

“A MEDICINE OF CHERIES”: THE LANGUAGE OF PROFIT IN SIDNEY’S *DEFENCE OF POESIE*

BERTA CANO ECHEVARRÍA
M^a EUGENIA PEROJO ARRONTE
University of Valladolid

The rise of Puritan ideas in the second half of the sixteenth century gave way to a number of attacks against poetry apparently based on moral grounds. One of the most famous examples in Gosson’s “The School of Abuse”, which was dedicated to Philip Sidney. Some time later Sidney wrote his *Defense of Poesie*, which has been understood since as a reply to Gosson’s arguments against poetry. Apart from the moral debate, we can read in Gosson’s work an indirect attack against idleness, a mark of identity of the aristocracy. To countervail this idea Sidney uses a language tinged with a vocabulary that makes of poetry a Puritan value based on the ideas of profit, usefulness and action. Both Sidney and Gosson hide behind a moral screen to enter a debate that deals with the social conflict between the aristocracy and the rising middle class that was taking place at the moment.

Philip Sidney designs his *Defence of Poesie* almost like a military campaign. Following the established stages of oratory, he develops a strategy where the tactics consist in blocking all the fronts and filling the possible gaps to avoid any weak points from where to be attacked. The fact that Sidney develops arguments based on different, sometimes contradictory, justifications has given way to divergent interpretations as to whether Sidney’s *Defence* is ascribable to traditional neoplatonist ideas, or to more advanced views about the relation of fiction to reality (Levao 1979: 230). Similarly, it is uncertain whether Sidney aligns himself with the more moralistic positions, or this is just a screen to defend the right to seek pleasure and enjoyment from literature. “Which is Sidney’s real position?” we can ask ourselves; and a possible answer to this question is “All and none at the same time”.

As a matter of fact, in the introductory paragraph of the *Defence*, after recounting in a comical-ironical tone how Esquire Pugliano had spoken to persuade his audience that horses and horsemen were the most noble creatures and subjects in a State, Sidney concludes that he learnt a lesson from this speech “that selflove is better than any guilding, to make that seem gorgious wherin our selves be

parties” (3).¹ And he goes on to tell us that he is going to follow the example of Pugliano (whom he calls “his maister”), only this time defending that in which he himself is party. This way of introducing his *Defence* should make us at least suspicious that what follows could be no more than an exercise of the same order as Pugliano’s and that his point is to make poetry “seem gorgeous” and not necessarily to demonstrate it is. This way Sidney gives us a clue that we should better bear in mind in order to take Sidney’s argumentation from a more distant point of view.

A way of creating this “seeming of gorgeousness” is by using the enemy’s weapons as a tactic of the “defence”. Sidney’s *Defence of Poesie* is full of references to the “profit” and “fruitfulness” of poetry that can be read as a direct response to one of the main accusations in Stephen Gosson’s *Schoole of Abuse* against poetry. Gosson is only one among the voices that during the sixteenth century arose to reprove “Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters, and Such Like Caterpillers of a Commonwealth”. Other named authors such as William Tyndale or John Northbrooke had already accused poetry of corrupting society, and this had been followed by severe indictments directed by ministers from their pulpits, specially after the Theatre had started its business outside the city walls. But Stephen Gosson’s pamphlet had an unprecedented echo, and moreover, it was dedicated on its title page to Philip Sidney. His attack on poetry was primarily based on moral concerns; the longest part of the essay was dedicated to describe the immorality that could be seen in the theatres of his time, both on the stage and among the audience, but on its final part he directs an accusation towards poets whom he considers mere “contemplators” “studying all things and professing nothing” and pictures them as “idle” members of the commonwealth (Gosson: 266). This last argument is what Sidney tries to challenge.

In his article “Moving and teaching: Sidney’s *Defence of Poesie* as a Protestant Poetic”, Andrew D. Weiner wonders why there was a need to defend poetry in Sidney’s time since Plato’s attack had been there for a long time without arousing any reply, and Gosson’s is largely directed at the popular drama. Certainly, at first sight, Sidney’s work does not seem the answer that Gosson’s attack would require. However, if we look deep into *The School of Abuse*, we find that there are certain passages which have their just reply in the *Defence*, though they do not constitute in themselves an open charge against anything directly related to poetry. The most significant of these passages appears nearly at the end of the work: Gosson is writing about the futility of a complaint when a solution is not sought; this is his excuse for a long paragraph where there are stated ideas such as:

...so should the whole body of the commonwealth consist of fellow labourers (...). From the head to the foot, from top to the toe, there should nothing be vain, no body idle (...). The mean must labour to defend the mighty, the mighty must study to defend the mean (...). No man is born to seek private profit—part for his country, part for his friends, part for himself. (266)

Gosson puts an emphasis on the benefit of work, but in an oblique way he

1. Our emphasis. The same applies to all the items underlined in the quotations.

is directing an accusation towards the social class that made of idleness one of its marks of identity in the sixteenth century, the aristocracy.

Sidney and Gosson are representative of two different social classes and their dispute can be seen, not only as a moral debate about the virtues or vices of poetry, but as a discussion of the values that both social classes esteem or despise. The severe social changes that had taken place by the end of the sixteenth century led the aristocracy to an abandonment of their military activities and an extension of their time of leisure. The aristocracy was increasingly becoming “idle” and seeking “pleasurable” activities while the rising middle class was acquiring power. Both social classes are seeking their new place and status in society, and while the aristocracy defend themselves from the intrusion of this rising class by inventing new privileges and exclusions, the middle class judges with resentment the social parasitism of the former. Robert I. Matz refers to Lawrence Stone’s *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* to support this idea:

...the decline in the warrior role of the aristocrat and the increase in social mobility during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries led to a significant growth in conspicuous consumption and leisure among the aristocracy. (1994: 20-1)

Sidney was an aristocrat by birth, and Gosson a regular member of the middle class, but we cannot regard them as complete opponents because they also shared fundamental principles. Both were dedicated to the literary activity and both were convinced protestants, each from his particular position. The defence of the pleasure of literature that is made by Sidney is sustained, therefore, in one of the most established principles of the mercantile moral of the middle class: “profit”.

Obviously, Horace’s *Ars Poetica* lies behind Sidney’s words. In this case, the question is what kind of benefit is intended by Horace’s “prodesse”? There is a possibility that at least in its first occurrence in the *Ars* (333), the Roman poet was taking into account the greed for business characteristic of his fellow citizens. The rendering of “prodesse” as “profit” in Drant’s 1567 translation suggests that something very similar was taking place in the Renaissance (Matz 1994: 2-3). The first use of “profit” in the sense of pecuniary gain is registered by the OED in 1604, a date not very far from the supposed year of composition of the *Defence*.

The language of the *Defence* is tinged with a vocabulary and a repertoire of expressions that reproduce the interest of the middle class for profitable activities while it is defending the right to seek pleasure of the aristocracy. It is significant how the language of profit and activity pervades Sidney’s work. The key passages are to be found in the part where Sidney considers all the objections made against poetry and tries to give an answer to all of them. The crucial charge as declared by Sidney is the uselessness of poetry; considering that there exist many other more fruitful knowledges, a man might better spend his time in them than in poetry. Curiously enough, the objection as it appears in the text is ambiguous regarding the stand taken by the author: either that of the writer or that of the reader. The answer dissolves the ambiguity by referring to both: by means of a syllogism supported by the argumentation presented in the previous pages, he concludes that “inck and paper cannot be to a more

profitable purpose employed”; and a little further down he denies “that there is sprung out of earth a more fruitfull knowledge” (28). Therefore, both the poet and the reader of poetry are fully justified in their activities from the point of view of their usefulness. There is no waste but profit in the act of writing or reading poetry. It is not a leisurely activity. However, it could be argued that the use of adjectives such as “profitable” and “fruitfull” is perfectly consistent with the context in which they are inscribed.

Nevertheless, in some other places, there appear expressions similar to these that do not seem to be required in their contexts. This is what happens when Sidney is defending poetry from the charge of its being an art of lies and he affirms: “So in Poesie, looking but for fiction, they shal use the narration but as an imaginative groundplat of a profitable invention” (29). The adjective “profitable” does not seem strictly necessary here, and besides its occurrence brings back again the idea of the usefulness of poetry reminding us of Gosson’s accusations. Similarly, the vocabulary is quite peculiar in a conclusive passage which runs as follows: “And so a conclusion not unfitly ensue, that as vertue is the most excellent resting place for al worldly learning to make his end of, so Poetry, being the most familiar to teach it, and most Princely to move towards it, in the most excellent worke, is the most excellent workman” (21-22). Where the word “workman” would only have an explanation if understood within the context of Gosson’s words. We can observe that Sidney is not only putting forward arguments to contradict Gosson, but he is dressing up his whole discourse with references to the efficacy and profit that surround the whole business.

As a matter of fact, all through the essay, the author uses a number of expressions that try to reconcile two apparently contradictory tendencies: “idleness” and “usefulness”. This is best illustrated with the most famous quotation of the essay: “that delightfull teaching.”, but is also present in expressions such as “fruitfull knowledge”, “profitable invention”, “verteous action” which put together two different aspects of human behaviour, the one directed to action and the other to contemplation, and although they are not mutually excluding or complete opposites like in an oxymoron, their mixture enhances their contrast. The same happens with the metaphor which Sidney uses to describe the double effect that should be produced by poetry: “a medicine of Cheries” (21), which contains in it the benefit or usefulness that is sought by the mercantile mentality and the delight and relish that the activities of the new aristocracy involve.

Analyzing more carefully these instances we can see that in those parts where the ethical criterion is more openly put forward, Sidney is very careful to lay the stress on action and not on virtue or knowledge alone. He recovers the Aristotelian distinction between *gnosis* and *praxis* in order to emphasize the importance of the latter:

...all these are but serving sciences; which as they have a private end in themselves, so yet are they all directed to the highest end of the mistress knowledge by the Greeks architectoniké, which stands as I think, in the knowledge of a mans selfe, in the Ethike and Politique consideration, with the end of well doing, and not of well knowing onely. (11)

And a few lines further down, he writes:

So that the ending end of all earthly learning, being verteous action, those skills that most serve to bring forth that, have a most just title to be Princes over al the rest: wherein if we can shew, the Poet is worthy to have it before any other competitors. (12)

This argument is picked up again in the reply to the objections when a new one of these is stated: "They aledge herewith, that before Poets began to be in price, our Nation had set their hearts delight upon action, and not imagination, rather doing things worthie to be written, than writing things fit to be done" (31). Sidney's answer sides partially with the objection when he writes: "...it is manifest that all government of action is to be gotten by knowledge, and knowledge best, by gathering manie knowledges, which is reading" (31). He agrees that action is what matters when knowledge is at stake. His argument, however, is rather weak in this case: it does not follow so clearly that "action is to be gotten by knowledge" at least, according to Aristotle's epistemology, whom, as we have seen, he is following for the ethical considerations. Aristotle states that we learn to do what must be done after having learnt by doing (*Ethics*, II 1, 1103a30-1103b6). Consequently, knowledge derives from action and not action from knowledge. In any case, this is his strategy: to reverse the argument.

Now the question is, to what type of action is Sidney referring to? Surely when Gosson talks about "labour" and "works" he implies activities that have to do with palpable benefits. Robert I. Matz argues that it is military action that he is talking about. That is, the kind of action that had been common among the aristocracy: the warrior service, and which was not so any longer. This would be the proper place for the leisure class according to Gosson in Matz's interpretation of his work (1994: 20-29). However, in all likelihood, *The School of Abuse* was not the only attack against poetry that Sidney bore in mind when he wrote his *Defence*. Russell Fraser has laid the stress on the shift to mercantile enterprise and mercantile values in the Renaissance: "The polemical literature of the period demonstrates conclusively the existence of an economic motive in the attack on poetry and plays" (1970: 53). The warrior service would not be, therefore, the kind of activity expected from the leisure class by all these attackers. It seems that, in a way, Sidney is aware of it. His use of the vocabulary that has to do with work, action and profit cannot be anything else but a reply to objections of this kind. Still, a gap remains when one tries to interpret Sidney's words related to action as something that refers to a palpable activity or benefit. Sidney's ideas are stated in a language and train of thought borrowed from the classics, mainly Horace and Aristotle, which, in a way, work merely as a mask worn to protect the kind of (in)activity enjoyed by the aristocracy while at the same time, in their linguistic outward appearance, they meet the demands of the protestant bourgeoisie. This may be due to the fact that in his defence of poetry Sidney takes as his the values that appear in the attacks. He does not want to abandon either faction, as his militant protestantism committed him to the ideas of the rising middle classes. In this sense, Gosson's dedication of the *School of Abuse*

to him could be understood as an indication of that commitment. At the same time, in his lifelong aspirations to achieve a status within the aristocratic circle, he felt obliged to defend its way of life.

REFERENCES

- Fraser, R. 1970: *The War Against Poetry*. Princeton, Princeton UP.
- Gosson, S. 1579: *The Schoole of Abuse*. > Hebel, J. William et al. ed. 1952: *Prose Works of the English Renaissance*. New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Levao, R. 1979: Sidney's Feigned Apology. *PMLA* 94: 223-233
- Matz, R. 1994: For Profit and Pleasure: The Writing of Social Transformation in Elyot, Sidney and Spenser. Diss. Johns Hopkins University.
- Sidney, P. 1968: *The Defence of Poesie*. > Feuillerat, Albert ed. 1968: *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*. Cambridge, C.U.P.
- Stone, L. 1965: *The Crisis of the Aristocracy. 1558-1641*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.