry may have had in practice, its theoretical potential is as boundless as the poet's imagination. And this places the poet streets ahead of the cautious rulers whose little monarchies he is condemned to live in.

As if to demonstrate the sheer range of the poet's mind ('the zodiac of his . . . wit', **85**/23), Sidney's *Apology* is geographically hugely expansive: it travels as far afield as Sidney had done in the 1570s, and it visits many of the same places. It opens with an anecdote set in Vienna, where Sidney converses in Italian with a famous riding-school teacher; and it goes on to display Sidney's familiarity with modern Italian literature and literary theory, and indicates that he had seen Venice (**109**/6). It shows an informed interest in Turkish culture which Sidney could have acquired on his visit to Hungary, where the war against the Turks was being waged (**83**/18–19); and it later refers explicitly to Sidney's Hungarian visit (**99**/10–13). It parades his familiarity with Italian, French and Spanish (**115**/38–44), and (somewhat misleadingly) with 'Dutch' (German), which Sidney stubbornly refused to learn on his tour of Europe. It touches on his knowledge of Irish and Welsh poetry, acquired through his father's close connections with those two countries, and the poetry of Scotland – he twice mentions the great Scottish political theorist and dramatist George Buchanan, with whom he had corresponded. And it evinces Sidney's fascination with the New World, which he hoped to visit in future. All these allusions to contemporary cultures are seamlessly woven in with a complex tapestry of allusions to Sidney's exten-

sive reading among the Greek and Latin classics, from the philosophical works of Plato and Plutarch to the prose fictions of Heliodorus and Apuleius, from Cicero's treatises on rhetoric to the histories of Xenophon, Livy, and Quintus Curtius. In the *Apology*, Sidney's remarkable education both in experience and in book-learning, in literature, politics, philosophy, diplomacy, history and military training, found an outlet which it had not yet found in English public life. Contemporary readers confronted with such evidence of Sidney's accomplishments might well have found themselves wondering how on earth such a valuable subject could have found himself ('in these my not old years and idlest times') with the time on his hands to write about poetry, when he ought to have been engaged in more directly political action. And they might have concluded that Sidney's political inertia was a direct result of the state of affairs in Elizabethan England.

Throughout the *Apology* Sidney argues for England's potential to match other nations, from ancient Greece and Rome to modern Italy, in the writing of poetry and in the various forms of action which poetry is uniquely qualified to encourage. The English language is eminently suited to a variety of verse forms and persuasive techniques, and in the past the poetic achievements of England have been more than matched by its military successes: at one point Sidney casually sets the names of English victories at Poitiers and Agincourt alongside the greatest military triumphs of ancient times, the battles of Marathon and Pharsalia (89/21–2). But in his own time, England's immense potential – both military and poetic – remains unfulfilled. Only a few years after Sidney wrote the *Apology*, George Puttenham was to celebrate modern English poetic achievements with enthusiasm in *The Arte of English Poesie*. Sidney, by contrast, is everywhere concerned to play them down. This is not necessarily a matter of objective critical judgment: indeed, Sidney stresses the difficulty, even the impossibility, of arriving at an unbiased judgment of anything. His list of successful English poetry (110/11ff.) is remarkably short: it excludes, for instance, the verse of Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–42), whose introduction of the sonnet form into England might have recommended him to Sidney the sonneteer, and of George Gascoigne (c. 1539–77), the leading poet of the previous decade, whose accomplishments in poetry, prose and court entertainment anticipate Sidney's.[25] But Sidney is not arguing in this section of the *Apology* that there is no good poetry in England: only that most good English poetry has not yet found its way into print (see 110/22). It is therefore in his interest to exclude all but a few printed poems from his list.

[25] He could have read Wyatt's poetry in the book that contained Surrey's: *Tottel's Miscellany* (1557). Gascoigne's had been published in two volumes in the 1570s: *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* (1573) and *The Posies of George Gascoigne Esquire* (1575).

to make France great and to subject England to the yoke of Catholicism; and the English, having been weakened 'as well by long peace . . . as by the poison of [religious] division' (*Misc. Prose*, 50), would be powerless to stop him attaining those ends. To support his argument Sidney alludes to the troublesome marriage of his godfather Philip II of Spain to the last Catholic Queen of England, Mary Tudor, Elizabeth's sister. In the process he invokes a period of extreme danger both to Elizabeth herself and to the Protestant cause in England: Elizabeth was imprisoned in the Tower of London on a charge of high treason in the year of Mary's marriage. Then as now, England had been on the verge of losing its Protestant princess and its independence both at once – this time to Spain – and only the death of Mary had saved the country from becoming an outpost of Catholic Europe.

The crisis in England's national identity manifests itself in the *Apology* in the question-mark that hangs over the lineage of contemporary English poets. Alone among modern nations, England has disavowed its maternal relationship to its poets: it acts towards them less like a parent than like the stereotypical 'stepmother' (108/25) who resentfully raises another woman's children. The only poets who flourish under these conditions are 'bastard poets', the illegitimate offspring of the Muses, and true poets have retired into obscurity because they are unwilling to have their noble birth contaminated by association with these base-born upstarts (they 'are better content to suppress the outflowing of their wit, than, by publishing them, to be accounted knights of the same order' (109/22–3)). Modern English dramatic poetry is so bad that, 'like an unmannerly daughter showing a bad education', it 'causeth her mother Poesy's honesty to be called in question' (113/15–17). In other words, the English poet's pedigree is in a worse condition than that of Sidney's family. And it would not perhaps have taken much for Sidney's earliest readers to see a connection between the uncertain state of the poets' lineage and the threat posed to the lineage of the English monarchy by Elizabeth's projected marriage to Alençon. The one good reason for such a marriage, Sidney argued in his famous letter, was to furnish the Queen with 'the bliss of children' (*Misc. Prose*, 51) – something which any other husband could do just as well as the Frenchman. And children are a decidedly mixed blessing: 'many princes have lost their crowns, whose own children were manifest successors', and some have had 'their own children used as instruments of their ruin' (54). In addition the letter suggests that although 'in so lineal a monarchy' as the English one, Elizabeth's subjects have imbibed the love of their sovereign along with their mother's milk, 'an odious marriage with a stranger' could only have the effect of turning the bulk of her subjects against her (54–5). What makes Elizabeth 'the most excellent fruit of all your progenitors' (57) is not her royal birth (after all, Elizabeth had twice

lineage to the throne of England (and his son, the Duke of Norfolk, was executed in 1572 for plotting to strengthen his family's claim to the throne by marrying Mary Queen of Scots). Surrey, then, was decidedly not 'servile', as are the 'bastard poets' who print their poems for money. Nor are the other good English poets Sidney mentions. Sackville's tragedy *Gorboduc* (performed in 1562) was written to frighten Elizabeth either into marriage and childbearing or into naming her successor – it graphically describes the consequences of failing to settle a kingdom on a single designated heir to the throne.[29] The *Mirror for Magistrates* (1559), to which Sackville contributed two important poems, was suppressed by the Catholic censors in the reign of Mary Tudor, perhaps because it persistently reminded its readers that the lineage of the English royal family was a fiercely contested one.[30] Sir Thomas More died for defying Henry VIII on the related questions of his marriage to Anne Boleyn (Elizabeth's mother) and the separation of the English church from Rome. At the same time, the *Utopia* could be seen as a fierce attack on corrupt politicians and churchmen in pre-Reformation Europe. Even the less aristocratic English writers Sidney mentions were by no means slavish servants of the crown. Among Protestants in Tudor England, Geoffrey Chaucer was widely regarded as a proto-Protestant satirist of the medieval church; and Edmund Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* consciously followed in the Protestant satirical tradition which was thought to have been initiated by Chaucer (it has been read by recent commentators as a trenchant critique of the mismanagement of the Elizabethan church and state).[31] For Sidney, the best poetry is written by men who are either involved in or closely concerned with the business of government: and its tone is invariably oppositional, either explicitly or implicitly critical of the ruling authorities.

As I have said, two of the poets Sidney mentions – More and Surrey – were beheaded for their opposition to the crown: and this links them once again to Sidney's family history. Sidney's grandfather, John Dudley, Earl of Northumberland, had been executed for high treason (like Surrey he had sought to claim royalty for his family). So had his great-grandfather Edmund Dudley (like More he was one of Henry VIII's sacrificial victims). In his *Defence of Leicester* Sidney took the extraordinary step of citing the fall of his grandfather as evidence of the greatness of his own ancestry: only the grand scale of his grandfather's aspirations permitted him to be 'so thunder-stricken' (*Misc. Prose*, 139) as to suffer

[29] See David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics: A Critical Approach to Topical Meaning* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 141–7.

[30] See Andrew Hadfield's excellent discussion of the *Mirror*, Hadfield 1994, ch. 3.

[31] For Chaucer as proto-Protestant and Spenser's place in the Protestant satirical tradition see John N. King, 'Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* and Protestant Pastoral Satire', in Lewalski 1986, 369–98.

execution, unlike the ancestors of Leicester's accuser, who were never tempted to rise above the mud that engendered them. But Sidney's repeated assertions of his own noble birth were not, I think, designed to prop up a stable, time-honoured social hierarchy. They served instead as reminders of the flexibility of that hierarchy, whose order had been shaken and reversed on so many occasions in history. The story of Sidney's family was the story of England in miniature, where the power-relations between monarchy and aristocracy had undergone innumerable subtle and not-so-subtle alterations. This may have been one reason why Elizabeth (whose claim to the throne was being challenged even as Sidney wrote by the rival claim of Mary Queen of Scots) distrusted Sidney and his uncle. The title of the 1584 attack on Leicester was given in the first printed edition as *Leicester's Commonwealth*, emphasizing the Earl's presumed ambition to control the English state. The imaginary alternative commonwealths Sidney alludes to in the *Apology* had counterparts in the imaginations of his contemporaries: counterparts which might stir their imaginers into action as effectively as poetry stirs its readers in Sidney's text.

The controversial English poets Sidney recommends came from a long line of poetic agitators against real and imagined systems of government. From ancient times poetry had been seen as a potential menace to the social order, and had called forth attacks from the self-appointed custodians of public morality.[32] The first and most influential of these attacks was directed against the threat posed by poets to an imaginary commonwealth: Plato's Republic. For the philosopher Plato, writing in the fourth century B.C., poets were second-rate craftsmen: imitators who had no direct access to or serious interest in the things they mimicked; producers of luxury goods without a recognizable function in a properly run state. He thought that their appeals to the emotions – especially grief, and especially in the theatre – encouraged emotional self-indulgence and even cowardice in their audience. Above all, he disapproved of the fictions they disseminated about the gods. Stories about the vindictiveness and sexual profligacy of divine beings and their semi-divine children could only have a deleterious effect on those who heard them. Plato therefore advocated a strict control over the forms of poetry permissible in the well-ordered republic. Responsible poets should represent only simple images of virtue ('hymns to the gods or praises of good men' (*Republic*, X, 607)), and poets who depicted vice in their poems should not be permitted to live within the bounds of a respectable city.

Subsequent attacks on poetry relied heavily on Plato's perception of

[32] For detailed accounts of the anti-poetic prejudice see Fraser 1970, Barish 1981, and Herman 1996.

the poet as an irresponsible gossip-monger who brought the gods into disrepute, or worse still a traitor, 'one who gives a city over into the hands of villains, and destroys the better citizens' (*Republic*, X, 605). Early Christian apologists such as Tertullian attacked the Roman theatre for fostering pagan beliefs, and in the early fifth century St Augustine summarized their arguments in *The City of God*. Augustine has a strong admiration for the persuasive powers of poetry, even when it is used to promote 'a full wrong divinity' (as Sidney puts it).[33] In his opinion 'the excellency of [man's] capacity maketh the rare goodnesse of his creation apparant, euen then when hee goeth about things that are either superfluous or pernicious' (Augustine 1610, 908). But poetry has proved particularly 'pernicious', especially dramatic poetry. For Augustine, the Roman theatre was the tool of 'most deceitfull and malignant deuils' masquerading as deities, whose 'onely delight was to haue most bestiall and abhominable practises, either published as their true exploits, or faigned of them by poeticall inuentions; these they commanded to be publikely presented in playes and at solemne feastes' (Augustine 1610, 155). Theatres were directly responsible for the sack of Rome during the Punic wars, since they encouraged the Roman people to weaken themselves by imitating the depraved actions of the pagan gods. Augustine also accuses the poets of having been mouthpieces for corrupt human rulers as well as demons: dishonest historians who depicted their mortal masters as divine in order to lend their crimes a spurious authority for future generations. He therefore agrees with Plato that non-religious poets should be expelled from the ideal state, as serious impediments to the ongoing Christian project of establishing the kingdom of God on earth.

Like everything he wrote, Augustine's attack on pagan poetry was highly influential throughout the medieval period; but it found a new and somewhat different place in the sixteenth-century academic curriculum thanks to the commentary added to it by the Spanish scholar Juan Luis Vives, which Sidney might well have known. For Plato and Augustine, poets were the seductive demolishers of cities. For Vives, on the other hand, they were the founders of cities and courageous critics of the crimes of the ruling classes, as well as occasional blasphemers. Vives' passionate endorsement of the poet's productions marks him out as a devotee of the New Learning: the effort to recover ancient Greek and Roman texts and to understand them in their historical context which has come to be known as humanism.[34] The humanist movement began in fourteenth-century Italy, where it quickly set itself up in opposition to the near-monopoly on learning possessed by the medieval

[33] See Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.2.2–4.

[34] For useful introductions to humanism see Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-century Europe* (London, 1986), and Kraye 1996.

church. For the church, there was only one truth which was always and everywhere the same. The pre-Christian peoples did not have it, and after the birth of Christ its only mediators were the authorities approved by the church of Rome: the theologians, grammarians, logicians and philosophers known as scholastics, who sought to articulate truth through the use of highly specialized forms of discourse comprehensible only to the initiated. The humanists, on the other hand, were often sponsored by secular members of the governing classes – princes and their advisers, noble families, wealthy merchants – who were engaged in power-struggles with political and commercial rivals both secular and ecclesiastical. Many humanists were lawyers, notaries, or secretaries rather than clerics, and their interests lay in promoting the discourse of popular communication – rhetoric – which was most valuable in the law-courts, the marketplace and the debating-chamber, rather than logic, the tool of the professional theologian. Poetry was held to be the ultimate form of popular communication, and defences of poetry played a central role in the humanists' theoretical explications of their quest to recover and interpret classical texts from the time of Petrarch onwards.

The most elaborate early humanist defence of poetry is the *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* by Giovanni Boccaccio, author of the *Decameron* and an important influence on one of Sidney's heroes, Chaucer. Boccaccio accepts Plato's and Augustine's point that the ancient poets had made up or elaborated stories about the pagan gods, but he turns this into a virtue: they told their stories as a means of imparting knowledge.[35] Pagan myths are allegories which encode a number of different kinds of information. On one level they narrate historical events, celebrating the actions of real men or women as if they were the actions of gods. On another level they contain what we would now call scientific observations, figurative accounts of the mysterious forces which govern the physical world. On a third level they convey the half-glimpses of knowledge about the Christian God which were available to enlightened thinkers in pre-Christian times. This conception of poetry as an allegorical 'dark philosophy', a method of delivering valuable information in code from one generation of scholars to another, remained popular with intellectuals in England until well into the seventeenth century. Arthur Golding used it to justify his translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the 1560s, George Chapman subscribed to it in the 1590s, and Francis Bacon was still producing allegorical readings of ancient myths in the early seventeenth century.[36] For these writers, men such as Boccaccio

[35] See Boccaccio 1930, introduction.

[36] See the Preface to Arthur Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses* (1567); Chapman 1941, introduction; and Bacon's *De Sapientia Veterum* (*Of the Wisdom of the Ancients*) (1609), Preface. Bacon suggests that the most profitable 'sense' of ancient fables or parables need not be related to the original intentions of the men who invented them.

ever in the sixteenth century) represented all that was corrupt about late medieval society, when the church had encouraged the fabrication of fictions pandering to the nastiest erotic fantasies of its members.[42] Many later writers agreed with them. According to E.K., who wrote the commentary on Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender*, Arthurian literature was written 'by a sort of bald Friers and knavish shavelings' who 'soughte to nousell the comen people in ignorounce, least being once acquainted with the truth of things, they woulde in tyme smell out the untruth of theyr . . . Massepenie religion' (Spenser 1989, 115). Even for defenders of poetry such as E.K., poetry could serve as the ideal instrument for the spreaders of religious fictions, in modern times as in the early years of the Christian church.

During Sidney's lifetime, the view of poetry as a seductive distraction from the religious education of the Christian reader was most fiercely articulated by the eminent humanist Roger Ascham, former tutor to Edward VI and Elizabeth I.[43] Ascham's *The Schoolmaster* is concerned first and foremost with the teaching of Latin, and the teaching method he recommends is that of enticing the young pupil into the classroom by making his studies attractive. In this he sets himself up in opposition to what he claims is the usual practice among Elizabethan schoolmasters, who like to beat their charges into submission. But Ascham's gently persuasive pedagogic project is threatened by the superior attractions of modern poetry. In the course of *The Schoolmaster* he repeatedly sets up secular love-poetry and erotic stories as vicious counterparts of the classical and biblical texts which form the basis of the humanist curriculum. In medieval times, he tells his readers, depraved monks seduced young men away from the scriptures by composing romances like the tales of King Arthur, the pleasure of which 'standeth . . . in open mans slaughter, and bold bawdrye'; 'Yet I know,' he goes on, 'when Gods Bible was banished the Court, and *Morte Arthure* receiued into the Princes chamber' (Ascham 1904, 231). But in recent years a more insidious poetic menace has arisen, in the form of 'bawdie bookes . . . made in Italie, and translated in England' (230–1). What books these are he does not specify, but one assumes they contain Italian poetry and prose fiction, since Ascham later inveighs against readers who 'haue in more reuerence, the triumphes of Petrarche: than

[42] See Fraser 1970, 3 and 77. A satisfactory assessment of the popularity of chivalric romance in the sixteenth century has yet to be written. One view of these romances – which is that they achieved new popularity with the translation of *Amadis de Gaule* into French and English in the late sixteenth century – is voiced by Paul Salzman, with bibliographic references, in his *English Prose Fiction 1558–1700: A Critical History* (Oxford, 1985), 5.

[43] See Maslen 1997, introduction, and ch. 1, 41–51.

powers, on to English soil. 'There was neuer fort so strong,' writes Gosson, 'but it might be battered, neuer ground so fruitful, but it might be barren: neuer countrie so populous, but it might be wast: neuer Monarch so mighty, but he might be weakened: neuer Realme so large, but it might be lessened: neuer kingdom so florishing, but it might bee decayed' (106–7). England's enemies are merely waiting for the debilitating influence of poets and players to take hold of the youth of England before pouring in through the breaches in the island's defensive system.

Gosson's primary target, like Ascham's, is 'amarous Poets', who offer their young readers 'the Cuppes of *Circes*, that turne reasonable Creatures into brute Beastes' (76–7). He describes them as teachers of lessons in erotic self-gratification, and commends Plato for expelling them from his ideal state. The worst of their productions are plays, and he sees the modern theatre as the perfect vehicle for smuggling Italian values into England: 'Compare *London* to *Rome*, and *England* to *Italy*, you shall finde the Theaters of the one, the abuses of the other, to be rife among vs' (91). And like Ascham, Gosson believes that one of the most dangerous aspects of modern poetry is its moral complexity: its tendency to encourage writers to produce indiscriminate mixtures of good and evil, virtue and vice in their efforts to entertain their audiences. Gosson considers variety – the inventive yoking together of many different elements – to be what makes writing attractive, and confesses that poets are the wittiest exponents of verbal variety; but 'notwithstanding', he adds, 'that wit is dearly bought: where hony and gall are mixed, it will be hard to seuer the one from the other' (77). Moral lessons, he argues, should be clear and simple, since the human mind is simple; there can therefore be no justification for communicating the truth through a web of falsehoods, as the poets claim to do when they state that their fictions convey valuable lessons to their readers. Poetry is the product of idleness and encourages only idleness in its recipients. It is therefore both the symptom and the cause of the unhealthy condition of modern England – what Gosson sees as its rapid decline into effeminacy. Gosson ends his argument with an appeal to the Lord Mayor of London to exercise his powers of censorship over the plays performed in the city, and a clarion call to the women of London to shun the theatres. The wheel has come full circle: for Gosson as for Plato, poets are traitors to the nation, preparing the ground for England's surrender to its hostile neighbours. In a later publication, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), he again follows Plato in advocating the expulsion of all unauthorized forms of imaginative writing from the purlieus of the besieged English commonwealth. When Sidney wrote his *Apology*, the irresponsible poet or playwright was in some writers' eyes among the most dangerous domestic enemies of the Elizabethan state.

Sidney and the prodigal poet

One of the strangest things about the early Elizabethan poets for a modern reader is the extent to which they seem to concur with Gosson's assessment of poetry. Gosson himself was a playwright whose plays were still on stage when he wrote his attack on the contemporary theatre. He was not, as he has frequently been called, a 'Puritan' – a radical reformer who felt that the contemporary church had not gone far enough in expelling Catholic practices and who wanted an end to the episcopal system. He ended his days, as his modern editor points out, with something of a reputation as an anti-Puritan controversialist.[46] He had studied in the same schools as the poets, attended Oxford along with Sidney and other men who later became prominent writers of imaginative fiction, and wrote in a style that was highly fashionable with Elizabethan novelists (in fact, *The School of Abuse* ends with an advertisement for a novel he had just completed). He was a member, in fact, of what Richard Helgerson has described as a generation of 'prodigals' among Elizabethan poets: male writers active from the 1570s to the late 1580s who identified themselves with the biblical figure of the Prodigal Son.[47] This is the young man in one of Christ's parables who demands his inheritance from his father, leaves home and spends all his money in the pursuit of the pleasures of the flesh, then returns to his father in penitent mood to ask his forgiveness.[48] Gosson adopts the stance of the penitent prodigal mid-way through his *School* when he confesses that he is a reformed poet: 'I haue sinned, and am sorry for my fault: hee runnes farre that neuer turnes, better late then neuer' (Gosson 1974, 96). And an astonishing number of other writers of poetry and imaginative fiction in the decade leading up to the writing of Sidney's *Apology* chose to present their careers as following – or having the potential to follow – the pattern established by Christ's parable. George Gascoigne, George Whetstone, George Pettie, John Lyly – all printed their poetry or prose fiction with a kind of health warning attached, acknowledging that their romantic stories and love-lyrics are the products of a wasted youth, that the reader should avoid doing the things that are described in their pages, and that the writer is now ready to enter the next phase of his career as prodigal by returning to the paternal embrace of the Elizabethan authorities. Gascoigne, Whetstone, and the rest have developed their verbal talents among the fleshpots of erotic literature, and are prepared now to turn them to more legitimate uses if anyone is willing to give them employment.

Implicit in the stance of the prodigal poets is the assumption that

[46] See Gosson 1974, introduction.
[47] See Helgerson 1976.
[48] Luke 15:11–32.

the centuries-old attack on poetry was at least partly justified.[49] For the early Elizabethan poets as for the poet-haters, erotic fictions and amorous verses are the products of idleness; they awaken unhealthy sexual appetites in their young readers, and are essentially un-English in character, self-conscious imitations of the diabolical Italian books condemned by Ascham, and just as able to seduce their English audience into an acceptance of perverse Italian values: atheism, republicanism, intellectual sophistication, and freedom of speech. Why, then, did these poets write poetry? And more importantly, why did they print it? One answer might be that they fully intended their readers to recognize the dangers young men courted when writing erotic verse and prose: the danger of wasting their considerable talents on the composition of worthless texts, and of seducing their youthful audiences into enrolling in the 'school of abuse' where women and poets were the principal teachers.[50] For other writers as for Sidney, the fact that they were writing poetry at all showed that they were idle: that they had been offered no better employment, and that their education was restlessly searching for an outlet. Followers of Ascham might well have suspected that writing poetry was merely a prelude to producing still more controversial texts – such as propaganda for England's enemies. The poets of the 1570s were effectively engaging in a form of blackmail: give us work, they warned the Elizabethan government, or somebody else will: and the work for which we are best suited is that of undermining the moral fibre of nations.

The potentially harmful effects of erotic poetry were certainly taken seriously by the Elizabethan censors. The most celebrated poet of the 1570s, George Gascoigne, had at least one collection of poetry withdrawn from circulation by the ecclesiastical High Commission, the body responsible for vetting printed texts.[51] This may well have been reason enough for Sidney to have avoided mentioning him in the *Apology*. And one of the young poets who wrote a reply to Gosson's *School of Abuse*, Thomas Lodge, had his *Defence of Poetry* (1579) suppressed as soon as it was printed.[52] Lodge responded in his next published book, *An Alarum against Usurers* (1584), by presenting himself as yet another penitent prodigal, eager to make up for his earlier rashness by using his talents in a more socially acceptable manner – that is, by joining Gosson in satirizing contemporary social abuses. In his *Defence of Poetry* Lodge makes much of the point that Gosson bears a close resemblance to the poets

[49] See Herman 1996.

[50] See Maslen 1997, introduction.

[51] See C. T. Prouty, *George Gascoigne: Elizabethan Courtier, Soldier, and Poet* (New York, 1942). For a more recent account of the censorship of Gascoigne's work see Cyndia Susan Clegg, *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (Cambridge, 1997), ch. 5.

[52] See Smith 1904, I, 61, and Helgerson 1977, ch. 6, esp. 108–9.

he despises: 'You say that Poets are subtil; if so, you haue learned that poynt of them; you can well glose on a trifeling text' (Smith 1904, I, 65). Because of this resemblance, Lodge hopes it will be easy to effect Gosson's conversion from poet-hater to lover of the Muses;[53] but, as it turns out, he found it more expedient to convert himself (temporarily at least) into a second Gosson. And this was a course followed by a number of his contemporaries.

Lodge's *Defence of Poetry* does not look to modern eyes a particularly controversial work; yet he himself seems to have had a premonition that it would be taken as such by the Elizabethan authorities, especially in the section defending the stage. 'I must now search my wits,' he announces:

> I see this shall passe throughe many seuere sensors handling; I must aduise me what I write, and write that I would wysh. I way wel the seriousnes of the cause, and regarde very much the iudges of my endeuor, whom, if I could, I would perswade that I woulde not nourish abuse, nether mayntaine that which should be an vniuersall discomoditye. I hope they wil not iudge before they read, nether condemne without occasion.
>
> (Smith 1904, I, 79)

Lodge's acute sense of the seriousness of the case against him stems from his wholehearted agreement with parts of Gosson's attack on the contemporary theatre. 'I praise your reprehension in that,' he tells Gosson at one point, 'you did well in discommending the abuse, and surely I wysh that that folly wer disclaymed; it is not to be admitted, it maks those sinne, whiche perhaps, if it were not, would haue binne present at a good sermon' (84). And in *An Alarum against Usurers* – which is dedicated to Sidney – Lodge concedes that Gosson had 'a good cause' for his objections to the Elizabethan stage and 'a good pen' with which to articulate them. Despite his willingness to take up the opposite 'cause' in the dispute about poetry – and university students were taught to argue *in utramque partem* (on both sides) in any debate – Lodge seems to have shared some of Gosson's opinions on the current state of English poetry. And there is reason to suppose that Sidney, too, found much to agree with in Gosson's polemic.[54]

Like Lodge's *Alarum against Usurers*, *The School of Abuse* was dedicated to Sidney, and it has often been argued that the *Apology* was written as an answer to Gosson. It has also been assumed that Sidney was implacably hostile to Gosson's position. This assumption would seem to be borne out by a comment in a letter from the poet Edmund Spenser to the Cambridge scholar Gabriel Harvey, published by Harvey in 1580. After mentioning a recent conversation with Sidney, Spenser

[53] See Smith 1904, I, 72–3.
[54] See Herman 1996, ch. 2.

stage in his discussion, together with many other verbal echoes of Gosson's and Ascham's texts, brings him perilously close to accepting their strictures. He reverses Gosson's claim that 'Poetry abuseth man's wit' and proposes instead that 'man's wit abuseth Poetry' (104/16–17); but he goes on to echo Gosson's assessment of the dire consequences of such abuse: 'I yield that Poesy may not only be abused, but that being abused, by the reason of his sweet charming force, it can do more hurt than any other *army* of words' (104/27–9, my emphasis). This is no argument for banning poetry from the state, he adds, since 'whatsoever, being abused, doth most harm, being rightly used . . . doth most good' (104/31–3). Nevertheless, the drift of Sidney's reasoning here is that poetry may serve as the deadliest of verbal weapons, the soldier's most prized intellectual possession, and that its services are as readily available to a nation's enemies – domestic as well as foreign – as to its defenders: 'With a sword thou mayest kill thy father, and with a sword thou mayest defend thy prince and country' (104/41–2). And within a few pages he is confessing that poetry in England is in no fit state to defend its prince and country. The implication is that the nations where poetry is highly regarded are in a very much stronger position than England when it comes to emulating the military successes of the Macedonian conqueror Alexander or the 'triumphant captains' of ancient Rome. Poetry is a 'fit soil for praise to dwell upon' (108/9); and nations whose 'soil' is inimical to poetry (and the only such nation on earth, Sidney tells us, is England (108/42)) are in danger of having the poets' weapons turned against them.

Sidney also agrees with some of Gosson's more specific criticisms of current English poetry. Gosson argued that 'in all our recreations we shoulde haue an instructer at our elbowes to feede the soule' (Gosson 1974, 88–9), and condemned the English stage for failing to act as such a spiritual instructor. Sidney says something similar. Like the mythical youth Icarus, who ignored the instructions of his father Daedalus and died as a result, English poets pay no attention to the rules and patterns which would help them to perfect their art (109/39ff.). Sidney's reference to Daedalus leaves his readers in no doubt as to the calamitous consequences for the poet of ignoring one's instructors – Icarus's dismissal of his father's guidance was frequently used as an analogue for the disobedience of the prodigal son. For Sidney as for Gosson, England is a nation of prodigal sons, willing to do anything to satisfy their cravings for money and status, yet arrogantly self-reliant and contemptuous of even the best authorities when it comes to seeking models for their compositions. Most English poetry has no logical structure (it is 'a confused mass of words'), and the theatre in particular offends against the rules of 'honest civility' as well as of 'skilful Poetry' (110/29); in other words, it threatens to reintroduce barbarism on to English soil. Like Gosson,

and playwrights he castigates: as prodigal, as self-absorbed, as idle and as sexually irresponsible as the rest of his generation.[56] It is not for nothing that Sidney recommends the parable of the 'lost child and the gracious father' as an ideal subject for poets (91/37ff.), and as having a particular imaginative hold on Sidney himself ('Truly, for myself, me seems I see before my eyes the lost child's disdainful prodigality, turned to envy a swine's dinner'). Sidney is not, as he has often been presented, a lone genius who dissociates himself from the poetic practices of his less distinguished fellow-countrymen. The advantages of his education and his class may have given him a wider intellectual frame of reference than that of mere gentleman-poets such as Gascoigne, Whetstone, and Lodge; but he was taught along similar lines, his concerns were often identical, and he presented himself as an author using the same scriptural paradigm: that of the rebellious young man who spurns the advice of his elders and nearly loses everything in the process. Sidney casts himself as a prodigal. But the vital difference between him and his non-aristocratic contemporaries is that he does not cast himself as a *penitent* prodigal.

The form his prodigality takes in his poetic works would have been instantly recognizable to readers of Ascham's *Schoolmaster*. Like the Italianate young men in the English Court, and like the young men Ascham describes as 'quick wits' – masters of verbal improvisation, rapid assimilators of information, always ready with a clever but superficial response to any question – Sidney the poet is obsessed with sexual desire. Both versions of the *Arcadia* and his sonnet-sequence *Astrophil and Stella* take love as their subject. All three texts are based (among other things) on Italian books: the pastoral romance *Arcadia* (1485) by Jacopo Sannazzaro, and the sonnets of the fourteenth-century humanist Petrarch. The first version of the *Arcadia* (completed c. 1580) – known as the *Old Arcadia* – describes a young prince, Pyrocles, breaking away from his conventional education and succumbing instead to the irresistible attractions of what Sidney calls the 'school of affection' (*OA*, 276). And the influence of this school is very much as Ascham and Gosson predicted: it transforms Pyrocles into a woman (he dons a female disguise to get close to the princess he loves), transforms his speech from rational discourse to the metaphor-laden discourse of poetry, and diverts all his intellectual energies into formulating elaborate plots to distract his superiors while he gets into bed with his royal mistress. The political consequences of Pyrocles's transformation are as disastrous as the poet-haters could have imagined. Rebellion breaks out in the Greek state of Arcadia as a direct result of Pyrocles's machinations – the rebels are afraid that Basilius, their ruler, is being governed by the strange woman who has insinuated herself into his household. By the last part of the book

[56] See Helgerson 1976, ch. 7.

Basilius is seemingly dead, poisoned by his own wife; his daughters are in prison under suspicion of collaborating with foreign spies; the Arcadian throne is occupied by a neighbouring monarch; and Pyrocles and his friend Musidorus are awaiting execution for rape and murder. The combined effects of erotic poetry as Plato and his successors saw them – treachery, intellectual oversophistication, youthful disobedience, the feminizing of young men by their attraction to women, and the rest – could hardly have been more graphically illustrated, it seems, than in the dramatic finale of the *Old Arcadia*. And the direct link between truancy and high treason could hardly have been more convincingly traced.

Astrophil and Stella, too, explicitly declares its affiliation with the literature of truancy. The famous opening sonnet depicts the poet Astrophil discarding all the 'artificial rules' and 'imitative patterns' made available to him by his education and by the writings of others, in an effort to find words to express his desire for a woman:

> But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay,
> Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Studie's blowes,
> And others' feete still seem'd but strangers in my way.
> Thus great with child to speake, and helplesse in my throwes,
> Biting my trewand pen, beating my selfe for spite,
> 'Foole,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart and write.'
> (Ringler 1962, 166)

The poem announces Astrophil as a student in the 'school of affection' – fleeing the blows of an aggressive educational system, like the pupils of Eton college in the anecdote that opens Ascham's *Schoolmaster*, who ran away for fear of a beating.[57] Much of *Astrophil and Stella* is taken up with metaphors of the schoolroom, and Astrophil's neglect of the lessons taught by schoolmasters, churchmen (as in sonnet 5), and friendly advisers (sonnets 14 and 21) is a consequence of his preoccupation with lessons taught by Cupid, by his mistress Stella, and by a kiss, which he calls 'schoolmaster of delight' (sonnet 79). Unlike previous Elizabethan prodigals, however, Astrophil makes no final apology for his truancy from his conventional schooling. The lessons he learns at Stella's hands are as difficult to master as the complexities of grammar, translation and political theory as taught in an Elizabethan university – indeed, he never fully masters them. And his acceptance of Stella both as his schoolmistress and eventually as his 'Queene' (sonnet 107) remains unchanged at the end of the sequence. This truant never loses his regard for the woman, the passion, and the system of values for which he committed truancy. In the same way, despite all the disasters they have

[57] See Ascham 1904, 175ff.

brought on themselves and their mistresses, the princes Pyrocles and Musidorus in the *Old Arcadia* remain proudly impenitent as they languish in prison awaiting trial in the final 'Book or Act' of the narrative. 'We have lived,' one of them tells the other, 'and have lived to be good to ourselves and others' (*OA*, 321). If Astrophil and the princes end up in a dark place, it is not because they make the wrong choices, but because the stars, and the older generation who lay claim to ownership of the stars and the destinies they govern, are ranged against them.

According to his biographer Katherine Duncan-Jones, Sidney's own life was marked by repeated acts of truancy: from his efforts to avoid the attentions of his self-appointed mentor, the political theorist Hubert Languet, in the early 1570s, to his prolonged absences from Court at the end of the decade, which Languet regarded as detrimental to the young man's political career.[58] In the penultimate year of his life Sidney made elaborate preparations for a particularly dramatic flight from his domestic responsibilities to both wife and country, when he arranged to accompany Sir Francis Drake on an expedition to the West Indies without the permission of the Queen or his father-in-law.[59] His flight (Greville tells us) was prevented only by a last-minute intervention by the Queen herself. Truancy, then – the minor act of rebellion whereby the pupil takes the reins of his education into his own hands, in protest (according to Roger Ascham) against the pedagogic methods of inadequate schoolmasters – remained a course of action Sidney was always willing to contemplate as a mark of his distaste for the prescriptions of his elders. And *An Apology for Poetry* marks itself out as a peculiarly thoughtful act of truancy from its first page.

The structure of *An Apology for Poetry*

Before going on to examine Sidney's text as the work of a politically sophisticated prodigal, we need to consider the rhetorical form Sidney gave it. Sidney's early readers would have been trained from childhood in the art of composing and analysing persuasive discourse, using models provided by textbooks on rhetoric such as Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* or the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. Since the work of Kenneth Myrick in the 1930s it has been generally recognized that the *Apology* is organized along the lines of a classical oration or formal speech: specifically, a judicial or forensic oration of the kind that would have been used by the counsel for the defence in a criminal trial.[60] This supports the notion that Sidney wrote it as a response to a specific attack

[58] See Duncan-Jones 1991, 71ff.
[59] See Duncan-Jones 1991, 273–4, and Stewart 2000, 265–74.
[60] See Myrick 1965, ch. 2.

or set of attacks such as Gosson's *School of Abuse*. Geoffrey Shepherd sees it as falling into seven parts, along the lines recommended by Sidney's acquaintance Thomas Wilson in his celebrated handbook *The Art of Rhetorique* (1553).[61] The parts may be construed as follows:

1 INTRODUCTION or EXORDIUM (**81/1–82/4**)
Sidney adopts what the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* calls a 'subtle approach' to the case – an approach to be used when the audience is assumed to be prejudiced against the client (in this case, poetry). He uses a humorous anecdote to establish a genial relationship between himself and his audience, and establishes his concern with the theory and practice of the art he is defending.

2 STATEMENT OF FACTS or NARRATION (**82/5–86/16**)
Sidney presents the facts which give dignity to poetry, such as its antiquity, its universality, and the etymological meanings of the various words for poet in Latin, Greek, and English. He makes a preliminary statement about what makes poetry superior to the other arts: it is not constrained by the laws of the material universe.

3 PROPOSITION (**86/17–20**)
This summarizes the argument of the *Apology*. Poetry is to be valued for what it is: imitation which aims 'to teach and delight' its recipients.

4 DIVISION (**86/21–87/44**)
Divides up poetry into its different kinds, in order to clarify the definition he gave of it in the PROPOSITION, and to form the basis for his ensuing demonstration of its value.

5 PROOF or CONFIRMATION (**88/1–100/14**)
Argues for poetry's superiority to its rival disciplines, philosophy and history, by showing that it is more effective in persuading people to virtuous action. Analyses the functions of the different kinds of poetry.

[The proof is followed by a SUMMARY of the whole argument up to this point (**100/15–35**). The summary concludes that poetry is the best of all disciplines.]

6 REFUTATION (**100/36–108/11**)
Demolishes the case that has been made against poetry by its antagonists.

[Again the REFUTATION is followed by a SUMMARY of this part of Sidney's argument (**108/12–21**), which turns the inade-

[61] See Shepherd 1965, 11ff.

of the poetic art as it is currently practised in England.[62] But if the 'Digression' is the most important section of the *Apology*, why call it a digression?

The answer is that Sidney himself encourages his readers to treat this section as an appendix, the work of a man who has been carried away by enthusiasm into areas extraneous to his initial project, which was to defend poetry *in general* rather than as the product of any particular culture. 'But since I have run so long a career in this matter', the section begins, 'methinks, before I give my pen a full stop, it shall be *but a little more lost time* to inquire' why England has abandoned its former passion for imaginative writing (108/22ff., my emphasis). Later he apologizes for 'straying' from matters relevant to poetry into a discussion of style which might have been better suited to a teacher of rhetoric (115/5). The section ends with another apology: 'much more . . . might be said, but that I find already the triflingness of this discourse is much too much enlarged' (116/12–14). The section on English poetry, we are told, is a waste of time, an unwarranted turning aside from the strict topic of the essay, a trifle which threatens to confirm the 'triflingness' of the *Apology* as a whole.

But this last remark should alert us to the ironic tone of Sidney's apologies for his Digression. The *Apology* has made claims for poetry that are very far from trifling, and has supported these claims with weighty authorities, from the gods of the humanist intellect – Aristotle, Plato, Plutarch – to the Bible itself. The Digression is trifling only if the rest of Sidney's argument may be easily dismissed, and his case has been too strongly argued for that. The apparently marginal status of his discussion of English poetry within his essay reflects the marginal status of poetry in Elizabethan England: and by the time we reach this discussion Sidney might reasonably expect us to be convinced – or at least to be convinced that he is convinced – that marginalizing poetry is a mistake. He might also expect us to have remembered that a light treatment of a subject need not imply that the subject is unimportant. In his 'Refutation' he recalls the humanist tradition of handling serious subjects lightly, mentioning as examples two serio-comic humanist treatises which were hugely influential in his time: *The Praise of Folly*, by the great educationalist Erasmus, and *Of the Vanitie of the Artes and Sciences* by the magician-scientist Cornelius Agrippa. Erasmus and Agrippa, he tells us, 'had another foundation, than the superficial part would promise'

[62] In saying so I am taking issue with O. B. Hardison, whose influential essay 'The Two Voices of Sidney's *Apology*', in Kinney 1988, 45–61, argues that the *Apology* was written in two stages, beginning life as a response to Gosson's *School of Abuse*, and later partly revised as a neo-classical tract. The Digression, Hardison argues, incorporates Sidney's revisions, and its argument cannot be reconciled with the rest of the *Apology*. See Hadfield 1994, ch. 5, for a convincing refutation of Hardison's thesis.

The shape of the *Apology*, too, implies that an analysis of the situation in England will form the climax of its argument. A fall has taken place: poetry has 'fallen' or been 'thrown down' from its once lofty place in the nation's estimation, and has reached its nadir in the present day; and the *Apology* neatly replicates this plunge in poetry's fortunes. A simplified analysis of the essay's structure might note (as Shepherd notes)[64] that it arranges itself in three broad sections: first a commendation of poetry as the best of all arts and sciences, then a refutation of the case against it, and finally a summary of the problems and potential of poetry written in English. Broadly speaking, the trajectory of the three sections is downwards: the first deals with poetry as it ought to be, the second with poetry as it is imagined by its enemies, the third with the current poetic practices that confirm the worst of these hostile imaginings. The *Apology*, then, might be said to re-enact the biblical Fall of Man, from the perfect Edenic state – which Sidney conflates with the classical Golden Age described by Hesiod and Ovid – when poetry assisted at the birth of civilization; through the Iron Ages of ancient Greece and Rome, when heroic poets such as Xenophon and Virgil reminded their readers of the ideals they had lost;[65] to the degenerate Elizabethan state, when the poet has been reduced to an object of derision. According to this analysis, the Digression forms an integral part of the *Apology*'s admirably inclusive account of literary history. The narrowing of its focus, from poetry in general to poetry in a specific place and time, mimicks the narrowing concerns of the poet as he responds to the pressures of an increasingly timid national regime.

But the fact that poetry has followed in its history the inexorable decline that sixteenth-century historians traced in the successive generations of humankind does not rob it of its preeminence among the arts. All other fields of human endeavour have undergone a similar falling-off, from the military discipline to the academic studies of history and philosophy. The final end of all learning, Sidney tells us, 'is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls, made worse by their clayey lodgings, can be capable of' (**88**/7–9). And the only branch of learning that takes the fallen nature of mankind into due consideration – that recognizes both in theory and practice the degeneracy, as well as the supreme possibilities, of the human mind and soul – is poetry. Far from undermining Sidney's case, then, the *Apology*'s re-enactment of the Fall reinforces his argument for the value of this most despised of human arts. Poetry may have declined and fallen like the nations that have practised it, but it still provides the firmest foundation – or the most fruitful soil, to use another of Sidney's metaphors

[64] See Shepherd 1965, 12.

[65] Sidney describes Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* as 'an absolute heroical poem'; see **87**/31–2.

– for moral and national regeneration. And the nation that stands to benefit most from this regeneration is the nation whose language is best suited to the metrical and lexical needs of poetry. It should hardly come as a surprise when Sidney announces at the end of the Digression that this nation is England.

Poetry and the Fall

Sidney's theory of poetry is famously eclectic. He draws on an immense range of theoretical texts, poetic and philosophical, political, educational, and historical, and mentions the names of many thinkers ancient and modern to whom he is more or less indebted, among them Agrippa, Aristotle, Erasmus, Horace, Landino, More, Plato, Plutarch, Scaliger, and Xenophon. He does not mention by name a great many more with whom he was undoubtedly familiar, such as Amyot, Ascham, Castiglione, Gosson, Elyot, Minturno, Ramus, and Ronsard. Scholarly opinion is sharply divided as to exactly how well he knew these writers' works and how important they were to him. How well, for instance, did he know the Italian poetic theories to which his own bears so many similarities? He had plenty of opportunity to get to know them, since he had travelled in Italy and spoke Italian – but some similarities could as easily have arisen from conversation or even coincidence as from first-hand acquaintance.[66] He refers to Dante's *Divine Comedy* twice (**93/29** and **117/1**), and this has led some scholars to assume that he had read the greatest of medieval poems, but if so one might also assume that he would have had a great deal more to say about it than he does. In the analysis of the *Apology* that follows, I shall concentrate on explaining what I take to be Sidney's argument, and shall make little attempt to indicate the many points at which it intersects with other contemporary theories except where this seems helpful to elucidate his meaning. The notes to this edition indicate his possible debts in detail. At this stage it is merely necessary to point out that Sidney's originality lies not in the individual points he makes but in the way he weaves them together.

If the overall structure of the *Apology* is that of a judicial oration in seven parts, its metaphorical structure is closer to that of a poem, an interlaced romance such as Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* or Sidney's own *New Arcadia*.[67] Sequences of metaphors run through the text from start

[66] Shepherd's contention, for instance, that Sidney had 'a direct knowledge of advanced contemporary theorising on art' – meaning the theories of the Italian Mannerists (Shepherd 1965, 64–6) – is challenged by D. H. Craig in his essay 'A Hybrid Growth: Sidney's Theory of Poetry in *An Apology for Poetry*', in Kinney 1988, 62–80.

[67] For a discussion of the *Apology* as poem, see Catherine Barnes, 'The Hidden Persuader: the Complex Speaking Voice of Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*', in Kinney 1986, 155–65.

to finish, surfacing and resurfacing like coloured threads in a tapestry – the 'rich tapestry', perhaps, to which he compares poetry itself (85/24) – and lend a continuity to his discussion over and above its sometimes ambiguously worded argument.[68] Many of the scholarly disagreements over Sidney's meaning arise from the intensely figurative means by which he expresses himself. But close examination of these metaphors can help to identify the consistent set of concerns which lies at the heart of his efforts to rehabilitate his craft. And such an examination can also help to remind us that the *Apology* is a brilliant exemplar of the best kind of early modern poetry as well as a defence of it.

For Sidney, poetry is the art of the fallen world.[69] The point is worth repeating because it is fundamental to his argument: humanity has suffered at some point in its past an appalling calamity which left it flawed, damaged, unhinged – capable, at best, of recalling mentally the state of perfection from which it has been precipitated, but unable to reproduce more than an occasional dim shadow of that perfection in its daily activities. This was a view of history shared by both the Christian and the classical religious traditions. The former mourned the loss of the special relationship between God and human beings that obtained in the Garden of Eden; the latter lamented the happy society of the Golden Age, when the genial craftsman-god Saturn ruled the universe, when gods and people and beasts lived in harmony together and the fruits of the earth were distributed equally among its inhabitants. According to both traditions, the human memory of perfection was growing dimmer as the passing years carried the species ever further from its origins. Human beings were growing more selfish, more violent and devious in pursuit of their own interests, less willing to subject their private desires to the impartial test of reason. And, according to Sidney, the only human activity capable of bringing a substantial proportion of the species some way back along the road to its fortunate past was poetry, because of its equal appeal to the two warring components of the human constitution, reason and passion.

From the beginning, the *Apology* emphasizes the sheer difficulty of making its case in this fallen world, where both the apologist and his readers are locked in their own peculiar brands of passionate self-obsession. It opens with an anecdote about one of Sidney's teachers, the master horseman Pugliano, an irascible Italian who one day waxed so eloquent in praise of his discipline – horsemanship – 'that if I had not been a piece of a logician before I came to him, I think he would have

[68] For a discussion of one such group of metaphors – military ones – see Edward Berry, 'The Poet as Warrior in Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*', *SEL* 29 (1989), 21–34.

[69] For Sidney's handling of the Fall in the *Apology* see Frank B. Evans, 'The Concept of the Fall in Sidney's *Apologie*', *Renaissance Papers* (1969), 9–14, and Craig, 'A Hybrid Growth', in Kinney 1988, 62–80.

persuaded me to have wished myself a horse' (81/18–20). The incident taught Sidney a valuable lesson: 'that self-love is better than any gilding to make that seem gorgeous wherein ourselves are parties' (81/21–2). Everyone in the *Apology* is equally addicted to self-love – the text is populated with Puglianos – and the first third of the essay stresses this repeatedly. It presents itself as a competition between the arts or sciences, a sort of intellectual Olympic games in which poetry pits itself against its rivals among the academic disciplines in a bid to establish itself as the best of all forms of knowledge available to humanity. Poetry, of course, emerges victorious, but Sidney has warned us from the start that this is inevitable. Like Pugliano's his defence is driven by 'strong affection' for his subject, like Pugliano he may at times use 'weak arguments' but will end by convincing himself (if nobody else) more firmly than ever (81/23). And like Pugliano he addresses an audience which is equally driven by 'strong affection' – that is, by their emotional attachment to poetry's rival disciplines.

At each stage he reminds us of ways in which the 'judgment' – his favourite word for the power of rational assessment – is contaminated by the passions or emotions. When he claims that parts of the Bible may be described as poetry, he announces at once his fear that the claim will horrify some of his readers, and begs them to consider the point 'with quiet judgments' (84/30). This suggests that many readers' judgments are very far from quiet (that is, disinterested), and that they will be prone to articulate their private opinions and prejudices noisily and aggressively if Sidney fails to calm them down. Later he accuses those who despise 'philosophical' poetry of having had their reason distorted by some sort of illness, as a sick man's appetite is warped by his condition: 'the fault is in their judgments quite out of taste, and not in the sweet food of sweetly uttered knowledge' (86/38–40). This in turn suggests that there should be some universal standard by which the validity of a person's judgment may be measured. But there is little agreement as to what this standard may be. Astronomers, scientists, musicians and mathematicians passionately cleave to the notion that their own supremely rational disciplines offer the most direct pathway to 'perfection' – and betray their personal failings in their efforts to prove it (88/4ff.). Philosophers and historians, the poet's chief rivals in the competition between the arts, become enraged before they have even begun to make a case for the supremacy of their respective disciplines: the philosophers get 'angry with any man in whom they see the foul fault of anger' (88/40–1), the historian denies 'in a great chafe, that any man . . . is comparable to him' (89/16). Enemies of heroic poetry are 'prejudiced with a prejudicating humour' (100/6–7). If we conceive of the *Apology* as an intervention for the defence in an imaginary trial, with poetry in the dock, the final 'sentence' or legal judgment (88/4) looks as though it will be

of poetry. They have involved Basilius and his dependants, he says, in 'such changes and traverses as a quiet poet could scarce fill a poem withal' (337), with the result that the weaknesses of the monarchic system have been disastrously exposed.[71] The prosecutor does not exaggerate: as consternation spreads through Arcadia after the princes' arrest, the narrator comments that this offers 'a notable example of how great dissipations monarchal governments are subject unto; for now their prince and guide had left them, they had not experience to rule, and had not whom to obey' (277). In the *Apology* poetry is no less politically potent than the Arcadian prosecutor suggests, and its effects may be no less explosive. But it is also capable, if properly applied, of subjecting rulers and governments to *positive* transformations, of reversing the plunge from grace that is carrying the human race, and the English nation in particular, on its cataclysmic downward course. Poetic 'changes and traverses' may work to a nation's advantage as well as to its detriment, if national prejudices and opinions may be changed, or exploited to work change. And poetry is the art that is best suited to changing things in a postlapsarian context.

This transformative power is implicit in Sidney's account of poetry's origins. After its anecdotal Introduction comes the Statement of Facts or Narration, and in it the apologist asserts, like all early modern defenders of learned disciplines, the antiquity of the art he celebrates. Poetry has its roots at the beginning of recorded time. Indeed, it is responsible for recording the most ancient of times: poets were the first masters of the art of writing, the first men who 'made pens deliverers of their knowledge to their posterity' in the shape of versified history and moral philosophy (82/17). They were also the first to draw primitive people together into civil societies. From the beginning, then, poets specialized in resisting the lapses into savagery which the degenerate condition of humanity makes inevitable. Above all, they specialized in transforming bands of savages into nations: coherent social units with histories, legal constitutions, geographical possessions and languages of their own. The ancient poet Amphion founded Thebes; Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio made the Italian language 'a treasure-house of science'; the English poets Chaucer and Gower moulded their mother tongue into a supremely versatile medium for intellectual communication. And this poetic work of cultivating the human inward wilderness, of preparing the ground for national efflorescence, is still going on as Sidney writes. The most barbarous nations, as Sidney sees them, both within and beyond the limits of the Tudor domains – the Irish, the Welsh, the Turks,

[71] Philanax later describes Pyrocles in strikingly Gossonian terms, as 'the arrantest strumpet in luxuriousness, the cunningest forger in falsehood; a player in disguising, a tiger in cruelty, a dragon in ungratefulness' (*OA*, 338).

to material existence. Imagining, for instance, a perfect prince such as Cyrus, he can 'bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses, if they [i.e. his readers] will learn aright why and how that maker made him' (85/41–3). The poet, then, is not just a fabricator of imaginary objects but a shaper of people, who works on his readers' minds and through these on the societies they inhabit.

It is here that Sidney introduces his first direct reference to the Fall. Aware that some might think him 'saucy' for comparing the poet's creative powers with 'the efficacy of Nature' (85/44ff.), he deflects this criticism by attributing the poet's powers to God, who made man (alone among his creations) capable of envisaging perfection. Human beings even resemble God in their ability to bring forth 'with the force of a divine breath' – that is, through words – things far superior to Nature's workmanship (86/5). But humanity is also a fundamentally divided species, torn between contradictory impulses. On the one hand we possess an 'erected wit', the intellectual faculty that can elevate or 'erect' us to a mental plane far above the lowly level to which we have fallen (86/7). This is the faculty that enables the poet to envisage perfection. On the other hand we are possessed by an 'infected will' (86/8), an overwhelming desire for the contents of the 'too much loved earth' which constantly diverts us from our potential upward course. This diversion, Sidney tells us, provides 'no small argument . . . of that first accursed fall of Adam' (86/6–7). The highest achievements of the poets, in other words, proclaim both the immense potential of humanity and the immense distance that lies between our current state and the fulfilment of this potential. The *Apology* is partly dedicated to the problem of identifying the propulsive force that will bridge the distance: a force that poetry dispenses more than any other discipline. But Sidney is equally committed to demonstrating that poetry is the only art that ministers to the dual nature of humanity, its unique fusion of the spiritual with the physical, of boundless mental agility with a congenital infection that misdirects its mental powers.

The poet's ministration to our dual nature is implicit in the tension between two major groups of metaphors Sidney uses to describe his discipline. On the one hand the poet is master of infinite space, vaulting from earth to heaven with the aid of his 'high flying liberty of conceit' (84/13), evading the physical and historical constraints that govern other disciplines and 'freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit' (85/23). On the other hand he is a kind of second Adam, tending an imaginative earthly garden to rival Eden. Sidney's practical interest in gardening is attested by his correspondence with the eminent French botanist Charles de l'Ecluse, whom he met in Vienna;[72] and

[72] See Duncan-Jones 1991, 65.

horticultural metaphors abound alongside metaphors of flight throughout the *Apology*: from the garden of Apollo, which the philosopher Plato raids for the poetic 'flowers' that decorate his philosophical dialogues (83/3), to the garden of the poet's golden world adorned with 'pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers'; from the 'fair vineyard' which the poet plants to entice his readers into his fictional dominions (95/12) to the many references to the moral and intellectual 'fruit' borne by poetry.[73] Like all the best intellectual disciplines, poetry works to 'plant goodness even in the secretest cabinet of our souls' (90/5–6) – the tiniest and most private inward chambers of the mind become alive and productive at its touch. But unlike the other disciplines, poetry offers its adherents a place to *live in* rather than to visit. Philosophy, history, and the rest build schoolrooms to occupy our working hours; they ignore, repudiate, and attempt to police the hours of leisure and the pursuit of pleasure which take up the rest of our daily schedule. Poetry, on the other hand, offers its devotees accommodation fit for all uses, with rooms and grounds for every function, and the endless potential for constructing more.

This is the implication of one of the most celebrated phrases in the *Apology*: the statement that poetry serves as 'an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention' (103/31–2). A ground-plot was a piece of land ripe for development, either as a garden or as the foundation of a building. Sidney elaborates on the phrase at the end of the Refutation, when he transmutes the poetic art into an Edenic landscape which has not yet been fully developed for human habitation (108/9ff.). Poetry, he says, is 'a fit soil for praise to dwell upon', a soil on which he urges us to 'plant more laurels for to engarland our poets' heads', watered (as Eden was) by 'clear springs' and unencumbered by serpents: objections to poetry may be 'trodden down' as easily as the snake whose head was to be bruised by Eve's descendants after the biblical Fall. For all its libertarian high soaring, then, poetry for Sidney is firmly based on the earth – hence the rather startling metaphorical juxtaposition midway through the digression, when he insists that 'as the fertilest ground must be manured, so must the highest-flying wit have a Daedalus to guide him' (109/39–40). The meeting of the two sets of metaphors may here look awkward, perhaps even contradictory, but it is what lends the *Apology* the dual quality of solidity combined with energy, of pragmatism combined with vision, which best serves its ultimate political purpose. The poet's inventive cultivation of the intellectual soil is a *manifestation* of his high-flying liberty, and both aspects of his personality must be brought to bear if he is to accomplish the task Sidney has set him, which is to reform (or replant, or rebuild) the English nation.

[73] See e.g. 83/27; 86/32; 90/20–1; 94/34; 100/7; 102/41; 113/20.

The poet and his rivals

Sidney's commitment to the task of national regeneration means that he is reluctant to discuss certain kinds of poetry at any length in the *Apology*. 'Divine' poetry, for instance – the most high-flying variety of all – is simply not relevant to his present concerns. Thus, when he comes to define poetry in his Proposition (he tells us it is an art of imitation, 'with this end, to teach and delight' (86/19–20)), he speaks with all due respect of poets such as David who 'did imitate the inconceivable excellencies of God' (86/22–3), but excludes them from his defence on the grounds that nobody 'that hath the Holy Ghost in due holy reverence' could possibly find them objectionable (86/27–8). These grounds for their exclusion are scarcely convincing, since he includes in the category of divine poets the pagan poet-prophets Orpheus, Amphion, and Homer, who wrote 'in a full wrong divinity' (86/28) and who were therefore among the principal targets of attack by Christian poet-haters from Tertullian to Gosson. The real reason for excepting theological matters from his essay is given later on, when he tells us that the divine has its scope 'as far beyond any of these as eternity exceedeth a moment' (89/40–1). Eternity occupies a different dimension from the one we inhabit, and Sidney is fundamentally concerned with the space we live in: the earth, the nation, the household. An art that deals only with things spiritual leaves too much of our dual nature unacknowledged and unsatisfied.

He also excludes from consideration a second kind of poet, 'them that deal with matters philosophical' (86/35). By this he means those who represent things as they are, confining themselves to moral, scientific, or historical topics drawn from the study of their own and other people's experience or researches. The scope of this second kind of poets is too narrow to be useful to his argument, just as the first was too vast. By concerning themselves only with what has been and what is, they render themselves incapable of instituting change, and changing things is what Sidney wants poetry to do. The vocabulary he uses to describe them is that of stifling confinement: they are 'wrapped within the fold of the proposed subject' as a baby is tightly bound in linen (86/41–2), and this infantile condition robs them of the liberty that enables 'right poets' to choose their own 'course'.

These 'right poets' (86/44), the poets with whom the *Apology* concerns itself, produce only fictions. He describes them in exuberantly energetic terms: they 'imitate to teach and delight, and 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' (87/8–11). Sidney's subject is the poet as maker, not the poet as prophet or servant; and the reason for his very specific choice of

subject is now becoming clearer. The 'right poets' intervene in earthly affairs, but do so with a freedom of movement which resembles that of God himself. Since they concern themselves exclusively with 'the *divine* consideration of what may be and should be', their creative imitations are independent of all earthly powers. They 'borrow nothing', and therefore owe nothing, to any extant regime or faction; their only fealty is to the divine. This freedom from political subjection, as well as the youthful energy with which they exercise that freedom, distinguishes them from the practitioners of every other discipline.

The phrase that best describes what Sidney does *not* want poetry to be is the one he uses to describe the rival disciplines of astronomy, music, mathematics, and 'natural and supernatural' philosophy (88/14) – the study of the material world and the non-human forces that govern it. These, he tells us, are no more than 'serving sciences' (88/23), humble domestics in the entourage of more exalted branches of learning. By this he means that they accumulate material which may be useful but is not essential to 'the highest end' of knowledge, 'which stands' (Sidney thinks) 'in the knowledge of a man's self' and in the 'virtuous action' to which such knowledge gives rise (88/24–33). The 'serving sciences' contribute towards this ultimate purpose, he tells us, in much the same way as a saddler supplies the needs of a more elevated discipline, horsemanship, or as horsemanship serves the more socially and politically urgent requirements of military action. This analogy, recalling the opening anecdote about the equestrian Pugliano, shifts the notion of 'serving sciences' from the intellectual sphere to the military or political. As well as serving other disciplines, Sidney implies, the 'serving sciences' occupy the lower ranks in a strictly hierarchical chain of command, at the highest level of which stand the disciplines which have a direct bearing on the way human beings organize their personal, social and political lives. The topmost level is occupied by the most exalted public servant of all, the figure who directs every action undertaken by the state: the prince. The *Apology* is designed to demonstrate that poets 'have a most just title to be princes over all the rest' (88/32–3), and that they have been toppled from their deserved pre-eminence by an act of moral and intellectual treason. And one of Sidney's chief arguments for the poet's pre-eminence is that he need serve no earthly princes.

In this, we learn in the next section of the essay, the 'right poet' is quite different from his chief rivals among the teachers of academic disciplines, the moral philosopher and the historian. The historian in particular has his pedagogic efforts seriously hampered by his 'servile' status. He claims to teach 'virtuous action' by offering real examples of such actions from the past; but these examples are profoundly problematic. In the first place, their claim to authenticity is questionable. Not only are the reputed facts 'built upon the notable foundation of hearsay' (89/11), but they suffer too from the various forms of politi-

which must be mastered' (89/2–4). Such pedagogic belligerence – conveyed in the vocabulary of mastery and destruction – is likely to raise the hackles of masterful and destructive men, especially rulers. The philosopher's directness betrays, in fact, a catastrophic lack of tact. He is prepared to risk his personal safety 'by plain setting down' how virtue 'extendeth itself out of the limits of a man's own little world to the government of families, and maintaining of public societies' (89/5–7). And his outspoken interference in public and private affairs is always getting him into trouble. Sidney mentions the philosopher Socrates, forced to commit suicide by a hostile Athenian state (94/4). Later he points out that Alexander the Great put the philosopher Callisthenes to death 'for his seeming philosophical, indeed mutinous, stubbornness' (105/38–9), and later still that 'many cities banished philosophers as not fit members to live among them' (106/30–1). Plato himself was helpless against tyranny: he 'could do so little' with the tyrant Dionysius 'that he himself of a philosopher was made a slave' (106/36–7). Philosophers, in other words, are as much 'captived to the truth of a foolish world' as historians – in a quite literal sense: they are vulnerable to imprisonment, enslavement, execution. As More pointed out in the *Utopia*, the philosopher's problem is that he is incompetent in the arts of persuasion and flattery which are essential prerequisites for those who wish their voices to be heard by corrupt politicians.[74] The poet's expertise in these arts, by contrast, not only makes him welcome among politicians, courtiers, and soldiers but gives him a quasi-monarchic power over them unmatched by that of any other teacher.

So what is the source of the poet's matchless persuasive power? The metaphor of the poet as gardener suggests that he 'plants' the image of goodness in his readers' minds (95/39), where it can grow and fructify without further interference from the poet. But how is this plantation accomplished? The answer lies in the most famous metaphor in the *Apology*, that of the poem as 'speaking picture' (86/19).[75] This is the metaphor that most neatly illustrates the poet's ability to negotiate the gap between the universal principles studied by the philosopher and the particular examples provided by the historian, between mind and body. And it also offers the best clue to poetry's attractiveness.

Sidney's interest in and familiarity with the rich diversity of visual arts in early modern Europe is well documented.[76] Greville tells us that

[74] See More 1985, 47.

[75] The fullest (and most contentious) account of the place of this metaphor in the *Apology* is Robinson 1972. See also S. F. Heninger, 'Speaking Pictures: Sidney's Rapprochement between Poetry and Painting', in Waller and Moore 1984, 3–16.

[76] See K. Duncan-Jones, 'Sidney and Titian', in *English Renaissance Studies Presented to Dame Helen Gardner in Honour of her Seventieth Birthday*, ed. John Carey (Oxford 1980), 1–11; Gent 1981, 26–7 and 29; Duncan-Jones 1991, 75–6.

soul and of the 'clayey lodgings' it inhabits. Poetry exploits those clayey lodgings as its chief means of drawing its readers towards the beauty of virtue – or not, as the case may be. And its exploitation of the body goes far beyond anything achieved by the painter. It woos, titillates, allures its recipients by simulating bodies, objects or actions which 'satisfy' all the senses, not just the sense of sight (**90**/33). In Elizabethan times the most celebrated myth of painterly verisimilitude was the story of the Greek artist Zeuxis, who painted a bunch of grapes so lifelike that wild birds came to peck at it.[81] Sidney does not mention the story, but he does suggest that poets entice their readers into their texts, as Zeuxis did, by tempting their bodily appetites, presenting them 'at the first' with 'a cluster of grapes, that full of that taste, you may long to pass further' (**95**/12–13). Poets, then, have an advantage over Zeuxis, who tricked the birds' eyesight but failed to gratify their tastebuds. Like expert cooks they offer 'food for the tenderest stomachs' (**92**/3–4): a 'medicine of cherries' for the distempered appetite (**96**/10), or a fable about eating to suppress a rebellion (**96**/13ff.). Their metrical music (and music, Sidney tells us, is 'the most divine striker of the senses', **101**/35) offers us the authentic 'sound of virtue' (**92**/7) and stirs the heart 'more than with a trumpet' (**99**/7). And their pictorial imaginations, through which 'all virtues, vices, and passions' are 'laid to the view', offer us a range of 'familiar insights' into the workings of the mind through their depiction of bodies in extremity (**91**/6ff.): the eyeless Oedipus representing 'remorse of conscience', Atreus who served up his wife's bastards at a banquet as an instance of 'self-devouring cruelty', Medea's murder of her own children signifying 'the sour-sweetness of revenge'. These feeling, vociferous pictures 'inhabit both the memory and judgment' as the philosopher's abstract generalizations and the historian's pedantic specificities cannot. Like tapestries or murals they bedeck the walls of our minds, shining, illuminating and resonating through our corporeal houses. They occupy all the spaces in which we live, from the most public to the most secret. None of the other arts can boast the same intimacy with the labyrinths of the human anatomy. And this intimacy is as problematic as it is pedagogically convenient.

Sidney first develops the notion of the poem as 'speaking picture' in his account of the 'right poet', who resembles, he tells us, the best sort of painters: those 'who having no law but wit, bestow that in colours upon you which is fittest for the eye to see: as the constant though lamenting look of Lucretia, when she punished in herself another's fault; wherein he painteth not Lucretia whom he never saw, but painteth the outward beauty of such a virtue' (**87**/3–7). Like the best painters, poets make verbal imitations of the ideal pictures they conceive in their 'wits',

[81] See Gent 1981, 34. The anecdote comes from Pliny, *Natural History*, XXXV.

pictures which represent particular examples of universal virtues. These creative imitations endow us with a 'true lively knowledge' of their subjects, enabling us to 'grow', like a plant or a child, 'to a judicial comprehending' of them (90/36–7). In addition, speaking pictures are as delightful as they are instructive, and their delightfulness is what makes them instructive. They 'move men', arouse their emotions and desires, as strongly as they appeal to their rational understanding of what constitutes goodness (87/15–7). By moving men they stir them to action. And the sort of action they encourage is hinted at by Sidney's choice of Lucretia as the subject for an exemplary painting or poem.

The painter who sets out to represent Lucretia must be guided, Sidney tells us, by 'no law but wit' if he is to make her an accurate representation of virtue. He must share, in other words, the courageous independence of the poet, his 'liberty of conceit', his free ranging within the uncircumscribed zodiac of the mind. And here as elsewhere the painter and his companion artist the poet would seem to be proponents of a specifically political conception of liberty. The suicide of Lucretia was an act of resistance to tyranny: she killed herself after being raped by a relative of the corrupt Roman monarch, Tarquinius Superbus, and her death sparked off the revolution that brought an end to monarchic rule in Rome and led to the establishment of the Roman republic. This is only the first and most dramatic instance in the *Apology* of poetry's hostility to despotism. At his most aggressive, the poet 'deviseth new punishments in hell for tyrants' (94/13–14), but he is also capable, as the caustic philosopher is not, of finding more obliquely persuasive means to reform despotic monarchs. In the Bible, Nathan the prophet deploys a simple poetic fiction to 'do the tenderest office of a friend' – and the most dangerous office of a counsellor – when he draws King David's attention to his crimes of adultery and murder by means of a fable (96/29ff.). The pastoral genre 'can show the misery of people under hard lords or ravening soldiers' (97/17–18), while the tragic 'maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours' (98/27–8). The Digression offers as an example of a good tragic theme the story of Hecuba, who avenged herself 'most cruelly' on the tyrant Polymnestor (111/34ff.). So successful are these poetic interventions in politics that 'Certain poets', Sidney tells us, 'so prevailed with Hiero the First, that of a tyrant they made him a just king' (106/34–6). By choosing the picture of Lucretia as his first example of a 'speaking picture' Sidney suggests not only that some of the virtues poets depict are political ones but that their depictions of political actions are likely to be as effective as Lucretia's carefully staged self-punishment.

But this first example is also suggestive in another sense. Early modern paintings of Lucretia invariably depict her as an object of erotic

desire for the male spectator as much as for her princely rapist.[82] She is usually naked, often alone – in the original story told by Livy her death was witnessed by her husband and his allies, whereas the painters place her in a state of intimate isolation with the viewer – and she frequently seems to be in a state of mournful ecstasy. Sidney's familiarity with such representations is implied, perhaps, by his description of her 'constant though lamenting look . . . when she punished in herself another's fault' (87/4–6); but, whether he was thinking of any particular picture or not, he could have found no more potent expression of the fusion of the political with the erotic in art than a painting of Lucretia. The delight by which the poet attracts his audience, then, is a stimulation of the senses, an arousal of the appetite, which includes the provocation of sexual desire as a legitimate part of its *modus operandi*. When Sidney goes on to offer further instances of successful poetic 'speaking pictures', he chooses Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* and Heliodorus's *Theagenes and Chariclea* as his second and third examples, the former a political text, 'the portraiture of a just empire', the latter a 'picture of love' (87/30–3). Neither of these ambitious word-paintings is privileged over the other, and Sidney's own prose poem, the *Arcadia*, fuses the political with the erotic – taking hints from both Xenophon and Heliodorus – to often unnerving effect.

As the *Apology* proceeds, the moral and political instructions offered by poetry become increasingly entangled with the vocabulary of desire. In the Psalms, Sidney tells us early in the essay, David shows himself 'a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith' (84/26–8). Later we learn that poetry 'ever setteth virtue so out in her best colours . . . that one must needs be enamoured of her' (93/37–9), and later still he repeats the point again: 'if the saying of Plato and Tully be true, that who could see virtue would be wonderfully ravished with the love of her beauty – [the poet] sets her out to make her more lovely in her holiday apparel' (99/32–5). Lyric poetry strives to 'awake the thoughts from the sleep of idleness, to *embrace* honourable enterprises' (99/24–5), while 'the lofty image' of the epic heroes '*inflameth the mind with desire* to be worthy' (99/40–1, my emphases). Seductive clothing rivals vivid painting as a metaphor for poetry's appeal to the senses. The poets chose rhyme as the 'fittest raiment' for their fictions (87/40), and 'mistress Philosophy' must borrow the 'masking raiment of Poesy' when she wishes to allure her adherents (96/2–3). The 'apparel' of the simplest lyric would be immeasurably improved if 'trimmed in the gorgeous eloquence of Pindar' (99/10); the poet 'bringeth his own stuff' or cloth to make up

[82] For a detailed account of Renaissance representations of Lucretia see Ian Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and its Transformations* (Oxford, 1982).

his compositions (100/22–3); and Plutarch trims the 'garments' of history and philosophy with 'guards' or decorative borders of poetry (108/7). At one point Sidney even transforms poetry into an essential cosmetic aid for the woman who wishes to 'fashion her countenance to the best grace' – that is, to master the art of make-up (92/30–3).[83] Masks, disguises, and all the ingenious tricks of flirtatious concealment are the stock-in-trade of the poet, who combines the functions of the tailor, the fashion guru, and the pimp with his more exalted role of imitating virtue.

This emphasis on the physicality of poetry's effects on its readers is an impudent rhetorical tactic for Sidney to have adopted in the context of the Elizabethan critical debate. As we have seen, the opponents of modern imaginative writing – Ascham and Gosson in particular – saw the appeal of erotic poetry to the senses as a debilitating influence on the vulnerable young, encouraging idleness, effeminacy, deviousness, and the insidious erosion of English Protestant values. But Sidney's erotic metaphors are so woven in with poetic examples of political, military and patriotic virtues – Cyrus, Aeneas, Ulysses, Achilles, Hercules, Turnus – that he makes those virtues inseparable from the intensely physical means by which they are made attractive. As a result, any attempt to sunder virtue from physicality makes the attempter look out of touch, academically cloistered, naive. And this is just how Sidney portrays the poet's 'principal challengers' among the academic disciplines (88/35ff.). The verbal portraits he paints of poetry's competitors, the moral philosopher and the historian, show them as pedants rather than activists, caricatures of the hidebound academics or pedagogues who were the butt of endless humanist jokes. In his own words, they are the 'self-wise-seeming schoolmasters' who are an ideal subject for comedy (113/9). The moral philosophers are mocked for a lack of self-knowledge and social grace which is embodied in what they wear: they are 'rudely clothed for to witness outwardly their contempt of outward things' (88/38–9). The historians are hopelessly behind the times: they carry 'old mouse-eaten records', are 'better acquainted with a thousand years ago than with the present age', 'curious for antiquities', 'a wonder to young folks', and cherish an exaggerated respect for 'Old-aged experience' (89/8ff.). Worse still, both parties lack certain intellectual limbs: the philosopher teaches only theory, the historian records only what has been practised, but 'both, not having both, do both halt' – that is, hobble on their one sound leg (90/10–11). Under the circumstances, their claims to supremacy in the field of leading men to action seem absurd. Both scholars are impotent, physically as well as intellectually; neither young men nor young women

[83] For Elizabethan hostility to cosmetics, and its association with the art of painting, see Gent 1981, 7 note.

widest possible audience, in terms that will tempt the truant as well as the good pupil, the childishly old as well as the child. 'With a tale forsooth he cometh unto you,' we learn, 'with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner' (95/17–19). Sidney's text is the very opposite of a schoolbook, and as such sets itself up in friendly rivalry with the most celebrated schoolbook written in English at the time: Roger Ascham's *The Schoolmaster*.

This rivalry is evident as early as the Introduction. The *Apology* begins by wittily investing the equerry Pugliano with the status of Sidney's principal teacher, an improbable substitute for the enlightened schoolmaster whom Ascham sets at the centre of his pedagogic system. Young Sidney found himself provoked, he says, by the Italian's eloquent defence of horsemanship to write something in defence of poetry, 'which if I handle with more good will than good reasons, bear with me, since the scholar is to be pardoned that followeth in the steps of his master' (81/27–9). Sidney's debt to his equestrian 'master' manifests itself throughout the *Apology* in its occasional references to horsemanship: in the comparison of the 'serving sciences' to the craft of the saddler, for instance, or the allusion to the poet's course 'reined only with learned discretion'; in the description of Sidney's argument as a 'career' (108/22) – a horse-race or tilt; in his mocking allusion to bad Elizabethan poets as mounted on 'post-horses' or 'Pacolet's horse' instead of the winged steed Pegasus, the ancient metaphor for poetic inspiration (109/19, 111/28); or in his apology for 'straying' into the Digression like an ill-trained colt. These manifestations of an equestrian obsession are not without classical precedent. If Sidney acknowledges a riding instructor as his master he is merely following the example of the ancient Greeks, 'who set those toys at so high a price that Philip of Macedon' – Sidney's namesake, whose name means 'lover of horses' – 'reckoned a horserace won at Olympus among his three fearful felicities' (99/21–3). And if he rejects the older men whom the humanists considered the best of teachers, he is merely imitating Philip's son, young Alexander the Great, who 'left his schoolmaster, living Aristotle, behind him, but took dead Homer with him' when he went to conquer Asia (105/36–7).

For readers familiar with Ascham's *Schoolmaster*, Philip's high regard for horsemanship and Alexander's decision to abandon his tutor were as closely related as father to son. Ascham complains in his treatise that among the contemporary English aristocracy 'more care is had, yea and that emonges verie wise men, to finde out rather a cunnynge man for their horse, than a cunnyng man for their children' (Ascham 1904, 193). Horsemanship, Ascham believes, is in a better condition than schoolteaching in Elizabethan England;[86] and Sidney's 'learner-like admiration'

[86] See also Ascham 1904, 193 and 195.

Ascham's strictures on Italian love-poems and love-stories sound thoroughly ungracious. Most strikingly, perhaps, Ascham prefers the qualities of the 'hard' wit in a pupil – the steady plodder – to the qualities of the volatile 'quick wits' who 'commonlie may proue the best Poetes, but not the wisest Orators' (Ascham 1904, 188ff.). Sidney, by contrast, thinks that 'hard dull wits' need to be raised to their full potential by the attractive powers of poetry (**83**/24–5). His ideal poet is the 'highest-flying wit' (**109**/40), who soars, gallops, trumpets, seduces, assaults, and generally engages in a flurry of activity which might have thrown Ascham into paroxysms of anxiety. He is prepared to acknowledge, with Ascham, that the wit or intellect is a two-edged sword: on the one hand, the 'erected wit' offers human beings a glimpse of perfection, on the other, 'man's wit' when applied exclusively to sexual scurrility 'abuseth' both poetry and its eager young readers (**104**/17).[88] But this is only to say that poetry is the most powerful tool of the intellect, which can do the most good in the right hands as well as the most harm in the wrong ones: 'with a sword thou mayest kill thy father, and with a sword thou mayest defend thy prince and country' (**104**/41–2). In stressing only the worst aspects of poetic 'quick wits', Ascham is rejecting what might be the most effective means of defending England against its enemies. In intellectual as well as military terms Ascham and his fellow schoolmasters have only a very tenuous grasp of strategy.

Sidney's most brazen act of impudence is to invert the relationship between poets and other teachers which Ascham and his fellow pedants took for granted. Replying to those 'poet-haters' (**100**/41) who adopt Plato's attack on poets in the *Republic* as the basis of their case against poetry, Sidney accuses Plato, the greatest of philosophical instructors, of having treacherously turned against the men who educated him. 'For indeed,' he observes,

> after the philosophers had picked out of the sweet mysteries of Poetry the right discerning true points of knowledge, they forthwith, putting it in method, and making a school-art of that which the poets did only teach by a divine delightfulness, beginning to spurn at their guides, like ungrateful prentices, were not content to set up shops for themselves, but sought by all means to discredit their masters; which by the force of delight being barred them, the less they could overthrow them, the more they hated them.
>
> (**106**/21–9)

In the *Apology* the poets are the erstwhile 'masters' of the philosophers and other purveyors of 'school arts'. But their historical priority means that they are also their more aristocratic forebears. The essay begins, as we have seen, by arguing that poetry is the most ancient form of learning and that the ancient poets were 'fathers' of all other thinkers (**82**/19,

[88] For a full discussion of Renaissance views on wit see Crane 1937.

and compare **100**/16). If this is the case, then philosophers, schoolmasters and similar poet-haters – the 'ungrateful prentices' who seek 'to discredit their masters', the brood of vipers who devour their parents (**82**/11–12) – are in a worse moral position than the young prodigals they wish to reform. Attacks on poetry, Sidney tells us with deceptive glibness, bring with them 'great danger of civil war among the Muses' (**82**/4) – a mutually destructive combat between the forces of competing disciplines on the soil of the country they share. If, as he has argued, poets 'have a most just title to be princes over all the rest' (**88**/32–3), then the poet-haters are the traitors and rebels, not the poets. Sidney's saucy defection from the educational programme offered by his elders is no act of truancy but a return to the ancient practices that established his country's identity.

By the time we reach the Refutation, where Sidney meets one by one the principal charges brought against poetry by its enemies, the inversion of the roles of poet and poet-hater has become explicit. The poet-haters 'do *prodigally* spend a great many wandering words in quips and scoffs' (**101**/1, my emphasis), like Ascham's prodigal quick wits who are 'readie scoffers, priuie mockers, and euer ouer light and merry' (Ascham 1904, 189). The poets, by contrast, are not only 'of most fatherly antiquity' (**100**/16) but encourage the utmost respect for fathers: 'Who readeth Aeneas carrying old Anchises on his back, that wisheth not it were his fortune to perform so excellent an act?' (**95**/36–8). The poet, in other words, carries the older generation towards a brighter future as Aeneas carried his old father away from the flames of Troy towards the founding of a new nation. This is the final 'speaking picture' with which Sidney leaves us at the close of the Proof or Confirmation: Aeneas the heroic soldier-adventurer, an invention of the poets (Sidney contrasts Virgil's ideal 'feigned' Aeneas with the treacherous 'right' Aeneas as represented in the work of the historian Dares Phrygius, **92**/29–30), whose struggles to lead his party of wandering Trojan exiles to fully fledged nationhood deserve to be 'worn in the tablet of your memory' as a model for the emerging nations of Europe (**99**/42). And if we do indeed bear Aeneas in mind as we read the rest of the *Apology*, we will emerge with a clear perception of the complex relationship between poetry and nationhood as Sidney sees it.

According to many Tudor historians, Aeneas was the great grandfather of the founder of Britain, Brutus, who gave his name to the island of Albion after purging it of its original inhabitants – an aggressive race of giants – and establishing a neo-Trojan dynasty in their place.[89] From

[89] For a full account of this tradition see Kendrick 1950. A convenient summary is provided in Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford and New York, 1995), 26–9.

one point of view, then, Virgil's Aeneas gave the impetus for the founding of the English nation. Sidney's interest in the early history of England and her neighbours is as well attested as his interest in painting.[90] It manifests itself in his letters to Languet, where he discusses the strengths and weaknesses of a history of ancient Britain written by his father's protégé Humphrey Lhuyd, and it emerges in the *Apology* when he refers to the Welsh as the 'true remnant of the ancient Britons' (**83**/28).[91] He would have been well aware of the myth of Brutus, and conscious too that its authenticity was as fiercely contested as the authenticity of Virgil's representation of Aeneas.[92] But as we have seen, Sidney sees the notion of historical authenticity as of limited value: the false Aeneas of Virgil is more useful as a stimulant to virtuous action than the 'historical' Aeneas of Dares Phyrgius. In a letter to his brother Robert he points out that even the fact-obsessed historian makes himself 'a poet sometimes, for ornament' (Duncan-Jones 1989, 292), lending substance to his true examples of virtue and vice with the aid of poetry – that is, of carefully disguised fictions. These intrusions of fiction into history help to explain the impact on populations of events whose actual impact is unknown, and the explanations they offer deserve to be carefully noted: 'for though perchance they were not so, yet it is enough they might be so'. He says much the same thing in the *Apology*, the historian must often 'tell events whereof he can yield no cause; or, if he do, it must be poetical' (**93**/7–8). At crucial moments in any historical narrative, then, the responsible historian's claim to authenticity must subordinate itself to his role as a moral and political instructor; and this point lies at the core of Sidney's attack on poet-haters in the Refutation.

The poet-haters represent themselves as the exclusive custodians of the truth about poetry and its place in the history of the English nation. But their claim to historical authenticity is as poetic as the purely imaginative writing they condemn. They specialize in distorting the judgment (instead of 'enabling' it as teachers should) by 'carping and taunting at each thing which, by stirring the spleen, may *stay the brain from a through-beholding* the worthiness of the subject' (**101**/2–3, my emphasis). Their preferred targets are things of 'sacred . . . majesty' (**101**/5), and they forfeit all their pretensions to moral or historical

[90] For his interest in history generally, see F. J. Levy, 'Sir Philip Sidney and the Idea of History', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 26 (1964), 608–17, and Elizabeth Story Donno, 'Old Mouse-eaten Records: History in Sidney's *Apology*', in Kay 1987, 147–67.

[91] See Duncan-Jones 1991, 72–3; Sidney's antiquarian poem, 'The 7 Wonders of Wilton', Ringler 1962, 149–51; and his commendation of Polydore Vergil and Holinshed to his friend Edward Denny, Duncan-Jones 1989, 289. Sidney could have met the historian William Camden at Oxford (see Duncan-Jones 1991, 40, and Stewart 2000, 55); Camden published his account of ancient British history, *Britannia*, in 1586.

[92] See Hadfield 1994, 140.

gravitas by their 'scoffing' argumentative methods, 'so as the best title in true English they get with their merriments is to be called good fools, for so have our grave forefathers ever termed that humorous kind of jesters' (101/19–22). This final sentence is one of Sidney's most brilliant rhetorical inversions. The poet supplants the poet-hater as the custodian of the wisdom of 'our grave [English] forefathers'. Indeed, the poet-hater's command of the English language itself would seem to be faulty – Sidney the poet speaks 'true English' where his opponents speak only a tangle of thought-inhibiting falsehoods. And the poet-hater who loves to mock 'majesty' is exposed as the least majestic of English subjects, with no claim to any hereditary 'title' except the humiliating one of a professional fool. In this first phase of the Refutation, then, the poet-haters' version of history – where poets are mendacious upstarts and their opponents are the bastions of truth – is turned on its head. And in the process the definition of truth itself is called into question.

It is in the Refutation that the *Apology*'s extraordinary barrage of allusions to truth reaches its climax, as Sidney concludes the list of charges against poetry with the wry observation, 'Truly, this is much, if there be much truth in it' (102/32). Sidney's term 'truly', as I pointed out at the beginning of this introduction, invariably occurs at moments when he is at his most controversial, when the truth of his claims is self-evidently in dispute. The most striking instance of this usage comes in his response to the first really grave charge against poetry, 'that it is the mother of lies' (102/23). To this Sidney replies with an extraordinary blend of assertiveness and caution: 'I answer paradoxically, but truly, I think truly, that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar, and, though he would, as a poet can scarcely be a liar' (103/1–3). The reason is, of course, that the poet 'nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth' (103/8–9); he makes no claim to historical accuracy, unlike the historian, who 'affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies' (103/11–12). In a world where the best information is enveloped in uncertainty, where apparent facts are merely probabilities (or as Sidney calls them, 'conjectured likelihoods', 93/3), the only honest way to state an opinion about the truth is to qualify one's statement, as Sidney does, with a modest disclaimer: 'I think'.

Sidney's wittiest illustration of the contingent status of truth in a fallen world occurs earlier in his argument, when he is comparing the relative merits of fictional examples and historical ones as aids to moral guidance. To facilitate the comparison he selects one example 'wherein a poet and a historian do concur' of a story with a seemingly straightforward moral application (93/9ff.). The historian's version of the story, as Herodotus and Justin tell it, concerns a faithful servant of King Darius who pretended to desert to his master's Babylonian enemies in order to

abuse' – that poetry corrupts its readers by subjecting them to 'wanton shows of better hidden matters' (104/25–6). If poetry's aim is to teach delightfully, the poet-haters claim that modern poets privilege delight over pedagogy; that the erotic desire which Sidney has situated at the heart of poetry's power over its readers has overwhelmed its instructive purpose. Still worse, they claim that poetry instructs its readers not in 'virtuous action' but in the pursuit of desire; that comedies, for instance, 'rather teach than reprehend amorous conceits', that 'the Lyric is larded with passionate sonnets, the Elegiac weeps the want of his mistress, and that even to the Heroical Cupid hath ambitiously climbed' (104/2–5). In the sentences that follow, the Refutation transforms itself into a series of further concessions to poetry's enemies. One by one Sidney grants 'whatsoever they will have granted, that not only love, but lust, but vanity, but (if they list) scurrility, possesseth many leaves of the poets' books' (104/13–15). The ideal poetry he has so carefully delineated in the course of his essay seems to vanish before these admissions like a nebulous mirage, a castle in the air, a lie detected.

But Sidney's response to the poet-haters' 'argument of abuse' is in fact wonderfully ambivalent. For one thing, we have already seen that he thinks a good deal more highly of 'amorous conceits' than most schoolmasters do. This was evident from the moment he praised the 'sugared invention of that picture of love' in a romance by Heliodorus at the beginning of the essay (87/32–3), and he now reminds us of his opinion in parenthetical asides: 'grant love of beauty to be a beastly fault (although it be very hard, since only man, and no beast, hath that gift to discern beauty); grant that lovely name of Love to deserve all hateful reproaches (although even some of my masters the philosophers spent a good deal of their lamp-oil in setting forth the excellency of it)' (104/8–12). At a later stage in his argument, when addressing once again the issue of the abuse of comedy in the contemporary theatre, he draws a careful distinction between 'scurrility, unworthy of any chaste ears' and the 'delight' with which men are ravished when they see a fair woman (112/11–40). To confuse 'love of beauty' and 'that lovely name of Love' with scurrility is a sign not just of bad manners but of ignorance in the poet-haters.

Manners are, however, an important indication of the difference between the princely poet and his schoolmasterly antagonists. The poet-haters' objection to the abuse of poetry, he points out, is scarcely adequate as an objection to poetry as such, since they are objecting only to poetry's subject, not to its techniques – so that if they are honest 'they will find their sentence may *with good manners* put the last words foremost, and not say that Poetry abuseth man's wit, but that man's wit abuseth Poetry' (104/15–17). If, then, the poet-haters refuse to reverse their judgment they will merely expose their own lack of breeding, and hence their ignoble origins, by attacking Poetry for something that is

The poet-haters' version of English history is here exposed as imaginary, a myth like that of the riddling Sphinx in the story of Oedipus, a piece of pure poetry, in fact, of the sort they profess to detest. The most prominent Elizabethan exponent of this myth was Gosson, who argued in *The School of Abuse* that poetry, playgoing, and piping were responsible for the loss of what he calls 'the olde discipline of England':

> *Dion* sayth, that english men could suffer watching and labor, hunger & thirst, and beare of al stormes with hed and shoulders, they vsed slender weapons, went naked, and were good soldiours, they fed vppon rootes and barkes of trees, they would stand vp to the chin many dayes in marishes without victualles . . . But the exercise that is nowe among vs, is banqueting, playing, pipyng, and dauncing, and all suche delightes as may win vs to pleasure, or rocke us a sleepe.
>
> (Gosson 1974, 91)

Gosson substantiates this claim for a time when Englishmen 'set their hearts' delight upon action, and not upon imagination' by reference to the ancient British queen Bunduica, whose resistance to the invading forces of Rome was cited by Tudor historians as a prototype of English nationalism. Bunduica derided the Roman invaders as 'vnwoorthy the name of men, or title of Souldiers, because they were smoothly appareled, soft lodged, daintely feasted, bathed in warme waters, rubbed with sweet oyntments, strewd with fine poulders, wine swillers, singers, Dauncers, and Players' (95). Poets and players were the men responsible for reducing the Romans to this state of luxuriant effeminacy, and Gosson implies that the proliferation of poets and players in modern England has reduced its people to the same degenerate condition. 'God hath now blessed *England* with a Queene,' he claims, who resembles Bunduica in her qualities as leader; but 'wee vnworthy seruants of so mild a Mistresse, vnnatural children of so good a mother, vnthankful subiects of so louing a prince, wound her royall hart with abusing her lenitie' (95–6). Like most Elizabethan social commentators Gosson lays the blame for the collapse of good relations between the authorities and their subjects – or the good mother and her unnatural children – squarely on the subject. And the most disastrous consequence of this social and moral collapse is that it has turned the once courageous Englishmen into a bunch of lascivious women.

Sidney's response is to question Gosson's credentials as a historian. 'Certain it is', he says – and the phrase emphasizes the uncertainty that surrounds Gosson's assertions – 'that, in our plainest homeliness, yet never was the Albion nation without poetry' (105/6–7). Gosson anachronistically refers to Bunduica as 'Queene of Englande' in an effort to underline her resemblance to Elizabeth I; Sidney quietly corrects the anachronism by using the most ancient of names for Britain, Albion. And he goes on to point out the folly of the view that to repudiate

learning, of which poetry is a branch, gives nations a military advantage over their civilized neighbours. 'This indeed,' he scoffs, 'is the ordinary doctrine of ignorance', a form of teaching worthy of the barbaric Goths who destroyed Rome (105/16). Gosson's championing of cultural vandalism shows that texts like the *School* are designed not to propagate knowledge but to stifle it, not to enhance the cultural status of the English but to encourage their regression to the condition of naked root-eating marsh-dwellers. *The School of Abuse* is no better than 'a chainshot against all learning' (105/8), including the history which it exploits to make its case against poetry.

Even as Sidney develops this reasoned response to Gosson, the military metaphors he uses accumulate, undermining the poet-haters' argument that 'before poets did soften us' the English nation was 'full of courage, given to martial exercises, the pillars of manlike liberty' (102/28–9). Sidney's admission that poetry may be used as an incitement to sexual transgression is transformed, as he makes it, into evidence of the quasi-martial forcefulness of his discipline. Being misused, 'by the reason of his sweet charming force, [poetry] can do more hurt than any other army of words' (104/28–9); it is a sword which can be used in defence of the poet's country as effectively as in offence against it (104/41–2); and in the triumphant climax to the Refutation he concludes that 'Poetry is the companion of camps' (105/25), an appropriate ally for conquerors such as Alexander the Great, 'the phoenix of warlike princes' (105/35). By the end of this sequence of statements the 'sweet charming force' of poetry is not merely not antagonistic to militarism; it has become at once the most ancient and the most effective stimulus to military action. The sentence in which Sidney makes this pronouncement again brilliantly underlines the contingent status of all historical assertions. 'And if to a slight conjecture a conjecture may be opposed,' it begins – the 'slight conjecture' being that poetry has feminized the English nation – 'truly it may seem, that as by him [i.e. the poet] their learned men took almost their first light of knowledge, so their active men received their first motions of courage' (105/29–32). Poetry is as inextricably a part of military history as it is of the history of ideas – Homer's poetry accompanied Alexander in his conquests – and historiography itself relies heavily on poetic 'conjecture' to construct its narratives, including the narrative that takes poetry to be the ruin of a nation's martial aspirations.

The last part of the Refutation, where Sidney answers the charge that the philosopher Plato expelled poets from his ideal republic, returns to his earlier strategy of depicting philosophers as impractical academics, useless in the battlefield ('the quiddity of *ens* and *prima materia* will hardly agree with a corslet', 105/24–5), useless as political advisers (Plato was made a slave by the tyrant he tried to reform), and more inclined to encourage 'effeminate wantonness' than any reputable poet (Plato

himself championed 'abominable filthiness' – that is, homoerotic love – and 'community' of women, 106/41–4). The poets expelled by Plato from his republic were those who contaminated the ancient Greek religion with 'wrong opinions' and 'light tales' (107/9). Yet the religion Plato sought to purify has since been exposed by Christianity as a mesh of superstitious 'dreams'; and in the *Ion* Plato makes it plain that he thought as superstitiously of poets as the poets did of the gods: 'he attributeth unto Poesy more than myself do, namely, to be a very inspiring of a divine force, far above man's wit' (107/36–8). Plato, in other words – who is 'of all philosophers . . . , the most poetical' (106/17–18) – is subject to the very same charges that have been laid against the poets. Evidently Sidney could act the 'playing wit' as nimbly as his enemies, 'carping and taunting' at the worthiest subjects – such as the supreme philosopher – with all the iconoclastic impudence of the poet-haters themselves. The difference is that Sidney's aristocratic manners remain impeccable even as he challenges the poet-haters' assumption that Plato is one of their number. 'I had much rather,' he concludes, '(since truly I may do it) show their mistaking of Plato . . . than go about to overthrow his authority' (107/32–5). His response to the appeal to Plato ends by enlisting him as 'our patron and not our adversary', one who gave 'due honour' to the poet's discipline and who deserves to be held in 'admiration' when he is not misusing his philosophical genius (107/30–6). With infinite courtesy Plato's abuse has been turned into commendation, the sentence he gave against poets in the *Republic* has been reversed, and the greatest of poetry's traditional enemies has been shown to be her son, the poet's brother, suffering from nothing more serious than a severe case of sibling rivalry.

The Refutation, then, substantiates what the Proof or Confirmation taught us: that history depends on poetic conjecture, that soldiership is encouraged rather than disabled by the 'sweet charming force' of poetry, and that the philosopher is the poet's close relative, with all his faults and little of his charm – like the disgruntled brother of the Prodigal Son. Poetry, in other words, is bound up with every human discipline, linked both by blood and by family resemblance with the most distinguished exponents of every art, nourished by and nourishing the physical and intellectual impulses that stimulate every kind of action, good or bad. To reject it is artificially to drive a wedge through a close-knit familial community, and by extension through the national community of which the family is both the model and the chief component. This is precisely what the poet-haters have done in Elizabethan England, and the Digression presents us with the plot of the absorbing national drama that has been engendered by their unwarranted hostility to fiction.

The drama is the exact obverse of the drama of England as Gosson

represented it, in which poets were the 'unnatural children' of their 'good mother' Elizabeth, rejecting the ancient moral and cultural values of their country in favour of continental lasciviousness and effeminacy. Sidney's drama opens not with children who reject their mother but with a mother who rejects her children: 'it shall be but a little more lost time to inquire why England (the mother of excellent minds) should be grown so hard a stepmother to poets' (108/23–5); and, although the reasons for the mother's rejection of her offspring are not given at this stage, we might assume that it arises, at least in part, from an unconditional acceptance of the Gossonian version of literary history. The effects of this abandonment of the maternal role on the part of England are made plain at once. They are first of all implied in a passing allusion to the *Aeneid* (108/28), a Latin quotation ('O Muse! the causes and the crimes relate; / What goddess was provok'd, and whence her hate') which reminds us of the relentless persecution of Aeneas, founder of Rome and ancestor of the founder of Britain, by Juno, mother of the gods. The dismissal of poetry, it is implied, is tantamount to a turning aside from the mission of establishing a great European nation fit to rival ancient Rome, the nation founded by Aeneas. And it is a policy which sets England radically at odds with her European rivals. All of England's neighbours, from Italy to France, from Germany to Scotland, have 'embraced' the poets like favourite children (108/32–8); only England has given them a 'hard welcome' (108/42). We might read in this passage a rueful allusion to Sidney's own 'hard welcome' at the court of Elizabeth, which contrasted so starkly with the warm embraces he had received at the hands of every other prince in Europe. But the passage suggests also that the poet-haters have alienated England from the policy of her own ancestors: 'For heretofore poets have in England also flourished, and, which is to be noted, even in those times when the trumpet of Mars did sound loudest' (109/2–4). And this detachment of the modern English nation from its heroic past unleashes a bewildering sequence of allusions to acts of sexual transgression. In the course of the Digression Elizabethan England emerges as a land where the relations between parents and children, and the distinction between the offspring of legitimate and illegitimate sexual unions, have broken down altogether: a land in need of a radical cultural overhaul if it is to achieve the international status Sidney has ambitiously claimed for it in the earlier parts of the *Apology*.

Above all, it is a land that has succumbed to indolence, an 'overfaint quietness' (109/4–5) which spurns any kind of action, from writing (England 'now can scarce endure the pain of a pen', 109/10–11) to warfare (Mars's trumpet has fallen silent). This is an atmosphere inimical to poets, who, we learn, 'like Venus (but to better purpose) hath rather be troubled in the net with Mars than enjoy the homely quiet of Vulcan' (109/7–9) – would rather, that is, be engaged in vigorous activity,

An Apology for Poetry

(or *The Defence of Poesy*), by the celebrated soldier-poet Sir Philip Sidney, is the most important English work of literary theory published in the Renaissance. Its wit and inventiveness place it among the first great literary productions of the age of Shakespeare. Since 1965 Geoffrey Shepherd's edition of the *Apology* has been the standard, and this revision of Shepherd's edition, with new introduction and extensive notes, is designed to introduce Sidney's best-known work to a new generation of readers at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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MANCHESTER
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ISBN 0-7190-5376-5

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