

## Impersonating Devotion

*Wee cannot plaie at Chess, but that we must give names to our Chessemen; and yet mee thinkes he were a verie partiall Champion of truth, that would say wee lyed, for giving a peece of wood the reverende title of a bishop. The Poet nameth Cyrus or Aeneas, no other way than to shewe what men of their fames, fortunes, and estates should doo.*

—Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie*

WHAT CAN BIBLICAL PSALMS TEACH us about literary devotion? An unexpected answer to that question is provided by Philip Sidney's *The Defence of Poesy* (1595), a touchstone of literary criticism in its time and in ours.<sup>1</sup> My argument unfolds from analysis of a single paragraph, where I reveal the importance of specific features of Sidney's description of King David's Psalms. Few studies linger over the details of this sketch, for it appears just before Sidney differentiates divine poets from right poets and appeals to Aristotle's definition of poetry as an art of imitation. This ordering makes it tempting to treat David as prologue to the main event and to conclude—as many commentators have done—that Sidney is most interested in defending secular poetry. Others counter that biblical sources and theological ideas inform all of Sidney's work. Yet none acknowledge that Sidney's account of David challenges our regnant categories in the following way: If today religion connotes fidelity or devotion to an external authority, as for many it does, and if literature entails authorial sovereignty and independent creativity (also a widespread assumption), then Sidney's approach deviates by equating divine inspiration with poetic creativity.<sup>2</sup> His celebration of variable voices and personae, in particular, undermines the

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**ABSTRACT** What can biblical psalms teach us about literary devotion? An unexpected answer to that question is provided by Philip Sidney's *The Defence of Poesy* (1595), a touchstone of literary criticism in its time and in ours. The argument in this essay unfolds from analysis of a single paragraph, which reveals how Sidney's description of King David's Psalms challenges our regnant categories in the following way: If today religion connotes fidelity or devotion to an external authority, as for many it does, and if literature entails authorial sovereignty and independent creativity (also a widespread assumption), then Sidney's approach deviates by equating divine inspiration with poetic creativity. His celebration of variable voices and personae, in particular, undermines the distinction between fidelity and autonomy by offering the psalmist's voice as a model of transformative self-expression. **REPRESENTATIONS** 153. 2021 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 11–28. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2021.153.2.11>.

distinction between fidelity and autonomy by offering the psalmist's voice as a model of transformative self-expression.<sup>3</sup>

It is all too easy to take the Psalms for granted and presume that their importance is understood. There is no more important devotional source for biblical traditions, but even those who have never read the Hebrew or Christian Bible, or prayed the Psalms alone or with a religious community, are likely to know and appreciate some of their most familiar phrases and to imagine that the Psalms are also literary because of these memorable expressions of emotion. "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength," we read in the King James Bible's version of Psalm 8. And "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," these same translators offer us, in Psalm 23.<sup>4</sup> Many Psalms describe God as "my rock and my fortress" (as in Psalm 31), and the Psalms—from a Hebrew word meaning something sung—soar with words of praise for the creator and creation. The Psalms are, in short, well known as texts that provide comfort to those who grieve, refuge to those in need, and satisfaction for the righteous. But how? What gives the Psalms such a satisfying intensity? Since late antiquity, Christian commentators have emphasized that the power of the Psalms arises not just from their content but also from their form, and from the poetics of voice and personification, in particular. This commentarial tradition's longstanding interest in poetic personae coalesces in Sidney's work and should—or so the current essay argues—prompt a new understanding of the relationship between religious and literary devotion.

Certainly most scholars of English Renaissance literature know that their favorite authors read, prayed, and often also created their own poetic psalms. One could fairly say that the Psalms filled the airwaves in premodern Europe. England was no exception. Before Henry VIII dissolved most monasteries, the entire Psalter was recited at least weekly by monks following the Rule of Saint Benedict. The Psalms were less frequently, if no less devoutly, prayed by pious laypeople, who could read them in books of hours and penitential psalm collections and hear and sing them in church. The metrical version of the Book of Psalms by Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins was the best-selling book in early modern England: appended to the *Book of Common Prayer* beginning in the 1560s, it was sung and recited by generations of English churchgoers well into the nineteenth century. The Psalms were cited by John Calvin and numerous other reformers as evidence that no other poetry needed to be written. The *Bay Psalm Book* was the first book printed in British North America, in 1640. And the Psalms unquestionably influenced all early modern lyric poets within Christianity's orbit.<sup>5</sup>

Yet agreement on the fact that the Psalms matter does not mean consensus on *how*. The centrality of the question as well as uncertainty about the

answer is especially clear when it comes to Sidney. In addition to his memorably vivid appeal to King David in a work avowedly not limited to defending religious poetry, Sidney also embarked on a poetic translation of the entire Psalter. This project was completed by Philip's sister, Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, after his untimely death (he was felled by gangrene after being wounded by a Spanish cannonball, when he was only thirty-one years old).<sup>6</sup> The Sidney-Pembroke Psalter is invariably described as metrically inventive, and often praised as inspiring all subsequent English poetry—echoing John Donne's appreciative insistence that the Sidney translation "both told us what, and taught us how to do."<sup>7</sup> Accounts of the place of the Psalms in Sidney's literary theory nevertheless vary widely, ranging from detailed appraisals of his rhetoric and theology to grand claims about how the Psalms provided religious cover for what was ultimately a secular vision of imaginative writing.

What these assessments have in common are two mistaken (and usually unstated) assumptions. First, that when Sidney talks about the poet being "lifted up with the vigour of his own invention," he must be talking about a singular voice. Second, that this description cannot apply to the divine poet, because his creative strength would come from God rather than "his own invention." Both impressions can find textual support. Sidney regularly refers to "poet" in the singular, and "own" had the same meaning in his day as in ours, connoting possession by a singular person or thing.<sup>8</sup> And Sidney refers to both "divine poets" and "right poets," appearing to distinguish between them. Yet these unexamined notions are wrong. Consequentially so.

This misreading of Sidney arises from a limited understanding of how the poetics of personification and textual voices relate to the personhood of writer and reader. Personification should be understood as connoting both anthropomorphism (attributing human characteristics to nonhuman entities) and voice (a correlation still apparent in the description of grammatical voices, for example, "first person"). Understood in this sense, personification was crucial to Sidney's conception of poetic force and energy.<sup>9</sup> It was essential to the distinction he draws between poetry's capacity to deceive and distract, which he condemns, and its unrivaled ability to conjure alternative realities and make them appealing, which he commends. In particular, Sidney's focus on the rhetorical *practices* (rather than *thematics*) of personification, rooted in his devotional experiences of the Psalms, differs in decisive and revealing respects from personification understood, as Susan Stewart has described it, as one of lyric poetry's primary aims and challenges.<sup>10</sup> Sidney's account of personification differs from that of modern theorists because he is not concerned, as they are, with the challenges of alienation, objectification, agency, and imaginative writing's

capacity to destabilize reality. The intrigue of Sidney's work comes from his psychologically astute insistence, informed by a long history of Psalm commentators, that poetry is powerful precisely because it offers readers and writers alike the opportunity to identify with multiple voices, unimpeded by the structural logic of narrative or drama—and thereby offers an alternative to contemporary literary theory's emphasis on agency and objectification.

### “Merely Poetical” Prophecy

Why does Philip Sidney, honoring King David as a revered source of “divine poesy,” describe David's prophecy as “merely poetical”? The Psalms are justifiably described as divine poems, Sidney contends, because they are metrical and lyrical, entertaining and evocative. The biblical prophet is a skillful poet, painting a scene of joyful animals, leaping hills, and a majestic heavenly monarch. Indeed, David's prophecy is poetical, Sidney declares, because of these three attributes: the musicality of the psalmist's language, the “often and free changing of persons,” and his use of “notable *prosopopoeias*,” attributing speech to nonhuman animals, objects, and concepts. All this in a few lyrical sentences:

And may I not presume a little further, to show the reasonableness of this word *vates*, and say that the holy David's Psalms are a divine poem? If I do, I shall not do it without the testimony of great learned men, both ancient and modern. But even the name psalms will speak for me, which being interpreted, is nothing but songs; then, that it is fully written in metre, as all learned hebricians agree, although the rules be not yet fully found; lastly and principally, his handling his prophecy, which is merely poetical. For what else is the awaking his musical instruments, the often and free changing of persons, his notable *prosopopoeias*, when he maketh you, as it were, see God coming in His majesty, his telling of the beasts' joyfulness and hills leaping, but a heavenly poesy, wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith? (84)

Although this passage concludes with his oft-quoted assertion that poetry “deserveth not to be scourged out of the Church of God” (84), Sidney is not simply defending poetic psalms against pious critics who warned Christians that even biblical poetry could be dangerously seductive. Nor is he—as David Marno argues—engaged in a sleight of hand, invoking religious sources to buttress what is ultimately an argument in defense of a “*secular* concept of poetry as pure invention.”<sup>11</sup> Rather, echoing claims made by Psalm commentators, in a tradition that stretches from Origen and Cassian through Bernard of Clairvaux to Calvin and Martin Luther, about how the psalmist's voices give voice to the reader, Sidney here identifies a point central to his defense of secular poetry as well: The psalmist's lyrical “free

changing of persons” (by which Sidney meant what we today would call grammatical voice) and notable *prosopopoeias* create dynamic cohabitation between divine and human and locate the reader within a time irreducible to past and present. The space of the poem is not defined by the contrast between presence and absence but instead filled with variegated voices and persons. David’s lyric voice thereby exemplifies the centrality of personification to Sidney’s notion of poetic inspiration.

Yet this is not how scholars usually read David’s place in Sidney’s work, for reasons consistent with current assumptions about religion and literature. Consider, for example, two exemplary studies, one by Anne Lake Prescott, the other by John Guillory, both of whom are convinced that what makes biblical texts divine is a divinity external to the text. Prescott’s inability to see that Sidney equated prophecy with poetics is all the more noteworthy because she was the first to recognize and detail all the ways that Psalm commentaries inform Sidney’s argument.<sup>12</sup> According to Christian commentators, as Prescott points out, the Psalms offer a “living image” and “moving pictures”; they inspire imitation, create sweetness, dispense medicine, and teach effectively. The psalmist addresses human “diversitie” by speaking to each “as God shall move him.” “All this,” Prescott observes, “including the metaphors is in Sidney’s apology and applied to ‘right poetry’” (146). And yet, Prescott admits, there is one question her article cannot answer. Why, she asks, does Sidney invoke David more than once as an inspired model only to then deny the role of inspiration in the work of the “right poet”? “It was, I think, precisely the peculiar status of the Psalms—so like ‘right’ poetry and yet so beyond emulation,” Prescott conjectures, “so central to parts of his case and yet finally so irrelevant to a defense of merely secular verse” (147)—that explains Sidney’s decision *not* to invoke the “heavenly Maker” or esotericism.

Here though, Prescott imagines a distinction Sidney himself did not draw. In David’s case, as in that of the right poet, Sidney attributes the force of their poetry to their poetics. Indeed, this is the import of Sidney’s observation that David’s prophecy is “merely poetical.” “Merely” here means entirely: Sidney was exalting poetry without demeaning prophecy. Notably, in describing what made David’s work divine, Sidney avoided prevalent theories of divine fury or *furor poeticus* or other esoteric or external sources for David’s work.<sup>13</sup> Instead, he detailed the specific rhetorical attributes that infused poetry with prophetic power. By focusing on *techne* in this way, Sidney implies that this power is true for all poetry, not only that which takes religion as its theme. Knowing this, Prescott nevertheless took for granted that the Psalms were inimitable and that Sidney presumed, as she apparently does, that biblical inspiration entails divine intervention.

Guillory, by contrast, rightly recognizes that Sidney's account of the psalmist made no mention of mystical insight or divine intervention. Yet Guillory betrays assumptions akin to Prescott's (and that of many others) by concluding that Sidney thereby stripped poetry of its divinity. Sidney's *Defence* represents a moment in European literature when the idea of imagination began to "wander," Guillory argues, for it works in the gap that had opened up between theories of *furor poeticus* (related to inspiration of the prophets) and new notions of creativity.<sup>14</sup> "The originality of Sidney's *Apology* perhaps lies in just this intuition," Guillory conjectures: "Sidney must redeem poetry from its fallen state, its secularity, without returning, as Tasso did, to the mystified notion of the inspired poet." Thus, Guillory concludes, the "imagination enters upon the English scene uneasily allied to a view of poetry emptied of divinity" (11).

Guillory hereby presumes what needs to be explored. When Sidney evacuates poetry of *external* divine inspiration he is not necessarily denying its *divinity*. Although he recognizes that Sidney does not sequester the Psalms or invoke them only to support his claims for secular poetry, Guillory seems unprepared to learn from Sidney's own account of what makes David's poetry divine. Sidney explicitly maintains that David's Psalms are *prophetic* because of the specific ways they are *poetic*—because of their lyrical "often and free changing of persons" and notable *prosopopoeias*.<sup>15</sup> What concerns Sidney about the Psalms is what concerns him about all poetry: not their source but the force of their inspiration, their transformative effect on the reader.

### Poesy's Sweet Charming Force

"Force" is one of Sidney's favorite words of praise. He uses it repeatedly throughout the *Defence* to extol poets, their craft (which he calls "poesy"), and the product of that craft ("poetry").<sup>16</sup> Poesy, he says, has a "sweet charming force" (104). The poet shows his skill as a creative inventor when, with the "force of divine breath," he evokes images beyond what nature provides. The poet's conceit "did seem to have some divine force in it." Force names poetry's capacity to bring vivid images to mind. The peerless poet knows how to "strike, pierce," and possess the "sight of the soul" and awaken a "true and lively knowledge" (90). The "forcibleness or *energia*" of the writer, Sidney explains (in one of the earliest printed references in English to a form of the word "energy"), can be attributed to the writer's ability to express the passions (113).<sup>17</sup> Poesy sets itself apart from other ways of presenting ideas because it appeals to the reader's heart as well as mind, because—as Sidney repeatedly emphasizes—it not only informs but also

delights. “To be moved to do that which we know, or to be moved with desire to know” (95), this is the aim, Sidney affirms. Thus the poet is the greatest of all practitioners of the human sciences, “for he doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it” (95).<sup>18</sup> Sidney’s claims about poetry’s effect on readers thus reflect two speculations he makes about human psychology or what could more precisely be called his theological anthropology: first, that humans can and should change—that we are, as Sidney puts it, mired in our “clayey lodgings,” inescapably limited and yet able also to see and aspire to something better (88); second, that this change must be a change of heart as well as mind.

But how does poetry do this? To what does Sidney attribute this liveliness and force, this remarkable capacity to change how readers feel as well as what they do? Deploying a familiar ekphrastic metaphor, Sidney describes poetry as a “speaking picture” (86). The verbal qualifier underscores the lexical and communicative function of poetry, for it is created not simply to exist in itself, or as a mirror to reflect the glory of nature or a creator, but to speak and be heard, to have an impact on its viewer or reader. The poet is a great artificer, not bound to replicate what is but capable of imagining what could be: “Only the poet, disdain[ing] to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect into another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew” (85). Nature’s world is “brazen,” he says. Poets alone “deliver a golden” (85), and “lift up the mind . . . to the enjoying of his own divine essence” (88). Rather than solipsistic replication, the aim is always to “teach and delight,” something poetry does better than any other form of writing, for its “feigned example . . . may be tuned to the highest degree of passion” (93). In his resonant appeal to the passions the poet differs from the historian, who seeks to recreate the past by recording the “bare was.” The poet diverges also from the philosopher, who deals in lofty abstractions. Unlike the philosopher, the poet spins a golden world from everyday threads, moving readers to “take . . . 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” (87).

Poetry’s faculty to move readers is paramount, and Sidney practices what he preaches throughout the *Defence* and in the Sidney Psalms, which are aptly described by Kimberly Coles as a “technical demonstration of Sidney’s *Defence*,” linking person and voice just as rhetoricians and Psalm commentators before him had done.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as Gavin Alexander observes, in Renaissance fictions (including poetry) personhood is built on the rhetorical idea that a self is the words it speaks. This connection had a history stretching back to antiquity. We “cannot imagine a speech without we also imagine a person to utter it,” Quintilian observed in the first century CE.

Moreover, in the rhetorical traditions influenced by Aristotle, the idea of *prosōpon* (signifying the external person, in the sense of face, mask, or the performance of a role) often merged with *ethos* (a word denoting interiority in the sense of disposition or character). An effective orator, Aristotle explained, “should show himself to be possessed of certain qualities.” Persuasive speech is personified speech.<sup>20</sup>

Psalm commentaries from late antiquity through the sixteenth century insisted on the related point, that the link between voice and person amplifies the timbre not just of oratory but of written words. Athanasius of Alexandria, for example, repeatedly drew attention to the connection between “affections of the soul” and a person’s ability to claim the words of another for him- or herself. We see this in the Letter to Marcellinus, translated by Archbishop Matthew Parker, a friend and correspondent of Sidney’s father, and included in Parker’s metrical psalter (likely published in 1567).<sup>21</sup> “Whosoever take this booke in his hande,” Athanasius wrote, “reputeth and thinketh” all the words he reads “as his very own words spoken in his own person.” To be affected by the Psalms is to read them as if you were the “very man that read them or first spake them,” as if they were “properly” your “owne onely wordes.” Other books of the Bible tell of what God has done, but the Psalms comprehend the “whole affections of the soul,” so “who that heareth a man readyng such kynde of poesie, undoubtedly he taketh it so to himself as it were onely of himselfe” (sig. C1v). To each reader the Psalms offer “a bright glasse and playne paterne” in which every one may see and perceive “the motions and affections of his owne hart and soule” (sig. B4v). In a psalm of lament one does not speak “as though he should speak of some other” but “as he himself felt the same in deede” (sig. C2). Since the Psalms “teache every man with divers instructions” and “aptly distribute matter to every man peculiar to himself,” they offer a “very good fourme of prayer” (sig. C1). Summarizing Athanasius’s claims in his own simple metrical introduction, Matthew Parker differentiates scripture’s concern with the “rule of virtue” from the Psalter, “of soule it hase / the state for each degree.” The Psalms have a unique effect, Parker concludes, for only in them does the reader find “most wordes his owne to be” (sig. A3v).

Calvin’s introduction to his Psalm commentaries, translated and published in English by Arthur Golding in 1571, makes analogous claims, describing the Psalms as the “Anatomies of all the partes of the Soule.”<sup>22</sup> In the Psalms, Calvin observes, the Holy Ghost “hath set out before our eyes all the . . . sorrows, feares, anguishes, and finally all the troublesome motions” that addle people’s minds. There is no “affection of the soul whereof the Image appeareth not in this glasse,” according to Calvin, and when in this book a reader encounters the “Prophets themselves talking with God, because they discover all the inner thoughts,” the reader, too, is

called to “the peculiar examination of himself” (sig. \*6v). In a dedicatory letter, Golding paraphrases Calvin’s message by highlighting the rhetorical strategies whereby the psalmist “wrappeth up things in types & figures, describing them under borrowed personages” (sig. 5r). These sources, in sum, support Sidney’s focus on effect through *techne* rather than claims to an external divine source or a focus on content.

Sidney himself borrows and creates personages throughout the *Defence*, although the most expansive exploration of voice and persons is to be found in his poetic Psalm translations. Lyric itself is personified in Sidney’s account, alongside other forms of poetry, in a section that exemplifies the methods of feigning and counterfeiting he has deemed essential to poetry’s appeal. “Is it then the Pastoral poem that is disliked?” Sidney asks, with its “pretty tales of wolves and sheep”? “Or is it the lamenting Elegiac?” he continues, conjuring personalities for these forms of writing. “Is it the bitter but wholesome Iambic?” reminding readers that each style conveys, and evokes, distinct emotional responses: “Or the Satiric? Who sportingly never leaveth until he make a man laugh at folly?” (116–17). No, he continues, “perchance it is the Comic” who imitates the “common errors of our life, which he representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be.” Or what about Tragedy, who “maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours?” Then he introduces lyric, half-apologetically: “Is it the Lyric that most displeaseth? Who with his tuned lyre and well-accorded voice, giveth praise . . . who sometimes raiseth up his voice to the height of the heavens, in singing the lauds of the immortal God?” (118). Even as he aligns lyric with music, Sidney also insists that the poem improves upon the tune, for “I have never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas,” he confesses, without finding “my heart moved more than with a trumpet.”<sup>23</sup> Words rendered lyrical affect the reader even more powerfully than the music of instruments played without sung accompaniment. Finally, he concludes with a paean to the “Heroical,” who “teacheth and moveth to the most high and excellent truth,” celebrating great exemplars such as Achilles and Aeneas. Yet also serving as an exemplar in himself, for “this man,” referring to heroical poetry, “makes [virtue] more lovely in her holiday apparel” (119). Personified in this way, poetry embodies Sidney’s claim that the reader relates to poetry as to a person.

We can see Sidney’s attempts to enact these poetic principles in his own Psalm translations (although a fair reading of the first forty-three, poeticized by Philip, as compared to the rest, done by Mary Sidney Herbert, confirms the importance of having time to revise: on the whole, hers show more creativity in varying voice, rhymes, and meters). The power of the personified voice declares itself in every version of Psalm 29, where the Geneva translators, more often interested in clarity than elegance, confirm that

God's voice "maketh the hinds to calve, and discovereth the forests" (Ps. 29:5, 7–9).<sup>24</sup> This Psalm, eleven lines in the Geneva translation, becomes twenty-seven in Sidney's, further amplifying what the divine voice accomplishes: "Hys voice is on the waters found," Sidney writes, "His voice doth threatening thunders sound. . . . His voice doth flashing flames devide; His voice have trembling desertes tride."<sup>25</sup> Like the Geneva translators, Sidney relishes the efficacy of the voice, which, in his version, "makes hindes their calves to cast . . . [and] makes bald the forrest waste" (lines 22–23). But he also inserts references to the voice's potent influence on the reader: "The voice of that Lord ruling us / Is strong. . . . By voice of high Jehova we / The highest Cedars broken see" (lines 13–14). In Sidney's rendition, this strength is manifest not in its effect on nature but in its effect on the reader. His concern is not with roiling water, echoing thunder, consuming fire, and felled trees in themselves, but in the way that the Psalm brings all this to life for the reader.

Sidney claims this voice *and* its interactivity for himself and any reader in numerous Psalms. "To him my voice I spread / From holy hill hee heard mee" (Ps. 3, lines 14–15). The power of the juxtaposition is suggested by comparison with the Geneva translators' flattened description, "I did call unto the Lord with my voice, and he did hear me from his holy mountain" (Ps. 3:4). The immediacy of the scene might be helpfully compared to the Sternhold Psalter's more relaxed sense of time: "Then with my voyce upon the Lorde, I did bothe call and cry: And he out of his holy hill: did heare me by and by."<sup>26</sup> In Sidney's version, the interaction is instantaneous and localized: the voice ripples out from the speaker toward the listener and the alliterative, rhythmic, and sonic repetition of the paired line ("holy hill hee heard mee") verbally performs the active response it depicts.

Sidney's poetic translations thereby intensify qualities characteristic of the Psalms. Cities and stones call out. God comforts, exhorts, and threatens. Poet and reader merge as the poetic voice oscillates, moving from first-person praise and lament and confession to direct address to third-person descriptions of the faithful and the damned, of lilting landscapes and defiant reprobates. These biblical prayers sometimes cycle through two or three grammatical voices in as many lines. Subject and object are often hard to identify, and instead of linear narrative logic, the Psalms prioritize the emotional range and intensity conveyed by this play of different voices and personae. For Sidney, this is the power of imaginative writing: speaking in many voices, it strikes the reader in multiple ways—a cumulative effect dependent on the simultaneity of recognition and transformation. Translated into the terms of Sidney's definition of poetry, an "art of imitation" that "borrows nothing" (102), poetry speaks in voices and personae the reader can recognize and identify with, altering the reader's sense of what she can thereby claim as her "own."

## Poetic Personae

Sidney's interest in how a reader's textual encounter with other persons might alter how one feels, thinks, and acts is not shared by most modern critics, including those who study Renaissance literature. "Personifications have become almost spooky in the modern literary imagination," Andrew Escobedo proclaims in his study of personification and volition in early modern English literature, citing Paul de Man's memorable declaration that personification is a master trope of poetic discourse, inescapable and always also more than a little bit disturbing. "Personifications can dismember the texture of reality," de Man remarks, "and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways." Escobedo's own study of premodern *prosopopoeia* reveals the limits of the modern conviction that personifications are "failed persons," whether because they lack psychological depth, objectify those they depict, or "signal the haunting potential of language to undo the category of the human."<sup>27</sup> In premodern texts, Escobedo explains, we find instead a notable lack of concern with the distinction between human and nonhuman things. Rather than destabilizing reality, stripping persons of character, or undoing the very idea of the human, Renaissance *prosopopoeia* is "channeling energy," Escobedo argues (3). On this point Sidney would agree. Yet Escobedo demonstrates how easy it is to miss the importance of Sidney's specific treatment of personification by concluding that these premodern uses of personification are worthy of our attention because they anticipate posthumanist agency or a notion of volition at odds with the liberal self-determining subject.<sup>28</sup> For Sidney, at least, energy was not a substitute for volition or will, and personification was not a way to depersonalize agency. In a study more focused on theories of rhetoric than a philosophy of action, James Paxson defends Renaissance *prosopopoeia* against the assumption that authors who anthropomorphize in this way are childish or intellectually unsophisticated. To the contrary, Paxson contends, personification is a poetic mark of theoretical "maturity" and a "complex tool for revealing and advertising the problems and limits inherent in narration in particular and poetic or verbal creation in general." This too is right as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough to illuminate the intriguing alternative Sidney represents. Theories of human action and the limits of verbal creation may plausibly be described as the preoccupations of some of Sidney's contemporaries. George Puttenham's *Art of English Poesie* (1589) declares, for example, that poets use *prosopopoeia* when they "attribute any human quality, as reason or speech, to dumb creatures or insensible things, and do study (as one may say) to give them a human person."<sup>29</sup> Glossing this quote, Escobedo observes that "the 'person' in this sentence possesses a strong affiliation with *persona*, the mask through which an actor speaks" (245). Like

Angel Day's 1592 definition of *prosopopoeia* as "when to thinges without life wee frame an action, speech, or person fitting a man," Puttenham's account confirms Paxson's claim that personification reflects literary sophistication while supporting Escobedo's contention that Renaissance personification challenges anthropocentrism.<sup>30</sup>

Yet Sidney's work remains important for different reasons. Sidney does not equate energy with agency and is less interested in limning the limits of poetic creation than in finding ways to describe and explain—to himself as well as his readers—how poetry "strikes the soul" and leads and draws us to "as high a perfection" as we are "capable of" (104).<sup>31</sup> Personification and the proliferation of voices is crucial to this process, according to Sidney, because they provide the liveliest experiences of familiarity and dissimilarity. It is this interplay of near and far, like and unlike, known and unknown, that engages the heart as well as the mind, enabling the reader to differentiate between the destructively fantastical, which "may infect the fancy with unworthy objects" and poetry's good and beneficial "figuring forth of good things" (126). The transformed person, envisioning the golden world that poetry creates by "representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth" (101), is neither unmoored from reality nor tied to a reality. Poetry does not confirm that the reader's voice and vision is only his or her "own." But neither is the reader's voice elided or erased, subsumed into the voice of another.

The nuance and importance of this insight can be clarified by comparing it to John Parker's conclusion that Christianity's reliance on personification is a "symptom of the otherness internal to orthodox doctrine."<sup>32</sup> Speaking of Sidney, Parker rightly observes that there is nothing coincidental about the fact that the period's most famous defense of imaginative language should come from an English psalmist, for the Psalms had long been understood as a "record of spiritual *personae*" (605). Glossing Cassiodorus's explanation, that whoever chants the Psalms does so "*as if* they were his own . . . *as though* they had been written by himself . . . *as though* speaking about himself," Parker explains that in these poetic prayers the "most intimate, 'personal' relationship with God has to be performed, literally, when the reciter of a psalm takes on its *persona* as if it belonged to his own person" (604, emphasis mine). Here, however, instead of recognizing that this insight invites us to reconsider what it means for something to "belong" to one's "own person," Parker betrays his reliance on a modern notion of singular selfhood. It is "only then," Parker observes, "when the performer has ceased, for this fabricated moment, to be his everyday self, does he commune with the divinity that makes him the full person he really (or 'eternally') is" (604).<sup>33</sup> This description of one self ceasing to exist and another taking its place attributes a fixity, a clean exchange, to what the

texts envision as dynamic and irreducibly interactive, as we saw when studying closely Sidney's Psalms 29 and 3.<sup>34</sup>

A similarly straitened understanding of the implications of personification can be detected in Parker's question about the person of Christ. What does it mean, Parker asks, to understand the speakers of the Psalms as personae "while asserting, at the same time, that the book affirms the personal singularity of Jesus as God?" Parker concludes that this must be a theological workaround—a way to simultaneously claim Christ as a model for everyone while exculpating Christ from the guilt all humans share. But by approaching this as a paradox that needs to be solved, Parker misses the importance of what he observes: the presence of variable and diverse personae in a text Christians associated with a singular God. The singularity of Christ manifest in biblical poems is characterized by a proliferation of voices—including recurring shifts from first to second to third person, frequent use of direct address, and the attribution of spoken and musical voices to nonhuman animals, landscapes, and objects—which collectively demonstrate that, for many Christian commentators at least, singularity is compatible with multiplicity and, indeed, that the one entails the other.

Cassiodorus's claim that the Psalms are a record of spiritual personae, complicated by the presence of different personages presented under different figures, lacking clear and consistent identifiers, shifting positions and voice, is no simpler or more complex than its implied claim about persons. Elsewhere, I've argued that Sidney and other poets of the English Reformation—writers of love poems as well as explicitly devotional poetry—responded to the era's emphasis on scriptural devotion and inward piety with notable lyric interactivity and poetic relations.<sup>35</sup> In devotional poems and love poems by George Herbert, Aemilia Lanyer, John Donne, Anne Bradstreet, and others, we can see how personification was key to the way writers of this period raised and answered questions about textual energy. Voices resonate because—as the Psalm commentators, who were also adept psychologists, frequently emphasized—they are familiar; they accord with what is already known, felt, expected. And yet it is also true, as all who endorsed devotional reliance on the Psalms believed, that experiencing the voice of another as one's own can change the reader's sense of self.

### Conclusion

What are the implications of this dynamic play of voices for our organizing question about the relationship between literature and devotion? Consider the implications in light of the claims that literature and devotion are necessarily opposed. The willingness to be inventive—as in Sidney's insistence

that the poet must be lifted up by the force of his “own invention”—has long been identified as the mark of a poet finally free of the constraints of theological fidelity. Devotional poetry is not real poetry, Samuel Johnson proclaimed in the eighteenth century, because “the essence of poetry is invention; such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights.”<sup>36</sup> Harold Bloom updates Johnson’s judgment with a characteristically implacable assessment: “All strong poets must ruin the sacred truths to fable and old song,” Bloom says, “precisely because the essential condition for poetic strength is that the new song, one’s own, always must be a song of one’s self.”<sup>37</sup> No wonder, then, that Jahan Ramazani’s recent study of prayer and poetry takes as its premise the idea that the two stand opposed. There is a “push and pull,” Ramazani observes, “between creative self-assertion and ascetic self-immolation.”<sup>38</sup> What prayer humbles, poetry hails, redeeming the voice that the one who prays declares subject to God. The sense of tension, even opposition, between piety and artistry now seems fairly obvious, even axiomatic, as it is for Marno, who says Sidney is “acutely aware” of the “inherent logical difficulties” of reconciling faith and poetry. The Psalms, like any other kind of religious poetry, are poetic only in a “limited sense,” Marno concludes, because “they do not freely invent their subjects.”<sup>39</sup>

Be that as it may, subjects are not the same as persons in Sidney’s account. Instead of a lyric “I,” Sidney equates poetry with interactivity and expressed relations. The result is that the “heart-ravishing” knowledge he imputes to the *vates*, or prophetic poet, inheres in the energy or forcibleness of the text. The poet is one who can make the reader see, as the readers of the Psalms see, “with the eyes of the mind.” Just as the divine poets like David and Solomon and Moses and Deborah and the writer of Job and Orpheus and Homer provide comfort and consolation and an image of “never-leaving goodness” (102), so too the right poet is one who moves readers to “take goodness in hand” and “make them know that goodness whereunto they are moved.” What makes that possible is a language that situates the reader within the text, without fixity, free of the binary options of self-assertion and self-subjugation, of creative sovereignty or ascetic self-immolation.

Thus the poet who is lifted up by the “vigour of his own invention,” following the “course of his own invention” or “enjoying his own essence” is feigning and counterfeiting the discovery not of a singular persona but of many. For Sidney this *energia*, the capacity of textual voices to communicate and transform what writers and readers perceive and experience, was divine. And even for those uninterested in divinity, Sidney might still be read as a writer who attunes us to the ways that any poet, including a scriptural poet, speaks with more than one voice. Indeed, the account of Sidney I have offered here suggests that modern literary criticism is relearning what those who speak with and through scriptural voices already knew.<sup>40</sup>

## Notes

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1. Except in this essay's epigraph, which quotes from the version of Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* published by William Ponsonby in 1595 (the same year that another edition, published by Henry Olney under the title *An Apology for Poetry*, also appeared), I have relied throughout on modern critical editions. Parenthetical page numbers refer to Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry, or, The Defence of Poesy*, 3rd ed., ed. Geoffrey Shepherd and Robert W. Maslen (Manchester, 2002). See also the excellent notes in "A Defense of Poetry," in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and J. A. van Dorsten (Oxford, 1973), 59–121.
2. See, e.g., Bruce Lincoln's "Theses on Method," which describes religion as a "discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal." Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," in *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions* (Chicago, 2012), 1. For a summary of this relationship between literature and modern subjectivity, see Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature: Sites of Reading in Colonial Egypt* (Princeton, 2016).
3. For a provocative recent version of the secularizing thesis, arguing that Sidney upset the logocentric, patristic, and patriarchal order by superseding the Protestant humanist pedagogic view of the poet, see Catherine Bates, *On Not Defending Poetry: Defense and Indefensibility in Sidney's Defence of Poesy* (Oxford, 2017). The best work on Sidney's religious views is by Robert Stillman, *Philip Sidney and the Poetics of Renaissance Cosmopolitanism* (Aldershot, UK, 2008). See also Robert Stillman and Nandra Perry, "Sacred and Scandalous: Philip and Mary Sidney's Reforming Poetics," in *Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Literature and Religion*, ed. Andrew Hiscock and Helen Wilcox (Oxford, 2017).
4. I quote here from the version of the Psalms in *The English Bible: King James Version*, vol. 1, *The Old Testament*, ed. Herbert Marks (New York, 2012).
5. Rivkah Zim, *English Metrical Psalms: Poetry as Praise and Prayer* (Cambridge, 1986), 151. Zim cites John Calvin's assessment from his letter to the reader in the 1542 edition of "La Forme des prieres et chantz ecclesiastiques," in *Le Psautier huguenot*, ed. Pierre Pidoux (Bâle, Switzerland, 1962), 2:17. For an alternative approach, arguing that poetic psalms were less influential than the singsong simplicity of the Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins version, see Lucía Martínez Valdivia, "Mere Meter: A Revised History of English Poetry," *English Literary History* 86 (2019): 555–85. On psalms in New England see Amy Morris, *Popular Measures: Poetry and Church Order in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts* (Newark, 2005).
6. *The Psalms of Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke*, ed. J. C. A. Rathmell (New York, 1963). This Psalter can also be found online at <http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/sidpsalms.html>.
7. John Donne, "Upon the Translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip Sydney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister," line 20, in *The Divine Poems*, 2nd ed., ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1978), 33–35. Modern scholars echo Donne's claims: the Sidney Psalter is declared "a secure bridge to the magnificent original seventeenth-century religious lyric in the biblical and psalmic mode" in Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton, 1984), 241; as illustrative of the principles of Sidney's *Defence*, the Psalter serves

- as a source of the present construction of English-language literature according to Kimberly Anne Coles, *Religion, Reform, and Women's Writing* (Cambridge, 2008), 76; it is assessed as a "master text" by Roland Greene, "Sir Philip Sidney's Psalms, the Sixteenth-Century Psalter, and the Nature of Lyric," *Studies in English Literature* 30 (1990): 19–40; and Zim, *English Metrical Psalms*, concludes that "Sidney's psalms practically exhausted the formal possibilities for new developments in the metrical psalm as a literary kind" (207).
8. See, e.g., William Tyndale's 1526 translation of 1 Cor. 11:21, reproving the selfishness of a man who sits down to eat "his awne supper"; *OED Online*, s.v. "own, adj. and pron.," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/135512>.
  9. On the connection between voice and person in the Renaissance see Gavin Alexander, "Prosopopoeia: The Speaking Figure," in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. Sylvia Adamson et al. (Cambridge, 2007), 97–112.
  10. See the discussion of Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago, 2002) as astutely assessed in Kimberly Johnson, *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* (Philadelphia, 2014), 25.
  11. On the seductive power of biblical psalms, see John Calvin's "Preface to the Geneva Psalter," cited in Coles, *Religion, Reform, and Women's Writing*, 94. David Marno, *Death Be Not Proud: The Art of Holy Attention* (Chicago, 2016), 44; emphasis in the original.
  12. Anne Lake Prescott, "King David as a 'Right Poet': Sidney and the Psalmist," *English Literary History* 19 (1989): 131–51.
  13. "Heart-ravishing knowledge" is not the same as the "divine fury" invoked by many of Sidney's poetic peers, particularly those influenced by theories of the occult as Duncan-Jones and van Vorsten explain in their commentary on "A Defence of Poetry," 188–89n76. Note also that Sidney's idiosyncratic definition of *vates*, based on a false etymology that derives *vates* (diviner) from *vi mentis* (with violence of mind), as explained in Shepherd and Maslen's notes to Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 151n23, identifies the prophet as a figure who feels what he knows. By linking prophecy's poetics to heart-ravishing knowledge, Sidney foreshadows what later sections of the treatise assume, that poetry names a concern with emotional change and the question of how language can both effect and reflect what is felt.
  14. John Guillory says that Sidney avoids attributions of divine inspiration when talking about the Psalms for the same reason he eschews claims of godly intervention in talking about nonbiblical poetry: because Sidney does not believe an external force is the source of poetry's power; John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History* (New York, 1983), 11.
  15. The poetical features Sidney listed include lyricism, the proliferation of voices, and the free changing of persons. Prescott in fact ends her essay with a nod to Sidney's interest in varied voices by noting that the psalm tradition maintained that the Psalms had "no one tonality"; Prescott, "King David as a 'Right Poet,'" 151.
  16. Relevant to this point is the fact that the first use of "poesy" in the *Defence* is in reference to David.
  17. Shepherd lists this as the "first known use in English" of a form of "energy"; Shepherd and Maslen's notes to Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 240, but the *OED Online*, s.v. "energy," currently lists two earlier examples: E. Walshe, *Office & Duty Fighting for Country* (1545), J. Olde, *Antichrist* (1556). "Energy," <https://www.oed.com/view/entry/62088>.
  18. See Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford, 1997), for the argument that Sidney led the way in recognizing the

- importance of emotion to learning by rejecting the Stoic model for an Aristotelian and Thomistic emphasis on the passions (215). While James's claims of novelty are overstated, they underscore the importance of Sidney's emphasis on delight and expediency: "for delight we scarcely do but in things that have a expediency to ourselves or to the general nature," he says (136). My point here is that Sidney viewed personification as a way to both awaken and expand the sense of "expediency."
19. Coles, *Religion, Reform, and Women's Writing*, 76.
  20. See Alexander, "Prosopopoeia," 98–100. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 9.2. 31–32 ("Nam certe sermo fingi non potest, ut non personae sermo fingatur").
  21. Matthew Parker, *The whole Psalter translated into English Metre* (London [1567?]).
  22. John Calvin, introduction to *The Psalmes of David and Others: With M. John Calvins Commentaries*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1571).
  23. "Percy and Douglas" likely refers to a favorite English ballad, according to Shepherd and Maslen's notes to Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 191.
  24. In this section I quote from the Geneva Bible (London, 1587).
  25. Psalm 29, in *The Psalmes of Sir Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke*, 62–63, lines 7–8.
  26. Thomas Sternhold, *The whole Booke of Psalmes* (London, 1562), 34.
  27. Andrew Escobedo, *Volition's Face: Personification and the Will in Renaissance Literature* (Notre Dame, 2017), 1. The Paul de Man quote is from his "Epistemology of Metaphor," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago, 1979), 19.
  28. See Andrew Escobedo, "Epilogue: Premodern Personification and Posthumanism?," in *Volition's Face*. Not all modern critics find personification disturbing, but many believe it undoes or "decenters" the human, in line with Escobedo's conclusion that it thereby anticipates posthuman agency. For a more formalist account of how personification advertises the "problems and limits" of poetic or verbal creation see James Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification* (Cambridge, 1994), and the counterargument, that personification resolves these problems, in the review of Paxson by Craig R. Davis, *Speculum* 70, no. 4 (1995): 960.
  29. George Puttenham, *Art of English Poesie* (London, 1589), 246, cited in Escobedo, *Volition's Face*, 245.
  30. Angel Day, *The English secretorie: or, plaine and direct methode, for the enditing of all manner . . . Also, a declaration of all such tropes, figures or schemes . . .* [1592] (London, 1595), sig. Mm4.
  31. On music as a model for Sidney's poetry, see Anne-Marie Miller-Blaise, "'The name of Psalmes will speak for me.' Le rôle des psaumes dans la conception sidnéienne de la musique de la poésie," *Etudes Epistémè* 18 (2010): 34–50.
  32. John Parker, "Persona," in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (Oxford, 2010), 593. Parker's primary purpose is to demonstrate the entwining of rhetoric and theology in Renaissance debates about theater and poetry and to show "a defense of poetry and drama at one with the Protestant critique" (602).
  33. Parker quotes from *Cassiodorus: Explanation of the Psalms*, trans. P. G. Walsh (New York, 1990), 1:24.
  34. The reason Parker stops short is, I think, because he allows Slavoj Žižek's insistence that Christianity reveals that there is *nothing* behind the mask to supersede what his own account of Renaissance personification reveals; Parker, "Persona," 604, citing Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief*, (London, 2001), 89.
  35. Constance M. Furey, *Poetic Relations: Faith and Intimacy in the English Reformation* (Chicago, 2016).

36. Samuel Johnson, "Waller," in *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets; with Critical Observations of Their Works*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Oxford, 2006), 2:53.
37. Harold Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present*, (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 125.
38. Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres* (Chicago, 2014).
39. Marno, *Death Be Not Proud*, 43, 45.
40. See, e.g., Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 143.