

## Perspectives on the Poetics of the Conceit

Steven V. Hunsaker  
University of California, Riverside

Since Plato postulated the existence of eternal and ideal forms, many theories of art have been derived from that base. Neoplatonic critics and theorists, arguing that art is an indirect imitation of an ideal form, have struggled to reconcile artistic greatness with the derivative action of imitation. One variation of Plato's ideal forms is the poetics of the conceit. Theorists of the conceit such as Tesauro, Gottsched, Optiz, and Weise develop a poetics around the conceit, which is an independent mental structure that governs the work. Two other theorists of the conceit, Baltazar Gracián and Sir Philip Sidney, propose interesting and challenging developments of this poetics.

These theorists base their work on the poet's perception or creation of the conceit. With Sidney, the poet's task is to somehow reach the realm of the conceit and to imitate it in poetry. In the case of Gracián, the poet creates the conceit and expresses it in witty language. In both cases, the transfer from conceit to poetry implies an inevitable loss of power or clarity. The reader therefore faces the difficult task of reading through the imperfect language of poetry in order to reach an understanding of the conceit, whether created or pre-existent. The poet must elevate his mind and representational skills in order to reach the conceit. The resulting imitation of the conceit is a move from perfection to imperfection. The reader, however, faces the more difficult task of moving from imperfection to perfection. This is accomplished by perceiving the conceit through the faulty language of the poet. Though Sidney and Gracián are almost exclusively concerned with the role of the poet, I suggest that the role of the reader is of a similar kind and magnitude.

Sidney discusses the fore-conceit in his well-known *An Apology for Poetry*. The reference to the conceit is found in a short, though hotly debated passage:

Neither let this be jestingly conceived, because the works of the one be essential, the other in imitation or fiction; for any understanding knoweth the skill of the artificer standeth in

that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself. (101)

The central point is that poetic greatness is determined by the possession of conceits; not by elegant expression. Proof that the conceit exists is the work itself. Debate over this passage centers on the nature of the conceit. Some critics see the conceit as akin to the platonic ideal, while others interpret the conceit as a mental structure which gives direction and form to the work. In all cases, Sidney's fore-conceit is a pre-existent entity. The poet can approach and imitate the conceit, but the conceit is not altered nor in any way impacted by the poet's efforts.

Though the poet is only able to imitate, he is given enormous importance by Sidney. Calling the poet a "Maker," Sidney claims for the poet a capacity very similar to that of God. The association of the poet with divinity is repeatedly emphasized in Sidney's discussion of various etymologies of the term. Sidney cites the Greek, Hebrew, and Roman past to support his elevation of the poet. The greek term *poiein*, which means "to make" is given as the root of "poet." *Vates*, the Latin word for prophet and poet, is likewise offered as evidence for Sidney's argument that the poet is a divine Maker. Finally, Sidney presents the divine poetry of the Hebrew prophet and poet David to support his contention that the poet "makes" much as God made the world.

Gracián's very different notion of the *concepto* is extensively developed in his *Agudeza y arte de ingenio*. This work explores the workings of three central terms; the *concepto* or the conceit; the *ingenio*, genius or the power of perception; and *agudeza*, verbal precision or wit. The *concepto* is an unexpected connection between knowable extremes. The result of the yoking is a conceit which draws out the true nature of the two compared elements.

Consiste, pues, este artificio conceptuoso, en una primorosa concordancia, en una armónica correlación entre dos o tres cognoscibles extremos, expresa[da] por un acto del entendimiento. (64)

Why then should Sidney and Gracián be discussed together? Though distant from one another in time and in space, the two theorists develop aspects of the same questions. How is poetry justified? What does a poet do? I have linked Gracián and Sidney because they are

mutually illuminating. I am not proposing an influence study but an exploration of two independent developments of the poetics of the conceit.

Sidney (1554-1587) is a canonical poet and critic, and he has been thoroughly discussed in these contexts. The presence of Sidney's writings in anthologies of poetry and criticism testify to his status. Gracián (1601-1658), however, is not well-known except to the specialist in Spanish Golden Age literature. *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* is but one of many critical and literary productions of this Jesuit priest. In both Sidney and Gracián, the role of the reader is a complex issue. Since the poet imitates or communicates the conceit, the reader must in some way reach an understanding of the conceit to understand the poetry. The skill of the poet in perceiving and expressing the conceit is discussed extensively in Sidney and Gracián. I suggest that a corresponding and very similar skill is implied for the reader.

By reversing the process of poetic production, a procedure for reading is revealed. Since the terms and theoretical basis for a poetics are more complete in Gracián, the resulting reversal provides a more complete exposition of the role of the reader. An application of some of the issues raised in the *Agudeza* to Sidney's *Apology* clarify both Gracián and Sidney.

"The skill of the artificer standeth in that *idea* or fore-conceit of the work" (Sidney 101). Sidney's fore-conceit is the governing mental construct behind poetic expression. According to Robinson in *The Shape of Things Known*, "it is a diagrammatic concept, a mental chart upon which the 'reasons' of a poem are organized" (118). In this interpretation, the fore-conceit is essentially a matter of form. The conceit establishes form, and the language of the poem adorns the pre-existent structure. While this provides some insight on the nature of the fore-conceit, the effect is largely reductionist. If the greatness of poetry lies in the fore-conceit, surely the conceit is more than the simple planning ahead postulated by Robinson. Whatever the nature of the fore-conceit, there is loss in the translation of the conceit into poetry. Sidney insists that the activity of the poet is "an art of imitation" (101), but he does not explain the consequences of the imitation. Much as a platonic conception of art emphasizes the inferiority of imitation of imitation, the poetics of the conceit requires a loss of power and purity in the translation from conceit to poetry (DeNeef 162).

Aside from the comment that the greatness of a work lies in the fore-conceit, Sidney does not concern himself with the issue of loss in imitation. Rather, Sidney is determined to demonstrate that the poet is a Maker. The principle justification for this term is that the poet creates a "golden" world in contrast with the "brazen" world of nature.

Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden. (100)

The suggestion that the poet's world is somehow better than nature complicates the question of the poet's relation to the conceit, as well as the difficult question of what the conceit is. Is it possible that the greatness of a work could be a conceit as poor as a mere magnification and enhancement of nature? The fore-conceit surely demands more than the questionable improvement of richer tapestry and more fruitful trees. There is a strong sense of anti-climax in an argument which praises the creative power of the poet and illustrates that power with imitation. The fore-conceit appears to be a second attempt to establish the originality of the poet, but again, Sidney subverts his own argument with an insistence that "poesy is an art of imitation" (101). The quality of poetic making remains unclear. The point of Sidney's argument that the poet is a Maker is soon lost in the determined portrayal of the poet as an imitator.

What then is the value of the conceit? If, as suggested by Wolfley (230) and DeNeef (167), Idea and fore-conceit are not synonymous, the fore-conceit may be a means of introducing the reader to the realm of Idea. This requires the poet to reach the level of Idea to transfer it back to the reader through poetry. The reader, meanwhile, must bridge the gap between the imperfections of poetry and perfect Idea. While the poet moves down, the reader moves up.

The reader's difficult task of moving toward and into the realm of the Idea requires some particular skill or mechanism. Robinson suggests that "the reader will use the verbal image of the artifact as a basis for the reconstruction . . . of the full-scale Idea as seen in the poet's mind" (123). DeNeef pursues a similar thought: "We could say that the task of the reader initially reverses that of the poet: the poet transfers Idea to text; the reader must transfer text to Idea" (162).

DeNeef further clarifies this reading by suggesting that "both reader and poet 'imitate' an Idea by figuring it forth in material and thus particular form" (162).

Both reader and poet face difficult challenges in Sidney's poetic scheme. Sidney is aware of the role of the reader, but he does not demonstrate extensive concern for the difficulties it entails. If we substitute "reader" for "understanding," I think we have a clear view of Sidney's role of the reader. "For any *reader* knoweth the skill of the artificer standeth in that Idea or fore-conceit of the work" (101). The reversal of the poetic process reveals an active reader.

Though the reader reverses the processes of poetry, it is misleading to describe the act of the reader as imitation. Imitation always involves loss. If the reader imitates poetry, or even if the reader imitates the conceit itself through the mediation of poetry, the product will be doubly or triply removed from the conceit. Sidney falls into the problems of Platonism if the reader is required to imitate imitation (DeNeef 173). I suggest that Sidney's reader is more of a Maker than Sidney's poet. While the poet's action is derivative imitation, the reader performs an inventive act of understanding in bridging the gap between faulty expression and the conceit. Here in particular, Gracián is extremely helpful.

As earlier mentioned, the three key terms in Gracián's theory are the *concepto*, the *ingenio*, and *agudeza*. A brief explanation of the function of these terms will clarify future discussion. The *ingenio* is the power of understanding, poetic genius that permits new insight into the nature of things.

Si los materiales objetos dicen una cierta agradable simpatía  
y una grande conformidad con sus inferiores potencias,  
¿cuánta mayor alcanzará una ingeniosa sutileza con la que es  
reina de todas ellas, digo, el ingenio? (62)

This mental capacity is an "imaginative or inventive faculty of the writer" (Foster 27). The nature of the *ingenio* as an inventive faculty is crucial to the understanding of the *concepto*. Whereas the fore-conceit of Sidney is pre-existent to the poet's perception, Gracián's *concepto* is a creation of the poet. The *concepto* is a product of the *ingenio*, "an act of understanding which expresses the correspondence found between objects" (May 54).

En este modo de conceptuar caréase el sujeto, no ya con sus adyacentes propios, sino con un término extraño, como imagen, que le exprime su ser o le representa sus propiedades, efectos, causas, contingencias y demás adjuntos; no todos, sino algunos, o los más principales. (Gracián 92)

*Agudeza* is verbal precision which the poet employs to convey the connection between linked objects. *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* is a systematic description of the varieties of this verbal wit. Though perhaps of less consequence than the *ingenio* or the *concepto*, *agudeza* is the means of communicating the other two terms. “Entendimiento sin agudeza ni conceptos, es sol sin luz, sin rayos” (62).

Given the scheme of genius, conceit, and wit, does the reversal of the poetic process in Gracián afford any insights into the role of the reader? Casanova suggests that the challenge of a difficult conceit is a communicable pleasure. “El placer y la agudeza del concepto son transmisibles, intercambiables por medio de la palabra; implican no sólo el ingenio del forjador, sino la sutileza del descubridor” (Casanova 146). Since poetry involves both reader and poet, the interchange between the two can become a type of intellectual cat-and-mouse, with the poet striving to keep his conceits beyond the understanding of the reader. “La verdad, cuánto más dificultosa, es más agradable, y el conocimiento que cuesta, es más estimado” (Gracián 85). Difficulty or obscurity of conceits becomes an end in itself. Communication consequently loses almost all value. The poet is clearly not creating a poetry of easy access, but the value of struggling through difficult conceits does eventually reward the reader.

Cuanto más escondida la razón, y que cuesta más, hace más estimado el concepto, despiértase con el reparo la atención, solícitase la curiosidad, luego lo exquisito de la solución desempeña sazónadamente el misterio. (Gracián 83)

How then does the reader penetrate the difficulty of obscure conceits? Casanova suggests that the reader employs the same *ingenio* that creates the poetic difficulty (149). If we accept the proposition that *ingenio* is the reader’s tool of understanding, we define the act of reading as an inventive and imaginative act. This is implicit in both Gracián and Sidney. By requiring the reader to bridge the distance between the imperfections of poetry and the perfection of the conceit,

the theorists of the conceit are elevating the reader to the level of the poet. In fact, we see that the reader performs a more difficult task. Though he supports the superiority of the poet, Gracián does acknowledge the greatness of the perceptive and active reader. "Si el percibir la agudeza acredita de águila, el producirla empeñará en ángel; empleo de querubines y elevación de hombres, que nos remonta a extravagante herarquía" (62).

There is no explicit statement of the reader/poet hierarchy in Sidney's *Apology*. Since Sidney does not posit a creative power like the *ingenio*, the reversal of the poetic process reveals very little for the reader to work with in the perception of conceits. The reader and the poet are confined by imitation to continual loss. Neither can move toward the realm of ideas by producing derivations. The poet may imitate the conceit, but the result will necessarily be lower than the conceit itself. In like manner, the reader's imitation of the poetry will be yet further removed from the conceit. Both reader and poet need a generative power like the *ingenio* to bridge the gap between conceit and poetry.

Sidney's lack of a power of appropriation is a serious weakness of his *Apology*. We are informed that the production of poetry is imitation of a conceit, but how does the poet come to understand the conceit well enough to imitate it in poetry? I suggest that the poetics of the conceit can succeed only if the poet does not imitate a pre-existent conceit. Instead, the poet must create conceits through an inventive, imaginative power like the *ingenio*. The application of *ingenio* to Sidney clarifies the muddled issue of perception and imitation of the conceit.

If, in addition, we appropriate the *ingenio* for the reader, we have a viable means for the comprehension of poetic difficulty. Since this genius is a generative, inventive power, the reader can bridge the gap between language and conceit creatively. Mere imitation can never generate the necessary link. The reader must not only be educated in order to understand allusions and symbols, but also, through *ingenio*, imaginative in order to follow the flight of poetic fancy. Such a reader is a Maker, and a peer of the poet.

Sidney argues that the poet is a Maker of a golden world, and yet an imitator of conceits. The Maker/imitator relationship of the poet to the conceit is troubling. How does the poet reach the level of the conceit, and what is the conceit after all? As previously mentioned,

DeNeef and Wolfley suggest that the Idea and the fore-conceit are different. The separation of Idea from fore-conceit allows DeNeef to propose that the fore-conceit “mediates between Idea and the work or text” (167). By mediating between Idea and text, the fore-conceit communicates matter from one realm to another. The Idea meanwhile, is very similar to the platonic Idea. Poets approach Ideas and express their experience through the mediation of the conceit. The conceit does not possess an inherent value; rather, the conceit has value only as it transmits the value of Idea.

The derivative value of the conceit and the derivative imitation of the poet are very different from the vigorous theory of the conceit in Gracián. The conceit is created and the connection is formed by the poet; there is no pre-existent conceit. The value of the conceit for Gracián is its potential for creating the pleasure of understanding. As May has said, “Gracián is really an early devotee of a modern ‘aesthetic experience’; and an early seeker for a theory of its meaning” (55). Communication can only have a secondary or tertiary value in such a system. Sidney, on the other hand, seeks to communicate. The fore-conceit is a means of giving the reader access to a higher realm, the realm of pure example. The reader is subsequently obligated to transform that example into virtuous action.

The responsibility to transform the conceit into virtuous action adds responsibility to the already heavy burden of the reader. We have seen that in Sidney’s theory the reader must imitate poetry with such accuracy and strength that his imitation will lead to the conceit and the Idea. However, since imitation is derivative and not generative, the reader cannot make the move from poetry to conceit, no matter how strong the imitation may be. Given the difficulty of correct imitation, the potential for virtuous action through poetry is slight, though demanded.

Gracián does not make such demands. Since poetry is the product of free intellectual play, it is certainly not an imitation of the mind of God. When we reverse Sidney’s poetic theory to explore the role of the reader, we see that the reader is asked to imitate god-like making. The reversal of Gracián does not ask for herculean imitation, but for human understanding of human creation. Though often obscure and difficult, Gracián posits a poetry that is always human and ultimately comprehensible.

Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry*, despite wide popularity, is an inadequate treatment of the conceit. By requiring the poet to imitate pre-existing ideas, Sidney negates his argument that the poet is a Maker. Gracián does not suggest that the *concepto* exists independently of the poet. By allowing the poet to function as a true Maker of conceits, Gracián frees the poetics of the conceit from the trap of neoplatonic imitation. When the two schemes are reversed, the role and responsibility of the reader are revealed. Just as Sidney asks the poet to imitate, so the reader in Sidney's theory is forced to imitate that imitation in the pursuit of pure understanding. The appropriation of Gracián's *ingenio* allows the reader to imaginatively and actively participate in the processes of poetry.

"Si el percibir la agudeza acredita de águila, el producirla empeñará en angel" (62). Despite the hierarchy of the metaphor, Gracián recognizes the reader. The metaphor valorizes production of wit over perception of wit, even making the distinction one of kind and not one of simple degree. Given the difficulty of progressing from the imperfections of poetry to the clarity of the conceit, I would alter the metaphor and suggest that the production of conceits is the work of cherubim while the perception of conceits is the equally noble work of seraphim.

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