Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry** in the Light of *Confucian Analects*

Kwok-kan Tam

The nature and function of literature have been the most basic concern of literary theory. Plato argues that poetry is an imperfect imitative art, which is against reason and is basically contradictory to scientific knowledge. Hence, the poet should be banished from Plato's Republic. Aristotle, however, argues that poetry, or literature in general, is an "imitation of men in action," which has a cathartic effect upon the audience (*Poetics* II, 1). Sir Philip Sidney asserts that poetry has positive influence upon the reader. In his essay, *An Apology for Poetry,* he develops further this theory of the didactic function of poetry. His treatise gives a full account of the functions of poetry and is representative of the pragmatic view of literature in the West. In their book *Literary Criticism: A Short History,* William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks consider Sidney's work as "a kind of formal beginning of literary theorizing by English man of letters, and a brilliant enough one.... The essay reflects and telescopes not only the continental criticism of the century but a certain amount of classical Greek and Roman as well" (169).

In China, the earliest discourse on poetry can be traced to Confucius' *Analects* [Lun yü 論語], though which is dialogues and scattered sayings of Confucius and his disciples. While the Greeks took Homer as their classic model, the Chinese took *The Book of Odes* [Shih ching 詩經], a collection of ancient ballads and songs, as the classic example for discussion of literature. Much of the discussion between Confucius and his disciples is

* Sidney's critical treatise was written about 1580 but not published until 1595 after his death when two separate editions appeared under different titles, *An Apology for Poetry* and *The Defence of Poesy.* The former title is used in this paper.

recorded in the *Analects,* in which Confucius shows the view that poetry (or literature in general), ideology, moral institutions, and the social order are inseparable in their relationship of interdependence. An ideal man begins with his personal cultivation and works toward the betterment of society. Consequently, Confucius thinks that an ideal state can be achieved through the knowledge and moral principles conveyed in poetry. One can find some of the earliest Chinese references to the function of literature in Confucius' *Analects,* which has become one of the classics in Chinese literature. Because of the tremendous influence the Confucian school has exerted on Chinese literature, a great number of the later theorists or critics, in one way or another, subscribe to the Confucian canons. Many of the later theoretical works either elaborate on a certain aspect of *Analects* or take it as their critical criteria. The *Analects* actually became the source and foundation of the traditional Chinese view of the practical function of literature, although that may not have been Confucius' original intention. It is true that in the *Analects* Confucius is portrayed mainly as an educator, whose primary concern in teaching the classics is the moral conduct and practical ability of his disciples. He wanted his disciples to be "well-rounded men" who would be useful to the state, and taught them *The Book of Odes,* which has comments on social and political affairs. He considers himself "a transmitter [of the great ancient classics] and not an originator" (*Analects* VII, 1), but his influence upon later generations is so great that his interpretation of the classics, particularly *The Book of Odes,* has become canonical in traditional Chinese literature and philosophy.

In his book *The Mirror and the Lamp,* M.H. Abrams says, "We may name criticism that, like Sidney's, is ordered toward the audience, a 'pragmatic theory,' since it looks at the work of art chiefly as a means to an end, an instrument for getting something done" (15). Abrams does not deal with Chinese literature in his book, but his classification of the Western critical tradition into four major categories, the mimetic, the pragmatic, the expressive and the objective, is insightfully illuminating in the study of the Chinese literary tradition, as well as in comparing the Chinese view with its Western counterpart. Abrams' classification and definition of the "pragmatic theory" is based on the belief that literature does not exist in a void. Whenever there is a reader, there must be some effects, positive or negative, of the literary work. Such a view is not only valid, but also has a universal significance, for the Chinese have this pragmatic view in their literary tradition too.

The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines didactic poetry as "poetry which is primarily intended to instruct. Most commonly, the label is used for poetry which teaches a moral. It can also refer to poetry which conveys factual information" (190). According to this definition, we can also call Sidney's notion of poetry didactic. As for Confucius, the same term may well serve as an appropriate description. "Pragmatic" refers to a person's attitude that stresses the practical use of things, which in this case is poetry or literature in general. An author with a pragmatic attitude does not necessarily have to teach a moral lesson. He may influence the reader through such devices as "pity" or "fear." Being "didactic" refers more to the way in which the author teaches. Effects reflect attitudes, and underlying the "didactic" purpose is the "pragmatic" view. In studying Confucius' and Sidney's ideas about the practical use of poetry, we may have a glimpse of their basic attitudes toward literature and of what they advocate. Such a comparative study of the *Analects* and *An Apology for Poetry* will enable us not only to find out the parallels and disparities between Confucius' and Sidney's notions of poetry, but will also throw light upon the theoretical orientation of their approaches to poetry as well as some fundamental issues in the Chinese and Western literary traditions.

In answering the philosopher's accusation that poetry is "a waste of time," "the mother of lies," and "the nurse of abuse," Sidney avers that in ancient society poetry was the main source of education and by means of many classical examples he shows that poetry is "the father of all learning": "Let learned Greece in any of her manifold sciences be able to show me Sidney one book before Masaeus, Homer and Hesiod, all three nothing else but poets" (155). On the other side of the earth, almost two thousand years earlier, Confucius has expressed a similar view of the practical use of poetry:

> The Master said, "If a man who knows the three hundred *Odes* by heart fails when given administrative responsibilities and proves incapable of exercising his own initiative when sent to foreign states, then what use are the *Odes* to him, however many he may have learned?"
>
> (*Analects* XIII, 5)

This passage from the *Analects* refers to the practice of the statesmen, in the time of Confucius, to cite poems as an oblique way to express their

ideas on state affairs. The pragmatic attitude toward the function of literature is self-evident. On another occasion when Confucius says that poetry can serve one's state (XVII, 8), he extends the practical use of poetry even to the realm of politics.

This practical attitude can also be found in Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry,* in which he gives an example: "Tully taketh much pains, and many times not without poetical helps, to make us know the force love of our country hath in us" (161). This is an example through which Sidney tries to prove that poetry can be of use to the country by arousing our love of our country. He also gives other examples, such as that Tyrtaeus made use of poetry in matters of war in ancient times and Solon in matters of state policy, to support his view that poetry can be of great use (156).

Besides maintaining that poetry can be of practical use, both Confucius and Sidney add that poetry serves an artistic function too. Confucius once addressed his son about *The Book of Odes* as a model of eloquence and beautiful speech: "Unless you study the *Odes* you will be ill-equipped to speak" (*Analects* XVI, 13). In *An Apology for Poetry,* Sidney expresses a similar view on the aesthetic function of poetry: "After [Gower and Chaucer], encouraged and delighted with their excellent foregoing, others have followed to beautify our mother tongue" (155).

Having expressed their ideas about the practical use of poetry, both Confucius and Sidney deal with the relationship between the poetic form and subject matter. They both try to define poetry through one more quality: its content. To the question "What makes good writing [literature]?" Confucius' answer is: "A man of virtue is sure to be the author of memorable sayings" (*Analects* XIV, 4). What occupies the mind of Confucius is one's morality as well as the moral content of literature. To him, morality is the thing that constitutes the basic quality and purpose of good writings. Yet he also treasures the aesthetic qualities of literature. He once told his son and his disciples: "Words [truth] without literary refinement cannot spread far" (*Ch'un-ch'iu cheng-chuan* 307/hsiang 25, fu 2). In another situation commenting on the relation between content and literary refinement, Confucius says,

> When there is a preponderance of native substance over acquired refinement, the result will be churlishness. When there is a preponderance of acquired refinement over native substance, the result will be pedantry. Only a well-balanced admixture of

these two will result in gentlemanliness.

(*Analects* VI, 18)

Commenting on rhyming and versification, Sidney thinks that they are not the most fundamental elements in poetry, although they are important:

> It is not rhyming and versing that maketh poesy. One may be a poet without versing, and a versifier without poetry. But yet presuppose it were inseparable (as indeed it seemth Scaliger judgeth) truly it were an inseparable commendation. For if "oratio" next to "ratio," "speech" next to "reason," be the greatest gift bestowed upon mortality, that cannot be praiseless which doth most polish that blessing of speech; which considers each word, not only (as a man may say) by his forcible quality, but by his best measured quantity, carrying even in themselves a harmony (without, perchance, number, measure, order, proportion be in our time grown odious).
>
> (167)

In *Analects,* Confucius' discussion of poetry is limited to its practical function and its substance, While Sidney also compares the poet with the historian and philosopher in their practical contribution to life and society. Sidney finds that the poet is more capable of "moving" the reader than the historian or the philosopher is. For him, poetry can easily be remembered because of its beauty in language, its special structural pattern, and other musical effects (168). A historian provides the reader with particular examples, and the philosopher with abstract ideas, but the poet gives both. Hence, the poet is superior in his appeal to the reader.

The direct appeal that poetry has upon the reader is summarized in M.H. Abrams' book *The Mirror and the Lamp* as follows: "'Prodesse' and 'delectare,' to teach and to please, together with another term introduced from rhetoric, "movere," to move, served for centuries to collect under three heads the sum of aesthetic effects on the reader" (16). For Confucius and Sidney, poetry has all these three effects. Trying to give full comments on poetry, Confucius asks his students:

> Why is it none of you, my young friends, study the *Odes*? An apt quotation from the *Odes* may serve to stimulate the imagination, to show one's breeding, to smooth over difficulties in

> a group and to give expression to complaints.
>
> Inside the family there is the serving of one's father; outside, there is the serving of one's lord; there is also the acquiring of a wide knowledge of the names of birds and beasts, plants and trees.
>
> (*Analects* XVII, 9)

This is so far the fullest statement Confucius has made about poetry and its function. It can be examined at two levels. First, poetry is good for self-cultivation. The reader can learn from poetry the proper ways to do things and get along with others, how to criticize state affairs, and the names of many types of flora and fauna. Second, it can be of service to one's country and parents. Self-cultivation is an important element in Confucianism. About the pleasing effects of poetry, Confucius gives the following comment in his admiration of *Kuan-chui* as a model for the study of poetry: "In the *Kuan-chui* there is joy without wantoness, and sorrow without self-injury" (*Analects* III, 20). In other words, Confucius' idea of the appeal of poetry includes the "pleasing" and "moving" effects. All these effects, however, serve a higher purpose: the "parents" and the "state."

Sidney also gives a full view of the effects of poetry in his treatise. On the enlightening effect of poetry, he says, "[The author] barbarous and simple Indians [whose] hard dull wits were softened and sharpened with sweet delights of poetry" (156). He further distinguishes the three types of effects poetry has:

> [Poems] indeed to merely make to imitate, and imitate both to delight and teach, and delight to move men to take that goodness in hand, which without delight they would fly as from a stranger, and teach, to make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved: which being the noblest scope to which ever any learning was directed.
>
> (158)

In this passage, Sidney not only expounds on the relationship between "to teach," "to delight," and "to move," but also renders them under "goodness." He thinks that "[t]he inquiring philosopher might blind himself, and the mathematician might draw forth a straight line with a crooked, . . . as they have a private end in themselves" (159). Thus, for Sidney, knowledge is not a guarantee of moral "goodness." This is similar to Kant's idea that knowledge will not change one's moral as expressed in *Critique of Practical*

Reason. Sidney thinks that these effects of poetry should be "all directed to the highest end of the mistress – knowledge, . . . in the ethic and politic consideration, with the end of well doing and not well knowing only. So that the ending end of all earthly learning being virtuous action" (159).

Hence, in Sidney's mind "to please, to teach and to move" serve the same end as that of the self-cultivating effects of poetry advocated by Confucius, which all tend toward "the ending end": virtuous action. In Sidney's notion is a more sophisticated order in which "to teach," "to delight" and "to move" have their proper purposes:

> That moving is of higher degree than teaching, it may be this appear, that it is well-nigh the cause and the effect of teaching. For who will be taught, if he be not moved with desire to be taught, and what so much good doth that teaching bring forth (I speak still of moral doctrine) as that it moveth one to do that which it doth teach? For as Aristotle saith, it is "gnosis" but "praxis" must be the fruit. And how "praxis" cannot be, without being moved to practice.
>
> (163)

The concept of "gnosis" and "praxis" are used as two ends to link up the three functions "to teach," "to delight" and "to move" in a strict causal relationship. Each effect in turn becomes the cause of another, thus forming a whole chain from "gnosis" to "praxis."

Because of the moving force it uniquely has, poetry excels all other sciences. Sidney thinks that neither the historian nor the philosopher has such power, so he ranks poetry as "the Monarch of all sciences." That is why he advocates that poetry be considered the most effective means to move people. Confucius also says, "Be stimulated by the *Odes,* take your stand on the rites and be perfected by music" (*Analects* VIII, 8). What Confucius drives at is a complete program for self-cultivation, in which he places poetry at the foremost position. The study of poetry becomes the first important thing in self-perfection. The Confucian idea of moral cultivation is determined by his overall view about the relationship between the self and society. For him, the self is the starting point in the web of social relations. The self acts as the center. From self-cultivation to administering state affairs, the self projects itself out like ripples reaching out in circles. In *Great Learning* [Ta hsüeh 大學], the Confucian concept of the relationship between the self and society is of such an order:

> Having obtained this sincerity, one can stabilize one's heart, cultivate oneself; having attained self-cultivation, one can discipline one's own family; having disciplined one's family, one can govern his country; when one's country is governed, then can one bring peace to the world.

Moral and intellectual cultivation becomes an endless process, in which morality and knowledge are perfected and brought into service of society. This becomes a formula for Confucius and his disciples to look at literature, philosophy, art, politics, and in fact all human affairs. Having a great moving force (cathartic effect), poetry naturally occupies an important position in the pragmatic consideration of Confucianism. Hence, Confucius calls his disciples' attention to the practical value of poetry.

For Sidney, poetry can be of great service or harm to man. He thinks that poetry is like a sword with which one can kill one's father or defend one's country. It all depends on how one uses it. When Plato argues in his *Republic* that poetry "feeds and waters passion," he indirectly admits the force of poetry and takes a pragmatic attitude toward literature, which, however, is rather negative. With Aristotle, poetry becomes positive in its use to man. Horace takes one step further in asserting the positive value of poetry in his *Ars Poetica*: "The aim of the poet is either to benefit, or to make his words at once please and give lessons of life" (73). Horace is generally considered the founder of the pragmatic attitude toward poetry in the West, but Sidney can be called undoubtedly the epitome of this view, for he has developed it to the full. Sidney is typical of the Renaissance critical attitude. His sources are derived from Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and Scaliger, with slight but basic modifications. His pragmatic attitude is based on a concept of "poetic imitation," which is different from his predecessors'. In his *Poetics,* Aristotle defines literature as imitation of nature. Sidney agrees that nature is the object of imitation, but that literature is not a mechanical process of reflection. Sidney defines poetry in this manner: "Poesy therefore is an art of imitation, for Aristotle so termth it in his word *mimesis,* that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth – to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture; with this end: to teach and to delight" (158).

In his search for the function of poetry, Sidney seeks reference to the origin of the word "poet," which comes from "poiein," meaning "to make." He thus looks at a poem as "a making," which in itself implies a sense of

creation. It becomes "a speaking picture," "a figuring forth." In this light, he even remarks that only "the poet, disdaining to be tied to any such subjection [to nature], lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things better than nature bringth forth" (157). Imitation thus becomes a process of creation. For Sidney, the poet has nature as his object, but he also transcends it and does "make another nature." He further says, "That imitation whereof poetry is, hath the most conveniency to nature of all other, insomuch that, as Aristotle saith, those things which in themselves are horrible, as cruel battles, unnatural monsters, are made in poetical imitation delightful" (164). In spite of the reference to Aristotle, Sidney is apparently emphasizing his own point that the purpose of poetry is to teach. Hence, the moral content of poetry becomes the determining element in the definition of poetry.

In his *An Apology for Poetry,* Sidney also relates "delightfulness" in poetical imitation to the transformation of one's character, and he says that he has seen people influenced by it to become courteous, liberal, and courageous (164). This "creative imitation" therefore becomes the basis of Sidney's advocacy of poetry for practical use. Imitation and creation form a dichotomy; so do reality and idealism, which Sidney tries to blend together: "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich a tapestry as divers poets have done – neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, not whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden" (157). For Sidney, it is also the poet's job to bring to completion, or perfection, what nature is always in the process of trying to complete. The poet has nature as his object of imitation, but in the process of imitation he has to go beyond it and create "another nature." This is a process of projecting the poet's own ideal onto nature (or reality). Poetry is, hence, not only imitative but also creative. Poetry is a means for Sidney to achieve as well as to express his idealism, both in nature and in the human world. Virtue becomes the moral ideal for Sidney. So he says that poetry does not imitate "what is, hath been or shall be" but "what may be, and should be" (158). The distinction between "what is" and "what should be" is in a sense a further extension of Sidney's concept of the difference between "reality" and "ideal." Poetic imitation of "what should be" instead of "what is" is an important idea further developed from the Aristotelian definition of literature. The definition of poetry as an imitation of the ideal gives rise to Sidney's concept that the nature of poetry determines its function: to be

didactic.

For Confucius, the nature of poetry is not imitation. He has never showed his disciples the concept of literary imitation, either in the Aristotelian sense or in the definition adopted by Sidney. Confucius actually has never given literature a formal and complete definition. Yet, on the nature of poetry Confucius has said the following which is very close to Sidney's emphasis on the moral content of poetry: "The *Odes* are three hundred in number. They can be summed up in one phrase, 'Swerving not from the right path' [or 'No evil thoughts']" (*Analects* II, 2). Here Confucius shows the view that poetry, which is represented by *The Book of Odes,* is moral and the value of poetry is in its moral teaching. Confucius tries to get at the nature of poetry through its function. In other words, he thinks that poetry is its function. In this sense, Confucius is different from Sidney in his approach, though he has a similar conclusion that poetry teaches.

In ancient China, there was the concept of the "way" or order in human affairs as well as in the universe. Everything, including man, has its own place in this order. The moral order follows the order of the universe. The world will be in good order if everybody follows the order and knows his place. Poetry as a human expression can be a means to achieve highest moral and of course has to express this "order", which becomes concrete moral teaching when applied to human affairs. Since poetry has such a great "cathartic effect," it is no wonder that Confucius considers it a good medium for preaching morality. This is the philosophical and ethical consideration underlying Confucius' advocacy of poetry as a means to preach morality. In Confucius, it is poetry's function of being a good didactic medium that determines its nature of being an expression of morality.

Both Confucius and Sidney have similar views on the practical use of poetry and its powerful moving force, and on the idea of poetry as a means to achieve a good and moral society. For Sidney, poetry imitates so as to teach and to delight. For Confucius, poetry instructs and should therefore be moral. While Sidney conceives of literary imitation as an active and creative process, Confucius thinks that the content of poetry is determined by its function. An easily noticed dissimilarity between Sidney and Confucius is that, although on the surface there are many parallels between them, the approaches they take in defining poetry are basically different. Confucius gets at the nature of poetry by beginning with its function. On the other hand, Sidney comes to a conclusion about the function of poetry

by arguing on its specific nature. Although they have similar positions on the moral purpose of poetry and both believe that poetry should teach, for Confucius it is the function of poetry that decides its nature, but for Sidney it is the nature of poetry that determines its function. This is what Ch'ien Mu 錢穆 distinguishes as the Chinese humanistic-functional approach to learning and writing [jen t'ung 人統], as opposed to the Western essentialist approach [shih t'ung 事統].

Works Cited

Abrams, M.H. *The Mirror and the Lamp.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Aristotle, *Poetics.* In Hazard Adams, ed., *Critical Theory Since Plato.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971, 48-66.

Ch'ien, Mu. "Yu kuan hsüeh-wen chi hsi-t'ung [On systems of learning 有關學問之系統]. In Philip S. Shen 沈宣仁, ed., *Ta hsüeh chiao yü yü ta hsueh sheng* [University education and university students 大學教育與大學生]. Taipei: Ta hsueh sheng huo she 大學生活社, 1973. 15-32.

Fung, Yu-lan. *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. Ed. by Derk Bodde. New York: Free Press, 1966.

Horace, *Art of Poetry* (*Ars Poetica*). In Hazard Adams, *op. cit.*, 68-75.

Lau, D. C., tr. *The Analects.* Penguin, 1979.

Liu, James J. Y. *The Art of Chinese Poetry.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.

———. *Chinese Theories of Literature.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Ma, Yau-woon. "Confucius as a Literary Critic: A Comparison with the Early Greeks." In *Essays in Chinese Studies Dedicated to Professor Jao Tsung-i.* Hong Kong, 1970, 13-45.

Preminger, Alex, et al., eds. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Sir Sidney, Philip. *An Apology for Poetry.* In Hazard Adams, *op. cit.*, 155-177.

Wimsatt, William K, Jr. and Cleanth Brooks. *Literary Criticism: A Short History.* New York: Vintage Books, 1957.