The Scope of Sidney’s Defence of Poesy: 
The New Hermeneutic and Early Modern Poetics

When Sidney turns in the opening pages of his Defence of Poesy from a survey of those names the ancients “have given unto this now scorned skill” to his wittily phrased and argumentatively crucial endorsement of “the luck or wisdom” by which “we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling [the poet] a maker,” he highlights his transition by writing “which name [a maker], how high and incomparable a title it is, I had rather were known by marking the scope of other sciences than by my partial allegation” (emphasis mine).1 Sidney’s transition creates a passage into what is appropriately the most celebrated and the most controversial portion of The Defence’s argument: the account of the poet’s golden world, the definition of poetry as “an art of imitation,” the discrimination among three kinds of poets, and the culminating determination both of the main aim or purpose of the human sciences generally and the particular purpose of poetry relative to that main aim (p. 101). As Sidney begins this portion of the argument by considerations of scope, so he returns in this determination three different times to further reflections about scope: first, he defends “right poets” for their ability “to delight and to teach,” which he terms “the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed” (p. 103); second, he defines as the aim or purpose of the human sciences generally (“all, one and other”) “this scope—to know, and by knowledge to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying of his own divine essence” (p. 104); and third, in a hierarchy of purposes he distinguishes the divine from other learned men “for having his scope as far beyond any of these as eternity exceedeth a moment” (p. 106, emphasis mine).

In order to organize his discussion of the poet as a maker and to justify “his high and incomparable status” by virtue of that title, Sidney has recourse to an oratorical term of art with a long and important history, the *scopus dicendi*—Englished here as “scope.” To my knowledge, this is a technical term that has never been adequately glossed by editors of *The Defence*. It goes virtually without comment even in the best of the contemporary editions by Geoffrey Shepherd, Katherine Duncan-Jones, and Forrest G. Robinson. Not surprisingly, then, the term likewise goes unexamined in the voluminous body of contemporary critical commentary, on the assumption, presumably, that Sidney’s critics have understood it to mean what Shepherd suggests when he mentions “intellectual scope,” as if “scope” denotes “intellectual range.” Recovering some portion of the term’s history can fix the meaning of “scope” more precisely than Shepherd’s implied definition permits, and make possible a clearer understanding of Sidney’s golden-world poetics. The recovery of that history will enable the restoration of Sidney’s *Defence* to a newly recognized tradition of hermeneutics that was having, as Kathy Eden, Peter Mack, and Kees Meerhoff have recently shown, a revolutionary impact on practices of reading and writing in sixteenth-century Europe. If Sidney’s success in creating the first definitive version of an English literary criticism derives in great measure, as scholars have long understood, from his extensive knowledge of Italian Renaissance poetics, the distinctiveness of his critical practice derives, in no small part, from the accommodation of that poetics to the new hermeneutic—to those new notions of reading and writing that


3. Shepherd, p. 167, n. 25. By contrast, see his n. 6, p. 163, where the third appearance of “scope” is glossed, “a mark for aiming at.” Shepherd seems unaware, like all of *The Defence*s editors, that “scope” is a rhetorical term of art with an extensive history.

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Sidney acquired from his unexplored connections with an important body of humanists, the students of Philip Melanchthon (the so-called Philippists).4

Interpretation always matters, but an argument about how Sidney himself interpreted texts has particular timelines in the wake of the recent revival of Edwin Greenlaw’s seemingly outmoded allegorical readings of the Arcadian narratives. Prominent new studies by Blair Worden and Kenneth Borris have returned to the examination of Sidney’s two Arcadias as allegorical romances or epics.5 Whatever the virtues of their particular readings, the appearance of these new allegorizing interpretations of the

4. Roger Kuin has recently made an important contribution to understanding Sidney’s personal and political ties to the Huguenots and the Philippists, in “Querre-Muhau: Sir Philip Sidney and the New World,” Renaissance Quarterly, 51: 2 (1998), 549–85. Kathy Eden’s Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition argues concisely and cogently for a humanist rehabilitation during the sixteenth century of the classical tradition of interpretatio scripti—what she calls “a loosely organized set of rules for interpreting the written materials pertinent to legal cases, such as laws, wills, and contracts” (New Haven and London, 1997), p. 7. Formulated by Cicero and Quintilian, those rules included: attention to historical and textual context; analysis of complete works with an eye to the “economy” or the persuasive arrangement of the work’s parts; and concern for authorial intention and decorum as touchstones of analysis. Melanchthon, says Eden, was influential in the rehabilitation of the interpretatio scripti and as northern Europe’s “most compelling advocate . . . for an alliance between rhetorical imitation and biblical hermeneutics” (p. 79). For Peter Mack, the revolution in sixteenth-century reading practices has a shorter, more defined history. Against a tradition of medieval and early humanist commentaries “occupied mainly with explanations of difficult words and constructions, historical background, allusions and mythology,” Mack argues that Rudolf Agricola devised in his remarkably influential De inventione dialectica a new “close reader of texts” who combined the dialectical analysis of natural language with strong rhetorical interests in the affective impact of language upon readers (“Rudolf Agricola’s Reading of Literature,” Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 48 [1985], 23–41); see, too, Renaissance Argument: Valla and Agricola in the Traditions of Rhetoric and Dialectic [Leiden and New York, 1993]. Kees Meerhoff details how this “veritable tradition” of new reading practices “developed at a remarkable and incredible speed” in great part through the influence of Melanchthon’s works, which by the early 1530s were the beneficiary of “an editorial and advertising campaign . . . launched on a modern scale and in a new spirit, comparable to that initiated ten years earlier in Basel by Johann Froben, the publisher of Erasmus” (pp. 362–63), (“Logic and Eloquence: A Ramusian Revolution?,” Argumentation, 5 [1991], 357–74); see also Meerhoff’s “Melanchthon lecteur d’Agricola: rhetorique et analyse textuelle,” in Reforme-Humanisme-Renaissance, 16: 30 (1990), 5–22, and his “The Significance of Melanchthon’s Rhetoric” in Renaissance Rhetoric, ed. Peter Mack (New York, 1994), pp. 46–62.

Arcadias highlights the need for a serious reconsideration of Sidney’s own notions about hermeneutics. Sidney scholarship has much to say about writing, but very little about reading. In that regard, it is conspicuously undertheorized in comparison, for example, to Spenser studies, where the need to account for allegory has for a long time generated sophisticated, historically and theoretically complex accounts of those hermeneutical principles, those foundational concepts of reading and writing, which reciprocally enable his poetics and the fictions constructed on them.\(^\text{6}\)

Perhaps there is something in the peculiarly self-conscious dynamic of allegory, and its work of saying other than it means, that helps to explain this difference. Perhaps, too, it is the renewed call for the allegorizing of Sidney’s fictions that helps to explain the urgency of raising more explicitly such issues in regard to his strikingly different corpus. For there is allegory, and then there is allegory—and there are good reasons, historically and theoretically, to keep the distinction clear. If to write allegorical fictions means to figure-forth or to embody abstractions, then all literature is allegorical and, as Northrop Frye long ago argued, “all commentary, or the relating of the events of narrative to conceptual terminology, is in one sense allegorical interpretation.”\(^\text{7}\) In one sense, Frye is both correct and prudent, especially in the implied acknowledgment of our critical need to distinguish between alternative modes of writing and reading that reflect alternative, sometimes contrasting modes of understanding. Sidney scholarship stands in need of that distinction. For if Gordon Teskey is correct in defining allegory as “an incoherent narrative,” which traditionally attends to “the difference between what it refers to and what it refers with,” which operates by means of a strategic disjunction between the signifier and the signified (in the manner of Spenser’s Faerie Queene), then Sidney (I hope to show) clearly belongs to an alternative, self-consciously non-allegorical history of hermeneutics.\(^\text{8}\) That history is best recovered by an examination of the lineage of one of his key critical terms—the scopus dicendi, its roots in Aristotle’s Rhetoric, the anti-allegorical exegesis of the Antiochene fathers, and the pointedly non-allegorical hermeneutic of Luther and Melanchthon.

\(^6\) For an exception to this claim, see Margaret Ferguson’s chapter on The Defence in Trials of Desire: Renaissance Defenses of Poetry (New Haven and London, 1983), esp. pp. 155–62.


As a term of art, the *scopus dicendi* derives metaphorically from a Greek word, *skopos*, meaning the aim or mark or target at which an archer shoots his arrow. Like so many rhetorical terms, this one arises first in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, where in the course of arguing that “men deliberate, not about the end, but about the means to the end,” he defines “the aim [*skopos*] before the deliberative orator” as “that which is expedient.” The orator’s scope is that main aim or purpose to which everything else in his speech is directed: the good orator demonstrates by probable reason that a specific aim is realizable. As that concept was translated from ancient Greek into ancient Latin rhetoric, Aristotle’s text clearly remained the *locus classicus*, even as his terminology was altered: the pseudo-Ciceronian *Ad Herennium* argues for utility or expediency as the “end” (“*finem*”) of “the orator who gives counsel.” By contrast, Cicero’s *De Inventione* substitutes as the “end” (“*finem*”) of deliberative oratory, “both honour and advantage,” characteristically adding an ethical aim to Aristotle’s more practical art. When Quintilian later wrote about the final aims or ends of the orator, the rhetorical terminology shifted once again in ways that were ultimately to be consequential for Renaissance oratorical thought. In Book III of the *Institutio Oratoria*, he describes as the “basis” (*status*) of the speaker’s cause “that point which the orator sees to be the most important for him to make,” noting in the course of his description—with some evident impatience—the diversity of names (*constitutionem, quaestionem, caput*) imparted historically to this same or similar concept. For Quintilian, what the orator “aims” at can just as well be described by another metaphor-turned-*techne*, the “basis” or *status* on which he builds.

In the first centuries after Christ, Aristotle’s *skopos* returned as a key term of art among two apparently distinct bodies of rhetorically trained

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12. Ed. and tr. H. E. Butler (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1920), pp. 412–13, III. vi. 9; pp. 408–09, III. vi. 2. For Quintilian, “These different names, however, all mean the same thing, nor is it of the least importance to students by what special name things are called,” (p. 413). For the historian of rhetoric, however, those different names can be enormously consequential. For a wide-ranging, suggestive history of this vocabulary (*scopus, status*, and related terms), from Aristotle to Quintilian, see Otto Alvin Loeb Dieter’s “Stasis,” in *Speech Monographs* 17: 4 (1950), 345–69. For a more recent history of the rhetorical tradition that helps to contextualize these terms, see Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (Chicago and London, 1990).
authors, the patristic writers of the Antiochene school, like Theodore of Mopsuestia and John Chrysostom (4th century), and the philosophical adepts among the ancient neoplatonists, like Iamblicus and Proclus (5th century). For the patristics of the Antiochene school, the term had special utility in organizing an interpretative practice in opposition to the allegorizing hermeneutic sponsored most brilliantly and controversially by Origen and the Alexandrian fathers. By insisting on a single skopos as a guide to interpreting the scriptures, the Antiochenes could counter what appeared to them as the dangerous piecemeal approach to exegesis encouraged by the allegorizers, whose boundaries of interpretative freedom seemed limited by nothing more than self-pleasing imagination. For Theodore and Chrysostom, biblical texts were interpretable only in the context of their Maker’s intention, an intention revealed by paying close attention to the purposeful rhetorical organization of biblical parts within the biblical whole. For the neoplatonists, by contrast, the appeal to skopos was useful as the solution to a particular philosophical problem. Identified with the conscious intention of its author, the skopos guaranteed to the text, in its work of shadowing truths by mysteriously evocative allegorical symbols, what the neoplatonists liked to call a unity amidst multeity. It gave to the world of the text—conceived as a microcosm—a coherence among its organically related elements.


14. Theodore is the most explicit and most theoretically self-conscious of the Antiochenes, and when he rails against the allegorizers he sounds much like Luther: “They invent their own idiotic stories and give to their nonsense the name of ‘allegory,’” distorting in the process the “purpose” (skopos) of the biblical author. See Commentary on Galatians 4.24 in Minor Epistles of St Paul, ed. H. B. Swete (Cambridge, Eng., 1880–82) I, 73, 77. For Chrysostom’s acknowledgment of the presence of biblical allegories and insistence on the clarity with which these texts offer themselves to rhetorical interpretation, see his Interpretatio In Isaiah Prophetam, ch. 5 in Joannis Chrysostomi, Opera Omnia Quae Extant (Paris, 1836), Patrologia Graeca v, 66, 64–66. For Aristotle and the Antiochenes, see Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church, ed. and tr. Karl Froehlich (Philadelphia, 1984), p. 19.

neoplatonists, the recourse to *skopos* appears to have originated for both in a common tradition of rhetorical education.

Sidney may well have translated a portion of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, if John Hoskins’ claim is correct that he saw in Henry Wotton’s hands “the two first books Englished by him.” It was “the right virtuous Edward Wotton,” Henry’s half-brother, who accompanied Sidney on his first visit to the Imperial court in Vienna, and who endured, too, Pugliano’s lessons in horsemanship so comically recounted in the opening lines of *The Defence* (p. 95). I forge a genealogical connection here, Edward to Henry Wotton, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* to *The Defence of Poesy*, because it was during Sidney’s three-year tour of the Continent (1572–1575), and especially during several long stays in Vienna, that he received first-hand the education in Philippist humanism that translated Aristotle’s *skopos* from a rhetorical term into a vital component of a larger, influential framework of interpretation—a hermeneutic at once oratorical and ethical, political and pious. Vienna was Sidney’s main home during his continental tour. It was a cosmopolitan city, like the Frankfurst of Henri Estienne’s celebrated book fair or the Strasbourg of Johann Sturmius’ world-famous Protestant Academy, renowned for its coincidence of religious moderation and flourishing arts. In a study called *The Quest for Compromise*, Howard Louthan has recently written about the brief triumph and eventual failure of the irenic cause in the Vienna of the 1570s—the search by moderates for unity across confessional lines, and the singular importance of the Philippists in Vienna in pursuit of that cause. They were called “Philippists” because they were the former students and followers of Philip Melanchthon—at once, the *praeceptor Germaniae*, a humanist whose Protestant learning transformed the universities of the Northern Renaissance, and Luther’s quiet compatriot, an influential spokesman for confessional compromise. Vienna in the 1570s was home to the Silesian physician


and diplomat Johannes Crato, to the Hungarian emblematist Johannes Sambucus, the French botanist Charles de l’Ecluse, as well as that Burgundian factotum of the Protestant republic of letters, Hubert Languet—all of them prominent Philippists, all of them committed to religious moderation as the necessary instrument to the enablement of civil life and the civil arts. Sidney’s education was placed chiefly in the hands of Languet, whose long life of service to his “magister” (his teacher, Melanchthon, as he almost always called him) was the very enactment of Philippist self-sacrifice, the product of a conversion by the book—a chance encounter, “tolle, lege-style,” with Melanchthon’s *Loci communes.*

A letter from December of 1575 speaks clearly about how the two spent their time together and the character of that primary education undergone by Sidney. Languet reminds him about “how many excellent writers” he studied during the mere “three or four months” he spent in Vienna the previous year, and how “many things” he learned from them “which concern the right ordering of man’s life.” Those readings included history (Sidney’s progress in the discipline is the frequent subject of Languet’s praise); moral philosophy, since “nothing is more beneficial” than that which “teaches what is right and wrong”; and “Holy Scripture,” since “the knowledge which is most necessary for us is that of our salvation.”

majority of Melanchthon’s other works, readers must consult the 28 volumes in *Corpus reformatorum Philippi Melanthonis opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. C. B. Bretschneider and H. E. Bindseil (Halle, 1834–1852; Brunswick, 1853–1860), hereafter cited as *Corpus Reformatorum.*

18. According to Languet’s recent biographer, Sidney and Melanchthon were the only two people with whom Languet maintained an intimate relationship. See also Beatrice Nicollier-de Weck, *Hubert Languet (1518–1581), un réseau politique international de Melanchthon à Guillaume d’Orange* (Geneva, 1995). Nicollier is the first to situate Languet inside the historically important circle of Philippists. For Philippism as a distinctive confessional movement, see Luther D. Peterson’s “Philippists” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hiltbrand (New York, 1996), III, 255–61. As Peterson notes, “The much-maligned loser in its struggle with the Gnesio-Lutherans [the so-called “true” Lutherans], the Philippists and their religious perspectives have since then received relatively little study of a balanced and scholarly sort,” p. 256. Important new studies suggest this overdue neglect is ending. In addition to Peterson’s bibliography, see Robert Kolb’s *Confessing the Faith: Reformers Define the Church, 1530–80* (St. Louis, 1991) and Bodo Nischan’s *Lutherans and Calvinists in the Age of Confessionalism* (Aldershot, 1999). See, too, an important collection of new essays, *Melanchthon in Europe: His Work and Its Influence Beyond Wittenberg*, ed. Karin Maag (Cumbria and Grand Rapids, 1999).


philosophy, and history—speaks to a hierarchy of aims, its rhetorical organization a reflection, then, of a characteristic Philippist preoccupation with scope. That Sidney understood his own education in similar terms might best be illustrated by the letter he wrote to Robert Sidney, his younger brother, just as Robert was beginning his own education on the Continent (1578) traveling, as Philip had done, in the care of Hubert Languet. Sidney organizes his reflections in that letter by reference to Aristotle (this time, the *Ethics*) and the need for Robert to “have imprinted in your minde” what he calls first “the good ende which everie man doth & ought to bend his greatest actions.” It is one thing to travel “but to travaile or to saie you have travailed”; it is another to travel for the purpose of furnishing “your selfe with . . . knowledge,” or what he terms “the scope and marke, you meane by your paines to shoote at.”

21 *Scope*, the rhetorical term, assumes ethical implications, and even a distinctive cosmopolitan aura, characteristic of Sidney generally, in the association of good judgment (in its “mixed and correlative knowledge of things”) with wide horizons (“the most excellent waies of worldlie wisdome”). Sidney has one of his later fictive travelers, the Musidorus of *The Old Arcadia*, reflect in a similar manner that “well doing was . . . his scope, from which no faint pleasures could withhold him,” just as he has Philanax admonish the princes in their trial that “strangers have scope to know the customs of a country before they put themselves in it.” The term “scope” is loaded in both instances with a strong sense of right reason acquired from the purposeful acquisition of knowledge.  

22 Or to return from the ethical to the rhetorical, so as to illustrate how quickly the passage between them is made, it is well to recall too Philanax’s summary fulminations against the princes during that same trial: “Shall we doubt so many secret conferences with Gynecia, such feigned favour to the over-soon beguiled Basilius . . . , lastly such changes and traverses as a quiet poet could scarce fill a poem withal, were directed to any less scope than to this monstrous murder?”

23 If murder is the scope or purpose of the princes’ actions (as Philanax crudely reimagines them), as an event it is simultaneously the rhetorical object of the quiet poet, an additional and characteristically Sidneian extension of that term’s significance to the realm

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of the literary. This is an extension not unique to Sidney. In completing his translation of the Psalms, Mary Sidney opens the volume, with sisterly familiarity and verbal tribute, by announcing that her work “hath no further scope to goe, / nor other purpose but to honor thee.”

As a term of art, the *scopus dicendi* appears in Melanchthon’s oratorical works always in conjunction with his concept of *status*—a concept that lies right at the heart of his theory of eloquence and his assumptions about interpretation. More than any other, these are the terms that made his work distinctive, that put his distinguishable imprint on the study of *oratio* in the northern Renaissance. Melanchthon was not the first in Renaissance Europe to revive the vocabulary of *scopus* and *status*: Erasmus set the precedent, but it was Melanchthon who developed that vocabulary into a systematic oratorical hermeneutic—into a new institutionalized practice of reading and writing. As Melanchthon writes in the *Elementorum rhetorices libri duo* (1531), the most extensively elaborated of


his several oratorical textbooks, “No part of the art [of rhetoric] is more necessary than the precepts dealing with the status of the case, in respect of which, this is first and foremost: in relation to every problem or controversial question we consider what the status is, that is, what is the chief subject of inquiry, the proposition that contains the gist of the matter toward which all arguments are aimed, in other words, the main conclusion.”

Pursuing the status is what supplies dialectical rigor to rhetorical acts of invention and the work of interpretation. That pursuit, in turn, has as its final goal the location of what Melanchthon calls the *scopus dicendi*. Locating the *scopus* is so important because, “No matter of debate can be comprehended, nothing can be explained, stated or grasped in an orderly fashion, except some proposition be formulated which includes the sum total of the case.” (As root and branch, Melanchthon’s “orderly fashion” resonates rhetorically with Langue	’s educational concerns about “right ordering.”) It is one thing, however, to identify the centrality of these key terms, *scope* and *status*, to Melanchthon’s oratorical texts; it is quite another to consider—Philippist-wise—the aim or purpose that they were designed to serve.

If Luther was the inspiration for that theological and semantic revolution that we now call the Reformation, then Melanchthon was the first systematic expositor of the character, meaning, and consequence of the Word regarded as promise. As Luther’s lieutenant, Melanchthon faced the task of creating a coherent statement of the new theology and an educational system that could adequately reflect that theology. In a reformed church so centrally committed to authorizing itself on the rightness of its understanding of Scripture (*sola scriptura*!), no small part of Melanchthon’s burden was to devise a practice of reading sufficient to the challenge of

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the new faith. That challenge is represented most formidably by Luther’s insistence that since the Holy Spirit is the clearest and hence “the simplest writer and adviser in heaven and on earth. That is why his words could have no more than the one simplest meaning which we call the written one, or the literal meaning of the tongue.”

This did not mean that the Bible contains no allegories or parables or extended figures of speech, only that the significance of such moments was available to understanding without the exercise of some special grace. The Word has causative power as a vehicle of saving faith not because of some mysterious grace it carries or contains; instead the Word has power, in Melanchthon’s view as well as Luther’s, because words themselves are naturally and inherently powerful. They cause things to happen.

In the absence of allegorizing as a principal mode for communicating God’s message to mankind, Melanchthon came to reconceive the Bible in oratorical terms, as divine speech perspicuously organized—like the great texts of the classical humanist tradition—according to the best rules of rhetoric and dialectic. In place of allegories and elaborate schemes of four-fold interpretation, Melanchthon emphasized instead the preeminent significance of the Bible’s use of what he calls histories or examples. Similar to the Bible stories generally, the story of Nathan and David is a history or example that pictures to the mind God’s forgiveness of sins (one of the summary meanings of Scripture as a whole), and thereby moves and transforms the heart with its lesson of consolation. Its literal meaning is that abstraction (what Melanchthon calls elsewhere that “hypothesis”) embodied by the narrative in its entirety. Or to use his more familiar terms: if its status is forgiveness, its scopus is to make forgiveness available. The Bible is more than perspicuous. It is also a unified whole, fashioned in all of its parts as illustration of a single argument of salvation. Conceived as a unified argument, the Bible needs to be interpreted ad fontes, both in its original languages, but also and more crucially for Melanchthon, in its origin as divinely ordered rhetoric and dialectic. Hence his scorn,

29. Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig (1521) in Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis, 1989), p. 78.

30. As J. S. Preus writes regarding Luther, “Words . . . do not, like signs, need some hidden ‘grace’ to be ‘causal.’ Words are intrinsically causal: they cause expectation, fear, doubt, hope, or trust, in the one who hears what they say. Not because a concealed grace comes with them, but simply from what they say as ‘naked words,’” From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther (Cambridge, 1969), p. 254. Schneider extends this argument to Melanchthon, pp. 227–29.
Antiochene-style, for the scholastics, who in failing to seek out the *loci communes* that organize the text, misinterpret its meaning and, worse still, adduce (allegorically) new meanings never intended. The *loci* can be regarded as those logical-foundational principles supplying the unity of the biblical argument—principles, like that of David’s repentance, to which reason will respond in its quest for order. But the *loci* can also be conceived as those innate-experiential laws of nature that govern universal human experience—laws, like David’s hunger for repentance, to which human nature will respond because of our common need for salvation.\(^{31}\)

Biblical *loci* are logical principles and existential truths. Hence, the extraordinary eloquence of the scriptural text at once to teach and to persuade, to speak to the mind about what reason requires and to address the heart about the needs of nature.

When Melanchthon published his *Elementorum rhetorices libri duo* in 1531, he had recourse to a favorite narrative that recurs obsessively in the exegetical writings, the story of Nathan and David. But this time he treats it in the distinctive context of his educational work. In the first modern European textbook designed to teach students the principles of correct reading as an introduction to the knowledge of correct writing, it is fascinating to investigate why and how Melanchthon *reads* the story of Nathan and David. No effort is made to search for hidden allegories or to derive, scholastic style, logical propositions from the biblical text. Instead, Melanchthon interprets the narrative as an extended example of a commonplace-at-work. It illustrates the oratorical art of demonstrating and amplifying (*ad probandum et ad amplicandum*) a universal truth from experience, the human need for penitence. Penitence, then, is the commonplace that David’s exemplary history embodies as a doctrine (*as doctrina*, what is taught and what teaches), a history that simultaneously instructs and moves its audience to virtue as they learn aright how to discover the textual *scopus*. Around and about the exemplary history of David, then, circle the terms of an elaborately detailed art of communication.\(^{32}\)

What is especially interesting about the history of Nathan and David in this context is its prominence inside a comprehensive rhetorical textbook designed not as an instrument of religious or exegetical education, but as

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\(^{31}\) Commonplaces are not arguments, nor even the conclusions of arguments; they are those universal truths at the seat of argumentation from which the main logical and rhetorical power of the text stems or what Melanchthon calls concisely the “main points [of every doctrine] which contain the sources and sum total of the art,” *Elementorum*, p. 193.

\(^{32}\) *Elementorum*, pp. 191–94.
a general primer in the arts of communication crucial to the governing class, dialectic and rhetoric. As Melanchthon’s reading shows, the history of Nathan and David can be studied for its oratorical benefits because it is itself oratorical. The search for *scopus* belongs equally to the analysis of Paul’s Epistles and the plays of Terence, the Gospel of Matthew and the orations of Demosthenes.

Some years ago Paul Oscar Kristeller observed that “Melanchthon, the defender of rhetoric against philosophy, . . . had more influence on many aspects of Lutheran Germany than Luther himself and . . . was responsible for the humanistic tradition of the German Protestant schools down to the nineteenth century.” Historians of rhetoric have both confirmed and in some respects extended Kristeller’s claims for Melanchthon’s importance to the humanistic tradition, especially as that tradition made its impact felt on reading and interpretation. Kathy Eden, Peter Mack and Kees Meerhoff have drawn attention to a remarkable series of transformations in reading practices during the sixteenth century in which Melanchthon played a major role. For Eden, those transformations are an instance of “humanist rehabilitation” of the classical tradition of interpretation, *interpretatio scripti*, a practice of reading whose origins lie in judicial rhetoric. For Mack and Meerhoff, they comprise a dialectically inspired revolution in the art of textual interpretation. Eden emphasizes the importance of “accommodation” to this tradition: the emphasis of the Church Fathers and their influential Reformed student, Melanchthon, on interpretation as an activity that makes readers at home in the text, encouraging them toward spiritual journeys of their own (pp. 41–63, 82–85). Mack and Meerhoff concentrate on the important marriage of dialectics and rhetoric for the development of an integrated theory of reading that attends to the logical connections among words in “natural” use and their affective force upon readers. Despite these distinctive emphases, there is considerable agreement among Eden, Mack, and Meerhoff about the character of these “new” reading practices. Key practices concern what until recently were strikingly modern assumptions about how to read: the importance of examining whole books to recover arguments in their completeness; the need to consider authorial intention and textual/historical context as guides to interpretation; the assumption that language exists to reveal rather than to conceal meaning; and the usefulness of applying dialectics (logical analysis) to rhetoric (to language in “natural” use).

Whether regarded as a rehabilitation or as a revolution, Melanchthon’s methodical teaching of eloquence reflects what these three recent scholars of the history of rhetoric are agreed was a whole new set of ideas about how to read. All three are agreed, too, about the significance of what Kathy Eden calls “the profound interaction between rhetoric and hermeneutics” in sixteenth-century Europe, “especially between writing and reading” (p. 102). Melanchthon and his students first taught eloquence through textual analysis, and then through composition or pronunciation, a pedagogical reflection in miniature of that larger history in which the Reformers’ biblical exegesis motivated the creation of new notions first of interpretation and then composition. What emerges most forcefully from Melanchthon’s ideas about reading is a tremendous confidence about eloquence in the sacred and secular domains alike, and a striking rigor about the business of interpretation in his demand that eloquence be mediated and evaluated at every turn by logic. To the analyses of Eden, Mack, and Meerhoff, I would add, as an argument crucial to the history of poetics in England, the formative impact of that new confident set of assumptions (about reading and writing) on The Defence of Poesy. Developed as an alternative method of interpreting texts inside a culture still swarming with the old-style philological commentaries of the early humanists on the one hand and the remarkably enduring practices of the allegorizing commentators on the other, the new ideas of reading are as essential to Sidney’s poetics as a theory of allegory is to Spenser’s poetry.34 They are key to understanding, in short, how Sidney sought to authorize his claims on behalf of the metamorphic power (remarkably) not of orations, but of fictions.

II

The Scope of the Golden World

There is no better example of Sidney’s skill in “methodizing” the eclectic matter of his Defence than his treatment of Julius Caesar Scaliger. As

34. For a detailed account of what I mean by “old style” humanist commentaries, with their vast quantities of paraphrase, moral reflection, rhetorical analysis, and basic lexical and historical detail, see Anthony Grafton’s “Renaissance Readers and Ancient Texts” in Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800 (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), pp. 23–46. E.K.’s prefatory epistle to The Shepheardes Calendar belongs, for example, far more to this tradition than to the new hermeneutic making its impact felt on Sidney’s Defence.
the author of the Poetices, the best known of the sixteenth-century Italian treatises on poetry, Scaliger was a figure with whom Sidney was eager to be associated (he refers to him by name four times, and always politely). His presence in The Defence lends a cosmopolitan air to the discussion, and sometimes, too, suggestive matter to be reshaped for other purposes. As Sidney reads Scaliger to raid the fashionable Italian master for ideas about poetics, for terminology and conceptual categories, what emerge so clearly are his own distinctive assumptions about writing and reading.35

Sidney’s reshaping of Scaliger is particularly instructive in The Defence’s “accommodation” of the Poetices’ first chapter, a discussion of poetry in relation to various culturally significant disciplines that concludes with the suggestive characterization of the poet as “almost . . . a second deity.”36 The main aim of Scaliger’s chapter is to distinguish poetry from the traditionally more revered sciences of philosophy, oratory, and history. His discussion proceeds in terms that must have seemed familiar to Sidney by creating categories among the sciences as distinguishable modes of cultivating language. For Scaliger, a branch of learning is a species of discourse, and so philosophers, orators, historians, and poets are first categorized according to the degree of precision each obtains in his employment of words. Philosophers are most precise; orators, less so; historians and poets “employ narration, and use much embellishment” (p. 2). Having grouped historians and poets together, Scaliger then distinguishes the poet from the historian. This is a distinction he makes, first by referring to poetic imitation—a bit uncertainly, since poets are said to imitate “actual” and fictitious events—and, subsequently by appealing to the Horatian dictum that poetry is really to be understood according to its end (finem), “the giving of instruction in pleasurable form.”37

Regrouping somewhat, Scaliger proceeds to define a single end for “philosophical exposition,” “oratory,” and “the drama”: the act of persuasion. The definition occasions both a digression on poetic eloquence as the


means to persuasive effects and a revision of Quintilian’s categories of speaking (p. 3). That discussion concludes when Scaliger suggests that poets differ from philosophers, historians, and the rest because while these others “represent things just as they are, . . . the poet depicts quite another sort of nature,” and, therefore, is justly called by the Greeks a maker (pp. 7–8).

Suggestive as it may have been, Scaliger’s “second deity” passage is a digression from the main discussion about how to categorize the sciences (“while we are on the subject,” he writes), and a digression that leaves uncertain just how the poet’s status as a maker relates either to the business of persuasion or to another main issue at stake, the value of poetry. So what if the poet is a maker of “images more beautiful than life”? (pp. 2–3). Scaliger offers no answer, and for a Sidney intellectually disposed to pursue final causes, that silence must have seemed strangely empty. Once more, for a Sidney equally disposed to regard “methodical order” in argument, the whole of this chapter must have seemed as conceptually incoherent as it was imaginatively stimulating. In a gesture of accommodation, with a familiar nod toward the fashionable, Sidney proceeds to devour Scaliger’s text and make it wholly his own. 38

As Sidney sets out to distinguish poetry as an art from other arts, he promises to do so “by marking the scope of other sciences than by my partial allegation” (p. 99). In short, he promises an analysis that accounts for what Melanchthon would call the final aim or mark of each art, considered comprehensively, or what The Defence terms in its very next sentence its “principal object” (p. 99). For example, the “scope” of the astronomer is “to look upon the stars” and set “down what order Nature hath taken therein,” as the scope of the musician is “in times [to] tell you which by nature agree, which not” (p. 100). Sidney adapts, thereby, a

38. In 1935, Myrick argued that Sidney’s Defence is structured on the model of the classical judicial oration, complete in its seven parts from its witty exordium to its comically hyperbolic conclusio. Other critics have revised (sometimes usefully) Myrick’s account about exactly where Sidney incorporates his narratio, propositio, and divisio, and where the main business of confirmation and refutation begins, but there have been few challenges to Myrick’s main argument. Some attention has been paid to Sidney’s motives for crafting his Defence as a judicial oration: Shepherd notes, for instance, that Sidney follows the traditional pattern of university disputations by his choice of forms (p. 46) and Arthur F. Kinney suggests that this display of humanist elocutio was one potent means of whipping Gosson back to school, “Parody and Its Implications in Sidney’s Defense of Poesie,” Studies in English Literature 12 (1972), 17. For a recent revision of these oratorical views, see Robert M. Coogan, “The Triumph of Reason: Sidney’s Defense and Aristotle’s Rhetoric,” Papers on Language and Literature 17: 3 (Summer 1981), 255–70.
rhetorical term customarily applied to individual texts to his discussion of individual arts. In place of Scaliger’s ever-shifting categories, Sidney’s attention to the “scope” of the arts immediately permits him to distinguish clearly between those whose “principal object” consists in their dependence on “the works of Nature,”—all of the other humane arts from astronomy to metaphysics—and the “scope” of the poet, who “lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature” in order to make “things better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature” (p. 100). Sidney’s language is close to Scaliger’s, who writes about the poet’s depiction of “quite another sort of nature.” However, Sidney transforms the Italian’s much tamer “another sort of nature” into the fully realized metaphor of the poem as a golden world, a transformation suggestively related to his reliance on the terminology of the scopus dicendi. The concept of the literary work as a microcosm was already present in the history of the term as it was derived from Proclus and the neoplatonists—in fact, the concept is original to the late neoplatonists. It was Sidney, however, who for the first time in early modern Europe explicitly reintroduces the notion of the literary work as a little world, and that reintroduction seems more likely the product of his demonstrable fascination with the vocabulary of scopus than his presumed familiarity with the unpublished theoretical works of Lomazzo and the Italian mannerist aestheticians.39

Sidney borrows from Philippist oratory not just a term, but also a set of concepts that helps to explain why and how he characterizes the well-made poem as a well-made world.40 As The Defence makes clear, the superiority of the poet’s world to history’s (the explanation for its golden quality) stands “not in the work itself,” but in “that Idea or fore-conceit”

39. See Shepherd, pp. 155–56 and, on mannerism, Erwin Panofsky, Idea: A Concept in Art Theory, tr. Joseph J. S. Peake (Columbia, 1968), pp. 69–100. Sidney’s knowledge about Proclus and Iambilicus may derive from his friend, Philippe de Mornay, whose Verité de la religion christienne (dedicated to Languet and partially translated by Sidney) makes constant reference to them, especially in its first book. Mornay and Sidney were already in close contact by 1578. Coincidences are possible, but the fact that for the first time in early modern Europe, Sidney conceptualizes the literary work as microcosm, using the vocabulary central to the formulation of that concept by its originators, strikes me as just too neat to be an accident.

40. Richard Waswo anticipates my argument by writing: “The fundamental dynamic of Sidney’s defense . . . seems to proceed much more directly from reformed ways of treating Scripture than from Italian theoretical debates about literature,” Language and Meaning in the Renaissance (Princeton, 1987), p. 228. Waswo has nothing to say, however, about Melanchthon or the oratorical theory underlying that exegetical practice.
represented, counterfeited or figured forth by the work (p. 101). Explaining Sidney’s “scope” depends on understanding how he conceived of the Idea. A great deal of critical discussion has attempted to account for the philosophical origins of Sidney’s Idea, ordinarily taking shape as debate between Aristotelian and neoplatonic poetics, or some syncretically realized position between or distinct from them. Clearly, Sidney was no Aristotelian. For all of The Defence’s attention to the vocabulary of mimesis, its deep and consistent diminishment of the truths to be derived from a slippery world makes small sense out of possible claims to induction or empiricism, and hence to the value of that Aristotelian project of locating forms (or ideas) embodied in the material realm. Clearly, too, Sidney was no neoplatonist. He does not conceive of Ideas as deriving from or participating in some transcendent realm of meaning and value, and he specifically disclaims any source for the poet’s Ideas in divine inspiration. By contrast, what Sidney insists upon is the poet’s possession of the Idea, a possession made “manifest” by his delivering it forth “in such excellency” in the poem’s activity of figuring-forth (p. 101). As he writes later: “the poet only bringeth his own stuff” (p. 120).

John Ulreich has written helpfully about Sidney’s epistemology as a syncretically brilliant compromise between the Aristotelian and the Platonic, showing how “imitation” assumes new meaning in The Defence’s “actual transplanting of . . . Aristotelian organicism into the fertile soil of neoplatonic cosmogony.” The process of poetic imitation can be conceived, he argues, in Platonic or Aristotelian terms, as an “actualization of matter by form” (the Idea figured-forth through speaking pictures) “or the infusion of form into matter” (speaking pictures figuring-forth the Idea).41 Restated with an eye to the history of the text’s critical

terminology, an appeal to such syncreticism can highlight usefully Sidney’s skill in employing the *scopus* of the Aristotelian rhetorical tradition, with its regard for the this-worldly activity of demonstrable argument, to the neoplatonically conceived microcosm of the text. In this light, the *Defence* emerges as an especially skillful synthesis of competing traditions since the force of that *scopus* is simultaneously to discipline and to give purpose to the world of imagination. Sidney gains the exhilaration and expansiveness of the neoplatonic vision (what zodiacal range!) without sacrificing the clarity or control of Aristotelian standards of demonstrable reason.

A crucial point can be made in relation to this argument. For while it is possible to write meaningfully about Sidney’s debts to neoplatonism, especially in his conception of the fiction as a microcosm, poetry does not shadow forth transcendent realities behind a fictive veil—as an instrument to build causeways across that dualistic universe (the phenomenal and the epiphenomenal) traditionally implied by neoplatonic allegorists. Instead, Ideas are realized by substantive images exemplified paradigmatically as pictures of the poet’s making. The figuring-forth of the Sidneian poet works “substantially” in his depiction of a “perfect picture . . . of a true and lively knowledge”—knowledge that makes a reality available for the reader (pp. 101, 107). I emphasize the poem’s important activity in presenting a “reality” in order to foreground the extraordinary intellectual and affective power that Sidney attributes to the Idea as it is figured forth—the capacity of the poet’s “perfect” pictures to unleash real powers that exist at once in Nature and in the erected wit, and the dramatic metamorphic potential of those Ideas as they are comprehended by the reader.

Sidney does not conceive of writing as allegory because he does not conceive of reality in allegorical terms, an argument best elaborated in regard to Sidney’s own purposefully organized account of the world of poetry. As an epistemic construct, the poet’s golden world is one reliable guide to his epistemological assumptions about the world at large. Put more plainly, Sidney’s golden world is something more than a loosely constructed, rhetorically suggestive metaphor. It is the methodically

conceived imitation, counterfeit, and figuration of the Maker’s own prelapsarian creation, the world itself: a world that has a maker who works by intention; that possesses its own natural goodness and power; and that is constructed according to a specific purpose, aim, or scope. Like the macrocosm itself, the poet’s golden world is a world in which the maker’s intentions, at once clear and demonstrably coherent, can and must be recovered by the best hermeneutical means available, dialectic and rhetoric. Useful as Ulreich’s analysis is in detailing a history to explain the syncretic philosophical provenance of Sidney’s Idea, understanding its eloquent function requires that we travel from Aristotle’s Greece beyond Scaliger’s Italy to Renaissance Vienna and that circle of Philippists from whom Sidney derived his crucial notions about how to read and write.

These notions are crucial because the Idea of Sidney’s poetics functions as an eloquent device in precisely similar terms to the locus of Philippist oratory. It is “a universal truth” about experience—a representation of virtue or vice—which stands at the foundation of the narrative, generating speaking pictures and providing unity to the whole. It is simultaneously associated, like Melanchthon’s loci, with the author’s intention (voluntas), chief cause (summam causam) or main argument (status dicendi). When Sidney offers examples of these Ideas in *The Defence* such as the chastity of Lucretia, the piety of Aeneas, or the courage of Turnus, they are invariably represented as the moral commonplaces of his education, not so much as arguments as the seats upon which arguments are built. As the world has a Maker, who realizes his intentions by the creative power of the Logos (at once his reason and his Word), so too the Sidneian poet has his aim: to make poetic matter from the conceits of his wit. Since the poet’s scopus is “to teach and to delight,” his Ideas are always motivated, fraught with intention. It is no surprise, then, consistent with these assumptions about writing, that reading for intention is a strategy Sidney employs on writers across the disciplines throughout *The Defence*. Defending Aesop from the charge of lying, Sidney comically diminishes those who would read the fables “for actually true” instead of considering the intention (the moral purpose) that is their meaning (p. 124). So too, Sidney rescues Erasmus and Agrippa from the charge of mere “playing” in their satiric and parodic works by claiming that they had “another foundation [another moral intention] then the superficial part [the ‘playing’] would promise” (p. 121). He even rescues Plato from Plato by means of intentionality, as he inquires about his “meaning,” arguing craftily that it was
Plato’s aim to undo blasphemy in Athens by attacking the abuse, not the right use, of poetry (p. 129).

Like the well-made oration, Sidney’s poetic world is governed by laws internal to its organization, and can be read with the same kind of attention to its logical coherence and argumentation. In this respect, too, the logic of the poetic world reflects Sidney’s assumptions about the rational design of the cosmos. Dialectics matters to poetry. Hence, Sidney’s call in his description of the golden world for active readers who will “learn aright why and how that maker made” his poem (p. 101). As an extension of this concept, The Defence offers what to post-romantic audiences is startling advice about how to read poetry well. To test for genuine “poetical sinews,” Sidney suggests putting verse into prose, “and then ask the meaning.” In bad poetry one verse will “but beget another, without ordering at the first what should be last, which becomes a confused mass of words . . . barely accompanied with reason” (p. 133). His sentence foreshadows Ezra Pound’s dictum: poetry ought to be as well-written as prose. The philosopher may have some degree of superiority in “methodical proceeding” (p. 112), Sidney allows, but this does not prevent him from demanding that the poet use the “unflattering glass of reason” to marshall the matter of his work into an “assured rank” (pp. 132–33). When crucial examples of the poet’s power to teach and delight are supplied, as in the tales of Agrippa and Nathan, they are cited not as illustrations, but as “proofs” of the forcefulness of poetical invention, proofs that carry real conceptual and affective force with them (p. 114).

Affective force matters also to The Defence’s representation of the poem as a golden world since, like the loci of the well-made oration, the ideas figured by Sidney’s poetic world are associated closely and consistently with the power of Nature: the great creating nature of the Maker (natura naturans), not the fallen nature of the postlapsarian world (natura naturata). It is important to stress that the poet “goeth hand in hand with Nature,” because that cooperation secures for the poet’s Ideas a whole separate order of persuasiveness related to, but distinct from, their logical power (p. 100). It secures the added dimension of existential affectiveness, the persuasiveness of the Ideas depicted by fictions that derives from their power to speak to the needs of human nature. We respond to fictions—especially to the characters represented by narrative fictions—because we see ourselves mirrored in them, “ourselves” as teleologically considered we “naturally” should be. Such insight suggests, in turn, some foundational assumptions about what it means for the poet “to deliver forth in such
excellency” Ideas just “as he hath imagined them” (p. 101). Consider for a moment how much power Sidney attributes to nature in *The Defence*, and not just as that great creating force with which the poet walks hand in hand—itself a speaking picture of the cooperation of the maker and his Maker, the human and the divine—but also as the power attributed to human nature in its appetite for goodness. The Ideas figured forth by poets have power, Sidney argues repeatedly, because “poetry ever setteth virtue so out in her best colours . . . that one must needs be enamoured of her” (p. 111). When the reader is made to see Aeneas carrying old Anchises on his back, the “form of goodness” poetically depicted, “cannot but” be loved (p. 114). So similarly, in his discussion of heroic characters like Cyrus, Turnus, and Achilles, Sidney cites Plato and Cicero’s opinion “that who could see virtue would be wonderfully ravished with the love of her beauty” (p. 119). Poetry has such power to “plant goodness even in the secretest cabinet of our souls” only because of the human appetite for virtue (p. 106). Sidney is not so naive as to think poetry always effective. The tyrant Alexander Pheraeus, as Plutarch relates, was moved to tears by tragedy, but “in despite of himself” continued to perpetrate tragedies (p. 118). The phrase “in despite of himself” makes Sidney’s point for him; Pheraeus acted against his own nature.

The force of poetry’s natural power assumes always the value of clarity. Hence Sidney’s praise for that long list of fictional characters from Homer’s Ulysses to Chaucer’s Pandar, in whom “all virtues, vices, and passions [are] so . . . laid to the view, that we seem not to hear of them, but clearly to see through them” (p. 108). An imitation of Lucretia exists not to conceal but to reveal her chastity, as a means of “counterfeiting, or figuring forth” what he calls the “beauty of such a virtue” (pp. 101–02). Sidney reads the Bible with this expectation of claritas, just as he reads fictions. Like a good student of Philippist exegesis, Sidney cites Christ’s use of “the divine narration of Dives and Lazarus” as proof of divine eloquence: the story presents “the moral commonplaces [the loci communes] of uncharitableness and humbleness” so that they better inhabit “the memory and judgment” (pp. 108–09). There is no hint of allegory in his language. When Sidney moves in the next sentences to his consideration of Aesop’s tales and their “pretty allegories,” he represents those fables as “the formal tales of beasts,” accommodating the traditional dark poetics of the allegorical tradition to the standard of claritas enshrined by the new reading practice. As formal tales, their purpose is to illuminate clearly the “forms” of virtue and vice. Aesop is mentioned here, like Christ, as specific
counterpoint to the philosopher who “teacheth obscurely” (p. 109).\footnote{42} Claritas is a particular virtue of the poet by reason of his recourse to\textit{ energia} (classical rhetorical skills for amplifying arguments) and to speaking pictures—the exemplary narratives and metaphors that permit readers to visualize poetic conceits. The first editions of Melanchthon’s\textit{ Loci communes} included in their titles, revealingly, the words\textit{ seu hypotyposes} or the speaking pictures.\footnote{43}

Like the well-made oration of the Philippist tradition, Sidney’s golden world has in common with the great world of its Maker one more important characteristic. As a world fashioned purposefully, which gives perspicuous representation to ideas of virtue and vice, the poem invites accommodation. Accommodation (becoming at home in the world of the fiction) is a process described doubly, suggesting a necessary cooperation between two ways of finding oneself at home in the work. Sidney writes about the need for readers who actively engage texts for the real benefits to be mined from them, as they analyze “why and how” the work gets made (p. 101). When Sidney recruits Plutarch’s authority

\footnote{42} Sidney treats “allegory” as he treats so many other traditional terms in \textit{The Defence} (e.g. “imitation”) as the object of his own magical inclusivity: the term’s use fosters the appearance of agreement, while context utterly transforms its meaning. In every case that Sidney writes about allegory, he does so in the context of recalling literature for children—the sort of literature represented by Aesop’s\textit{ Fables} in which stories usually announce their “\textit{scopos}” explicitly; Sidney’s edition of Aesop was that of Joachim Camerarius, another Philippist who practices the new hermeneutic, whose edition was specifically designed for children (\textit{Fabulae Aesopicae} [Lugduni, 1571]). When late in his argument, while defending the poet from accusations about lying, he writes about stories as “allegorically and figuratively written,” he can do so safely because of the clarity with which he has already characterized the process by which the poet constructs his golden-world fictions. By “allegorically,” Sidney means nothing more than that poets figure-forth—give body to—abstractions. The concluding conjuration of \textit{The Defence} that readers “believe with me, that there are many mysteries contained in Poetry, which of purpose were written darkly,” is a characteristically witty Sidneyian joke at the expense of an allegorical tradition that he has so brilliantly and effectively sought to diminish (p. 142). Borris makes much of William Temple’s use of the term “\textit{algorica fictio}” in his contemporary analysis of \textit{The Defence}, but applied as that term is to the stories of Nathan and David and Aesop’s fables, clearly it indicates once more only their figurative status (p. 197). Temple’s Ramistic reading habits are diametrically opposed to anything that we could usefully call “allegorical.”

\footnote{43} For an extended study of Sidney’s debts to a visualist epistemology, see Forrest G. Robinson, \textit{The Shape of Things Known} (Cambridge, Eng., 1972). Melanchthon had an enduring interest in the visual arts as pictorial counterparts and complements to the work of eloquent preaching, as Donald B. Kuspit has demonstrated in “Melanchthon and Dürer: The Search for the Simple Style,” \textit{The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies} 3: 2 (Fall 1973), 177–202. Sachiko Kusukawa comments on the contrast between Luther and Melanchthon’s oral and visual epistemologies in \textit{The Transformation of Natural Philosophy: The Case of Philip Melanchthon} (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), pp. 192–96.
for his praise of fictions, he cites his success in teaching “the use to be gathered out of them,” the moral utility of those ideas or conceits that they embody (p. 130). In turn, when he discusses readers who turn to “History looking for truth,” Sidney parodies that search by the hyperbolical claim that they go away from histories “full fraught with falsehood” (p. 124). They would do better to look in poetry for fictions, “where they shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention” (p. 124). Readers are advised imaginatively to invent (literally, to reinvent) the making of the poem, to reconstruct the conceptual design of its fictional landscape in order to profit in the very act of so doing, from its teaching. Accommodation, in the first instance, sounds mainly like the conceptual activity of adapting the text to the reader’s own needs. But accommodation to the poetic text also requires simultaneously something else of equal importance. To make oneself fully at home in the poetic text, to accommodate oneself to the poet’s invention, requires too-affective identification, such as the wish to become an Aeneas in his rescue of Anchises or a Turnus in his courageous stand for honor. The distinctive power of the Sidneian golden world is its power to make acts of identification possible. For the world of the poetic text is golden not because it represents an “earth more lovely,” nor even that it counterfeits more “excellent” kinds of heroes such as Xenophon’s Cyrus, but rather the “golden” eloquence of the fiction is signaled by its power to bestow “a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses” (p. 101).

Like the world, then, a fiction has its own maker (an analogue to the divine Maker), its own laws (the logic internal to its organization), its own natural power (as the representation of ideas that speak clearly about human nature and human needs), and its own purpose, aim, or scope—its cause for being (to have readers accommodate themselves to the maker’s intention). The golden world of poetry bears one more telling resemblance to the unfallen world of creation since it, too, is a supreme example of eloquence-in-action, an instance of words (like the Word) working at the very height of their power. As the matter out of which Sidney forms his conception of fiction as a well-made world, these are the ideas that transform The Defence’s well-known engagement with Italian poetics into an argument with “scope.” Considered comprehensively, Sidney’s ideas about poetic eloquence, including his several assumptions about reading—his concern with intentionality, clarity, coherence, and the all-important business of accommodation—share the optimism about eloquence that informs Melanchthon’s account of oratory. They include,
too, Melanchthon’s tough-minded regard for logic, his insistence that rhetoric be subjected to analysis of a rigorously dialectical kind.

Once more, they suggest an answer to a problem that Ulreich’s analysis of The Defence leaves unresolved: how to explain the authority of Ideas presumed by Sidney’s analysis, their authority to carry truth with them? Certain crucial categories of Ideas were for Melanchthon innate. In a brilliant evangelical revision of Aristotelian anthropology, Liber de anima (1553), the later Melanchthon constructed a portrait of the mind as a “wise architect,” already furnished by that heavenly architect with the knowledge necessary to honor its creator: innate mathematical understanding (numbers), the capacity to follow syllogistic reasoning, the fundamentals of geometry and physics, and the foundational tenets of moral philosophical judgment, inclusive in its detail from specific distinctions between good and evil to the belief in God and the afterlife.

Knowledge of the good becomes in the natural theology of the late Melanchthon a remembrance of the good, recalling us to our own natures. The Defence assumes, too, both the autonomy of the Idea and its authority (legitimacy). It is possible to imagine the poem’s generative Idea (its “stuff”) as the creation of the poet’s own “erected” wit, but Sidney never writes about the poet as a maker of Ideas. More likely, Sidney conceives of the Idea as innate to that same erected wit, an impression remaining from his Maker inscribed within (hence, innate to) what The Defence refers to as the mind’s own divine essence. When he agrees with those “learned men

44. In the De anima (1553), within an argument designed to show that God made man with rational skills so that an awareness of the deity will shine in him, Melanchthon writes: “Est igitur mens architectatrix sapientis” (“Therefore the mind [of man] is a wise architect”) Corpus Reformatorum XIII, 138; he proceeds to point out that: “Architectus cogitans domum, pingit imaginem eius, et de ea iudicat. Tantum propemodum dici potest, cum quaerimus, quid sit noticia. Mirando autem consilio Deus noticias voluit esse imaginis, quia in nobis umbras esse voluit significantes aliudque de ipso” (“An architect thinking about a house depicts an image of it and judges it. So in a similar sense we can say, when we question it, what perception is. By his wonderful design God wished perceptions to be images, because he wished reflections in us to signify something of himself”) Corpus Reformatorum XIII, 145). Once more, this architectonic power of the mind—a reflection in man of the Maker’s power—is the source, Melanchthon argues, of all arts: “Et fontes omnium artium sunt in hac potentia” (“And the fountain of all the arts is in this power [of making]”) Corpus Reformatorum XIII, 138).

45. Sidney writes that the poet “doth not learn a conceit out of a matter, but maketh matter for a conceit” (p. 120). The “conceit” is the Idea that the poet possesses; the poet’s “matter” is that sensible material with which he “figures forth” or embodies (like creating nature) the “conceit” that he possesses. In an interesting article, Leigh DeNeef proposes that Sidney’s “foreconceit” is the “mediating term” between the Idea and the “textually bodied” conceit, “Rereading Sidney’s Apology,” Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies 10 (1980), 155–91.
who have learnedly thought” that “in Nature we know it is well to doe well, and what is well and what is evil,” he does so by appealing to belief in natural law scripted in the heart that teaches us, as a body of innate knowledge, truths that extend from basic tenets of moral philosophy to the recognition of the soul’s immortality and the existence of a providential God—precisely the recognition provided, for instance, to his “pagan” Arcadian princes on the eve of their trial and impending execution (p. 113). Beyond such limits, Sidney does not resolve (let alone address) the philosophical questions at issue in current scholarly debate, because what matters to him most centrally is not the philosophical status of the Idea, but its eloquent function.

Sidney’s terminology speaks to the purposefulness of his argument—to his preoccupation with final aims and marks—and to the wisdom of attending carefully to the “scope” of The Defence’s own argument. Acts of identification matter so profoundly because of the anthropology that underlies its critical positions. At the very heart of his enterprise, Sidney transforms the metamorphic art of Philippist oratio (the power of words and the Word to renew the old Adam) into the strangely similar metamorphic art of the poet. Scaliger attends to poetry’s making “of another sort . . . of nature,” but he could never claim—anymore than Plato or Aristotle could—that poets make another sort of man. Let me explain my point by reference to a crucial passage in Sidney’s argument where he supplies by way of his new reading skills two “proofs” of the “strange effects of . . . poetical invention” (p. 115). As Sidney explicates his proofs, one about Menenius Agrippa and the other about Nathan and David, he transforms “two often remembered” tales into speaking pictures of the preeminent power of poetry (p. 115).

The tales of Agrippa and Nathan are introduced at an especially significant juncture in the methodically designed economy of Sidney’s argument. They are situated at the climactic moment of The Defence’s demonstration of poetry’s “most excellent work”—the “high argument” of its confirmatio—just before the turn to justify poetry by an examination of its parts (p. 115). So situated, the tales supply summary proofs of the main burden of Sidney’s claim on behalf of the superiority of the poet’s “works”—its effects upon the reader—over those of his chief rivals for cultural authority, the philosopher and the historian. A single standard measures the relative value of the disciplines: the success of each in hitting the “scope,” the ultimate aim or mark of the humane sciences in their pursuit of architectonic knowledge—what Sidney describes alternately
as the lifting up of the mind “to the enjoying of his own divine essence” and “the knowledge of man’s self, in the ethic and politique consideration, with the end of well doing and not of well knowing only” (p. 104).46

The tales of Agrippa and Nathan supply a complementary pair of proof texts. One is drawn from classical history, the other from sacred. One illustrates the power of a fable to provide “a perfect reconcilement” in the public arena, as Agrippa’s tale of the belly heals the divisions in Rome’s body politic; the other illustrates the power of feigning in the private sphere, as David is shamed by Nathan’s story of the lamb “as in a glass [to] see his own filthiness,” to repent for adultery and murder, and reclaim (“as that psalm of mercy well testifieth”) his role as God’s chosen servant (pp. 114–15). One illustrates the power of a feigned tale over the people, one over the prince. Paired in this manner, the complementary tales seem deliberately chosen in order to illustrate comprehensively, across the domains of pagan and sacred history, public and private life, among the low and the high, the superior effects of poetry’s “most excellent work” in teaching and persuading. As a prelude to his illustrations of that work, in the paragraph immediately preceding, Sidney cites Aristotle’s claim on behalf of poetry’s “conveniency to Nature” as a way of highlighting those strong acts of identification that make readers want to see themselves as Aeneas piously carrying old Anchises on his back or as Turnus heroically preferring death to dishonor (p. 114). But as the tales of Agrippa and Nathan make clear, Sidney makes more-than-Aristotelian claims about the transformative power of those readerly acts of identification. Readers do not merely identify with virtuous characters. Instead, they are metamorphosed by love of those virtues pictured by such characters. Both “the whole people of Rome” collectively and David individually are brought to an architectonic knowledge of themselves; they are taught fictions that heighten understanding about their natures and that move them by reason of such knowledge to virtuous action (p. 114). In both instances, that architectonic knowledge is metamorphic in character, since knowledge

46. Sidney writes with an eye to causes, the “ending end of earthly learning,” from a strict teleological perspective, adopting Aristotelian vocabulary (architectonike) to a Christian anthropology (“divine essence”); that vocabulary—itself evocative of the pious Aristotelianism of the late Melanchthon—is, in turn, filtered through an important rhetorical term (“scope”) equally distinctive, as I have shown, to Philippist oratorical theory. See his Enarrationes Aliquot Librorum Ethiconum Aristotelis in Corpus Reformatorum XVI, 283, n. 2, where Melanchthon, writing as a teacher, highlights the conjunction between Aristotle’s concept of architectonic knowledge and the knowledge Christians require “ut cognoscamus Deum.”
about their real natures (the nature of the body politic’s necessary inter-
dependence of parts, the nature of the self’s dependence on God) sparks
change that paradoxically renders them both different from their former
selves and what they truly are (a whole people, a chosen servant). The works
of poetry are “strange effects,” as Sidney writes, precisely because of this
metamorphic power (p. 114).47

At its most important moments, in passages like this, The Defence
advances arguments on behalf of the preeminence of poetry that are
unprecedented in the history of European poetics—if we consider, that
is, critical arguments made for what Sidney calls “right poetry,” the fictive
products of human imagination. Certainly no Englishman had ever
advanced such claims on behalf of poetry’s metamorphic power. And yet
such claims are not without precedent in other contexts. Anne Lake
Prescott has written persuasively about a long tradition of commentary
on the Psalms, descending from Anthanasius and Basil among the Church
Fathers and echoed by numbers of contemporary Protestant and Cath-
olic biblical commentaries, which celebrates similarly metamorphic powers
of the Davidic poet; so too, Debora Shuger has argued for the creation of
a tradition of sacred rhetoric in the late sixteenth century, deriving from
Augustine’s remaking of classical notions of eloquence, which advances
kindred claims for the power of sacred speech to inspire godly trans-
formations in the audience.48 As important as their work is, neither points
to the more specific, more historically and biographically probable origin
for Sidney’s metamorphic poetics, the oratorical ideas of Melanchthon.
For in Melanchthon, Sidney found what neither commentators on the
Psalms nor the creators of Shuger’s sacred rhetorics ever interested them-
Selves in: an account of eloquence that bridges the gap between sacred

47. For an analysis of this passage in relation to Sidney’s political concerns, see Ferguson,
pp. 159–65. Her argument that The Defence itself can be read as an allegory, because of the desire to
have readers “find themselves figured in [its] images,” mistakes the origins of Sidney’s interest in
accommodation (p. 156). See also Anne Lake Prescott’s incisive commentary on Sidney’s biblically
inspired effort “to turn the reader’s own gaze inward,” in “King David as a ‘Right Poet’: Sidney
the relationship between Sidney and Amyot in their respective representations of Cyrus, see Anthony
Miller, “Sidney’s Apology for Poetry and Plutarch’s Moralia,” English Literary Renaissance 17: 3 (1987),
267.

48. See Prescott, pp. 131–51, and Debora Shuger, Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in
the English Renaissance (Princeton, 1988). See too Carol Kaske’s Spenser and Biblical Poetics (Ithaca,
1999), a recent book that breaks new ground in measuring Melanchthon’s impact on the English
literary Renaissance.
and secular oratory, that so completely naturalizes the operations of rhetorical and dialectical language as to explain how eloquence of all kinds potentially exerts power over readers. That account was something Melanchthon spent a lifetime making: it was integral, not adventitious to his labors. Moreover, such an account presupposed, in order to be called genuinely explanatory, a theory of reading, one that could explain how Agrippa’s tale and Nathan’s story can serve as complementary examples of eloquence.49 Sidney could find in Italy much of the great poetry that inspired his own productions, and much of the theoretical matter that he needed to construct a defense of fiction-making. But for a theory of reading and a sense of the scopus that gives meaning and value to human acts of making, he turned to Vienna and his education by the Philippists.

An account of Sidney’s critical theory has implications for how we read Sidney’s fictions, particularly during the current revival of allegorizing interpretations of his Arcadias. As the implications of my argument suggest, there are good reasons why Sidney, among all the major Renaissance poets, in spite of the potency of his political and pious objectives, is the least topical, the least likely to load his fictions with allusions to specific historical persons or events. A peculiar and distinctive doubleness surrounds the Sidneian fiction: its deliberately maintained remoteness from history (in its desire to locate those “Ideas” that organize experience) and its urgent quest to make contact with history (in its rhetorical movement to impress upon its readers clearly, coherently, and forcefully, the virtue and necessity of such Ideas). Consider the rhetorical strategy of his friends, De Mornay and Languet, as they organize politically charged works like the verité and the Contra tyrannos, and the decision both make deliberately to advance what they portray as universalizing philosophical arguments against atheists, on the one hand, and Machiavellians, on the other (rather than, say, party-political assaults on Tridentine Catholics), and it is possible to see just how much contemporary political power Sidney’s compatriots could assume universalizing ideas to contain. The move from topical allegory to speaking pictures of (universal Ideas of) virtue and vice is not a remove from history or politics in such a cultural milieu, but instead the very means by which to effect the most important kind of political–historical transformation—the kind that transforms the way people think. To call The Arcadias allegories is not so much a mistake.

49. As Sidney writes regarding David’s metamorphosis, “the application [was] most divinely true, but the discourse [the oratio] itself feigned” (p. 115).
about literary significance (although it is that); it is far more a mistake about their private and political import. Sidney would have been pleased by current accommodations of his fiction to the world of Elizabethan politics—this is precisely the right response to the urgency of its making. But Sidney also would have been dismayed to have been called an allegorizer, for in confusing his new hermeneutic with the allegorical, the reader would have missed from whence those fictions gain their real power: from Ideas rich with contemporary, political–historical significance (ideas about nature, justice, moderation, humility, and the like) designed to transform both self and society in our discovery of both why and how their maker made poetry from them.

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