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# Aesthetic Ideas and Practice in English Renaissance Court Culture

The Case of Sir Philip Sydney

Ferenc Hörcher

*Institute of Philosophy, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Science  
Department of Aesthetics, Pázmány Péter Catholic University*



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**Institute of Philosophy**  
Research Centre for the Humanities  
Hungarian Academy of Sciences

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## About the author

**Ferenc Hörcher** [Ferenc Horkay Hörcher on titles in Hungarian] (1964), director of the Institute of Philosophy, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Science; full professor with habilitation, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Department of Aesthetics, doctor of the Hungarian Academy of Science. His main works include: *Prudentia iuris: towards a pragmatic theory of natural law* (2000), *Aspects of the enlightenment: aesthetics, politics and religion* [ed. by Ferenc Hörcher and Endre Szécsényi] (2004), *A gentleman születése és halála: válogatott eszmetörténeti tanulmányok* (2006.), *Konzervativizmus, természetjog, rendszerváltás: politika- és jogfilozófiai tanulmányok* (2008), *Ottlik kadét történetei: közelítések, vázlatok* (2010), *Edmund Burke esztétikája és az európai felvilágosodás* [szerkesztette: Horkay Hörcher Ferenc, Szilágyi Márton], (2011)

## Abstract

*Aesthetic Ideas and Practice in English Renaissance Court Culture  
The Case of Sir Philip Sydney*

This paper reinterprets the poetic theory of Sir Philip Sidney to answer the following question: how does poetry relate to courtliness, passionate love, martial virtues and diplomatic skills, or even to the faith of the true believer in the court of queen Elizabeth I. It claims that if we carefully analyse the key concepts of this Aristotelian poetics, we shall find answers to the apparent conflicts of the *personae* identified with Sidney and can also understand better the close connection between art, morality, politics and religion in the early modern period.

***Ferenc Hörcher: Aesthetic Ideas and Practice in English Renaissance Court Culture.  
The Case of Sir Philip Sidney<sup>1</sup>***

I. The *imago* of the 16th century English poet-courtier, Sir Philip Sidney transcends the authorial presence within the texts of a limited number of poetical, rhetorical or political masterpieces, all of them published posthumously, like in that of the sonnet series *Astrophil and Stella*, the pastoral romance *Arcadia*, the political pamphlet *A Discourse in Defence of the Earl of Leicester*, and the rhetorical discourse on poetry *An Apology for Poetry*. The readers' imagination is caught by a much more complex image when he hears the name Sidney, than the anachronistic figure of a late 16th century Aristocratic dilettante and failed courtier. The present essay is interested in the multiplicity of selves attributed to this ever young poet by readers along the centuries. It wants to present an argument in favour of the supposition that what we come across here is a deliberate fabrication of a complex personality, by developing often contradictory, but even more often complementary selves in real life situations, in written texts and through visual self-representations. And I would like to show that the conceptual basis for this personal pursuit is provided by a rather complicated construction of later Renaissance poetics, which is closely connected to ethics, politics and religion as well, as it used to be in the Aristotelian paradigm.

This main line of argument will be subdivided into smaller units, which will be organised in the following order. First, it shall be established that Sidney himself belonged to the thriving late renaissance culture of the courtier, influentially summarized in the enjoyable book of fictional dialogues addressed to this theme at the Renaissance princely court of Urbino, entitled *The Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione, an Italian diplomat and ideal courtier himself. Then the Platonic-Aristotelian notion of *poiein* will be referred to, in order to show that at its nascence the concept of 'making' (as it translates to present day English) was not meant simply as referring to the activity of the author of works of what came to be called *belles lettres*, but in a much more general sense. Thirdly, I shall focus on the image or metaphor of the 'speaking picture', which is used in the text of the *Apology* to describe the mechanism with which the work of art (and its creator) succeeds to impress the audience in a

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<sup>1</sup> Research for this paper was made possible by the generous help of an OTKA research project (project number: 81305), entitled *Early Modern Aesthetic Thought (1450-1650)*. Its material was presented in the seminar series at the Hungarian Institute of Philosophy, the Research Centre for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Science and at the Department of Hungarian Literary Studies of Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. I am grateful for members of these audiences for their inspiring questions and comments. The failures of the paper, of course, are fully my own responsibility.

delightful way, and through this delight to teach her and move her in the direction the author points to. And of course, this direction leads to the good, in its most general sense, i.e. the morally virtuous. And finally, it shall be argued that this interpretation of the creative and receptive phases of the ‘poetic’ process define a rather wide notion of art, and proves its relevance for the ordinary lives of ordinary authors, readers and audiences. It also tries to explain that there exists in this theory a direct link between the aesthetic ideas of a person and his actual practice, in Aristotelian terms between his thinking and acting, which defines a concept of art, where thinking about art is not disconnected from doing it.

The paper finishes with a summary of the intellectual background to this traditional, but also rather innovative understanding of the Renaissance concept of art. And then it will shortly describe some of the most important roles and characters so memorably formed by our main hero – in real life, in written format or in the concrete visual images; of the heroic, amoroso and believer poet, known by the world as Sir Philip Sidney.

II. But first, let us sum up some of the basic facts behind this well-constructed ‘poetic’ life-narrative so memorably retold again and again by Sidney’s posterity, generation after generation – where ‘poetic’ is certainly meant, as we said, in its widest possible sense, referring both to the artist’s creative process and to the poet’s effort to fashion his own face, through ordering a number of portraits about him. .

One should first of all recall how firmly Sidney’s knowledge of classical and Renaissance thought and literature was rooted in the elite education he received at Shrewsbury and Christ Church in Oxford. The most important part for us is of course the newly raised interest in literature and rhetoric within the humanistically oriented curriculum taught at these traditional schools.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Sidney’s awareness of the public appeal of literature and rhetoric was something not uncommon in the age, and yet a character trait which distinguishes him among his contemporaries. He seems to have been able to apply his familiarity with the literary-rhetorical tradition both to the themes of his theoretical and purely practical interest in a very effective way. Another key component to his own “*Bildung*” is a close reading of classical writers of philosophy, history and other disciplines, as rediscovered and reintroduced by the international community of humanist scholars before him, and the

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<sup>2</sup> See Gavin Alexander: Introduction, in: Sidney’s *‘The Defence of Poetry’*, and *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. with intr. and notes by Gavin Alexander, London: Penguin Books, 2004, xvii-lxxix, xx. Alexander refers to Erasmus’s *De ratione studii* (1511), which emphasizes „the chief points of rhetoric”, giving a list of the main elements of it. Desiderius Erasmus, *Literary and Educational Writings 2: De copia, De ratione studii*, ed. Craig R. Thompson, *Collected Works of Erasmus* 24 (Toronto: 1978, 670), quoted by Alexander, in work cited, xxvi.

new literature born out of the recapitulation of the classical tradition, including authors like Chaucer, Boccaccio, Petrarch or Tasso.

This second layer of reception of earlier or contemporary authors, schools and styles was deepened by his first hand knowledge of a large network of scholars, diplomats and celebrities he had got acquainted with on his grand tour on the continent between 1572-1575. There is certainly nothing surprising or provoking in the plain fact that on his wanderings around Europe Sidney's first targets were such cultural centres, as Paris or Venice. What is more interesting is that he happened to spend some time in Vienna – one should keep in mind that it was a European power-centre in those days. He also paid an official visit to thriving court of Rudolf II. in Prague. But even more surprisingly he also decided to visit such far away countries as Poland and the Kingdom of Hungary. This is a point which might be worthwhile to further elaborate on, but to which we cannot pay special attention within our present context. We can simply repeat here the general consensus in the literature about the relevance of this tour for completing his humanistic education. Not only did he get a colourful bunch of impressions from the number of people (scholars and artists, social celebrities, advisers, counsellors and other sorts of public intellectuals, and also some of the mighty politicians themselves) he met in countries with rather diverging political cultures. But the simple fact of making personal acquaintances, some of them with a prospect of becoming real friendships, with a large number of people abroad, is already a sure sign that Sidney had a talent to make a name on the continent, by becoming one of the favourites of a European cultural-social elite, representing a number of the virtues of the younger humanist generation, presenting himself in their eyes as a promising star of British politics, a very distinguished diplomat and courtier, as well as a potential leader of the British Kingdom, a firm believer and perhaps even as an author of literary works of art.<sup>3</sup>

One should also keep in mind that Sidney's "cosmopolitanism", i.e. the flair of being well versed in rather different Continental cultures, is an important part of his image, and it was basically established in these years of wandering.<sup>4</sup> Also, his roots in Protestantism as such, and in Protestant theology, in particular, in the line of Philip Melancton, can also be traced back to these years. Finally, his vision of politics on a European scale, i.e. of the aim of

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<sup>3</sup> Although, as far as we know, his experiments in *belles lettres* date a bit later than his Grand Tour, the letters he wrote during these years already show his literary skills, which gave him the chance to become a writer or a translator.

<sup>4</sup> On this theme see for example Robert E. Stillman: *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.

striving for what was called a balance of Continental powers, was also the result of the experiences gained in those years – including the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre in Paris.

After the school years and the Grand Tour the next phase in his career is a bit unfortunate entrée at the thriving court of the British Monarch, Elizabeth I. What is usually emphasized in this context is the fact that being a potential candidate for the future king of England, he was handled with a rather distinguished care by the queen herself, the more so after she saw his success as a diplomat in his mission to the court of Rudolf in Prague. The queen did not necessarily like the kind of self-assurance which could be detected in the young courtier's efforts to try to convince her about the unreasonableness of the plan of her marriage to a Catholic Frenchman. One should keep in mind, however, that the keenness of Sidney in this issue might have been connected with his own personal recollections of the horrible happenings, when a number of Huguenots were cruelly killed by their Catholic opponents, supported by the French king and his mother. Elizabeth did not accept the sort of Courtier mentality represented by Sidney, and he was forced to decide to leave the court for a while.

It was during this time of recluse that Sidney most probably started to write poetry for his sister, but also to express his own personal(ity) problems. It was also there and then that he started to reflect on his own position in a systematic manner and tried to express himself in a theoretically consistent way. Beside the political papers – defending his family and criticising the intentions of the queen – he decided to write a rhetorical defence of poetry as well. In what follows we shall basically rely on this argumentative masterpiece, which was published posthumously, first in an illegal version, and then by his own circle, in 1595.<sup>5</sup> It shall be shown that although it looks like an ordinary treatment defending literary fiction in an Aristotelian fashion, it turns out to be much more than that. It will be taken as a proof that English Renaissance poetry was meant by (at least some of) its practitioners as a way of creating one's own public persona, the "image" of one's figure that could substitute or at least cover up or correct one's fallible real self. This aim is achieved by the *Defence*, thanks to the author's stylistic capacities, as exemplified by Sidney's rather intricate trouvaille of the metaphor of the speaking picture. One should, however, be aware of the fact, that his piece of rhetoric is itself a perfect work of art, a showcase of "conceit" as understood in the age, which cheats its readers in ways one is not always aware of. So let us be as careful in our

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<sup>5</sup> The first (unauthorized) version was entitled *An apologie for poetry*, printed by Henry Olney. The licensed one had the title *The defence of poesie*, and published by William Ponsonby. Both of them were made available in 1595.

interpretative strategies as we can be, in order not to be misguided by the rhetorical tricks of the text.

III. Conventionally Sidney's defence of poetry is understood in contrast with contemporary protestant views of the immorality of art, as represented in Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse*<sup>6</sup>, published in 1579, and dedicated to Sidney. By a contemporary Gosson is mentioned with Sidney and Spenser among the "best for pastorall", although we are not aware of any surviving pastoral by him, but only theatrical pieces, which are most probably meant to show that it is possible to write dramas with the right moral message, even if his *School of Abuse* condemned stage plays for their immorality. Although there is a layer in Sidney's text that can be read along these lines, we are less interested in his direct moral-theological views of theatrical performances, and rather try to reconstruct other dimensions of his poetics, namely reading it in the context of Sidney's public image and of his later cult as the ideal gentleman.

The reason of his cult lies basically in his ability to present to the world a number of rather different characters (including practical ones, like that of the courtier, the diplomat and the soldier, as well as more artistic ones, like that of the poet, the lover, the patron of art, the thinker, the religious believer), all of them 'played' authentically, and all of them hanging together within the outlines of the 'superego' of the ideal gentleman. We would like to argue that this sort of role-playing is an essential element of sociability in the age – gentlemen and gentle women are expected to be as widely cultured as possible, and the nature of Renaissance culture is partly explained by the very fact of this horizon of different social expectations. If we want to see clearly the connections between social manners, individual "self-fashioning" and cultural production, we have to take into account two sets of ideas – one is the Ciceronian concept of the four layers (or 'personae') of our identity, and the second is the demand of 'self-fashioning' in Renaissance (and baroque) court societies. Let us have a look at the main pillars of these two theories in order to see how Sidney makes use of them in hammering out his own public portrait.

It was Cicero, who in his *On Duties* provides the famous theory of four different layers of human personal identity.<sup>7</sup> The first two characters belong to the person by nature. The first one of them is shared by every adult human being: "one of these is universal, arising from the

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<sup>6</sup> As its subtitle runs: *containing a pleasant invective against Poets, Pipers, Plaiers, Jesters and such like Caterpillars of the Commonwealth.*

<sup>7</sup> For relevant recent interpretations of Cicero's practical philosophy see Walter Nickgorski's and Carlos Lévy's writings.

fact of our being all alike endowed with reason and with that superiority which lifts us above the brute”.<sup>8</sup> This is the humanity of the human being, the essential human ingredient in all of us, reasonable adult human beings. This character of ours is responsible for our moral nature: “from this all morality (*honestum*) and propriety (*decorum*) are derived”.<sup>9</sup> The second character is the source of our particular being – here we are not one of a kind, but a fully individual person. This makes one witty, the other more serious, it presented Scipio with “a more austere life” and made Socrates – a “genial conversationalist”.<sup>10</sup> There are other “peculiar gifts”, causing dissimilarities among natures and characters. These “personal traits” cannot be copied from others, because that would destroy our life’s propriety, which Cicero defines as “uniform consistency in the course of our life as a whole and all its individual actions.”<sup>11</sup> What Cicero speaks about here is what later philosophers are going to call the authenticity<sup>12</sup> of one’s life: “it is each man’s duty to weigh well what are his own peculiar traits of character, to regulate these properly “and not to wish to try how another man’s would suit him.”<sup>13</sup> Cicero compares this character to that of a Character-actor: natural qualities: bodily conditions, voice, etc. decide what sort of play he or she can act properly: “We shall, therefore, work to the best advantage in that role to which we are best adapted”.<sup>14</sup>

However, Cicero’s concept of personality is not quite as deterministic as it would seem to be from these two character traits. He has another pair of them. One is imposed on us by circumstance or chance, so it is still not dependent on our own will, but at least it can also open up the prefigurations of one’s inborn nature. But the most inspiring one is probably the fourth one, “which we assume by our own deliberate choice”.<sup>15</sup> According to Cicero, one’s social and political functions will be decided mostly by chance. But the main occupation of one’s life is freely chosen: “And so some turn to philosophy, others to the civil law, and still others to oratory”. And most importantly the virtues we strive for are also largely dependent on our own preferences. What really matters to succeed in this fourth respect is whether we have set our aims high enough.

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<sup>8</sup> Cicero: *On Duties, De Officiis*, with an English translation by Walter Miller, Cambridge, etc.: Harvard University Press, 1913, 2002, Loeb Classical Library, I. Book 107., p. 109.

<sup>9</sup> These two terms – ‘*honestum*’ and ‘*decorum*’ – will be crucial in the anthropological background to the idea of the perfect gentleman, defining his moral and aesthetic quality, showing how closely connected it is to the Ciceronian concept of the human being.

<sup>10</sup> *On Duties*, I. 108. p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> *On Duties*, I. 111. p. 113–115.

<sup>12</sup> See for examples Charles Taylor: *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1992)

<sup>13</sup> *On Duties*, I. 113. p. 117.

<sup>14</sup> *On Duties*, I. 114. p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> *On Duties*, I. 115. p. 117.

One should certainly not exaggerate the significance of Cicero's theory of human personality – it was created in a period when Europe has not yet developed a fully fledged concept of individuality. It will only come later, through the influence of Saint Paul, Augustine and Montaigne, among others, as a result of Christianity combining its intellectual powers with those of antique philosophy. But Cicero had a tremendous influence on the way people thought about interpersonal relationships in the early modern period. For indeed, Cicero provided arguments pro and contra about human nature: he could be used to defend the claim that your character is given ready-made, and your own preferences do not matter at all, or to favour the opposite position, according to which there is a space to manoeuvre in your own personality, which makes you responsible for yourself.

The four persons theory of Cicero was to play a major role in the discourse on the ideal courtier that has sprung from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Rulers were always aware of the prestige they can gain from the arts. Renaissance Italian city states looked back at the example of Pericles's Athens, or of the Rome of Emperor August to understand that artists in the household of a prince, or in the service of the city can bring light and fame to him. Also, examples of Church leaders and the pomp of medieval Christian courts pointed in the same direction.<sup>16</sup> No doubt these examples spread the idea that power is well served by the arts and culture. Historians of culture like Burckhardt, Huizinga and Norbert Elias have shown the process how first in Italy and later in other countries the fashion of building up ever more complex structures of courts spread at the dawn of early modernity.

It was in tiny Casatico near Mantua that Baldassare Castiglione, the later learned humanist and diplomat was born to his wealthy noble family, related to the Gonzagas in the later part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was his lot to write the manual of Renaissance court behaviour in his *The Book of the Courtier*, published in 1528, one year before the death of its author. This work, a dialogue written under the spell of ancient philosophical dialogues, tells a story which takes place at Urbino, widely regarded as the most learned and elegant centre of the alliance of power and culture, which Castiglione came to know personally, when he joined its circle as a result of an invitation by its duke, Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, whom he met during one of his missions to Rome. The court was exceptionally well organised by the Duchess, Elisabetta Gonzaga and her sister in law, attracting the cultural elite of the day, including the

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<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to prof. dr. S.I. (Sebastian) Sobiecki from the University of Groningen who called my attention to the fact that already in the 12th century French court we find traces of the cult of the ideal courtier. For the birth of the courtly ideal, see the classical works of C.S. Jaeger: *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939–1210*. Philadelphia:1985. and of course Norbert Elias: *The Court Society [Die höfische Gesellschaft]*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1983, 1969)

poet-scholar Pietro Bembo, Guiliano de Medici, prince of Florence between 1512 and 1516, the comedy-writer Cardinal Bibbiena, and other social and cultural celebrities of the age. All of them were chronicled by the portraits of the painter, Raphael, himself a son of the city. *The Book of the Courtier* is a poetic recollection of the youthful days of its author spent at the court at its golden age, dominated by the Duchess, whose husband being invalid, had to look after the right and smooth workings of the court machinery alone. The tale is a reconstruction of an idealised conversation between the Duchess and her courtiers and guests, spanning four nights in 1507, in search of the answer to the trendy question of Federigo Fregoso about the character traits of the ideal Renaissance gentleman. The imaginative portrait of this figure is built up of elements of the medieval Christian knight and of the cultivated and well-mannered virtuoso (man of virtue) of Ciceronian humanism. This complex personality is an ‘uomo universale’, as it was called by Burckhardt in connection with Alberti, relying on the fragment of his biography still available to the historian, which presented him with superhuman abilities, and which was used by Burckhardt as an illustration of the birth of modern individuality. Castiglione’s court gentleman however, although he himself combined elements of manly virtues with rational and artistic virtues, was not a superhuman hero. On the contrary: what he excelled in was humanity, as it was capsulated in the Ciceronian concept of the honest man. Castiglione relied on the formation of the ideal rhetor prescribed in the ancient Roman tradition, and even his conversational format resembles the ideal of sociable conversation as described by Cicero.

The important fact is that with Castiglione a new phase of the discourse starts out, based on the Ciceronian concepts of urbanity, and the medieval ideal of the perfect Christian knight, but adopted to the new style of court life in the Italian Renaissance city states. His vocabulary is partly inherited and reframed, but partly invented in a creative fashion. And this terminology is of the utmost importance from the perspective of what later came to be called early modern aesthetic thought. For Castiglione’s concepts came to be accepted as the standard formulations of a set of norms which circumscribes the daily behaviour, way of talk and thought, dress code, educational ideals and artistic sensitivity and skills of the early modern ‘connoisseur’. Perhaps the most important among these norms is called ‘sprezzatura’, translated as nonchalance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century English translation of the book.<sup>17</sup> Let us quote on this point Castiglione: “to use possibly a new word, to practice in everything a certain

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<sup>17</sup> Baldesar Castiglione: *The book of the courtier*; Translated and with an introd. by George Bull, Baltimore: Penguin Books, [1967] For an internet version, see: <http://archive.org/details/bookofcourtier00castuoft>, as of 11.07.2013.

nonchalance that shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought.”<sup>18</sup> This easy-going performance is also closely connected to grace (‘grazia’) or elegance. As the concept of virtuoso, which is nowadays primarily used in connection with musical performance, the grace of ‘sprezzatura’ is also connected to a concept which is most often used in the context of musical performance: improvisation. This language use shows that the social norms in question are closely connected to what we regard today aesthetic qualities. The point Castiglione wants to make this way is this: ordinary human behaviour should be as perfectly formed in the case of the courtier as musical performances are well-formed by artists, without revealing the efforts that led to their ideal performance. The performer’s gesture should suggest that he or she is playing the given piece for the first time, without straining, training or basically without any outline plan. In other words: the ideal performer’s activity will have an aesthetic quality, achieved by a pretended easy-going style, which is cheating and - this way - convinces the audience, hiding the preparations for the performance and simulating improvisation. But this is not simple role playing. The ideal behind it is the natural quality: everything perfect necessarily has a natural quality, one which cannot simply be pretended. The Renaissance had no problem with the inner tension which one can sense in the centre of this ideal : that artfulness means here a pretended naturalness, non-chalance means a prepared performance that hides its being prepared, role-playing a kind of masking, that hides the role itself.

It is here that the concept of self-fashioning coincides with that of the four-‘personae’ theory of Cicero. For indeed Castiglione’s ideal courtier is a protagonist in a show, an actor/actress on the stage, who has to make good sense of the discrepancy between his or her self and the role that one has to play in a given context. The art of self-fashioning gives the actor a skill which “allows one man to play many parts, as we all must do in our daily existences. But it also may rob us of any singular identity that is our own.”<sup>19</sup> Or as another scholar puts this inner tension of the Renaissance ego: “No single role ever fully represents or covers his entire fictive nature. He plays instead many roles (...) though even their totality fails to express completely his moral essence. The rhetorical act generates a dramatic interest in how (...) he squares or fails to square these roles with his moral selfhood.”<sup>20</sup> Castiglione does not deny the fact that what he requires from the courtier is “to play a role”, “to ‘become

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<sup>18</sup> *The book of the courtier*, book I., 26. chapter 35.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur F. Kinney: *Continental Humanist Poetics. Studies in Erasmus, Castiglione, Marguerite de Navarre, Rabelais, and Cervantes*, , Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989, 104.

<sup>20</sup> William J. Kennedy: *Rhetorical Norms in Renaissance Literature*, Connecticut: New Haven, , 1978, 5.

another person', or better, perhaps, to 'put on a different mask' ('vestirsi un'altra persona') when the occasion demands it."<sup>21</sup>

But though role-playing might be questionable as far as the consistency of one's personal identity is concerned, the aesthetically directed variability in one's norms of behaviour does not exclude rational considerations, or the moral aspects of one's action. On the contrary, in the very same passage of the book we come across with the concept of good judgement, which will play a major role in explicit aesthetic theories as well, but which is in itself a moral term. One is expected to govern "himself with that good judgment ('bon guidizio') which must ever be his guide, to go about selecting now this thing from one and that thing from another".<sup>22</sup> From this perspective good judgment means the capacity to select naturally, without making much fuss about the procedure of the choice itself, relying heavily on one's discriminating capacity, which enables one to choose the right one, either in an aesthetic, moral or simply rational sense. What we encounter in this description of early modern cultured human behaviour is the original complexity of the term taste, uniting moral, aesthetic and social aspects, and excluding the sort of aesthetic autonomy which shall be the catchword of Aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, academically formulated at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that will overcome the discourse on taste, as the changes in the terminology of the title of Kant's third critique proves.<sup>23</sup>

If we had convinced the reader that this early modern text is not simply a rhetorical text on poetry, but one which is able to address problems of social norms, moral rules and aesthetic sensibility, we have now a standard which can be used to weigh Sidney's own achievements in this respect in his own personal life. Let us summarise the thesis we want to defend: Sir Philip Sidney is another example of the intention, to create oneself (fashion one's self, paint one's self-portrait) in a systematic and orderly way. Here, we can rely on Stephen Greenblatt's analysis of the early modern ideas of self-fashioning, as he explained it in his book on *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*.<sup>24</sup>

To create one's self what is required is a fictional self, unpacked with the help of a narrative, combining life events, fictional stories and pictorial representations of the self. In

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Burke: *The Fortunes of the Courtier, The European Reception of Castiglione's Cortegiano*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995, 31., quoting 2.19 from *The Book of the Courtier*.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Kant famously turns away from taste ('Geschmack') to judgment ('Urteilkraft') in the process of writing the third critique.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Greenblatt: *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1980. For other scholars who touched this theme, see Peter Burke: *The Fortune*, 2-3, referring to Burckhardt's term 'Selbststilisierung' (sg. like self-styling), to Goffman and Burger's concept of „the presentation of self in everyday life" and "impression management" (Burke: *The fortune*, 31.) beside Greenblatt.

other words, if we accept Greemblatt's claim, that this procedure was quite common among the early modern intellectual elite, the secret of Sidney's self-representation is to be attributed to his talent to combine the narrative of his own life-events (building up into a biography), with metaphorical self-representations in his poetry (not confessional in the sense that Shakespeare's sonnet sequence seems to be, but very useful in colouring his own self-portrait), and with those contemporary paintings which depicted the visual signs of his identity recollected from his face and transforming his public image into actual pictures. And there is a metanarrative, too, provided by him for the audience who confronted his character in his own time and for later generations as well: *The Defence* can be read as a clue to attribute meaning to the activities of its author as courtier-soldier-poet-lover-believer. But before we embark on a short cross-examination of this text from this perspective let us remind ourselves of the dangers of the interpretative game we are going to play: Sidney as author is also an ideal orator, whose use of similitude and dissimilitude does not make easy to recover his real (i.e. historically true) character. But perhaps this fact is only to caution us, late readers of this early gentleman-writer, that our reading should be less ambitious in its interpretative strategy. Maybe it is enough for us to try to reconstruct the fictional character of Sidney, as it was meant to look like by himself. One more step is also possible beyond this point: to try to find out the authorial technique (poetry, rhetoric and deeds) used by him to try to reformulate his own figure in our eyes. Let us suppose that he really wrote his works in order to delight us, as well as to instruct us. But even this is not a riskless endeavour. For indeed strong lines of poetry 'fashion' not only the face of their author as it takes shape in our minds, but also paints the self-perceptions and views of the public realm around the author. As far as Sidney's contemporaries were concerned they could not even exclude the possibility that perhaps he wanted to convince them in a rather strong sense, inviting them to follow him on his political and intellectual path, either in his public or private persona.

All in all, my aim is to look at Sidney's public persona (as printed in the form of texts by and about him, and pictures about him) and see his heritage in its 'diversity in unity', trying to interpret it morally, politically and aesthetically – claiming that all these human dimensions are parallel to each other. As we saw, Renaissance common sense did not yet isolate the realms of human praxis, so we can easily compare one's views in poetics with his views in morality, politics and religion.

Still an important question needs to be tackled: the possible philological link between Castiglione and Sidney. The English courtier had a chance to travel about in Italy as well, and

“seems to have been fluent in Italian”<sup>25</sup>, it needs to be emphasized that the English translation appeared in 1561. It was done by Sir Thomas Hoby, “a member of what has been called the ‘Cambridge connexion’ of Protestant intellectuals (among them William Cecil, Toger Asham and John Cheke) who became influential on the accession of Queen Elizabeth in 1558.”<sup>26</sup> The volume was reprinted in 1577 and 1588 in Sidney’s lifetime. And the contemporaries recognized the similarities between Castiglione’s ideal and the performance of Sidney. Peter Burke mentions Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nashe by name as representing the contemporaries who argued for the link between the Italian and the English ideal courtier, but his friend Fulke Greville also emphasized a ‘native courtesy’ in him.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, in order to help to contextualise Sidney, let me refer here to a rather famous French contemporary, who was also seriously concerned to fashion his own image through acts, thoughts and – most importantly from our perspective – texts.<sup>28</sup> It was after all Michel de Montaigne who made Renaissance self-fashioning so popular. His works on himself, as he famously referred to the essays in which his main theme was himself (“ I study myself more than any other subject.”<sup>29</sup>) provided a standard which one could follow in case of having a dialogue with oneself. Montaigne-like self-questioning creates two differentiated egos: one, who wants to know, the other the object of the enquiry, in other words the knower and the known. As Merleau-Ponty summarizes it: Montaigne puts “a consciousness astonished at itself at the core of human existence.”<sup>30</sup> However, this astonishment is of course part of the image itself. Francis Goyet compares Montaigne’s effort to that of Baltazar Gracian who wanted to achieve by (in) his own self-portrait something like the Thomist “prudence of the saints”.<sup>31</sup> He agrees in this respect with Fumaroli, who claims that the *Essays* are “the Spiritual Exercises of the Christian nobleman”, a role in which François de Sales will follow him. Montaigne’s characteristic ease in his self-formation, however, reminds us of

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Burke: *The Fortune*, 56, Sidney of course learnt a number of European languages, including French and Spanish.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Burke: *The Fortune*, 64., referring to Wihthrop S. Hudson: *The Cambridge Connexion and the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559*, Durham: NC, 1980.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Burke: *The Fortune*, 97. He refers to Fulke Greville’s *Life of Sir Philip Sidney*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907.

<sup>28</sup> „What I chiefly portray is my cogitations, a shapeless subject that does not lend itself to expression in actions. It is all I can do to couch my thoughts in this airy medium of words... It is not my deeds that I write down; it is myself, it is my essence.” Montaigne: *Of Practice, Essays*, ii. 6. F274, V379. Quoted in: *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne*, ed. by Ulrich Langer, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, Motto.

<sup>29</sup> Montaigne, *Essays*, F821, V1072

<sup>30</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *Signes*, trans. Richard C. McCleary, Evanston: North-western University Press, 1964, 203. Quoted by Ann Hartle: Montaigne and Scepticism, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne*, ed. By Ulrich Langer, CUP, 2005, 207–228, 200.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Francia Goyet: Montaigne and the notion of prudence, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne*, 118-141, 136.

‘sprezzatura’, the key-virtue of the ideal courtier, as opposed to the saint: “It is a matter, at the ultimate end of working on oneself, of doing “beautiful”, noble deeds that have an allure and an ease about them. Moral beauty and sensual beauty will go hand in hand. Montaigne not only has a sharp sense of *ars* (...) He also has an extreme taste for appearances, for the beauty of women and of words, as well as for the beauty of a gesture.”<sup>32</sup>

This artistic sensitivity, however, very soon realizes that there is no ideal portrait of a being in constant flux and change, “always midway between birth and death, offering only a dim semblance and shadow of itself (...)”<sup>33</sup> If the essence does not promise to be caught, it is rather shadows that the portrait catches. “Struck by the diversity and inconsistency in the world around him and in himself”, he confesses: “I give my soul now one face, now another (...) All contradictions may be found in me, by some twist or in some fashion. Bashful, insolent, chaste, lascivious; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; surly, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; liberal, miserly and prodigal: all this I see in myself (...)”<sup>34</sup> Surely, all human beings have a personality rich and for ever changing. Yet it is Montaigne’s novelty to confess this ever-changing character of the self, presenting it as so many faces of the very same identity, in concordance with the Ciceronian theory of ‘personae’.

IV. Turning back now to Sidney, let us first try to see what he means by poetry in the *Defence*, because the sort of creativity meant by this term is obviously a key to our more complex question of the many sidedness of his public persona. As we shall see, his term poetry is closely related to representation, in other words to portraying. That is why we shall have to say something about the general meaning, as well as dealing with some typical forms of the relationship between word and picture in the age of high Renaissance, which never separated words from pictures, or the two of them from deeds. As I shall suggest the best interpretative strategy might be to read Sidney’s texts and pictures as deeds in the sense meant by Austin in his conception of speech acts and performative utterances, claiming that by saying something you act.<sup>35</sup>

But first let us see Sidney’s sense of poetry: “The Greeks called him a ‘poet’, which name hath, as the most excellent, gone through other languages. It cometh of this word

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<sup>32</sup> Goyet: *Montaigne*, 137.

<sup>33</sup> Ian Maclean: Montaigne and the truth of the schools, in *The Cambridge Companion*, 142-162, 153. quoting *Essays*, II. 12., F455, V601A

<sup>34</sup> *Essays*, II.1., F242, V335B. Quoted by Maclean: *Montaigne*, 150.

<sup>35</sup> Goyet: *Montaigne*, 137, quoting Marc Fumaroli, from preface to Michael A. Screech: *Montaigne et la mélancolie*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, p. xi. John Langshaw Austin: *How to Do Things With Words*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, , 1962, 2nd edition, 2005.

‘poiein’, which is to make; wherein I know not whether by luck or wisdom we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him a maker. Which name how high and incomparable a title it is, I had rather were known by marking the scope of other sciences than by any partial allegation.”<sup>36</sup> The poet is not specified as simply a craftsman whose medium is the text. Rather, his *differentia specifica* is indeed his creative power, which emulates him above mere imitators of Nature, i.e. the scientists and craftsmen: „Only the poet, disdainful to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature.”<sup>37</sup> The definition of the poet being its power to create ex nihilo certainly goes back to Petrarch’s self-esteem, parallels Alberti’s and Leonardo’s glorification of the painter’s genius, and reminds one of Dürer, painting his own self-portrait with the iconographic signs of Christ. Certainly, Sidney does not lack the sort of self-esteem that is so characteristic even of the best humanists of the age. But he wants to say something more specific with defining the poet as maker. Here making is not contrasted with imitation, as in the tradition which used to oppose Aristotle’s concept of *mimesis* with Plato’s notion of the creative genius. On the contrary – *mimesis* is here interpreted in a way to include the creative moment: “Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his 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.”<sup>38</sup>

If poesy is represented as a speaking picture, which means that the focus is on its capacity of presenting something, as pictures used to do, it means that words operate in this case as pictures used to do. However, there is a further element hidden in this poetic metaphor of poetry. A speaking picture is one that is alive: it speaks as humans do. Like in the famous story of Pygmalion where the statue came to life, poetry in Sidney’s story is presented as a creature that has its own independent life. While in Pygmalion’s story the artist and his product fall in love with each other, Sidney’s poem takes the position over from its author, in order to re-present him. It functions as a “surrogate” for him, as one recent commentator puts it.<sup>39</sup> According to Gavin Alexander, Sidney enumerates a number of metaphors which serve to vivify the work of art, borrowing it its own voice and body. This description offers a view of the author with divine attributes: after all no one can overcome nature except for a god.

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<sup>36</sup> DP, 215.

<sup>37</sup> DP, 216.

<sup>38</sup> DP, 217.

<sup>39</sup> Gavin Alexander: *Introduction*, lix

Sidney drifts close to sacrilege when he exaggerates his defence of the artist by presenting his portrait as an *imitatio dei*.

But there is another way to make sense of Sidney's basic art theoretical stance. To appreciate it we need to turn back to the medieval discourse on what is today regarded as artistic production.<sup>40</sup> In the Christian tradition "imago" has a rather specific meaning. It is connected to the Biblical loci of 'imago dei', i.e. to the statements that humans were created in the image of God. Now this tradition gave rise to an understanding of the concept of image according to which it was to be taken as a living creature wearing on its face the character traits of its creator. The same idea was reinforced by the Christian teaching of transubstantiation, where the bread and the wine do not simply represent the body and blood of Jesus, but will literally change into their substance while still keeping their external, sensible attributes. In this context the emblem tradition also comes to one's mind: here the idea is that a picture is directly connected with a meaning, i.e. the meaning of an abstract concept, of a person, of a moral or a physical quality. An emblem is not identical with a symbol: the emblem translates something abstract into visual terms, while in the case of the symbol perhaps there is no necessary change of medium between sign and signified. In any case, the Renaissance emblem<sup>41</sup> is clearly the combination of a linguistically graspable concept and its visualised variant, its visible form. In the emblem tradition the onlooker is expected to search for the meaning of the given object as soon as he/she sees it. In other words, we look at them as if they were embodied intentions, to reveal the intentions embodied in them.

There is a further point to be made about this metaphor. If we call poetry a speaking picture, we use a part of it, i.e. the poetic image, to represent the whole thing, as a kind of *pars pro toto*, itself a metaphor, and a common technique of emblematic representation. One could even venture to say that the speaking picture is both an emblem of and a short form for poetry. This way a double representation is taking place: the emblem (speaking picture) stands for the whole (poetry) which in this way itself becomes identified with an emblem. In other words, the speaking picture is an emblem of an emblem.

Finally, one could go one step further, and claim that the speaking picture image works almost like an exemplum. It does not define poetry in the traditional way, by giving its

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<sup>40</sup> Here I follow Wesley Trimpi: Sir Philip Sidney's An apology of poetry, in: *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 3. *The Renaissance*, ed. by Glyn P. Norton, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 2006, 187-198. I shall return to his ideas a bit later as well, where I rely on his brave claim that Sidney's use of the concept of image is not independent of the medieval concept of it.

<sup>41</sup> The first emblem-book, collected by Andrea Alciati appeared in 1531 (unauthorized) in Augsburg: *Viri Clarissimi D. Andreae Alciati Iurisconsultiss. Mediol. Ad D. Chonradum Peutingerum Augustanum, Iurisconsultum Emblematum Liber*.

genus and species: rather it exemplifies its working mechanism by providing a poetic image, this way offering a sense experience of the effect of literature on its recipients. Here Sidney's prose style itself turns into poetic discourse, giving the reader a short sample of the thing itself instead of describing it from the outside, in an objectively tuned way of language-use, one was accustomed to in 'scientific' discourse.

V. The way Sidney incorporates the language-use and vocabulary of poetry into his theoretical defence of poetry of course resembles Plato's poetic musing in the *Myth of Er* at the end of his long reflections on the ideal Republic. For indeed by his own practice Plato seems to opt for poetry there, replacing finally his own dialogical philosophical narrative with it. Instead of describing what the right form of poetry should look like, he actually delivers a tale, a parable in a poetic fashion. The same way Sidney realises that to talk in a fairly objective fashion about the nature of poetry is perhaps less convincing than replacing it by an exercise of directly setting before his readers eyes and ears poetry itself, in the form of the complex metaphor of the talking picture. Giving in to rhetorical theory, Sidney in fact admits that instead of convincing them theoretically, it is wiser to win over the audience by letting them judge the merits of poetry for themselves. Therefore, he lets poetry talk for itself. This way he provides an internal view of the subject matter, instead of a distanced, detached way of presentation. This way he can capitalize on poetry's power to move the audience for his own rhetorical exercise. He can convince his readers about the merits of poetry by poetry itself – because poetry has an exceptional power in this respect, as we know it from the history of philosophy and rhetoric, and also from his own words, where he compares the two aims of poetry as it was suggested by Horatius: "(...) that moving is of a higher degree than teaching, it may by this appear, that it is well nigh both the cause and the effect of teaching; for who will be taught, if he be not moved with desire to be taught? And what so much good doth that teaching bring forth—I speak still of moral doctrine—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 practise, it is no hard matter to consider."<sup>42</sup> In other words, in Sidney's view, the first target of anyone who tries to convince someone of what he regards as the right course of action is to move him or her towards it. In this respect there is no real difference between poetry, philosophy or practical political deliberation. In Aristotle's view – which is directly contrasted to Socrates' view in Plato,

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<sup>42</sup> DP, 226.

according to which there is a causal necessity between knowing the right way and doing the right kind of action – in all these fields one should first take over the other to one’s own side, and that is only possible if one moves the other.

This Aristotelian claim is closely connected to another Aristotelian comparison – the one between the philosopher, the historian and the poet. It is interesting that Aristotle whose ethics and politics has survived in text-forms that are almost boringly scholarly, is so much in favour of the rhetor-poet, in his comparison of him and the other two professions. As for Sidney, it is less surprising that he is enthusiastically engaged with this opinion, even if he seems to present his argument in a more or less rational discourse. After all, his identification with poetry is beyond question. As we have seen, his combination of rather diverse personae is firmly rooted in his concept of the poet-maker: he becomes kind of an emblem for the young, passionate, cultured, aristocratic poet, whose elegance is preserved even on the battlefield. But this self-identification with the role of the poet-maker, the pretender does not accept the Platonic critique of the poet as liar. On the contrary, Sidney, by connecting his comparative analysis of the three professions to Aristotle’s ethics indirectly admits his fundamentally moral approach to the role of the poet – that is why he also talks about the moral philosopher. But let us see first how he distinguishes the three roles. The philosopher and the historian are presented as taking the two opposite poles. While the philosopher’s “knowledge standeth so upon the abstract and general that happy is that man who may understand him, and more happy that can apply what he doth understand. On the other side, the historian, wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things, and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine.”<sup>43</sup> The philosopher’s description is too general, the historian’s narrative is tied to the particular. In between them the poet can synthesize both these ways. The philosopher’s description is “but a wordish description”, which has no evocative power, it “doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other doth.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, with Sidney’s phraseology, it cannot move its audience. The poet, on the other hand, does not use a simple “wordish description, but “a perfect picture”. In projecting this image the poet unites the abstraction of the philosopher with the particular example. The picture created by the poet shall provide a “truly lively knowledge” of the general truth of the philosopher, “be it of virtue, vices, matters of public policy or private government”, in other words of politics or morality. All these fields require a

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<sup>43</sup> *DP*, 221.

<sup>44</sup> *DP*, 222.

“judicial comprehending of them”, and the operation of “the imaginative and judging power” is facilitated by the abstract knowledge being “illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of poesy”.<sup>45</sup>

What Sidney does here, is first of all, taking over the distinction between the historian and the poet in the *Poetics*, where Aristotle calls the poet more philosophic, and connecting this idea with the idea of the lively image in the *Rhetoric* of Aristotle. But this way he reframes the Aristotelian view of poetry. While for Aristotle, too, the poet’s work should move the audience, he does not particularly concentrate on the picturesque element in poetry’s language. In this respect Sidney is definitely referring to the Christian ideas of the image, and this way connects Aristotelian poetics with the Christian ideas of the perfect image.

This way Sidney will become a part of that philosophical tradition, which connected the ancients’ love of wisdom with Christian ideas, as represented both in the Scholastic and the Christian Thomistic tradition.

VI. If we try, therefore, to recapture the far-distance perspective of the intellectual lineage of Sidney’s conception of poetry as speaking picture, what we have to reconstruct is the wide stream of thought coming down from Aristotle, through Cicero, to Aquinas and the Renaissance. Already Peter Burke reads Castiglione in the context of Aristotelian ideas, like prudence (‘phronesis’), self-control (‘sophrosyne’) and the golden mean. He refers to Cicero who uses similar terms in his *Orator*, when he talks about studied negligence (‘negligentia diligens’) about aptness (‘decorum’), and urbanity (‘urbanitas’).<sup>46</sup> This rhetorical ideal is taken over by Christianity for example by Ambrose, and reworked in the teachings of moral virtue by Aquinas.<sup>47</sup>

This stream is certainly not homogeneous, and does not develop in a straight linear way. However, there are stable conceptual connections between the different pillars of this bridge which leads from antiquity through the medieval period to modernity, and these connections allow us to see the bridge itself, as a whole. The most important commonly shared point in this tradition seems to be an engagement with the rhetorical ideal. This is an ideal which comes from Plato and Aristotle, in which Isocrates excelled, and which was once

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<sup>45</sup> *DP*, 222.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Burke: *The Fortune*, 10-11.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Burke: *The Fortune*, 12.

again restated by Cicero.<sup>48</sup> This lineage is of course not exceptional in the age, Sidney's distinguishing feature is that he is more successful than others to make sense of it by embodying the very tradition in his own personal life-narrative, as well as in his own poetic works. In other words he seems to be more authentic in this role than most of his contemporaries, even if a number of similar cases can be found around him.<sup>49</sup> The popularity of this tradition shows how thriving in those days the tradition of Christian humanism must have been. By Christian humanism one should mean this very tradition, which starts out with the early non-Christian thinkers of the antique Greece, will be present in Ancient Rome, but definitely resurfaces in Christianity, and will not disappear with the rebirth of antiquity in the Renaissance.

Interestingly, however, I would claim, Sidney is less Platonic, and more Aristotelian in the *Defence*, than one would expect from a practising poet – although the Platonic elements do not disappear totally, but neither did they do so in Aristotle himself. Also, at times he seems to be a bit fed up with the overemphasis on the Ciceronian element within this very tradition – at least that can be read in one of his letters to his brother, where he suggests him “I never require great study in Ciceronianism.”<sup>50</sup> But in spite of this criticism of his own tradition Sidney obviously belongs to this spiritual hemisphere. In this respect I follow Trimpi, who argues in a detailed fashion in defence of this intellectual heritage in Sidney's own understanding of art and poetry. Yet in his interpretation of the Christian and Thomistic line he seems to be more daring than in the reconstruction of the antique rhetorical tradition. He claims that “Sidney brings his argument to its climax by invoking the Christian emphasis upon the will”.<sup>51</sup> By pointing at the will Trimpi refers here to Sidney's preference of *moving* over *teaching*. And the Thomistic line is also present in the concept of image in Sidney. Trimpi calls our attention to medieval faculty psychology. Sidney's poetic image is moving, as it is the opposite of abstract conceptions; it can also reveal the ‘universal’, by choosing exemplary figures. What is more, so Trimpi, the image of the Christian emblematic tradition leads back to the doctrine of “intentio” in the Christian teaching. There you decipher the “meaning” of a work of art in a way that would recall the moral dimension of it as well. If you look at the representation of a wolf, what you encounter is the image of “wolfishness”, and your emotions are raised by the sight but also your moral awareness is awakened by the

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<sup>48</sup> Trimpi: *Sir Philip Sidney's*, 187.

<sup>49</sup> Including friends and followers, like Grenville or Spenser.

<sup>50</sup> Letter to Robert Sidney, 18. Oct. 1580, 293. in: Sir Philip Sidney. *The Major Works*, ed. with an intr. And notes by Katherine Duncan-Jones, Oxford: Oxford University Press, , 291-294., 293.

<sup>51</sup> Trimpi: *Sir Philip Sidney's*, 197.

“moralization” of the image. It is through this association of ideas raised by the sense-experience that you realize its function as exemplar.<sup>52</sup>

As we see, in Sidney’s meta-narrative the rediscovered antique rhetorical tradition very nicely connects with the medieval tradition of emblems and exemplars. It requires a very fine reason, however, to see how the two traditions are linked to each other. If the reader still accepts the thesis, let us turn to our last point: it would be interesting for us to find out how Sidney thought about the functional roles he had to play as poet-maker, and how he himself related to each of them, and to the whole spectrum of his roles taken together.

VII. In this last part of the paper the reader is going to find the short description of Sidney’s four important roles played at the court or in contrast with its values. These ones include the role of the chivalric poet, of the erotic lover, of the religious believer and of the political actor. One can see at the first sight that these roles are quite far away from each other, sometimes they can even be contradictory, and therefore one should always keep in mind the difficulties the ego had to confront when trying to negotiate them. But most often these roles were safely isolated from each other, so that the question of their separation did not have to be raised. This separation was made possible by the idea of the layers of the human micro-cosmos as developed by adopting the four personae model of Cicero. This allowed courtiers to think of themselves as presenting themselves in different social masks without compromising their own inner self which was left unaffected by these changes in its public appearances. In fact society rewarded those actors who could present in the most natural way the most diverse repertoire of roles, as it was regarded a kind of art of living, a social ideal of virtuosity in staging one’s self on the stage of the court.

The first and perhaps best known role of Sidney is that of the chivalric poet, a complex figure personified by Sidney in a rather convincing way. The poet-knight’s figure was born in the medieval legends and chivalric romances as well as in provençal poetry. Sidney, as a latter day troubadour, was an authentic soldier-poet, whose figure suggested heroic loyalty and courageous defence of Christian values and English national honour. In this perception a key role was played by his family circumstances – belonging to one of the most prestigious aristocratic political family of the period, he was widely regarded as an uncrowned prince. In his posthumous cult narratives of his death on the combat field played a significant role.

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<sup>52</sup> The above paragraph is based on Trimpi: *Sir Philip Sidney’s*, 197–198.

This knightly quality is the more astonishing in Sidney's self-fashioned portrait as his image had nothing of the atmosphere of physical power and lion-like cruelty about it. On the contrary – there is something unquestionably peaceful about his public persona – even if he could pronounce very critical remarks about certain policies or the manners of the court. This tame impression is partly due to the seriousness of his religious belief but one would suspect that after all, it finally depends on his specific temperament or personal character traits. This part of his internal constitution is very eloquently expressed in the moving episode of his behaviour after receiving the fatal wound on the battlefield, made public by his friend and first biographer, Grenville: “being thirsty with excess of bleeding, he called for drink, which was presently brought him, but as he was putting the bottle to his mouth he saw a poor soldier carried along, who had eaten his last at the same feast, ghastly casting up his eyes at the bottle; which Sir Philip perceiving, took it from his head before he drank, and delivered it to the poor man with these words: “Thy necessity is yet greater than mine”.”<sup>53</sup>

The inner contradictions within the complex personality of Sir Philip Sidney are well epitomized by these self-contradictory traits of the merciful soldier. Of course this figure had its precursors in the figure of medieval Christian Knights as well as in that of the Medieval Minnesängers, who were more interested in love and art than in war. On the other hand the fact that he dies on the battlefield transforms his figure of the ideal lover into something of a national demigod and a religious martyr as well.

However, the soldier is closely connected to the role of the courtier, the diplomat and the believer. In other words he does not only turn brutal fight into (religious) poetry, but on the other hand tunes his court activity into warfare: it is the new battlefield where the courtier needs to win – and there his pen serves as his sword, indeed.

Sidney, the courtier-soldier-believer-turned-into-poet presents in his theoretical piece all the key concepts of the aesthetic dimension of court standards. We can collect all those ideas that were collected by Castiglione and his contemporaries from late medieval traditions and then taken over from them by all the major Italian and Continental followers. Let me shortly enumerate some of the key concepts in this paradigm which have aesthetic relevance: *civility, judgement, taste, wit, conceit* are among the most important ones that can be found in the *Defence*.<sup>54</sup> Now these terms served as describing the poetry of everyday life at the court:

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<sup>53</sup> Grenville, *The Life of Sir Philip Sidney* (1652), 'The water bottle story', in: Sir Philip Sidney: *The major Works*, 329.

<sup>54</sup> In contexts they sound the following way: „Our tragedies and comedies not without cause cried out against, observing rules neither of honest civility nor of skilful poetry” (*DP*, 243), „the fault is in their judgment quite out of taste, and not in the sweet food of sweetly uttered knowledge”, (*DP*, 218) „This purifying of wit, this

people were expected to behave in a strictly codified manner, as this is the distinguishing feature of the courtier. His behaviour is the poetry of human activity, opposed to the prose of the manners of ordinary people. I think this is not a farfetched metaphor, if we keep in mind that social manners become almost ritualized in early modern courts – following aesthetic principles, disregarding functionality. If we want to make sense of concepts like gallantry, elegance, politeness and the others, we cannot do it without providing a rather detailed practical hermeneutics of court behaviour. For indeed, all these categories refer to the same functions as rules of poetics for poets: they prescribe the social expectations one should be able to fulfil in order to get public recognition and support. Even if this normativity is not always formulated into explicit written rules, they always have a very strong effect upon human behaviour – in fact, no one in pursuit of a public career can remove his or her self from its jurisdiction. Therefore, canons of human behaviour, differentiating those who belonged to the closed circle of the court and those, who were excluded from it, played a major role in the birth of some of the most important particular features of early modern aesthetic thought.

If the courtier-poet's role is a public one, necessarily in concord with public expectations that of the lover-poet could be regarded as also creating the private sphere of the individual, which phase by phase liberated itself from public control. And yet, what we see is that Sidney's poems in this field are also quite formalised, and again quite in tune with everyday expectations. But here again, his text is double-edged: it can be read both as a consolidation and as a critique of the prevailing notions of the art of love, and as precursor of later, pre-romantic notions of intimate and yet morally motivated love.

This duplicity of the message of his poems is of course a strength of them. They seem to fit the ideals of the bright, witty and formalised poetry of Renaissance humanists, admiring ancient models and poetical doctrines and yet below this shining surface giving birth to the identity problems of the modern individual, who is "obsessed with sexual desire"<sup>55</sup>, whose "deep misery"<sup>56</sup> caused by his deep feelings surface time and again, breaking through the mirror-like surface of the text. Sometimes this outpour of the passions can even seem to be too harsh, almost shocking, but its expressive potential is so much the stronger, due to the fact that – after the first cultural shock – it helps the reader or hearer to identify him- or herself with the voice of the poem, this way interiorize the feelings raised by it.

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enriching of memory, enabling of judgment, and enlarging of conceit, which commonly we call learning". (*DP*, 219)

<sup>55</sup> R. W. Maslen: Introduction, in: *An Apology for Poetry or The Defence of Poesy by Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd, revised and expanded by R. W. Maslen, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1973, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2002, 1–78., 29.

<sup>56</sup> Duncan-Jones: Introduction, in Sir Philip Sidney: *The Major Works*, VII–XVIII., XII.

But again, obsession and enthusiasm can be controlled by social expectations as it happened when the figure of the melancholic young man in love was created in the late Medieval period<sup>57</sup> and then consolidated in the early modern period. Though the figure had its roots in ancient pastoral idylls and legendary victims of love's tyranny in medieval romances, myths and legends, there was a characteristically modern sensitivity, an overwhelming pessimism and psychic darkness to it which made it modern. But the way the figure was solidified by the age was less dramatic and more aesthetic: it was an enjoyable sorrow, a golden gloom, an almost mannerist pleasure of pain in it that made it so fashionable in circles of aristocratic youngsters and so easily acceptable by high society.

There was one more element which was responsible to this Aesthetic character of melancholy: the fashion derived from the works of the miniature painter Nicholas Hilliard. His was a talent to turn an uninteresting genre into a popular trend-setter: like the fashion photographers of a later period, he helped to find the most perfect iconographic signs of the melancholic young man, and this way prescribed a sort of attitude, a posture, a body language, even a dress code which helped to identify those who belonged to this elite circle of victims of unrequited love.

It is known, that Hilliard very soon discovered the popularity of young Sidney, and he embarked on a few representations of his type on a number of compositions. On the other hand, Sidney himself must have learnt a lot from the talented way Hilliard could recapture the typical disappointed lover. In his poetry Sidney himself presented his readers with a number of variations on this theme, this way helping to standardize aesthetic features represented in divergent artistic media. Renaissance love songs, love poetry and disillusioned lover portraits all went hand in hand presenting images to the elegant circle of society in urgent need of fresh models of artistic and aristocratic behaviour.

But surely, not every fallen victim of this characteristically modern malaise<sup>58</sup> could and wanted to be comforted by securing the social models of the suffering and the melancholy lover. There was another escape-route made available by the age for its sons. It was the role of the true religious believer, who follows the Augustinian pattern, popularised by the mystics of the Renaissance period: this figure, after getting disillusioned from the vanities of sexual love, gives up the life of the flesh in order to get really reborn for a life of the soul and true divine

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<sup>57</sup> See for the late medieval origin of melancholy the concept of Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, 1919, translated into English in 1924.

<sup>58</sup> With this phrase I refer here to the thorough-going investigations of Charles Taylor into the conditions of the birth of early modern individuality. In: *Sources of the Self. The Making of Modernity*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1989, and *A Secular Age* Cambridge, Mass. : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.

love. If his poetry connected Sidney with the patterns of socially controlled behaviours of lovers, and his court activity with that of the soldier and diplomat, he left us a branch of writings that connects him to the parallel phenomenon of the religious revival, called Reformation. If we rely on his texts, which include translations of theological texts, and of the songs in the Psalms, he fashions yet another remarkable figure: that of the true believer who is ready even to suffer for his religious convictions. Although some scholars suggest that Sidney turns towards religious question to escape the deadlocks of his erotic life<sup>59</sup>, religious upheavals had to be confronted by a responsible humanist intellectual in the age. We have seen that Sidney was early influenced by the prosecution of Huguenots in France, when he witnessed what came to be called the massacre of St Bartholomew's Day, and that he had a wide network of friends with a protestant bias all over Europe, including Hungary since his youth.

The main point one has to keep in mind in relation to this issue is that religious affiliation was a rather sensitive political decision to be made by each and every thoughtful individual on his own account. For him the choice was the more agitating as he lived not yet far away from the date of the religious schism taken up by Henry VIII (1536), and even in Sidney's life the succession of the British throne and the fate of the land was largely and directly dependent on religious affiliation. It might be taken as symbolic, that before the premature death and burial of Sidney, the premature burial of Mary, Queen of the Scots took place, who lost her life as a result of the bloody religious dispute between her and her first cousin, Queen Elizabeth I. Both death could be associated with the social unrest caused by religious disputes in the age on an international European level.

For Sidney, too, the problem was both a question of identity and a practical political matter. Greville rightly emphasizes the fact that he regarded real live deeds as more important than acts of writing. Or to phrase it in a more refined way: this is an age when Ricoeur's hermeneutic claim that acts are to be read as texts with specific meaning were genuinely accepted by the majority of intellectuals as well.<sup>60</sup> In this context Sidney's moves can again be read and interpreted on different layers. As Greville's biography, hagiography, or apocrypha<sup>61</sup> shows, his self-sacrificing life could be interpreted as that of a latter day saint, that might serve as exemplum for present and potential followers. In this sense his body is

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<sup>59</sup> Duncan-Jones: *Introduction*, xiii.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Ricoeur: *The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. by Richard Kearney, London: Sage, 1996.

<sup>61</sup> These genres were traditionally maintained for religious saints, but in the early modern period, the cult of the lives of artists became quite popular. See for example: Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Italian Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, from Cimabue to Our Times* (1550, 2nd edition 1568).

transfigured into that of a this worldly saint, a living picture which serves as a memento for later generations, a sign full of meaning that talks to us better than any orator is able to do. The single fact of his efforts to translate pious and theological writings serves as a guideline for us not to miss the religious interpretation of his life.

On the other hand it can also serve as reminder of the geo-political match which was right than unfolding in Continental Europe and in the Atlantic world. One of Sidney's most important intrusions into contemporary politics was his piece in which he tried to convince his Queen not to get involved in a wedding with a Catholic groom. Although the letter he was commissioned by friends and allies to write to the Queen to convince her of the disadvantageous consequences of a step like this might have played a role in the break of his court career, apparently the goal of convincing her on the whole can be regarded as successful. And yet, as a courtier, Sidney always remained a creature of the Queen, of which she liked to remind him. His politics might have been motivated by religious or this worldly considerations, being a courtier determined his fate: he was a creature of his queen, and his image a speaking image also used for political aims by the queen, including his state burial which is claimed to have been invented to counterbalance the earlier burial of Queen Mary.

VIII. Let us conclude along the following lines. One of the most elevated interpretations of Sidney's public career can compare it to that of Cicero, in the sense that he, too, often turns to writing when frustrated in external action. Politics is, of course, a mixture of deeds, words and thoughts, and most politicians have periods of time when they cannot do other things but to write. If they are not artists of talking they will surely fall on the long run: „Tully taketh much pains, and many times not without poetical helps, to make us know the force love of our country hath in us.”<sup>62</sup> – claims Sidney, giving us clues to interpret his own writings as well. We have already referred to the insight that political writings and speeches are also to be interpreted as moves in a political game, and in this sense as political deeds themselves. In this respect, again, Cicero is a role-model for Sidney. To negotiate one's private life in a way to be successful in public life, without losing his sense of identity, one could indeed learn a lot from Cicero. The Renaissance gentleman learns from his Roman predecessor the difference and connections between the 'vita activa' of the state's servant and the 'vita contemplativa' of the private gentleman, “matters of public policy or private government”.<sup>63</sup> Cicero showed a very successful way how to politicize one's private life – for

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<sup>62</sup> *DP*, 222.

<sup>63</sup> *DP*, 222.

example writing his personal notes on political obligations, sins and virtues – , and privatize politics, by turning his public role into an authentic self-presentation, by explaining in a masterly prose the available possibilities for a particular agent at a particular historical moment and the arguments in favour of his decisions, making it possible for his readers to transfer from one to the other without much difficulty.

The humanist's linguistic creativity enabled Sidney to present his own, much more modern case to the intellectual audience of his age in a light which won their sympathy, and made a lasting influence on his later audiences. In this sense all his court activities, both his physical, real world activity and his fictional and theoretical writings were politically motivated, based on the antique conception of the political life of the citizen and on the power of the orator to convince his audience. He wrote a memorable story of his own by his deeds and by his poetic fictions and theoretical ideas. But as a courtier of one of the most thriving and politicized courts of contemporary Europe he himself fell also victim to other people's ambition, a supporting actor on the grand stage of the Globe, of stories written by authors with better capacities to convince real life audiences by force instead of arguments or emotions. It was Puttenham who called Queen Elizabeth: the "most excellent Poet, making in maner what ye list, the poore man rich, the lewd well lerned, the coward couragious, and vile both noble and valiant".<sup>64</sup> Indeed leadership was regarded in the age an artistic activity, and not without good reasons. Certainly to make good choices in the right moment requires a kind of creativity that is comparable to artistic creativity. Unfortunately, however, this art was yet comparatively brutal in those days: Sidney's peaceful self-image did not help to lend him authority in the power-game, and this caused him the ignorance he had to suffer on Elizabeth's part – although we do not yet know all the details of their relationship, so one should be cautious to generalize on the topic of their relationship. Yet if we look at the grand narrative of early modern history, it reassures our hypothesis: the refined rules of court society was closely connected to a kind of authoritative rule which was reasonably labelled absolutistic afterwards. But let us keep our conviction that Sidney's culture-centred view of politics, according to which convincing by arguments is much better than convincing by sheer force played its part in the historical development which in Britain very soon led to a strengthening of the role and power of the Parliament, and which finally resulted in the establishment of the formally most delicate parliamentary system of the West, the rule of law,

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<sup>64</sup> George Puttenham: *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), Ed. Gladys Willcock and Alice Walker, Cambridge: 1936. 4–5.

where formal, and perhaps even more importantly informal rules helped artists of politics to articulate their political opinion in a more saturated, cultured form.

On the other hand, his most important legacy consists of the ideal of the gentleman-writer, a form of writing prevailing in Britain up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This ideal will become relevant in the early Enlightenment, represented by figures like the third Earl of Shaftesbury. And he is also among the founding fathers of the very tradition which is usually called the aesthetics of taste, where taste is meant in the most general and widest possible sense, including the ability to decide in matters artistic, moral and political. If you think about his public persona you recall a figure who was well versed in all these fields, an almost perfect gentleman, lover, poet, religious believer and politician. And most of all, he remains in our eyes a humane and loveable personality in the midst of all these roles.



