

two contexts; the relation may not prove as mutually solicitous as that which Wimsatt proposes for Jerome and his apocryphal lion, but that is probably more interesting and certainly more pertinent to Chauher's text.

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Sidney's *Apology*

To the Editor:

In "Sidney's Feigned *Apology*" (*PMLA*, 94 [1979], 223–33), Ronald Levao maintains that, in *An Apology for Poetry*, Sidney, like the poets he defends, does not affirm or deny. Levao describes the work as an array of conjectural and often conflicting arguments that Sidney proposes and abandons. If this description is accurate, Sidney has ensconced poetry in an irrefutable defense. For if his *Apology* never affirms, how can it be denied? And if Sidney has consciously dispensed with the norms of dialectic—consistency, coherence, completeness—how can he be held to them?

Levao's apology for the *Apology* is similarly foolproof. (Levao himself considers the possibility that both apologies may be subject to the infinite regress of conjecture supported by conjecture [p. 231].) How can we possibly take issue with whatever Levao may find in a text that he describes as being intentionally heterogenous and contradictory? It would be to no avail to question his contention that for Sidney the mind has no access to truth through Platonic forms, Aristotelean universals, or divine illumination (pp. 224–25) by pointing to Sidney's "divine essence," "inward light," and "natural conceit." It would be useless to argue that the distinction Sidney emphasizes between poetry and the other arts is not between conscious and unconscious fictionalizing (p. 229) but between freedom from nature and subjection to it. And why bother to dispute Levao's association of conjecture with poetry (p. 226) by explaining that for Sidney conjecture would belong to the historic contingent world of "what is, hath been, or shall be" and not to the poetic immutable world of "what may be and should be." Even were Levao to grant our objections, it would not weaken his view of the *Apology* as a motley of "fictions" and "conjectures." Our exceptions and counterexamples could be accommodated, contributing even to the complexity and variety of the desired disarray.

If arguments from the text are futile, perhaps history—the *Apology*'s philosophical and religious context—will serve. Levao, intent on preserving the autonomy of the poet's mind, claims that for Sid-

ney "Ideas" are independent of any supernal absolute (pp. 224–25). Why then are they not simply "ideas"? Rightly recognizing the danger inherent in cutting off poetic wit from metaphysics and theology, Levao has Sidney directing poetry to an ethical and moral end (p. 225). He insists, however, that this morality has no ontological affiliation. But in a tradition that identified Good with Being and Evil with Non-Being, how can morality be separated from ontology?

Levao looks for affinities with Sidney's position (or lack of one) in the shady complexities of Cusa's "learned ignorance," conjectures, and coinciding of opposites (p. 232). But if such a comparison is to be helpful, it should begin by explaining that Cusa works with a different concept of mind (his *ratio* and *intellectus* together would correspond to Sidney's reason or wit), has a different objective (to draw the finite toward understanding the Infinite) and a different expectation (intellect may gradually approximate truth, instead of necessarily falling deeper into regress). Cardinal Cusa might also have taken exception to the theological view Levao's interpretation implies. That "all attempts to make sense out of the world are based on illusion" (p. 228) would be a desperately pessimistic view among those who regarded Scripture, Creation, and the Incarnation as intimations of Truth. Compelling as these philosophical and religious considerations might be, Levao could sweep them aside. Departures from the traditional could only strengthen his conviction that the *Apology* is a "daring" and "original" document (p. 223).

What recourse if we can argue neither from the text nor from history? I see no other way but to harp on irregularities for which there can be no apology—irregularities in particulars of reading and documentation. At points in both text and notes, Levao's presentation confuses his own interpretation with the content of his primary and secondary sources. In the letter to Sidney that Levao discusses, Languet warns of the double translation of Cicero's letters not because it leads to incapacitating and spiraling introspection (p. 232) but because it might lead to emulation of Cicero alone. Weinberg and Howell do treat the *res/verba* distinction but consider *res* not as "solidity of 'things'" (p. 230) but as subject matter that includes such intangibles as decorum, invention, and moral precepts. And Myrick, though he does give an analysis of the *Apology* as a classical oration, never "makes clear just how self-conscious an actor Sidney is" (p. 229).

The same casualness is reflected in the documentation. Where in Aristotle is the definition of rhetoric that Levao quotes in his text (p. 229)? Is "Mornay and Hoskins' [sic]" sufficient should we

want to follow through on Sidney's Augustinianism (n. 2)? Note 10 might lead one to believe that one history of criticism devotes forty-five pages and another an entire volume to an aspect of Manzoni's poetic theory. And we will not learn much about the impact of the *Posterior Analytics* by seeking out Levao's reference to one page in Gilson (n. 23). Such haziness leads one to wonder whether there might not be some relation between a theory of mingled meanings and a loose handling of source material.

Aristotle would have frowned on such nit-picking objections, which attack accidents of exposition rather than the substance of theory. And to engage in such bickering degrades the critical enterprise of interpreting, discussing, and questioning. But what choice do we have if we wish to resist a description of the *Apology* as a grab bag ("something for everyone" [p. 230]), an invincible tautology along the lines of the supreme "I am that I am" ("poetry ought to be what it ought to be" [p. 228])? Sidney assures us that he had his logic to keep him from being persuaded to wish himself a horse, but Levao's tactics allow us no such defense.

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Mr. Levao replies:

I will not presume to argue about Nicholas of Cusa's possible reactions to my article. Any confrontation between what Margreta de Grazia inaccurately terms my "desperately pessimistic" interpretation of his thought and her own cheerfully one-sided summary of it is as unresolvable as are the paradoxes of his philosophy. But I will venture to guess that Sidney would have been amused by her letter. It is a clever rhetorical performance, using approaches that range from informative, if tangential, arguments to curious distortions of my article and delivering the whole in a three-part structure that insists at each turn that the preceding material is beyond discussion.

Neither my article nor her letter is as inaccessible as she pretends. Her objections show an uncanny knack for missing the point. I will cite only a few examples. My argument deals quite explicitly with how Sidney uses such terms as "Idea" and "divine essence." I contend not that "morality has no ontological affiliation" but rather that a ready appeal to the realm of Being to justify the poet's activity has become epistemologically untenable for Sidney. There is a considerable difference. I do not attribute any understanding of "spiraling introspection" to

the sage and serious Languet; nor do I retract my own theory on page 231. There I am concerned with forestalling possible misreadings of the article, an effort that de Grazia's letter has convinced me can only yield ironic results. Nor does de Grazia's confessed attempt at nit-picking through my documentation yield her an abundant catch. Aristotle's definition of rhetoric, which she seems to find so mysterious, appears as the first sentence of the *Rhetoric*, Book 1, Chapter ii, and is one of the most often quoted passages of that work. I suppose I ought to consider myself fortunate that only three of twenty-six endnotes failed to pass her inspection, but I would like to recommend that she read the works cited in the objectionable note 10. She will find much of interest there, including the name of the critic I discuss, Jacopo Mazzoni, and not "Manzoni," who was a nineteenth-century novelist and poet.

To continue in this vein would be not only to reproduce the article but also to suggest, too ungraciously, that de Grazia has not read it very carefully. A lack of care is definitely not the problem here; the most winning quality of her letter is the obvious earnestness that lies behind its rhetoric. One wishes, however, that de Grazia had been a little clearer about what she thinks is at stake. Based on the slim evidence she gives me, my suspicion is that it has something to do with upholding what she calls "history—the *Apology's* philosophical and religious context"—and, later, its "tradition." Not much is clarified by grandly sweeping across at least thirteen hundred years of brilliant and often conflicting patterns of thought, patterns that continue to generate a multitude of diverging interpretations among the best intellectual historians. Her feeling that my article violates Sidney's historical context may only reflect the inflexibility of her version of that context.

Epistolary sparring over such interpretations is probably not much more useful than a Christmas-dinner controversy over politics. But regardless of our choice of interpretations, we should remember that it is as important to test our hypotheses about the shape of intellectual traditions against our experiences of reading individual texts as it is to consider texts in terms of tradition. To neglect the reciprocity of literary and historical studies is to become reductive and mechanical as readers for the sake of a tradition that, ironically, suffers in the process by being sapped of its vitality. This danger is particularly acute when we examine the work of a writer as self-conscious and alert as Sidney or a culture as diverse and volatile as that of the Renaissance.