

“The Poets Deliver”: Procreation, Communication, and Incarnation in Sidney and Wordsworth

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In this talk¹ I shall be discussing some central passages in Sir Philip Sidney's *The Defence of Poesie* and William Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* in terms of three concepts: procreation, communication, and incarnation. The general drift of my argument will be that, despite obvious differences in historical and cultural contexts, the two poets share some fundamental convictions that can be summed up in terms of the three concepts.

According to the *OED*, the word *procreate* can mean to “beget, engender, generate (offspring)” and, less commonly, it can be a synonym of the word *create*, “To bring into existence, produce; to give rise to.” The two meanings provide a useful semantic spectrum when we apply the term *procreation* to the poetics of Sidney and Wordsworth. The first meaning, “begetting,” speaks of a natural process, the offspring being similar in nature to the begetter, while a thing created may be essentially different from the creator, not limited by or to the creator's nature.² Studying the different synonyms used in the *Defence* for the poet as “maker” we find that Sidney negotiates the two meanings of procreation: creation and begetting (I have boldfaced the key expressions):

The Greeks called him a ‘poet,’ which name hath, as the most excellent, gone through other languages. It cometh of this word [*poiein*], which is, **to make**: . . . There is no art **delivered** to mankind that hath not the works of nature for his principal object, . . . Only the poet, disdain[ing] to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour 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, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like: so as he goeth hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never **set forth** the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets

have done, neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only **deliver** a golden.

. . . Neither let this be jestingly **conceived**, because the works of the one be essential, the other in imitation or fiction; for any understanding knoweth the skill of the artificer standeth in that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. And that the poet hath that *idea* is manifest, by **delivering them forth** in such excellency as he hath imagined them. Which **delivering forth** also is not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build castles in the air; but so far substantially it worketh, not only to **make** a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency as nature might have done, but to **bestow** a Cyrus upon the world, to **make** many Cyruces if they will learn aright why and how that **maker made** him.

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of nature; but rather give right honour to the heavenly **Maker** of that **maker**, who having **made** man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he **bringeth things forth** surpassing her doings—with no small argument to the credulous of that first accursed fall of Adam, sith our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it.³

Many of the boldfaced expressions, such as "grow," "bringeth forth," "deliver" or "delivering forth," not to speak of "conceived" and "conceit," clearly allude to the metaphor of giving birth, the poet and in particular nature bringing forth what is an extension of the parent's own nature. The poet's "making," however, is also likened to creation: "rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth surpassing her doings." There is a built-in tension between the two meanings of procreation: on the one hand, the poet is "not enclosed within the narrow warrant of [nature's] gifts," yet at the same time he or she is not allowed to "build castles in the air." The reason for this negotiation is theological and ethical: as a maker in the image of the heavenly Maker, the poet's wit should be used to recreate the "golden" world, "delivering" in the sense of liberating, both human and physical nature to its pre-lapsarian state. The poet therefore never truly creates *ex nihilo*, but attempts to re-create what the

divine Maker had originally intended.⁴ This, of course, is an utopian project, which can never be fully implemented in a post-lapsarian world; Sidney and, as will be shown, Wordsworth, were well aware of this: "our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it."

Communication, to move on to our second concept, is essential to this project; poetry "works" through a process of "delivering" (here meaning both "uttering" and "handing over") an idea/ideal to the recipient, who, in turn, needs communicative competence in order to "learn aright why and how that maker made him [i.e., Cyrus]." The rhetorical structure of all of Sidney's fiction, as well as the *Defence* itself, presupposes a communicative process and assumes the possibility of reaching out to another human being through the medium of language. If, as Sidney claims, "the work itself" is not privileged then it is not only because the originating "idea or fore-conceit" (Ciceronic or Platonic) is favored, but also because the emphasis is on the efficacy of the communicative process. For an idea to be efficacious, it must be embodied in a text in order to be communicated and thereby incarnated in the "virtuous actions" of the reader (*Defence* 83).

This becomes clearer as Sidney moves from a Platonic to a more Aristotelian understanding of poetry as an art of imitation, "that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth—to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture—with this end, to teach and delight" (*Defence* 79-80).⁵ Despite the apparent new perspective not much has changed. "Delightful teaching" describes the communicative thrust of the poet's activity, and *mimesis* does not mean a mirror to nature but a recreation of divine nature, since true poets "borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be, and should be" (*Defence* 81). One of the new expressions for the poetic process—"figuring forth"—adds to our understanding of the earlier expressions "delivering" and "bringing forth." As Sidney later explains, the philosopher's learned definitions "lie dark before the imaginative and judging power, if they be not illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of poesy" (*Defence* 86). One meaning of the "begetting" of poetry is that the word becomes flesh, becomes embodied,

that is, the transformation of abstractions into figures such as Cyrus, in order to communicate persuasively with the reader. This, as Sidney goes on to argue at length, is the “work” of poetry, what speech act theorists would call the perlocutionary act—to inculcate virtue: “with a tale forsooth [the poet] cometh to you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And, pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue” (*Defence* 92).

To bring in speech act theory here is a way to emphasize what is central to Sidney’s poetics. J. L. Austin, in *How to Do Things With Words*, distinguishes between three kinds of linguistic acts: (1) the locutionary act: uttering words; (2) the illocutionary act: what we do in saying something (e.g., greeting, promising, commanding, etc.); (3) the perlocutionary act: what we bring about by saying something (e.g., persuading, surprising).⁶ For all their carefully crafted rhetorical structures, the *Arcadia* or *Astrophil and Stella* are only the locutionary means for illocutionary and perlocutionary ends. Nor, despite the autobiographical presence in his works and his own *post-mortem* legendary status, is the poet as such interesting. It is communicative action that interests Sidney. A dialogue with a very real recipient, Queen Elizabeth, is integral to *The Lady of May*, while the *Arcadia* is designed to engage and train the reader’s interpretative competence. The model proposed by speech act theory is so fundamental that Sidney can feel free to play illocutionary and perlocutionary games, as he does in sonnet 1 of *Astrophil and Stella*:

Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,
 That the deare She might take some pleasure of my paine:
 Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know,
 Knowledge might pitie winne, and pitie grace obtaine,
 I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
 Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertaine:
 Oft turning others’ leaves, to see if thence would flow
 Some fresh and fruitfull showers upon my sunne-burn’d braine.
 But words came halting forth, wanting Invention’s stay,
 Invention, Nature’s child, fled step-dame Studie’s blowes,
 And others’ feete still seem’d but strangers in my way.
 Thus great with child to speake, and helplesse in my throwes,
 Biting my trewand pen, beating my selfe for spite,
 ‘Foole,’ said my Muse to me, ‘looke in thy heart and write.’⁷

One can also note how closely connected in Sidney's mind the communicative process is to procreation, the poet being in the throws of labor to beget an offspring that is both his poem and, his communion wishfully consummated, a child of flesh and blood.

In his faith in communication Sidney is well within a Christian rhetorical tradition, a tradition that is at odds with much contemporary critical thought. If the death of the author, the indeterminacy of the text, and the existential loneliness of the subject are the results of the supposed death of God, then Sidney's poetics is anchored in a God that speaks, and thereby validates communication and community. The theologian Kevin Vanhoozer has recently proposed an Augustinian interpretative trinitarianism which, I believe, captures well the Christian assumptions behind Sidney's poetics:

Christian orthodoxy believes that God is essentially the one who communicates himself to others in trinitarian fashion. A trinitarian theology of the Word of God conceives God as the author, as message, and as power of reception: 'In the beginning was the communicative act.' The God of Jesus Christ is the self-interpreting God. The Incarnation, wherein God goes out of himself for the sake of communicating himself to another, grounds the possibility of human communication by demonstrating that it is indeed possible to enter into the life of another so as to achieve understanding.⁸

The basis for this model, Vanhoozer argues, is that "Jesus . . . is both signifier and signified; he does not only represent God but is himself God's presence."⁹ Brian Stock, in *Augustine the Reader*, proposes a similar model: "The theological model for mediation between the temporal and nontemporal elements is Christ, whose incarnation is the basis for the concept of the sacred sign."¹⁰

Augustine himself expressed the same ideas in the following terms:

In what way did He come but this, "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us [John 1]"? Just as when we speak, in order that what we have in our minds may enter through the ear into the mind of the hearer, the word which we have in our hearts becomes an outward sound and is called speech; and yet our thought does not lose itself in the sound, but remains complete in itself, and takes the form of speech without being modified in its own nature by the change: so the Divine Word, though suffering no change of nature, yet became flesh, that he might dwell among us.¹¹

To repeat what I have stated before: if God the Father is the transcendental signified, the divine *res*, then Christ is the transcendental *signifier*, the *verbum* which translates God's unspeakable essence into human speech (and action). Through the Incarnation, God has privileged not only the human body, but also human language (through the *uttered* word of Christ, and the *written* word of Scripture). It is the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, that communicates this Sign to humankind, both through the general illumination of the human mind and, as a special instance of this illumination, through the written Word.¹²

As we now turn to the critical manifestoes of a much later poet, William Wordsworth, we shall find basic similarities with Sidney's poetics in the three areas under investigation: procreation, communication and incarnation. This time I shall start with the incarnation and work my way back to procreation. My stress on congruence goes against the grain of much recent criticism; we have been told that between the two poets lies an epistemological and existential chasm, sometimes described as that between mirror and lamp,¹³ sometimes between classicism and modernism. Harold Bloom, for example, claims that "Modern poetry, in English, is the invention of Blake and of Wordsworth. . . . Wordsworth's greatness is that his uncanny originality, still the most astonishing break with tradition in the language, has been so influential that we have lost sight of its audacity and its arbitrariness."¹⁴ Furthermore, if we are to believe poststructuralists like Paul de Man, Wordsworth pointed the solipsistic way towards Derrida.¹⁵ From these critics we can easily get the impression that Sidney and Wordsworth have virtually nothing in common, except being English poets. While not propagating the untenable position that the two held identical views, I do believe that their basic agreements overshadow differences in opinion or emphasis.

Before studying a longer passage from the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, we shall look at some lines from the Essay Supplementary to the Preface of 1815 in which Wordsworth, like Augustine in *De doctrina christiana* and Sidney in the *Defence*, compares the communication of mankind with that of the heavenly Maker:

The commerce between Man and his Maker cannot be carried out but by a process where much is represented in little, and the Infinite Being accommodates himself to a finite capacity. In all this may be perceived the affinity between religion and poetry; between religion—making up the deficiencies of reason by faith; and poetry—passionate for the instruction of reason; between religion—whose element is infinitude, and whose ultimate trust is the supreme of things, submitting herself to circumscription, and reconciled to substitutions; and poetry—ethereal and transcendent, yet incapable to sustain her existence without sensuous incarnation.¹⁶

That last line reminds us of Sidney's "figuring forth by the speaking picture of poesy," but more than that it reveals that the Romantic poet too subscribes to a Christian epistemology (he elsewhere echoes Augustine by describing language as "an incarnation of the thought").¹⁷ The breaches between heaven and earth, God and man, spirit and body, thought and language, words and the things they designate, are bridged by acts of incarnation. Without incarnation there can be no communication.¹⁸

That poetry is "passionate for the instruction of reason" highlights another basic similarity between the poets: both passionately believe in the need for and possibility of human growth through poetry. This is because Wordsworth no less than Sidney, despite everything that has been written on Romantic poetic solipsism, is committed to communicative action. As he sums it up in the 1802 revision of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: "What is a Poet? . . . He is a man speaking to men."¹⁹ Communication after all is a basic precondition for communion and community, central Romantic concepts. All of Wordsworth's poetry deal in one way or another with the communion between man and man, man and nature, and man and God. Not that communion and communication on these interrelated levels is uncomplicated or unproblematic. Like Sidney in his way, Wordsworth was painfully aware of "the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world,"²⁰ yet that is exactly why the poet has a job to do.

The communicative thrust comes out clearly in the long initial section of the Preface dealing with the "purpose" of poetry (corresponding to Sidney's section on the "work" of poetry). By "the act of writing in verse," Wordsworth begins his discussion, "an Author makes a formal engagement" with the reader that is "voluntarily contracted,"²¹ that is, there is an agreement about the purpose of the communicative act:

For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so by the repetition and continuance of this act feelings connected with important subjects will be nourished, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much organic sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced that by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits we shall describe objects and utter sentiments of such a nature and in such a connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, his taste exalted, and his affections ameliorated.

I have said that each of these poems has a purpose. I have also informed my Reader what this purpose will be found principally to be: namely to illustrate the manner in which our feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement.

To describe the purpose in terms of speech act theory, we could say that the locutionary act (uttering words) of the *Lyrical Ballads* consists of the selection and arrangement of words into poetry, the illocutionary act (what the author does) consists of illustrating the manner in which feelings and ideas are associated in a state of excitement, while the perlocutionary aim (what the author wants to bring about) is to strengthen the understanding, taste and affections of the reader.

In his critical writings Wordsworth has as much to say about the reader as about the poet, and he is always assuming the interaction between the two. More than once he elaborates on the interpretative virtues needed for successful reading, often in terms of "taste":

If a man attaches much interest to the faculty of taste as it exists in himself . . . certain it is his moral notions and dispositions must either be purified and strengthened or corrupted and impaired. How can it be otherwise, when his ability to enter into the spirit of works in literature must depend on his feelings, his imagination and his understanding, that is upon his recipient, upon his creative or active and upon his judging powers, and upon the accuracy and compass of his knowledge, in fine upon all that makes up the moral and intellectual man.²²

As with Sidney—who saw poetry as part of a humanistic project leading to the “purifying of wit, enriching of memory, enabling of judgement, and enlarging of conceit” (as he puts it in the *Defence* 82)²³—Wordsworth believes the poet should do more than simply *reflect* human nature as he finds it: “But a Poet ought . . . to a certain degree, to rectify men’s feelings, to give them new compositions of feelings, to render their feelings more sane, pure, and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things.”²⁴

That last expression—“more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature”²⁵—pinpoints a final similarity between our two poets, which also brings us back to the starting point: procreation as begetting or creation.²⁶ Like Sidney, Wordsworth is not content to simply copy nature, yet that does not give him any more than his Elizabethan counterpart the right to build castles in the air. His celebrated praise of the imagination, which “has no reference to images that are merely a faithful copy, existing in the mind, of absent external objects; but is a word of higher import, denoting operations of the mind upon those objects, and processes of creation or of composition, governed by certain fixed laws,”²⁷ is not different in kind from Sidney’s “idea or fore-conceit” that the poet delivers forth “in such excellency as he hath imagined them” (222). Of course there are differences: where Sidney’s interest in human nature centers on virtuous action, Wordsworth believes the feelings are most in need of restitution. And where the Elizabethan wants to improve brazen nature, the Romantic poet is more concerned to take away the “film of familiarity” so the readers can see the beauty and sublimity of nature with unpolluted eyes. Yet for neither is it a matter of the poet shining his own idiosyncratic light: both aim at “delivering” (in all its senses) a pre-lapsarian standard in a post-lapsarian world. Let me end with Wordsworth’s own words:

It is not enough for me as a Poet, to delineate merely such feelings as all men *do* sympathise with; but it is also highly desirable to add to these others, such as all men *may* sympathise with, and such as there is reason to believe they would be better and more moral beings if they did sympathise with.²⁸

NOTES

¹My talk at the *Connotations* symposium on "Poetry as Procreation" (Halberstadt, 4-8 August 1999) is part of a continuing exploration of Wordsworth's relation to earlier traditions, begun with a paper given at Uppsala University in 1996 (published as "Of Mountains and Men: Vision and Memory in Wordsworth and Petrarch," *Connotations* 7.1 [1997/98]: 44-57) and continued at Leiden University in 1998 ("Tradition and Individual Talent in *Lyrical Ballads*," not yet published).

²There are important theological aspects to both these metaphors, since God *created* the universe but *begot* his only Son. While the Son, according to the creeds, is of the same substance as the Father, humankind, although created in the likeness of God, is essentially different in nature. On the human level, for the poet to beget his work is theologically uncontroversial, but the Christian tradition has always been uneasy about the proposition that the poet creates, since this activity can be seen as encroaching on God's prerogatives. Yet as we shall see, Sidney and Wordsworth do not go that far since neither is free to leave nature behind; there are always traces of begetting in their poetic creation.

³*Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973) 77-79.

⁴The one passage in my quotation from the *Defence* that appears to gainsay this theological interpretation is when Sidney wants the poet to bring forth "quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the Heroes, Demigods, Cyclops, Chimeras, Furies, and such like," none of which can be said to be particularly prelapsarian in origin or function. While Sidney elsewhere is quite successful in integrating the Classical tradition into a Christian context, in this one instance it seems the weight of his scholarly sources gets the better of his overall argument.

⁵For a discussion of this passage, and its communicative thrust, see Lothar Černý, *Beautie and the Use Thereof: Eine Interpretation von Sir Philip Sidneys Arcadia* (Köln: Böhlau, 1984) esp. 1-74.

⁶J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1976).

⁷*The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringler (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962) 165.

⁸Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 161.

⁹Vanhoozer 86.

¹⁰Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996) 7-8.

¹¹Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.13, trans. J. F. Shaw, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. 2 (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

¹²See my "Formal and Verbal Logocentrism in Augustine and Spenser," *Studies in Philology* 93.3 (1996): 260.

¹³Famously proposed by H. M. Abrams in his influential study *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1953). For a questioning of this dichotomy, see my "Of Mountains and Men."

¹⁴"The Internalization of Quest-Romance," *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970) 6-7.

¹⁵Paul de Man's poststructuralist essays on Wordsworth have been collected in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984).

¹⁶William Wordsworth, "Essay Supplementary to the Preface of 1815," *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967) 337.

¹⁷As cited in W. J. B. Owen, *Wordsworth as Critic* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1969) 44.

¹⁸Leona Toker and others, in the discussion following my talk, pointed out the metaphorical use of the term "incarnation," as against the historical event recorded in the Bible. I would argue with Augustine that God's speech, whether the word that became flesh within the time-space continuum or the perlocutionary word of Genesis 1 that brought the universe into existence, forms the basis without which no human communication is possible. To bridge, however, is not the same as to equate, and the difference between Creator and creature ensures that human speech must remain metaphorical. That indeed is one aspect of being created in God's likeness.

¹⁹Wordsworth, Preface, in Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. W. J. B. Owens, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1996) 165.

²⁰"Tintern Abbey," *Lyrical Ballads* 113.

²¹Wordsworth, Preface 155.

²²Wordsworth, "Essay Upon Epitaphs," *Literary Criticism of William Wordsworth*, ed. Paul M. Zall (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1966) 114. A similar discussion can be found right after the passage quoted above about the affinities between religion and poetry (see "Essay Supplementary" 337).

²³See my *The "Enabling of Judgement": Sir Philip Sidney and the Education of the Reader* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1989).

²⁴Wordsworth, Letter to John Wilson written June 1802, Perkins 351.

²⁵There followed an animated discussion at the symposium about what Wordsworth meant by "eternal nature," and if the expression was blasphemous or not. The issue centres on whether Wordsworth elevates nature to divine status. While Thomas Kullmann proposed that Wordsworth's use of the expression may not be Christian, others suggested that the poet was alluding to the traditional Christian view of the Book of Nature, analogous to the Book of Scripture, as a means of approaching the divine. My own interpretation is that Wordsworth is not talking about physical nature at all, which he rather distinguishes it from, but like Sidney is thinking in terms of a Platonic ideal nature, or in Christian terms, nature before the fall. In my reading the term "eternal nature" is therefore not a synonym to, but rather an effect of "the great moving spirit of things."

²⁶While the symposium noted that the procreative metaphors were not as evident in Wordsworth's Preface as they had been in Sidney's *Defence*, John Russell Brown produced a climactic reading that brought out its procreative juices.

²⁷Wordsworth, Preface to the Edition of 1815, Perkins 333.

²⁸Wordsworth, Letter to John Wilson, Perkins 352.