

THE LIGHT IN TROY
Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry

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transitive role for which he deliberately cast himself and which he accepted responsibly, assuming in good faith the burden one carries to cross a threshold.

Eight • Poliziano: *The Past Dismembered*

The death of Petrarch in 1374 was followed by a period of poetic aridity in Italy that lasted over three quarters of a century. The new wave of humanist energy that began to gather strength early in the quattrocento did not immediately produce an important body of poetry either in Latin or the vernacular. Somewhat more surprisingly, it also failed to produce interesting discussions of imitation. This failure may be due in part to the pedagogic method of the commonplace book, which tended to foster syncretic textures of fragmentary allusions or *topoi* and left little room for extended reflection.¹ The educational treatises of the quattrocento have curiously little to say about *imitatio*; this may be due to their emphasis on *curriculum*—the requisite range of subjects and canon of authors—rather than *method*. At the opening of the last decade of the century, the *De poetice* of Bartolommeo della Fonte contains a few derivative remarks on the need for judgment both of the writer's self and his model before he sets out to emulate it.² But the vogue of imitation as a theoretical issue seems to have been triggered by della Fonte's more gifted colleague at the Studio of Florence, Angelo Poliziano, who exchanged polemics at about the same time with a young humanist, Paolo Cortesi, on the propriety of following a single model, Cicero. This exchange was followed by a flood of theoretical debate throughout western Europe that subsided only in the latter sixteenth century.

The one treatise on imitation we possess between Petrarch and Poliziano in no way ranks with their briefer but incisive discussions. This is the heretofore unpublished *De imitatione* by Gasparino Barzizza (died 1431).³ As its editor George Pigman suggests, Barzizza's little essay may not have been intended for publication but for the private use of his students; it remains at any rate at a very elementary and even mechanical level. Imitation is discussed almost entirely in terms of diction, although invention and disposition are said to require parallel procedures. Verbal imitation is effected in four ways: addition, subtraction, transposition, and alteration.⁴ Each is explained in language so simple as to be childlike. An example of addition: if one's model is Cicero and he writes "Scite hoc inquit Brutus" (Brutus says this deftly), one can expand this to read "Scite enim ac eleganter hoc inquit ille vir noster Brutus." Barzizza also lists the five standard metaphors for imitation: apian, digestive, filial, echoic, choral. He could have found all but the fourth in Seneca. What is striking is their status as routine *topoi* so early in the humanist Renaissance. The longevity of the first two in particular after this demonstration of their familiarity, and what is more, their reascent to something like eloquence at the hands of an Erasmus, a Du Bellay, a Montaigne, a Jonson,⁵ reinforce a lesson no twentieth-century reader will ever fully absorb. For

the evidence that these metaphors were already felt as commonplaces, and the evidence that boys of that era learned imitation at a primary stage in their studies, this plodding schoolbook is chiefly valuable.

Its limitations should not in any case be allowed to obscure the vaster intellectual adventure in which it played a humble part. During the era stretching from Petrarch to Poliziano, the humanist movement established itself in Italy as a dominant intellectual force. Major texts of antiquity were rediscovered; the composition of Latin prose and poetry came to approximate ancient Roman style; education in the best schools came to be based chiefly on classic Roman authors and also included some Greek. A far sharper perception of the alien specificity of ancient civilization was achieved, and along with this a perception of period styles during the course of that civilization. In his inaugural lecture delivered at the Florentine Studio, Poliziano reveals his own sensitivity to the shift of *mundi significantes* as the universally admired Augustan age of letters was succeeded by the silver age, which many humanists regarded as decadent.

Neque statim deterius dixerimus quod diversum sit. Maior certe cultus in secundis est, crebrior voluptas, multae sententiae, multi flores, nulli sensus tardi, nulla iners structura, omninoque non tantum sani et fortes sunt omnes et laeti et alacres et pleni sanguinis atque coloris. Quapropter ut plurima summis illis sine ulla controversia tribuerimus, ita priora in his aliqua multoque potiora existere iure contenderimus. [We should not automatically call worse what is different. In the later authors there is assuredly more elaboration, more frequent pleasure, many *sententiae*, many flowers, and there is nothing sluggish; no structure is inert; not only is everything healthy but it is strong, joyous, animated, full of blood and color. Thus while we recognize without debate the great merits of those [earlier] supreme masters, we must rightly affirm that in these [later authors], certain new qualities appear with more distinction.]⁶

All these ages, Poliziano argues, provide matter for imitation and nourishment, as Lucretius's bees find nectar in all meadows. This new alertness to period style is visible not only in the growth of connoisseurship through all the arts, but in the facility that produced fakes: Alberti's Latin comedy corresponds to the youthful statue by Michelangelo successfully passed off as antique. Poliziano composed Greek poetry that could *pass* as Greek among native speakers, although he personally never left the shores of Italy. This kind of distinction is the most persuasive token of the enormous gain in quattrocento historical and linguistic sensitivity.

Yet the spectacular gains were irregular, insecure, and overshadowed by a persisting sense of estrangement. Many ancient texts were available in manuscripts incomplete or faulty—and *divergently* faulty—to the point of heartbreak. No usable dictionaries existed for either ancient language; Greek was generally learned by the arduous comparison of facing Latin translations, usually those done by Theodore of Gaza. Confronting a mutilated or nonsensical manuscript, the scholar had no recourse but to consult another manuscript that might be less reliable. The relatively systematic organization of philologic research in universi-

ties, as against the more brilliant but erratic research of humanists employed in courts and chancelleries, assumed major importance only at the end of the quattrocento. I have already quoted that remarkable confession of Poliziano which must have cost him no little pain: "There is no single book of Roman antiquity, I believe, which we professors fully understand" (*nullus apud Latinos . . . liber [ut arbitror] quem professores ad liquidum intellegamus*).⁷ And I have quoted also (see above, p. 9) his tribute to those intrepid-adventurers who seek out the obscure and forgotten mysteries ("tam remota tamque oblivia") of the distant past. The increase of humanist knowledge heightened ironically the sense of the unknown; the wider the diameter of light, the greater the circumference of darkness—and the keener the awareness of potential estrangement. Poliziano's own alertness to the risk of anachronism is revealed in such an insignificant phrase as his boast of having translated a certain ancient text *coloribus servatis*, with its particular cast, its moral style, intact.⁸ It is true that the dedicatory epistle to the *Raccolta Aragonese* stresses the continuity of ancient Latin and vernacular Italian poetry. But this passage from an official document may have less to teach us than a private jotting in the poet's journal: "Nuovi ragionamenti fanno nuovi casi: e nuovi casi vogliono nuovi modi." (New reasoning produces new examples, and new examples require new modes of thought.)⁹ The Christian sense of universal fragility we find in Poliziano's sermons ("nulla in fra gli uomini è stabile"—nothing human is stable)¹⁰ is not fully distinguishable from a secular anxiety of millenary loss. Instances of the necromantic metaphor can be found throughout his work, from the early praise of the book dealer and copier Vespasiano da Bisticci:

Felix, cui liceat revocare in lumina vitae
Mortua priscorum tot monumenta virum.¹¹

to the late praise of Ficino for having brought back Platonic philosophy from the underworld as Orpheus wanted to bring back Eurydice. Yet as we shall see, the imagery of neither compliment escapes the problematic. Moreover in a city that had lost the civic spirit and communal liberty of the Salutati-Bruni era, the necromantic metaphor began to be co-opted for the propaganda of Poliziano's patrons. The Virgilian slogan "Le tems revient" appeared on a banner carried by Lorenzo during a Florentine tournament.

It is against this checkered background of ignorance and knowledge, against the perpetual Renaissance conflict of perceived continuity and rupture, that one must read the well-known letter of Poliziano on the subject of imitation. It is not his only pronouncement on the subject, but it is rightly regarded as the richest and the most representative. It was composed toward the close of the author's relatively short career, at a time when he saw himself primarily as teacher and scholar, only secondarily as a poet, writing almost exclusively now in Latin. The recipient of the letter was a young man, Paolo Cortesi, who had made the mistake of sending the master a sheaf of letters composed by various hands in strict imitation of Cicero.

Poliziano's brief, withering polemic would receive a somewhat longer reply from Cortesi. During the sixteenth century the same scenario would be played out by Giovanfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (nephew of the philosopher) and Pietro Bembo, and then again by Erasmus and Scaliger among others.¹² Of all the contributions to this sizable literature, Poliziano's has the merit of concision. I quote it in full.¹³

I return to you the letters which you have gathered so diligently, in the reading of which, speaking frankly, I am ashamed to have wasted my time. Except for a very few, they do not deserve to be read by a cultivated person or to have been collected by you. I shall not indicate which I approve or disapprove. I prefer that no one's pleasure or displeasure in them be swayed by my judgment. However there is one question of style on which I take issue with you. If I understand you, you approve only those who copy the features of Cicero. To me the form of a bull or a lion seems more respectable than that of an ape, even if an ape looks more like a man. Nor, as Seneca remarked, do those most highly reputed for eloquence resemble each other. Quintilian ridicules those who think themselves Cicero's brothers because they end their sentences *esse videatur*. Horace scolds those who are imitators and nothing else. Those who compose only on the basis of imitation strike me as parrots or magpies bringing out things they don't understand. Such writers lack strength and life; they lack energy, feeling, character; they stretch out, go to sleep, and snore. There is nothing true in them, nothing solid, nothing efficacious. Someone says: "You don't represent Cicero." What of it? I am not Cicero; I think I represent myself.

Then there are some, dear Paolo, who beg for their style like bread, bit by bit, and live by the day. Unless the book is at hand to draw from, they can't string three words together, and even these they muddle with awkward transitions and disgraceful barbarisms. Thus their style is always tremulous, wobbly, weak—unkempt and ill-fed, so to speak; these I can't tolerate. And they have the temerity to pass judgment on the learned, whose style has been enriched by abstruse erudition, broad reading, and prolonged practice.

But to return to you, Paolo, whom I love deeply, to whom I owe much, whose mind I greatly respect, I hope that you will detach yourself from that superstition whereby what is entirely yours cannot please you and you never take your eyes off Cicero. When you have read Cicero and other good authors widely and at length, when you have pondered, learned, digested them, filled your breast with the knowledge of many things and propose to compose something yourself, then I hope that you will swim as they say without cork and take counsel with yourself, putting aside that fretful and demoralizing concern with reproducing Cicero alone and finally venturing all your own powers in the effort. For whoever contemplates with awe those ridiculous features of your models cannot adequately represent them, believe me, but only hamstringing the velocity of his mind, block the road, as it were, of a true runner, and to use the Plautine expression, act as a remora. One who takes care to place his foot in another's tracks cannot run well, nor can one write well if he lacks the courage to leave the beaten path. Bear in mind finally that to draw nothing from the self and to imitate always is the mark of an unhappy mind. Farewell.

It would be well to exclude at the outset an anachronistic reading of this document that would see in it a manifesto of a modern expressionism. The last

sentences of the first paragraph, if taken out of context, might lend themselves to a view of their author as an unfettered individualist fighting free of the constraints of tradition. But this of course is precisely what Poliziano was not, in or outside of this letter. The self which he wants to express is that self nourished and matured by the digestive absorption of others that is described in the third paragraph. Only the man whose heart and stomach are filled with the substance of others is able thus to portray himself. The Ciceronian is not overstuffed by a hypertrophy of learning, as the post-Romantic observer might consider him to be; without his model he is rather undernourished, unkempt, and ill-fed, betraying that scarcity of *recondita eruditio* which leaves his beggarly prose so trembling and unsteady.

It is true that for Poliziano the digestive phase is understood to be preceded by a phase of analytical withdrawal, the philological act of *placing* the word and the text in their own era, at their own distance, in order to experience their peculiar savor, their uniqueness as historical artifacts. There is a rigor, an impersonality, in this moment of lucid apprehension that is absent from the Petrarchan metaphor of innutrition. And this is a moment that does not fade even after the assimilative act occurs. The capacity to savor implies a necessary, preliminary stage in the innutritive process. As these metaphors suggest, a *wissenschaftlich* detachment was not altogether distinct from an Epicurean detachment, the refined composure of an erudite connoisseur. Yet it is a mistake to be deluded by this composure into denying the assimilative act that follows and fulfills the preliminary distancing.¹⁴ The poetry of Poliziano is there to guarantee the validity of that profound absorption which the letter defines and celebrates.

What is really at issue between Poliziano and Cortesi is the human capacity for achieving an *integration* of the self, which then becomes an integration of style, out of the contamination of multiple models. The young Cortesi, speaking in this dispute for the generation to follow, denies the possibility of forming a stylistic unity out of the flotsam of literary history. In the battle of metaphors that focuses this polemic, he opposes to the fullness of Poliziano's well-fed eclectic avoiding the footprints of a single forerunner the dissonant clashing of stones in a landslide, the chaos of a pawnbroker's shop, cluttered with the bric-a-brac of its motley customers, or the confusion of the traveler who strays from the highway and wanders among the thorns. The ill-assorted meats on the plate of the eclectic for Cortesi can only produce indigestion. In these images of satiety, confusion, and disorder, given the cult they introduce, it is perhaps not too much to discern a humanist *crisis of receptivity*. One way, that is, to interpret the Ciceronianism of the high Renaissance is in terms of a glut, if not of knowledge, then of the will to knowledge, the end of a long chapter of omnivorous passion. Is it paradoxical that the supremely civilized man of Poliziano's letter takes the form of a bull or a lion, preserving a wildness of predatory appetite? To surrender this appetite is to act the remora, *facere remoram*, to cancel the dynamism of civilization.

Thus the decision whether to draw upon a single master (Cicero) or the entire breadth of the canon translates a choice between rival conceptions of assimilation and rival possibilities of humanist wholeness. These were in fact issues around

which Poliziano's entire career had turned. And assimilation is a crucial motif running through the thought of the fifteenth century. It is already significant in the profound and original thought of Nicholas of Cusa.

Si hanc divinam simplicitatem infinitam mentem vocitaveris, erit ipsa nostrae mentis exemplar. Si mentem divinam universitatem veritatis rerum dixeris, nostram dices universitatem assimilationis rerum, ut sit notionum universitas. Conceptio divinae mentis est rerum productio; conceptio nostrae mentis est rerum notio. Si mens divina est absoluta entitas, tunc eius conceptio est entium creatio; et nostrae mentis conceptio est entium assimilatio. . . . Si omnia sunt in mente divina ut in sua praecisa et propria veritate, omnia sunt in mente nostra ut in imagine seu similitudine propriae veritatis, hoc est notionaliter: similitudine enim fit cognitio.

[If you affirm the divine mind to be the entire truth of things, you affirm our mind to be the entire assimilation of things, since it contains the totality of impressions. For the divine mind to conceive of things is thereby to produce them; for ours, to conceive of them is to form an impression. If the divine mind is absolute being, it need only conceive beings to create them; the conception of our mind is the assimilation of entities. . . . If all things are contained in the divine mind as in their proper and precise truth, all things are in our mind as in an image or resemblance of their proper truth, which is to say as impressions; all knowledge is achieved by means of resemblance.]¹⁵

There is much in this passage of the *Idiota* that speaks to us today, not least the argument that human knowledge is by necessity figural or metaphoric. What for our purposes is seminal is this proud affirmation of the mind's vocation as container and assimilator, second only to the divine function of creation. The older meaning of *assimilatio* (comparison) is associated with the process of mental reception, the modern English meaning. In fact, Nicholas was still closer to the vision of late Italian Neoplatonism because he saw in this human capacity for reception a complementary capacity for assimilating itself to the multiplicity outside itself. The act of drawing this multiplicity into the self is somehow akin to giving one's self to the movement, diversity, disjunction outside it. Paradoxically the mind absorbs the otherness of the external creation by yielding itself up. This double movement of absorption and surrender reappears in the thought of Ficino, where the metaphoric activity of the assimilative mind disappears and the distinction between divine and human creativity is further blurred.

Neque credendum est animum sibi minus unire quae capit quam corpus. Corpus enim cibos vel diversissimos in suam vertit substantiam anima concoquente. Ita et animus quae accipit, immo concipit, in se vertit, et multo magis, siquidem dimensiones corporum mutuum in corporibus impediunt unionem; spiritualia vero sunt unioni admodum aptiora. Itaque rationes rerum intellectarum magis in substantiam transeunt intellectus, ut vult Plotinus, quam in substantiam corporis alimenta.

[One must not believe that the soul unites what it receives less with itself than does the body. The body transforms the most varied nourishment into its own substance, through the digestive process of the vital principle. Similarly the soul transforms what it receives and even what it conceives into itself still more thoroughly, for the physical dimensions of bodies are an obstacle to their union, whereas spiritual entities are better

adapted to union. Thus the principles of things understood penetrate more deeply the substance of the intellect, according to Plotinus, than does nourishment the substance of the body.]¹⁶

Elsewhere Ficino writes: "Our soul tends to become all things, as God is all things."¹⁷ This giving up of the self to the nonself no more constitutes an annihilation of the subject than does the diffusion of the One in the many; it is simply one more of man's divine prerogatives, and perhaps the central prerogative. It is once again a phase of an activity that remains circular and assimilative.¹⁸ It is only in this larger conception of dynamic interchange that one grasps the deepest interpretation accorded the familiar formula attributed to Cosimo de' Medici: "Every painter paints himself" (*Ogni pintore dipinge se.*) Later formulations can be found in Pico and in Patrizzi; perhaps one hears an echo of the idea in Leonardo's remark: "Whoever paints a figure and cannot be that figure, cannot reproduce it." (*Chi pinge figura, se se non po' esser lei, non la po' porre.*) The assimilationist impulse, cut off in this case from the impulse to self-surrender, reaches its culmination in the thought of Charles de Bouelles, who designated self-knowledge as the goal of all human endeavor and made assimilation of the outer world the single means to this goal. This conception doubtless carried the Renaissance trend as far as it could go. The mind of the sage swells to contain the universe itself, and this ingestion becomes his life.

It would be a serious error to place in the center of this metaphysical current the reflection of Poliziano, whose reservations concerning Neoplatonic speculation are well known. But it would be equally wrong to segregate him from the milieu in which he moved and breathed. The assimilationist images of the letter to Cortesi and the Studio lecture cannot be read as mere transcriptions of the corresponding images in Petrarch. There is, that is to say, a seriousness in the concept of self-creation by mellification or innutrition which the egoism of Petrarch would ultimately have repudiated. Yet Poliziano also distinguishes himself from the metaphysical thought of his century by substituting for the act of self-surrender the act of philologic apprehension. Cortesi's response goes so far as to question the very possibility of a richly assimilated selfhood. Who wants the clutter of a pawnshop? Isn't there a limit to each man's capacity for absorption? Nietzsche for one thought there was.

There is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of "historical sense," that injures and finally destroys the living thing, be it a man or a people or a system of culture. To fix this degree and the limits to the memory of the past, if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present, we must see clearly how great is the "plastic power" of a man or a community or a culture; I mean the power of specifically growing out of one's self, of making the past and the strange one body with the near and the present.¹⁹

Nietzsche deals here in his own idiom with that question of the wholeness of the assimilative individual which brought the long affirmative stage of humanism to the point of crisis. The dispute between the two humanists at the close of the

quattrocento turns precisely upon what Nietzsche calls *plastische Kraft*. The Ciceronian cult can be regarded as a misguided or pathological response to an authentic issue, a response that is a superstition rather than a liberation. What in Poliziano looks to the naive eye like an individualism repudiating tradition is more properly understood as a defense of every man's unlimited "plastic power," the strength to absorb and remain free. Underlying the exchange of letters is this deeper problem of receptivity whose solution in any given case is by no means obvious.

Along with this crisis of assimilation in the Ciceronian dispute one can make out a crisis of historicism. As the quarrel was fought and refought repeatedly, one can discern a conflict between heuristic and reproductive imitation, between history as freedom and history as ceremonial repetition. The Ciceronian (Cortesi, Bembo, Longueil, Erasmus's *Nosoponus*) is inclined to believe in pure repeatability, in imitation as secular ritual, and to reduce by implication anachronistic distance. The anti-Ciceronian (Poliziano, Giovanfrancesco Pico, Erasmus) is inclined to deny the sacred status of the original text and to stress the creative freedom of the imitator, a freedom which is inescapable given the fact of cultural change. This dimension is present in the exchange that concerns us, but in the letter of Cortesi there are hints of a movement away from any concern with history, however understood. There is in fact already here in germ that massive shift of emphasis from imitation of texts to imitation of "nature" which would gradually take place over the course of the cinquecento. We can watch this shift acted out in two successive sentences. Cortesi has just stated that he prefers to be an ape of Cicero than a student of anybody else. But there is a great difference between wishing to imitate someone and no one.

Ego autem statuo non modo in eloquentia, sed in aliis etiam artibus necessariam esse imitationem. Nam et omnis doctrina ex antecedenti cognitione paratur, et nihil est in mente quin fuerit prius in sensibus perceptum.

[I hold imitation to be necessary not only in eloquence but also in the other arts. All knowledge is based on an antecedent cognition; there is nothing in the mind which has not first been perceived by the senses.]²⁰

The pivotal word is "antecedent" (*antecedenti*). Is this the antecedence of a model anterior in time or the antecedence of sensory to mental apprehension? Cortesi has it a little both ways. Cicero in any case deserves to be the unique model of all writers because his preeminence attains the flawless wealth of nature itself, a higher, perfected, ideal nature. To take this direction is to dehistoricize Cicero and suppress the etiological passage from his particular moment to the present. It is to bypass that moment of philological savoring which places the text at its unique and proper distance. It is also implicitly to redefine the risk of anachronism—not as a failure of the historical imagination but as a failure of skill to reach an enduring standard. In this incipient reinterpretation of imitation a certain diachronic sensibility stands threatened and another crisis begins to gather.

Thus along with the familiar anxiety of estrangement, so acute in Poliziano, the quarrel over imitation at the close of his life signals a potential crisis of assimilation and another of historicism itself. In his letter, all three seem to be mastered with an imperturbable and arrogant assurance that in his own image might be called leonine. This is curious, almost ironic, since the same issues join to create the troubled fascination of his poetry.

2

Poliziano's richest and most important poem, the *Stanze cominciate per la giostra di Giuliano de' Medici*, seems to have been intended originally as a celebration of the victory in a civic tournament by Lorenzo's younger brother. It would also have dramatized Giuliano's interest in a young woman then living in Florence, Simonetta Vespucci. But the ill-starred poem had to change its notes to tragic or apocalyptic when Simonetta died in 1476, a year after the tournament; and when Giuliano himself was murdered during the Pazzi conspiracy of 1478, the poet must have abandoned any thought of completing it. The *Stanze* remain a marvelous fragment of less than two books, but even as a fragment arguably the poetic summit of the quattrocento. Before its composition, earlier poems about civic tournaments had begun to constitute a kind of emergent subgenre, but the *Stanze*, far more ambitious in every sense, bear little resemblance to them. I give here the summary of the poem contained in the admirable introduction by David Quint to his translation of the poem.

After invocations to Love, and to Lorenzo the Laurel (Book I, stanzas 1–7), the action of the poem opens in a pseudo-classical landscape around Florence. Here Giuliano, his name Latinized to Julio (Julius), lives as a hunter, close to nature. An adolescent, he is ignorant of love, and an angry Cupid decides to punish him for his mockery of lovers (8–24). As Julio enters a forest to hunt, the god places a white doe in his path (25–32). Giving chase to the animal, Julio comes to a clearing where the deer vanishes and a beautiful "nymph" appears in its place (33–37). She reveals her name, Simonetta; she is married and lives in Florence (38–54). She leaves and Julio returns home a changed man, desperately in love (55–57). The rest of Book I is taken up with a description of the garden and palace of Venus on Cyprus; its primary literary source is Claudian's *Epithalamium*. Poliziano has added the description of the doors sculpted by Vulcan with their mythological scenes of love (97–119). Cupid, meantime, flies back to the garden where he finds his mother on her couch with Mars (120–25).

In Book II, Cupid discusses with Venus the amorous fate of Laurel and Julio. He will take pity on Laurel, who has been faithful to the rule of love. But Julio will have to prove himself in battle in order to gain the hand of Simonetta (II, 1–15). Venus sends out the little cupids to wound all the noble young men of Florence and make them eager to bear arms for love (16–21). Meanwhile she dispatches Pasithea to obtain a dream from the god of sleep (22–26). The dream is intended for Julio: in a vision that owes much to Petrarch's "Triumph of Chastity," he sees Simonetta overpower Cupid and tie him to Minerva's olive tree, apparently symbolizing a victory of chastity and

reason over love. The goddess Glory then descends and disarms Simonetta. Glory and Julio fly off to the field of battle, where Julio carries the day. But on his return he finds Simonetta enveloped in a dark cloud. She emerges as Fortune and as his personal Genius to govern his life and eternalize them both (27–37). On awakening, Julio prays to Minerva, Glory, and Cupid for victory, both in battle and in love (38–46). Here the poem abruptly stops, never reaching the action of the tournament itself.²¹

Before we consider the language in which this abortive story is told, something needs to be said about the *mundus significans* Italian poetry could draw upon in 1475. Precisely a century had passed since the deaths of Petrarch (1374) and Boccaccio (1375), a century dominated by the medium of prose and the prestige of Latin. Vernacular poetry had been largely limited to popular modes, to carnival songs, *ballate*, *rispetti*, *canzoni a ballo*, in drama the *sacre rappresentazioni*, or else the raucous proletarian compositions of a Domenico Burchiello. The energies of the classicizing humanist Latin culture were out of touch with the popular vernacular energy. And when in 1441 a kind of contest was organized in Florence (the *certame coronaria*) for vernacular poems in a formal style on a set subject (true friendship), the results in their stiffness and frigidity betrayed this segregation of energy. A serious vernacular idiom had to be reinvented, beginning with what was available: ancient Latin and Neo-Latin texts, medieval Provençal and Italian, Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, and the popular modes. For Poliziano as for few others one may add to this short list the corpus of extant Greek poetry. No single body of texts in this list constituted a living vernacular canon on which a humanistically trained poet could build. In the absence of a wholly original genius, some form of syncretic verbal imagination was needed to establish a viable Italian voice. In the work of that gifted dilettante, Lorenzo de' Medici, one can trace a process of restless experimentation drawing in turn on each available tradition but failing to produce any single work of indisputable authority. The very prestige of Latin poetry, together with the prestige of the *tre corone* of the trecento, did not simplify the task of reinvention. It was a task at the broad generic level but also at the local verbal and rhetorical level. The *Stanze* are the first poem of the century that might truly be said to have solved the problem.

The *Stanze* are in fact profoundly eclectic. The language owes most doubtless to Petrarch, but to the poet of the *Trionfi* rather than the *Canzoniere*, which means that the oxymoron is no longer the radical trope. There is no such trope, or rather this trope is simply conflation—*contaminatio*. In a certain sense, the *Stanze* represent the perfect example of that magisterial assimilation to be celebrated much later in the letter to Cortesi. We can take as an example the opening of a stanza describing nightfall after Giuliano's meeting with Simonetta, a stanza whose imagery will be in part familiar.

La notte che le cose ci nasconde
tornava ombrata di stellato ammanto,
e l'usignuol sotto l'amate fronde
cantando ripetea l'antico pianto;

ma sola a' sua lamenti Ecco risponde,
ch'ogni altro augel quietato avea già 'l canto;
dalla chimmeria valle uscian le torme
de' Sogni negri con diverse forme.

[1.60]

[Night that hides the world from us was returning, covered by a starry mantle, and the nightingale, singing under her beloved branches, repeated her old lament; but only Echo answered her weeping, for by now every other bird had stilled its song: the swarms of black Dreams came out of the Cimmerian valley in their different forms.]²²

Poliziano's readers were not expected to miss the faint presence of Petrarch's sonnet 311 ("Quel rosignuol . . .") in lines 3–4, and even that sonnet's subtext from the *Georgics*. But the opening line is taken verbatim from Dante's *Paradiso*. Is it an accident that in that context also one finds an image of a mother bird and her young? Poliziano's commentators appear not to have noticed that his phrase "amate fronde" in line 3 is drawn as well from the same passage, a long simile that warns the young birds with a maternal presence Petrarch and Virgil deny them.

Come l'augello, intro l'amate fronde,
posato al nido de' suoi dolci nati
la notte che le cose ci nasconde,
che, per veder li aspetti disati
e per trovar lo cibo onde li pasca,
in che gravi labor li sono aggrati,
previene il tempo in su aperta frasca,
e con ardente affetto il sole aspetta . . .

[Par. 23. 1–8]

[As the bird among the loved branches, having sat on the nest of her sweet brood through the night that hides things from us, anticipates the time on the open spray that she may see their longed-for looks and find the food to nourish them for which her heavy toils are welcome to her, and with ardent longing awaits the sun. . .]

As this bird awaits the sun, so Beatrice awaits the vision of the eighth sphere. It is an image of solicitous love, of hospitable retreat, of joyful suspense and nascent radiance, but Poliziano has chosen that single line which in isolation might be read negatively as an image of absence. The Dantesque passage is contaminated in line 2 with a phrase from Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae*.

stat pronuba iuxta
stellantes Nox picta sinus tangensque cubile
omina perpetuo genitalia foedere sancit.

[2.362–64]

[Night clad in starry raiment, stands by her as her brideswoman; she touches the couch and blesses the union of marriage with a bond that cannot be broken.]²³

This is the culminating moment, terrible and majestic, of that dark epic, also unfinished, which completes the rape of the girl and consummates her wedding in the bed of the chthonic god. Poliziano substitutes for the ornamental Latin "picta" (dressed in embroidery) the somewhat unexpected "ombrata"—covered or shadowed (can night be shadowed by stars?), which weakens faintly the stellar

brilliance. The Dantesque image of serene repose is not altogether violated by the recall of Claudian, since the wedding in his poem suspends death on earth and torture in the underworld, bringing a simulacrum of epithalamic reassurance to the frightened bride. But the element of rape is nonetheless sustained by Poliziano's allusion to the Philomela story in line 4. All of these subtexts hover on the border of consciousness as the humanist reader takes in this evocation of a solemn, tranquil, and restful twilight haunted by ghosts of violence and loss. The subtexts are like those echoes of the nightingale heard in line 5, which also introduces the Ovidian story of Echo and Narcissus (already present earlier in the antierotic taunts of the virginal Giuliano, which draw on the *Metamorphoses*). Or else the subtexts glimmer dimly like the diverse, confusing shapes in lines 7–8 issuing from the Homeric Cimmerian vales, darkening with illusions and half-shades the linear purity of the description. This flood of black dreams at the close of the stanza works to reinterpret retrospectively the first line, suggesting a more sinister concealment of things, a redefinition of a Dantesque paradisiac composure by a pagan Erebean insubstantiality. The muted play of subtexts partakes of this Erebean vagueness, but it is nonetheless essential to the magisterial subtlety of the poet's art. If the intertextual play were suppressed, little would be left.

In this conflative alchemy lie at once the brilliance and the limits of the poet's creative achievement. It rests on an art of eclectic assimilation that can only yield itself to and only absorb other texts. The historical pretext of the poem, the tournament, is delayed; the historical figure Giuliano de' Medici is scarcely recognizable in the character Julio. The real substance of the poem is a tissue of subtexts.²⁴ The *Stanze* compose a mosaic, each of whose stones is likely to prove a tiny composite of still smaller elements. The effect of this subtle and haunting intercontamination of a hundred subtexts is a kind of alchemical quintessence of the European poetic tradition. What the *Stanze* do not give us is a sense of transformation; there is no sense of a modern sensibility or moral style into which the past is reborn. The rhetoric is purely conflational and thus purely synchronic; historical process is excluded because there is no visible *terminus ad quem*. The historicity of the word is exorcised by a kind of miracle of simultaneity that abolishes anachronism and seems to deny all loss. The ideal would appear to be a kind of Utopian plenum of the past, an ideal that leads in practice to a vacuum of the modern. There is no continuous itinerary because a modern *modus significandi* is not established; what might be a modern idiom only allows itself to be glimpsed or triangulated intermittently. Anachronism is controlled, not by a denial of distance, which would be neomedieval, but by a homogenization of specific alterities.

In the presence of certain Ovidian subtexts there emerges a kind of irony that may have escaped the poet's control. The young Julio, in his disdain for love and his pleasure in the hunt, recalls Euripides' Hippolytus, but in his proud and self-sufficient rejection of erotic advances, he recalls two figures in the *Metamorphoses*. The stanza that presents this rejection:

Ah quante ninfe per lui sospirorno!
Ma fu sí altero semple il giovinetto,
che mai le ninfe amanti nol piegorno,
mai poté riscaldarsi il freddo petto.
Facea sovente pe' boschi soggiorno,
inculto semple e rigido in aspetto. . . . [1.10]
[How many nymphs sighed for him! But the amorous nymphs could never make the arrogant boy yield, nor could his cold breast be warmed. He often made his home in the forest, always unkempt and hardened in aspect.]

is indebted both to Ovid's story of Narcissus:

Multi illum iuvenes, multae cupiere puellae;
sed (fuit in tenera tam dura superbia forma)
nulli illum iuvenes, nullae tetigere puellae. [3.353–55]²⁵
[Many youths and many maidens sought his love; but in that slender form was pride so cold that no youth, no maiden touched his heart.]

and his story of Daphne:

Protinus alter amat; fugit altera nomen amantis;
silvarum latebris captivarumque ferarum
exuviis gaudens innuptaeque aemula Phoebes;
vitta coercebat positos sine lege capillos.
Multi illam petiere; illa, aversata petentes,
impatiens expersque viri nemora avia lustrat
nec quid Hymen, quid Amor, quid sint conubia, curat. [1.474–80]
[Straightway he burned with love; but she fled the very name of love, rejoicing in the deep fastnesses of the woods, and in the spoils of beasts which she had snared, vying with the virgin Phoebé. A single fillet bound her locks all unarranged. Many sought her; but she, averse to all suitors, impatient of control and without thought for man, roamed the pathless woods, nor cared at all what Hymen, love, or wedlock might be.]

But these Ovidian antecedents can only underscore the absence of a resolution in the *Stanze* comparable to those of the *Metamorphoses*. In the fates of Narcissus and Daphne, as in those of so many other Ovidian figures, the metamorphosis out of the human represents doubtless a loss but nonetheless a solution that integrates the creature into a dynamic, living cosmos. But in the *Stanze* this integration is lacking. Julio is not convincingly metamorphosed after his meeting with Simonetta within the abortive narrative as we have it. In book 1 we scarcely see him after this meeting, and in book 2 he is fragmented emblematically between Cupid, Pallas, Gloria, Fortuna, and Simonetta herself. Time and Death, which enter the poem in its opening stanza, are felt to be present and to share in this decomposition. He is presented in an original state followed by a passage that is then aborted by a dispersal. This is analogous to the destiny of the word in the poem's verbal texture. There is an origin, say in Ovid, which is left behind by the word's passage into the surface text, but the end of the passage is a contamination with Euripides or Petrarch or Claudian.

If the *Stanze* have in fact any single major subtext, it is the epithalamion by Claudian entitled "De nuptiis Honorii Augustii," composed for the marriage of the emperor Honorius. The flight of Cupid to his mother's palace, followed by a description of her palace and garden, was a central element of the later Roman epithalamion, beginning with Statius; Poliziano's version is especially close to Claudian's and in some stanzas imitates it closely. (He shared a taste for the poetry of the later empire with Huysmans' *Des Esseintes*.) Poliziano's descriptive prolixity, like Claudian's, tends to clog the narrative, and his mythographic vision, like Claudian's, tends to dwarf the historical pretext. But Poliziano's sensibility is the subtler, his control of detail more discriminating; insofar as his poem succeeds in distancing itself at all from this major subtext, the passage traversed is felt as a movement toward a more fastidious refinement.

Both poems take their occasion from a public event that has been to some degree degraded. Honorius's marriage, at a late stage of imperial decadence, brought him as bride Maria, daughter of the Vandal general Stilicho, whom he would later have murdered. The civic tournament at Florence was won in 1469 by Lorenzo and in 1475 by Giuliano; emptied of its chivalric function and of genuine competition, the *giostra* had become a frivolous entertainment designed to enhance Medici prestige. It diverted energies harmlessly away from the kind of civic contention that during the commune had had tangible political results. Poliziano's intended mythicization of the *giostra*, like Claudian's apotheosis of the emperor's wedding, served clear political ends. This fact does not in itself discredit either poem as an art work—it is equally true of the *Aeneid*—but it means that the relation of myth to history would pose an artistic problem requiring a solution. In the fragmentary work as we have it, the problem remains unresolved, the *giostra* remains unwritten, and history makes itself felt precisely as that force which in actuality cut short the poem.

The opposition between creativity and violence remained the organizing theme throughout Poliziano's career. His philological labor counted as a contribution to culture in its perennial struggle against time the destroyer. In his long verse celebration of poetry, *Nutricia*, that art is given to men to redeem them from bestial savagery and lead them to civilized concord. But in the drama *Orfeo*, the poet is hideously dismembered by the wild fury of the Bacchantes. In the *Stanze*, the civilizing power of creative language is displaced onto the power of creative love: the antisocial, narcissistic Julio, whose predatory wildness betrays itself during the hunt, is meant to be tamed and civilized by his encounter with Simonetta. The mythographic emblem of this process will appear when Amore finds the head of a tamed Mars in the lap of Venus.²⁶ The creative principle seems victorious in this first book, but in the apocalyptic presentiments of violence in book 2, this victory is menaced with a reversal. The struggle of government, love, and letters, arranged paratactically, against fortune, death, and time, is actually introduced in the poem's opening stanza.

Le gloriose pompe e' fieri ludi
della città che 'l freno allenta e stringe
a' magnanimi Toschi, e i regni crudi
di quella dea che 'l terzo ciel dipinge,
e i premi degni alli onorati studi,
la mente audace a celebrar mi spinge,
sì che i gran nomi e i fatti egregi e soli
fortuna o morte or tempo non involi.

[1.1]

[My daring mind urges me to celebrate the glorious pageants and the proud games of the city that bridles and gives rein to the magnanimous Tuscans, the cruel realms of the goddess who adorns the third heaven, and the rewards merited by honorable pursuits; in order that fortune, death, or time may not despoil great names and unique and eminent deeds.]

This struggle remains dominant throughout the poem²⁷ and, most significantly for our purposes, it affects the status of language. The word seems to strain toward the perpetuity of universal myth, the permanence of the myths sculpted outside Venus's palace. By offering a quintessence of European poetry, it reaches toward the repose of an eternalized history. From a certain perspective, it achieves this repose. Yet this achievement remains precarious, partly because the force of violent change obtrudes itself in the apocalyptic and truncated ending, partly because the integrity of the word depends on a tissue of fragments, partly because the status of the mythic itself has to be seen as anything but secure.

We can trace this insecurity in the copula of the *Stanze*. After taking in, along with the reader, the haunting and miraculous apparition of Simonetta, Julio addresses her:

O qual che tu ti sia, vergin sovrana,
o ninfa o dea, ma dea m'assembri certo . . .

[1.49]

["Whatever you are, o sovereign virgin, nymph or goddess, but certainly you seem a goddess to me . . ."]

The reader may well echo this question: what in fact *is* she? The dramatic immediacy of the question is qualified by its Virgilian and Homeric associations, just as the long, exquisite portrait has interwoven phrases from Theocritus, Petarch, Cavalcanti, Horace, Claudian, Dante, and Boccaccio. The very intricacy of allusion cannot fail to affect the ontological status of this figure, however fresh and distinct she emerges on the page. The young hunter has been led to her as he follows a chimerical stag fashioned by Amore; at the crucial moment the stag vanishes and the girl appears. Something of the magical does cling to her, despite her protests that she is simply a married woman, born in Genoa, who enjoys straying in the forest to gather flowers. Despite her disclaimers, Giuliano's address seems appropriate: there *is* something virginal, nymphlike, even immortal about her aura, something also of the Venus of the Virgilian subtext. The poet chooses

not to resolve this tension between the extratextual Signora Vespucci and the prefiguration of that goddess whose person and palace he is shortly to evoke. History is in conflict with myth, and the conflict can be located precisely in that subjunctive copula: "qual che tu ti sia." On which side of the conflict lies "reality"? The *Nutricia*, written much later, would assert that poetry lies at the origin of human development through time; poetry is the source of what man now is. But the *Stanze* transform what is into an artifice which insists on itself as artifice, as *literature*, and implicitly denies the process of becoming. There is a pressure on the copula not to let in too much. Thus one can speak of *vergin* as a "mistranslation" of Virgil's *virgo*.

At the culmination of book I this removal from the referential world is doubled by a second removal, in the long description of the mythographic bas-reliefs adorning the portals of Venus's palace. These represent first the birth of Venus and then other mythical stories of the loves of gods and men, descending gradually to the grotesque comedy of the clumsy Cyclops Polyphemus. Nothing is more true than these reliefs, writes the poet: "né 'l vero stesso ha piú del ver che questo" (119) (truth itself has not more truth than this). Yet it is striking that the cosmic vision of divine love and its descent has to be mediated by these immobile panels. The bourgeois earthly plane where the narrative began has yielded to the quasi-mythic Simonetta, who yields in turn to the fully mythic garden in its Lucretian vitality, which yields finally to the static mythography in stone. Each successive plane is rendered limpidly and impeccably, but we are left to ask whether their succession leads up toward a firmer Platonic truth, or simply and duplicitously away from that force of destruction which remains, scandalously, the ultimate actuality. If integration is the goal of the letter to Cortesi, the *Stanze* seem to function by a serial segregation.

Thus the stream of subtexts into the present of this surface text is diverted and broken up not only by its contaminative allusiveness but by its metaphysical insecurity. The imitative art of the *Stanze* does not, like the *Canzoniere*, act out a fall but rather a dispersal. Its great poetry does not yet rest on a robust intuition of cultural passage that would permit steady, completed etiological itineraries from past to present within the single text. Much less does it permit the courageous assumption of mutual, dialectical criticism. Humanist poetry would never be more exquisite, but it would become more open to the power of diachronic tides.

3

The theme of personal wholeness once assumed a ghastly vividness in Poliziano's experience, according to his own history of the Pazzi conspiracy. That account does not spare the reader the most atrocious details of the Florentine mob's revenge upon the conspirators, including the mutilation of their bodies both before and after death. Mutilation seems to have extended even to dismemberment, since in one grisly passage the head of a man is said to be carried on a pike to the Medici

palace and on another pike a man's shoulder. The body of Jacopo de' Pazzi is subjected to the outrage of a double disinterment: first from the sacred ground where it had originally been buried and then later by a troop of children who dug it up again, dragged it through the city, and threw it finally in the Arno.²⁸ Thus the necromantic metaphor had a terrible reality for Poliziano during this pivotal series of events, as did the image of dismemberment, an image that would become obsessive and can be traced throughout his work.

It has been noted that the outrages of the conspiracy's aftermath reappear at the close of the *Orfeo*, probably written two years later.²⁹ There one of the Bacchantes urges her companions to rip Orpheus's heart from his breast, runs off stage, returns with the singer's head, and describes for the audience the circumstances of his death.

Oh oh, oh oh, morto è lo scelerato!
 Eù oè, Bacco! Bacco, i' ti ringrazio.
 Per tutto 'l bosco l'abbiamo stracciato
 tal ch'ogni sterpo è del suo sangue sazio;
 l'abbiamo a membro a membro lacerato
 in molti pezi con crudele strazio:
 or vadi e biasmi la teda legitima!
 Eù oè, Bacco, accetta questa vittima.

[ll. 365-72]

[Oh oh, oh oh, the villain is dead. Eu oe, Bacchus! Bacchus, I thank you. We have mangled him throughout the wood, so that every bush is replete with his blood; we have torn him apart in many pieces, member by member, in cruel agony. Let anyone now reject the nuptial torch of legitimate marriage [as Orpheus had done]. Eu oe, Bacchus, accept this victim.]

The account of Orpheus's death in Ovid is longer but the details of his dismemberment less graphic; for these, Poliziano had to return to the Greek of Euripides' savage *Bacchae*. In the *Orfeo* the horror inflicted on Giuliano's murderers is displaced onto the archetypal poet, who confronted Death with courage and art. That confrontation repeats the perennial opposition of creation and destruction, civilization and violence, reenacted so often in Poliziano's imagination, and it is punished with the terrible *sparagmos* that denies wholeness even to the singer's corpse.

This repetition of history in the fate of Orfeo has been pointed out, but what to my knowledge has not been noticed is the vulnerability of the text as well as the creator to dismemberment. This common destiny is in fact the theme of the prefatory epistle to the *Orfeo*. There the author reports that this little drama was written hurriedly and that he would have preferred to destroy it after its composition, just as the ancient Spartans exposed a boy who was sickly or imperfectly formed. He would have preferred, he says, that this daughter immediately be torn up, just as Orfeo was himself ("... fusse di subito, non altrimenti che esso Orfeo,

lacerata.”³⁰ However, he explains, others prevailed upon him to let his offspring live. In another writer this analogy might be taken as merely a graceful witticism, but it cannot here because its obsessive character in the poet’s canon is too patent. In the preface to the *Raccolta Aragonesa*, written before the Pazzi rebellion, two prestigious texts are already said to have been once dismembered: namely the Homeric poems, which circulated only in fragments before their resurrection, reintegration, and reedition under Pisistratus. That ruler thus plays the metaphoric roles of both necromancer and Aesculapian healer.

Né questo poeta . . . sarebbe in tanto onore e fama salito, se da uno clarissimo ateniese non fusse stato di terra in alto sublevato, anzi quasi da morte a sí lunga vita restituito. Imperocchè, essendo la sacra opera di questo celebratissimo poeta dopo la sua morte per molti e vari luoghi della Grecia dissipata e quasi dimembrata, Pisistrato, ateniese principe, . . . proposti amplissimi premi a chi alcuni de’ versi omerici gli apportassi, con somma diligenza ed essamine tutto il corpo del santissimo poeta insieme raccolse, e sí come a quello dette perpetua vita, cosí lui a se stesso immortal gloria e clarissimo splendore acquistonne.³¹

[This poet would not have risen to such veneration and fame, if an illustrious Athenian had not elevated him on high from the earth, as though restored to a long life from death. For since the divine work of this most renowned poet was scattered and so to speak dismembered after his death in many different parts of Greece, Pisistratus, the prince of Athens, . . . having promised generous rewards to anyone who would bring him lines by Homer, re-assembled the entire body of the sacred poet with extreme care and the closest scrutiny, thus at once giving him perpetual life and winning for himself immortal glory and supreme honor.]

By the end of this passage the body of the poet becomes indistinguishable from his work. Homer is restored to wholeness by the life-giving reintegration of his poems. He had suffered in death the *dispersal* that death imposes, the fate of Osiris, which is the common lot of poets and their poems. Both can be put together again only by the divine labor of the Isis-figure, the civilizer, the statesman, the philologist, the creator, who miraculously refits the mangled fragments into unity.

This passage from the preface ghostwritten by Poliziano to an anthology of other men’s poems leads in several directions, into a network of narratives, images, and motifs forming together a personal myth, the inner drama of Poliziano’s imagination, which will incidentally clarify what for him was subsumed by the act of imitation. The Pisistratus story leads most obviously to the figure of Lorenzo, supposed author of the preface, himself a civilizer, a creator, a gatherer of pieces as in the gathering of the *Raccolta*. In a Latin epigram, Poliziano represents the Florentine state as having been maimed, mutilated, a trunk without branches or a torso without a head, until Lorenzo completed it.

Ante erat informis, Laurens, tua patria truncus,
Nunc habet ecce suum, te tribuente, caput.³²

Thus the healing of a dismemberment is a political act, a response to the dispersions of mobocracy. But it is also a philological act, in the broadest Viconian sense as well as the narrowest and most professional. Pisistratus was coping with the heartbreak of textual mutilation by history as Poliziano while still an adolescent wanted to cope. Here he is at eighteen, writing on the last page of his corrected edition of Catullus.

Catullum Veronensem librariorum incitua corruptum, multo labore multisque vigiliis, quantum in me fuit, emendavi, cumque eius poete plurimos textus contulissent, in nullum profecto incidi, qui non itidem ut meus esset corruptissimus. [After much labor and many sleepless nights, I have corrected as best I could this work of Catullus Veronensis, corrupted by the incompetence of copyists; although I have collated a great many texts, I have found none which was less thoroughly corrupt than my own.]³³

When all editions are faulty and divergently faulty, the *textus* lacks integrity and the word lacks security, the acculturating word which is the fountainhead of all civilization and all knowledge. (After the gift of poetry to men in the *Nutricia*, the mind itself is finally restored to itself: “mens sibi tandem sic reddita mens est.”) Thus the philological act of healing is at once political and metaphysical, since it repairs real substances against time the mutilator. This high function of Pisistratus-Aesculapius is also assumed in Poliziano’s lifetime by the book dealer and copier Vespasiano da Bisticci.

. . . deus veluti Cressis, Epidaurius herbis
Extintum patri reddidit Androgeon,
Sic tu, quos rapuit nobis cariosa vetustas,
Restituis Latio, Vespasiane, viros;
Per te Lethaeos iam spernit Graecia fluctus,
Nec metuit Stygium Romula lingua deum.
Felix, cui liceat revocare in lumina vitae
Mortua priscorum tot monumenta virum,
Felix, cui liceat sanctorum nomina vatium
Perdita flammatis eripuisse rogis.³⁴

[As the god of Epidaurus, by means of Cretan herbs, restored the dead Androgeon to his father, so you, Vespasian, restore to Latium those whom decrepit age has carried off. Because of you, Greece can now disdain the waters of Lethe, nor does the language of Romulus fear the god of the Styx. Happy the man who can recall to the light of the living so many dead monuments of the ancients; happy he who has been able to snatch from the flaming pyre the lost names of divine poets.]

In this early elegy the necromancer and the Epidaurian healer (Aesculapius) of the mangled Hippolytus become the heroic defers of consuming time on the pyre of universal history.

The preface to the *Raccolta*, the epigram, and the elegy quoted all represent a successful accomplishment of reintegration. In these texts the healing civilizer is allowed to glimpse the goal that the *Manto* sets for Virgil: eternity. The whole

word and the whole creator endure forever; Orpheus overcomes Pluto. But in many other writings the outcome is less happy. In the Christian works of Poliziano, only Christ is able to survive dismemberment. For man without him, life is nothing but a swift race to death. Christ put on humanity by permitting his body to be torn: "tutto il corpo suo lacero, tutto flagellato, tutto piagato e sanguinoso" (his whole body lacerated, whipped everywhere, everywhere wounded and bloody).³⁵ But the ultimate mystery of Christ is the miracle whereby his body retains its wholeness in the dispersion of the Eucharist.

Christo uno è tutto in uno tempo in diversi luoghi, . . . e persevera in sè stesso immutabile e invariabile senza patire alcuna contaminazione o diminuzione nel partimento de l'ostia, anzi in ciascheduna delle parti tutto intero e perfetto, come lo specchio in sè stesso e nelle sue parti, si manifesta!³⁶

[Christ is entire simultaneously in various places, . . . and remains immutable and invariable in himself without suffering any contamination or diminution in the division of the host; rather he reveals himself to be whole and perfect in each part, like a mirror in itself and its pieces.]

The infinite multiplication of the parts of Christ's body fails to diminish or contaminate it. In Christ there is no need for reintegration. But the apter image for men who suffer "questa nostra umana miseria che ha nome vita" (this human misery which is called life)³⁷ is the comic and hideous crucifixion of the *Scabies*, the *eczema* celebrated in that brilliant, intolerable antihymn to the humiliation of the purulent body. At the culmination of his agony, as his body disintegrates in suppuration, the victim wears a grimacing mask almost akin to a repellent smile, but then breaks into a scream like the cries of a Bacchant: "euchyon eu oe!"³⁸ The dismemberer and dismembered fuse in this fantastic play with disgust.

The reliefs before Venus's palace in the *Stanze* begin with a Hesiodic Ur-dismemberment that sets in motion the action of the rest. Cronus's castration of his father Uranus leads to the birth of Venus, which then leads to the series of erotic legends arranged in a more or less descending order. Is there a paradox in this birth of the creative principle out of that violence the poet characteristically opposes to it? One resolution of this apparent paradox was suggested by Edgar Wind, who interpreted the birth of Venus both in Poliziano and Botticelli by means of Piconian philosophy.

The unpleasant machinery of the myth, which is far remote from Botticelli, will seem less pedantic and far-fetched when it is understood that "dismemberment" is a regular figure of speech in the Neoplatonic dialectic. The castration of Uranus is of one type with the dismemberment of Osiris, Attis, Dionysus, all of which signify the same mystery to the neo-Orphic theologians: for whenever the supreme One descends to the Many, this act of creation is imagined as a sacrificial agony, as if the One were cut to pieces and scattered. Creation is conceived in this way as a cosmogonic death, by which the concentrated power of one deity is offered up and dispersed: but the descent and diffusion of the divine power are followed by its resurrection, when the many are "recollected" into the One.³⁹

There are several reasons for doubting that this metaphysics holds the key to Poliziano's castration. The young poet of the *Stanze* had not yet fallen under the spell of Pico, nor indeed under the spell of any philosophy. It is also worth noting that the victim of dismemberment in the most accessible ancient sources (Plutarch and Macrobius)⁴⁰ was Dionysius, whose dismemberment Poliziano fails to represent anywhere. More tellingly, the first result of Uranus's castration in the *Stanze* is the birth of bloodthirsty Furies and Giants; this is only complemented subsequently by the birth of Venus.

nell'una è insculata la 'nfelice sorte
del vecchio Celio; e in vista irato pare
suo figlio, e colla falce adunca sembra
tagliar del padre le feconde membra.

Ivi la Terra con distesi ammanti
par ch'ogni goccia di quel sangue accoglia,
onde nate le Furie e' fier Giganti
di sparger sangue in vista mostro n voglia. . . .

[1.97, 98]

[On one is sculpted the unhappy fate of old Celius; his son appears, angry in countenance, and with a curved scythe seems to cut away the fertile members of his father.

There the Earth with her outstretched mantles seems to gather up every drop of that blood, whence are born the Furies and fierce Giants, who show desire in their faces for bloodshed.]

Love and violence are born from this original mutilation, which thus cannot be read tendentiously as the transfiguration of flux by form. Venus cannot be regarded in any case as pure beauty or pure form; there is incipient violence in her own garden.

E mughianti giovenchi a piè del colle
fan vie più cruda e dispietata guerra,
col collo e il petto insanguinato e molle,
spargendo al ciel co' piè l'erbosa terra.
Pien di sanguigna schiuma el cinghial bolle
le larghe zanne arruota e il grifo serra,
e ruggia e raspa e, per più armar sue forze,
frega il callosa cuoio a dure scorze.

[1.86]

[At the foot of the hill, bellowing young bulls wage a much more brutal and pitiless war, with breast and neck wet and bloody, their hooves scattering the grassy earth to the sky. The boar boils with bloody foam, grinds his huge tusks, and shuts his snout; he roars and rasps, and, to arm himself further, he chafes his calloused hide against rough bark.]

The displacement of civilizing creativity on to Venerian fecundity involves a certain compromise with Mars. The descent into multiplicity is never creative for Poliziano; it is precisely that which terrifies him.

The image of dismemberment throughout his oeuvre is too protean and too suggestive to be reduced to a single version even by the seductive Neoplatonic metaphysics. If one looks for an intuitive conception of creation, it would tend to correspond to the second phase of the Neoplatonic cycle, to the recollection of the many into unity. The author of the *Stanze* may not have believed in the Macrobian or Ficinian One, but he seems to have believed instinctively in that spiritual innutrition which repairs patiently, endlessly, the immense mangled cadaver of the past. This is the great vocation of poetic imagination. Consciously or semi-consciously Poliziano believed in that assimilation which in the letter to Cortesi is the prerequisite for self-expression. If history begins with a divine maiming, then to match the furies and barbarians engendered the civilizer must become a lion or a bull, autonomous and proud guardians in this letter, solitary and whole.

It is the *horror fragmenti* that most truly illuminates Poliziano's contaminative imitation. The world left to itself would treat all texts as it treated the Homeric poems, as the Bacchantes treated Orpheus. It would undermine and disintegrate the word; it would produce the abominable manuscripts that defy all skill, or it would rend the text to pieces and drown it beyond the necromancer's power. Poetry in the face of this centrifugal power can only be a force of recollection. Imitative poetry is the supreme medium of the artistic vocation that receives by giving itself and fuses in receiving. Each circumstantial particularity of each verbal shard, of each broken subtext, is dissolved within the whole, even if for the philologist the apprehension of that particularity has required a career of labor. The assimilated word is dehistoricized and so protected; anachronism is smoothed away.

The portrait of *Simonetta* is a palimpsest of so many poems that their blurred cross-hatching serves to heighten her supratemporal reality.

Folgoron gli occhi d'un dolce sereno,
ove sue face tien Cupido ascose;
l'aier d'intorno si fa tutto ameno
ovunque gira le luce amorose.
Di celeste letizia il volto ha pieno,
dolce dipinto di ligustri e rose;
ogni aura tace al suo parlar divino,
e canta ogni augelletto in suo latino.

[1.44]

[From her eyes there flashes a honeyed calm in which Cupid hides his torch; wherever she turns those amorous eyes, the air about her becomes serene. Her face, sweetly painted with privet and roses, is filled with heavenly joy; every breeze is hushed before her divine speech, and every little bird sings out in its own language.]

This is only one of five stanzas that compose the portrait, yet for it alone the commentators⁴¹ multiply subtexts so densely that the layers of allusion and *topos* require no simple archaeology. The first line in itself fuses Propertius, Ovid, Claudian, Horace, and Petrarch; the last line Cavalcanti, Salvini, Arnaut Daniel, and the anonymous author of *L'Intelligenza*. Petrarch, Dante, and Claudian

haunt the intervening lines, and the itinerary of the *topos* in line 2 leads through too many texts to be counted. This integrating structure is Poliziano's artistic response to his own historical solitude. *Simonetta* exists as talismanic artifact against the demon of estrangement. To permit a true *rite de passage*, from a particular past to a distinct, modern present, would be to leave the poem in history and thus expose it to the force of disintegration. It offers instead incomparable artifices of eternity. The Aesculapian labor triumphs again and again at the level of the stanza, even if it fails at the level of the whole. If of the two major works that have lived, the *Orfeo* is termed by its author *lacerata*, one hardly wants to press the irony in the status of its greater companion as an episodic and mutilated segment.

The struggle played out in Poliziano's mind did not subside toward the end of his abbreviated life. If anything, each of the rival voices—the affirmation of wholeness and the intuition of decomposition—achieves a firmer statement. On the one hand there is the leonine letter to Cortesi; there is also the proudest and most personal assumption of the Aesculapian role, firmly arrogated to himself by the master philologist.

Ciceronis liber secundus de deorum natura non minus lacer in omnibus novis, vetustus etiam exemplaribus reperitur quam olim fuerit Hippolytus turbatus distractus equis; cuius deinde avulsa passim membra, sicuti fabulae ferunt, Aesculapius ille collegit, reposuit, vitae reddidit; qui tamen deinde fulmine ictus ob invidiam deorum narratur.

Me vero quae nam deterrebit invidia, quod fulmen, quo minus restituere ipsum sibi coner romanae vel linguae vel philosophiae parentem, nescio equidem a quo rursus Antonio truncatum capite et manibus? Fecimus idem antea in ipsius epistolis, eaque nostra quasi dixerim redintegratio iam recepta est, quantum intellego, videlicet excusis passim voluminibus in eam formam quam nos de vetustis exemplaribus praescripseramus.⁴²

[The second book of Cicero's *De deorum natura* is just as mangled in all ancient and modern manuscripts as was Hippolytus once, pulled apart by frightened horses. The legends tell how Aesculapius later gathered the torn members, pieced them together and restored them to life, for which act he is said to have been struck by lightning as a result of the gods' jealousy.

But what jealousy will deter me, what lightning bolt, from daring to restore the very father of the Roman language and philosophy, whose head and hands have been lopped off again by I know not what Antony? We did this before for his correspondence, and this restoration, so to speak, of ours has now been accepted, so far as I know, in that version, clearly printed at last, which we determined on the basis of the early manuscripts.]

So reads the opening of the first section, *De divinatione*, of the fragmentary *Miscellaneorum Centuria Secunda*, restored to life by two gifted scholars within the last decade. In that strong noun *redintegratio* lies the culmination of a career. But against this strength can be set the ambiguous testimony of the late *sylva*, *Nutricia*. It is true that the official theme of this long meditation on poetry is the harmony it bestows on an erstwhile savage humanity. Yet in the catalogue of poets

that occupies the bulk of the work, it is the death of each which receives most attention, and not infrequently death by aggression. One after another—Linus, Hesiod, Ovid, Lucretius, Empedocles, Gallus, Lucan, Sappho, Archilochus—all fall by the violence of their own hand or another's. And even when no violence is involved, it is the mode of death, not of poetic harmony, which most commonly appears as paramount: it is *all* we learn, for example, about the three great Athenian tragedians. Perhaps the only authentic if meager affirmation emerges from the exemplary story of Orpheus, whose head and lyre, floating down the Hebrus, continue their music after his limbs have been strewn through the fields of Thrace. This minimal continuity survives dismemberment.

But another mangled body appears in the sequel. The epigone Neanthus steals Orpheus's lyre from the temple wall where it has been laid to rest, and his inept performance draws a pack of dogs who dispatch him. The incompetent imitator parodies the master even in death. Is this an allegory to frighten Cortesi's Ciceronians? It must not in any case be applied to Cortesi's correspondent. If one looks for an emblem of his destiny, it might be found in the letter recounting the death of Lorenzo, a calamity which, says the poet, has killed any desire of his to write again. Among the portents occurring on the night of the great man's end was noted the death struggle of two great-hearted lions enclosed in a public pen, who tore at each other so fiercely that one was nearly done for and the other altogether expired.

Nine • Sixteenth-Century Quarrels: Classicism and the Scandal of History

The first half of the sixteenth century produced the most vigorous and sustained debate over the proper modes and goals of imitation ever witnessed on the European continent. The topic became a kind of storm center drawing into its vortex debates over the ancients and the moderns, over the *questione della lingua*, over the psychology of literary creation, over the propriety of rules, over the value of a single classic as a model rather than many, over the relation between the classics and "nature" as an object of imitative endeavor, and over the usefulness of imitative exercises as a pedagogic method. The turbulence of these debates was heightened by the fact that imitation could mean many things: the adoption of a given author's vocabulary, syntax, and stylistic mannerism, the adoption of his themes, his *sententiae*, his moral style, or the adoption of his characteristic genre with its associated topoi, or the specific adaptation of a single work. Imitation could be interpreted to refer primarily to *elocutio* or to *inventio* or to both and *dispositio* as well. At issue also were the proper power of literary tradition over artistic originality, the status of the approved canon of authors, the continuity of human genius, the relationship of signifiers to signifieds or of *verba* to *res*, and, not least, that problem of peculiar relevance, the significance of historical difference.

No study of less than book length could adequately organize all the pertinent materials; the survey that follows aims to be representative rather than complete. From our perspective the theory of imitation can be traced in its veerings toward or away from understanding the paradoxical status of the model, at once alien and accessible, separated from the imitator by a cultural divide and yet capable of partial contact through the invention of a constructed itinerary. As the sixteenth century wore on, of course, ancient culture was increasingly absorbed through the processes of education and imitation. Renaissance civilization throughout western Europe increasingly defined itself in terms of its filtered assimilation of antiquity. Even the popular, irreverent anticlassical and parodic modes have to be regarded against the background of official classicism. Thus the paradox of rupture and continuity was itself constantly altering the relation of its antithesis. Presently the threatening character of the alien would dwindle as the remote was domesticated; the risk of anachronism would shrink; the dynamism of the imitative leap would flag, and humanism would feel the hardening chill of academicism.

Two of the most interesting texts for our purposes were written near the beginning of this hardening process, during the second decade of the sixteenth