

CHATTERTON LECTURE

PHILIP SIDNEY'S TOYS

BY KATHERINE DUNCAN-JONES

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THE word 'toy' in my title may seem rather odd: I should perhaps begin by explaining what I mean by it. I shall not claim to have discovered corals, hobby horses, or spinning tops played with by the infant hero, and for my purposes it is purely coincidental that the stable wing at Penshurst now houses a Toy Museum. My use of the word 'toy' is the one the OED classes as sense I. 3: 'A fantastic or trifling speech or piece of writing . . . a light or facetious composition'. The word was more widely used in this sense in the Elizabethan period than the OED's four examples might suggest. Sir Arthur Gorges entitled his love poems his 'vannetyes and toyes of youth', presumably contrasting them with his later, more weighty, achievement in translating Lucan's *Pharsalia*. The foolish Matheo in Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour* (the 1601 version) presses his friends to listen to a 'toy' of his—a poem cobbled up from well-known lines of the 1580s. Sidney referred to his *Arcadia* to his brother as his 'toyfull book', and to his sister, the Countess of Pembroke, he called it an 'ink-wasting toy'. It is striking that his younger brother Robert, whom we now know to have been a poet too, was held back from preferment by the Queen apparently because of some 'youthful toy' lodged in his brain. My concern today is to suggest that Philip Sidney's use of the word 'toy' of his own poetry may have been more than a studied pose of modesty. I would like to emphasize the obvious point that all Sidney's poetry is *early* poetry. He did not know, as we do, that he was to die before the age of thirty-two. Sidney, I suspect, saw all the poetry we have as a kind of tuning in or voice practice for the greater work on which he would one day embark, following the classical prototype of Vergil. Most of the serious poets of the age made this transition, Spenser moving from *The Shepheardes Calendar* to *The Faerie Queene*, Daniel from *Delia* and *Rosamond* to the *Civil Wars*, using the epigraph *Aetas prima canat veneres, postrema tumultus*. *The Defence of Poetry* lays out the ground for a grandly uplifting heroic poem,

directly inspiring men to virtuous action. Sidney never wrote that work—he scarcely came near to writing it, even in his revised *Arcadia*. But I think it is reasonable to deduce from the *Defence* that he believed that only such a work, calculated to have an immediate didactic effect on its readers, could really be justified. Had he lived to write such a work, he would, I think, like Gorges, have put all the poems we possess into the charming but unpretending basket labelled ‘toys’.

Another oddity in my title may seem to be my omission of my subject’s knighthood. This too is intended to underline his youth. Sidney was not a nobleman born. He derived from ‘always well esteemed and well matched gentry’, and his father, though holding in turn the two highest offices in Wales and Ireland, was only a knight. Philip Sidney was knighted in January 1582, purely for reasons of court protocol, not as a reward for active service, when he stood proxy for Count Casimir who was installed as a knight of the Garter¹. By this date he had written most of his poetry. When he wrote the last line of *Astrophil and Stella* 83, addressing Stella’s sparrow:

Leave that, sir *Phip*, lest off your neck be wrung

he was probably not identifying ‘Sir’ Philip Sparrow with ‘Sir’ Philip Sidney, but was using the word as well defined by the OED (sense II. 6. b) ‘With contemptuous, ironic, or irate force’, much as Shakespeare’s angry old men are apt to say ‘Sirrah’. ‘Sir’ Philip Sidney no more wrote the *Old Arcadia* than ‘Dr.’ Johnson wrote the *Dictionary* or ‘Cardinal’ Bembo *Gli Asolani*. Sidney the poet was a well-connected courtier, nephew and heir to the queen’s old favourite the Earl of Leicester. But at the period of his life when the *Old Arcadia* was written he was referred to merely as ‘Master Philip’: he was not, like Surrey or Sackville, born into the aristocracy. I think this point worth underlining, as his supposed rank has often been thrown in his teeth by hostile critics, from Horace Walpole to John Carey.

To return to Sidney and his ‘toys’: The *Defence of Poetry* makes high claims for an immediate connection between literature and life, poetry and action:

So far substantially it worketh, not only to make a Cyrus, which had

¹ Mr H. R. Woudhuysen has pointed out to me that the *DNB*, Wallace, Osborn, and others get the date of Sidney’s knighthood wrong, placing it in 1582/3. It was in 1581/2. Casimir’s investiture at Windsor, with Sidney as proxy, is recorded in BL MS Add. 37998 f. 14.

been but a particular excellency, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses.¹

or, more forcefully:

Truly, I have known men that even with reading *Amadis de Gaule* (which God knoweth wanteth much of a perfect poesy) have found their hearts moved to the exercise of courtesy, liberality, and especially courage. Who readeth Aeneas carrying old Anchises on his back, that wisheth not it were his fortune to perform so excellent an act?²

But how far do we find this stress on active public virtue exemplified in the poetry Sidney wrote? Far from presenting us with inspiring pictures of supermen, like Cyrus or Aeneas, whom we long to emulate, his poetry, as I hope to show, takes us deep into a world of internalized brooding. He was himself no superman, though it suited many writers after his death to build him up as one, nor did he write of supermen. Sidney has often been seen as Yeats's soldier, scholar, horseman—the man who could wield a lance or a pen with equal ease, and perhaps did both at once. The most appropriate encapsulation of this view for the present purposes is Shelley's stanza in *Adonais* linking Chatterton and Sidney as 'Inheritors of unfulfilled renown':

Chatterton

Rose pale,—his solemn agony had not
Yet faded from him; Sidney, as he fought
And as he fell, and as he lived and loved,
Sublimely mild, a spirit without spot.³

This view of Sidney as more or less living permanently on the battlefield is given a certain amount of reinforcement in his own *Defence of Poetry*. His opening praise of horses and horsemanship is not wholly ironical, and he sees soldiers as an important audience for poetry:

I dare undertake, *Orlando Furioso* or honest King *Arthur* will never displease a soldier: but the quiddity of *Ens* and *Prima materia* will hardly agree with a corselet.⁴

Poetry is the companion of camps, and Sidney asserts an immediate connection between heroic poetry and heroic action

¹ Sidney, *Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. K. Duncan-Jones and J. van Dorsten, 1973, p. 79.

² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³ Shelley, *Poetical Works*, ed. T. Hutchinson, 1952, p. 441; *Adonais* lines 399–403.

⁴ Sidney, *Misc. Prose*, ed. cit., pp. 105–6.

when he cites the powerful example of Alexander the Great, whose dearest wish was that Homer had been still living:

This *Alexander* left his schoolmaster, living Aristotle, behind him, but took dead Homer with him . . . He well found he received more bravery of mind by the pattern of Achilles than by hearing the definition of fortitude.¹

Sidney has often been seen as such a figure: the soldier-poet, whose courage and leadership were directly nourished by the reading and writing of poetry. The Romantic image of him at times approximates to the prototype so marvellously ridiculed by Dickens in *The Pickwick Papers*, when Mr Jingle recalls his past life:

‘Epic poem—ten thousand lines—revolution of July—composed it on the spot—Mars by day, Apollo by night—bang the field-piece, twang the lyre.’

‘You were present at that glorious scene, sir?’ said Mr. Snodgrass.

‘Present! think I was; fired a musket—fired with an idea—rushed into wineshop—wrote it down—back again—whiz, bang—another idea—wine shop again—pen and ink—back again—cut and slash—noble time, sir.’²

Such a picture of Sidney, as simultaneous man of action and heroic poet, can be fashioned only by telescoping the fourteen years of his adult life into a few months, and by looking with the utmost myopia at what he actually wrote. In this lecture I hope to keep a firm distinction between Sidney the Governor of Flushing and war hero, and Sidney the supreme poet of the Elizabethan ‘Golden’ age.

Sidney’s life falls into three distinct phases of very unequal length. He was born in 1554, and the years from then until his return from the Continent in the autumn of 1575 can be described as the period of his education, at Shrewsbury School, at Oxford, and perhaps Cambridge, and in some of the great cities of Europe—Paris, Frankfurt, Vienna, Venice, Padua. The following nine years, from 1575 to 1584, seem to have been those in which all the literary works that we have were written. During this time he served as an ambassador, sought vigorously for major court or military employment, but achieved no single office that came near to matching his aspirations. In 1580, for instance, his father Sir Henry Sidney made it clear to Lord Grey, who succeeded him as Lord Deputy Governor of Ireland, that his son Philip, then aged

¹ Sidney, *Misc. Prose*, ed. cit., p. 106.

² Dickens, *Pickwick Papers*, chapter ii; Oxford Illustrated Dickens, p. 11.

twenty-six, would dearly have loved to hold this post.¹ Such clear thrusts on his behalf may in fact have damaged Philip's prospects with the queen and her advisers. His very gradual progress towards more responsible duties, as a Member of Parliament and in the Ordnance Office, culminated in his appointment in November 1585 as Governor of the cautionary town of Flushing. In this last phase of his life, ending with his death in October 1586 after less than a year spent as a soldier, we have no reason to think that he wrote any poetry. If he did, it has not survived.

All Sidney's poetry (with the possible exception of the *Psalms*) appears to have been written before 1584, much of it before 1582. During this middle period of his life Sidney was one

that never set a squadron in the field,
Nor the deviſiõn of a battle knows,
More than a spinster.

—though he had, like Cassio, mastered much of the 'bookish theoretic' as is evident from his letters of advice to his brother Robert and to Edward Denny. Until he left for the Netherlands at the end of 1585 the only active service Sidney may have seen—and even that is far from certain—was a skirmish in the West of Ireland, when he accompanied his father, the Lord Deputy Governor, to Galway in September 1576. He is said to have met there the virago woman sea-captain, Granny O'Malley. But no echo reaches us of his taking any active part in suppressing the Earl of Clanricard's rebellion. Had he done so, surely a memory of such an exploit would have percolated into the early biographies, such as those of Whetstone, Moffett, or Greville or, still more likely, into John Derrick's *Image of Ireland*, dedicated to Sidney in 1578, which eulogizes Sir Henry Sidney's reign as Governor. I think we must conclude that, though Sidney throughout his twenties longed to be actively employed, as when he finally attempted to leave for the West Indies with Drake in August 1585, he was in fact but a carpet knight. While seeing military valour as possibly the highest form of virtue, he had, during his short productive life as a poet, no opportunity to test his own capacities as a soldier.

The pictures Sidney offers us of the circumstances of writing poetry scarcely suggest the breathless alternation between action and poetic effusion that Mr Jingle boasts of. Much of the *Arcadia*, Sidney reminds his sister, was written in her presence, or dispatched to her as soon as it was written—no doubt from some secluded chamber at Wilton, or, if we are to believe Aubrey,

¹ HMC, *De L'Isle and Dudley*, ii. 93-4.

dashed off in the intervals of hunting on the pleasant Wiltshire downs. Aubrey's suggestion that Sidney, like the Canterbury Pilgrims, composed poetry on horseback, is given some confirmation in *Astrophil and Stella* 84:

my Muse, to some ears not unsweet,
Tempers her words to trampling horses' feet
More oft than to a chamber melody.

His reading and writing on the hoof, as it were, is also implied by Moffett's remark (in *Nobilis*, 1592) that Sidney would scarcely leave his room without a book in his hand.¹ These references, along with some in the Languet letters to his excessive studying², conjure up the dreamy schoolboy, unable to put his book down for one moment, rather than the compulsive man of action. Could it have been sheer absent-mindedness that led to his leaving off those vital thigh-pieces before the battle of Zutphen? In *Astrophil and Stella* most of the glimpses of the poet's condition while writing show him as profoundly inactive:

As good to write, as for to lie and groan.

Astrophil is apathetic, time-wasting, and unsociable:

my wealth I have most idly spent,
My youth doth waste, my knowledge brings forth toys.
My wit doth strive those passions to defend
Which for reward spoil it with vain annoys.

In the *Defence of Poetry* Sidney describes himself as 'in these my not old years and idlest times having slipped into the title of a poet'. We might note also that he hints, with the true insensitivity of youth in money matters, that he and Wotton were dilatory in paying Pugliano's bill for riding lessons. Pastoral and love poetry, after all, which were the kinds Sidney in practice wrote, are naturally associated with youth and idleness.

In his earliest literary work, *The Lady of May*, Sidney gave high praise to the quiet enjoyments of pastoral life:

where it is lawful for a man to be good if he list, and hath no outward cause to withdraw him from it; where the eye may be busied in considering the works of nature, and the heart quietly rejoiced in the honest using them.³

¹ Thomas Moffett, *Nobilis: Or a view of the Life and Death of a Sidney*, ed. V. B. Heltzel and H. H. Hudson, San Marino, 1940, pp. 6, 71.

² James M. Osborn, *Young Philip Sidney*, New Haven and London, 1972, pp. 131, 137, and *passim*.

³ Sidney, *Misc. Prose*, ed. cit., p. 28.

This sounds almost like Wordsworth's 'wise passiveness', a falling asleep in body to become a living soul. Though a counter-claim is made, in *The Lady of May*, for the more strenuous and dangerous life of the forester, it is striking that the Queen, who was invited to choose between the two, opted for pastoral contemplation rather than sylvan activity. In both versions of the *Arcadia* the country of Arcadia is praised for its quietness. Its neighbours, like those of Elizabethan England, are torn by civil strife and rebellion, but Arcadia has 'ease, the nurse of poetry'. Its peaceful rural society is an essentially creative environment, as is shown at length in the versatile poetic outpourings of the shepherds in the Eclogues. These conform closely to Huizinga's definition of lyric poetry as at its best hyperbolic, competitive, and close to its roots in music and dance.¹ Unfortunately Sidney did not have the benefit of being able to read *Homo Ludens*. Instinct and tradition taught him to write playful, hyperbolic verse with little intellectual content, but the critical theory available to him, which he so brilliantly synthesized in the *Defence of Poetry*, demanded that poetry should be earnestly directed towards moral edification. We can see this split in many of the best Renaissance poets—for instance Ariosto, who felt obliged to impose a heavy didactic framework on his delightfully free-ranging, flippant, and absurd poem, or Ben Jonson, who would have been a less good dramatist if his works had really been as remorselessly disciplined as his theory would seem to claim. The split in Sidney's case is particularly clear and striking because he wrote so well both as poet and theorist.

Looking in more detail at the Eclogues, we find that Ovid's advice, 'Shun idleness, and Cupid's bow will break',² is disregarded by all Sidney's young men, who slip into idle ways and immediately fall passionately in love. But the good thing about idleness, as we have seen, is that it is the nurse of poetry. A nation at peace and a man at ease are the ingredients for a rich and inventive versification. No doubt, according to theory, that eloquence should in turn be used for heroic or political purposes; but in the bulk of Sidney's poetry it is not. Even his most apparently serious poem, the beast-fable 'As I my little flock on

¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture*, [1949], with an introduction by George Steiner, 1970, pp. 165–6. Sir John Harington in his 'Treatise on Playe' c. 1597, was to commend divine 'play' in such works as the Sidney-Herbert *Psalms*, but condemned such mirth and poetic games as spring purely from idleness (*Nugae Antiquae* ed. T. Park, 1804, i. 186 ff.).

² Ovid, *Remedia Amoris*, l. 139. Sidney's *OA* 9, lines 115–34, in which Geron tries to persuade Philisides to reject love as a 'toy', is closely based on this passage in the *Remedia Amoris*.

Ister bank', is curiously muffled and inconclusive. It is a warning, possibly topical, against man's natural tendency to tyranny: a serious theme, but handled by Sidney with none of the detailed mastery of patterns of intrigue and power which is so striking in his friend Greville's *Treatise of Monarchy*. The effect of Sidney's poem is whimsical, even puerile. The language is archaic, in spite of his later assertion that he 'durst not allow' Spenser's use of an old and rustic language. In the tradition of animal stories with serious import which stretches from Aristophanes to *Animal Farm*, this poem is only a tiny backwater. Its chief charm lies in the evocation of the animals themselves:

The fox gave craft; the dog gave flattery;
 Ass, patience; the mole, a working thought;
 Eagle, high look; wolf, secret cruelty;
 Monkey, sweet breath; the cow her fair eyes brought;
 The ermion, whitest skin, spotted with naught . . .

The hare, her sleights, the cat, his melancholy;
 Ant, industry, and coney, skill to build;
 Cranes, order; storks, to be appearing holy;
 Chamelion, ease to change; duck, ease to yield;
 Crocodile, tears, which might be falsely spilled;
 Ape great thing gave, though he did mowing stand,
 The instrument of instruments, the hand.¹

As in most of Sidney's poems, the speaker here is young, and sees himself as raw: such political wisdom as the fable contains derives wholly from old Languet. Perhaps Sidney's lack of real experience helps to explain the rather feeble conclusion, which on the literal level resembles an anti-vivisectionist pamphlet:

But yet O man rage not beyond thy need:
 Deem it no glory to swell in tyranny.
 Thou art of blood; joy not to make things bleed:
 Thou fearest death; think they are loath to die.

Most often in other poems Sidney's speaker sees his youthful potential being frittered away either in pointless games (such as poetry itself) or, more damagingly, in introverted emotional dilemmas. Many poems in the *Arcadia* eclogues show young shepherds engaged in futile and trivial pursuits—not the kind of play with which, as Greville tells us, Sidney used to enrich his mind, but the Elizabethan equivalents of tiddlywinks or hopscotch:

¹ Sidney, *Poems*, ed. W. A. Ringler, 1962, OA 66, p. 101. All quotations here from Sidney's poems are based on this edition, but have been modernized, following the practice of Jean Robertson in her edition of the *Old Arcadia*, 1973.

As for the rest, how shepherds spend their days,
 At blow-point, hot cockles, or else at keels,
 While, 'Let us pass our time', each shepherd feels,
 And doth not feel, that life is nought but time,
 And when that time is passed, death holds his heels.¹

Sidney's real fear of time-wasting is confirmed by the parallel phrasing in his letter of advice to Edward Denny:

When so ever you may justly say to yourself you lose your time, you do indeed lose so much of your life.²

Yet the longest poem Sidney ever wrote concerns just such a time-wasting game. The poem appeared in the First Eclogues in the 1593 edition of the *Arcadia*: Ringler classed it as Other Poems 4, thinking it too overtly English to be intended by Sidney to appear in his revised romance, although it seems to have been written later than the *Old Arcadia*, probably close in time to *Astrophil and Stella*. The poem describes an extended game of 'barley-break', a highly elaborate form of 'catch' or 'tag', between six players. A versatile reciter, Lamon, well able to do the police in different voices, tells how Strephon and Klaius lead an innocent and cultivated life as shepherds until both fall in love with the shepherdess Urania. Lines 225-416 describe the barley-break game, in which Strephon and Urania participate, watched by Klaius. The next hundred lines are given to Strephon's complaints of love, and a speech of equivalent length by Klaius was no doubt intended to follow, but the poem is unfinished. We are told, in the 1593 text, that the hearers enjoy and admire Lamon's recitation, but are overcome by weariness—scarcely surprising, given the poem's pace and length. As a whole, it is a very strange mixture of profound resonances and trivial surfaces. Perhaps Greville, if it was he who selected poems for the eclogues in the 1593 edition, rejected this one because its hints at deeper meaning seem to be in the end unfulfilled. The characters' names point towards neo-Platonic allegory, yet the narrative surface is painstakingly physical in its documentation. These lines, for instance, at the end of the barley-break game, show the shepherdess Urania, whose name is that of the Muse of divine poetry, as red-faced, sweating, and breathless:

Her race did not her beauty's beams augment,
 For they were ever in the best degree,

¹ Sidney, *Poems*, ed. W. A. Ringler, 1962, *OA* 10, p. 28.

² Osborn, *Young Philip Sidney*, pp. 537-8.

But yet a setting forth it some way lent:
 As rubies' lustre, when they rubbed be:
 The dainty dew on face and body went
 As on sweet flowers when morning drops we see:
 Her breath, then short, seemed loath from her to pass,
 Which more it moved, the more it sweeter was.

A shepherdess who sweats and pants, however flatteringly described, seems more like the outrageously physical Venus of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* than the Muse whom Milton was to invoke. As a whole, this 550-line poem seems to be a piece of glorious fooling, playing lightly with Platonic images, and yet chiefly delighting in authentic details of rustic life, such as the simile of hunted hares on the Wiltshire downs. Increasingly as it proceeds it is dominated by wildly hyperbolic enunciations of passionate love, reminiscent of the better-known double sestina of Strephon and Klaius. Strephon's hundred-line lament paints a vivid picture of the kind of miserable inactivity which I have described as characteristic of Sidney's lovers:

Alas! What weights are these that load my heart!
 I am as dull as winter-starved sheep,
 Tired as a jade in overloaded cart,
 Yet thoughts do fly, though I can scarcely creep.
 All visions seem, at every bush I start:
 Drowsy I am, and yet can rarely sleep.

Increasingly Strephon moves towards a passionate incoherence verging on nonsense:

Alas! A cloud hath overcast mine eyes,
 And yet I see her shine amid the cloud;
 Alas! Of ghosts I hear the ghastly cries,
 Yet there, me seems, I hear her singing loud:
 This song she sings in most commanding wise:
 'Come shepherd's boy, let now thy heart be bowed
 To make itself to my least look a slave:
 Leave sheep, leave all, I will no piecing have.'
 I will, I will, alas, alas, I will . . .

No hints of irony or self awareness invite us to view this as a deliberately satirical or critical portrait of a love-madness, as in some of Astrophil's more breathless and disjointed utterances. Poetic display seems inseparable from an obsessive state verging on real madness. The author of a seventeenth-century manuscript poem describing the love affair of Sidney and Penelope Devereux tells us in the notes that his grief on hearing of her marriage to

Lord Rich was such that 'at that time it was doubted whether he would have fallen into a Lunacy or not'.¹ Though we can scarcely attach much authority to this late account of the legend of Sidney as lover, the painful frenzy of the Strephon and Klaius poems makes one wonder whether Sidney may not really have passed through some such phase. Thomas Moffett associates Sidney's writings with phases of illness brought on by too much study.² Although Moffett's chronology is extremely confused, he may, as a distinguished medical man attending on the Sidney's and Herberts, have observed accurately that there was some link between phases of nervous collapse and poetic activity.

Strephon and Klaius, the most dignified but also the most miserable of Sidney's shepherds, are remarkable for the number of lines allotted to them: 734, even though the barley-break poem tails off before Klaius has had his say. Those who have written on Sidney's poetry have not generally found Strephon and Klaius very interesting figures—certainly they are not dramatically realized in the way that Astrophil is—but I think we should notice how much mileage he gives them. The double sestina 'Ye goatherd gods' has been admired by a very wide range of critics, including Empson³: it too describes, with rather more concentration and control than the barley-break poem, the collapse of the two lovers into a hopelessly irrational, inward-looking despair, so over-stated as almost to provoke ridicule:

Me seems I see a filthy cloudy evening
 As soon as sun begins to climb the mountains:
 Me seems I feel a noisome scent, the morning
 When I do smell the flowers of these valleys:
 Me seems I hear, when I do hear sweet music,
 The dreadful cries of murdered men in forests.

What the Strephon and Klaius poems are in large, many of Sidney's other poems are in little: pictures of the pastoral dream turning into nightmare under the influence of passionate love. No doubt improving lessons could be drawn from this theme—mainly perhaps the Ovidian remedy again, 'Shun idleness, and Cupid's bow will break'. But the speakers are for the most part far too deeply enmeshed in their own subjectivity to be capable of inspiring such reflection. Like the grieving Tennyson, they write simply because they must, composing patterned verse to relieve pent-up emotions which would otherwise be intolerable:

¹ Bodleian MS Eng. poet. f. 9, fol. 234.

² Moffett, *Nobilis*, ed. cit., pp. 10, 73.

³ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1935, pp. 34-8.

for the unquiet heart and brain
 A use in measured language lies,
 The sad mechanic exercise,
 Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.¹

Astrophil claims to write only to 'paint his hell', and Sidney in his own person, addressing his sister, gives a very similar picture of the pressures which caused him to compose the *Arcadia*: writing from

a young head, not so well stayed as I would it were . . . having many fancies begotten in it, if it had not been in some way delivered, would have grown a monster.

This modest claim may, I think, have been more than a mere pose. Though Sidney was very careful, in the *Defence of Poetry*, to avoid any claim that poetry was divinely inspired, his best poems do read as if they burst from a brain 'over-mastered by some thoughts', rather than forming part of a carefully planned programme of writing.

Sidney's longest *Arcadia* poems—his beast fable, his Strephon and Klaius poems, and some I have not mentioned, such as the Ovidian blason of Philoclea's beauties, the rather tedious fabliau, and even the long dialogue between Plangus and Boulon on human misery and divine injustice—all are in different ways disappointing as the work of a man who set a high value on action and was a determined 'intellectual'. The Boulon-Plangus dialogue, for instance, shows that melancholy, like love, draws a man away from useful action into a condition of mental stagnation:

Woe to poor man; each outward thing annoys him
 In divers kinds; yet as he were not filled,
 He heaps in inward grief, that most destroys him.
 Thus is our thought with pain for thistles tilled;
 Thus be our noblest parts dried up with sorrow;
 Thus is our mind with too much minding spilled.

Most of the *Old Arcadia* poems have outstanding technical merit, using and stretching the language with a complex fluency unsurpassed by any poet of the period. Yet all are, by his own most exacting standards, *empty*. None offers us a picture equivalent to Aeneas carrying old Anchises from the flames of Troy, or Cyrus taking counsel in peace and war. The 'notable images' Sidney gives us, whether in Pyrocles, Philisides, Strephon and Klaius, or Plangus, are repeatedly of talents wasted and will-power sapped. And if we turn from Sidney's longest poems to his shortest, their

¹ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, stanza v.

predominant triviality is even more noticeable. It is striking that the only poem which survives in Sidney's own hand is the charming and deliberately whimsical lyric 'Sleep baby mine Desire':

Sleep baby mine desire, nurse beauty singeth,
Thy cries o Baby sett my hedd on akinge
The Babe cryes way, thy love doth keep me waking.

Lully lully my babe hope cradle bringeth
unto my babies allway good rest takinge
The babe cryes way Thy love doth keepe me wakinge

Since Baby myne frome me thy watching springeth
Sleep then a little pap content is makinge
The Babe cries nay for it abyde I wakinge¹

This is lovely, and perfectly worked out: Beauty which tries to damp down desire serves only to stimulate it. But what does it offer besides charm? The satisfaction Sidney felt in songs such as this is suggested by his injunction to Edward Denny, second only to serious advice about Denny's historical reading:

that you remember with your good voice, to sing my songs, for they will well become another.

That is, Denny's excellent voice will suit Sidney's excellent lyrics. Though Sidney is commonly thought to adopt a consistent pose of modesty about his works, several hints such as this indicate that he knew perfectly well that his lyric gift was outstanding. Only, alas, his literary theory offered little justification of lyric poetry unless it celebrated virtuous acts or the excellence of God.

What of *Astrophil and Stella*, probably Sidney's latest, and certainly his most sustained poetic achievement? Greville does not mention it, perhaps finding it impossible to reconcile with his view of Sidney's fundamental seriousness and concern with affairs of state. Other writers in the years immediately after Sidney's death, while making play with his love for 'Stella,' often seem to conflate her either with the Arcadian Philoclea, or, as Spenser does, with Sidney's wife. It seems to have been as the author of the *Arcadia*, rather than *Astrophil and Stella*, that Sidney was chiefly remembered until Lamb's brilliant essay in 1823². Certainly *Astrophil and Stella*, though written close in time to the *Defence of Poetry*, offers

¹ P. J. Croft, *Autograph Poetry in the English Language*, 1973, vol. i. p. 14. Since this poem is autograph I have retained the original spelling.

² Charles Lamb, 'Defence of the Sonnets of Sir Philip Sidney', *The London Magazine*, 1823, reprinted in *The Last Essays of Elia*, 1833.

remarkably few links with the ideals on which the *Defence* is based. True, Sidney's sonnets do at their best have that 'forcible-ness' which he complains that many English poets lack. But Astrophil, like the Arcadian shepherds, is shown as wasting his heroic potential. In Sonnet 21, for instance, he is rebuked by a friend for having betrayed 'Great expectation', so that

mine own writings, like bad servants, show
My wits, quick in vain thoughts, in virtue lame.

Astrophil's dazzlingly ingenious attempts to convince himself that love for Stella is actually a form of virtue or heroic activity are less and less successful as the sequence proceeds, and the unsparingly physical nature of his love becomes apparent. His role, it seems, is neither that of courtier or poet, though he knows that his poetry is admired, but purely that of the happily blinded lover:

I never drank of Aganippe well,
Nor ever did in shade of Tempe sit:
And Muses scorn with vulgar brains to dwell,
Poor layman I, for sacred rites unfit.
Some do I hear of poet's fury tell,
But (God wot) wot not what they mean by it;
And this I swear, by blackest brook of hell,
I am no pick-purse of another's wit.
How falls it then, that with so smooth an ease
My thoughts I speak, and what I speak doth flow
In verse, and that my verse best wits doth please?
Guess we the cause: 'What, is it thus?' Fie, no:
'Or so?' Much less. 'How then?' Sure, thus it is,
My lips are sweet, inspired with Stella's kiss. (AS 74)

By the later stages of the 'affair' Astrophil is glorying unashamedly in his lost ambition:

Let clouds bedim my face, break in mine eye;
Let me no steps, but of lost labour trace:
Let all the earth with scorn recount my case,
But do not will me from my love to fly.
I do not envy Aristotle's wit,
Nor do aspire to Caesar's bleeding fame,
Nor ought do care, though some above me sit . . . (AS 64)

Philip Sidney, as distinct from Astrophil, cared passionately that some above him sat, delighting to designate himself son of the 'Prorex' of Ireland—by implication, a sort of prince. Like Shakespeare's Hotspur or Henry V, he was, I suspect, passionately greedy for honour. His extreme touchiness on the subject of his

own social position, as a courtier of great talent and promise who was scarcely even a member of the aristocracy, is manifested all too clearly in the *Defence of Leicester*. But his poet-lover Astrophil collapses totally into a world of private and self-destructive emotion, neglecting his career at court and even ordinary forms of politeness. Lewd innuendo comes to take the place of the Petrarchan love of Stella's virtue by which initially he claimed to be moved. Philip Sidney has all too much in common with Philip Sparrow as he comes to

Pray that my sun go down with meeker beams to bed. (AS 76)

Or, almost as in Porphyro's melting embrace of the dreaming Madeline, he gives himself up to unrestrained erotic fantasy:

Think, think, of those dallyings
 When with dove-like murmurings,
 With glad moaning passed anguish
 We change eyes, and heart to heart
 Each to other do depart,
 Joying, till joy make us languish. (Song 10)

Hardly the stuff to give the troops. Even Sidney's supple wit could scarcely maintain that poetry like this would help to fashion a brave soldier or a just magistrate. As the sequence proceeds to its painful end, in which nothing is concluded, a very unheroic reason for the failure of the love affair begins to emerge. The ultimate barrier to fruition is not Stella's chastity—not Astrophil's conscience, or his ambition—not even the disintegration of the passion itself, though there is certainly a sense of this in the last thirty or so sonnets. The bar is simply that of social embarrassment—the fear of being discovered, the fear of loss of dignity. Stella in the Eighth Song tells him:

Therefore, dear, this no more move,
 Lest, though I leave not thy love,
 Which too deep in me is framed,
 I should blush when thou art named.

Increasingly in later sonnets Astrophil has to justify, with Donne-like ingenuity, what are clearly strong temptations to unfaithfulness; he hints that he wants to get on with writing something else; and in the penultimate sonnet he makes loss of dignity his final reason for ending the affair:

O let not fools in me they works reprove,
 And scorning say; 'See what it is to love'.

Like Browning's lovers in *The Statue and the Bust*, Astrophil and Stella stand apart, finally, not because they are chaste or star-crossed, but because they are social cowards. Seldom has the cul-de-sac of unfulfilled love been more mercilessly explored. Astrophil does not end, like Chaucer's Troilus, as a tragically unhappy lover who has at least learned habits of patience and single-mindedness which will stand him in good stead in the after-life. He has marred his young mind with a passion which was in the end utterly pointless.

Most writers on Sidney use the word 'sprezzatura' at some point, and suggest that his disparaging view of his own poetic vocation was no more than a courtly pose. While no one in their senses would deny that Sidney's self-image was indeed very deliberate and self-conscious, I think he may, in his mid twenties, have felt such modesty to be a fitting framework for what were in the last analysis only splendid trifles. Many Renaissance writers enact a ritual of rejecting their 'looser lays' (or 'toys'), as they strive towards something more edifying. Spenser, for instance, claimed to reject his first two *Hymnes* on Love and Beauty, written in greener youth, in favour of the second two, on Heavenly Love and Heavenly Beauty. But most readers feel that even the first two are fairly rarefied, and there was not really very much to reject. More than this routine and ritual rejection of juvenile and secular work was entailed when Sidney, at the end of *Certain Sonnets*, bade a long farewell to splendid trifles, striving manfully towards eternal love. Like Keats, Sidney intended to engage himself seriously with what he believed to be important in life: he must have known quite well that what he actually wrote came nowhere near doing this. Sidney's rejection of his works on his death-bed may not, I think, have been purely the invention of writers after his death eager to accommodate him to a Vergilian prototype. A chaplain present at his death, probably George Gifford, describes Sidney's remorse for his unredeemed life in rather convincing terms. The dying Sidney, being told that

godly men, in time of extreme afflictions, did comfort and support themselves with the remembrance of their former life, in which they had glorified God: 'It is not so', said he, 'in me. I have no comfort that way. All things in my former life have been vain, vain, vain.'¹

Whether or not he was really troubled by memories of Lady Rich, as one version of Gifford's account claims, we are given a very powerful picture of a young man in pain and despair who looked

¹ Sidney, *Misc. Prose*, ed. cit., p. 171.

back on no part of his life with satisfaction. Thomas Moffett, writing only six years after Sidney's death, and addressing his account to Sidney's young nephew William Herbert, gives a more circumstantial account of Sidney's rejection of his poetry (here translated from Latin into American):

enraged at the eyes which had at one time admired *Stellas* so very different from those given them by God, he not so much washed them as corroded them away with salt tears, and exhausted them in weeping . . . He blushed at even the most casual mention of his Anacreontics, and once and again begged his brother, by their tie of common birth, by his right hand, by his faith in Christ, that not any of this sort of poems should come forth into the light.¹

The much more fanciful and poetic speech attributed to the dying hero by Greville is at one with the earlier accounts in making Sidney identify his life with 'vanity':

Above all, govern your Will, and Affections, by the Will and Word of your Creator; in me, beholding the end of this World, with all her Vanities.²

Greville, too, shows him as bequeathing the *Arcadia*, as an 'unpolished Embrio', to the fire.

Even allowing for strong elements of convention, both in Sidney's actual behaviour and in later accounts of it, I think there may be a kernel of truth in all this. Sidney's desperate last letter to Dr Weier shows him as a young man in agony and terrified of death. We should remember that until a day or two before his death everyone assumed that he would recover from what was, after all, only an infected leg wound, not an injury to a vital organ. Very little time was left him for repentance and preparation, and his remorse may have been all the more violent. An element in Sidney's terror, when it became apparent that he really was going to die, may have been the realization that he would never now be able to move on to the more serious forms of writing on which he had so eloquently based his *Defence of Poetry*. Like Keats, he may have felt that his name was writ in water: all that he had managed to create were glass and feathers, fit, according to his own criteria, to be swept away.

When Sidney referred to his poems as ink-wasting toys, he was to some extent being modest, since he must have known that even the slightest of his lyrics were technically superior to most of the English poetry written since Chaucer. But he knew also that

¹ Moffett, *Nobilis*, ed. cit., pp. 41, 91.

² Fulke Greville, *Life of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Nowell Smith, 1907, pp. 139-40.

virtually everything he had written was secular, much of it lascivious or trifling. No doubt he hoped to go on to write his *Aeneid* or his *Lusiads*, his *Franciade* or his *Faerie Queene*. Clear if unfocused impulses towards heroic writing are apparent in the *New Arcadia* before it founders amid an over-intricate plot and a growing obsession with fine details of swordsmanship and strategy. Sidney's unfinished works of translation, the *Psalms*, Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Du Bartas's *La Sepmaine* and Du Plessis Mornay's *De la Verité*, are all much more serious in tone than the surviving works. I suspect that he never really got very far with any of these projects. The forty-two *Psalms*, which do survive, are not particularly promising. What Sidney had finished by the time of his death were, for the most part, poetic toys, to be enjoyed as such.