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The General Theory of Poetry in the Italian Renaissance (1899)

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In the first book of his *Geography* Strabo defines poetry as "a kind of elementary philosophy, which introduces us early to life, and gives us pleasurable instruction in reference to character, emotion, action." This passage sounds the keynote of the Renaissance theory of poetry. Poetry is therein stated to be a form of philosophy, and, moreover, a philosophy whose subject is life, and its object is said to be pleasurable instruction.

I. Poetry as a Form of Scholastic Philosophy

In the first place, poetry is a form of philosophy. Savonarola had classed poetry with logic and grammar, and had asserted that a knowledge of logic is essential to the composing of poetry. The division of the sciences and the relative importance of each were a source of infinite scholastic discussion during the Middle Ages. Aristotle had first placed dialectic or logic, rhetoric, and poetics in the same category of efficient philosophy. But Averroës was probably the first to confuse the function of poetics with that of logic, and to make the former a subdivision, or form, of the latter; and this classification appears to have been accepted by the scholastic philosophers of the Middle Ages.

This conception of the position of poetry in the body of human knowledge may be found, however, throughout the Renaissance. Thus, Robortelli, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* (1548), gives the usual scholastic distinctions between the various forms of the written or spoken word (*oratio*): the demonstrative, which deals with the true; the dialectic, which deals with the probable; the rhetorical, with the persuasive; and the poetic, with the false or fabulous. By the term "false" or "fabulous" is meant merely that the subject of poetry is not actual fact, but that it deals with things as they ought to be, rather than as they are. Varchi, in his

[1] The essay represents the second chapter of the first part (*Literary Criticism in Italy*) of the seminal book *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissaince* by Joel Elias Spingarn. Reference edition is New York, Columbia University Press & Macmillan, 1899.

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public lectures on poetry (1553), divides philosophy into two forms, real and rational. Real philosophy deals with things, and includes metaphysics, ethics, physics, geometry, and the like; while rational philosophy, which includes logic, dialectic, rhetoric, history, poetry, and grammar, deals not with things, but with words, and is not philosophy proper, but the instrument of philosophy. Poetry is therefore, strictly speaking, neither an art nor a science, but an instrument or faculty; and it is only an art in the sense that it has been reduced to rules and precepts. It is, in fact, a form of logic, and no man, according to Varchi, can be a poet unless he is a logician; the better logician he is, the better poet he will be. Logic and poetry differ, however, in their matter and their instruments; for the subject of logic is truth, arrived at by means of the demonstrative syllogism, while the subject of poetry is fiction or invention, arrived at by means of that form of the syllogism known as the example. Here the enthymeme, or example, which Aristotle has made the instrument of rhetoric, becomes the instrument of poetry.

This classification survived in the Aristotelian schools at Padua and elsewhere as late as Zabarella and Campanella. Zabarella, a professor of logic and later of philosophy at Padua from 1564 to 1589, explains at length Averroës's theory that poetics is a form of logic, in a treatise on the nature of logic, published in 1578. He concludes that the two faculties, logic and poetics, are not instruments of philosophy in general, but only of a part of it, for they refer rather to action than to knowledge; that is, they come under Aristotle's category of efficient philosophy. They are not the instruments of useful art or of moral philosophy, the end of which is to make one's self good; but of civil philosophy, the end of which is to make others good. If it be objected that they are τῶν ἐναντίων, that is, of both good and evil, it may be answered that their proper end is good. Thus, in the *Symposium*, the true poet is praised; while in the *Republic* the poets who aim at pleasure and who corrupt their audiences are censured; and Aristotle in his definition of tragedy says that the end of tragedy is to purge the passions and to correct the morals of men (*affectiones animi purgare et mores corrigere*).

Even later than Zabarella, we find in the *Poetica* of Campanella a division of the sciences very similar to that of Savonarola and Varchi. Theology is there placed at the head of all knowledge, in accordance with the mediæval tradition, while poetics, with dialectic, grammar, and rhetoric, is placed among the logical sciences. Considering *poetica* as a form of philosophy, another commentator on Aristotle, Maggi (1550), takes great pains to distinguish its various manifestations. *Poetica* is the art of composing poetry, *poesis*, the poetry composed according to

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this art, *poeta*, the composer of poetry, and *poema*, a single specimen of poetry. This distinction is an elaboration of two passages in Plutarch and Aphthonius.

II. Poetry as an Imitation of Life

In the second place, according to the passage from Strabo cited at the beginning of this chapter, poetry introduces us early to life, or, in other words, its subject is human action, and it is what Aristotle calls it, an imitation of human life. This raises two distinct problems. First, what is the meaning of imitation? and what in life is the subject-matter of this imitation?

The conception of imitation held by the critics of the Renaissance was that expressed by Aristotle in the ninth chapter of the *Poetics*. The passage is as follows:—

> It is evident from what has been said that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen,—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history; for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. The universal tells us how a person of given character will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in giving expressive names to the characters.

In this passage Aristotle has briefly formulated a conception of ideal imitation which may be regarded as universally valid, and which, repeated over and over again, became the basis of Renaissance criticism.

In the *Poetica* of Daniello (1536), occurs the first allusion in modern literary criticism to the Aristotelian notion of ideal imitation. According to Daniello, the poet, unlike the historian, can mingle fictions with facts, because he is not obliged, as is the historian, to describe things as they actually are or have been, but rather as they ought to be; and it is in this that the poet most differs from the historian, and not in the writing of verses; for even if Livy's works were versified, they would still be histories as before. This is of course almost a paraphrase of the passage in Aristotle; but that Daniello did not completely understand the ideal element in Aristotle's conception is shown by the further distinction which he draws between the historian and the poet. For he adds that the poet and the historian have much in common; in both there are

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descriptions of places, peoples, laws; both contain the representation of vices and virtues; in both, amplification, variety, and digressions are proper; and both teach, delight, and profit at the same time. They differ, however, in that the historian, in telling his story, recounts it exactly as it happened, and adds nothing; whereas the poet is permitted to add whatever he desires, so long as the fictitious events have all the appearance of truth.

Somewhat later, Robortelli treats the question of æsthetic imitation from another point of view. The poet deals with things as they ought to be, but he can either appropriate actual fact, or he can invent his material. If he does the former, he narrates the truth not as it really happened, but as it might or ought to happen; while if he invents his material, he must do so in accordance with the law of possibility, or necessity, or probability and verisimilitude.Thus Xenophon, in describing Cyrus, does not depict him as he actually was, but as the best and noblest king can be and ought to be; and Cicero, in describing the orator, follows the same method. From this it is evident that the poet can invent things transcending the order of nature; but if he does so, he should describe what might or ought to have been.

Here Robortelli answers a possible objection to Aristotle's statement that poets deal only with what is possible and verisimilar. Is it possible and verisimilar that the gods should eat ambrosia and drink nectar, as Homer describes, and that such a being as Cerberus should have several heads, as we find in Virgil, not to mention various improbable things that occur in many other poets? The answer to such an objection is that poets can invent in two ways. They can invent either things according to nature or things transcending nature. In the former case, these things must be in keeping with the laws of probability and necessity; but in the latter case, the things are treated according to a process described by Aristotle himself, and called paralogism, which means, not necessarily false reasoning, but the natural, if quite inconclusive, logical inference that the things we know not of are subject to the same laws as the things we know. The poets accept the existence of the gods from the common notion of men, and then treat all that relates to these deities in accordance with this system of paralogism. In tragedy and comedy men are described as acting in accordance with the ordinary occurrences of nature; but in epic poetry this is not entirely the case, and the marvellous is therefore admitted. Accordingly, this marvellous element has the widest scope in epic poetry; while in comedy, which treats of things nearest to our own time, it ought not to be admitted at all.

But there is another problem suggested by the passage from the *Poetics* which has been cited. Aristotle says that imitation, and not metre, is the test of poetry; that even if a history were

versified, it would still remain history. The question then arises whether a writer who imitates in prose, that is, without verse, would be worthy of the title of poet. Robortelli answers this question by pointing out that metre does not constitute the nature, force, or essence of poetry, which depends entirely on the fact of imitation; but at the same time, while one who imitates without verse is a poet, in the best and truest poetry imitation and metre are combined.

In Fracastoro's *Naugerius, sive de Poetica Dialogus* (1555), there is the completest explanation of the ideal element in the Aristotelian conception of imitation. The poet, according to Aristotle, differs from other writers in that the latter consider merely the particular, while the poet aims at the universal. He is, in other words, attempting to describe the simple and essential truth of things, not by depicting the nude thing as it is, but the idea of things clothed in all their beauties. Here Fracastoro attempts to explain the Aristotelian conception of the type with the aid of the Platonic notion of beauty. There were, in fact, in the Renaissance, three conceptions of beauty in general vogue. First, the purely objective conception that poetry is fixed or formal, that it consists in approximating to a certain mechanical or geometrical form, such as roundness, squareness, or straightness; secondly, the Platonic conception, ethical rather than æsthetic, connecting the beautiful with the good, and regarding both as the manifestation of divine power; and, thirdly, a more purely æsthetic conception of beauty, connecting it either with grace or conformity, or in a higher sense with whatever is proper or fitting to an object. This last idea, which at times approaches the modern conception that beauty consists in the realization of the objective character of any particular thing and in the fulfilment of the law of its own being, seems to have been derived from the *Idea* of the Greek rhetorician Hermogenes, whose influence during the sixteenth century was considerable, even as early as the time of Filelfo. It was the celebrated rhetorician Giulio Cammillo, however, who appears to have popularized Hermogenes in the sixteenth century, by translating the *Idea* into Italian, and by expounding it in a discourse published posthumously in 1544.

As will be seen, Fracastoro's conception of beauty approximates both to the Platonic and to the more purely æsthetic doctrines which we have mentioned; and he expounds and elaborates this æsthetic notion in the following manner. Each art has its own rules of proper expression. The historian or the philosopher does not aim at all the beauties or elegancies of expression, but only such as are proper to history or philosophy. But to the poet no grace, no embellishment, no ornament, is ever alien; he does not consider the particular beauty of any one field,—that is, the singular, or particular, of Aristotle,—but all that pertains to the simple idea of beauty and of

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beautiful speech. Yet this universalized beauty is no extraneous thing; it cannot be added to objects in which it has no place, as a golden coat on a rustic; all the essential beauty of each species is to be the especial regard of the poet. For in imitating persons and things, he neglects no beauty or elegance which he can attribute to them; he strives only after the most beautiful and most excellent, and in this way affects the minds of men in the direction of excellence and beauty.

This suggests a problem which is at the very root of Aristotle's conception of ideal imitation; and it is Fracastoro's high merit that he was one of the first writers of the Renaissance to explain away the objection, and to formulate in the most perfect manner what Aristotle really meant. For, even granting that the poet teaches more than others, may it not be urged that it is not what pertains to the thing itself, but the beauties which he adds to them,—that it is ornament, extraneous to the thing itself (*extra rem*), and not the thing itself,—which seems to be the chief regard of the poet? But after all, what is *extra rem*? Are beautiful columns, domes, peristyles *extra rem*, because a thatched roof will protect us from rain and frost; or is noble raiment *extra rem*, because a rustic garment would suffice? The poet, so far from adding anything extraneous to the things he imitates, depicts them in their very essence; and it is because he alone finds the true beauty in things, because he attributes to them their true nobility and perfection, that he is more useful than any other writer. The poet does not, as some think, deal with the false and the unreal. He assumes nothing openly alien to truth, though he may permit himself to treat of old and obscure legends which cannot be verified, or of things which are regarded as true on account of their appearance, their allegorical signification (such as the ancient myths and fables), or their common acceptance by men. So we may conclude that not every one who uses verse is a poet, but only he who is moved by the true beauty of things—by their simple and essential beauties, not merely apparent ones. This is Fracastoro's conclusion, and it contains that mingling of Platonism and Aristotelianism which may be found somewhat later in Tasso and Sir Philip Sidney. It is the chief merit of Fracastoro's dialogue, that even while emphasizing this Platonic element, he clearly distinguishes and defines the ideal element in æsthetic imitation.

About the same time, in the public lectures of Varchi (1553), there was an attempt to formulate a more explicit definition of poetry on the basis of Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Poetry, according to Varchi, is an imitation of certain actions, passions, habits of mind, with song, diction, and harmony, together or separately, for the purpose of removing the vices of men and inciting them to virtue, in order that they may attain their true happiness and beatitude. In

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the first place, poetry is an imitation. Every poet imitates, and any one who does not imitate cannot be called a poet. Accordingly, Varchi follows Maggi in distinguishing three classes of poets,—the poets *par excellence*, who imitate in verse; the poets who imitate without using verse, such as Lucian, Boccaccio in the *Decameron*, and Sannazaro in the *Arcadia*; and the poets, commonly but less properly so called, who use verse, but who do not imitate. Verse, while not an essential attribute of poetry, is generally required; for men's innate love of harmony, according to Aristotle, was one of the causes that gave rise to poetic composition. Certain forms of poetry however, such as tragedy, cannot be written without verse; for "embellished language," that is, verse, is included in the very definition of tragedy as given by Aristotle.

The question whether poetry could be written in prose was a source of much discussion in the Renaissance; but the consensus of opinion was overwhelmingly against the prose drama. Comedy in prose was the usual Italian practice of this period, and various scholars even sanction the practice on theoretical grounds. But the controversy was not brought to a head until the publication of Agostino Michele's *Discorso in cui si dimostra come si possono scrivere le Commedie e le Tragedie in Prosa* in 1592; and eight years later, in 1600, Paolo Beni published his Latin dissertation, *Disputatio in qua ostenditur præstare Comœdiam atque Tragœdiam metrorum vinculis solvere*. The language of Beni's treatise was strong—its very title speaks of liberating the drama from the shackles of verse; and for a heresy of this sort, couched as it was in language that might even have been revolutionary enough for the French romanticists of 1830, the sixteenth century was not yet fully prepared. Faustino Summo, answering Beni in the same year, asserts that not only is it improper for tragedy and comedy to be written in prose, but that no form of poetry whatever can properly be composed without the accompaniment of verse. The result of the whole controversy was to fix the metrical form of the drama throughout the period of classicism. But it need not be said that the same conclusion was not accepted by all for every form of poetry. The remark of Cervantes in *Don Quixote*, that epics can be written in prose as well as in verse, is well known; and Julius Cæsar Scaliger speaks of Heliodorus's romance as a model epic.

Scaliger, however, regards verse as a fundamental part of poetry. For him, poetry and history have the forms of narration and ornament in common, but differ in that poetry adds fictions to the things that are true, or imitates actual things with fictitious ones,—*majore sane apparatu*, that is, among other things, with verse. As a result of this notion, Scaliger asserts that if the history of Herodotus were versified, it would no longer be history, but historical poetry. Under no circumstances, theoretically, will he permit the separation of poetry from mere

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versification. He accordingly dismisses with contempt the usual argument of the period that Lucan was an historian rather than a poet. "Take an actual history," says Scaliger; "how does Lucan differ, for example, from Livy? He differs in using verse. Well, then he is a poet." Poetry, then, is imitation in verse; but in imitating what ought to be rather than what is, the poet creates another nature and other fortunes, as if he were another God.

It will be seen from these discussions that the Renaissance always conceived of æsthetic imitation in this ideal sense. There are scarcely any traces of realism, in anything like its modern sense, in the literary criticism of this period. Torquato Tasso does indeed say that art becomes most perfect as it approaches most closely to nature; and Scaliger declares that the dramatic poet must beyond all things aim at reproducing the actual conditions of life. But it is the appearance of reality, and not the mere actuality itself, that the critics are speaking of here. With the vast body of mediæval literature before them, in which impossibilities follow upon impossibilities, and the sense of reality is continually obscured, the critical writers of the Renaissance were forced to lay particular stress on the element of probability, the element of close approach to the seeming realities of life; but the imitation of life is for them, nevertheless, an imitation of things as they ought to be—in other words, the imitation is ideal. Muzio says that nature is adorned by art:—

> Suol far l'opere sue roze, e tra le mani
> Lasciarle a l'arte, che le adorni e limi;

and he distinctly affirms that the poet cannot remain content with exact portraiture, with the mere actuality of life:—

> Lascia 'l vero a l' historia, e ne' tuoi versi
> Sotto i nomi privati a l' universo
> Mostra che fare e che non far si debbia.

In keeping with this idealized conception of art, Muzio asserts that everything obscene or immoral must be excluded from poetry; and this puristic notion of art is everywhere emphasized in Renaissance criticism. It was the *verisimile*, as has been said, that the writers of this period especially insisted upon. Poetry must have the appearance of truth, that is, it must be probable; for unless the reader believes what he reads, his spirit cannot be moved by the poem. This anticipates Boileau's famous line:—

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L'esprit n'est point ému de ce qu'il ne croit pas.

But beyond and above the *verisimile*, the poet must pay special regard to the ethical element (*il lodevole e l'onesto*). A poet of the sixteenth century, Palingenius, says that there are three qualities required of every poem:—

> Atqui scire opus est, triplex genus esse bonorum,
> Utile, delectans, majusque ambobus honestum.

Poetry, then, is an ideal representation of life; but should it be still further limited, and made an imitation of only human life? In other words, are the actions of men the only possible themes of poetry, or may it deal, as in the *Georgics* and the *De Rerum Natura*, with the various facts of external nature and of science, which are only indirectly connected with human life? May poetry treat of the life of the world as well as of the life of men; and if only of the latter, is it to be restricted to the actions of men, or may it also depict their passions, emotions, and character? In short, how far may external nature on the one hand, and the internal working of the human soul on the other hand, be regarded as the subject-matter of poetry? Aristotle says that poetry deals with the actions of men, but he uses the word "actions" in a larger sense than many of the Renaissance critics appear to have believed. His real meaning is thus explained by a modern writer:

> Everything that expresses the mental life, that reveals a rational personality, will fall within this larger sense of action... The phrase is virtually an equivalent for ἤθη (character), πάθη (emotion), πράξεις (action)... The common original from which all the arts draw is human life,—its mental processes, its spiritual movements, its outward acts issuing from deeper sources; in a word, all that constitutes the inward and essential activity of the soul. On this principle landscape and animals are not ranked among the objects of æsthetic imitation. The whole universe is not conceived of as the raw material of art. Aristotle's theory is in agreement with the practice of the Greek poets and artists of the classical period, who introduce the external world only so far as it forms a background of action, and enters as an emotional element into man's life and heightens the human interest.

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Aristotle distinctly says that "even if a treatise on medicine or natural philosophy be brought out in verse, the name of poet is by custom given to the author; and yet Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except the material; the former, therefore, is properly styled poet, the latter, physicist rather than poet."

The Aristotelian doctrine was variously conceived during the Renaissance. Fracastoro, for example, asserts that the imitation of human life alone is not of itself a test of poetry, for such a test would exclude Empedocles and Lucretius; it would make Virgil a poet in the *Æneid*, and not a poet in the *Georgics*. All matters are proper material for the poet, as Horace says, if they are treated poetically; and although the imitation of men and women may seem to be of higher importance for us who are men and women, the imitation of human life is no more the poet's end than the imitation of anything else. This portion of Fracastoro's argument may be called apologetic, for the imitation of human actions as a test of poetry would exclude most of his own poems, such as his famous *De Morbo Gallico* (1529), written before the influence of Aristotle was felt in anything but the mere external forms of creative literature. For Fracastoro, all things poetically treated become poetry, and Aristotle himself says that everything becomes pleasant when correctly imitated. So that not the mere composition of verse, but the Platonic rapture, the delight in the true and essential beauty of things, is for Fracastoro the test of poetic power.

Varchi, on the other hand, is more in accord with Aristotle, in conceiving of "action," the subject-matter of poetry, as including the passions and habits of mind as well as the merely external actions of mankind. By passions Varchi means those mental perturbations which impel us to an action at any particular time (πάθη); while by manners, or habits of mind, he means those mental qualities which distinguish one man or one class of men from another (ἤθη). The exclusion of the emotional or introspective side of human life would leave all lyric and, in fact, all subjective verse out of the realms of poetry; and it was therefore essential, in an age in which Petrarch was worshipped, that the subjective side of poetry should receive its justification. There is also in Varchi a most interesting comparison between the arts of poetry and painting. The basis of his distinction is Horace's *ut pictura poesis*, doubtless founded on the parallel of Simonides preserved for us by Plutarch; and this distinction, which regarded painting as silent poetry, and poetry as painting in language, may be considered almost the keynote of Renaissance criticism, continuing even up to the time of Lessing.

In Capriano's *Della Vera Poetica* (1555) poetry is given a preëminent place among all the arts, because it does not merely deal with actions or with the objects of any single sense. For

Capriano, poetry is an ideal representation of life, and as such "vere nutrice e amatrice del nostro bene." All sensuous or comprehensible objects are capable of being imitated by various arts. The nobler of the imitative arts are concerned with the objects of the nobler senses, while the ignobler arts are concerned with the objects of the senses of taste, touch, and smell. Poetry is the finest of all the arts, because it comprehends in itself all the faculties and powers of the other arts, and can in fact imitate anything, as, for example, the form of a lion, its color, its ferocity, its roar, and the like. It is also the highest form of art because it makes use of the most efficacious means of imitation, namely, words, and especially since these receive the additional beauty and power of rhythm. Accordingly, Capriano divides poets into two classes: natural poets, who describe the things of nature, and moral poets (such as epic and tragic poets), who aim at presenting moral lessons and indicating the uses of life; and of these two classes the moral poets are to be rated above the natural poets.

But if all things are the objects of poetic imitation, the poet must know everything; he must have studied nature as well as life; and, accordingly, Lionardi, in his dialogues on poetic imitation (1554), says that to be a good poet, one must be a good historian, a good orator, and a good natural and moral philosopher as well; and Bernardo Tasso asserts that a thorough acquaintance with the art of poetry is only to be gained from the study of Aristotle's *Poetics*, combined with a knowledge of philosophy and the various arts and sciences, and vast experience of the world. The Renaissance, with its humanistic tendencies, never quite succeeded in discriminating between erudition and genius. Scaliger says that nothing which proceeds from solid learning can ever be out of place in poetry, and Fracastoro (1555) and Tomitano (1545) both affirm that the good poet and the good orator must essentially be learned scholars and philosophers. Scaliger therefore distinguishes three classes of poets,—first, the theological poets, such as Orpheus and Amphion; secondly, the philosophical poets, of two sorts, natural poets, such as Empedocles and Lucretius, and moral poets, who again are either political, as Solon and Tyrtæus, economic, as Hesiod, or common, as Phocyllides; and, thirdly, the ordinary poets who imitate human life. The last are divided according to the usual Renaissance classification into dramatic, narrative, and common or mixed. Scaliger's classification is employed by Sir Philip Sidney; and a very similar subdivision is given by Minturno.

The treatment of Castelvetro, in his commentary on the *Poetics* (1570), is at times much more in accord with the true Aristotelian conception than most of the other Renaissance writers. While following Aristotle in asserting that verse is not of the essence of poetry, he shows that

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Aristotle himself by no means intended to class as poetry works that imitated in prose, for this was not the custom of Hellenic art. Prose is not suited to imitative or imaginative subjects, for we expect themes treated in prose to be actual facts. "Verse does not distinguish poetry," says Castelvetro, "but clothes and adorns it; and it is as improper for poetry to be written in prose, or history in verse, as it is for women to use the garments of men, and for men to wear the garments of women." The test of poetry therefore is not the metre but the material. This approximates to Aristotle's own view; since while imitation is what distinguishes the poetic art, Aristotle, by limiting it to the imitation of human life, was, after all, making the matter the test of poetry.

Castelvetro, however, arrives at this conclusion on different grounds. Science he regards as not suitable material for poetry, and accordingly such writers as Lucretius and Fracastoro are not poets. They are good artists, perhaps, or good philosophers, but not poets; for the poet does not attempt to discover the truth of nature, but to imitate the deeds of men, and to bring delight to his audience by means of this imitation. Moreover, poetry, as will be seen later, is intended to give delight to the populace, the untrained multitude, to whom the sciences and the arts are dead letters; if we concede these to be fit themes for poetry, then poetry is either not meant to delight, or not meant for the ordinary people, but is intended for instruction and for those only who are versed in sciences and arts. Moreover, comparing poetry with history, Castelvetro finds that they resemble each other in many points, but are not identical. Poetry follows, as it were, in the footsteps of history, but differs from it in that history deals with what has happened, poetry with what is probable; and things that have happened, though probable, are never considered in poetry as probable, but always as things that have happened. History, accordingly, does not regard verisimilitude or necessity, but only truth; poetry must take care to establish the probability of its subject in verisimilitude and necessity, since it cannot regard truth. Castelvetro in common with most of the critics of the Renaissance seems to misconceive the full meaning of ideal truth; for to the Renaissance—nay, even to Shakespeare, if we are to consider as his own various phrases which he has put into the mouths of his dramatic characters—truth was regarded as coincident with fact; and nothing that was not actual fact, however subordinated to the laws of probability and necessity, was ever called truth.

It is in keeping with this conception of the relations between history and poetry, that Castelvetro should differ not only from Aristotle, but from most of the critics of his own time, in asserting that the order of the poetic narrative may be the same as that of historical narrative. "In telling a story," he says, "we need not trouble ourselves whether it has beginning, middle, and

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end, but only whether it is fitted to its true purpose, that is, to delight its auditors by the narration of certain circumstances which could possibly happen but have not actually happened." Here the only vital distinction between history and poetry is that the incidents recounted in history have once happened, while those recounted in poetry have never actually happened, or the matter will not be regarded as poetry. Aristotle's fundamental requirement of the unity of the fable is regarded as unessential, and is simply observed in order to show the poet's ingenuity. This notion of poetic ingenuity is constant throughout Castelvetro's commentary. Thus he explains Aristotle's statement that poetry is more philosophic than history—more philosophic, according to Castelvetro, in the sense of requiring more thought, more speculation in its composition—by showing that it is a more difficult and more ingenious labor to invent things that could possibly happen, than merely to repeat things that have actually happened.

III. The Function of Poetry

According to Strabo, it will be remembered, the object or function of poetry is pleasurable instruction in reference to character, emotion, action. This occasions the inquiry as to what is the function of the poetic art, and, furthermore, what are its relations to morality. The starting-point of all discussions on this subject in the Renaissance was the famous verse of Horace:—

> Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetæ.

This line suggests that the function of poetry may be to please, or to instruct, or both to please and instruct; and every one of the writers of the Renaissance takes one or other of these three positions. Aristotle, as we know, regarded poetry as an imitation of human life, for the purpose of giving a certain refined pleasure to the reader or hearer. "The end of the fine arts is to give pleasure (πρὸς ἡδονήν), or rational enjoyment (πρὸς διαγωγήν)." It has already been said that poetry, in so far as it is an imitation of human life, and attempts to be true to human life in its ideal aspects, must fundamentally be moral; but to give moral or scientific instruction is in no way the end or function of poetry. It will be seen that the Renaissance was in closer accord with Horace than with Aristotle, in requiring for the most part the utile as well as the dulce in poetry.

For Daniello, one of the earliest critical writers of the century, the function of the poet is to teach and delight. As the aim of the orator is to persuade, and the aim of the physician to cure,

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so the aim of the poet is equally to teach and delight; and unless he teaches and delights he cannot be called a poet, even as one who does not persuade cannot be called an orator, or one who does not cure, a physician. But beyond profitableness and beauty, the poet must carry with him a certain persuasion, which is one of the highest functions of poetry, and which consists in moving and affecting the reader or hearer with the very passions depicted; but the poet must be moved first, before he can move others. Here Daniello is renewing Horace's

> Si vis me flere, dolendum est
> Primum ipsi tibi, —

a sentiment echoed by poets as different as Vauquelin, Boileau, and Lamartine.

Fracastoro, however, attempts a deeper analysis of the proper function of the poetic art. What is the aim of the poet? Not merely to give delight, for the fields, the stars, men and women, the objects of poetic imitation themselves do that; and poetry, if it did no more, could not be said to have any reason for existing. Nor is it merely to teach and delight, as Horace says; for the descriptions of countries, peoples, and armies, the scientific digressions and the historical events, which constitute the instructive side of poetry, are derived from cosmographers, scientists, and historians, who teach and delight as much as poets do. What, then, is the function of the poet? It is, as has already been pointed out, to describe the essential beauty of things, to aim at the universal and ideal, and to perform this function with every possible accompaniment of beautiful speech, thus affecting the minds of men in the direction of excellence and beauty. Portions of Fracastoro's argument have been alluded to before, and it will suffice here to state his own summing up of the aim of the poet, which is this, "Delectare et prodesse imitando in unoquoque maxima et pulcherrima per genus dicendi simpliciter pulchrum ex convenientibus." This is a mingling of the Horatian and Platonic conceptions of poetic art.

By other critics a more practical function was given to poetry. Giraldi Cintio asserts that it is the poet's aim to condemn vice and to praise virtue, and Maggi says that poets aim almost exclusively at benefiting the mind. Poets who, on the contrary, treat of obscene matters for the corruption of youth, may be compared with infamous physicians who give their patients deadly poison in the guise of wholesome medicine. Horace and Aristotle, according to Maggi, are at one on this point, for in the definition of tragedy Aristotle ascribes to it a distinctly useful purpose, and whatever delight is obtainable is to be regarded as a result of this moral function; for Maggi

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and the Renaissance critics in general would follow the Elizabethan poet who speaks of "delight, the fruit of virtue dearly loved." Muzio, in his versified *Arte Poetica* (1555), regards the end of poetry as pleasure and profit, and the pleasurable aim of poetry as attained by variety, for the greatest poems contain every phase of life and art.

It has been seen that Varchi classed poetry with rational philosophy. The end of all arts and sciences is to make human life perfect and happy; but they differ in their modes of producing this result. Philosophy attains its end by teaching; rhetoric, by persuasion; history, by narration; poetry, by imitation or representation. The aim of the poet, therefore, is to make the human soul perfect and happy, and it is his office to imitate, that is, to invent and represent, things which render men virtuous, and consequently happy. Poetry attains this end more perfectly than any of the other arts or sciences, because it does so, not by means of precept, but by means of example. There are various ways of making men virtuous,—by teaching them what vice is and what virtue is, which is the province of ethics; by actually chastising vices and rewarding virtues, which is the province of law; or by example, that is, by the representation of virtuous men receiving suitable rewards for their virtue, and of vicious men receiving suitable punishments, which is the province of poetry. This last method is the most efficacious, because it is accompanied by delight. For men either can not or will not take the trouble to study sciences and virtues—nay, do not even like to be told what they should or should not do; but in hearing or reading poetic examples, not only is there no trouble, but there is the greatest delight, and no one can help being moved by the representation of characters who are rewarded or punished according to an ideal justice.

For Varchi, then, as for Sir Philip Sidney later, the high importance of poetry is to be found in the fact that it teaches morality better than any other art, and the reason is that its instrument is not precept but example, which is the most delightful and hence the most efficacious of all means. The function of poetry is, therefore, a moral one, and it consists in removing the vices of men and inciting them to virtue. This twofold moral object of poetry—the removal of vices, which is passive, and the incitement to virtue, which is active—is admirably attained, for example, by Dante in his *Divina Commedia*; for in the *Inferno* evil men are so fearfully punished that we resolve to flee from every form of vice, and in the *Paradiso* virtuous men are so gloriously rewarded that we resolve to imitate every one of their perfections. This is the expression of the extreme view of poetic justice; and while it is in keeping with the common sentiment of the Renaissance, it is of course entirely un-Aristotelian.

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Scaliger's point of view is in accord with the common Renaissance tradition. Poetry is imitation, but imitation is not the end of poetry. Imitation for its own sake—that is, art for art's sake—receives no encouragement from Scaliger. The purpose of poetry is to teach delightfully (*docere cum delectatione*); and, therefore, not imitation, as Aristotle says, but delightful instruction, is the test of poetry. Minturno (1559) adds a third element to that of instruction and of delight. The function of poetry is not only to teach and delight, but also to move, that is, beyond instruction and delight the poet must impel certain passions in the reader or hearer, and incite the mind to admiration of what is described. An ideal hero may be represented in a poem, but the poem is futile unless it excites the reader to admiration of the hero depicted. Accordingly, it is the peculiar office of the poet to move admiration for great men; for the orator, the philosopher, and the historian need not necessarily do so, but no one who does not incite this admiration can really be called a poet.

This new element of admiration is the logical consequence of the Renaissance position that philosophy teaches by precept, but poetry by example, and that in this consists its superior ethical efficacy. In Seneca's phrase, "longum iter per præcepta, breve per exempla." If poetry, therefore, attains its end by means of example, it follows that to arrive at this end the poet must incite in the reader an admiration of the example, or the ethical aim of poetry will not be accomplished. Poetry is more than a mere passive expression of truth in the most pleasurable manner; it becomes like oratory an active exhortation to virtue, by attempting to create in the reader's mind a strong desire to be like the heroes he is reading about. The poet does not tell what vices are to be avoided and what virtues are to be imitated, but sets before the reader or hearer the most perfect types of the various virtues and vices. It is, in Sidney's phrase (a phrase apparently borrowed from Minturno), "that feigning notable images of virtues, vices, or what else, with that delightful instruction, which must be the right describing note to know a poet by." Dryden, a century later, seems to be insisting upon this same principle of admiration when he says that it is the work of the poet "to affect the soul, and excite the passions, and above all to move admiration, which is the delight of serious plays."

But Minturno goes even further than this. If the poet is fundamentally a teacher of virtue, it follows that he must be a virtuous man himself; and in pointing this out, Minturno has given the first complete expression in modern times of the consecrated conception of the poet's office. As no form of knowledge and no moral excellence is foreign to the poet, so at bottom he is the truly wise and good man. The poet may, in fact, be defined as a good man skilled in language and

imitation; not only ought he to be a good man, but no one will be a good poet unless he is so. This conception of the moral nature of the poet may be traced henceforth throughout modern times. It is to be found in Ronsard and other French and Italian writers; it is especially noticeable in English literature, and is insisted on by Ben Jonson, Milton, Shaftesbury, Coleridge, and Shelley. In this idea Plato's praise of the philosopher, as well as Cicero's and Quintilian's praise of the orator, was by the Renaissance transferred to the poet; but the conception itself goes back to a passage in Strabo's *Geography*, a work well known to sixteenth-century scholars. This passage is as follows:—

> Can we possibly imagine that the genius, power, and excellence of a real poet consist in aught else than the just imitation of life in formed discourse and numbers? But how should he be that just imitator of life, whilst he himself knows not its measures, nor how to guide himself by judgment and understanding? For we have not surely the same notion of the poet's excellence as of the ordinary craftsman's, the subject of whose art is senseless stone or timber, without life, dignity, or beauty; whilst the poet's art turning principally on men and manners, he has his virtues and excellence as poet naturally annexed to human excellence, and to the worth and dignity of man, insomuch that it is impossible he should be a great and worthy poet who is not first a worthy and good man.

Another writer of the sixteenth century, Bernardo Tasso, tells us that in his poem of the *Amadigi* he has aimed at delight rather than profitable instruction. "I have spent most of my efforts," he says, "in attempting to please, as it seems to me that this is more necessary, and also more difficult to attain; for we find by experience that many poets may instruct and benefit us very much, but certainly give us very little delight." This agrees with what one of the sanest of English critics, John Dryden (1668), has said of verse, "I am satisfied if it caused delight, for delight is the chief if not the only end of poesie; instruction can be admitted but in the second place, for poesie only instructs as it delights."

It is this same end which Castelvetro (1570) ascribes to poetic art. For Castelvetro, as in a lesser degree for Robortelli also, the end of poetry is delight, and delight alone. This, he asserts, is the position of Aristotle, and if utility is to be conceded to poetry at all, it is merely as an accident, as in the tragic purgation of terror and compassion. But he goes further than Aristotle would have been willing to go; for poetry, according to Castelvetro, is intended not merely to please, but to please the populace, in fact everybody, even the vulgar mob. On this he insists throughout his commentary; indeed, as will be seen later, it is on this conception that his theory of the drama is primarily based. But it may be confidently asserted that Aristotle would have willingly echoed the

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conclusion of Shakespeare, as expressed in *Hamlet*, that the censure of one of the judicious must o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. At the same time, Castelvetro's conception is in keeping with a certain modern feeling in regard to the meaning of poetic art. Thus a recent writer regards literature as aiming "at the pleasure of the greatest possible number of the nation rather than instruction and practical effects," and as applying "to general rather than specialized knowledge." There is, then, in Castelvetro's argument this modicum of truth, that poetry appeals to no specialized knowledge, but that its function is, as Coleridge says, to give a definite and immediate pleasure.

Torquato Tasso, as might be expected, regards poetry in a more highly ideal sense. His conception of the function of poets and of the poetic art may be explained as follows: The universe is beautiful in itself, because beauty is a ray from the Divine splendor; and hence art should seek to approach as closely as possible to nature, and to catch and express this natural beauty of the world. Real beauty, however, is not so called because of any usefulness it may possess, but is primarily beautiful in itself; for the beautiful is what pleases every one, just as the good is what every one desires. Beauty is therefore the flower of the good (*quasi un fiore del buono*); it is the circumference of the circle of which the good is the centre, and accordingly, poetry, as an expression of this beauty, imitates the outward show of life in its general aspects. Poetry is therefore an imitation of human actions, made for the guidance of life; and its end is delight, *ordinato al giovamento*. It must essentially delight, either because delight is its aim, or because delight is the necessary means of effecting the ethical end of art. Thus, for example, heroic poetry consists of imitation and allegory, the function of the former being to cause delight, and that of the latter to give instruction and guidance in life. But since difficult or obscure conceits rarely delight, and since the poet does not appeal to the learned only, but to the people, just as the orator does, the poet's idea must be, if not popular in the ordinary sense of the word, at least intelligible to the people. Now the people will not study difficult problems; but poetry, by appealing to them on the side of pleasure, teaches them whether they will or no; and this constitutes the true effectiveness of poetry, for it is the most delightful, and hence the most valuable, of teachers.

Such, then, are the various conceptions of the function of poetry, as held by the critics of the Renaissance. On the whole, it may be said that at bottom the conception was an ethical one, for, with the exception of such a revolutionary spirit as Castelvetro, by most theorists it was as an

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effective guide to life that poetry was chiefly valued. Even when delight was admitted as an end, it was simply because of its usefulness in effecting the ethical aim.

In concluding this chapter, it may be well to say a few words, and only a few, upon the classification of poetic forms. There were during the Renaissance numerous attempts at distinguishing these forms, but on the whole all of them are fundamentally equivalent to that of Minturno, who recognizes three *genres*,—the lyric or melic, the dramatic or scenic, and the epic or narrative. This classification is essentially that of the Greeks, and it has lasted down to this very day. With lyric poetry this essay is scarcely concerned, for during the Renaissance there was no systematic lyric theory. Those who discussed it at all gave most of their attention to its formal structure, its style, and especially the conceit it contained. The model of all lyrical poetry was Petrarch, and it was in accordance with the lyrical poet's agreement or disagreement with the Petrarchan method that he was regarded as a success or a failure. Muzio's critical poem (1551) deals almost entirely with lyrical verse, and there are discussions on this subject in the works of Trissino, Equicola, Ruscelli, Scaliger, and Minturno. But the real question at issue in all these discussions is merely that of external form, and it is with the question of principles, in so far as they regard literary criticism, that this essay is primarily concerned. The theory of dramatic and epic poetry, being fundamental, will therefore receive almost exclusive attention.