Let me begin with a few basic assumptions:

Without brains there would be no culture and without culture there would be no minds. This seems to be an odd combination of a truism with a paradox, but I still hope, not only that this statement is not too wide off the mark but that the fundamental insight it wants to convey is something we all share whatever our own conclusions. Culture is thus conceived as an extension of and a playing field for brains. It is used by brains to turn themselves into minds. Thus its primary reality is the man-made world and the other brains in it, and not a physical material reality.

To put my own convictions in this matter as radically and bluntly as I can: reality in the physical, experiential sense does not come in, at least not as a prime concern, when it comes to analysing and understanding the interplay between brains and culture. If human brains had never existed, there would have been no conceptualizations of reality as we know them, no reality in the sense that cultures have tried to configure it. There would probably only have been mindless matter or, to put it more cautiously, matter with something other than humans in mind.

Now, if we look at the many attempts in Western culture to define what literature, after all one of the most complex products of the human mind, is about and does, we find – at least until the eighteenth century and, I would claim, far into the twentieth century – the mimesis concept or ‘imitatio naturae’ as a description of what art and literature do, taking pride of place.

For Aristotle on whose doctrine of mimesis European thinking about art had been based for more than 2000 years, imitation in art is an anthropological universal,

a rationalization of a naive response to art, a response which we can still observe in the satisfactions popularly expressed in representational accuracy, in catching a likeness in portraiture for example, or in the verisimilitude of a story or play. Obviously this is imitation in the sense of establishing a convincing illusion of what is represented ...

so Geoffrey Shepherd in his “Introduction” to Philip Sidney’s An Apology for Poetry (Shepherd 47).

Aristotle argued that

The creation of poetry generally is due to two causes, both rooted in human nature. The instinct for imitation is inherent in man from his earliest days; he differs from other animals in that he is the most imitative of creatures, and he learns his earliest lessons by imitation. Also inborn in all of us is the instinct to enjoy works of imitation.
The instinct for imitation, then, is natural to us, as is also a feeling for music and for rhythm – and metres are obviously detached sections of rhythms. Starting from these natural aptitudes, and by a series of for the most part gradual improvements on their first efforts, men eventually created poetry from their improvisations.

(Dorsch 35)

What Aristotle claims and Shepherd still seems to take for granted is that the relationship between the artistic representation and the object represented is naturally a relationship between the human mind and some physical reality or an idealization based on it; whereas it is, in reality, much closer to what Coleridge described as the relationship between the primary and the secondary imagination – i.e. a relationship that is intra-mental and not one between ‘in here’ and ‘out there’. (Coleridge, I, 202) In short, my thesis here is that the concept of mimesis falls prey to an optical illusion, an epistemological fallacy, which has been at the bottom of much of the misconceptions about the origin and function of art and literature.

Even Shepherd has to admit “that exactly what Aristotle meant by imitation still baffles his commentators.” (47f.) But I think the reason for this bafflement is not Aristotle’s obscurity or the intricacies of his Platonic epistemology but the fallacy I have been talking about.

If Aristotle and his followers had used the concept of simulation or second degree conceptualization, instead, I would be much happier, but mimesis as a key concept was required by his Platonic constructions of reality so that he not only had to insist that poets should imitate ‘natura’ but that they should also do so, if they want to earn their proper place in the scheme of things. By adding ‘catharsis’ to the mimesis myth he bolstered his claims with a theory of effects which would link up the mimetic impulse to an internal emotional switchboard, i.e. a psychological theory designed to assure that imitation would be more than just a mechanical reduplication, would involve something extra that tied it to the needs of the human mind and human society.

Horace added to Aristotle’s recipes a couple of even more problematic notions of what poetry should achieve. According to his famous *Ars Poetica* poetry should

\[
\text{Aut prodesse volunt, aut delectare poetae,} \\
\text{Aut simul et jucunda et idonea dicere vitae (lines 333 – 4)}
\]

Aim at giving profit or delight, or at
Combining the giving of pleasure with some useful precepts for life. (Dorsch 90)

In using the persuasive skills of rhetorical or poetical strategies literature was supposed to represent ‘natura’ within the bounds of probability in a particularly effective way – and this included its idealized as well as its depraved state so that the recipients could learn from it how the human world should be or how to avoid what was bad or dangerous about it. It is easy to see that Christian culture had no problem picking up this moralizing epistemology and Renaissance thinkers adopted the Aristotelian and Horatian premises
and injunctions and used the revived prestige of these ancient authorities to flourish their own intellectual acumen. But they also discovered that these premises did not sit well with their own ambitions and aspirations.

If we ask, what was behind their notion of ‘natura’ it is obvious that they were still a long way away from a concept of nature in an empiricist or even Romantic sense. They stuck to a residual Platonism but “men who thought about the arts in the sixteenth century found it necessary to reforge the whole doctrine and give it a new edge.” (Shepherd 48) And this “new edge” lay in moving away from a Platonic ontology to an interest in mental processes:

... the new bias of humanist inquiry made the mind of man a much more important field of study than it had been before. There is more interest in the process of thinking, in mental analysis ... There is a prime emphasis in Renaissance thought on concept-making. ... The mind manufactures its own intellectual species ... (Shepherd 22f.)

In short, in Humanism and the Renaissance we can observe a more or less obvious radical shift towards a ‘mentalization’ of reality concepts. This also had far-reaching consequences for the mimesis myth. Increasingly writers had a hunch that there was something basically wrong with the Platonic and Aristotelian imitation story because it had tied thinking about the role of art and literature to an intrinsically passive notion of their production. The growing confidence in the ability of man to shape and change his world adumbrated the moment when literature and art would be free from the constraints that traditional thinking had imposed upon them. The mirror-concept of the human mind could then be replaced by a concept of its workings which recognised its primary role and fundamental creativity; poetry could become an important agent of world making. I will analyse an example for these processes in more detail in the second part of my paper.

Yet in spite of these early signs for a paradigm shift in these matters mimesis enjoyed continued popularity because the concept seemed to be reinforced by intellectual movements running parallel to the processes of mentalization described above. The rise of modern sciences, of philosophical empiricism and the theological revaluation of everyday experience as the stage for the drama of election and salvation in Protestantism gave a new lifeline to the mimesis concept. Admittedly, what was imitated now came to mean something completely different, but the growing importance of a concept of nature as physical, empirical reality ultimately underscored the traditional configuration of a relationship between something in the mind and something outside it. ‘Natura’, whether physical or metaphysical, still was first and foremost ‘out there’ rather than ‘in here’ – and this structure remained firmly in place at least until the end of the nineteenth century.

In sum, I think the combination of the prodesse aut delectare-formula with that other shibboleth of poetics ‘Mimesis’ or ‘Imitatio’ has been a serious impediment to progress in understanding what really happens in literature not to speak of our understanding of the working of the human mind which
it implies. The fixation on the mimesis-concept tied debates about the usefulness of literature to its role in helping to make sense of a perceptual world, to understand fate, to guide human behaviour, to instil rules and codes of conduct. It drove the discussions about the status and role of literature into the arms of religion, epistemology and ethics and in most cases into a mixture of them and their various territorial claims. And even in modernism when representation of reality as the guiding principle for artistic production was seriously challenged in theory and practice it remained a central concern 'ex negativo', so to speak.

As long as this was the case, literature and its theory tended to hover uneasily between the different mind-sets of epistemology and ethics and was tied to the 'ut pictura poesis' notion, i.e. to a compartmentalized and perception-focused concept of how the human mind works.

If we accept as a historical fact that human societies have survived and prospered irrespective of whether what they believed about reality was scientifically and empirically right or wrong, then their reality-concepts must have been working first and foremost as mental constructs rather than as approximations to a physical reality or to the natural laws governing them. The rationale of cultural mind-work is fundamentally different from the rationality promoted by the Enlightenment and by scientific thinking.

From this point of view the development of cultures, literature and the arts can be seen as comparable to the laws, governing the development of the modern sciences and of technology. However, its agenda is not understanding and mastering the physical world but managing and optimizing the mind’s potentials and needs. The mind is, after all, not subject to the stringencies of natural laws but to the fractal patterns of cultural dynamics.

What I have been trying so far is to initiate a first step towards a long-overdue revision, which shifts the focus of the debate from world-making and managing to mind-making and mind-management, i.e. to a theory of mind in which reality concepts are primarily seen as cognitive strategies, as exercising, adapting and enlarging the mind’s capacity for information processing and concept building.

The main focus of the argument thus moves to the internal dynamics and development of the human mind and no longer insists on its central role in the construction of a supposedly real world. Radically phrased, my approach involves a redirection of the focus of analysis from an interaction between 'outside world' and mind work to the dynamics of mind work, in short from epistemology to cognition. The point is to see what comes out of such a thought experiment when one takes the world and all it includes to be a function of the mind rather than the other way round. In playing with the world, the mind first and foremost is playing with itself. I think, there are very interesting implications in such an approach for an evolutionary theory of human culture, and the place of literature in it; but this is definitely beyond the scope of this paper.
To give substance to such an argument clearly requires a new theory of mind, and although I think that cognition research holds a number of elements for such a theory already in store, I also think it would overburden the occasion as well as my own small expertise in these fields if I tried to sketch such a new theory in the space of a paper like this. I will, therefore, explore another avenue, stay within the confines of poetics and more generally aesthetics and use one particular historical example to show that in spite of the straightjacket of ‘prodesse aut delectare’ and ‘imitatio’ poets have, with growing urgency, tried to stake out a special claim for poetry or literature when they felt the pressures of cultural change and consequently the need for reinforcing and reshaping the unique contribution of the literature- and art-producing capacities of the mind in preparing it for the challenges of such change.

If Mark Turner and others working in the various branches of cognitive research are right in their assumption that the way in which human minds process information, sort it, store it, retrieve it, visualize and conceptualize it, and combine it to produce new connections and constellations in order to weigh, to decide, to project, to calculate the consequences of a possible course of action – that this mind-way is much closer to what we find in literature and art than in the highly specialized forms of scientific and philosophical argument, then poetological discourses – even if they are paying more than lip-service to the mimesis creed and a didactic version of the ‘prodesse’-injunction – will always also show an insight, however tentative and indirect, into the capacity of literature to optimize the mind’s strategies for dealing with new challenges.

Turner, for instance, argues:

One transcendent story of the mind that has appeared many times in many avatars (myths, scientific or not) is ... that there are certain basic, sober and literal things the mind does; that imaginative and literary acts are parasitical, secondary, peripheral, exotic, or deviant; and that when neuroscience gets its act together, we will come to understand that the brain does things pretty much in the ways we have always expected. On this logic, since imaginative and literary acts are peripheral and exotic, they can safely be ignored, while, as serious scientists we investigate the basics. (Turner 113)

But such a story, Turner continues, completely misses the point: For

It is possible that this story is just wrong at its core. The brain does not seem to work at all in ways we expected it to, based on our notion of stable and unitary concepts. On the contrary, our notion of concepts as stable and unitary seems to be a false guide to neurobiology. Blending may seem exotic to us, but in fact it may have a fundamental neurobiological analogue. It should not be surprising if blending turns out to be basic, not exotic, in the everyday mind. Certainly there is considerable evidence that blending is a mainstay of early childhood thought. (113f.)

And he clinches his argument by saying that, in general
... the processes of the literary mind are usually considered to be different from and secondary to the processes of the everyday mind. On that assumption, the everyday mind – with its stable concepts and literal reasoning – provides the beginnings for the (optional) literary mind. On the contrary, processes which we have already considered to be literary, are at the foundation of the everyday mind. Literary processes like blending make the everyday mind possible. (115)

If literary strategies of using language and concepts are a specific cultural practice to exploit everyday mind-work in a highly sophisticated and creative way then the mimesis myth can be finally laid to rest.

My prime example for the historical exploration I have in mind will be Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry* or *Defense of Poesie* and its implicit Theory of Mind. What I hope to show is that on the surface Sidney seems to reinforce the traditional precepts of ‘prodesse aut delectare’ and of ‘imitatio’ as guiding principles for literature, but if you peel off the layer of traditional concepts one can clearly see that he also has to say a great deal about what literature does in and to the mind and that this is much more important and valuable than what the established authorities such as moral philosophy and historiography are able to do for it. In this way imitation is pushed aside and the needs of the mind take precedence.

Through this strategy I also hope to sharpen our sense of the necessities behind the shifts and moves of poetics in particular cultural contexts, shifts which, I think, are not haphazard, due to chance constellations, exceptional personalities or a happy conjunction of outside influences, but the result of pressures within a given culturally shaped mental system to reorganize its strategies for conceptualization, its processing facilities in order to make them fitter for necessary adaptations to changes in their cultural environments.

What I do not want to support is the idea of a cultural teleology or any kind of cultural determinism that produces such shifts and movements in accordance with some hidden but universal logic, but rather something that Norbert Elias once formulated in the introduction to his “Entwurf zu einer Theorie der Zivilisation”:

In fact, nothing in history indicates that change is brought about “rationally”, through any purposive education of individual people or groups. Change happens by and large unplanned, but it does not happen without a specific type of order. (Elias 313, my translation)

In summary, one could say that all literature and art aspire to a re-conditioning and extension of the human mind.

If one takes Turner’s point about blending to be a metaphorical approximation to what happens in the mind when it is not put in a rationalist straitjacket then we have some sort of idea of the immense flexibility, combinatorial power and plasticity of our minds using language, images, concepts and emotions as switchboards for connecting, sorting and experimenting with everything in their reach.
But with it we also have a Theory of Mind in which Mind reasserts its primacy, particularly when there arises a historical situation in which it just would not do to rely on routinized processes of conceptualization. Such massive shifts occurred in classical antiquity in the lifetimes of Plato and Aristotle and during the Augustan reign in the Roman Empire; they again happened in Renaissance Europe, in Romanticism, in High Modernism and, maybe, again today.

In all these shifts we find thinkers and poets reflecting upon the role of literature in the ways humans see and regulate their world. And in all these text we find hidden or explicitly a sense of urgency in their pleas to use what the literary mind has to offer in terms of conceptual and emotional creativity.

As promised I will use the remainder of this paper to identify such pleas in a more detailed analysis of Sidney’s *Apology*.

Sidney’s *Apology* was probably written between 1581 and 1583 and published posthumously in 1590. It is said to have been a direct response to Stephen Gosson’s *School of Abuse* which had satirically targeted “Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters, and such like Caterpillars of the Commonwealth.” But since Gosson is not mentioned in the text and Sidney’s approach is much more serious and comprehensive, it is likely that he had a more fundamental agenda whatever his original impulse for writing it might have been.

Geoffrey Shepherd conclusively sums up Sidney’s indebtedness to the poetological philosophical traditions in the following way:

His understanding of the nature of poetry is Horatian in main character and derivation, but it is reinforced by a firmer if still mainly indirect knowledge of Aristotle than had been possessed by any earlier theoriser on poetry in England; it is enriched still further with high Platonic notions about ideal forms in art which still retain religious overtones; and it is supported throughout by the technical institutions and moral insistences from an unbroken line of rhetoricians stretching back through the humanists to Quintilian, Cicero, and Isocrates. This is the critical milieu we would expect of a man of Sidney’s intelligence and interests, placed in his chronological position. For us perhaps it appears an intricate inheritance, a complex of traditions which is almost as difficult to unravel as to see whole. (Shepherd 45)

It is true, in the overall design of his argument as well as in many of its details Sidney never directly challenges the venerable precept that poetry (and he uses the term to include all types of literature) has to teach and to delight and that it does it mainly through ‘imitatio naturae’. But he is at great pains also to prove that to understand poetry as ephemeral, as merely a rhetorical embellishment of philosophical truth or of historical facts would be a gross misunderstanding of what it really does. And what he thinks it should really do is far from the representational claims and didacticisms of the traditions which he uses as his starting points. But this situation only becomes clear, if one avoids philologizing Sidney’s text. By writing him back into the intellectual traditions which he uses as a jumping board, one tends to miss what he is really trying to grasp.
Right from the beginning his implicit Theory of Mind assigns to literature a primary role. He does it by separating its achievements from any truth claims. The main line of his argument is an attempt to provide evidence for his conviction that literature is superior to moral philosophy and historiography, that is, if it comes to mind-power and not to giving a true picture of the factual world or to instilling moral ideals.

Poetry ... has been the first light giver to ignorance, poets were rightly called fathers in all learning. With their charming sweetness they drew the wild untamed wits to an admiration of knowledge. (Shepherd 96)

But Sidney’s argument is not that poetry has shown the way from ‘mythos’ to ‘logos’, has done its best in the early days of human development and has since been superseded by higher forms of knowledge such as philosophy and historiography, but that it has established itself as a medium with which the mind expresses and regulates itself in ways that are much more adequate if it comes to know the truth about human affairs and to find out what course of action to take.

Because this is so, philosophers and historiographers, according to Sidney, have always been glad to borrow “both fashion and perchance weight of poets.” (97)

What they did was “stealing from Poetry their passionate descriptions of passions.” (97) Again, our attention is directed to the internal world of the mind, to the cognitive and emotional strategies the mind holds in store and employs.

Poetry provided “a great passport” (97) for everyone to tap the secret and profound sources of the mind. Poetry, one could say, was for Sidney not only a particularly efficient instrument to convey ‘natura’ and guide moral conduct, but it is first and foremost a strategy for enabling the mind to operate at maximum capacity. It optimizes the mind’s ability to look ahead, to experiment with ideas and images thus preparing it for new challenges. Poetry is, in Sidney’s eyes, the only discipline that “looks beyond the confines of nature and morality.” Allowing the poet to freely range “only within the zodiac of his own wit.” (100) Poets look at everything with “the eyes of the mind.” (99)

It is true, he agrees that works of nature are a starting point for poets, but true poets also have the obligation to “making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew forms, such as never were in Nature” (100).

“Nature’s world” – and that is the world which represents the end-horizon for philosophers and historiographers – “Nature’s world is brazen, the poets deliver a golden.” (100) A world, he adds, “which is not wholly imaginative, as we are want to say by them that would build castles in the air, but so far substantially it worketh, not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency, as Nature might have done, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world, to make many Cyruses,” i.e. mental Cyrous that will
provide blueprints for other minds and help them to build and fix concepts of greatness with a strong emotional input. (100)

What Sidney is describing here, one would call today the mind’s capacity for emergence, for creating images, ideas, stories, worlds that unleash the tremendous generative power we have in our minds and that cannot be reduced to mere configurations of so-styled real experience or memories of a real world stored in the brain.

In other words, poetry turns what is already in the mind into something that can become an inexhaustible source for further creativity, in fact into a creative matrix – and cultural history is, after all, an accumulation of such productive matrices.

As I have said, Sidney plays to the gallery by frequently presenting his case for poetry by stressing its role in keeping human beings on the path of virtue or leading them back to it. But that this is not the only, perhaps not even the primary effect he has in mind, comes out clearly, when he attacks the moral philosophers and the historians for ignoring the true needs of the human mind. “Only the poet yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description.” (107)

And the historian knows “better how the world goeth than how his own wit runneth.” (105)

Sidney’s focus here is clearly on a mind doing something for the mind rather than something with, in and to an outside world. He also posits a “literary mind” beyond the specifics of genres and styles. “It is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet. But it is feigning notable images of virtues, vices or what else, with that delightful teaching, which is the right describing note to know a poet by.” (103) Teaching can be interpreted here not as the teaching of moral behaviour, but as training the brain muscle to operate at full capacity.

The effect of poetry is, in terms of its beneficial impact on the operations of the human mind, of universal significance, for it offers:

- a “purifying of wit”,
- an “enriching of memory”,
- an “enabling of judgement” and an “enlarging of conceit” (104)

which, so Sidney, “we commonly call learning” and in helping us on “in the knowledge of a man’s self, in the ethic and politic consideration with the end of well doing and not of well knowing only ... to lift up the mind from the dungeon of the body to the enjoying of his own devine essence” (104).

In this last point, I think, Sidney subtly uses the traditional Christian anthropology to get across a message that is quite un-theological: the message that in literature the mind is at home with itself - uninhibited by the violence and straight-jacketing of rational thinking, the thought-policing of theology and philosophy and the fact-grinding of historiography.

The moral philosopher gives the precept, the historiographer the example, but both remain ineffective because what they say “lieth dark before the imaginative and judging power, ... However, “when illuminated or figured
forth by the speaking picture of poesie,” (107) they take hold of the inward light each mind hath in itself ...” (113) It helps “to feel the inward reason” for following a particular insight, whereas the philosopher setting down with thorny argument the bare rule, is so hard of utterance, and so misty to be conceived, that one that hath no other guide but him shall wade in him till he be old before he shall find sufficient cause to be honest. For his knowledge standeth so upon the abstract and general, that happy is that man who may understand him, and more happy that can apply what he doth understand.

One the other side, the historian, wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine.

Now doth the peerless poet perform both: for whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, he giveth a perfect picture of it in some one by whom he presupposeth it was done; so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example.

A perfect picture I say, for he yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description: which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other doth. (106f.)

This is why “His imagining of matters be so fit for the imagination” that the poet “with his hand of delight doth draw the mind more effectually than any other art does, not to speak of philosophy or historiography.” (109)

So, “Then is the conclusion manifest that ink and paper cannot be to a more profitable purpose employed than in writing poetry ...” (123)

The final deathblow Sidney deals to the pretensions of the philosophers and historians to a privileged access to truth and Nature and, indeed, to the notion that some outside nature or reality, empirical or metaphysical, is the yardstick for what they have to imitate, comes with his assertion: “that the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth.” (123)

The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes. ... In Poesy, looking for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative ground-plot of a profitable invention. (124)

This profitable invention is profitable only, because it is an invention, not an abstracting representation of some truth or reality, but something the mind has made for itself to train and expand its own capacities for making optimal use of its own resources. Maybe this is what McNab once called Salman Rushdie’s “ethics of mutability and possibility” as the ultimate ethical agenda of literature (Hadfield et al. 8).

Shepherd, the authoritative commentator and editor of Sidney’s Apology pinpoints “the difficulty we have in re-stating Sidney’s position” and hopes to reduce them with the help of “chronology”, that is to say by his accurate positioning within the ruling traditions:
Sidney precedes Descartes (1596 – 1650) by little more than one generation. Sidney thinks as a literary man on the eve of Cartesianism. His is a groping forward to a position from which a man would be able to see all the interesting and important processes as taking place within the mind, where even dealings with external things must be with the mind, not the senses, where ultimately the only truly reliable ideas are those that are invented by the thinker himself. (60)

“Sidney”, he concludes, “draws near to this position” but sadly, a traditional philological analysis of the sources and traditions which inspired Sidney and which he uses as points of reference, obscure rather than reveal what is really revolutionary in his approach. Sidney takes the first steps in moving aesthetics out of the stranglehold of epistemology and moral philosophy, a move that eighteenth century theories of the beautiful and the sublime picked up and which Immanuel Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* brought to a philosophical conclusion. But only now, arts and literature as cultural practices for generating knowledge have completed the move from epistemology to cognition, a move that was only possible by discarding the mimesis myth.

Of course, I have deliberately highlighted those arguments from Sidney’s *Apology* that support my claims. Sidney had to engage with the established traditions in order to make his points. He, therefore, couches much of what he has to say in the language and conceptual framework of his time.

But a mind-centred perspective clearly allows us to see below the surface of the text a Theory of Mind which privileges the realities of the mind over concepts that tie its workings too closely to outside reality or an idealised version of it.

Faced with a world that was so much in transition and was undermining most of the certainties of former ages in what was no more than a millisecond of evolutionary time, thinkers like Sidney had perhaps more than a hunch that exploring and exploiting the literariness of the mind might yield a richer harvest than all other efforts to make sense of the new with the help of older traditions.

**Works cited**


