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Social and Political Thought

Study Notes for Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*

Sir Philip Sidney (anonymous) oil on panel, circa 1576

When you speak of a "Renaissance man" or "Renaissance woman" or "Renaissance person" today, which is to say a person of immense learning, sophisticated understanding, searching intelligence, broad abilities, spiritedness (or what Plato calls *thymos*), and courage, a person with a strong public presence and sense of duty, someone who succeeds in almost everything that they do, whether as a scholar or as a citizen, it is perhaps Sir Philip Sidney who comes most easily to mind as the historical exemplar. In his short life he was a poet and prose writer, a diplomat, a courtier, and a soldier, all tasks he did with considerable skill. Sidney was born into nobility and wealth in 1554. He put his immense privilege, which included a deep and wide education in languages, literatures, history, and culture, to very good use, and perhaps never more legibly so than in *An Apology for Poetry*, the text that we take up in this course. Nowhere else in Sidney's writings is his faith in the educability of human beings more evident and nowhere else does he make so explicit his abiding sense that 1) knowledge, not dogmatic belief, forms the basis for *well doing* (117), and that learning to take pleasure (or *delight*, as he says) in knowledge is the surest way–because the most humanely patient and understanding way–to help both individuals and communities move from knowing what virtue is to actually practicing virtue–i.e., from *gnosis*, as Sidney says, recalling the words of Plato's famous pupil, Aristotle, to *praxis* (123). All of the *Apology*'s densely learned sentences and paragraphs, its granular details and over-arching structure, is mobilized to teach these things. Curiosity, generosity, civility, learnedness, and virtuous action, coupled with and activated by a passion to teach, learn, and invent, are touchstones for Sidney's *ethic and politic consideration* (117). Where, precisely, do you see these powers at work in the *Apology*? A good place to begin is to trace the evidence of their importance throughout the text.

After his formal schooling, Sidney went on to live a short but truly extraordinary life, a life of learning and taking pleasure in learning which culminated in his work–his "cultural work," so to speak–in and around the complex court of Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth was the last of the great Tudor monarchs, an extremely powerful sovereign who oversaw the struggle to unify Great Britain, the consolidation of the Anglican Church as the nation's state religion, as well as the precipitous–and always precarious--rise of the country as a global power, mostly through the defeat–never assured--of European competitors (primarily Catholic Spain and Portugal), the enslavement of Africans, and the forcible extraction of the wealth of the lands that it colonized. Her reign brimmed with conflict and would set the stage for even greater conflict after her death in 1603, as we see in John Locke's lifetime (1632-1704). Sidney is acutely cognizant of this struggle, and both wonders and worries about the fate of education, thoughtfulness, and virtue–the elemental co-ordinates, as it were, of Sidney's work–amid an age that is riven by war, factionalization, religious conflict (often savagely violent), intolerance, and anti-intellectualism. Looking around, Sidney could not help but worry that things would only get worse–which is indeed what took place. Within a generation, England had become a "failed state" (to cite a phrase from a recent historian of the period), burdened by enormous social and political calamities through most of the century. To visit England then meant "entering into an unsettling, fantastical world," as the great scholar of early modern Britain puts it; with Elizabeth I's

accession to the throne came the latest wave "of conspiracies, suspicions, arrests, and executions, on top of the ordinary punishments meted out in a brutally punitive society." (For a vivid account of England in Sidney's day, see Greenblatt's short essay from the *New York Review of Books*, "Competitive Consumption.") It is no accident that this period sees the emergence of the work of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the great English political theorist who argued that human beings were inherently vicious and violent creatures and that only by making themselves answerable to a supreme sovereign, only by giving their lives over to that ruler, would there be anything like peace in the land. Without the absolutely firm hand of an all-powerful king, Hobbes argues, citizens will fight each other to the death. Sidney is appalled at that idea. As a humanist thinker, he concedes that human beings can be depraved but insists that they are not necessarily reducible to that depravity. They are more than hungry wolves preying on each other, which is how Hobbes will characterize humans in the years after Sidney's life. One possible word for that "something more" in human beings is "poetry." Amid the social and political chaos, Sidney senses a growing suspicion of "poetry" (and of the idea of expanding and complicating the very meaning of the word), and of the value of literary knowledge more generally. That deep distrust is a symptom, he argues, of a deeper misanthropy–i.e., a belief that human beings are unworthy of peace and virtue. What moral principles–if any--guide the actions of the sovereign, the Queen, and her courtiers, during such turmoil? (Sidney was counsel to the Queen, although his advice was sometimes ignored or rebuffed, perhaps most famously when he tried to warn the monarch against marrying Duke d'Alencon, the last of a series of suitors for her hand in marriage. Elizabeth rejected Sidney's advice, but ended up not marrying her much younger suitor anyways.) Why are elements of Christianity, of which Sidney was an unwavering adherent, so opposed to literary knowledge and literary practice, a knowledge and practice that for Sidney–among like-minded others in Britain–epitomizes a love of wisdom, an attachment to thoughtfulness, experimentation, and inventiveness? These are questions to which Sidney attempts to mount a vigorous answer in the *Apology.*

Sidney's life coincides almost exactly with Elizabeth I's Britain, so it is no surprise that a thinker who argues that *the ending end* [i.e., the culminating objective] *of all earthly learning* is *virtuous action* (117) ensures that his diverse writings–from poems to essays--are in a constant dialogue with the nation's understanding of itself and of its future. Consider for a moment the meaning of *earthly* in Sidney's phrase, *earthly learning*. It means that education for Sidney is both *of* this world and *for* this world, a terrestrially focused education in learning how to be a better "earthling," so to speak, among other "earthlings," not an education that orients itself mostly to a redeemed life after death. The education that matters most to Sidney, in other words, is one resolutely focused on what we do with and make of the time that we have given to us on the planet. *Earthly learning* prepares us for the labour of a more virtuous life on earth, a life informed by the exemplars of virtue (and failure) that so vividly populate literature (or "poetry")--so Sidney spends no energy at all worrying about the ultimate fate of the soul or the consolations of faith.

Sidney's focus on the here and now also sets him apart too from the rich and powerful who sought to shore up the wealth of the "first" British empire, most often by dispossessing others. So Sidney is at odds with certain Christians for whom the true rewards of life lie in heaven, *and*, it should be added, with others who sought material gain by extracting the resources

of the Earth. Sidney's concern is rather with Britain's intellectual riches, its capacity to draw upon a deep and wide well of learning going back to the ancient Greeks, which, by rights, should form the basis for building a *commonwealth* founded on goodness. Such is the bold and brave premise of *An Apology for Poetry*; for its author, both education and justice, knowledge and virtuous action towards others, go hand in hand, a lesson that he would have learned from Plato, a thinker to which he refers many times (Where? What exactly does Sidney make of Plato? In what ways does he make use of his work?). Alas, Sidney died far too soon, a relatively young man at the age of 32, from grievous wounds that he received on a battle-field in Holland–*doing well*, he hoped, both for God and in the service of his beloved queen. (See the engraving after Benjamin West's rather sentimental painting of the death of Sidney–made more than two centuries after his death--reproduced below on page 14. You might notice what is located at the dead centre of the painting–a canteen of water. The scene recalls a famous story about Sidney's death: as he lay dying, he insisted that water meant for him be offered to another wounded soldier. In other words, the painter puts Sidney's virtuous well-doing at the centre of the scene, signaling to us that he practiced what he taught up to the very end of his life. [You will recall that Socrates says that he will do the same. Where? What are Socrates' exact words?]), Sidney died fighting the Catholic armies of the Spanish; but he was also defending the fledgling republic of The United Provinces of the Netherlands (the "Dutch Republic"), an early experiment in Protestant self-rule that was not simply under the control of an absolute monarch like Elizabeth I. As much as he sought to blunt the anti-intellectualism of the sectarian forces within Britain, he was killed in the service of sectarian violence abroad, while Queen Elizabeth sought to ensure that her Protestant empire thrived and grew in the wider world. Was he ever given the opportunity to bring *an ethic and politic consideration* to bear on his actions on the battlefield, or, as a loyal subject of the Queen, did he have no choice but to fight the Catholics, i.e., those whom his sovereign had been declared to be the single greatest enemy of the state? Recent biographies of Sidney have argued that he shared little of Queen Elizabeth's animosity towards Catholics but that he had no choice but do what she commanded of him as a loyal subject when it came to fighting them. As a young person he had traveled extensively in Europe and met many European sovereigns and courtiers and diplomats; he had witnessed terrible atrocities against Protestant minorities in Catholic dominated lands. He returned to England to counsel Elizabeth I to seek ways to make peace rather than pursue fanatical wars against the Catholics. But all to no avail. Perhaps he made a kind of devil's bargain: in exchange for access to Queen Elizabeth and indeed to the broader British nobility, he consented to be a warrior for her prosecuting the Protestant cause in Europe. Sidney was given an enormous state funeral–sometimes reported to be the largest every held until the funeral of Sir Winston Churchill in the 20th century. To be sure, his funeral was "political" in nature: he was remembered as a martyr to the cause of Protestantism. And yet among the many thousands who witnessed the funeral were others who saw in Sidney the promise of something better. William Shakespeare was among those others.

Elizabeth 1 ("The Darnley Portrait), c. 1575

The *Apology for Poetry* was written a few years before Sidney's death from an infected war-wound in 1586 but was not published as a printed text until 1595, although the text had circulated widely among colleagues in the court and at the universities. It was not unusual at the time for authors to "publish" their work in this way, i.e., through channels of acquaintance that helped knit together a diverse if elite group of the nation's leading thinkers, courtiers, and administrators. In other words, initially Sidney is speaking quite pointedly and intimately to a relatively small circle in Britain rather than through the highly mediated and widely cast form of the printed essay or book. He means to get those holding his manuscript in their own hands to prick up their ears because, in effect, he is speaking directly to them! He means for them to see themselves in his pages, and to see themselves as they might be too. To understand the *Apology* means first to understand the complex historical context in which it was written, i.e., the specific–and indeed roiling--social and political conditions from which it emerges and to which it is in a sustained and dynamic dialogue. Now, as you know, every text has a context, indeed, many contexts, and the *Apology* is certainly no exception. What then was the setting in which the *Apology* appears? By chance, Sidney comes of age in the midst of a powerful artistic and intellectual efflorescence in Britain (as indeed across Europe), a moment that sees an unusual resurgence or "renaissance" in the creation of poetry, fiction, essays, plays, and scientific treatises, among other products of the critical imagination. For a long time this period was called "the Renaissance," emphasizing the degree to which its most influential thinkers drew sustenance from intellectual bounty of the classical Greek and Roman past, two millennia earlier. –A period of rebirth. But over the course of your lifetime, Sidney's time frame has been renamed "the Early Modern Period," the better to emphasize the ways in which that time frame anticipates and shapes some of the most important features of the modern world. In any case, this is the inaugural moments of a flowering of British intellectual life, the age which will eventually include, for example, the playwright and poet, Ben Jonson (1572-1637), the philosopher, scientist, play-wright, Margaret Cavendish (who also wrote a remarkable early science-fiction text, *The Blazing World* [1666]), and William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the poet and play-wright who, immediately after Sidney's death, captured the imaginations of Britons by immersing them theatrically–i.e., gathering unusually heterogeneous groups together in one place to experience universes of Shakespeare's own making, universes in which Britons were invited to see what they were and could be and to experiment with watching worlds that were at once wholly different from their own and strangely familiar. (Shakespeare was careful and close reader of Sidney's work especially in literary work. Sidney fabulous series of sonnets, *Astrophel and Stella*, clearly inspired Shakespeare to write his famous series of sonnets; and Shakespeare borrowed scenes and characters from Sidney's great prose romance (i.e., a narrative of love gained and lost, of daring-do, of disguises and intrigue), *Arcadia*, for some of his own plays.) These fictional worlds remain in some sense answerable to both religious and royal authority, but what is intriguing is that they also constitute realms of thought and pleasure that are palpably not in control of those authorities either. In the greatest literature of the period and in literature going back far before the time of Plato and Socrates, in what Sidney calls "poetry," Britons glimpse and experience the first inklings of what will come to be called the public sphere, a region of thinking

and talking and writing, and a realm of communication that is to some extent at odds with the authorized spheres, the ones more directly beholden to the powers of the state and church. These are zones of invention, *making*, that celebrate their status as invented and *made* and that affirm the human power to create.

This period–in the latter half of the 16th-century--also witnesses the emergence of empirically or observationally based scientific investigations into the nature of things, investigations that affirm the singular powers of human reason to probe and understand how the world works. Rational analysis, rooted in the evidence of the senses, becomes the new standard for knowledge, rather than accepted and undemonstrated wisdom. John Locke, whose *Second Treatise of Civil Government* we also take up, will be the direct inheritor of that renewed emphasis on rational deliberation and the reasonableness of human beings. The drive for colonial domination–which subjugates peoples and robs them of the resources–also, after a fashion, exposed Britons to new worlds, new cultures, and a sense–always troubling–that they were but one civilization among many in a very wide and still evolving world. This is a period in which literate and learned individuals like Sidney steep themselves in the vast library of materials–poems, plays, essays, scientific treatises, philosophical speculations, among many others–flowing from Greek and Roman antiquity. Two thousand years after these materials had originally been written, this enormous compendium of knowledge is reactivated, although not without some opposition from quarters in England that treated this knowledge as compromised because developed by "pagans" and thus without the benefit of the Christian revelation of God (*they had not the light of Christ*, as Sidney says, throwing a bone to those Christians [137], but not sharing their worry in the slightest. We can say this because although Sidney may *say* classical authors lack "light" he always treats them as enormously illuminating). Sidney emerges from and in turn contributes to this swirling moment in the history of European culture that affirms the human capacity to *make* things–i.e., to fashion communities and to fashion themselves, and thus to have the experience, as Sidney says of the poet, of being *lifted up with the vigour of his own invention* (113). (Hint: Consider the sentences in which this remark is set; they contain one of the principal theses of the *Apology*, one of the central claims that Sidney makes for the practice of knowledge that he calls "poetry.") That's one reason why, early on in his *Apology*, Sidney celebrates the ancient Greek definition of poetry as *Poiein*, a term which means *"to make"* (113): *But now, let us see how the Greeks named it, and how they deemed of it* (113). *To make*: such a simple verb, and yet so existentially important to Sidney's circle. What to *make* of the knowledge that human beings are the creatures that possess the gift to *make* worlds and who are themselves a kind of *making*? Poetry for Sidney is the most pointed example of how human beings are *makers of themselves* (138), as he says. (In the 1980s, as literary critics came to recognize the true complexities of Sidney's text, this making was called "Renaissance self-fashioning.") To be sure, this fashioning work doesn't take place in a vacuum; everything happens in a larger Christian context for Sidney but what is worth emphasizing is how seldomly he feels the need to dwell on that context or to make the making-power of human beings understandable only by reference to God. Poets make; God too is a maker, Sidney notes at one point (114), but even here his emphasis remains on the inventiveness of human beings, not, as would usually be the case in such a context, the dazzling plenitude of Creation as the handiwork of God. God makes, but it is human making that matters to Sidney. In this way, the *Apology* feels

like a more secular–i.e., non-religious--text than in fact it is or perhaps can be; but that's part of Sidney's strategy, i.e., to describe human struggles to learn how to act virtuously, and to engage the question of the merits of poetry, in a manner that holds away, without for a moment diminishing, the larger Christian framework by which it is nevertheless deeply informed. That is the humanist side of Sidney making its presence legible.

What we as human beings make of ourselves and our world becomes, during Sidney's life, a subject of focused consideration and enthusiasm among the members of a literate elite in Britain. Make no mistake: Sidney nowhere makes a case for or speaks for or to a broader audience. But the audience for which he does speak represents the flowering of what will one day be called "Christian-humanism," a movement or perhaps informal gathering of minds or shared spirit, one of whose principle objectives was to persuade sovereign authority to reflect more carefully on its motives, world-view, and effects–whether that authority was religious (as was the case with the "moral philosophers" and the Puritan preachers), academic (as was the case with the historians, lawyers, philosophers, an others at the universities), or political (as was the case with Queen Elizabeth I). Sidney's focus is not on "the people" (a concept he would not have understood) but on the limits of authority of all kinds. Yet the "Christian-humanist" emphasis on individuals and communities taking responsibility for the worlds that they make will come later in the next century, the 17th century, to stir populist movements to action in Britain, eventually leading to the overthrow of the sovereign. (The history of social and political thought is characterized sometimes by this kind of delayed action: a thinker opens the door to possibilities that he or she might not see clearly and that will not come to fruition until long after.) In any case, the "Christian-humanist" focus on making and self-making has a strong precedent in ancient Greece, as we've already seen in this course. Recall, for example, a point that I raise in the Study Notes for Plato's *Republic*. What matters to the teacher, Socrates, you might remember, is to explore what it means to be human (an education, to be sure, that is not without its problems), and this process means taking one's life to be a work to be accomplished, i.e. something to be made. As you can imagine, treating one's own life, or the life of others, as a work to be accomplished means becoming mindful, although this is not a term Socrates ever uses or perhaps would ever care to use, in part because mindfulness suggests today an activity that is mostly inward or self-regarding, whereas Socrates thinks of how what we do in life, which means acting with and for others, is as important as what we think about it. As Sidney says, quoting Plato's pupil, Aristotle, the most important thing is to move from *Gnosis* (knowledge) to *Praxis* (action).

> *What so much good doth that teaching bring forth...as that it moveth one to do that which it doth teach? For, as Aristotle saith, it is not* Gnosis *but* Praxis *must be the fruit. And how* Praxis *cannot be, without being moved to practice*, *is no hard matter to consider*. (123)

What makes teaching *good*, Sidney says, is its power to *move* the student to act on what they learn. No teaching, no accumulation of knowledge or *Gnosis* is worthy of the name unless the *fruit* or product of that teaching is virtuous action. But at the same time, Sidney concludes, there is no practice of virtue, no *Praxis*, without being *moved to practice.* Being good

presupposes being moved to be good; it presupposes the process or transformation that translates knowing what virtue is in the abstract or in books to doing something real about it and with it. And that's the *hard matter*, Sidney openly concedes; *there's the rub*, as Shakespeare's Hamlet would say, meaning, that's the point that you and I really need to think about rigorously and carefully. Notice Sidney's candidness here, conceding to his readers that how and why a person or a community is *moved to practice* virtue is extraordinarily difficult or resistant; it is a labour, a project, a work, just the sort of thing about human life to which the Christian-humanists were attracted. In effect, the *Apology* is Sidney's attempt to face up to *consider* the *hard matter* at hand. He has his work cut out for him, and says so: *But these arguments will by few be understood, and by fewer granted* (114).

The death of Sir Philip Sidney at the battle of Zutphen: he is depicted as graciously passing a water-flask to a fellow soldier, doing-well until the end. Mezzotint by J. Jones after G. Carter, 1782.

Being in possession of a poetic intelligence, sensitive to fact that education involves the whole person, not just the transmission of an abstract idea from one person to the next, helps *make* that move to virtuous action happen. The Greeks had a specific word for this kind of "deep" form of education and for this unusually pressing kind of teaching and learning: *Paideia*. And as Socrates emphasizes time and again, *paideia*, the education that turns us body and soul

from mere appearances and a worship of appearances, from adhering to thoughtless cliches and mindlessly accepted "wisdom" or "opinion," to the larger truths, to the things that truly matter, and therefore towards living what Socrates calls, in the *Apology* (another one of Plato's dialogues), the "examined life." Life is not worth living if it isn't labouriously caught up in *paideia*, both the teacher's life and the student's life. *Paideia*: a powerful word worth hanging onto. (See the American philosopher, Cornell West, talk powerfully about *paideia* and about the "examined life," while also embodying that education in his very presence, here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HDOE1PETypU)

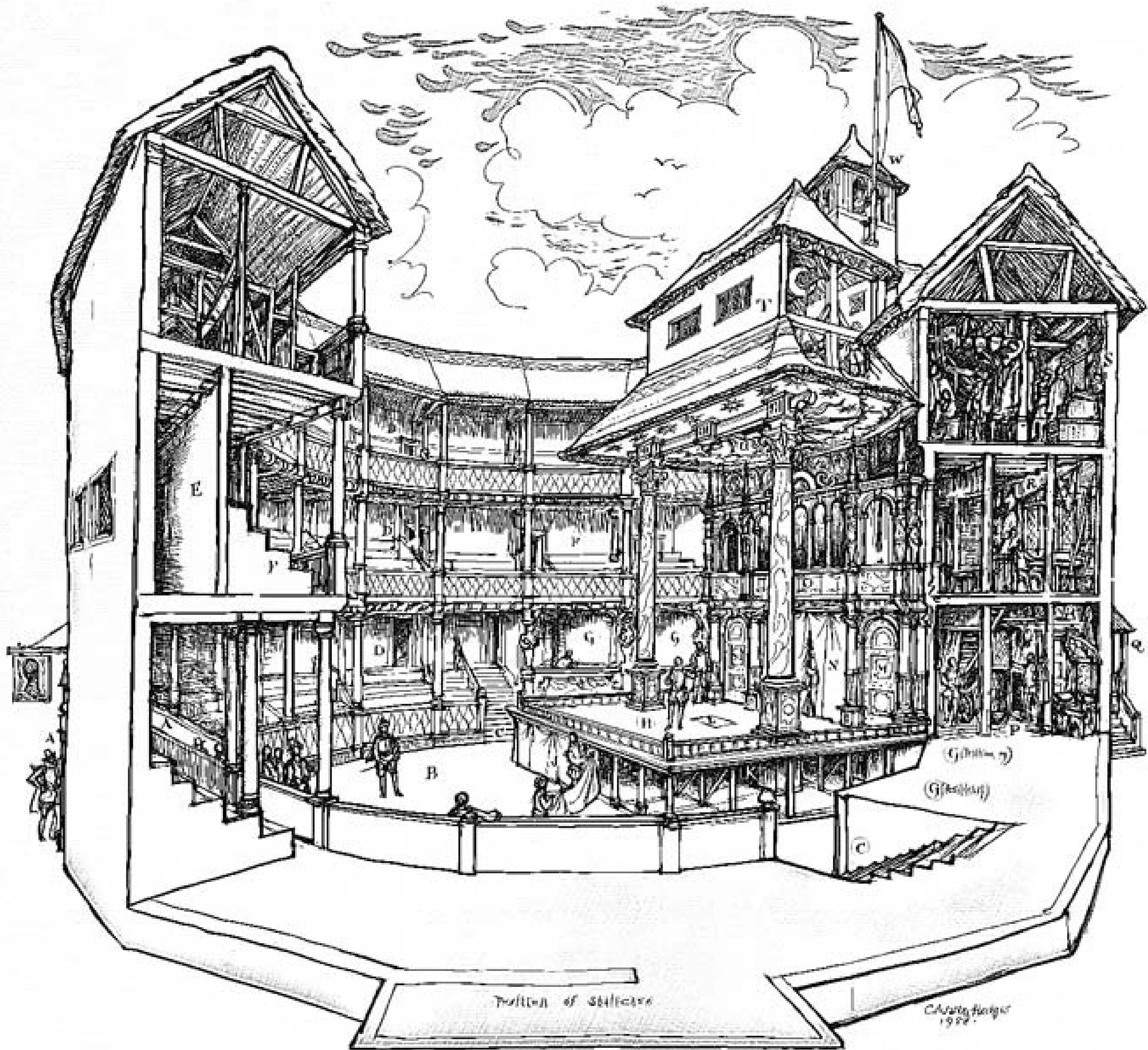
Perhaps one way of translating *paideia* is *earthly learning*. The difference between Sidney and Socrates on this particular point is that the humanist emphasis on the life being a work to be accomplished, rather than a fate to be endured, i.e., set in stone or preordained, is that these labours–which are never perfect or complete and are always vulnerable to failure because, after all, we are human beings, not angels, a point Immanuel Kant always emphasized–take place in a specifically Christian framework. What then is "Christian-humanism"? Today, strangely enough, among certain influential American evangelical churches, "humanist" has become a kind of slur–it means a directionless, nihilistic, amoral, and godless person who refuses the Christian revelation of the divine truth. But in the context of Sidney's world, "humanism" is not the opposite of "Christianity" but an unusually generative and voraciously curious way of both living in the world and being with others that is in a very productive conversation with a life of faith. I once had a truly scary and marvelous professor named Dr. Arthur E. Barker who spoke about "the existential instability" of the hyphen joining "Christian" to "humanism" in the phrase, "Christian**-**humanism." What did Dr. Barker mean? Humanism and Christianity are joined during and after the reign of Elizabeth I, but in a way that is characterized by a productive and precarious tension whose stakes are very high, i.e., a tension that speaks directly to nothing less than what it means to be a human being–hence the descriptor, "existential instability." Here, humanism points to the new and insurgent sense that thinkers like Sidney had of the amazingly inventive powers of human beings and, it should be added right away, the immense responsibilities that come with those powers. In the words of the remarkable 17th-century poet, John Milton, we are "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall," i.e., that we are given the faculties and time to be virtuous, to stand "upright," we are not robots, not preprogrammed machines, but the high price of that freedom, of not being a robot, is that our communities are also vulnerable to failure, to falling down, to making a horrible mess of it. If we have the capacity to make and remake our worlds, we must also assume the full burden of responsibility for whether those worlds are virtuous and humane, that is, worlds of mutual understanding, curiosity, teaching, learning, and co-operation, worlds activated by a desire to be and to do good. (Study hint: pause and find four passages in which Sidney makes that connection between virtuous action, on the one hand, and the pleasures of a good education, on the other.) Humanism in the hands of a thinker like Sidney means possessing an interrogative or exploratory spirit (or does a truly exploratory spirit take possession of *you*? Describe some examples of Sidney's questioning spirit in the text.), and the courage to wrestle with new ideas and to experiment with unfamiliar positions without feeling like those experiments diminish you or threaten you with impiety. Literature is the space, or rather *can* be the space, in a culture in which writers and readers do just

that, i.e., take on the freedom to inhabit different worlds of thought and feeling, to engage speakers and consider scenarios for the purpose of complicating and enriching one's understanding of the world so as to be better equipped and more inclined to do good in it. Fictions are perhaps the most vivid example and expression of the fashioning powers of human beings, which is why Sidney expends all the energy he does defending them under the name "Poetry." Fictions remind Christians–and Sidney is speaking primarily to Christians–that rather than viewing human life as divinely pre-determined, i.e., as fixed ahead of time by God, that humanists insist that we are unique in the known universe for our ability to stylize ourselves and our worlds–that's commonplace wisdom for you and I today but in the 16th century it was refreshingly new . . . and attractive. --Attractive and energizing *especially* to poets and playwrights and other artists, who of course make the making-power of human beings especially legible by writing the things that they write and creating the creations that they create. Literature, in other words, condenses or distills into one highly focused place what the humanists affirmed more broadly as a strength or competence that all human beings in theory possess, namely the capacity to invent and to reinvent their worlds anew, whether individually or collectively. But of course this celebration of the imaginative capacities of human beings took place in what was for Sidney a presumptively *Christian* context. That is to say, humanists were not secular thinkers of the sort that, a century later, we will start to see emerging in the European Enlightenment. For Christian-humanists, our capacity to fashion ourselves and our worlds is given to us by God and must be understood entirely within a Christian world-view. Christianity informs humanism. But humanism also informs Christianity, activating a strand of Christianity that emphasizes "good works," i.e., that underlines the existential importance of what a Christian says and does in this *earthly* life. Humanism helps activate that part of Christianity that has always shied away from treating human beings as fated, by divine decree, to be being either a member of the Elect, and thus "saved," or not, and thus "damned," and instead to characterized human life as a God-given opportunity to demonstrate, through virtuous action, our worthiness in the eyes of God. --A God, by the way, that Sidney reminds his readers is himself a creator, a maker. That side of Christianity was already in place before humanism became a thing in Europe; but humanism electrified it, gave it new life, and did so by emphasizing that human beings are *educable*, i.e., that, through a careful immersion in the thinking and writing of others, they can learn in real time to be virtuous. Sidney's text is marshaled around that Christian-humanist principle.

Christian-humanism, and the existential instability of the hyphen joining these two terms, is legible in many different ways in Sidney's text, so I will ask you to parse it carefully, looking for those signs. But a promising place to begin would naturally be to look at what he says specifically about Christians in his text. Sidney identifies as a Christian, and yet some of the most pointed sections of the *Apology* addresses Christianity in a gently mocking way. Consider his image of the *moral philosophers* (117), i.e., the theologians of his age, those men tasked with the learned exploration of the intricacies of faith. Sidney turns to them early on in his text, locating them amid other learned *competitors* (117), i.e., amid all the other various practices of knowledge or disciplines of knowledge of his own day, including *Astronomy*, *Music*, *Mathematics* (116), *the historian[s]* (117), *the philosopher*, and *the lawyer* (118). Perhaps it helps to know that what Sidney is describing here are the professions and fields of his colleagues and friends, all people who he knew and hung out with, all part of the small, literate circle in

Britain. Sidney deliberately caricatures these figures, meaning that he not only exaggerates or fictionalizes certain features about them but also–and this part is crucially important--draws attention to that exaggeration, as if to say, "look, I know that, for the most part, actual lawyers or astronomers or historians don't behave or appear quite the way I am saying here, and some of my closest friends are in these very fields, but let's for a moment pretend together that my invention of them, my drawing of them in deliberately broad strokes, helps get at an underlying truth about what these characters represent and how they are different from the practice of knowledge called 'Poetry.' Certain striking qualities about these thinkers and these practices of knowledge need to be examined quite carefully and one way to do that is to exaggerate those qualities to comic effect." So Sidney caricatures those individuals whose job it is to parse the complexities of faith. *I see* [them] *coming towards me with sullen gravity*, he writes, *as though they could not abide vice by daylight, rudely clothed for to witness outwardly their contempt of outward things* (117). Notice how Sidney makes a point of *dramatizing* the scene, how he doesn't simply analyze late 16th century theology and theologians or neutrally describe them but instead paints a vivid and unembarrassedly partisan picture and sets a specific scene, asking readers to imagine with him what its like to be in the hallowed halls of the universities and seeing these characters approach you, metaphorically speaking. Note how here–as is the case throughout the *Apology*–Sidney is not only in the process of defending poetry, he is also being poetic, marshaling the rich resources of the English language to create intense pictures and thus to leave strong impressions. In other words, the *Apology* is very often an example of the practice it defends. (Where else does the text "perform" the poetry that it defends?) –And that makes sense, since he is trying his best to move you to embracing poetry, and, as he says, perhaps nothing has a more effective moving force than poetry. In the spirit of humanism, Sidney is devoted to *showing* his readers rather than telling them what to think–exactly as the arts do (remember that Sidney uses the word "poetry" to stand for all those practices that do not tell us what to think but instead *show us thinking*), whether in poems or paintings, plays or novels . . . or a text like the *Apology*, which not so much a treatise as a kind of performance. Indeed, for Sidney, the capacity to move someone to embrace virtue is the same thing as poetry. Sidney turns to the ancient Romans for an example. He points out that for the Romans *a poet was called Vates*, meaning *a diviner, foreseer, or prophet* (112). But what is revealing is how Sidney makes next to nothing of that soothsaying power of seeing into the future. Instead, he turns to the power of the Roman poet to affect people, body and soul, in the present. As Sidney says, using a truly memorable phrase, Roman poetry introduces into the community nothing less than a *heart-ravishing knowledge*. Sidney's complex metaphor summons our interpretive strengths. For what does it mean to have one's heart "ravished," i.e., enthralled and transported, and what kind of *knowledge* has that kind power over a human being? Notice that he isn't praising Roman poetry for its ability to appeal to our feelings. No, at its best, this poetry engages our thinking, our knowing faculty, but in a very particular way. It addresses and strongly affects us as a whole person. Sidney's phrase invites us to consider a knowledge that is experienced deeply, not as a bloodless abstraction and not in the form of pure emotion either, but something marvelously hybrid, felt as much as known and known as much as felt. To know goodness is one thing; to know it in a *heart-ravishing* way means something else entirely. Poetry in this sense makes us think feelingly because the thoughts or knowledge that it embodies address us squarely for what we actually are, neither merely appetitive creatures, like animals are

imagined to be, nor angelic creatures, like disembodied angels are imagined to be. Knowledge that matters, knowledge that moves actual human beings to virtuous action, is knowledge that activates us unforgettably in both body and the soul. Poetry that speaks to us as that whole person is the key. And Sidney suggests that the Roman poets modeled that power two thousand years ago, as if a knowledge that was *heart-ravishing* once, in a far off time and place, might remain active and affecting to this very day.



Cutaway of the replica of the Globe Theatre in which many of Shakespeare's plays were staged.

Sidney doesn't paint a pretty picture of the moral philosophers. They are imagined here to be dour and somber characters, not only disheveled but also showily disheveled, i.e., *rudely clothed* so as to broadcast to others that they couldn't give a damn about the world that you and I actually live in (i.e., what are called here *outward things*). –So, these guys may not be especially helpful to someone or to a community that is struggling to fashion more virtuous lives. The moral philosophers come across as a bit vampiric in that they would rather operate in the dark, as if a bit squeamish about discussing their favourite subject–i.e., human *vices*--out in the light, meaning, metaphorically, amid human beings for whom the vulnerability to vice and the difficulty of *doing-well* is a real, everyday concern, calling for teachers and teachings of a more humanely patient and engaging kind. --Less *scornful interrogative*, i.e., less mocking queries, and more affirming assistance: that is what is needed! Sidney here identifies himself as a creature of the light, not the dark, and nothing more than literature–"Poetry"–better illuminates the real life concerns of human beings. (It's worth noting that the moral philosophers are not the only ones who are careless of the world. So too are the sovereigns and their advisors who hungrily want to consume as much of the planet's riches as possible. Those folks are careless of the world in a different way, treating it as a "conscriptable reserve" [as the German thinker, Martin Heidegger, would say], an exploitable resource, rather than a place and a time to do good things and to become a good person.) Sidney cares deeply about whether or to what degree you and I use this world, which is the only one that we are given, after all, to join in the labour of *doing-well*, the labour of virtuous action. Are the moral philosophers, the theologians, up to the task? It doesn't look good. What's amazing to him, and what he wants his readers to be amazed about as well, is that the moral philosophers, whose only job it is to think deeply about what virtue and vice, good and evil, are, are oddly indifferent to how virtue and vice actually play out for real human beings. The moral philosophers are so close to the existential problem that activates Sidney's intelligence and his own actions as a thinker and writer . . . and yet, paradoxically, they are also so very far away. They don't look or feel like very good teachers to Sidney. And, he observes, insofar as the moral philosophers have any relationship with real people in the real world, it is one filled with disdain. The moral philosophers occupy themselves with *definitions, divisions, and distinctions*, he says, i.e., super-subtle speculations about the intricacies of the Christian faith ("counting angels on the head of a pin" is to this day a cliche for uselessly abstract musings that are modeled on egghead theologians), completely forgetting the example of Christ, who, as Sidney points out a bit later in the *Apology*, loved human beings and engaged human beings as a forgiving teacher by employing familiar and encouraging stories of parables. By contrast, when you ask the moral theologians for help, when you ask them to point you towards the *path...to virtue*, they focus instead on *what virtue is* (117). In this way, the moral philosophers are not that unlike the puritannical Christians off campus in Sidney's day, the ones gaining power in the land who focus on the *infected will* of human beings, and who insist that we are primarily doomed to life in our *clayey lodgings.* But as Sidney insists, we are also creatures with an *erected wit*, a God-given capacity to make something of ourselves and of our communities, lifting ourselves, through the sheer force of our inventive powers, out of our clogged, "dirty," "animalistic" or "appetitive" life (as Plato would say) into something more, something more truly "upright." That we alone in the known universe are the creatures capable of imagination (although this is not a word Sidney uses

to any real effect–it will be two hundred years before the word comes into more common usage), i.e., of using our wits to conjuring up lives and worlds beyond what we are and sometimes feel doomed to remain, is for Sidney the promise of becoming so much more than some of the Christians around him, the puritans outside of the university and the theologians on campus, seem willing to tolerate.

The fatal wounding of Sir Philip Sidney, by Benjamin West (1806). Note the prominent horses in the painting, which recall the opening of the *Apology* and the Greek origins of Sidney's name, *Philoppos*, meaning "lover of horses," *the only serviceable courtier without flattery* (109).

The moral philosophers are in this sense not unlike another caricatured figure in the *Apology*, namely the *philosophers*, who, as he says, are lost in abstractions that can often feel totally irrelevant to the *earthly* and pressing concerns of peoples and communities: *For the philosopher, setting down with thorny argument the bare rule, is so hard of utterance, and so misty to be conceived*, that one could become an old person before discovering *sufficient cause to be honest.* The philosopher teaches virtue as a kind of concept, *abstract and general* (119), meaning out of touch with day-to-day life–he teaches it as a kind of intellectual puzzle that takes a lifetime to solve, and does so in a language that is alien to those who are actually wrestling with day-to-day realities. *His virtue is excellent in the dangerless Academy of Plato,* Sidney notes (118), i.e., suitable for the ivory towers of the university but useless in the heat and dust of the world as an actionable phenomenon. As John Milton said in the 17th century, *I cannot praise a cloistered and fugitive virtue*, meaning, I am not interested in affirming virtue hidden away from real life. Sidney's slight about *the dangerless Academy* should smart for anyone teaching and learning in the university–for which Plato's Academy is the ancient Greek model. Is the contemporary university in fact *dangerless*, meaning is it at an escapist and sheltered remove from reality, and so a place where justice and injustice are only bloodless subjects to be studied in a curriculum rather than an existential issue to be fiercely faced in the world? Dr. Susan Searls Giroux, the former Acting Provost of McMaster, makes an interesting point in her own research about how studying novels on racial inequality in university courses can, under certain conditions, take the place of actually addressing the violence of racial inequality in society. –A sobering thought, to be sure. Sidney points out that injustice and justice are not only *abstract considerations*.

So the university is threatened both within and without. Outside, forces hostile to teaching and learning are gathering strength, as Britain strives through sheer might to become a global power. In his attempt to argued that Plato is the *patron* of poetry, *not our adversary*, Sidney recalls an often-told story about how, when the Athenians were utterly defeated by the armies of Syracuse in 415 BCE, their conquerors spared those who could cite verses from Euripides, the great author of dozens of tragedies (136). Does Sidney fear a future in which knowing literature will form no defense against the enemies of learning? You start to see why, early on in the text, Sidney remembers the coming of the *Romans, Saxons, Danes, and Normans*, i.e., historically all the waves of invaders of Britain that sought to *ruin all memory of learning among them* (112). Are Britons modeling themselves on those invaders, conquering the world without a care for the *memory of learning* in the lands they conquer? And while they commit themselves to this imperial project, founded as it is on violence, what will become of literature in their own country, what will become of the *memory of learning* among Britons? The first casualty of war, including wars of conquest, is truth. Sidney points to ancient examples of violent hordes who sought to destroy British culture and education, but what he is really speaking about are the violent war-mongers and profiteers around him in his own day who, in their ambition, are hostile to the thoughtfulness, reflection, and inventiveness that the *Apology* embodies. (Sidney provides a vivid story [134-135] about that very danger when he recalls the tale of the *Goths* who burn libraries down [the Goths were an early Germanic people who were partly responsible for the collapse of the Roman Empire; in myth and story, they were a kind of generic term for "barbarians."] But notice what this story is about: the Goths decide that they don't actually need

to destroy the library because, they observe, the librarians spend their time bickering among themselves. One of the things that Sidney is saying is that while the present-day "Goths" gain mastery of the country, we humanists can be left alone because we pose no threat and offer no resistance. Ouch.)

The university is also threatened from within by those practices of knowledge that turn thinking towards inconsequential generalities–that's Sidney's worry here, that theology and philosophy, among other practices of knowledge, don't dwell with the gritty reality of human beings, the good and the bad that human beings actually embody. But poetry does, meaning, narratives that draw upon the rich resources of the mother-tongue to capture what matters in human life. The philosophers' notion of *virtue* works well in the university, Sidney says, *but mine* [the poet's] *showeth forth her honourable face in the battles of Marathon, Pharsalia, Poiters, and Agincourt*, each famous armed conflicts that were well remembered in literature. This literature doesn't report on these battles the way journalism or histories might, but instead provides graphic, saturatedly evocative accounts of heroism (and cowardice) that help Britons grasp much more directly than philosophers can what doing-well means or can mean. Notice the range of battles Sidney names here: *Marathon*, the first epic conflict between the Athenians and the Persians (490 BCE); *Pharsalia*, a battle between two famed Roman generals in 48 BCE; *Poiters*, a decisive battle between the English and the French in 1356; and *Agincourt*, another English victory against the French in 1415). --So, two thousand years of deeply memorable "poetic" and storied accounts of war that picture--in high-definition, as it were–what makes human beings noble and ignoble. In each case, what makes poetry stand out is that it *coupleth the general notion*–for example, courage and wisdom, or cowardliness and foolishness–*with the particular example*. All practices of knowledge presumably work with both generalities and examples. Sidney's point is that poetry is entirely composed of examples (i.e., taken up with particular scenes or characters or speakers or events or stories) that embody more general principles, and because of that unique characteristic it so much better suited to the labour of teaching and learning, speaking as it does to us as whole human beings rather than as mere brains on a stick. Consider carefully the vivid examples of how poetry works on page 119, the pile of examples beginning with how *Tully* (i.e., the Roman statesman and orator, Cicero) puts vividly realized examples to use *to make us know the force of our country hath in us*, and ending on the next page with the case of Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), the honoured philosopher, statesman, and lawyer, who in some ways is the model of the original Christian-humanist. Before his execution by the powers that be–think, *Socrates*--More wrote *Utopia*, a satirical account of an imagined island-society–*a whole Commonwealth* (120), as Sidney says, marveling at the level of detail with which More outlines this world, a world in which Britons were expected to see more than a few traces of their own foibles. ("Commonwealth" is a favoured word that Britons can use to describe their kingdom, a word that evokes a society of fair and just governance. The question Sidney is quietly asking here is: do we in fact live in a commonwealth? What might we do to make it better?) Let me invite you to make notes about how this particular paragraph works. In a small number of long entangled sentences, as if spoken in almost one breath, Sidney here performs the role of the teacher swept up with his own enthusiasm. It is hardly the only place in which this sort of self-infectious enthusiasm is in evidence–the opening and the final paragraph of the text being another vivid case in point. Notice too how he begins and ends speaking to

Britons about their homeland: Cicero's beautiful and moving accounts of allegiance to the homeland are something from which Britons can learn a very great deal, as is More's playful account not so much of a perfect society, as the title–*Utopia*--appears to suggest, but of a society whose weird ideals are meant to give Britons a language which to think anew about the imperfections of their own land. The point is that none of these lessons would work so vividly if they weren't embodied in the form of carefully wrought *made* things about our responsibilities to *make* life, i.e., in the form of literary practice.

National Trust/John Hammond

Elizabeth I; painting by the studio of Nicholas Hilliard, circa 1599

Other practices of knowledge, as important as they are, suffer certain problems to which that Sidney points. It can help, in your own notes, list those different practices and identify what specific limitation characterizes each. Each practice of knowledge is one of what Sidney names the *serving sciences* (117), i.e., forms of wisdom that support the status quo or things as they are. For example, Sidney remarks, *the historian* is perhaps too *captived to the truth of a foolish world* (122), meaning that in their close and careful attention to describing the depravity and *injustice* (123) of human life, i.e., the world as it *is*, they can forget to imagine the world as it might or *should be* (119). *The lawyer* presents an analogous problem (118). It's perfectly true, Sidney notes, that law is *the daughter of Justice, and Justice the chief of virtues.* Law is closely connected to *Justice*, as close as a daughter might be to her mom. But is there more to justice than following the rules? This is the very question that Socrates poses to Cephalus in the *Republic*. As Sidney goes on to say, the law and the lawyers who specialize in its understanding and implementation *seeketh to make men good rather [by fear of punishment than love of virtue]*, i.e., for the law, *doing-well* is <u>negatively</u> a matter of being coerced, on pain of being penalized, not to behave in illegal ways rather than <u>positively</u> a matter of embracing virtue, embracing what is right and good because it is right and good. As Sidney says next, the law *doth not endeavour to make men good, but that their evil hurt not others, having no care, so he be a good citizen, how bad a man he be* (118). In other words, the law is there mostly to compel human beings not to hurt others; the law-abiding or *good citizen* is in this sense the person whose selfishness is put in check by the law. But the law is not interested–it has *no care*, in Sidney's words–in whether a person is *good* or not; all that matters to the law is that you follow it. The law does not make good people; it compels people, good and bad, to follow the law. Question: Is an honest person honest because it is good to be honest or because they fear the punishment of the law if they are discovered to be dishonest? That's why Glaucon tells the story of the Ring of Gyges–a story, by the way, that Sidney recalls in the *Apology* as an example of why Plato's text relies on poetry. Recall how for Glaucon, the moral of that tale is that if any person could break the law without being caught they would most certainly choose to break the law. For Sidney, as for Socrates, therefore, more than the law is required to understand and to practice justice; something more than the threat of punishment needs to draw us toward virtue and virtuous lives. (Sidney puts his finger here on an important question for social and political thought. For example, do we form communities and establish legal-constitutional frameworks governing those communities only negatively because we need something to protect us from doing violence to each other? In this course, this is a question that Locke asks us to consider. Or are communities established for more positive reasons, for example, because human life is inherently interdependent and only flourishes when we embrace that interdependence? (Socrates briefly considers this model. Where?) Consider too a pressing question that has come up in Holocaust studies, a question to which we will return. Thinkers like the great political theorist, Giorgio Agamben, for example, worry that the trials of the Nazi war criminals in the years following the Second World War, as crucially important as they most certainly were, nevertheless created the illusion that the murders in the Holocaust were essentially a legal matter, i.e., a question of criminality that was met with a legal solution–the prosecution and punishment of the guilty

perpetrators, or at least those that the Allies could find or wanted to find. But as Agamben argues, the mass killings of Jews and others at the hands of the Nazis calls for a much more capacious response, well in excess of the illegality of those murders. In other words, the trial and punishment of the perpetrators does not close the case and put the Holocaust safely in the past because the labour of doing justice to the memories of those who were killed and the historical memory of the killings themselves is never completed, never put in the past, but instead remains a task in perpetuity. Law may be the daughter of Justice, Sidney reminds us, but the two are not the same thing. Poetry helps us distinguish between the two: in the courts, law sifts the legal from the illegal; in poetry, we grasp in our bones what justice looks like and what injustice looks like. In vivid examples told in memorable tales, we are given to see that justice cannot be reduced to law. So, for example, when you read a deeply moving narrative of a survivor like Primo Levi, who lived through the death-camp, Auschwitz, and who then wrote a memoir called *The Drowned and the Saved*, you feel and much as know that what the Nazis did to him and to millions of others was not or not only criminally prosecutable under the law but also elementally immoral, a grotesque indignity to human decency rather than only a heinous criminal act.

The *Apology* has two titles: *An Apology for Poetry* and *A Defense of Poetry*. Each point to subtly different directions that the text takes. In Sidney's day, an "apology" didn't quite mean what it often means to us, i.e., a gesture of regret, but instead means something closer to an affirmation or avowal. To be an "apologist" for poetry means to make a supporting claim *for* poetry, and to vindicate it. (As we will see in this course, Mary Shelley unabashedly entitles her text affirming "the rights of woman," especially the right of women to be educated, a "vindication.") In one of his titles, Sidney signals to us that he will confirm poetry as something worthy of confirmation. As a "defense," on the other hand, Sidney describes his text as a kind of protective gesture or refutation (perhaps not unlike a lawyer defending her client in court) against those who claim that poetry is unworthy (as the puritanical Christians do) or irrelevant (as the sovereign and her advisors do) or a hot mess (as Sidney in fact does in the last section of his text, where he attacks the frivolousness of too much of what passes for poetry in contemporary Britain). As you read the text, make a list of those passages that tend more towards an "apology" and those that incline towards a "defensive" posture.

Whether read as a defense or as an apology of poetry, Sidney's text is, formally speaking, an example of an *oration*, which is a very old species of writing going back to celebrated examples in ancient Rome. That is to say, the specific genre or category of writing into which it falls is the particular form of speech called an oration, much the same way as John Keats's exquisite group of poems from 1819 are considered to be late examples of the even older genre of the "ode." By convention, orations are highly stylized, learned, and dignified public addresses reserved for special occasions and important subjects–for example, the birthday or funeral of a famous person or the anniversary of a special event. For Sidney to write an oration on poetry means that he is trying his best to elevate poetry to a level worthy of such a noble recognition. To many of his readers, that elevation might have come as a bit of a surprise. An oration for poetry? Really? Hadn't Stephen Gosson–in his *School of Abuse*--made it clear to Britains that poetry was mostly an unwholesome distraction, unworthy of Britons' attention? (The full title of Gosson's 1579 diatribe against literature says it all: *The School of Abuse, Containing a pleasant invective*

against Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters and such like Caterpillers of a commonwealth; Setting up the flag of defiance to their mischievous exercise, and overthrowing their bulwarks, by profane writers, natural reason, and common experience. Gosson dedicated his denunciation of literature to Sidney, as if daring Sidney to respond with his *Apology*.) And didn't an authority no less than Plato call for the disavowal of poetry in Book II and III of the *Republic*? Now, looking around the social media landscape of late 16th century Britain, you could be forgiven for not disagreeing with Gosson. There was, in truth, a lot of frivolous garbage and entertainment passing itself off as poetry and literature. Contemporary engravings depicting the City of London give as much emphasis to bear-fighting pits as the theatres. Yet despite and perhaps because of the poor examples of recent history, Sidney's text is an attempt to rescue poetry and poetic knowledge from its bad reputation, and the reasons that he gives are nothing less than existential in scope–meaning that the stakes are very high when the affirmation of poetry is caught up with affirming aspects learning and the capacity of human beings to do justice to each other in the wake of their love of wisdom. So, far from the mindless junk that Gosson claims it is, poetry lies at the heart of what it means to be a virtuous human being–and so, of course, Sidney wagers, hopes, and believes, it, poetry, is entirely worthy of being the subject of something as important as a formal oration.

Now, the word, "oration," comes from "oratio," the Latin word for "speech" and in particular a speech that makes a plea, i.e., a gesture of supplication to others to join the author in believing something. If you turn to the concluding paragraph of the *Apology*, Sidney makes explicit what is implicit all along in his text: his hope that you will *believe*–that is the verb to which he turns repeatedly in the last breathless, excited sentences–with him that poetry is not only a worthy topic but also essential to *virtuous action* (117) and to what he calls *an ethic and politic consideration* (117). As a kind of speaking or writing and as a gesture made in public, a supplication, not unlike a prayer, is intrinsically vulnerable and contingent: there is no guarantee that what you ask or implore others to believe in will be convincing come to pass. A supplication or *oratio* is diametrically opposed to the dogmatist who instructs us with the truth or to the sovereign, who, from her seat of unquestioned power and authority, commands us to agree. By nature, an oration, as a supplication, is more humane because it is an informed request for agreement, an attempt at persuasion, not a compulsion to concur. One way to consolidate your knowledge and understanding of this text, I suggest, is then to go through it and write down, say, a dozen points in the argument in which Sidney is supplicatory, i.e., when he reaches out to you for agreement without being authoritative or commanding. As you move through the text, make a list too of some of those moments in which Sidney sets his voice off from the voices of others who want nothing to do with asking for your agreement and instead speak–or claim to speak–from a position of untrammeled authority.

Orations have a long and august history and are modeled on the exemplars from ancient Rome. They unfold in a carefully staged sequence of parts. Sidney follows that sequence, reproducing the conventions of the oration-form partly to dignify poetry, to honour it, and partly to signal to his readers that he is part of the British intellectual class who share an education in such matters. To be taken seriously by other members of the British literate elite meant first ensuring that you *sounded* like them, i.e., that you knew the formal rules of writing and argumentation and persuasion. It's important to note that Sidney may well be addressing both

literate men and women in his text but that women hardly figure in his discussion, even though he certainly knew accomplished women poets and writers. What references to women exist in the text are fraught, to say the least. (Interestingly, his other "literary" works–assuming, for the moment, that we can decisively distinguish his poems from his defense of poetry–are heavily populated with female characters.) For example, responding to those who criticize the supposed immorality of poetry, Sidney adopts a curious position: Poetry, his critics claim, leads to *effeminate wantonness*–meaning, a lack of control, a loss of "manly" virility. At first, Sidney doesn't exactly disagree, but claims that such licentiousness is much more to be found in philosophy, not poetry. He points specifically i) to the affirmation of homoerotic love in Plutarch and Plato–those thinkers who *authorize abominable filthiness*, he says–and ii) to Plato, who imagines a *polis* in which the male Guardians are free to have sex with women of their choosing, a liberty, he thinks, that leads to them surrendering themselves to their appetites, and thus to what Sidney disdainfully calls a *community of women* [136]. Yet in the very next breath, Sidney says *But I honour philosophical instructions, and bless the wits which bred them*–meaning, I'm perfectly fine with Plato affirming same-sex relationships, as I am with the sexual lives of the Guardians, as unconventional as it seems. So the degree to which Sidney is willing to get behind his homophobia and misogyny is oddly indeterminate.) What Sidney *does* with this inherited form is important. Not only is the subject matter unusual, given the widely held suspicion of poetry in Sidney's day, but so too is the persona that he adopts–a persona whose passionate commitment to his subject matter, a persona by turns witty, learned, nerdy, excited, hyperbolic, self-deprecating and self-qualifying, and winkingly ironic, is meant to play against the rather strict restrictions of the form. Shakespeare had accomplished something very similar in his sonnets. Sonnets are very strictly controlled poems (they must be 14 lines long and nothing more, for example, and organized around certain prescribed rhyme schemes), but Shakespeare took that restriction as a kind of challenge. So he invented a speaker, by turns enamored, loving, sad, frustrated, and always searchingly thoughtful, whose liveliness is made all the more evident by being housed in the rigid restraints of the sonnet form. --Same thing with Sidney's *Apology*, which checks all the boxes for a formal classical oration, but is populated by a speaker who is highly animated, unusually alert to his various audiences, and trying his very best to make a case for poetry that is itself poetic, i.e., to *teach and delight*. What gives the *Apology* its curious texture is the tension that erupts when a very highly energetic speaker strains against the boundaries of an ancient and inherited form. Perhaps the best poems in the English language function in a comparable way, i.e., by playing the distinctiveness of a human "voice" against the conventions and expectations of a particular genre.

Sidney is in fact very interested in the question of genre: he devotes several detailed pages to the various kinds or species of poetry, whether *the Pastoral Poem* (126), *the lamenting Elegaic* (127), *the Comic* (127), *the Tragedy* (128), or *the Heroical* (129), pointing to the powers of each. Since Greek antiquity, pastoral poems have often imagined a simple world of shepherds amid a bounteous natural world, but rather than being naive and child-like (a *poor pipe*, as he says, meaning songs that seem at first impoverished, intellectually speaking), Sidney points out, these examples of literary practice can brim with important truths; *sometimes, under the pretty tales of wolves and sheep,* [pastoral poems] *include the whole consideration of wrongdoing and patience* (126). The elegy is a similarly ancient form, one associated with lamenting the great and

unrecuperable losses of life. But as Sidney points out, although elegiac poems *bewail . . . the weakness of mankind and the wretchedness of the world*, they do so with *a kind heart* [that] *would move rather than pity than blame*; i.e., they do not scold human beings for their deprivations and sorrows, but rather, invent scenes whose vividness evokes compassion, as if checking the moralizing impulse that seeks only to condemn and find fault. Comic poems and plays in Sidney's day brim with low-lifes, blow-hards, and other unsavory characters embodying *the filthiness of evil* (127). The characters populating these texts can be *crafty* or *flattering* or *vainglorious.* What could possibly redeem this kind of literature? Sidney responds by pointing out that the more imaginatively vivid the *vice* the easier it is *to perceive the beauty of virtue*. Again, note the Christian-humanist turn here in Sidney's thinking: the moral idiocy of characters in poems and plays are not there or not there only to embarrass readers and audiences into seeing their own frailties but rather, and more humanely, to make what constitutes a virtuous life more legible. And even if a dishonourable audience member happens to *find his own actions contemptuously set forth* (128) in a character on the stage of a comedy, the effect will be to *open his eyes* to his *faults* i.e., to afford that audience member a flash of self-realization rather than condemn that person.

Sidney next turns to the genre of tragedy. So *that the right use of Comedy will (I think) by nobody be blamed*, he says, *and much less of the high and excellent Tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue* (128). As with almost every sentence in the *Apology*, this one is doing a great deal of work. Sidney notes that whatever defects Britons attribute to comedy (a genre which, in his day, was closely associated with laughing at vulgar characters), it is not the poetry that is at fault but the wrong *use* of it. That's an argument that he will make again. (Where, exactly, and under what circumstances does he do so in the *Apology*?) Used well, poetry can help activate a moral intelligence in people. But Sidney is careful not to come across as dogmatic about all of this; he is working with us, not *carping* at us. He is trying to mount arguments, using vivid illustrations, and so cannot make a claim to absolute authority, the way others around him are. Hence the *I think* in parenthesis; here and at many other spots in the text, Sidney inserts himself into this own discussion, reminding us in these quiet asides that if he *thinks* this, others might well *think* differently. He isn't making a universal claim to truth but instead telling us that this is what he considers from a deeply informed place to be true, given the evidence that he provides. In the 1700s, the great British philosopher, and father of modern skepticism, David Hume, will make an analogous claim: it is very important, he writes, to avoid terms like "*'tis evident, 'tis certain, 'tis undeniable*" when writing and thinking (*A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739]. The world and its ideas are characterized by a very great deal of uncertainty, Hume advises, and our thinking and writing should humanely and frankly reflect that fact, the better to gather together others in the shared labour of sorting out the principles and practices of actually living a life.

Tragedy, Sidney notes, can be put to terrible uses, and in the next paragraph he provides a vivid example, remembering the *notable testimony of the abominable tyrant Alexander Phereaus*. Alexander of Pherae was a vicious tyrant who ruled over a part of the Greek lands called Thessaly from 369 to 356 BCE. Many centuries later, the life of Alexander was remembered by Plutarch (46-120 AD), the great biographer and historian who was born Greek but who became a Roman citizen. Plutarch recalls how Alexander was the sort who would weep

an *abundance of tears* watching a tragedy on stage, but who felt nothing (he was *without pity*) when he *murdered infinite numbers, and some of his own blood* (128). As Sidney points out, a man who is deranged in this way, responding to fictions in an emotional way but feeling nothing about those he is responsible for killing, is someone who has withdrawn *himself from hearkening to that which might mollify his hardened heart*, i.e., he attends to the violence in tragedies, and weeps for those who suffer, but not to that inventively energetic part of the very same play that is there to loosen him from his rigidities and fixities. Again, Sidney emphasizes, always aware of the *poet-haters* around him, that the problem lies not with poetry itself, nor in this case with badly written poetry (for as Sidney points out, the tragedies Alexander watched were *well made and represented*), but in a soul that is incapable of learning, incapable of being taught. Something in this tyrant actively resists education. We've seen Socrates wrestle with this troubling phenomenon. Where? For a thinker committed to teaching and learning, and to the educability of human beings, the prospect that there are people in the world that simply cannot be taught, including people who are enormously powerful, is a sobering thought to consider. Sidney asks us to consider it. And he asks his own sovereign to consider this prospect too. In a graciously indirect way he is asking Elizabeth and her courtiers whether or what degree they too indulge in literary feelings at the expense of feeling anything for the fate of their subjects. Sidney takes one daring step further here, and suggests, citing the authority of Seneca, the Roman philosopher and playwright, that the violence of tyrannical leaders is in fact an expression of the *fear* they feel in the presence of their *frightened subjects*. –That is an illuminating insight to have, i.e., that despots are deeply afraid of the subjects in whom they instill terrible fear. When you treat your subjects too tyrannically, Queen Elizabeth, is it ultimately because you are afraid of your own people? What a probing question to ask, even in the very indirect and polite way that Sidney does. It may help to know that the *Apology* is hardly the only place in Sidney's work in which he invited the sovereign to see herself in the mirror of fiction. For example, Sidney's *Arcadia*, a long romance in prose, is in part about an elderly monarch who chooses to ignore the wise counsel of a truehearted courtier. It would have been impossible for Elizabeth to have enjoyed this tale without thinking of her own situation.

For Sidney, the most important genre of poetry is, however, not Tragedy, but *the Heroical* (129). Aristotle had authoritatively claimed in his own defense of poetry, a lecture called the *Poetics* (c.335 BCE), that tragedy was the highest form of literature, the most significant poetic form for a culture and the most challenging to perfect; he was thinking in particular of the spectacular plays by Greek authors like Sophocles and Aeschylus. But Sidney breaks from Aristotle to suggest that the ancient stories of Greek and Roman heroes, none of them perfect, are in fact the most exemplary forms of poetry available to contemporary Britons, *the best and most accomplished kind of Poetry* (129). In a long, complex sentence, built on an assemblage of many subordinate clauses, Sidney takes on the voice of someone who not only praises the heroical (or epic) poem but also who is carried aloft just contemplating the intense sorts of teaching and learning that these sorts of poems embody. *Only let Aeneas be worn in the tablet of you memory*, he begins (129), pointing us to the example of the complex hero of Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*, the leader who, although fierce in battle, was generous to his enemies, loyal to his father, and respectful of the gods, at once steadfast and exemplarily moderate (i.e., as in Plato, having the virtue of being able to exert order over himself):

> *Only let Aeneas be worn in the tablet of you memory, how he governeth himself in the ruin of his country, in the preserving of his old father, and carrying away his religious ceremonies, in obeying the god's commandment to leave Dido, though not only all passionate kindness, but even the human consideration of virtuous gratefulness, would have craved other of him; how in storms, how in sports, how in war, how in peace, how a fugitive, how victorious, how besieged, how besieging, how to strangers, how to allies, how to enemies, how to his own; lastly, how in his inward self, and how in his outward government, and I think, in a mind not prejudiced with a prejudicating humour, he will be found in excellency fruitful...* (129).

This sentence calls for a close and careful reading and I warmly invite you to do so. Right away, what is worth emphasizing is the rhetorical energy of this single complicated sentence, with its repetition of *how...how....*and *how* prefacing clauses that each point, in a kind of short-hand, to particular examples of Aeneas's worthiness. This sentence is but one example in the text of a moment in which Sidney plays a character who, in his own words, is *overmastered by some thoughts*, i.e., all but overtaken by what he is considering–that's a state of mind that he evokes in the opening tale about Pugliano's lesson, reminding us, as he does in so many different ways, that he isn't speaking from a completely authoritative position, and indeed, sometimes is not in complete command of his own argument. In this particular sentence, Sidney tries to model the surging delight that he takes and that he hopes we too can take in learning something from this epic saga, notwithstanding the fact that it is written by Virgil, the famed Roman poet [70-19 BCE] who also, it must be said, because Sidney says it, lived in *full wrong divinity.*

Aeneas is in fact only one of many different exemplary leaders populating the *Apology*. In each case, Sidney invites his readers, many of whom were in fact leaders or aspiring to become leaders (as in Plato's day, fathers provided formal educations to their sons so as to prepare them for leadership roles), whether over themselves, or in Elizabeth's court, or in the universities, whether in local parishes or, as lords, over their inherited lands or the lands that they had helped colonize abroad. Sometimes exemplary leaders flash up suddenly in the *Apology* and then are gone. Consider, *Cato*, the renowned Roman general who insisted on *carrying Ennius with him to the field* (135), i.e., Cato was famous for, among other things, befriending the poet named Ennius, which for Sidney and many before him was a kind of metaphor for a king who embraced philosophy, that is, a fiercely powerful and war-like leader who knew enough to keep thoughtfulness and wisdom close to hand. Sidney hopes that he might play Ennius to Queen's Elizabeth's Cato, urging her not so much to consult the poets but to shelter a place for thoughtfulness leading to virtuous action in her court and in her sovereign decrees–especially decrees resulting in warfare. Or consider the story of *Meninius Agrippa* (125), the Roman counsel who placated the unruly members of the Senate who were themselves in opposition to *the whole people of Rome* by telling the story of the body and its members: i.e., the story of how, once upon a time, parts of the body threatened revolt only to learn that to survive they had to work together to support the body as a whole. In truth, as Sidney concedes–the *tale is notorious*, he says–meaning, this story is much older than ancient Rome, and has been told in different versions across many different cultures (from classical literature to the Bible). What catches

Sidney's attention is the decision by the Roman leader, who was *an excellent orator*, not to resort to *cunning insinuations*, i.e., tricky urns of speech to persuade his listeners, but instead to *behave himself like a homely and familiar poet*. And the earthy everydayness of the story worked; peace ensued, *for upon reasonable conclusions a perfect reconcilement ensued* (125). Sidney is himself behaving here like a *homely and familiar poet*, using a down-to-earth and time-honoured fable gently to coax his own audience into reasonableness and reconcilement regarding literature, teaching, and learning. And it bears remembering that by choosing to write his oration in English rather than in the "official" language of learning, Latin, he too chooses to *behave himself like a homely and familiar poet*–albeit one with an incredible body of wisdom also at his finger-tips!

Or consider the story of *Nathan the Prophet*, a figure from the Old Testament who acts as a kind of conscience for King David when he commits adultery with Bathsheba and murders Uriah the Hittite (2 Samuel 11-12). Nathan responds to these signs of David's *infected will* not by scolding him or taunting him for his depravity but instead by telling a story about a *beloved lamb...ungratefully taken from his bosom* (125-6). *The application was most divinely true*, Sidney points out, *but the discourse itself feigned*, meaning, that although the poetic story Nathan told David was a lovely fiction, the truth behind it was instantly and deeply felt. Nathan's lesson to David is a famous story, but Sidney modifies it to suit his purposes. Lots of existing discussions (and, indeed, paintings) of this scene picture Nathan severely reprimanding David, shaking him to his senses, but Sidney paints a much gentler picture, reimagining Nathan as a kinder and more humanely accommodating teacher. David sees *as in a glass to see his own filthiness*, Sidney observes, resorting, as he sometimes does, to the language of the puritanical souls around him who see human beings as essentially foul. And yet, Sidney says, in effect, although it is true that even the most beloved of God ("David" means "beloved of God") can do awful things, that doesn't mean that those same souls are only "filthy." The fact that David is moved by poetry to reconcile himself to his faith again is itself more than enough evidence for Sidney that we have an *erected wit* as well as an *infected will*. *Filthiness*, like *clayey lodgings* or *this world's dunghill* (126) is a word that Sidney throws back into the face of the puritanical Christians, using their own favoured, judgmental language, which is so demeaning of human life, to bring out how limited that language is when describing human beings as they actually are and could be. In other words, when Sidney resorts to this kind of language he consistently does so in a manner that underlines that he has no stake in it. He is mimicking the language of his opponents; nothing in the rest of the text suggests he believes for a moment that such language adequately or fairly describes the complexities of human life, not when *a never-leaving goodness* (115) never leaves that life. We human beings aren't entirely sinful, horrid creatures; there is a *goodness* in us, a possibility of being so much more than our base cravings and selfish intentions, a *goodness* that *never* leaves, and so is an elemental and ineradicable part of what we are or can be.

Rembrandt (1606-1669), *Daniel and Cyrus before the Idol Bel* (detail) (1633), oil on panel, 23.5 x 30.2 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA.

--One final example of Sidney's sustained interest in the conduct of sovereign authorities, namely the case of Cyrus. Cyrus the Great (601-530 BCE) was the king of the first Persian empire, a revered sovereign who at one time ruled over one of the world's most extensive kingdoms. In the stories told about him over millennia following his rule, he is often represented as a uniquely tolerant ruler, a king who was a conqueror of many different cultures, to be sure, but who allowed those cultures to continue to flourish under his command. Sidney hoped that Queen Elizabeth would rule her empire in the way that Cyrus did, at once great-hearted and charitable, in addition to being courageous. Perhaps she too would then be remembered two thousand years later for her magnanimity. Most famously, Cyrus freed the Jews from their captivity in Babylonia, and made it possible for them to return to their homeland. He is responsible for rebuilding the great Temple in Jerusalem, often considered to be a turning point in the history of the Jews. Because of his virtuous actions towards the Jews he is mentioned many times in the Old Testament, where he is honoured with the name, "Messiah," or "the anointed one." Whether the historical Cyrus actually embodied these virtues does not interest

Sidney; what matters is how Cyrus got represented fictionally in stories, for it is in those stories that he becomes, he hopes, an inspiration for others. Xenophon, the Athenian philosopher and historian who was a pupil of Socrates, like Plato, wrote a famous account of Cyrus's reign, an account that everyone knew or seems to have known was invented and embellished. Sidney doesn't object in slightest to that inventiveness, pointing out that Xenophon's *fiction* about Cyrus is an *honest dissimulation* (i.e., a "true lie" or perhaps what Socrates calls "a noble fiction") if it proves useful *to serve your prince* (122). The patent fictions about Cyrus precisely get at the truth about virtuous leadership, and that is what makes them valuable to courtiers, like Sidney, who offer wise counsel to the Queen rather than mere flattery. (Here you might recall that Pugliano praises horses as creatures who want only to serve their prince *without flattery* [109]). It is the "made" or "made-up" Cyrus, the virtuous sovereign who is the product of the inventiveness of fabled historians and chroniclers, that matters most. As Sidney says, a poetic historian like Xenophon delivers *forth* ideas about Cyrus *in such excellency as he had imagined them.* But these inventions are *not wholly imaginative*, Sidney suggests, meaning they aren't the products of a merely dreamy and arbitrary fancy. (Note here that "imagination" is a word Sidney associates with substanceless delusions. It won't be until the latter part of the 18th century, two hundred years later, that "imagination" is de-synonymized from "fancy," i.e., that the two terms come to mean different things.) As Sidney says, Xenophon's account of Cyrus can't properly be described as similar to those who merely *build castles in the air* (114). No, the fictional Cyrus offers us–all of us who live under sovereign authority, as Sidney did–an image of what a leader could be. And more than that, a fictional Cyrus offers up a kind of model to create more and more Cyrus's in the world, i.e., to teach real sovereigns what it really means to have *an ethic and politic consideration*. To invent a Cyrus in fiction *worketh not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency, as Nature might have done* [i.e., the invented Cyrus conjures up for us what a sovereign could be], *but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world, to make many Cyruses, if they will learn aright why and how that maker made him* [i.e., the maker-poet who invented the noble character of Cyrus does so not just to hold an image of nobility and virtue up for our contemplation; the ultimate objective is to translate this *gnosis* into *praxis*, this ideal image into real life sovereigns and court actors who act upon those ideals](114).

Sidney returns repeatedly to good and bad examples of sovereigns or political authorities, and every time he does so he is gently, humanely, not–scoldingly, inviting his own sovereign, Queen Elizabeth I, as well as her circle of advisors in her court, to reflect on the nature of authority. Sidney honours his sovereign by writing in a way that assumes that she is educable, i.e., that she too is part of the human community and so deserving of the capacity to grow and change. So Sidney is quietly rejecting the image of the Queen that we see in the famous portrait of her (reproduced at the start of these Study Notes), i.e., scarily static, frozen, the unmoved mover of Britain. It is revealing that Sidney nowhere in this text reproduces the language that was often used when addressing or discussing Elizabeth, which characterized and praised her as "the Virgin Queen," the queen "whose lifetime dedication to the sovereignty of her own body proved to be a masterly way of stabilizing the English crown" (Clair Wills, "The Wages of Virtue" 20). Why does Sidney avoid this language? He no doubt grasped the unique way in which Elizabeth linked her virginity with power. But he winces at the way in which that method of arrogating authority to herself reproduces an already existing myth about human beings in Christian Britain,

the myth that links virtue with the denial of the body. Elizabeth is surrounded by a story-making machine that claims this: her supposedly "untouched" body is the principle sign of her goodness. Because she commands her own body, she is deserving of commanding Britain. Sidney is very wary of this sort of story, versions of which he has heard before in the hands of religious leaders who chose to read the New Testament in a particular way, i.e., as pushing human beings to renounce this world in earnest of gaining entrance to the next. For him goodness is to be found and acted upon in this world, with all of its messy earthiness. To idealize other-worldly and disembodied life is not the world Sidney lives in: goodness, doing-well, is not about renunciation but about imagination, or, in his word, "poetry." What deserves defending, what deserves an oration or "apology," is not our capacity to disavow the world but our courage, against all odds, to make something better of it.

As you read the *Apology*, mark points at which the text falls into its more or less separate movements or parts, as formal orations are by convention expected to do. Identifying each movement, and getting a good sense of what happens in each, will go a long way towards helping your consolidate your understanding of this text.

Sidney's oration is organized in this way:

1) Prefatory welcome: the lesson of John Pietro Pugliano (109-110)
2) Discussion of various cultures (ancient and modern, near and far) that affirm poetry (110-112).
3) Discussion that contrasts poetry to various other practices of knowledge, including: astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, law, grammar, metaphysics, moral philosophy (113-126).
4) Discussion of various *genres* or kind of poetry (126-130).
5) First Recapitulation (130).
6) Discussion of objections to poetry (130-138).
7) Second Recapitulation (138).
8) Discussion of the state of poetry in England (138-146). Here Sidney inquires *why England (the mother of excellent minds) should be grown to hard a stepmother to poets* (138).
9) Concluding appeal to the reader (146-147).

Let me briefly review the salient arguments and telling details of a couple of these nine movements or parts of the *Apology*. (Other parts are discussed earlier in these Study Notes.)

Prefatory welcome--the story about the oration of John Pietro Pugliano (109-110). Sidney's text is itself an oration, and so we might consider Pugliano's remarks to be a miniature version of the *Apology* that is cached in the body of the text. Like Sidney's oration, Pugliano's addresses an unlikely topic, namely horses and horsemanship. Like Sidney, Pugliano is a member of *the Emperor's Court*, but also like Sidney, Pugliano is master of a body of knowledge that is somewhat to the side of the centre of power. Pugliano will of necessity spend a great deal of time

in the stables, and perhaps Sidney is here smiling at his readers, acknowledging that the one who defends poetry, like the one who defends horses, of necessity does so on the outside looking in. (And, after all, he could count on his Christian readers to remember that a very great deal, perhaps the biggest deal, can happen and has happened in a lowly stable!) But teaching and learning can happen in lots of different places–among horses and in a stable, or in the midst of what is said to be disreputable and misleading, poetry, for example. Moreover, in recounting the sheer power of Pugliano's oration, Sidney offers a story about what it means to encounter someone who is both knowledgeable and passionate about their craft. Those individuals can be very convincing, Sidney warns, speaking, after all, about his own oration! Be careful with me just as I needed to be careful with Pugliano, Sidney is saying. Pugliano's speciality is horses, and his love and wisdom about them is so captivating that, as Sidney says, the man had almost *persuaded me to have wished myself a horse* (109). That's a humourous way with which to start the *Apology* but it is important to observe the different ways in which it establishes some of the text's major concerns, as well as captures some significant details about Sidney's teaching practice. What better way to begin a text about the importance of both teaching and delighting than with a story about what it means to be taught delightfully? Sidney is preparing us for his own text, wittily giving readers fair warning that he will do everything he can, from a position of knowledge, experience, and commitment, to convince you of the merits of poetry. Pugliano, in other words, is a character who in some sense represents Sidney. He is a kind of double of Sidney inhabiting his own text. Why begin the text in this manner? (It can help to know that the name, "Philip," comes from the Greek, "Philippos," meaning "lover of horses.") Sidney is laying his cards on the table, offering readers a graciously fair warning of his designs on them, but by betraying that intention he paradoxically unsettles his own authority. This opening move is Sidney's equivalent to Socrates's famous inaugural sentence in the *Republic*: *I went down yesterday to the Piraeus*. How so?

Various cultures. As a first step, Sidney unfurls a rapid and enthusiastic survey of *nations and languages* that have sheltered an honourable place for poetry (110). Lots of names and places and examples tumble out of Sidney's mouth as he scans the world for evidence that other cultures treasure literary knowledge, and indeed give it and those who create it the highest priority. So why doesn't England? The objective here is to demonstrate how a wide range of cultures over a long span of human history share one thing, namely, the deep affirmation of poetry and poetic practices. Whether ancient or modern, "pagan," Islamic, Indigenous, or Christian, Sidney says, peoples everywhere embrace the distinctive powers of poetry. Why does Sidney press this point? While Queen Elizabeth asserts British primacy in the world, claiming its exemplary status among all civilizations, Sidney playfully reminds his readers that Britain is but one country among many, geographically and historically, and that it has a very great deal to learn from the wide world that it otherwise seems intent only on possessing and dominating. We Britons who go about teaching the world a lesson might pick up a thing or two from that same world, Sidney suggests.

Sidney first considers *learned Greece*, pointing to the pervasiveness of poetry in classical Greek culture and the centrality of literary knowledge there. That particular idealization of Greece will have a powerful afterlife in European culture, lasting into the 20th century. But here

and at the dozens of other places in the *Apology* where Sidney appeals to Greek authority, the author of the *Apology* must tread a fine line: Greek wisdom is praised and sheltered by Christian-humanists, including Sidney, as it is by many generations of thinkers in subsequent ages in Europe. But the embrace of Greece is not without problems, for in certain more puritanical Christian quarters, where classical culture, spectacular as it appears to be, so rich in literature, philosophy, and science, is experienced as competing with the importance of the revelation of God in the holy scripture. On pain of being denounced as impious by those puritans, Sidney must not come across as suggesting that ancient "pagan" wisdom is equivalent to the word of God, for that would be sacrilege in the often ferociously devout Christian context into which he was born; and yet, Sidney insists, that Greek and Roman knowledge cannot be reasonably ignored either. It too is part of what makes the world the wonderful and strange place that it is; its complex lessons should embraced. Like many Christian-humanists, Sidney abides at least by the spirit of the code of the great Roman playwright, Terence (195-159 BCE), who wrote *Nothing that is human is alien to me*--meaning that it doesn't matter, finally, if you are a Christian or a "pagan," from today or from millennia ago, *both* cultural expressions are expressions of what it means to be human and all are therefore part of my education *as* a human being. Perhaps one of the reasons why Sidney is so playful in his handling of Greek literature and philosophy, why he so often handles his deep knowledge of that culture with a light touch, is that it helps create an image of him as fascinated by ancient Greece but not necessarily slavishly beholden to it either. By adopting that persona, he gets to have his Greek cake and eat it too.

In his detailed survey of *nations and languages*, Sidney points to the illustrious example of Herodotus, the Greek who wrote his vividly memorable histories of the wars between the Greeks and the Persians in the form of poetry. In those histories Herodotus regularly attributed *long orations* to *great kings and captains* that *it is certain they never pronounced* (111), meaning, Herodotus reveled in the chance to "poeticize" his historical subjects, transforming their lives into dramatic characters who give stylized, quotable, and affecting speeches, the better to remember them and their respective achievements and errors. The implication is that ancient Greek history is all the better for this literary transformation of actual lives. Greek philosophy too is exemplary for its embrace of the poetic faculty. Sidney names no less than seven philosophers, all of whom *sang* their work *in verses.* (Study tip: be able to name at least two of these philosophers [111). Of all the Greeks, Plato of course calls for special attention since his rejection of the poets in Book 2 and especially Book 3 of the *Republic* is widely cited among the *poet-haters* (130) of England as justification for the disavowal of literary knowledge. Sidney notes that

> *truly, even Plato, whosoever well considereth shall find that in the body of his work, though the inside and strength were Philosophy, the skin as it were and beauty depending most of Poetry: for all standeth upon dialogues, wherein he feigned many honest burgesses of Athens to speak of such matters...*

As Sidney suggests, Plato's philosophy somehow remains philosophy while also embracing poetry as a kind of beautiful *skin*. (Note the use of a *homely* and familiar language here.) Plato had famously set philosophy in opposition to poetry (i.e., the love of wisdom vs. the thirst for

illusions and entertainment), but in Sidney's hands the Greek thinker is in fact deeply poetic, and never more legibly so than in his decision to write works like the *Republic* in the form of a dialogue, i.e., in the form of a self-consciously fictional or invented conversation (or rather a remembered conversation) between various Athenians. As Sidney points out, not a single, actual Athenian burgess–i.e., a wealthy citizen-merchant–would speak the way they do in the dialogue, even if *they had been set on the rack*, no more, we might expect, for Queen Elizabeth to talk like one of Shakespeare's royals. No, these speeches and discussions are wholly invented and unembarrassedly so! Plato mobilizes the power of invention to work, putting poetry–i.e., imagined words--into the mouths of Athenians who never spoke this way in real life. Moreover, he adds, Plato resorts to various *poetical* devices, including *Gyges' Ring* (i.e., the fable of injustice and invisibility that Glaucon tells Socrates and Adiemantus), to make his text work. Sidney's praise for Plato in this regard will have a complex afterlife: the Earl of Shaftesbury, the learned patron who supported John Locke (who we take up in this course), will note in the 1700s that Plato is like the best poets in that all these authors make a point of effacing themselves. In stepping away from their own texts and in letting their texts do the speaking, these writers ensure that they are not dogmatic or didactic: the writer is wonderfully un-opinionated because he or she "makes hardly any figure at all, and is scarce discoverable in his poem," the Earl of Shaftesbury will say in his 1711 text, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (I, 130). And as David Simpson has argued, the Earl of Shaftesbury is responsible for reviving the Platonic practice of writing philosophy as dialogue rather than monologue, staging two voices in discussion rather than speaking in one voice with no interlocutor ("Hume's Intimate Voices and the Method of Dialogue" [1979]). Sidney will have reason to return to Plato in the *Apology*, since he is a touchstone for him. Why? What other ways does Sidney engage Plato and engage contemporary readers of Plato who are marshaling his authority to denounce poetry and to disavow those who connect human inventiveness with *an ethic and politic consideration*? Note that Sidney will feel compelled to return to Plato later in the text, when he again confronts the argument that if a thinker as venerable as the Athenian philosopher disavowed poetry then he, Sidney, has his work cut out for him. Sidney's response is richly suggestive. He begins by noting: *But now indeed my burden is great* (136); *now Plato's name is laid upon me, whom, I must confess, of all philosophers I have ever esteemed most worthy of reverence; and with great reason, since of all philosophers he is the most poetical; yet if he will defile the fountain out of which his flowing streams have proceeded, let us boldly examine with what reasons he did it.*

In addition to the Greeks, Sidney points to *the Romans* (110), as well as the honoured place of poetry in Italy and in England (110), citing the importance of, for example, Geoffrey Chaucer, the author of the *Canterbury Tales*, the 14th-century story-sequence that was largely responsible for putting English on the cultural map, i.e., that made it possible for Britons to, as it were, take literature written in the mother-tongue seriously. The point here is to remind Britons that two centuries earlier, Britain was home to an artistic genius, the implication being, why isn't it more hospitable to that kind of talent today? He points to the examples of Turkey, Ireland (*where truly learning goeth very bare*, he says, winking at his audience, sharing a bit of chauvinist humour about a "distant" and supposedly "primitive" land that even then was the butt of English jokes), Wales, and the Caribbean (he recalls the *Areytos*, the poetic songs sung by Taíno, the indigenous inhabitants of islands like present-day Puerto Rico, almost all of whom

will be dead from European bourne smallpox during Sidney's lifetime. From the languages of the Taíno, we get words like "canoe," "hammock," "barbecue," "hurricane," and "tobacco." The Taíno were the Indigenous peoples with whom Christopher Columbus made first contact at the end of the 15th century. He transported several hundred individuals from Hispaniola to Spain in 1493, thereby starting the first transatlantic slave voyage. The Taíno appear ever so briefly as a kind of trace in this text, in a way that might bring to mind the brief appearance of the slave at the start of the *Republic*–the barest hint of the worlds that were exploited to shore up "the homeland.") In a racist way that is so typical of this age of empire, Sidney views the *Indians* of the Caribbean as *barbarous and simple*, characterized by *hard dull wits,* but his larger point is worth hanging on to as well–namely, that *hard dull wits* must also populate Britain, since the Taíno sheltered a special place for poetry whereas too many Britons treat it with moralizing disgust or ignore it–like the *Goths* Sidney describes (134-5)--because conquest is their game, not exploring the contents of the libraries. In each cultural and historical case that is reviewed in this section of the text, Sidney's point is that all these other cultures recognize the unique powers of literary texts *to draw with their charming sweetness the wild untamed wits to an admiration of knowledge*–i.e., to turn unfocussed minds to a love of wisdom. --All but Britain. Or so it sometimes seemed to Sidney.

Sidney also discusses the Psalms of the Old Testament, which brim with various poetic turns (including what he calls David's *notable prosopopeias*, i.e., the psalmist's love of personifying or giving life to inanimate objects, as is the case when he describes the *hills' leaping* in the presence of God. Hills don't of course do anything of the sort . . . except in the imagination of the poet who draws from the deep well of poetry–in which such evocative comparisons are possible–to activate faith in believers. It is one thing to be taught that as one of the faithful you turn towards the divine, but quite another thing to be taught and to feel the pleasure–the *delight*, as Sidney says–that comes from imagining a world in which even inanimate objects like hills respond yearningly to the presence of the divine in the nature of things. Such is the power of the psalmist's poetry–poetry that makes scripture more than a collection of texts about faith because it is also capable of <u>moving</u> readers to virtue, drawing the faithful in so that they might practice what they preach. About describing scripture as poetic, Sidney is always sorry, not sorry. He feigns a certain reluctance or embarrassment: *may not I presume a little further*, he says, and *say that the hold David's Psalms are a divine poem*? Sidney makes analogous claims about the New Testament as well. For, as he points out, when Jesus seeks to teach others about *uncharitableness and humbleness* (note how Sidney characterizes Christian teachers teaching <u>both</u> vice and virtue, both inconsiderateness and humility, rather than brow-beating the faithful with denunciations of their moral weakness), he regularly does so in the form of *instructing parables* (120). It's true, he concedes, that *the Philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him; that is to say, he teacheth them that are already taught.* But *the poet is the food for the tenderest stomaches, whereof Aesop's tales give good proof; whose pretty allegories, stealing under the formal tales of beasts, make many, many more beastly than beasts, begin to hear the sound of virtue from these dumb speakers* (120). Sidney moves swiftly and quietly here from discussing Christ to *the poet*, treating their two teaching strategies and equivalent because similarly encouraging and humane. And from there, without missing a beat, he moves on to the very ancient Greek story-teller, Aesop

(620-524 BCE). Do you see Sidney's rhetorical or writing strategy here? He is unembarrassed to speak of Christ, poets, and ancient Greek story-tellers in almost the same breath. This is a move that is typical of the Christian-humanists, who seek to bring Christian and pre-Christian worlds into a kind of close and respectful and mutually educational dialogue, since, as I've said, nothing that is human is foreign to them. The Greeks and Romans wrote gorgeous, moving poetry, Sidney says, *though in full wrong divinity* (115). But he won't let that concession to the Christians around him expressing skepticism about the worth of ancient wisdom stand on its own. For some, this qualification would be the end of the discussion. For Sidney, it is rather the beginning. Before that same sentence has run its course, he connects the Greeks and Romans to the Christians, refusing the temptation to separate them:

> *...though in a full wrong divinity, were Orpheus, Amphion,* [and] *Homer in his Hymns, and many other, both Greeks and Romans, and this poesy must be used by whosoever will follow St. James's counsel in singing psalms when they are merry, and I know is used with the fruit of comfort by some, when, in sorrowful pangs of their death-bringing sins, they find the consolation of the never-leaving goodness* (115).

Orpheus was an ancient Greek mythical poet and musician; Amphion was a mythical poet and singer; and Homer was the fabled author of the great Greek epic, *The Odyssey*. In Sidney's humanist hands, extended outwards to different cultures, these ancient Greek exemplars offer a wisdom directly comparable to the deeply affirming advice that St. James (one of Christ's twelve apostles or founding followers), who encouraged Christians to embrace poetry–*singing psalms*–both when they were happy and when they were heavily burdened by a sense of their own terrific weaknesses, *their death-bringing sins*. For a Christian-humanist like Sidney, it cannot help to end there, in the contemplation of one's *infected will*. That cannot be the bedrock of human life, and so Sidney's sentence refuses to conclude without also adding that in song, in the experience of poetry–and note how it is a <u>collective</u> experience here, others lifting others up (*they find*, Sidney says), the faithful also discover *the consolation of the never-leaving goodness*, i.e., the encouragement of the knowledge that goodness is ineradicable. No less an authority than the revered St. James is cited to back him up . . . and, importantly, to back the ancient Greeks up as well.

<u>Objections to poetry</u>. Sidney reserves a section deep in his oration specifically to address the several different objections that are leveled against poetry in his age. In truth this part of his oration gathers together threads that traverse the text in its entirety. In other words, from the opening to the concluding lines, Sidney's text is in a dynamic response to the charges being leveled against poetic practice (and the culture of education that it embodies) during his own day. What then are these *imputations* regarding poetry? (137) Briefly, they fall into four charges:

1) *First, that there being many other more fruitful knowledges, a man might better spend his time in them than in this* (132). You start to see why Sidney spends all the time and energy

that he does earlier in the *Apology* examining the strengths and weakness of those other *fruitful knowledges*. His point there is his point here, namely, that those knowledges are precisely <u>not</u> truly *fruitful*, meaning, in this text, morally productive or generative, ripening in the form of virtuous action. "Fruitfulness" is in fact a word that Sidney uses repeatedly and always as a familiar and homely metaphor for the springing forth of virtuous action. As he points out earlier, *it is not* Gnosis *but* Praxis *must be the fruit* (123). And he says the same thing here: *for it to be, as I affirm* [Sidney once again draws attention to himself making his case, i.e., *I* am the one affirming this, someone else might affirm differently...], *that no learning is so good as that which teacheth and moveth to virtue, and that none can teach and move thereto so much as Poetry, then is the conclusion manifest that ink and paper cannot be to a more profitable purpose employed* (132). Poetry is or can be importantly useful in its moving powers. Can the same be said about those other practices of knowledge, the ones that some say are *more fruitful*? One irony at work in this passage is that Sidney will in his oration's last paragraph worry that his text is nothing more than *an ink-wasting toy of mine* (146). But we know he is winking at his audience when he says this, because fourteen pages earlier he had countered this very argument. There is nothing wasteful about affirming poetry–quite to the contrary. Poetry bears fruit in virtuous action. He hopes–and it is <u>hope</u>, a supplication or request, that is the key in which Sidney sings his last paragraph--an apology for or defense of poetry, an apology or defense that is <u>itself</u> poetic through and through, will bear fruit too.

2) Poetry *is the mother of lies*. –To which Sidney responds, *Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth* (132). To hold fictions up to the same standard as, say, journalism, is entirely to miss what makes fictions different from reporting on reality or describing it. A fiction is not a lie but an invention; *in truth,* [the poet is] *not labouring to tell you what is, or is not, but what should or should not be* (133). When Aesop wrote his marvelous stories about talking animals ("Aesop's Fables"), he wasn't passing a lie off as true. A child who attends a play and sees *Thebes written in great letters upon an old door* doesn't actually think that *it is Thebes*. Poets provide *pictures of what should be, and not stories of what have been. But truly, I think truly, that of all writers under the sun the poet is the least liar*, Sidney says, beginning his sentence once more with one of those asides that draw attention to his attempt to convince you of what he is saying. "Truly, truly, he in effect says, poetry isn't answerable to the truth of what is." He hopes his readers will pause and reflect on the rhyming poetry of that claim, as it rings the changes of the word <u>truth</u>. He opens a space between "truth" as an abstract certainty and what he "thinks" must be true–a space to think and breath because it has abandoned dogmatic certainty.

3) Poetry *is the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires, with a siren's sweetness drawing the mind to the serpent's tale of sinful fancy* (132). Sidney is enjoying himself here, savouring the opportunity to repeat the language of the more puritanical Christians around him, the ones that are always looking for ways to denigrate or demean human life as sickly and wicked. Listen to the sibilance of the later part of his sentence: " a <u>s</u>iren's <u>s</u>weetness drawing the mind to the <u>s</u>erpent<u>s</u> tale of <u>s</u>inful fan<u>c</u>y," all those "<u>s</u>" sounds hissing at us like the serpent who, it is said, tempted human beings into sinfulness through the seductive powers of language. But of

course it is the puritans who are talking this way, tempting Britons to believe that poetry has horrible effects on them. Is poetry in the capacious sense that Sidney gives it a tempting serpent in England's "green and pleasant land"? This is *the principal* charge of *abuse I can hear alleged*, Sidney says (133). But poetry is not intrinsically abusive; it is the wrong *use* of poetry that is the problem, in the same way that *skill of Physic* [i.e., medicine] is, in the wrong hands, *the most violent destroyer* (134). Even and especially *God's word* can be *abused*–that's a point directed at the puritans, who claim, in the name of God, to reject poetry when, as Sidney has explained at length at several earlier points in the text, scripture draws deeply and widely on poetic resources. Sidney senses something villainous just beneath the surface of those who say that poetry is villainous, namely, an anti-intellectualism or what he calls *a chain-shot against all learning* (134). In other words, the renunciation of poetry is part of a much broader attack on education of all kinds (*chain-shot* is a special kind of projectile made up of linking several iron balls that are fired from a cannon; its purpose is to shred the sails of an enemy ship).

4) Plato banished the poets. But Sidney responds–and has already responded earlier in the *Apology*–by point out that *of all philosophers he* [Plato] *is most poetical* (136). Moreover, Sidney claims, Plato did not disavow poetry as such but cast out those who abused it (137), pointing to the example of poets who had *wrong opinions of the Deity* (137). Elsewhere than the *Republic*, in any case, Sidney says, citing the dialogue called *Ion*, Plato gives *high and rightly divine commendation to Poetry* (137). And he did so, wonder of wonders, without *the light of Christ*, i.e., without the benefit of Christian revelation.

Sidney leaves us with a powerful working definition of poetry early on in his *Apology*:

> *This purifying wit, this enriching of memory, enabling of judgment, and enlarging of conceit, which commonly we call learning, under what name soever it come forth, or to what immediate end soever it be directed, the final end 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* (116).

Note how Sidney crafts his sentence: the weight of it is tilted heavily towards the various strengths and powers that poetry–*commonly* called *learning*–activates and supports. Sidney seeks to broaden the meaning and practice of poetry to include all those practices of knowledge that make human beings make themselves more capacious, feeding into their various faculties–wit, memory, judgment, and conceit (*conceit* means, in Sidney's day, the ability to make ingenious connections, often through metaphor). The goal is to assist us not in becoming perfect but to *draw us to as high a perfection* as is humanly possible. Sidney, after all, doesn't expect us actually to become perfect <u>or</u> to demean ourselves or allow us to be demeaned by others for "failing" to be perfect. The latter phenomenon is where some of his fellow Christians have themselves failed, those who ignore the importance of teaching in a humanely encouraging ways, or, in Sidney's terms, to *teach and delight*. He leaves the language of those Christians, who see the world in black and white, in terms of angels and demons, to the very end of his sentence. We endure our degeneracy, to be sure, and live lives that are human, all-too-human, toiling away in

our *clayey-lodgings*. But we aren't reducible to those conditions, not while the enlarging possibilities of the first and emphasized part of this key sentence win the day. Step by step, Sidney hopes, the labour of making and of taking responsibility for that inventiveness grows from individuals to families to entire cultures: *it extendeth itself out of the limits of a man's own world to the government of families, and maintaining of public societies* (117).