

A Comparative Study of Sidney's "Apology for Poetry" and Shelley's "A Defense of Poetry"

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Sidney and Shelley belong to two different periods of literature. Sidney is a Renaissance model, while Shelly is a Romantic one. The two critics reveal almost certain points of similarities and differences in their understanding of the concept of poetry. Therefore, the paper aims at shedding light on the two concepts. Defending poetry against contemporary attack was the motive shared by both Sidney and Shelley in their essays. Sidney's defence was an answer to the puritan fanatics of the 16th century led by Stephen Lasso in his "School of Abuse". The main attack on poetry was on the ground of its immortality. As for Shelley, his retort was to the 19th century thinkers understanding poetry on the ground of its worthlessness.

Not only were the motives the same with the two writers but the major arguments are also quite similar. One may note a number of close parallels especially in the areas of:

1. Antiquity and Universality of Poetry:

One of the arguments of Sidney in the antiquity of poetry was the first light given to ignorance first nurse whose milk by little and little enabled them to feed afterwards of

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tougher Knowledge"⁽¹⁾. Every author, scientist, philosopher or historian was essentially a poet.

The same point is dealt with in Shelly when he says that poetry is connected with the origin of man. The child as well as the primitive man expresses his emotions in language and gestures deserving a certain rhythm or order. He goes on to stress the fact that "In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry"⁽²⁾.

Both writers agree that Plato himself was a poet. Sidney cites the tale of "Igye's Ring" written by Plato as an example of his poetry. Shelley talks of the truth and splendor of his imagery and the melody of his language"⁽³⁾. More over, he stresses that Shakespeare, Dante and Milton are beside being great poets, they were also great philosophers. Poets were also the institutors of law, the founders of civil society, the inventors of the arts of life, as Shelley says, and Sidney puts the matter this way, "Neither philosophers nor historiographer could at first have entered into the gates of popular judgment, if they had not taken a great passport of poetry"⁽⁴⁾.

One tends to believe in such argument. Anthropologists affirm the fact that the first form of expression was poetry or at least harmonious language that came nearer to poetry. One can safely say that poetry was the first made of expression because letters-or writing-were not invented yet, so a harmonious language was used as it was easier to memorize, and to transmit orally.

This is highly likely. Besides, imitation is instinctive in man as Aristotle says or as Shelley states in his "Defence". The child seeks to prolong a consciousness of the cause by

prolonging in its voice and motions the duration of the effect. Shelley says" Men, even in the infancy of society, observe a certain order in their words and actins, distinct from that of the objects and impressions represented by them, all expressions being subject to the laws of that from which it proceeds"⁽⁵⁾

A noteworthy point concerning the relation between philosophy and poetry is that it is true that philosophy was expressed in poetry and depended on it for its promulgation, but philosophy together with the other areas like history and astrology which once depended on poetry gained their independence and need no more assistance from poetry. This is one of the reasons for regarding poetry as worthless by some modern thinkers.

2. Metre in Poetry:

As for the question of meter in poetry both Sidney and Shelley agree that poetry is rhythmic and should have harmonious recurrence of sound. But rhyming and versification do not make a poet. Moreover, some prose writings may be considered highly poetic by, virtue of their harmony of sound and slandered of imagery. Sidney states that "verse being but an ornament and no cause to poetry.....it is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet."⁽⁶⁾ He cites two prose works-Xonophon's *lysopaedia* and *Heliodorus Aethiopica*-as excellent poems. Shelley too argues that "the popular division into prose and verse is inadmissible in accurate philosophy". He also mentions the work of Plato as excellent poetry though it is not written in metrical language.

This argument that metre is not essential poetic requirement is rather acceptable. A novel or a drama can produce the same effect of a metric poem. The best example that proves that metre is not essential is the Bible which is profound poetry though written in English prose.

3. The Divine Nature of Poetry:

The divine nature of poetry and poets is dealt with in the two essays almost in the same way. Sidney shows the high esteem enjoyed by poets among the Greeks and Romans. With the Greeks a poet was called "a maker" Shelley says the same and approves of Tasso's words, one but god and the poet deserves the name of creator."⁽⁸⁾ Thus the poet doesn't content himself with copying nature, he improves upon it and as Sidney says, he creates new forms never found in nature as the Heroes. Demigods, Cycloper. This reminds one of Aristotle when he say in his poetics that" poetry fills in what nature has left undone"⁽⁹⁾ The whole point is summed up in Sidney's remarkable sentence "Her world [Nature] is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden"⁽¹⁰⁾. A close parallel to this sentence is found in Shelley's essay, he says that poetry" makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos"⁽¹¹⁾.

With the Romans, as Sidney says, a poet was called" Vates" that is prophet and Sidney of course approves of this divine name. He borrows the Aristotelian notion that poetry deals not with what is or has been but with what may by and should be. Shelley shares the same conviction as regards the

divinity of poets when he affirms that in the earlier epochs of the world poets were called prophets as they behold the future in the present. In another place in the essay he says that "the office and character of a poet participate in the divine nature as regards providence. No less than as regards creation"⁽¹²⁾.

From this conception of nature of poets follows another, that the gift of poetry is not acquired but inborn. It can not be gained through hard labour if the divine touch is not within the poet. This is the platonic trace shared by both Sidney and Shelley. It is quite clear that this conception of the divinity of poets has become outmoded. There is much stress on the poet's acquired art which is more convincing. The tendency to stress the acquired art of the poet goes back to Aristotle's conception of poetry as structure which was a direct retort to Plato's notion that the poet was the rhapsode who uttered what he did by a divine dispensation. The poet is now no longer that divine being, a larger part of his art depends on hand labour and much reading in previously created works of art. So we find. Mathew Arnold stressing "the power of the moment as well as the power of man"⁽¹³⁾, and T.S. Eliot stressing tradition as well as the individual talent and Iver Winters insisting upon "the need for a rational structure"⁽¹⁴⁾. Almost all modern criticism stresses this point of acquiring the art of poetry through hard effort.

4. The Question of Morality:

The most important argument propounded in both essays is the question of morality and how far poetry man be advantageous to humanity. Here as in the preceding points

Shelley and Sidney share the same convictions and draw upon the same sources. In his definitions of poetry Sidney makes the moral content apart of the essential requirement of poetry. Poetry is "a speaking picture, with this end-to teach and delight.....It is that feigning notable images of virtues and vices, or what else, with that delightful teaching, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by"⁽¹⁵⁾. This Horatian delightful teaching is reproduced in Shelley where teaching" is replaced by wisdom. "A great poem is a fountain for ever over flowing with the waters of wisdom and delight."⁽¹⁶⁾

By delightful teaching poetry is incentive to virtuous action. It has a persuading power scarcely found anywhere else. Sidney proves this by drawing a comparison between poetry on the one hand and philosophy and history on the other. He cites the following proofs to affirm the superiority of poetry and Shelley follows him closely in his conceptions of poetry:

1. Philosophy teaches by precept, history by example, but poetry exploits both precept and example for its teaching. It couples the general notion with the particular example. Shelley agrees that the poem is "universal and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or action have place in the possible varieties of human nature"⁽¹⁷⁾.
2. Poetry gives a perfect picture of beauty, a picture more effective. Shelley in the same way asserts that "poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world. It exalts the beauty to that which is most deformed"⁽¹⁸⁾.

3. The imaginary examples of poetry are more instructive than the real examples of history because the feigned may be turned to the highest key of passion and by so doing it has a greater power of moving. Imagination for Shelley is the great instrument of moral goodness and poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by providing it with thoughts of ever new delight. Thus "poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man"⁽¹⁹⁾.
4. Poetry can present moral lessons in a more attractive form than philosophy or history as the poet "with a tale forsooth he cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play and old men from the chimney corner"⁽²⁰⁾. This charm of poetry is emphasized also by shelly when he argues that the auditors of the poet are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician. They feel that they are moved and saftened yet know not whence or why"⁽²¹⁾.

Towards the end of Shelley's essay, he says that poetry is the trumpet which sings to battle. This seems an echo from Sidney's statement, "poetry is the companion of camps", poetry then is useful and Shelley adds that the production and assurance of pleasure in a higher sense is true utility and it is poetry that produces this kind of pleasure. Poetry also is superior to every science. For Sidney it moves fastly to the platonic "Architectonike". The prevailing notion on the 6th century that above all sciences there is a secret ideal science created by god. Human Sciences are imperfect reflection of this perfect science which is the Architectonic For Shelley poetry is the center and circumference of knowledge, it is that which

comprehends all sciences and that to which all sciences must be referred.

Concerning the question of morality one is liable to face the problem that faced Sidney. For though he makes the moral an essential part of the requirement of poetry, he contradicts himself at the end by saying that poetry has asocial power of abusing; it is almost like a sword with which one can defend his country or kill his father. The problem always appears when the work of art is related to something alien to itself. Poetry shouldn't be judged by moral or ethical standards. The best achievement of modern criticism is the tendency to see the work of art as itself it really is as M. Arnold says. Thus it is judged by its own laws. As Benedetto Croce says, "ugliness when well justified and artistically presented turns to be aesthetically beautiful".⁽²²⁾

As we have already stated the most important points shared by both writers, Shelley and Sidney and their attitudes towards poetry there is a profound difference between the two defences. In Sidney's we find him talking about poetry as teaching and persuading doctrines discovered in some authority outside itself whether scriptural revelation or ethical philosophy. But in Shelly's defence he argues that the persuading power of poetry is something springing from within, it is an autonomous power and there is no appeal to any authority outside poetry itself.

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دراسة مقارنة بين قصيدة "الاعتذار عن الشعر" لسدني

و "الدفاع عن الشعر" لشلي

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الملخص

يهدف البحث إلى إجراء دراسة مهمة مقارنة بين النظرية النقدية للشعر لكل من الشاعر السير فيليب سيدني والشاعر الرومانسي شلي. ينتسب كل من الشاعرين إلى عصرين أدبيين مختلفين في خصائصهما الأدبية. فالشاعر فليب سدني يعود إلى فترة عصر النهضة، القرن السادس عشر. في حين ينتمي الشاعر شلي إلى العصر الرومانسي بكل ما تحمله هذه الحركة من خصائص أدبية على الرغم من البعد الزمني الشاسع بينهما إلا أنهما يتشابهان في موقفهما من الشعر. فكل منهما نظرية نقدية يحاول فيها الدفاع عن الشعر والإجابة على بعض تساؤلات النقاد وهجومهم على الشعر. فالشاعر فليب سدني كتب (الدفاع عن الشعر) في حين كتب شلي (الاعتذار عن الشعر). ومن أهم الملامح المشتركة لهذين العملين هي أن الاثنين قد دافعا عن الشعر كجزء من تكوين الإنسان وحياته. وهذا الدفاع هو رد على كل النقاد الذين يتهمون الشعر وأهدافه، كونه غير مجدٍ ولا ينفع الإنسان. وكذلك دافعا عن شمولية الشعر. واعتبر كل من الشاعرين أن الوزن هو واحد من أهم العناصر المهمة وبدونه لا يمكن أن يكون الكلام شعراً.

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