

## An Apology for Poetry - II

### Superiority of Poetry over Philosophy and History

Even a cursory view at Sidney's Apology may prove that Sidney has an exalted conception of the nature and function of poetry. Following Aristotle he says that poetry is the first light giver to ignorance, it flourished before any other art or science. The first philosophers and historians were poets; and such supreme works as the Psalms of David and the Dialogues of Plato are in reality poetical. Among the Greeks and the Romans, the poet was regarded as a sage or prophet; and no nation, however primitive or barbarous, has been without poets, or has failed to receive delight and instruction from poetry.

Poetry, according to Sidney, is an art of imitation, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth, to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture, with this end, - to teach and delight. The object of all arts and sciences is to lift human life to the highest altitudes of perfection; and in this respect they are all servants of the sovereign, or poetry, whose end is well-doing and not well-knowing only. Virtuous action is, therefore, the end of learning; and Sidney sets out to prove that the poet, more than any one else, fulfils this end.

Showing the superiority of poetry to history and philosophy Sidney says that while the philosopher teaches by precept alone, and the historian by example alone, the poet conduces most to virtue because he employs both precept and example. The philosopher teaches virtue by showing what virtue is and what vice is, by setting down, in abstract argument, and without clarity or beauty of style, the bare principles of morality. The historian teaches virtue by showing the experience of past ages; but being tied down to what actually happened, that is to the particular truth of things and not to general possibilities, the example he depicts draws no necessary consequence. The poet alone accomplishes this dual task. What the philosopher says should be done, is, by the poet, pictured most perfectly in some

one by whom it has been done, thus coupling the general notion with the particular instance. The philosopher, moreover, teaches the learned only; but the poet teaches all, and so is, in Plutarch's phrase "the right Popular philosopher." He seems only to promise delight, and moves men to virtue unawares. But even if the philosopher excels the poet in teaching, he can not move his readers to virtuous action as the poet can, and this is of higher importance than teaching, for what is the use of teaching virtue if the pupil is not moved to act and accomplish what he is taught? On the other hand, the historian deals with particular instances, with vices and virtues so mingled together in the same personage that the reader can find no pattern to imitate.

The poet improves upon history, he gives examples of vice and virtue for human imitation; he makes virtue succeed and vice fail, and this history can but seldom do. Poetry does not imitate nature, it is the reader who imitates the example of perfection presented to him by the poet. He is thus made virtuous. Poetry, therefore, conduces to virtue, the end of all learning better than any other art or science.

The basis of Sidney's distinction between the poet and the historian is the famous passage in which Aristotle explains why poetry is more philosophic and of more value than history. The poet deals, not with the particular, but with the universal - with what might or should be, not with what is or has been. But Sidney, in the assertion of this principle, follows Minturno and Scaliger, and goes farther than Aristotle would probably have gone. All arts have the works of nature as actors follow the lines of their play. Only the poet is not tied to such objects, but creates another nature better than nature herself. For going hand in hand with nature, and being enclosed not within her limits, but only by, the zodiac of his own imagination." he creates

a golden world in place of Nature's brazen; and in the sense he may be compared as a creator with God. Where shall you find in life, asks Sidney, such a friend as Pylades. Such a hero as Orlando, such an excellent man as Aeneas?

Furthermore, he defends poetry vigorously against the puritans' charges, and says that it is not the mother of lies; it is the oldest of all branches of learning and removes ignorance. It delights as well as teaches. Poetry does not mislead and debase the mind of man by turning it to wantonness and by making it unmasculine and effeminate; it is man's wit that abuses poetry; and poetry that abuses man's wit; and as to making men effeminate, this charge applies to all other sciences more than to poetry, which in its description of battles and praises of valiant men stirs courage and enthusiasm. Lastly, it is pointed out by the enemies of poetry that Plato, one of the greatest of philosophers, banished poets from his ideal Commonwealth. But Plato's Dialogues is in reality themselves a form of poetry.

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