

PHILIP SIDNEY AND THE ‘DEFENSIVE’ SIDE OF LITERARY CRITICISM

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În contextul actual al studiilor literare, în ciuda diversității curentelor de cercetare literară, în cadrul criticii și teoriei literare are loc și o reevaluare a tradiției critice cu scopul afirmării validității unor principii mai vechi sau cu scopul de a ajunge la originile unei tradiții critice naționale. În ceea ce privește literatura engleză, fondatorul criticii moderne este considerat Philip Sidney, cunoscut mai mult ca un poet remarcabil al Renașterii și nu ca un autor de critică literară. Studiul de față vizează, astfel, un aspect mai puțin cunoscut al personalității lui Sidney – și anume cel de critic – afirmat prin lucrarea sa *Defence of Poesie*, care va contribui enorm la revitalizarea doctrinei literare clasice de factură engleză din perioada Renașterii și până în secolul al XVIII-lea.

The art and literature of Renaissance reveal the two contradictory but co-existing aspects of ‘innovation’ (for instance, sonnet in poetry) and ‘tradition’ (the revival of ancient models, as, for example, in Renaissance tragedy). Based on the humanistic views, the Renaissance period revived the ancient classical tradition attempting to develop theories and doctrines reminiscent of classical ideals, and to judge literature by literary, not religious, values. There was the theory of epic poem, as in Torquato Tasso’s *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* (1594), which asserts the four major elements in epic poetry (the story or fable, the morality of the characters, the purpose behind the story, and the language), and the purpose of epic poetry to delight the reader and as a source of intellectual and moral improvement. At odds with ancient principles of epic writing tradition were romances as proto-novel inventions of the period, such as Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (1516) or Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (1596), and the literary criticism of the period that focused on such texts attempted to justify their literary validity. For instance, Giovambattista Giraldi (1504-1573, better known as Cinthio), in *On the Composition of Romances* (1554), explains and defends the use of the supernatural beings and action in romances, and the great variety of characters and events, as to prove that romance is a totally different from both epic and tragedy genre and should be judged as such.

The most discussed genre in Renaissance literary criticism was drama, where, according to Gilbert Highet, “modern standards of dramatic criticism were being built up through the Renaissance, partly by experiments in new forms, and partly by study and discussion of Greco-Roman literary theory – represented chiefly by Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Horace’s *Art of Poetry*, and, much less influentially, by Longinus’s essay *On the Sublime*. Much of Renaissance drama was created by the lofty standards of Renaissance critics, who, in spite of their frequent pedantry, would not tolerate slovenly work” [1, p.142]. The most discussed issues in relation to drama were the nature of tragedy and the concept of the tragic hero, as well as the doctrine of the ‘three unities’ in the dramatic structure involving the principles of time, place, and action. The theory of the ‘unity of action’ in the play was developed by Aristotle, and Gilbert Highet shows that the unities of time and place (the former just mentioned by Aristotle and the latter not mentioned at all) were largely the creation of the Renaissance scholars Cinthio, Robortelli, Segni, Castelvetro, and others in sixteenth century, all three unities being very useful in the period as “an attempt to strengthen and discipline the haphazard and amateurish methods of contemporary dramatists – not simply in order to copy the ancients, but in order to make drama more intense, more realistic, and more truly dramatic” [2, p.142].

In Renaissance criticism, there was also much debate on poetry as philosophy and imitation, the doctrine of verisimilitude in poetry, the poetic diction and decorum, and the twofold purpose of poetry to please and instruct. There was also the debate on the language of poetry, in particular, and of literature, in general: as Renaissance was the period of the revival of ancient classical tradition, there was no question about imitating the classical models, but about the language used in writing, whether it should be Latin, the language of the classics, or the vernacular one, the use of the latter being earlier defended by Dante (in the unfinished *De Vulgari Eloquentia*) and in Renaissance by, among others, Du Bellay (in *Defence and Illustration of the French Language*, 1549). During Renaissance the major European critical voices were Italian (Vida, Robortelli, Daniello, Minturno, Scaliger, Castelvetro), whereas the mid-sixteenth century throughout the seventeenth century saw the dominance of the French critical works (*Art of Poetry* (1548) by Sibilet, for example, and the

writings of Pierre de Ronsard and Joachim Du Bellay as representatives of the group called 'Pleiade'), which, like those of late medieval and Renaissance periods, were first rhetorical and metrical, guiding the growth of classicism already supported by Humanism, Aristotelianism, and Rationalism. Richard Harland considers the Italian critics to be 'the Italian Aristotelians' who, with the principle of verisimilitude, pointed to the achieving of likeness to reality in literature and, unlike Aristotle, "gave more weight to believability, less to emotional effect", thus prefiguring the later, "modern notions of realism and the realistic" [3, p.36-39].

In English Renaissance, criticism was first concerned with rhetoric and diction (Caxton, Leonard Cox, and Thomas Wilson), and then moved to issues concerning the development of a national literature in native language (for instance, Sir Thomas Elyot in *Book Named the Governour*, 1531), which received a strong opposition from the humanists and inkhornists who searched to adopt Latin words instead of developing a native lexicon. The use of English in writing required the building up of the English vocabulary and the development of different technical devices in versification, such as rhyme and meter, the first work on versification in English being Gascoigne's *Certain Notes of Instruction* (1575). The development of the verse devices that would urge the use of English in poetic composition followed two directions: one theoretical, insisting on the imitation of the classical forms, such as the unrhymed hexameter, and on decorum and imitation, and often condemning the rhyme (as in Campion's *Observations in the Art of English Poesie*, 1602, promptly answered by Samuel Daniel in *A Defence of Rime*); and, another, practical direction, perfecting English versification by means of the creative activity of the poets, where the same Campion and other poets, like Pierre Corneille some decades later in relation to drama, would often attempt at originality against the prevailing insistence on classical forms. Perhaps the main advocate of the classical tradition was Ben Jonson who turned a critic in *Timber: Or Discoveries*, representing together with Dryden some twenty years later the promoters of Neoclassicism in English literature and criticism. Some noteworthy critical ideas are also to be found in Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605), but the master critic of English Renaissance is Philip Sidney (1554-1586). Scholar, poet, courtier, and soldier, Sidney is the author of the most significant critical treatise of the period, the essay *Defence of Poesie* (also entitled *Apologie for Poetrie*), which was published in 1595, but was written much earlier as an answer to the Puritan minister Stephen Gosson's *The School of Abuse* (1579), a Puritan moralistic attack on imaginative writing of the period, dedicated to Sidney himself. Owing it to Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*, Renaissance marks the actual beginnings of literary criticism in Britain. Sidney's critical text is to be considered in relation to the co-existing in the period innovative element in literature, represented, among others, by Sidney himself as the writer of sonnets and pastoral poetry, and the traditional element in literature, standing for the revival of the ancient classical tradition. The text is also to be considered in relation to the fact that the poetry of the period, both pastoral and sonnet writing tradition, and the imaginative writing on the whole, were often attacked on moral grounds by the rising Puritanism.

Sidney was one of the most prominent authors of the Elizabethan Age as a part of English Renaissance, famous not only for his critical treatise but also for his pastoral poetry and sonnets. *Astrophel and Stella* (published in an authorised edition in 1598) is the first important of English sonnet sequences, containing 108 sonnets and 11 songs. *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, or simply *Arcadia*, is Sidney's most ambitious work, representing a romance in which the Greek model of Heliodorus combined with pastoral elements support the Renaissance idealisation of a shepherd's life, to which Sidney adds, following the Hellenistic model, narratives of kidnap, battle, rape, and other stories which are interweaved in the whole of the narrative sequence. There were these literary genres of the period that were attacked by the rising Puritanism, including Stephen Gosson (1554-1624), a Puritan who was earlier a poet and a playwright, and who later took Holy Orders and became Rector of the Church of St. Botolph's in Bishopsgate, London.

Concerning the form of Sidney's critical treatise, according to David H. Richter, "in constructing his *apologia* – Greek for a legal defence – Sidney addressed himself less to Gosson than to Plato, whose *Republic* provides most of the ammunition the Puritan divine expended against poetry. Sidney's *Apology* is structured according to the principles of medieval rhetoric like a good legal brief, with an introduction that draws the reader into the case while offering reassurance of the ethical rightness of the speaker, a central argumentative section, a set of answers to objections, and a glowing peroration" [4, p.131].

The most interesting part of the work is actually the one containing the answers to objections. In it, Sidney firstly states the three accusations of the poet haters, that is, the Puritans, against poetry, and then, using the techniques of rhetorical argumentation, answers them. The first accusation is that poetry teaches nothing, or

offers useless knowledge; poetry is useless knowledge and “there being many other more fruitful knowledge, a man might better spend his time in them than in this”. To this accusation, Sidney’s answer is that poetry gives the most complete knowledge, as compared to other disciplines, because, the critic claims, poetry “teacheth and moveth to virtue”. For Sidney, ‘fruitful knowledge’ is the one that both teaches what virtue is and determines the reader to become a virtuous being.

The second accusation is that poetry does not tell the truth, being “the mother of lies”. Sidney’s answer to this allegation is paradoxical, the paradox challenging the validity of the accusation itself. Like with the previous accusation, and using again rhetorical devices, Sidney asks what is to lie, and answers that to lie is “to affirm that to be true which is false”, which is the matter of history, medicine and other disciplines. Unlike them, Sidney argues, poetry “nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth”. Poetry does not affirm anything for the simple reason of being the result of a “good invention”, the “profitable” product of the poet’s imagination, and allegorically and figuratively written. Hence Sidney’s paradoxical answer to this accusation: poetry does not tell of true things, indeed, but, at the same time, does not lie because it affirms nothing. The accusation has no validity in its meaning, argues Sidney, since poetry nothing affirms, therefore it never lies, because of its imaginative, allegorical and figurative essence, and poetry must be taken seriously, for it helps the mind escape the boundaries of earth and reach eternity by inspiring and elevating it.

The third accusation is that poetry is sinful, “the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires, with a siren’s sweetness drawing the mind to the serpent’s tail of sinful fancies”. The answer to this accusation might be found in the answer to the first accusation, where Sidney claims that poetry both “teacheth and moveth to virtue”, one of the most important, including to Puritans, ethical principles. Based on the classical views and conceptions, Sidney emphasizes the importance of poetry for mankind, and states its superiority over other human activities. Sidney also emphasises the importance of poetry over other arts: poetry offers delight and teaches virtue, but also moves the man towards this moral category so dear to the Puritan mind. By both teaching and moving to virtue, that is making the human being virtuous and morally strong by means of *mimesis* and *catharsis*, poetry becomes the most complete and useful human knowledge.

Being one of the first English works of literary criticism, Sidney’s *Defence of Poesie* has its origins not in the critical act conceived as a self-conscious endeavour, but results from within the literary context and as being determined by an extra-literary problem. However, the three major components of a critical discourse – concern with particular literary texts, the use of theory and method, and the development of personal opinions – are to be found in Sidney’s critical text, in which the main concern is his own and his contemporary poetry; the theory is not far removed from the main principles of imitation and purification, and of usefulness of poetry found in ancient doctrine; the method is borrowed from rhetoric; and the abundance of personal, often subjective, considerations of the poetry’s superior status are easily noticeable.

Sidney’s criticism is first of all defensive, and he came to defend not just his own poetic work, or even the poetry of the period, but the entire imaginative writing from the second half of the sixteenth century. While answering the accusations, Sidney expressed his own ideas on poetry, and thus emerge some genuine parts of literary criticism, a type of critical judgement based on the works of ancients as well as modern poets.

Sidney’s defence of poetry makes Renaissance the period of the rise of a critical tradition in English and Philip Sidney the first important English literary critic, acclaimed for his “intellectual energy and stylistic vitality”, to use Harry Blamires’ words, who continues: “Ideas flow from his pen. Apt illustrations, imaginative turns of thought and neat dialectical thrusts crowd his pages. And the prose, largely free of arid modish turgidities and superfluous contrivances, carries the reader eagerly forward” [5, p. 55].

Philip Sidney’s critical text clearly shows the influence of Horace’s *The Art of Poetry*, which, according to Gilbert Highet, “was a very important formative factor in Renaissance literary theory”, being translated for the first time into Italian by Dolce in 1535, then “into French by Grandichan in 1541 and by Peletier du Mans in 1544; into Spanish in 1592 by Luis Zapata; and into English, along with the other *Letters* and the *Satires*, by T. Drant in 1567” [6, p. 142]. The rise of the literary criticism in England reveals through Sidney’s text obvious moral and defensive features, where, as an answer to Puritanism, Sidney defends poetry as a discourse that makes man a virtuous being, while giving a famous definition of poetry in clearly neo-Horatian terms as an art of imitation that teaches and delights: “Poetry therefore, is an Art of Imitation: for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth; to speak Metaphorically, a speaking Picture, with this end to teach and delight”.

References:

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6. Highet Gilbert. Op. cit., p.142.

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