

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN RENAISSANCE POETRY: TWO KINDS OF IMITATION

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THE relation of theory to practice is an old aesthetic crux, no easier to resolve while "history of criticism" tends its separate way as a bylet of history of ideas. To the English literary mind no tendency appears more natural; it complements the implicit dismissal of almost all *a priori* considerations as irrelevant when it comes to evaluating the autonomous work of art. Indeed, the justification is written into our literature. The gap between programme and performance is notorious, no less in a Spenser than a Shelley. George Sampson, in the standard short history of English literature, succinctly formulated the common faith:

Elizabethan criticism may be quoted as an example of the English habit of "muddling through", and arriving at sensible practice after some less sensible theorizing. . . . Fortunately, the poet-critics refused to practise what they preached. Spenser dallied with classical "versing" but wrote *The Faerie Queene*. And the English drama rose up and walked by itself without first aid from criticism.¹

Probably few critics twenty years on would feel easy in committing themselves, even implicitly, to that degree of sturdy chauvinism. When Sampson wrote, it was still just possible to make it a praise of Donne that he owed no Renaissance debts, that he was the poet who—to adapt Poliziano—expressed not Petrarch but his own unique and authoritatively independent self.² But one often has an uncomfortable sense in reading English criticism of Elizabethan poetry in particular (the essays in Boris Ford's *Pelican Guides* provide ready example) that the neglect of the surviving visible signs of what was evidently a great deal of

¹ *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge, 1945), p. 156.

² "Non exprimis (inquit aliquis) Ciceronem. Quid tum? Non enim sum Cicero, me tamen (ut opinor) exprimo" (*Opera* (Basileae, 1553), p. 113).

hard thinking and discussion about the conduct of works of literature, may be another symptom of the characteristic perversity continental scholars attribute to us. English criticism, I recall reading casually in a Florentine journal, "lacks historical perspective", thereby forfeiting claim to scientific disinterestedness; and there followed a notorious schedule of "authors overlooked for decades, then evaluated and interpreted as contemporaries"—and of course hopelessly misinterpreted in consequence.

There seems something more than casual in the neglect in England of recent long-awaited accounts of the literary theory of the Italian Renaissance; a neglect typically evidenced in the unconcern of leading scholarly journals even with getting them reviewed. It is not my immediate purpose to argue that such unconcern might be as distorting of works of art as ignorance of Renaissance iconography and rhetoric has at times demonstrably been. But I think that is a tenable view.

For a truer picture of the matter might show English Renaissance poetry not as an isolated growth or upsurge at all, but as resting like the visible tip of the iceberg upon a substantial basis of theoretical and encyclopaedic work produced in Italy. English poets, in a word, drew on the Italian commentators less directly but not less heavily than did the Italian poets. And as a corollary, what is interesting about the relative courses of English and Italian poetry in the sixteenth century is not so much that English poets often echoed Italian poets, as that one has here two offshoots of the same root, which developed in strikingly different ways. While the one moved without much errancy in the direction of Tasso, and Guarini, and Marino, the other went a more diverse way to its Spenser, Donne, Herbert—on the one hand the court epic, the ravishingly mellifluous madrigal, Arcadia and "secen-tismo"; on the other the long moral allegory, the toughly polemical lyric, the serious wit of the pious poet-divine using verse as a devotional exercise. Milton, most conscious English heir of the great Italian theorists, interestingly spans both worlds.

If there is a key to so various a terrain it is Imitation. But Imitation, at least in the sixteenth century, denoted two quite distinct and equally peremptory principles. The sway of one of

these was coterminous with the Renaissance itself, indeed in a sense was the Renaissance. This was the doctrine of literary imitation as it was sketched by Petrarch and others for the acquisition of Cicero's style, and then applied systematically to the poetry of Petrarch himself. The other became a live force in European poetry with the beginning of the vernacular commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics* in the fifteen-forties. It may stand as the theory of the universal imitation of nature.¹ One remarks that despite their independent origin and development and their material difference of emphasis, these two dogmas are manifestly products of the same outlook, the same technical conditions, and could neither have sprung nor flourished in another soil. To say no more, they exhibit the common dependence on the academic procedures of the day. Technically, their context is that alien environment in which poetry, being "without doubt . . . collocated in order" with Rhetoric and Logic,² shared the functions and particular devices of these disciplines. Materially, they waited on the magpie habit of mind, methodically catered for in Italy, which reduced all knowledge to commonplace matter and found its pickings indifferently in the vast thesauruses and compendia, the emblem-collections, and the dialogues of the philosophers of love. To stress the complex interplay of all these elements is to confess the crude artificiality of any attempt to separate and abridge them.

The theory of petrarchan imitation, which Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* in particular helped to formulate and fix, was the chief determinant of the course of sixteenth-century poetry, and incidentally responsible for a mass of dead wood all over Europe as well as for some of the most exquisite things in the vernacular languages. Its origin, as Bembo rehearses it, suggests both the appeal and the tendency of this most absolute of literary

¹ Some of the ways in which the notion of the imitation of nature bore on Elizabethan drama have been traced by Madeleine Doran in her *Endeavours of Art* (Madison, 1954), especially in chapters 3, 4, and 12. There are recent accounts of Renaissance discussions of imitation in B. Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago, 1961), and in B. Hathaway, *The Age of Criticism* (New York, 1962).

² T. Tasso, *Discorsi Del Poema Eroico*, in *Prose* ed. F. Flora (Milano-Roma, 1935), p. 156.

tyrannies. Like Augustan Latin, the Tuscan of Petrarch and Boccaccio offered a deliverance from the thick-tongued babel of a thousand barbarous years ; in it lay the best if not only the hope of perfecting out of chaos a standard Italian, fit in its purity, subtlety, and elegance to vie with Latin as the language of letters :

molto meglio faremo noi altresì, se con lo stile del Boccaccio e del Petrarca ragioneremo nelle nostre carte, che non faremmo a ragionare col nostro, perciò, che senza fallo alcuno molto meglio ragionarono essi che non ragioniamo noi.¹

Hence the creed (not undisputed, of course) of the sole model :

niuna compositione riuscir lodata et gentile se non fie scritta con imitatione del miglior e più eccellente huomo, che habbia quella lingua, in cui si scrive.²

Hence, likewise, the obsession with style as a static formalization, capable of receiving a new-impersonal perfection.

The product of linguistic and stylistic necessity, "imitation" was fixed in the practice of Bembo and Della Casa as a means to the cultivation of a subtle elegance of manner and an appropriate refinement of technique. Their sonnets play delicate variations on petrarchan themes, for the most part in Petrarch's very language ; in such niceties as modulation of cadence, variation of textures, and the shifting of the caesura lay the only originality they deemed worthwhile. Succeeding poets and theorists made the obvious inference ; and thus began that categorization of the matter of the *Canzoniere* which would make every situation, every conceit, every epithet in Petrarch available to anybody who wished to re-use and re-work it :

Poscia . . . a quello ricorso che fa il mondo oggidì ; e con grandissima diligenza fei un rimario o vocabolario volgare : nel quale per alfabeto ogni parola, che già usarono questi due [Petrarca and Boccaccio] distintamente riposi ; oltre di ciò in un altro libro i modi loro del describer le cose, giorno, notte, ira, pace, odio, amore, paura, speranza, bellezza sì fattamente raccolti, che nè parole nè concetto non usciva di me, che le novelle e i sonetti loro non me ne fossero esempio.³

"Ecco dunque," comments Francesco Flamini, "la poesia ridotta a una meccanica aggregazione di parole e maniere tolte da un frasario." ⁴

¹ P. Bembo, *Prose della volgar lingua*, ed. C. Dionisotti (Torino, 1931), p. 33.

² B. Tomitano, *Ragionamenti della Lingua Toscana* (Venetia, 1545), fol. 252r.

³ A. Broccardo in Sperone Speroni's *Dialogo della Rettorica. Opere* (Venezia, 1740), i. 224.

⁴ *Il Cinquecento* (Milano, 1903), p. 182.

The result of such an outlook, broadly speaking, was bound to be a separation of matter from style or manner, and also a separation of meaning from style, the plain sense from the various figures and conceits with which you might embellish or vivify it, "in che pare che consista la vera via, e laude del poeteggiare".¹ The material could be common, and even negligible, the manner of its application was to be individual; originality lay not at all in what you said but in the way you said it, or at least, in the new use you made of old matter. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this emerges in the work of that Sicilian Gertrude Stein described by Giraldi Cinthio, one Mariano Buonincontro da Palermo, who wrote "i più belli sonetti del mondo quanto alle voci ed alle rime, i quali non dicevano cosa alcuna ed erano senza sentimento."² But for Bembo as for his less lunatic followers, and as for Petrarch in the first place, the serious point lay in the artistic stimulus of rivalry at once with the creator of one's chosen material, and with those who had already made their own use of it:

Et vuole la imitation haver sempre compagna l'emulazion; laquale non è altro, che un fermo desiderio di avanzare colui, che l'huomo imita.³

While Renaissance poets remained strictly bound to the mechanical worship of their own Laura in Petrarch's very figures, the sole prospect of advance or development lay in the direction of the more and more subtle exploitation of the formal or sensuous potentialities of the various vernaculars. One way out of so manifest an *impasse* was offered in a system widely attributed to the cabalist logician Giulio Camillo, but sketched by Vida and many others before he gave it definitive form in his *Del Inventione*. This allowed poets the possibility of leaning heavily on their model and still not reproducing him directly; as, it was plausibly urged, the best of their predecessors had always done more or less systematically, Homer borrowing wholesale from his nebulous antecedents back to Orpheus, Virgil freely annexing and reshaping bits of Homer, Petrarch himself not disdaining to draw on the Sicilians, the "stilnovisti", and Dante. Here the animus

¹ B. Partenio, *Della Imitatione Poetica* (Vinegia, 1560), p. 42.

² Quoted Flamini, *op. cit.* p. 182.

³ G. Giraldi Cinthio, *Discorsi Intorno al comporre dei Romanzi* (Vinegia, 1554), p. 118.

was the famous Horatian comparison of the poet to a bee, a guiding myth with Petrarch long before it was erected into a formal working principle :

apes in inventionibus imitandus, que flores, non quales acceperint, referunt, sed ceras ac mella mirifica quadam permixtione conficiunt.¹

Formally, Camillo's system required the use of the " places " of logic, the minutely subdivided categories of the aristotelian physics into which every existent thing and every possible quality and relationship of things could be analysed. In theory, you took an epithet, figure or conceit, broke it down by reference to the places, and then simply built it up differently by drawing on different places, or different things under the same place. The idea was still basically Petrarch's but the garb had changed ; or, to put it in Camillo's own phraseology, the universal artifice remained constant and you varied the particular circumstances :

Ma volendo nella medesima lingua trattar le già trattate materie, che alle nostre mani veranno, ci potranno far . . . E così mostreremo imitar l'antico nella universal materia, nel suo artificio universale accomodato nondimeno esso artificio alle circostanze della particolar materia all'artificio, nel qual accomodamento potremo mostrar la nostra virtù.²

To imitate without robbery some good figure that Lucretius had made it was only necessary to understand the art of Lucretius, " which was to take arguments from the place of Consequents ",

¹ *De Rebus Familiaribus*, i, vii. Ed. J. Fracassetti (Florentiae, 1859), p. 58. This was a view the revered authority of ancient Rome did not deny ; the assumptions which underlay Roman verse making will stand *literatim* for the Renaissance also : " There was a persistent idea that thought was largely common property, that a number of ideas are naturally inherent in any situation, and that it is not by abandoning or amending these ideas that the poet must show his skill. With such conviction was this view held that well-known reflections and sentiments were listed by literary and rhetorical experts in their text-books, under the heading of ' common-places '. Far from being ashamed of using these, a poet regarded it as legitimate to do so, and indeed highly desirable : originality consisted in expressing them in new terms and in the best possible way " (Michael Grant, *Roman Literature*, Cambridge, 1954, p. 139). Vida advised his young charge that to feel shame in laying hands on material already much handled by others is to give way to a reverence and niceness at enmity with the Muses (*De Arte Poetica*, iii, lines 243-50). Tasso : " E nuovo sarà il poema in cui nuova sarà la testura de' nodi, nuove le soluzioni, nuovi gli episodi che per entro vi sono traposti, quantunque la materia fosse notissima, e da gli altri prima trattata " (*Discorsi Del Poema Eroico*, p. 356).

² *Due Trattati dell'eccellentissimo M. Iulio Camillo* (Venetia, 1544), fol. 23^r.

for "by taking matter from the same I can form equal or better and not in his words".¹ One observes in passing that poems like the *Arcadia* of Sannazzaro and the *Aminta* of Tasso are more than continually allusive, more even than an ingenious "mosaic of classical imitations".² They exemplify a kind of imaginative syncretism which in its quiet suggestion of universal experience perfectly answers a literary ideal of the age.

It is a question whether poets ever mechanically plied Camillo's formula, though later commentators cite Italian users and even give specific illustrations. Its significance is that it recognizes a decisive shift in emphasis, which now appears in the commentators as "removing the iron and making all gold and silver", or "making of the perfect the most perfect by uniting in one the perfections of many"³—a mannerist gloss, if one cares for such terms, on the old commonplace that poets seek glory as their proper due. Bembo's nostrum of Imitation has yielded a possibility unanticipated by him, that of showing originality by the way you adapted or re-pointed the stock device, theme, or situation. From Du Bellay's conception of the humble emulation of discipleship,⁴ one passes to the confident assumption of rivalry and the struggle for the advantage. A poet's greatest honour depends on his model being known; victory is to him who "farà che l'altrui materia nostra propria diverra . . . quasi lo trasforma; hora mutando, hora aggiugendo e alle volte tralasciando delle cose"—as a piece wrought of another's metal is the glory of the workman and not of the owner of the metal.⁵

¹ *Due Trattati dell'eccellentissimo M. Iulio Camillo* (Venetia, 1544), fol. 33v.

² J. Hutton, *The Greek Anthology in Italy to the year 1800* (Ithaca, New York, 1935), p. 331, n. 1.

³ Both phrases, in fact, were given currency by Camillo himself, op. cit. fols. 38v and 41v. Thereafter they occur everywhere. Paolo Beni, for example, praises Tasso for changing the copper of Homer and the silver of Virgil into fine gold (*Comparatione Di Homero, Virgilio E Torquato* (Padova, 1607), p. 40). But the humanist concern with refinement of form and style had not entirely evaporated: "perchè la novità del poema si considera più tosto a la forma, che a la materia" (T. Tasso, *Discorsi Del Poema Eroico*, p. 356).

⁴ "Immitant les meilleurs aucteurs Grecs, se transformant en eux, les devorant . . . les convertissant en sang et nourriture" (*La Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Francaise*, ed. H. Chamard (Paris, 1948), p. 42).

⁵ B. Partenio, op. cit. pp. 26 and 31.

It is a shorter step to the belief that poetic merit lies precisely in the adroitness and ingenuity with which the given metal is handled, that without such reworking of known material “ non si sarebbe punto faticato, ne havrebbe mostrata agutezza d'ingegno in trovarlo, e perciò non meriterebbe lode ”.¹ Tasso saw the opposite dangers besetting poets in the fifteen-seventies as the lure of the “ arguzie ” of the sophists, “ which stuff many compositions pleasing to the world ”, and the dominance of or intemperate indulgence in “ the condiment of music ”.² The point is not taken further, and it is possible that this “ condiment ” is the musical setting of the poem rather than the sensuous element which Tasso himself most notoriously over-indulged. But the interest of the warning lies in its implicit recognition that wit has joined grace as offspring of Imitation.

Hardly less important is the habit of thought Camillo's system reveals. It is not so much a commonplace as an unquestioned article of faith with late Renaissance writers on poetry that figures are produced by reference to the places or topics, “ from which not only arguments but almost all inventions of all artifices derive ”³; and the benefit ascribed to Camillo was the rediscovery of a technique neglected since Petrarch :

e Giulio Camillo da poi mostro esso usata da' poeti, particolarmente dal Petrarca nel formar l'elocuzione topica, che fu cavata da quelli stessi luoghi, da' quali si traggono gli argomenti. . . .⁴

But the profitable use of these “ luoghi degli argomenti, che debbono usare i poeti ”⁵ could not be casual ; it required a “ knowledge of the nature of things ”, which in practice meant a copious supply of commonplace matter, and it inescapably implied the systematic analysis and comparison of attributes or properties :

conchudiamo che sommamente giovi il saper de le cose, a l'esser buono, e leggiadre poeta . . . le proprieti, gli accidenti, le variationi, gli effetti, le somiglianze, a le ripugnanze di esse cose.⁶

¹ L. Castelvetro, *Poetica D'Aristotele Volgarizzata et Sposta* (Basilea, 1576), p. 28.

² *La Cavalletta ovvero Della Poesia Toscana*, in Tasso, *Dialoghi Scelti*, ed. A. Mortara (Milano, 1878), p. 180.

³ G. Camillo, op. cit. fol. 7^r.

⁴ T. Tasso, *La Cavalletta*, p. 175.

⁵ Ibid. p. 176.

⁶ B. Tomitano, *Ragionamenti della Lingua Toscana*, fol. 86^r.

The making of figures, in a word, turned precisely on the exploitations of these "somiglianze" and "ripugnanze" in things, "nor can he fitly find them who does not recognize the similitude of things in dissimilitude . . . whereby it appears that it properly belongs to "gli ingegni filosofici" to find them".¹

The tendency of a physics which treated objects qualitatively, as bundles of attributes divinely preordained, is unmistakable in the innumerable illustrations of figurative usages cited in such works as Camillo's *L'Idea del Teatro*. It is to concentrate attention on the manipulation of attributes conventionally ascribed, and in particular on meaningful correspondences of attributes. Emblemism and Cariteanism, the poles of sixteenth-century metaphorical usage, are alike implicit in the mental habit of the time. The question between them is just whether the attribute stands for concept or thing, whether the ingenuity lies in the complex of meanings packed into or teased out of a figure, or in the item-by-item materialization of its properties :

On a round ball
A workman that hath copies by, can lay
An Europe, Afrique, and an Asia,
And quickly make that, which was nothing, *All*,
So doth each teare,
Which thee doth weare,
A globe, yea world by that impression grow,
Till thy teares mixt with mine doe overflow
This world, by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolved so.

In use, from Petrarch to Donne, the two devices were complementary, and subtly interwoven.

The earliest breaches in the empery of Imitation were of course not made by professed anti-petrarchans like Berni or Aretino, the inevitable "scimie de la musa altrui"² who cock a snook at the dignity of their master by standing his art on its head or putting it to base uses. Nor were the first material modifications of the petrarchan fabric always felt as breaches. One sees, where the poets could not, the radical drift of the subtle redirection of concern induced by the moral pressure of the

¹ T. Tasso, *Discorsi Del Poema Eroico*, p. 462.

² The phrase is Giordano Bruno's in his tirade against petrarchism, *De Gl' Heroici Furori*, ed. F. Flora (Torino, 1928), p. 34.

counter-reformation. Here the cruder manifestations must serve as example. There was in Italian verse a self-conscious tradition of repentance and "spiritualization", whose roots are in Petrarch's own turn from the poems *In Vita* to those *In Morte*, and whose archetypal sanction is Savonarola's *Trionfo della Croce*, a strange visionary piece in which the secular Triumph is elaborately paralleled in a formal pageant of Christ.¹ Il Magnifico's *Laudi*, turning to leaden-footed piety the pagan "carnascialeschi" of a lighter day, are possibly the best known examples² :

Quant' è bella giovinezza
 Che si fugge tuttavia
 Chi vuol esser lieto, sia
 Di doman non c'è certezza.

The recasting hardly endears one to the later mood :

Quanto è grande la bellezza
 di te, Virgin santa e pia.
 Ciascun laudi te, Maria ;
 ciascun canti in gran dolcezza.

There was, moreover, an ancient disposition to find a Dante in Petrarch by conferring symbolic status on his Laura. She was an "idea universale di bellezza e leggiadra" to whom Petrarch had assigned "tutte le perfettioni in commune"³ : or she was something more : "la Vincitrice è Madonna Laura, e per lei la castità e la ragione intendendo."⁴

But the Council of Trent sponsored a systematic attempt to put literature in the service of God ; and it was not merely policy but the inescapable undertow of notions of Imitation that

¹ There is an account of this work in English, with translated excerpts, in M. F. Jerrold, *Vittoria Colonna* (London, 1906), pp. 288-9.

² Very many such examples of "spiritualized" "carnascialeschi" are recorded from Savonarola's regimen in Florence. See the thirteen-page "Tavola dei Canti Carnascialeschi Soggetti a Travestimento Spirituale" in W. Ghisi, *I canti carnascialeschi nelle fonti musicali del XV e XVI secolo* (Firenze, 1937), pp. 90-102. N. A. Robb describes Benivieni's spiritualization of his own petrarchan-neoplatonic love-lyrics (*Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance* (1935), p. 112). Vasari has a celebrated account of Piero di Cosimo's shock use of Alamanni's hymn *al carnascialesco*, "Dolor, pianto e penitenza" (*Le Vite De' Piu Excellent Pittori, Scultori, e Architetti* (Firenze, 1851), vii. 116-18).

³ Tomitano, op. cit. fol. 116^r.

⁴ *Il Petrarca con l'espositione di Messer G. A. Gesualdo* (Venetia, 1581), fol. 380^{v-r}.

suggested the exploitation of prevailing tastes as a likely stratagem. The most direct outcome of this policy was the actual rewriting of Petrarch's text, so that all his passion for Laura became directed to Christ, and the *In Morte* poems, with their real hint of the "contemptus mundi", crowned the whole—a work which elicited fantastic feats of pious virtuosity.¹ No such overt excess, naturally, commended itself to poets in a Protestant country, where in any event the letter of the *Canzoniere* was less law than hearsay. Native moralizers, of whom there were plenty from the first, did better in homespun.² But the outpouring of witty piety which developed in England in the fifteen-nineties is in the direct line of counter-reformed Petrarch. The Jesuit Southwell told the love-poets that he would "weave a new webbe in their own loome".³ Putting aside Southwell himself, and his immense debt to the petrarchizing Tansillo, one finds religious poets appropriating the sonnet-form, traditional vehicle of love, and drawing on all the techniques and much of the matter of contemporary love-poetry: Lok, Constable, Alabaster, to name no more. More important, one turns to Donne. The tendency plainly did much to form Donne's approach to pious poetry—witness the sheer amount of petrarchan material of all kinds, finely transformed to be sure, in the *Holy Sonnets*, not to mention the *Anniversaries*:

What if this present were the worlds last night?
Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell,

¹ Virgilian phrases were being ingeniously patched together into pious and impious centos at least as early as the Fourth Century (see O. Delepierre, *Tableau de la litt. du centon chez les anciens et les modernes*, Paris, 1875). The medieval *Ovide moralisé* evidences more than the inability of the pre-Renaissance mind to cope with antiquity on antiquity's own terms. But these were out-dexterited a hundred times over by such as Malipiero, Salvatorino, Sannazzaro, Stefano Colonna. Niccolò Franco mockingly speaks of "il Petrarca commentato, il Petrarca imbrodolato, il Petrarca tutto rubato, il Petrarca temporale e il Petrarca spirituale" (*Le pistole vulgari* (Venezia, 1538), fol. 191^r). A. Graf, *Attraverso il Cinquecento* (Torino, 1926), has the best account of these sixteenth-century re-handlings of Petrarch.

² Crude moralizations of lyrics by Wyatt, Vaux, Elderton, and many others, are described by H. E. Rollins in his editions of Tottel and of the *Handful of Pleasant Delights*. John Hall's *The Court of Vertue* (1565), the locus classicus for these English moralizations, has recently been edited by Russell A. Fraser.

³ Dedication of *Saint Peters Complaynt*, 1595.

The picture of Christ crucified, and tell
 Whether that countenance can thee affright,
 Teares in his eyes quench the amasing light,
 Blood fill his frownes, which from his pierc'd head fell . . .

Or still more explicit :

O might those sighes and teares returne again
 Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent,
 That I might in this holy discontent
 Mourn with some fruit, as I have mourn'd in vaine ;
 In my Idolatry what showres of raine
 Mine eyes did waste ? what griefs my heart did rent ?

Evidently, part of the wit of this lies precisely in the use, for a devout purpose, of material whose secular if not immoral origin its readers are expected to recognize at once. Like Spenser's *Four Hymnes*, and Pico's "steps", more self-consciously than Michelangelo's last sonnets, it resolves the old tug-of-war between the two kinds of love by assimilating the lower into the higher and demonstrating love's true centre.

English secular poets were always loosely bound to Petrarch, tending to take his devices and turns of phrase at secondhand through such as Alamanni or Marot, and adulterating them liberally with the old ends of Ovidian mythology, or the "goodly exiled train of gods and goddesses" from the Planudian Anthology and the Anacreonta. But in general it was not until the last decade of the sixteenth century that there was any major attempt to modify the spirit or the trappings of Italian petrarchism. What happened then was local, and in itself perhaps little enough. It amounts to a decisive shift, in some quarters, in the delicately kept balance between wit and grace, together with a sudden break from the confined field of courtly imagery in favour of the most remote and unlikely material. Both possibilities had long been anticipated by commentators and notorious outbreaks had already occurred in Italy ; but these were matters for warning, not praise. Particular targets of obloquy ranged from devices exhibiting the "cieca notte" of deliberate obscurity, to the sort of figurative excess that proclaimed "che i capelli della sua donna vincono di bellezza il Sole",¹ or caused rivers to be dried up with the fire of

¹ G. Ruscelli, *Del Modo Di Comporre In Versi* (Venetia, 1582), p. 18.

lovers, ships to be propelled by their sighs and the like,¹ or dubbed the stars the nails of heaven.² More generally, the objection was to the smell of the lamp, and the obscurity, that resulted from “transporting from afar”,³ from taking figures from “troppo remoto genere”,⁴ and even “dal contrario”,⁵ or “dall’arti, o dalle scienze lontane dalla capacità e dall’uso commune del popolo”⁶ :

quei concetti, che dal più intimo seno della filosofia e dell’altre scienze nella poesia sono trasportati . . . non tanto recan seco di novità quanto difficoltà, ne tanto di maestà quanto d’oscurità e d’orrore, e più tosto sono come nemici aborriti da gli uomini communi, che come stranieri o peregrini guardati or rimirati.⁷

Orthodox disapproval no doubt served to whet some appetites. At all events, the English successors of Sidney and Spenser, the poets of the sonnet sequences of the fifteen-nineties, went through all the old amorous motions of the *petrarchisti* but with the most fantastic range of properties and the most fantastic ingenuity in applying them. A favourite field of images and diction, significantly, was that of the learned professions. You wrote about your love in the technical terms of law, or medicine, or geography, demonstrating your wit by the brave dexterity with which you found or made more and more correspondences between the situation and the science or its jargon :

How often hath my pen (mine heart’s Solicitor!)
 Instructed thee in Breviat of my case!
 While Fancy-pleading eyes (thy beauty’s Visitor!)
 Have patterned to my quill, an angel’s face.
 How have my Sonnets (Faithful Counsellors!)
 Thee, without ceasing moved for Day of Hearing!

¹ G. Fracastoro, *Naugerius, Sive De Poetica Dialogus* (Illinois, 1924), p. 69.

² T. Tasso, *Discorsi Del Poema Eroico*, p. 528. Tasso censures a number of poets, including Dante, for the vanity displayed in the laboured violence or extravagance of their figures : one who said that his mistress’s eyes were arquebuses on wheels and her eyebrows Turkish Arches ; another who feigned that Charon had made a boat of the arrows launched at him by Love, and plied it on the river of his tears; another who spoke of the body as “carnal cloister” and “carnal nest”.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 457-8.

⁴ B. Bulgarini, *Alcune Considerazioni* (Siena, 1583), p. 90. This is the chief ground of a slashing attack on Dante’s metaphors.

⁵ G. Mazzoni, *Difesa di Dante* (Cesena, 1573), fol. 41^r.

⁶ L. Castelvetro, *Poetica D’Aristotele*, p. 450.

⁷ T. Tasso, *Le Considerazioni Sopra Tre Canzoni Di G. B. Pigna*, in *Le Prose Diverse di Torquato Tasso*, ed. C. Guasti (Firenze, 1875), ii. 122.

While they, my Plaintive Cause (my faith's Revealers!)
 Thy long delay, my patience, in thine ear ring.
 How have I stood at bar of thine own conscience ;
 When in Requesting Court my suit I brought!
 How have thy long adjournments slowed the sentence,
 Which I (through much expense of tears) besought!¹

Or again you ingeniously wrenched to your service some quite unpromising piece of mythology, or remote lore. One poet, Shelley-like, sees himself as Acteon pursued by his own raging thoughts.² Another represents himself and his mistress as a couple of snakes, differing from other snakes only in that she revives by his death, instead of waning with him.³ Henry Constable likens his mistress's image to Mahomet's coffin magically held aloft for veneration against the ceiling of the temple of his heart.⁴ Even the sober Daniel made of his face "a volume of despairs" wherein one might read the "tragic Iliad"—that is to say, his unrequited love described entirely in terms of the sack of Troy.⁵

Evidently a precipitating factor here was a more deep-seated change, which the content of this *fin de siècle* verse accurately mirrors. For all their wit, one cannot conceive of a Wyatt, an Oxford, a Sidney, joining in the academic knockabout of their latest heirs. Their milieu and station put them worlds away from the thrusting exhibitionism of Sidney Lee's young logic-choppers. But this is exactly what one might expect the competitive and professionally disputatious society of the universities and the Inns of Court to foster. The technical disturbance marks the beginning of the shift from a court-centred to a

¹ Anon. *Zepheria*, Canzon 20. In S. Lee, *Elizabethan Sonnets* (1904).

² B. Barnes, *Parthenophe*, xlix. Daniel also has the figure (*Delia*, v); as, of course, does Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 1, i. 21-23.

³ R. Tofte, *Laura*, xx.

⁴ *Diana*, iv. 4.

⁵ *Delia*, xlii. Chapman illustrates the telescoping of a tradition that makes "everything at once" the note of English poetry in the 1590s. In a volume published in 1595 he gives us, cheek by jowl, a set of thirty sextets in which he hawks his love through the zodiac, as Barnes had done just before with the same calculated eroticism, and a sequence of ten sonnets devoted to the high-flown petrarchan praises of "his Mistress Philosophy" at the expense of "Muses that sing Love's sensual empery" (*The Amorous Zodiacke* and *A Coronet for his Mistressse Philosophie*, printed together with *Ovid's Banquet of Sence* and *The Amorous Contention of Phillis and Flora*).

profession-centred poetry. As far as English petrarchism is concerned, there was no going back on that. But the legacy of the alternative allegiance later petrarchism allowed, to witty grace, or to wit in chief, is the distinction we recognize in our orthodox talk of a school of Ben and a school of Donne.

For in the limited sense of conforming to the technical pattern and accepting the logic of development Donne is wholly within the tradition of petrarchism and imitation; and despite his cynical "berniesque" pose, he is also petrarchan in much of his trappings. His metrical advances apart, he stands out as a technical innovator in two main ways. Firstly, in accordance with the notion of eclectic imitation which the Italian mannerists had lately taken up from Cicero, he carried the tradition a stage nearer its dissolution and frequently ranged well outside Petrarch and the petrarchan for his motifs and attitudes—to the Italian dialoguists of love, for example. Secondly, he found his witty manner in a school which had long reserved the word "wit" for its own ingenious processes, and in whose service he was all but professionally bound—the University Faculties, and the Inns of Court, with their overriding attention to skill in rhetorical disputation. We pass from Petrarch's own embellishing material and its late accretions, to the learned jargon of the sonneteers of the nineties, and then to Donne. And Donne's step forward—still speaking of technique—consists of a thoroughgoing application of rhetorical skills, a habitual adoption of the appropriate polemical stance and manner, and the introduction of the sort of embellishing material which rhetoricians were apt to draw from well-stuffed commonplace books to build up their case—scraps of geography, astrology, physics, alchemical lore, legal argument, metaphysics and the like. Even here, to be accurate, one has to add that in this last respect at least he had been anticipated casually by poets as far apart as Lorenzo de' Medici and Giambattista Pigna.

One need not doubt the truth of Professor Praz's observation that "Donne must have actually felt in opposition to the poetry of his day". But Praz's qualifying concession seems to miss the crucial point about the *Songs and Sonets*: "and if he still remained a Petrarchist to some extent, this is due to the fact that,

no matter how strong one's personal reaction is, one cannot avoid belonging to a definite historical climate."¹ Donne's was a personal reaction which drew its strength from his remaining a "Petrarchist to some extent", an individuality, and unorthodoxy, which essentially turned on the deliberate entertaining of much that was stock. If the *Songs and Sonets* present a conspectus of the love-motifs of the day, it is because Donne's brilliance exhibits itself precisely in the insouciant newness of his approach and treatment; his is a revolution within a frame, an art that revolves round fixed points of reference.

Usually these points of reference are petrarchan, or whatever had been assimilated into the lax provincial petrarchism of the late sixteenth century. Sometimes, as in "The Extasie", and "Aire and Angells", they are not. We are aware now that the arguments and ideas about the relative importance of body and soul in love, which have led some to exalt "The Extasie" as a decisive step in the evolution of a modern understanding, are not original in the poem.² They are taken, whether directly or not, from such common Italian sources as Leone Ebreo, Tullia d'Aragona, and Sperone Speroni. However private the origin or motive, Donne has chosen to cast his communication in a public form. He has brought the personal and the particular under the general, firstly by presenting it entirely in the terms of received doctrine, and then by concentrating his effort on the poetic realization, or (in Campanella's apt term) the vivification³ of the chain of ideas this involves. Conceivably the poem loses thereby. It is not a contribution to knowledge, or a unique perception, or an immediate record of personal experience and passion; to approach it as one approaches the Immortality Ode, or "Dover Beach", or "The Wreck of the Deutschland", or *Four Quartets*, is to risk misvaluing it totally. But possibly it is our romantic preconceptions which need revision.

¹ *The Flaming Heart* (New York, 1958), p. 198.

² See Helen Gardner, "The Argument about 'The Ecstasy'" in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies presented to F. P. Wilson* (Oxford, 1959), and the present writer's "The Metaphysic of Love", *R.E.S.*, N. S. ix (1958), 362-75, reprinted in F. Kermode, *Discussions of John Donne* (Boston, 1962), pp. 150-60.

³ T. Campanella, *Tutte Le Opere*, ed. L. Firpo (Milano, 1954), i. 861.

“Aire and Angells” has always been obscure because the distinction Donne elaborates with his finespun analogies from metaphysics and from angel-lore was neither known nor sought :

Then as an Angell, face, and wings
Of aire, not pure as it, yet pure doth weare,
So thy love may be my loves spheare ;
Just such disparitie
As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie,
'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee.

Again it is Speroni who gives us the clue to this. In his *Dialogo di Amore* three distinguished poets and an equally distinguished poetess-courtesan debate the issue whether a man's or a woman's love is to be adjudged the more perfect. The moral question divides them ; but on the facts, “la condizion delle cose”, they are at one : man's love is more ardent and quick to kindle than woman's because although a woman may have great love in her heart, it cannot operate there until the man actuates it, when it returns to her from him “like a victorious conqueror”, and achieves its effect with redoubled force.¹ The critical analogy discriminates firstly between love and a one-sided posture such as admiration, which falls short of love, and then between the way a man loves and the way a woman loves. The poet's love is neither manifest nor operative until it is given a “spheare” by his mistress's love in return ; an unreturned love lacks the very means of *being* love, which is a mutual condition ; and the “disparitie” is that between an initiating agent, and the potentially responsive stuff it activates and fashions to its own likeness.

The poem emerges, in fact, as a piece of pure art—an extremely witty, finely written and wholly individual, vivification or realization of a common-place distinction *which it is assumed the reader knows* ; as elsewhere he would be expected to know the aube and the valediction and the celebration of faithful love and the curse and the dream and the reassurance in absence ; and not least, the terms in which these motifs had been handled up till then. The prerequisite of late Renaissance art was an audience of sophisticates ; the *Songs and Sonets* assume more literary sophistication than most. And it is with Donne, not because of his contrary example, that this particular line of inheritance from

¹ *Opere* (Venezia, 1740), i. 33.

the theory of imitation comes to an end. The vein was worked out ; but it could not in any case have survived the vast subterranean shifts of the advancing seventeenth century.

The theory of universal imitation is more tenuous. Its emergence in the commentaries on the *Poetics* which loom so large among Italian critical activities after the fifteen-forties was a result of one of those happy misemphases which enliven the history of ideas. For Aristotle's "imitation" appeared to these writers to justify finally a favourite medieval idea, supported by rhetoricians, persistently waved in the faces of opponents of poetry even by such early apologists as Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Salutati, vehemently denied by the like of Savonarola. The function of poetry, one hears over and over, is to teach through delight, to persuade pleurably to good ; and the mode of teaching is "per fabulam", that is to say, the allegorical mode. It was common doctrine in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance alike that the distinguishing characteristic of the poet is his power of inventing fables or fictions :

Poema quidem inventio est hominis fictum aliquid vel ut fictum referens ¹

non gli viene però il nome, ma del fingersi, a farsi le favole ²

bisogna che egli usi la favola, per la quale è chiamato poeta, cioè fingitore et imitatore ³

Favola entra in tutte le poese, le quali senza lei non possono havere l'essere, ed è la principale, e come anima della poesia ⁴

His opponents here grounded their traditional charge of father of lies, and his friends their defence of utterer of shrouded truths :

Poeta delectatus est tegere fabulis veritatem ⁵

quasi gemma lintheo obvolutas ostendere . . . quae circumfusum vero est allegoriarum velo, ille sibi velint fabulae ⁶

le favole dei poeti, e lor magnifiche inventioni, le quali semplicemente sposte, paiono bugie, ma dentro di se, o diletto con l'artificio, o giovamento, con la moral significatione, ci apportano grandemente.⁷

¹ Coluccio Salutati, *Epistolario*, ed. F. Novati (Roma, 1905), iv. 177.

² Giraldo Cinthio, *Discorsi*, p. 55.

³ A. Lionardi, *Dialogo Della Inventione Poetica . . . Et Del Modo Del Finger La Favola* (Venetia, 1554), p. 61.

⁴ L. Castelvetro, *Poetica D'Aristotele*, p. 11.

⁵ Boccaccio, *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* (Venetiis, 1473), fol. 8^v.

⁶ Petrarch, *Opera* (Basileae, 1554), p. 868.

⁷ B. Tomitano, *Lingua Toscana*, fol. 89^v.

It is curious how this notion of poetry as indirect moral agent impressed itself on Renaissance commentators in spite of their own literary practice ; so much so that their sole means of justifying their veneration for the ancients was to make allegory of them. Petrarch expounded at length, and with great subtlety, the " covered senses " of the *Aeneid*.¹ Boccaccio demonstrated prescriptively how Greek myths were to be understood at the four formal levels.² Half the ensuing Renaissance turned Petrarch himself into allegory, in his turn, seeing in him " filosofo naturale, e morale " ³ and in Laura " una Idea divina e d'una Dea mortale ",⁴ or " Philosophia prima, e della Theologia poi " ⁵ or a type of perfect womanhood " senza macchia, o imperfettione alcuna ",⁶ as they felt inclined.

Aristotle's definition of poetry as imitation was evidently not propounded with any idea of allegory in mind. The truth it conveys is simpler—that poetry, and particularly dramatic poetry, represents life, portrays men behaving as they do indeed behave, aims at a verisimilar account of actions and motives and passions. And when he said that it should seek to do this universally he is surely laying down the essential condition of a serious art, that the imitation or representation should be significant ; it must appeal beyond particular character and situation, which might be

¹ *De quibusdam fictionibus Virgili (Rerum Senilium, Lib. iiiii, s. iv)*, in *Opera*, ed. cit. p. 867. See also his defence of poetry against his Carthusian brother, *De Rebus Familiaribus*, in *Opera*, ed. U. Bosco (Firenze, 1926-42), 10 :4 :2.

² He instances the episode in which Perseus, son of Jove, kills the Gorgon and then escapes into the heavens. This has, in addition to its historical sense, a moral import, the victory of the prudent over vice and the demonstration of the path to virtue ; an allegorical import, the elevation of the mind to pious things and its disdain for earthly things ; and an analogical import, the ascent of Christ to His Father having vanquished the prince of this world (*Genealogia*, 8^v). He has a long exposition of the allegorical senses of the Dido episode in the *Aeneid* (259^r-260^v), and in many places attributes allegorical intentions to Petrarch. Coluccio Salutati follows him in the formal interpretation of myth, *De sensibus allegoricis fabularum Herculis*. Cristoforo Landino, in the last two books of his *Quaestiones camaldulenses* (c. 1475), presents the *Aeneid* as an ideal history of the soul and a celebration of the contemplative life.

³ Bernardo Tasso, *Ragionamento della Poesia* (Vinegia, 1563), fol. 8^r.

⁴ G. P. Capriano, *Della Vera Poetica* (Vinegia, 1555), fol. F^r.

⁵ B. Daniello, *Della Poetica* (Vinegia, 1536), p. 28.

⁶ Capriano, op. cit. fol. F2^v-^r.

quite singular if not unique, to issues which deeply concern all human beings just because they are human.

But this is not how his commentators took him, from Robortello on. Reading into him their own preoccupation with direct moral profit, they understood his asseveration that the poet imitates more universally than the historian to prescribe the condition on which a character might become an exemplar of some virtue or vice. Robortello said that if the poet wishes to depict Ulysses wise in the performance of actions he should not consider him as he was, but setting particular circumstances aside, should transfer him into the realm of the universal and depict him in the way in which the perfect wise and ingenious man is ordinarily described by the philosophers.¹ The imitation, in fact, was to be ideal—not the man as he was, but as he ought to have been. Bernardo Segni strains from Aristotle's warning about the imitation of hard or ferocious traits of character (*Poetics*, ii, xv) an injunction to feign always "per esempio dell'una o dell'altra qualità di costume"—as Homer gave in Achilles example of "Fortezza".² In Minturno, shortly after, this becomes a categorical assertion that the major characters in tragedy and Comedy alike are to stand for one salient virtue or vice; and he gives a list of examples from the various literary kinds, which includes Ulysses, Aeneas, Nestor, Achilles, Terence's Pamphilio, Laura, and significantly, Beatrice. When he goes on, as Castelvetro will later go on, to locate the moral advantage of Comedy in its portrayal of characters who each stand, "universally", for some one particular vice, so arousing first laughter, and then disgust at that vice, we may feel that we have the kernel if not the very programme of the satiric comedy of humours:

Ma come l'universale si tratti; il Comico più d'ogni altro nel dimostra . . . [The office of comedy] Qual altro sarà, che d'insegnare e diletta? . . . soavemente direzzare i fanciulli a buona maniera di vivere costumamente; la vita anche loro amendare.³

¹ *Francisci Robortelli Utinensis in librum Aristotelis de Arte poetica explicationes* (Firenze, 1548), p. 91.

² *Poetica d'Aristotile* (Firenze, 1549), p. 314.

³ A. Minturno, *L'Arte Poetica* (Venetia, 1563), pp. 39 and 112. Castelvetro gives his account of the "universal" mode of the old comedy at *Poetica D'Aristotele*, p. 106.

Bawd, squire, impostor, many persons more,
 Whose manners, now call'd humours, feed the stage ;
 And which have still been subject for the rage
 Or spleen of comic writers. Though this pen
 Did never aim to grieve, but better men ;
 . . . But when the wholesome remedies are sweet,
 And in their working gain and profit meet,
 He hopes to find no spirit so much diseased,
 But will with such fair correctives be pleased . . .¹

Of course, the comedy of humours owes larger debts than that to Renaissance interpretations of the *Poetics*, with their symptomatic fixation on characterization by dominant attributes. It draws on the *Commedia dell'Arte* and the formal Italian comedy of Machiavelli, Aretino, and their like ; and with these it looks to medieval physiology, and ultimately to the old Roman comedy. In this general sense the "humour" exemplifies the other sort of Imitation as a further product of Renaissance italianizing and classicizing—of the spirit which drew men "to observe, how the best writers have imitated, and follow them".² But the prototype of the man in his humour was by and large a stock grotesque : the man himself is expected to be a crude symbol also. Stage comedy has acquired a permanent moral overlay ; it is "docere cum iucunditate"³ given dramatic body by ideal imitation.⁴

¹ Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, Prologue.

² Ben Jonson, *Timber*, in *Works* ed. Herford and Simpson (Oxford, 1925-52), viii. 639.

³ This is Scaliger's rendering of Horace, in *Poetics*, vii, 4.

⁴ There are curious crosscurrents. The irony of Renaissance interpretations of Ideal Imitation is that they err by authority of Aristotle himself. For it was Aristotle's definition of character as a common human type which prompted the Theophrastian portrait, with its single-trait typical characterization—the mean man, the arrogant man, the superstitious man. And Theophrastus led straight to the medieval exemplum : Absalom as the paradigm of beauty, Solomon of wisdom, Croesus of wealth, Esther of meekness, Penelope of wifely devotion, or whatever. It was a recognized hortatory stratagem of Renaissance orators to "canalize reflections on every human quality into a portrait of an ideal type whether cardinal, soldier or courtier" (J. Hale, "War and Public Opinion in the Renaissance" in *Italian Renaissance Studies*, ed. E. F. Jacob (1960), p. 98); and in funeral oratory in particular the portrait might be rendered as an account of a specific person. Renaissance biographers and historians, far from shrugging off this homiletic shackle, show at best a transitional equivocality or uncertainty of aim. Wolsey's career is an obvious occasion of a sermon on the dangers of worldly pride (G. Cavendish, *Negotiations of Thomas Woolsey*, 1641). Sidney

It may not be extravagant indeed to see both typical characterization and the satiric comedy of humours as broad expressions of that iconological habit whose subtle authority in all Renaissance arts we have only lately come to appreciate.¹ For technically their provenance is the same, and the same marks of the time put them at a remote distance from us. Spingarn, sixty years ago, observed in drawing attention to a Jonsonian definition of humour in the Florentine rhetorician Salviati, that the ground of the rigid classification of character-traits which underlay ideas of decorum and humour alike was rhetorical, and general :

Every such element, when once discriminated and definitely formulated, became fixed as a necessary and inviolable substitute for the reality which had thus been analysed.²

My concern here is with the way in which sixteenth-century interpretations of universal imitation fused and formalized elements already implicit in the common intellectual traffic ; as,

apparently interested even the seventeenth century less as a highly individual personality than as moral type—a formal and generalized model of gentlemanly virtues (Fulke Greville, *The Life of the renowned Sir Phillip Sidney*, 1652). It is an unluckier matter when Michelangelo's devoted Boswell, Ascanio Condivi, puts his years of " observation and gathering together " of the " sayings, actions, and habits " of his master in the service of an idealized portrait of the artist-type made by selecting " tutto quello che mi paresse degno o di maraviglia o di imitazione o di laude in tutta la sua vita ", to the end of " giovar ancor agli altri . . . con l'esempio d'un uomo tale " (*Rime e Lettere di Michelagnolo Buonarroti*, ed. G. E. Saltini (Firenze, 1948), p. 24). Contemporary historians-proper regularly proclaim an ideal or typical intention (see L. B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England*, chap. vii).

The mode, more evidently in the stock symbolic figures, turns on the conjunction of a qualitative categorization of phenomena with a rhetorical emphasis ; individuality replaces exemplariness as a principle of characterization only with the undermining of the " dominant trait " habit of mind, and the substitution of a psychological for a moral concern. The gulf between Marlowe's and Shakespeare's characterizations shows when this was happening in England. Hankerings after a set decorum of character, also provoked by Aristotle, continued, of course, to trouble critics and playwrights for some time.

¹ Paolo Giovio, the theorist of the emblem, was also one of the most celebrated composers of literary portraits. Francesco Flaminio characterizes him as " uno storico, il quale crede d'aver il diritto d'alzare e abbassare le virtù secondo i contrappesi e merito delle persone " (*Il Cinquecento*, p. 325).

² *Literary Criticism in the Renaissance* (1899), p. 86. The work Spingarn cites is L. Salviati, *Del Trattato della Poetica*, one of a series of public lectures delivered in Florence. It remains in manuscript in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence.

to put the complementary aspect, in accommodating Aristotle to their own understanding, Renaissance critics recast the leading ideas of the *Poetics* in the current image. One remarks three associated conditions, in particular, whose prevalence facilitated the reception of Aristotle's universal imitation and bore on attempts to operate it :

(a) The categorizing habit, deriving from the qualitative physics then in vogue, which turned natural objects into bundles of traditionally assigned properties, and isolated some dominant property as the special "character" or "virtue" of the thing :

(On Efficient Cause). Herbes kepe their vertue of necessitie. The Adamant draweth iron, even by nature. And so the bloud stone stoppeth blood.¹

(On Final Cause). Last of all, we know hereby, that God hath ordeyned nothing in vayne, and that everything is ordeyned for some one end . . .²

perchè la natura, o l'arte, sua imitatrice, ha segnata le cose tutte de'propri caratteri, o de le proprie note che vogliam dirle, de le quali altre sono maggiori, altre minori.³

(b) A moral criterion, by whose ordinance a poetic representation was to be significant or meaningful, either in the sense of conveying a complex message allegorically, or by virtue of the lessons for conduct it afforded.

(c) A technical criterion, whose chief touchstone was a quality or capacity variously termed "acutezza", "argutia", "esprit", or "wit".

Here is the natural soil of a literature or pictorial art of hieroglyphs, to whose ascendancy the teeming pages of Alciati, Cartari, Valeriano, Giovio, Ruscelli, Ripa, and their like, bear witness. And whatever their emblems or "imprese" imitated, it was certainly not life. Yet if recent Renaissance studies have shown anything, it is that we ignore at peril of total mistake the working in sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century poetry of a traditional iconography, emblematic in its mode of signification, but largely mythological or cabbalistic in its properties. Such figures as the several Graces, Circe, Astraea, Daedalus, Pan, rich with the accretions of manifold rehandling both within and beyond the covers of the great mythographers, presented Renaissance writers

¹ T. Wilson, *The Rule of Reason* (1551), fol. Lii^v.

² *Ibid.* fol. Lviii^r.

³ T. Tasso, *Discorsi Del Poema Eroico*, p. 505.

with a symbolism at once subtle and public ; and they present us with a problem. The immediate task is the recovery of lost connotations by patient scholarship. More generally, we have to reckon with the possibility that what we have long taken for one kind of imitation—decorative, or dramatic, or formal in intention perhaps—may sometimes turn out to be imitation of quite a different kind, whose true force lies in the complex of meanings conveyed to the initiate by a kind of pictorial shorthand. Professor Wind's work on the *Primavera*,¹ and Miss Tuve's demonstration of some singularly rich uses of archetypal personages in Milton² illustrate by the distance of time separating their subjects the continuity of an allegorical tradition in the presentation of human or neo-human figures. Far from challenging this habit the notion of universal imitation appeared to confirm it authoritatively. It offered a way of making direct symbols even of historical figures in a dramatically developed action—if one likes, of effecting a synthesis between old allegory and new drama.

No doubt the popularity of that most magnificently flamboyant of all synthetic forms, the Court Masque, was sealed anyway. It emerges almost as the consummation of the Renaissance imagination, not least in its way of putting every one of the major arts in the service of a "meaning" emblematically conveyed through the dramatic action of mythological personages. But one recalls our orthodox complaint against what is certainly the best known bearer of the title of masque, the work we know as *Comus*, that "as a drama it is deficient. The action is not probable",³ a judgement which Dr. Tillyard would modify in the light of Milton's (conjectured) intention: "Readers of *Comus* have usually failed to see that it is an experiment, not entirely successful, in drama".⁴

On the face of it, as Miss Tuve avers, these are absurd charges to lay against a work in this genre of "favola pastorale", arguing as they unmistakably do a misunderstanding of the nature of the piece from which even its true title has not preserved us. The

¹ *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958), chap. vii.

² *Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton* (Oxford, 1957).

³ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill (Oxford, 1905), i. 168.

⁴ *Milton* (1946), p. 66.

real problem Comus poses is that of the oddness of its reception. What ignis fatuus has led critics over two centuries to proceed on the naive assumption that the piece is a play gone wrong, or (the reverse side of the medal) just an "exuberance of picturesque description, poetical allusion, and ornamental expression"¹ which has somehow got itself into a spurious dramatic form?

The crux evidently centres in those elements which most strongly suggest drama. We do not look to find human personages in a masque, still less an action turning on the conflict, indeed the head-on clash, of characters dramatically conceived and motivated; the great moral abstractions, for our taste, need an embodiment a little less substantial, a little more stylized and statuesque. Milton has escaped us precisely because he has characterized not only by archetypes but ideally, that is to say, he gives us human as well as neo-human persons, who contribute to the presentation of the complex insight in so far as they are universal representatives of some quality, trait, or relationship. Milton knew his aristotelian commentators, and his Tasso above all. It is arguable that we should have fallen in with him sooner if we had known them too. We could hardly have overlooked, as we seem to have done, the sophistication of the wit which conceived the idea of a running double entendre, deriving from the casting and setting of that first celebratory performance. Personages, music, spectacle, and properties are taken up alive from the Ludlow entourage, and ingeniously exhibited in their normal relationships at the same time as they act out the ramifications of the moral truth they present; they are, throughout, at once themselves and symbols. If one hails Donne's incredible sleights as the apotheosis of the tougher kind of Renaissance wit, it is tempting to find the apotheosis of the other in *Comus*.

A late but logical development of universal imitation was the notion of eclectic imitation. Arising from the doctrine of the ideal hero, this was crystallized by Tasso, combined with the other sort of imitation, and erected by the mannerist painters into a working principle. The argument was terse. If you can stimulate a moral attitude in your reader by letting each character

¹ Thomas Warton, *The Origin of Comus* (1799), p. 100.

embody some single virtue, how much more powerful and valuable will be your moral effect if you propose a character who embodies all the virtues, "il sommo de le virtù"¹—a platonic Idea of the hero as it were :

l'esemplare non è alcun uomo o principe particular, ma l'idea dell'uomo o del buon principe ; però chi vorrà far l'opera somigliante a l'idea, formerà non solamente le persone migliori, ma ottime . . . Ho formato adunque a mio potere, eccellentissime persone, avendo maggior riguardo a l'idea ch'a l'istoria.²

Further, as Cicero showed in his anecdote of the artist Zeuxis, who represented an ideal woman replete with all excellences by combining the particular excellences of the most beautiful girls he could find,³ you could construct your Ideal Hero—if not indeed your entire poem—by bestowing on his single person all the excellences separately found in the heroes of the other poets, all the "perfettioni, che prima erano disperse in molti auttori"⁴ : "raccogliendo le bellezze e le perfezioni di ciascuno, insegnare come egli si possa fare bellissimo e perfettissimo insieme."⁵

The elegance of the scheme was that it made possible the reconciliation and simultaneous satisfaction of two dominant urges of Renaissance writers, incurably susceptible as they were to the lure of a grand if shadowy platonism, and the safe recourse of the syncretic resolution. One recalls Spenser's design for *The Faerie Queene*. The moral absolutism of the poem yields on one level its heroic representatives of the several virtues, each of them, as far as his creator could contrive it, consummating in himself the scattered manifestations of his own virtue to be found in the great epic progenitors, and then beyond all these, and almost disembodied, its all-saving master-hero. The

¹ T. Tasso, *Discorsi Del Poema Eroico*, p. 368.

² T. Tasso, *Del Giudizio Sovra La Sua Gerusalemme* (Roma, 1666), p. 528. This apologia was written after the redrafting of the *Gerusalemme Liberata* as *La Gerusalemme Conquistata*, and remained in manuscript until 1666.

³ *De Inventione*, ed. H. M. Hubbell (1949), pp. 167-70. This anecdote is obtrusive in these late sixteenth-century discussions, possibly because Della Casa and Castiglione both have it (*Il Galateo*, Cap. xxvi ; *Il Cortegiano*, Libro i).

⁴ G. Camillo, *Due Trattati*, fol. 41^v.

⁵ T. Tasso, *Discorsi Del Poema Eroico*, p. 321. Tasso distinguishes between the method of Homer, who made each character an exemplar of one particular quality, and of Virgil, who "formed in Aeneas piety, religion, continence, fortitude, magnanimity, justice, and each other knightly virtue" (ibid. p. 430).

conception is advanced,¹ but it falls short of the developed requirements of the Italian theorists. For one thing, while the Red Cross Knight, Guyon and the rest, faults and all, are clearly universal heroes in the limited sense, the demands of the allegory and the episodic arrangement of the narrative permit Prince Arthur only the peripheral importance of the last-minute rescuer—the ideal hero, at the dictate of Spenser's theology, shrinks to super-scout or omniscient machine-minder. Tasso had no such metaphysical distractions. Whether the notorious "allegoria"² was really the initial frame or as seems more likely, *ex post facto*, signal of a pathological loss of nerve, Goffredo represents the climax of the attempt to embody a purely moral design in the heroic poem. The mode is not so much allegorical as exemplary. Here is the hero who concentrates the moral intention in himself, simply in so far as he presents the perfect form of every possible human virtue—"e sol Goffredo in tutto buono e più ci vien rappresentato".³ He is, to the detriment of dramatic life, nothing short of the "bella Idea . . . di un sublime Heroe e perfetto Capitano e guerriero" that Paola Beni saw in him.⁴

Yet if Tasso here gives us not only an "eccellentissime persone, avendo maggior riguardo a l'idea ch'a l'istoria"⁵ but—as he had to—a "molto più nobile e perfetto Idea di valoroso Capitano e Heroe, che Homero"⁶ he has not swept the board clean. What one notices about all these applications of "Idea" and "Ideal" to the heroic poem is that they entail little or none of the metaphysical force of Plato's own use. When all is said,

¹ Cf. an older view of the poem, still current: "*The Faerie Queene* is essentially an anachronism—a medieval allegorical morality conceived in the full tide of the Renaissance" (J. Reeves, *The Listener*, 19 May, 1960, reviewing *The Allegory of the Faerie Queene*, by M. Pauline Parker, Oxford, 1960).

² *Allegoria Della Gerusalemme Liberata*, in *Le Prose Diverse*, ed. C. Guasti (Firenze, 1875). Tasso expounds the "doctrine" of the poem at length in a famous correspondence of 1576 with Scipione Gonzaga and Luca Scalabrino, given in *Prose*, ed. F. Flora (Milano-Roma, 1935), pp. 581 ff.

³ T. Tasso, letter to Silvio Antoniano, *Prose*, p. 588.

⁴ *Comparatione di Homero, Virgilio e Torquato* (Padova, 1607), p. 86.

⁵ T. Tasso, *Giudizio*, p. 528.

⁶ P. Beni, op. cit. p.l. Cf. Tasso's father on Homer's Achilles: "perchè tutte queste cose sono indegne d'uno Heroe: nel quale convenevol è, che siano tutte le virtù morali; e che egli sia tanto di perfettione a gli altri huomini superiore, che s'annoveri fra gli Dii" (B. Tasso, *Ragionamento Della Poesia*, fol. 11v).

Goffredo is a model of good conduct, " a flower of moral virtue, superior to man and *almost divine* " ¹ ; he is not the Form of the Good. It was left to Milton to provide the perfect epic hero in that ultimate sense.

" Onde si vede che l'eroe più conforme a questa definizione sarebbe Cristo ", comments Professor Toffanin on Luigi Landi's counter-reforming account of the aristotelian hero as " *colui che abbraccia e tiene in se tutte le virtù morali e intellettuali* ".² No doubt it required a Miltonic self-certainty both to admit and to push to its practical conclusion what had always been implicit in such discussions. *Paradise Lost* is an epic without a hero ; though it has the archetypal anti-hero, a glimpse of perfect innocence, and the promise, explicit and implicit, of " one greater man ". *Paradise Regained*, if it is not a blasphemy to say it, assures Milton of final victory in that struggle to surpass " *tutti gli altri* " which Renaissance writers from Petrarch on saw as the guarantee of worth. It crowns three centuries of pre-occupation with the ideal figure, and ends an era. Fortunately, a new one had already begun.

Outside the formal epic, Italian discussions of eclectic imitation and the ideal hero bore chiefly on heroic tragedy. Possibly we can thank English insularity for preserving Shakespeare from the raw force of them ; though they surely could not have turned him into a Fletcher, or Shirley, or Dryden. Not the least of his virtues is that he is beyond the didacticism, direct or oblique, which counter-reforming theorists presuppose. But whatever the debt of Shakespearean tragedy to Renaissance theorizing (and it still remains inadequately explored), the lineage of another kind of hero abides no question : in strictness one can only call him epic. For the cycle which begins with *Richard II* and culminates in *Henry V* is heroic in all save design on the audience's conduct. To its contemporaries it must have seemed self-evidently the English saga, apt alike in its scale, exalted level, dynastic interest and national significance to maintain the tradition which Trissino received, as he thought, from Virgil, and Ariosto and Tasso and Spenser carried on. Over-all, as they everywhere proclaim, the

¹ P. Beni, *op. cit.* p. 218, (my italics).

² *La Fine del Umanesimo* (Torino, 1920), p. 132.

two *Henry IV* plays grow from the vision of a theologico-political process working itself out in our domestic history, and the inter-related concern with the making of the English nation. But their outstanding technical feature is that both issues wait on the characterization of the king's elder son. Further, it is common critical ground that in these plays Shakespeare offers an intricate system of comparisons, through which the weightiest of public values are subjected to minute scrutiny and assessment. Richard II, Henry IV, Hotspur, Falstaff, Prince John, Worcester, the Lord Chief Justice—these and more are involved, in pointed juxtaposition with Hal himself. And the issue of the whole subtle process of sifting is the king Hal grows into, Henry V, the tavern-haunter who becomes the model of a divinely sanctioned warrior-king and the ideal patriotic hero of a national epic.

One returns easily to Donne. A later product of teaching about the ideal hero was the mannerist funeral elegy. This again was evolved in the Ducal Court of Ferrara. Tasso in his funeral oration for Barbara of Austria takes the line that she was a moral exemplar—"questa perfettissima virtù".¹ Another Ducal Secretary, G. B. Pigna, a neo-Latin poet of European reputation in his day, goes much further. To him the heroic poem is, in any case, at once a praise of one's patron and his House, and a powerful moral agent. One shows a perfect example of Christian virtue by endowing the Prince with all the excellences, and then vigorously and ingeniously lauding them in turn with the whole dialectical armoury. But if the occasion should be the death of the Prince, what further moral utility could not one find here, while aggrandizing one's subject to the status of "perfect and universal Idea"!

Perchè in eterno il mondo habbia per norma
Te d'ogni cavalier perfetta forma.

As king, "father and shepherd in one", a new Deucalion half-way between God and man, the model or Form of all virtues, "a fixed and immutable example whence others are derived", and at the same time as mortal in the midst of his greatness, he offered a complex occasion of meditation on human frailty.² Pigna's

¹ *Orazione In Morte Di Barbara D'Austria*, in *Le Prose Diverse*, ii. 28.

² *Gli Heroici* (Vinegia, 1561), p. 44 *et passim*.

scheme amounts to an ingenious re-application of ideas which were embedded in the literary consciousness of the age. Beyond the epic hero and the Council of Trent, one recalls Petrarch's much-copied conceit, which he in turn took over from the "stilnovisti", of the world's dependence on Laura for its life and virtues, and Capriano's typical interpretation of the petrarchan heroine as Idea of perfect beauty, the imperfect reality touched up by the poet's wit and art "from all those parts and all those things that may be conveniently considered in a most honest woman", to present a "celestial image" of perfection.¹

Donne may or may not have known of Pigna. But the final evidence of his lineage lies in the conception and execution of what has until very lately been his least tractable poem. For the essential point about *The First Anniversary* is that it *was* all "written of the Virgin Mary",² or at least of an archetype of immaculate femininity, and nothing in the *Conversations with Drummond* falls more exactly pat than Donne's sufficient appeal to the orthodoxy of twenty years before, or two hundred years before, "to which he answered, that he described the Idea of a Woman, and not as she was".³ The feeling of strain the poem

¹ *Della Vera Poetica*, fol. F2^v.

² Ben Jonson, *Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden*, in *Works* ed. Herford and Simpson (Oxford, 1925-52), i. 133.

³ Professor Louis Martz has used one contemporary tradition, the Ignatian discipline of formal meditation, to lay bare the articulation of the piece as it has probably not appeared since Donne's own century, and thereby, to indicate the way in which the poem is to be read (*The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven, 1954), pp. 228-35). But no less immediate evidence prompts the feeling that Martz himself misses the focus of the poem when he speaks of an overall failure "to bring Meditation and Eulogy into some sort of unity", and of "an imprecise and damaging ambiguity" and "blurred imagery" in the attempt to relate Elizabeth Drury's death to the "infection of Original Sin". It may be paradoxical to suggest that these strictures arise from an over-attachment to meditation, and to Petrarch. Martz's expectation of a meditative content, as well as form, causes him to see the poem as a series of more or less detached repetitions of the simple pattern Meditation/Praise, and blinds him altogether to the overall rhetorical scheme. For the boldest feature of the *invention* is that it allows a calculated equivocality, most dexterously sustained through the piece, whereby eulogy and homilizing are prosecuted together; common rhetorical tactics, and the easy convertibility of stock laudatory material, are exploited with incredible virtuosity and resource to make a formal praise of the girl and all she presents implicit in the anatomy of corrupted creation. And it is just at the pivotal point of this equivocality that

conveys is an inevitable consequence of Donne's staggeringly ambitious attempt to follow Pigna's programme, and even transcend it, in quite unpropitious circumstances. He seeks at once to force the young girl into the heroic mould, to make her death the occasion of an admonitory sermon on the corruptness and depravity of a creation from which virtue has finally departed, and—as was his prerogative—to bid to have the victory in the most strenuous of literary rivalries, with an unapproachable feat of wit. And his witty recourse is a vast "conchetto", a scheme which apotheosizes the Caritean device of materialization of a common figure.

Art works its salvation through the circumstantial and the particular not in spite of them. It diminishes Donne's stature no jot to say that the fiery Pegasus of his imagination turned and wound in the tight traces of Late Renaissance convention; rather, this was the condition of his individuality and his splendour. Regarded as a brilliantly *purposeful* "shuffling of the pieces",¹ *The First Anniversary* both loses and gains. If it ceases

the Petrarchan analogy misleads. Laura is not, in Petrarch, and could not have been with propriety, a type of perfect innocence: and the crux of the *First Anniversary* is precisely creation's loss of innocence. Elizabeth Drury offered Donne the possibility of a vastly extended symbolic reference.

She allowed him, in fact, a different kind of reference. The most extravagant claims of Petrarch's commentators never amount to more than the assertion that Laura is a symbol of virtue—a pre-eminent example of perfect womanhood, or an ideal object of contemplation and emulation. In this respect, Petrarch's own "contemptus mundi" and assertion of the world's dependence on her are personal to him (he rejects the world for himself, and it is destroyed *for him* by Laura's death), and in any case less statement of fact than hyperbolic device of eulogy and lament. Whereas Donne's poem is vanity if Elizabeth Drury is anything short of an archetype—literally a moral cornerstone, the very principle of Innocence, Virtue, Beauty, and all those perfections which man forfeited at the Fall. The central difficulty of the poem lies far beyond any maladroitness in its technical management. One may locate it in the habit of mind which allows an actual girl to stand as archetypal Form or Idea in the full platonic sense, which is ready, in a word, to find in a particular human death a re-enactment of the Fall, and a type of Christ's perpetual withdrawal from the world; as in a modern but vastly more discreet example, the martyrdom of Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* is a type or re-enactment of the Atonement. The real idiosyncrasy of *The First Anniversary* lies in its yoking of this sacramental intention with a full-scale rhetorical attack.

¹ ". . . there is in his poetry hardly any attempt at organization; rather a puzzled and humorous shuffling of the pieces" (T. S. Eliot, "Donne in our Time", in *A Garland for John Donne* (1931), p. 8).

to offer the delusive promise of kinship with our own condition, it also ceases to baffle where it might amaze and delight. But to be blatant in the pointing of a moral, unless you are prepared to call in such contemporary assistance, you may stare at the poem for the rest of your life and you will be lucky if it ever speaks anything to you but magnificent gibberish or seductive lies.

It would be as ingenuous to argue that you cannot "understand" Renaissance poetry without summoning up depressing regiments of dusty fuglemen as it would be to assume that you need never call upon contemporary evidence at all. To have experienced and reflected upon experience is infinitely better qualification for reading *Paradise Lost*, or *The Extasie*, than all the mechanically deployed learning in the world. But it is a dangerous qualification, if it carries the expectation that the categories of human awareness, and the modes in which they are expressed, are more or less stable; if, in short, it leads to the unconscious kaleidoscoping of the past into anticipated patterns, Romantic or post-Romantic or whatever they may be. That is an absolutism the more arrogant and perverting because it is beyond self-check. One traces its effects in many places in recent British criticism, the Donne-olatry of the thirties merely providing the most notorious case. Ultimately, one's recourse to literary theory rests on the supposition that it offers another way of making the alien past intelligible, of putting us in touch with modes of apprehension and expression which may be unexpected. What we do not require of it, and will find very rarely indeed, are insights that we ourselves can take over; for our concern with the past does not demand that we underwrite its evaluations, only that we understand them.