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A "DIVINE CONSIDERATION" : *UTOPIA* IN SIDNEY'S *DEFENCE OF POETRY*[1]

Sir Philip Sidney's commendation of *Utopia* and Thomas More in his *Defence of Poetry* is well-known, but the whole of his complicated comment is less so :

> But even in the most excellent determination of goodness, what philosopher's counsel can so readily direct a prince, as the feigned Cyrus in Xenophon ; or a virtuous man in all fortunes, as Aeneas in Virgil ; or a whole commonwealth, as the way of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*? I say the way, because where Sir Thomas More erred, it was the fault of the man and not of the poet, for that way of patterning a commonwealth was most absolute, though he perchance hath not so absolutely performed it.[2]

The commendation is as problematic as it is emphatic : Sidney commends More's "way of patterning" Utopia as "absolute" ("perfect"[3]) but immediately seems to contradict himself by adding the qualification. Further, the commendation is unique in the *Defence* in its demonstration of the benefits of poetry for something apparently other than the mind and conscience of an individual : the "way" of *Utopia*, Sidney claims, can "readily direct" a "whole commonwealth." The unexplained nature of this direction and of the "way" of *Utopia* that Sidney praises are enigmas for the modern reader.

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[1] I wish to thank Professor Jean R. Brink both for bringing the topic of this paper to my attention and for advising me generously on the early drafts.

[2] In *Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan Van Dorsten (Oxford : Clarendon P, 1973), 86-7. References to *A Defence* are to this edition, cited in the text by page numbers.

[3] *OED*, second ed., s.v. "absolute" #4 : "consummate, finished, complete, perfect." I interpret this word to imply that More conceived a perfect ideational archetype upon which *Utopia* is based, an implication that reflects the Platonism of Sidney's argument. All meanings cited from the *OED* in this paper are consistent with Elizabethan usage.

Understood in context, however, the commendation is clear in meaning, and its ostensible problems add to its interest. Alleging that More "erred," Sidney prosecutes his strategy to "speak of the art, not of the artificer" (89) : whatever are *Utopia*'s errors, they do not detract from the literary excellence that makes More's work an exemplary artistic achievement. *Utopia*'s power to inform the "most excellent determination of goodness" derives from the genius implicit in the "way" of poetic creation practiced by its author, one of the few poets who have reached "the high top of their profession" (87). Sidney essentially commends More's "way of patterning" the commonwealth in *Utopia* as the exemplification of the method of the "right poet," the type of the ideal literary artist described in the *Defence*.

Since the meaning of Sidney's commendation depends on its context within his argument, I shall begin to interpret the commendation by tracing that argument. After explaining Sidney's basis for his defense of poetry in its power to move readers to virtuous action, I shall examine his description of the artistic method of the right poet, through whose works the power of poetry is manifested. *Utopia* will be shown to exemplify right poetry, and the terms of Sidney's commendation will be defined and its qualifications explained in relation to the argument that contains it. Finally, I shall discuss what the commendation reveals concerning the literary theory implied by *Utopia*.

Sidney's emphatic endorsement is not only intriguing in its complex ambiguity, but also important for our view of More and Sidney as literary artists. The appreciation favors both the imaginative power of *Utopia* and its integrity, qualities from which the notorious abundance of interpretations can distract us. Sidney's commendation bears upon our conception of him, as well : that the paradigmatic Elizabethan Protestant aristocrat expressed public approval of a work by a Catholic author executed as a traitor, a work, moreover, that likely contradicted some of Sidney's most basic values, impels us to ask what it was in *Utopia* that appealed to him, and why it did so.

I. The *Defence* as Rhetorical Context

The force of Sidney's commendation appears when we consider how and where he uses *Utopia* as an example within his argument. Before examining the design of that argument, however, we must consider the issue of its intent, an issue raised by the literary style of the *Defence*. Sidney presents his arguments in the form of an oration, writing as if he were speaking, gliding back and forth between irony, theoretical explanation, and practical observation. His *sprezzatura* has caused some critics to question his seriousness,[4] but others see no need to call the *whole* work ironic because *parts* of it are ; rather, the irony is one of many strategies used to mount a serious defense of poetry, Sidney's "unelected vocation."[5] The mix of strategies helps account for the popularity and charm of the *Defence*, which Katherine Duncan-Jones says conveys most vividly of all Sidney's works an impression of his personality.[6] The blend of strategies should therefore be understood to enhance the effectiveness of the argument rather than undermine it.

That argument consists substantially of a reply to Plato's notorious attack on tragic poetry in the *Republic*, represented by the statement that "all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers."[7] Perhaps stimulated by Socrates' concession to allow poetry in the ideal republic if someone could "show not only that she is pleasant but also useful to States and to human life" (607D), Sidney constructs such a defense. Poetry, he says, surpasses all other arts and

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4 Two examples are Ronald Levao, "Sidney's Feigned Apology," *PMLA* 94 (1979) : 223-33, and Martin N. Raitiere, "The Unity of Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*," *Studies in English Literature* 21 (1981) : 37-57. Raitiere's statement exemplifies the interpretation that the *Defence* means nothing of what it says : "Its medium [Sidney's argument] is *never* its message" (53). But see also Chapter II, "*The Defence of Poesie* as a Classical Oration" in Kenneth Myrick, *Sir Philip Sidney as a Literary Craftsman*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln : U of Nebraska P, 1965).

5 Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney : Courtier Poet* (New Haven : Yale UP, 1991), 233.

6 Duncan-Jones, 236.

7 Third ed., trans. Jowett (Oxford : Clarendon P, 1921), 595B. References to this work are to this edition, cited in the text by section. Plato's suspicions about poetry in the *Republic* are qualified rather than general (cf. 394D ff., 595A ff.) : a fact of which Sidney makes use in the *Defence* (107 ff.).

sciences because it both organizes knowledge and encourages its virtuous use. He summarizes : "As virtue is the most excellent resting place for all 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 work is the most excellent workman" (94). For Sidney, poetry is finally justified by being "the mistress-knowledge, by the Greeks called *architectonike*" (82) ; M. J. Doherty explains, "Poesie transcends all arts and sciences epistemologically by being their integrative moral purpose, their gnosis."[8]

The Power of Poetry

Sidney's assertion that poetry has unique potential for good in human affairs is grounded in Christian theology. Following Romans 7:18, he regards the human post-lapsarian condition to be such that "our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it" (79). This paralysis of volition is the central problem facing society, Sidney implies, and only poetry can solve it.[9] Echoing the Stoics, he asserts that human beings are often enough able to learn from nature what we ought to do ; however, he agrees with St. Augustine that "to be moved to do that which we know, or to be moved with desire to know, *hoc opus, hic labor est*" (91).[10]

[8] *The Mistress Knowledge : Sir Philip Sidney's* Defence of Poesie *and Literary Architectonics in the English Renaissance* (Nashville : Vanderbilt UP, 1991), xiv, xviii.

[9] For a discussion of the conflict between Sidney's apparent assertion of human self-sufficiency in his explanation of the beneficial power of secular poetry and his Calvinist assertion of human insufficiency, see Andrew D. Wiener, *Sir Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Protestantism : A Study of Contexts* (Minneapolis : U of Minnesota P, 1978), 28-50. Weiner infers from statements in the *Defence* such as that God "set [man] beyond and over all the works of that second nature : which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry" (79) that poetry is a sort of indirect manifestation of divine enablement ; see also notes 10 and 49.

[10] Sidney's emphasis on the importance of moving the will and the power of poetry to do so derives from Greco-Roman stylistics as mediated by the medieval homiletic tradition ; cf. St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York : Macmillan, 1958), IV.12 : "Just as the listener is to be delighted if he is to be retained as a listener, so also he is to be persuaded if he is to be moved to act. . . . [He] is moved by whatever . . . may be done through grand eloquence toward moving the minds of listeners, not that they may know what is to be done, but that they may do what they already know should be done."

To dramatize the inability of academic learning to bring *praxis* out of *gnosis*, Sidney turns from theology to burlesque personifications of moral philosophy and history. Philosophers "sophistically [speak] against subtlety, and [are] angry with any man in whom they see the foul fault of anger," while the historian comes "with old mouse-eaten records, authorizing himself (for the most part) upon other histories, whose greatest authorities are built upon the notable foundations of hearsay" (83). Of these, however, "our poet [is] the monarch. For he doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it" (91-2).

"Right" Poetry

The poets who are able to create works that entice readers to practice virtue are distinguished by Sidney as "right"[11] poets, and the description of their poetry and its production is the core of his argument. Right poets are distinguished from "divine" poets like David and "philosophical" poets like Lucretius (80 ff.) primarily by their use of imagination. Sidney relates the poetic imagination to two seemingly different modes of action, "making" (from the Greek root of "poet," *poiein*, "to make") and Aristotelian mimesis (77-80) : the poet is both a maker and an imitator. These concepts are considered to contradict each other by some scholars, who have variously explained the apparent inconsistency.[12] However, we need see no contradiction if we understand "make" and "imitate" to describe the process of poetic composition as it occurs on two different levels. Poets and all other writers imitate by necessity whenever they use language, since such use presupposes meanings related to a real world (i.e. to understand what More means by calling Utopia a commonwealth, we must know what a commonwealth is) ; therefore, fictional descriptions have meaning with

[11] Cf. Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 309 : "Of good [*recte*] writing the source and fount is wisdom" ; translation from *Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard UP).

[12] For examples of analysis of the contradiction and harmonization of the concepts, see D. H. Craig, "A Hybrid Growth : Sidney's Theory of Poetry in *An Apology for Poetry*," *English Literary Renaissance* 10.2 (1980) : 183-201 ; see also John C. Ulreich, Jr., "'The Poets Only Deliver' : Sidney's Conception of *Mimesis*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 15.1 (1982) : 67-84.

reference to that world.[13] The right poet does not move beyond this mimetic level of implicit referentiality so much as subsume it within one both artistically higher and more comprehensive, that of poetic making : imagining new combinations and reflections of nature's elements, the poet ranges "within the zodiac of his own wit" in his creative activity (78). Sidney's famous description of the purview of the right poet illustrates the subsumption of imitating within making :

> Only the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection [to the level of mere imitation], lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like : *so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts*, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. (78 ; my italics)

The right poet, Sidney says, does not abandon nature but creates a "golden world" through the use of her gifts.

Idea and Poem

Within the eclectic combination of elements constituting the argument of the *Defense*, the Platonic ideas are central, though their interpretation has long been debated.[14] Perhaps the most significant Platonic concept in the work is that the value of poetry does not inhere

[13] As A. D. Nuttall has pointed out in *A New Mimesis : Representation of Reality in Shakespeare* (London : Methuen, 1983), "Language grows when certain schemes prove operable in relation to the real. Literature, even that most thoroughly liberated from the constraints of realism, . . . lives in language, and the meanings with which it *plays* must first have *worked*, or they would not be meanings" (193). See this entire work, *passim*, but especially 163-193, 80-98, for an explanation and defense of the referential nature of fictional language consistent with the philosophical realism implicit in the *Defence*.

[14] For recent examples of treatments of the *Defence* emphasizing Sidney's Platonism, see, for example, Doherty, 145 ; S. K. Heninger, Jr., *Sidney and Spenser : The Poet as Maker* (University Park : Pennsylvania State UP, 1989), xii, 238, 396 ; F. Michael Krouse, "Plato and Sidney's *Defense of Poesie*," *Comparative Literature* 6 (1954) : 138-147 ; John P. McIntyre, "Sidney's 'Golden World,'" *Comparative Literature* 14 (1962) : 356-365 ; Forrest G. Robinson, *The Shape of Things Known : Sidney's* Apology *in Its Philosophical Tradition* (Cambridge : Harvard UP, 1972), 97-136.

essentially in a written product but in the "idea" that the product expresses. Sidney explains : "The skill of each artificer standeth in that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. . . . That the poet hath that *idea* is manifest, by delivering [things] forth in such excellency as he had imagined them" (79). Sidney relates the conceptual creations of poets to the written products that embody them in the same way that Plato relates the realm of ideas to the temporal world. As C. S. Lewis noted, the idea or concept is "what matters" to Sidney because for him it constitutes a reality surpassing nature.[15] Poets transcend nature's particularity by universalizing and so produce creations that convey a more complete, therefore more essential, representation of the idea embodied in a class than could a representation of any particular member of that class.[16] The transcendent nature of poetry accounts for its unique power to "strike, pierce, [and] possess the sight of the soul" (85). In affirming that poetry thereby causes "men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger" (81), Sidney answers Plato : poetry is uniquely beneficial to society.

Fiction and Truth

Perhaps Sidney's most difficult problem in the *Defence* is the necessity to defend a paradox. Plato had based his attack on the distance of fiction from truth (*Rep.* 596-598E) ; therefore, Sidney must defend fiction with regard to its untruth. He does so directly. Throughout the *Defence* he either asserts or implies that fiction leads to moral truth more effectively than do "truer" disciplines such as philosophy and history.[17] Just as the fiction of Nathan the prophet, though "itself feigned," carried an "application most divinely true" as

[15] *Poetry and Prose in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford : Clarendon P, 1954), 345.

[16] Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, IX.3 : "Poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts" (translation from the Loeb edition : *The Poetics* ; with "Longinus," *On the Sublime* ; Demetrius, *On Style*). Sidney quotes from the passage to support the superiority of poetry over history : see *Defence*, 88-89. See also Heninger, 295.

[17] Sidney concludes his discussion of the citation of Aristotle (*Poetics*, IX ; see note 16) by explaining that a poet may "frame his example to that which is most reasonable," whereas a historian must exhibit "the bare *Was*" in which "the best wisdom" is overruled by fortune (88).

evidenced by its effect in powerfully revealing to David his spiritual corruption (94),[18] so poetry, in which "a feigned example hath as much force to teach as a true example" (89), effectively teaches and promotes "moral doctrine, the chief of all knowledges" (99). Sidney boldly asserts the paradox that fictional imitation, by virtue of its powerful communication of moral truth, "hath the most conveniency to nature of all other" (92).

Sidney's commendation of *Utopia* must be understood within this context of paradox. It occurs at the point where, having toppled his strawman-historian and philosopher, he proves the superiority of poetry. This superiority is implicitly asserted in the indirect query immediately following the *Utopia* reference : "The question is, whether the feigned image of poetry or the regular instruction of philosophy hath the more force in teaching" (87). The paradox of the "feigned image" outdoing "regular instruction" in practical effectiveness is too powerful to be explained away ; Sidney therefore follows his own advice and supplements his discursive explanations with examples like *Utopia.*

II. Sidney's Approbation of *Utopia*

Sidney commends what he ambiguously calls the "way" of *Utopia,* a term the ambiguity of which is further complicated by its repeated use to signify two different relations of the work : the first to its audience and the second to its author. The first sentence of the commendation, pruned and syntactically simplified, would run like this : "What philosopher's counsel can so readily direct a whole commonwealth in the most excellent determination of goodness as the way of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*?" We should understand this first

[18] Margaret W. Ferguson notes concerning Nathan's parable that "it is the orator's application of his fable that produces moral change" rather than the fable itself ; however, this seems to exclude the possibility that the story itself was powerful once it was *understood.* Ferguson's observation actually confirms Sidney's point that right poetry is *referential* in relation to its underlying moral precept : Nathan's explanation relating the parable to its moral meaning allowed the imaginative power of the fiction to enforce that meaning by effecting David's moral and spiritual realization of guilt. See Ferguson, *Trials of Desire : Renaissance Defenses of Poetry* (New Haven : Yale UP, 1983), 160-62.

use of the term "commonwealth" to mean a body politic,[19] to members of which Sidney recommends More's work as a pattern for virtue. However, Sidney follows this recommendation with his central commendation, in which "way" seems to have a somewhat different sense : "That way of patterning a commonwealth was most absolute, though [Sir Thomas More] perchance hath not so absolutely performed it." This "way" relates the work to its author, who has "performed" ("carried out" or "executed"[20]) the "way of patterning a commonwealth." The importance of these distinct uses of "way" as the focus of Sidney's commendation demands that they each be discussed in detail, but I shall first summarize how both uses can best be understood.

The "way of *Utopia*" first mentioned by Sidney is most appropriately taken to mean the "course of action"[21] exemplified by the Utopians in founding and maintaining their commonwealth. Obviously, a reader would find this helpful in the "most excellent determination of goodness" that Sidney names as the rationale for reading exemplary works like *Utopia.* The later use of "way" cannot be understood to have this meaning, however ; there, Sidney distinguishes the "way of patterning a commonwealth" from the "way of *Utopia*" to which he first referred. The "way of patterning" refers instead to the artistic procedure by which More imagined the "idea" of *Utopia* ; in other words, it refers to More's exemplification of the method of the right

[19] Sidney's use of "commonwealth" reflects the emphases of the *OED* definition (#2) : "the whole body of people constituting a nation or state, the body politic ; a state, an independent community, especially viewed as a body in which the whole people have a voice or an interest." He first refers to the commonwealth with respect to its members ; next, discussing the "way of patterning a commonwealth," he refers to the commonwealth with respect to its shape as a communal entity.

[20] *OED*, s.v. "perform" #5 : "to carry out an action," perhaps with resonance of #3a : to execute a literary work, and #1, "to complete, finish, perfect."

[21] *OED*, s.v. "way" #13.

poet, Sidney's preoccupation in the *Defense*.[22] He means, "What more inspiring example could members of any commonwealth have to stimulate them to virtue than what they find in *Utopia*? Thomas More's artistic method in conceiving his picture of the ideal state was virtually perfect, even though his product fell short of that perfect conception."

The two meanings of "way," though distinct, are correlated. As the demonstrative helps to indicate, "that way of patterning" relates back to the "way of *Utopia*" as cause to effect : the "way" of the community (its design and function) exemplifies the results of More's "way of patterning." Sidney thus implies the unity of the "way" of More's artistic method and the "way" embodied in his literary realization by virtue of their connection with the poetic "idea," but he distinguishes poetic genius as it manifests itself in the composing process from the literary results of that process.

The "way of patterning a commonwealth"

Identifying More's "way" of patterning his commonwealth with the method of Sidney's right poet emphasizes that the commendation is essentially artistic, an emphasis consistent with the argument of the *Defence*. This method consists in a poet's "representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth" to produce "a speaking picture" (79-80). The basis of this representation, or what *is* figured forth, Sidney explains, is a moral concept or proposition, the "precept" of the moral philosopher (84) : the right poet will imaginatively "bestow that [precept] in colours upon you which is fittest for the eye to see" in order to depict the "outward beauty" of the virtue (81). Commending *Utopia*, Sidney thus approves More's "way" of artistic creation as one in which the fictional "idea" of the poet is constructed upon the moral precept of the philosopher. Understood in the context of Sidney's argument, therefore, the commendation leads us to ask what Sidney might have considered to be the foundational precept of *Utopia*.

[22] *OED*, s.v. "way" #14b : "literary style or method." The date of the first recorded usage of this obsolete meaning is listed as 1632 ; however, the more general meaning of "method of performing an action or operation" was current in Elizabethan usage. The context of the phrase "way of patterning a commonwealth" suggests that "way" be understood with the more specialized meaning.

Examples of the sorts of precepts that Sidney had in mind would help to determine what he might have considered to be the philosophical foundation of *Utopia*. Unfortunately, such examples are nowhere clearly set forth in the *Defence*. Sidney comes closest to providing them in places such as this one : "See whether wisdom and temperance in Ulysses and Diomedes, valour in Achilles, friendship in Nisus and Euryalus, even to an ignorant man carry not an apparent shining" (86). He implies that the Homeric characters exemplify the "figuring forth" of general categories of virtue more than they exemplify specific moral propositions ; later, though, a more specific example is cited from Xenophon in which Abradatas, servant of Cyrus, lies to the king's enemies in order to help him achieve a military victory, exemplifying the merit of "serving [a] prince by . . . an honest dissimulation" (89).[23] If the moral precepts embedded in the works of right poets may encompass everything from commendation of general virtues to recommendation of specific stratagems, we should infer that Sidney means to commend the referential *relationship* of fiction to moral philosophy rather than to promote any specific sort of precept.

The best clue to what Sidney might have admired concerning the precepts figured forth in *Utopia* is suggested by the familiarity with both Plato and Cicero that is advertised in the *Defence*,[24] both of whose writings, as is well-known, heavily influenced *Utopia*.[25] Cicero's

[23] Sidney refers to an incident in the *Cyropaedia* (VI.i.39) but substitutes the character Araspas ("Abradatas") for the King of Susa ; see *Defence*, 196, note for 89.20-1.

[24] Plato is referred to by name over ten times and Cicero over five ; Sidney (98) indirectly quotes *De officiis* (I.5.15), in which Cicero cites Plato (*Phaedrus*, 250) : "If the saying of Plato and Tully be true, . . . who could see virtue would be wonderfully ravished with the love of her beauty" ; Sidney adjures "diligent imitators of Tully and Demosthenes" to "devour [their works] whole, and make them wholly theirs" by "attentive translation" (117), from which we may reasonably infer that Sidney followed his own advice.

[25] Cf. Raphael's comment in Book I : "What if I told [royal councilors] the kind of things which Plato creates in his republic or which the Utopians actually put in practice in theirs?" (101) For a discussion of the relationship of Plato's ideal city to *Utopia*, see Kevin Corrigan, "The Ideal in the *Republic* and *Utopia*," *Moreana* 27.104 (1990) : 27-49 ; see also Edward Surtz, S. J., in Part II of the introduction, *Utopia*, ed. Surtz and J. H. Hexter, The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, vol. 4 (New Haven : Yale UP, 1965), clvi-clxii. References to this work are to this edition, cited in the text by page numbers.

famous description of charity in *De officiis*, for example, would assuredly have affected Sidney's evaluation of *Utopia*:

> But since, as Plato has admirably expressed it, we are not born for ourselves alone, but our country claims a share of our being, and our friends a share ; and since, as the Stoics hold, everything that the earth produces is created for man's use ; and as men, too, are born for the sake of men, that they may be able mutually to help one another ; in this direction we ought to follow Nature as our guide, to contribute to the general good by an interchange of acts of kindness, by giving and receiving, and thus by our skill, our industry, and our talents to cement human society more closely together, man to man.[26]

Socrates' summary description in the *Republic* of an ideal commonwealth as one in which "the ways of men" are made "agreeable to the ways of God" (501C) complements Cicero. Obviously, anyone impressed with the *Republic* and *De officiis* would find much to agree with in *Utopia*, in which the Platonic and Ciceronian emphasis on the *utilitas communis*, on productive and unselfish use of possessions, and on duty to the community are emphasized. Perhaps the familiarity of classical political philosophy to Renaissance humanists explains why Sidney found it unnecessary to discuss what precepts *Utopia* exemplified. In any case, an estimate of a fundamental precept for More's work consistent with Sidney's philosophical interests could be as simple as this, that a commonwealth should function to serve justly the welfare of all of its citizens.

Understanding that Sidney considers *Utopia* to exemplify the "figuring forth" of moral precepts, in the manner of right poetry as explained in the *Defence*, helps to clarify his verdict that More's "way of patterning a commonwealth was most absolute." That "way" is to begin with a principle such as that the commonwealth should be structured to promote every citizen's welfare, and then to assemble through art and ingenuity a complex "idea" of such a community. The

[26] I.7.22 ; translation from the Loeb edition (Harvard UP). See also Gerard Wegemer, "Ciceronian Humanism in More's *Utopia*," *Moreana* 104 (1990), 5-26.

way is "absolute" (perfect) with respect to its beginning in the ideal precept and its "figuring forth" of that precept in images reflecting the "fore-conceit," which the written work represents and partially though imperfectly communicates. Sidney thus praises More for following the poetic procedure that the *Defence* is concerned to explain : "[Right poets] be they which most properly do 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 considerations of what may be and should be*" (81 ; my italics).[27]

The commendation of More's "way of patterning a commonwealth" resembles in both diction and theme a passage in the *Republic* that illustrates what Sidney seems to mean by the "way" of the poet. Discussing in Book VI how "no State can be happy which is not designed by artists who imitate the heavenly pattern[28]," Socrates and Glaucon describe the process of imitation through which the ideal state is constructed : the designers begin with a "clean surface," upon which they will "trace an outline" of their design, "often [turning] their eyes upwards and downwards," at "absolute justice and beauty and temperance, and again at the human copy ; and will mingle and temper the various elements of life into the image of a man ; and this they will conceive according to that other image, which, when existing among men, Homer calls the form and likeness of God" (500E, 501A,B). Later Socrates says, "In heaven . . . there is laid up a pattern of [the ideal city], methinks, which he who desires may behold, and beholding, may set his own house in order" (592B). The thematic similarity of these passages to Sidney's commendation suggests that Sidney envisioned More as Plato's artist/philosopher, translating the celestial pattern into a terrestrial realization. Where Plato emphasizes the artist's apprehension of the divine realities, Sidney intensifies the emphasis,

[27] For the source of Sidney's prescription that right poets must teach and delight, see the recommendation of Horace that a poet mix *utile* with *dulce* (*Ars Poetica*, 343-4).

[28] Jowett translates as "pattern" the word *paradeigma*, here (500E) "a sculptor's or painter's model," and in 592B one of the "divine exemplars after which earthly things are made" (v. Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, ninth ed., s.v. *paradeigma*). It is likely that Sidney translates Plato's *paradeigma* as the gerund in the phrase "way of patterning a commonwealth" ; the translation associates More's "fore-conceit" of *Utopia* with the notion of the Platonic archetypes.

asserting that the right poet creates by ideation or "figures forth" the transcendent realities that the Platonic artist apprehends and copies. The Socratic remarks, which must have been familiar to Sidney in theme if not in detail, emphasize that he means to commend More as a poet/philosopher, who in *Utopia* transforms a "divine consideration" into a fictional embodiment.

The "Way" of *Utopia*

Sidney basically commends More's "way" or artistic method ; however, he earlier distinguishes the "way of *Utopia*" from the artist's "way of patterning" the commonwealth : "But even in the most excellent determination of goodness, what philosopher's counsel can so readily direct a prince, as the feigned Cyrus in Xenophon ; or a virtuous man in all fortunes, as Aeneas in Virgil ; or a whole commonwealth, as the way of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*?" (86) This "way" cannot be the artistic method to which Sidney's later use of the term refers ; it appears to be what in the work itself assists readers to the "most excellent determination of goodness." The "way" here must therefore refer to the "course of action" of *Utopia*, its description of the founding and maintenance of an ideal commonwealth.

Again, the vagueness of Sidney's term requires us to examine the context in order to determine its meaning : what might readers learn from the "way" of *Utopia*? Sidney suggests that they can receive from the work a "perfect picture" of the ideal citizen, virtuous according to the tradition of the Ciceronian *honestus*.[29] This perfect picture will "[replenish] the memory with many infallible grounds of wisdom, which, notwithstanding, lie dark before the imaginative and judging power" (86). Such a picture transforms propositional knowledge into "a true lively knowledge" (85), characterized by "familiar insight" (86) into moral principles and conduct, and capable of leading the knower from mere *gnosis* to virtuous *praxis* (91).

The context of Sidney's commendation thus suggests that *Utopia* will not so much teach individuals *how* to act virtuously as it will *move*

[29] See, for example, *De off.*, I.5.15-17.

them to practice what they already know.[30] The two other examples preceding the commendation support this. Primarily, it is not knowledge of moral precepts that Xenophon's Cyrus can supply to a prince or that Virgil's Aeneas can supply to a virtuous man, but an affective engagement with such knowledge that manifests itself in action. Sidney describes this later when he repeats the example of Aeneas : "How [Aeneas] governeth himself in the ruin of his country," his "preserving his old father," his "carrying away his religious ceremonies," and his "obeying God's commandment to leave Dido" are all paradigmatic examples of Roman *pietas* but would seem to have slight instructional value for an Elizabethan gentleman ; rather, says Sidney, their value lies in their capacity to "[inflame] the mind with desire to be worthy" (98). Just so does the "way" of *Utopia* serve a commonwealth. Sidney does not suggest that More's readers will be moved to become "utopians" by carrying out the precepts of Utopia in detail but that they can be moved by the enlarged vision that the work conveys to act virtuously with respect to their actual civic and social roles.[31] More, he implies, tells us less what to *do* than what to *want*.

Utopia, of course, supplies numerous examples of its capacity to prompt citizens to a magnified awareness of their status and duties. The magnanimity of Utopus in assigning his own soldiers to dig the defensive earthwork for the newly-founded commonwealth along with the conquered original inhabitants would have appealed to Sidney, whose admiration of magnanimity is famous.[32] The competition among the Utopians over caring for their gardens, the elections on the basis of worthiness, and the banishment of idle persons would have pleased one

[30] Sidney's implicit approval of the power of *Utopia* to move the will to virtuous action is a *via media* between the two most prevalent Elizabethan estimations of the work : a practical pattern, and a visionary impossibility. See Anne Lake Prescott, "Renaissance References to Thomas More," *Moreana* 70 (1981), 5.

[31] Cf. the comment of Socrates concerning the value of the heavenly pattern of the ideal city : "But whether such a one exists, or ever will exist in fact, is no matter ; for [the philosopher] will live after the manner of that city, having nothing to do with any other" (592B).

[32] Duncan-Jones doubts the authenticity of the anecdote of the wounded Sidney giving away his water bottle to a common soldier but considers that it "has a higher truth" (305).

who "spent a large part of his life rewarding merit."[33] Certainly, Sidney would have viewed the Utopians' spontaneous willingness to serve the commonwealth as a powerful "speaking picture" of virtuous citizenship. After all, despite its innovative structure, Utopia would not function without the sort of members who would be content with a single cloak, a plain house, reading philosophy instead of bearbaiting, and, fundamentally, seeking the common good over their own ; as the More character points out in Book I, "It is impossible that all should be well unless all men were good" (101).[34] Finally, whatever we might make of the organizational structure of Utopia, that structure along with its effective and harmonious functioning powerfully symbolizes the kind of social justice of which any admirer of Plato and Cicero would approve.

In considering *Utopia*'s appeal to Sidney, we must not overlook the numerous points of the work that coincided with his temperament and personal interests. For example, fascinated by the New World to the point of attempting to join an expedition of Drake, Sidney would have found intriguing the exploration motif in Raphael's account of his travels and the Utopian island's vague location.[35] More seriously, Sidney's personal conflict between his devotion and political allegiance to Protestantism and his attraction to Catholicism, manifested, for example, in his association with prominent continental Catholics,[36] would have caused him to appreciate the Utopians' insistence on the importance of the individual conscience in determining religious belief. His "innate loathing" for astrology and his disgust with superstition[37] corresponded with the Utopians' disregard of "all that infamous and

33 Duncan-Jones, 304.

34 Cf. Raphael's comment in Book I that "the chief reason why, though [Europeans] are inferior to [Utopians] neither in brains nor in resources, their commonwealth is more wisely governed and more happily flourishing than ours" is that Europeans are "far inferior to [Utopians] in application and industry" as exemplified in the diligence with which the Utopians make use of new knowledge that they gain from foreigners (107-109).

35 He was forbidden to accompany Drake by the queen ; see Duncan-Jones, 273-4.

36 See Duncan-Jones, 123-127.

37 Duncan-Jones, 50 ; see also 178, 187.

deceitful divination by the stars" (161). Similarly, as Duncan-Jones notes, Sidney's witnessing of instances of cruelty to animals early in life "may have stimulated him to align himself with the humanists Erasmus, More, and Calvin . . . as one who viewed the killing of animals except for food as a degrading and disgusting activity,"[38] an attitude expressed vividly in More's denigration of blood sports in *Utopia*.

"Where Sir Thomas More erred"

The puzzling qualifications included with the commendation help to elucidate its meaning. After praising the "way" of *Utopia*, Sidney adds, "I say the way, because where Sir Thomas More erred, it was the fault of the man and not of the poet" (86). By the repetition of "way," Sidney means to emphasize the course or tendency of the functioning of More's commonwealth (i.e. the way in which the highest good of its members is promoted) over the details. His imputation of error reflects Aristotle's discussion of artistic flaws in the *Poetics*. Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of errors[39] in poetry, the essential and the accidental:

> If a man meant to represent something and failed through incapacity, that is an essential error. But if his error is due to his original conception being wrong and his portraying, for example, a horse advancing both its right legs, that is then a technical error in some special branch of knowledge. . . . It is less of an error not to know that a female stag has no horns than to make a picture that is unrecognizable.[40]

Good poetry, Aristotle implies, can contain accidental but not essential errors, since convincing images can include technical flaws but cannot be unbelievable in their overall conception : "For poetic effect a convincing impossibility is preferable to that which is unconvincing though possible."[41] Following Aristotle, Sidney concedes that *Utopia*

38 *Ibid.*, 57.

39 XXV.5-6. Aristotle's word for poetic flaw is *hamartia*, the basic meaning of which is "failure" or "fault" (Liddell and Scott, s.v. *hamartema*).

40 XXV.6, 10.

contains accidental errors but implies that these minimally impair the quality of the work. The errors are "the fault of the man and not of the poet" ; in other words, despite technical mistakes due to human judgment, More's poetic achievement is exemplary.

Sidney's application of the word "error," with its Aristotelian denotation of a technical mistake, to *Utopia*, must mean that he considered the work to contain specific problems ; however, it is difficult to determine what he considered those problems to have been. As a royalist, he may have been affronted by Utopian democracy. He must have been bothered by the Utopians' reliance on treachery and strategem in war in preference to direct confrontation of enemies, and perhaps by *Utopia's* contradiction of the Elizabethan love of finery and by the criticism of the notion of aristocratic privilege implicit in the communal stucture of the commonwealth. Along with many, he may have taken offense at some of the ironic absurdities of the work, "the common meals and look-alike houses, the regimented dress and travel, the early-morning lessons and apprenticeship on farms, the naked betrothals and golden chamberpots," as Arthur Kinney rather cavalierly summarizes them.[42] In any case, Sidney's distinction of the "way" of More's commonwealth from its ostensible errors and the location of its excellence in the "way" suggest not only that the errors were beside the point in relation to his argument, but leave open the possibility that for him they enhanced the work by their symbolic, imaginative, or humorous appeal.

The qualification of the praise of *Utopia* might well reflect more than a literary judgment. Sidney's association with prominent Catholics on the continent and his warm relationship with St. Edmund Campion, a Jesuit priest by the time Sidney met him in Prague in 1577, may have caused important contemporaries to suspect that he held Catholic sympathies ; indeed, Duncan-Jones admits the possibility that Sidney was for a time a "discreet Catholic fellow traveller."[43] Canvassing for

41 XXV.27-28.

42 Arthur F. Kinney, *Rhetoric and Poetic in Thomas More's* Utopia (Malibu : Undena, 1979), 28-29.

43 Duncan-Jones, 127.

political office and driven by financial troubles in 1581, close to the time of the composition of the *Defence*, Sidney knew that his political future depended on his being perceived as a loyal Anglican.[44] It is reasonable to suppose that such a political necessity would have pressured Sidney to qualify any public appreciation that he expressed for the work of a prominent Catholic, especially one of the stature and reputation of More, no matter how much he might personally have appreciated that work.[45]

Sidney's commendation of the "way of *Utopia*" despite its alleged errors accords with a theoretical point explained near the end of the *Defence* : "In poesy, looking but for fiction, [readers] shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention" (103).[46] Sidney means that poetic inventions do not provide a literal pattern for virtuous action but stimulate readers to define and accomplish whatever such action is appropriate to their situation. Interpreted within its context, therefore, Sidney's commendation does not imply that *Utopia* provides a model for a perfect commonwealth. Like Aeneas and Cyrus, Utopia is more an inspiring stimulus than a practical pattern.

Sidney's further qualification of his commendation exemplifies his strategic use of Plato to defend poetry. Adding to his approbation of More's "way of patterning a commonwealth" that "he perchance hath not so absolutely performed it" (87), Sidney adverts to his theory of the "*idea* or fore-conceit," the essential poetic creation, which, echoing the Platonic doctrine of ideal forms, he privileges over "the work itself" (79). Sidney implies that More conceived a perfect ideational product but erred in depicting it ; however, *Utopia*'s imperfections do not substantially detract from its exemplary quality. Poets' attempts to

44 Duncan-Jones, 216-17 ; see also 151. She places the composition of the *Defence* around 1582 (230).

45 Doherty alleges that Sidney's criticism of *Utopia* results from his Protestant bias against More (121) but does not account for his Catholic friends and sympathies.

46 A. C. Hamilton, in "Sidney's Idea of the 'Right Poet,'" *Comparative Literature* 9.1 (1957) : 58, emphasizes this point : "[Sidney] sees poetry as a Garden of Adonis containing the forms to be planted as seeds in man's imagination. . . . What poetry presents is revelation, a vision of the golden world."

render their ideas are invariably inadequate with regard to the ideal conception, Sidney means, but their works nevertheless create an opportunity for readers to "make a leap of intuition from the poetic image to the vision of intellectual and moral truth."[47] Idealizing and objectifying "poetry" for the purpose of his argument, Sidney elevates the conceptual core over the visible poem and, by implication, poetry over poets : if there have been more excellent philosophers than excellent poets, "it is, I say again, not the fault of the art, but that by few men that art can be accomplished" (87). Sidney's consideration of More to be one of these few makes emphatic his praise of *Utopia*.

The fault-finding survey of contemporary English poets in the *Defence* supports the view that the criticisms of working poets are meant more to exalt "poetry" than to denigrate its earthly practitioners. Sidney praises Chaucer only for *Troilus and Criseyde*. The *Mirror of Magistrates*, Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*, and Henry Howard's lyrics are also favorably mentioned. Other than this, he affirms that he had seen "but few . . . printed that have poetical sinews in them" (112). Indeed, many in England were attempting to write "in despite of Pallas," proving that the "very true cause of [England's] wanting estimation is want of desert" (111). Even Sidney himself falls short of poetic distinction (111). This criticism contrasts with his unqualified praise of "divine" poets such as David who "did imitate the unconceivable excellencies of God" (80) and whose poems model the qualities for which secular poetry is praised (79). As Anne Lake Prescott has pointed out, Sidney's use of a work from the Christian canon to defend and illustrate excellence in secular poetry is logically inconsistent, since the former was produced through the help of divine inspiration. The Psalms exemplify right poetry so perfectly, however, that Sidney must include them among his examples,[48] emphasizing by

47 Doherty, 66.

48 "King David as a 'Right Poet' : Sidney and the Psalmist," *English Literary Renaissance* 19.2 (1989) : 147. Prescott does not mention that Sidney himself notices the incongruity of his linking the "holy name" of David with "poetry" and then finesses the problem, implying that the inconsistency will resolve itself for those who "look a little deeper into it" (79). Prescott's charge that Sidney was inconsistent in citing inspired poetry as an example of right poetry appears to ignore the Platonic precedent : for example, the *Phaedrus* (245A) contains a description of the *mania* that comes upon a secular poet from the Muses. Sidney, however, resolutely ignores throughout the

that inclusion both the exalted nature of "poetry" and the vast distance between the quality of the works of most poets and the potential magnificence of their art. All this suggests that critical rhetoric is being pressed into service for the purpose of elevating "poetry" : none but a divinely inspired poet such as David can perfectly render divinely conceived ideas.

III. The Theory of *Utopia*

By exemplifying his own conception of poetic "figuring forth" in referring to More's method and product, Sidney defends his paradox against Plato : fiction not only can lead to truth but can do so with unique effectiveness and powerful benefit for the community. *Utopia,* because of its enigmatic combination of the serious and the satirical, is a particularly interesting example for Sidney to have chosen. Obviously, its ability to combine *utilitas* and *festivitas* accounts for its perennial popularity ; however, the intended relationship of its ethical and delightful elements continues to be debated. If *Utopia* "pleads with earnestness," Henry W. Donner observed, "it moves to laughter also, and it is often difficult to say which vein prevails."[49] Commentators such as C. S. Lewis value the entertaining elements over the serious, placing *Utopia* "close to *Gulliver*" and "a long way from the *Republic*."[50] Taking issue with Lewis's view, R. J. Schoeck urges "that we consider and accept the book as having a serious purpose but argued through an ironic structure."[51] Perhaps, though, to privilege the distinction of entertainment from instruction in our interpretation of *Utopia* is less important than to recognize the architectonic

Defence the tradition of poetic madness and the "divine fury" associated with poetry in the classical tradition. See *Defence*, 188, note for 76.22 ff.

49 *Introduction to Utopia* (London : Sidgwick & Jackson, 1945 ; repr., Freeport : Books for Libraries, 1969), 10.

50 Lewis, 169.

51 R. J. Schoeck, "'A Nursery of Correct and Useful Institutions' : On Reading More's *Utopia* as Dialogue," in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, R. S. Sylvester and G. P. Marc'hadour, eds. (Hamden : Archon, 1977), 281. Schoeck's point recalls another influence of Plato on *Utopia* : More's ironic presentation in *Utopia* reminds us of Socratic irony.

combination of the two, a combination which, if it puzzles, also fascinates. It is this provocative combination, "figured forth" out of More's poetic genius and appreciated by Sidney, that accounts for *Utopia*'s capacity both to amuse and arrest its readers.

Sidney's commendation prompts the question : what would More have thought of the theory that his work is used to illustrate? While More wrote little about fiction, he occasionally suggests a view of its power in conjunction with the imagination similar to that of Sidney. The prefatory letter to Peter Giles, for example, has been interpreted by Elizabeth McCutcheon as an *ars poetica* for *Utopia*, a guide for More's own poetics and hermeneutics.[52] In the letter, More plays with his readers, pretending to prepare us to read a truthful, eyewitness account of the conversation reported in *Utopia* but actually presenting paradox and "artful indirection"[53] such as the assertion that he will "take the greatest care lest anything in the book be false," since "if anything should be in doubt, I'd rather tell a lie than lie, because I'd rather be honest than clever."[54] More here parodies legal casuistry to serve his illusion that a real Utopia is being seriously discussed. Ironically, the mock-serious parody in which an outrageous fiction is affirmed as the truth is in fact meant to lead us to truth. As McCutcheon explains, More's paradoxes and other puzzles offer us the opportunity to "complete, reverse, adjust, or in some other way overturn" them in order to move beyond them.[55] In other words, More engages us as Sidney describes, advocating what is essentially true through what is literally false.

More also instances the power of imagination through anecdotes in *A Dialogue of Comfort*. He follows St. Augustine[56] in depicting the capacity of mental images to produce both good and evil effects.

52 *My Dear Peter : The* Ars Poetica *and Hermeneutics for More's* Utopia (Angers, France : *Moreana*, 1983), 9.

53 McCutcheon, 48.

54 McCutcheon's translation, 95.

55 McCutcheon, 24.

56 *On the Trinity*, IX, X ; *Confessions*, X.

Imagination can do harm if illusions are conceived, but, helped by divine grace, can enable us to experience some semblance of the "uncogitable joy" of spiritual blessedness.[57] While More seems to differ from Sidney in emphasizing the necessity of grace to accomplish this productive use of imagination,[58] he demonstrates a similar awareness of the importance and potential power of a right use of imagination in the moral life.

More's substantial agreement with Sidney on the power of the imagination is less surprising than Sidney's choice of More's great work, a work that criticized or mocked much of what an Elizabethan aristocrat held dear, to illustrate the power of right poetry. Actually, however, Sidney's approval, along with the rest of the diverse and even contradictory praise that *Utopia* has elicited, itself demonstrates the profundity of his theory insofar as it reveals how a striking idea can fascinate even those who might reject its implications.

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57 Dale B. Billingsley, "Imagination' in *A Dialogue of Comfort*," *Moreana* 74 (1982), 60-61.

58 See, however, Wiener's discussion of Sidney's idea of "moving" (28-50) in which he emphasizes the dependence of the *Defence* on Calvinistic theology, notably in claiming that the method of right poetry implies divine agency. For a contrary view, see Craig (190-193), who notices an "exceptional confidence in human capacity" in Sidney's explanation of the conceptual and creative process of secular poets.