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Aspects of criticism in art and literature in sixteenth-century Italy

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Historians of Renaissance art are concerned with two main types of iconographic problem: to identify the subject-matter of works of art, and to establish what kind of meaning a particular subject, or rather a particular representation of a subject, might have had for the artist and his immediate public. The second of these problems tends to cause much more disagreement than the first. It is widely believed, for example, that the subjects illustrated on ceiling of the Sistine Chapel were chosen as something more than mere illustrations of Genesis, that they had some deeper meaning known to Michelangelo and understood by members of the Papal Curia; but scholars cannot agree what that meaning could be. Renaissance texts, unfortunately, do not provide much explicit evidence about the kinds of interpretation that might have been applied to such works. Indeed, they contain little to indicate even that richness of meaning was thought to be admirable. It is worth asking why this should be so, and whether the modern study of iconography is based on preconceptions about artistic excellence that were not shared in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The Renaissance is the first period in history for which there exists a substantial body of written criticism about the visual arts, although a few texts about art survive from antiquity. The most significant ancient texts - by Pliny, Lucian and Philostratus - are concerned only tangentially with criticism as such, but some additional material appears in discussions of literature and rhetoric, especially by Quintilian and Horace. All these sources were used extensively by Renaissance writers on art, but they were also able to draw on a lively volgare tradition of criticism based on the standards of assessment and terminology current in the workshops of the artists themselves. Only quite recently have historians begun to use this material to discover what qualities Renaissance artists and their public valued in painting and sculpture. This has proved a rather disturbing exercise, because the terminology and premises of Renaissance criticism seem to be so different from those which we now take for granted. In particular, there is little of our emphasis on style and composition, and even less on meaning.

The most impressive aspect of Renaissance art criticism is the way in which the volgare and classical traditions were combined with such apparent ease. This is true already of Alberti's De Pictura of 1435. It no longer seems possible to see this work primarily as a response to the particular style of painting which Alberti encountered in Florence. In its structure, its language and the topics which it addresses the De Pictura is essentially a literary exercise, an attempt to compose an imitation-classical text on a subject which had not hitherto been tackled by humanists.(1) But central to Alberti's strategy was the appropriation of two crucial terms already current in the volgare: storia and comporre. Even in the fourteenth century pictures were routinely divided into two main categories: imagini (or figure), which are representations of single figures, as in polyptychs or portraits, and storie, representations of events, in other words narratives, which were to be found in such places as predelle and fresco cycles. Alberti characterised the creation of a historia as a process of compositio. Although this is a standard term in rhetoric, used to describe the way in which sentences are built up from clauses, and clauses from words, Alberti can hardly have been unaware that painters of his own time, as we know from Cennini, used the word comporre for the process of putting together a single figure - a usage which, in Cennini's case, was associated with the idea of combining the upper part of human figure with the lower part of a horse.(2) The expressions composizione and comporre, when used in Italian texts, almost always seem to refer primarily to the composition of individual figures, not to pictorial composition as we now understand it. In Alberti's formulation of composition - the parts of the istoria are bodies, the parts of bodies are limbs, and the parts of limbs are surfaces - there is an extension of compositio from the creation of a single figure to the combination of several figures; but the

emphasis is still on the process of making things by putting them together, rather than on the final effect of this combination.

Although Alberti's use of compositio could have encouraged a clever humanist reader to think about paintings in terms of good or bad composition, in practice there was little development of this kind of criticism in the Renaissance. Historically much more important was Alberti's emphasis on storie, rather than imagini, as the real test of artistic excellence, because it allowed him to exploit the standard rhetorical criteria employed in the discussion of texts. These criteria remained predominant in much of the artistic criticism of the sixteenth century, most notably among writers such as Dolce and Raffaello Borghini who were not professionally involved in the practice of art. Like Alberti, they were principally concerned with qualities which could be accomodated, however awkwardly, within the framework of literary criticism; and they could easily justify this kind of approach by invoking the familiar Horatian idea of ut pictura poesis. Even though they tended to liken painting to poetry, rather than to prose as Alberti had done, the difference in approach was apparent rather than real, because criticism of poetry, particularly when it drew its inspiration from the Ars Poetica, was commonly formulated in terms derived from rhetoric.

Writers like Vasari and Pietro Aretino were better at combining the literary approach with criteria derived from the craft tradition, such as the distinctively Florentine stress on rilievo and expressive outline, even on difficulty, above all as demonstrated in foreshortening. This enabled them, for example, to associate the emphasis on difficulty in a painting with an ornate style, indeed quite specifically to talk about style - here to be understood almost exclusively as figure style - in just the terms which were used in literary criticism. By the end of the sixteenth century educated laymen and the more articulate painters had a very highly developed body of criteria by which to assess artistic performance. The standards which they applied are so ubiquitous that we need not doubt that the written texts give a very adequate account of the kind of discourse that works of art provoked. This is as one would expect, given that the criticism itself was so strongly rooted in ideas familiar to the craftsmen and to the educated lay public.

It is at first sight surprising that the discussion of meaning occupied such an insignificant place in this type of writing, particularly given the apparent closeness of painting and poetry. But it is important to realise that the two activities were supposedly equivalent only to a limited degree. They are both imitative arts, but they do not both imitate the same things, and imitation is not their whole scope. The distinction is well expressed by Giulio Camillo Delminio, in a parallel which he draws between the imitative activity of the painter or sculptor and that of the orator or poet. To reach perfection in his particular field, to emulate the ancients, the painter or sculptor must master the design of all animals, including man; he must understand the differences of sex, of age, of character or profession, of anatomy, drapery, movement, and decorum. His goal, in short, is the perfect imitation of all natural creatures. The orator, by contrast, has to master all philosophy and theology, the different methods proper to verse and prose, differences in style, figures of speech, their disposition, and finally judgement of decorum. In other words, the artist imitates visible nature, and particularly its highest forms, while the orator takes as his subject ideas and learning.(3) In much the same way Castelvetro says that painters represent the goodness of the body, that is to say physical beauty, while poets represent the beauty of the soul, in other words good conduct.(4)

Most of us today find the notion of painting as an essentially imitative activity rather limited, even given the Renaissance topos that the good painter does not imitate nature directly, but refines and perfects what he sees. Leonardo, of course, undertook a spirited defence of painting against the pretensions of poetry, claiming that if painting is

mute poetry, then poetry is blind painting; and that the art which addresses itself to the highest of the senses, sight, is automatically the best. But even he saw painting principally as an activity concerned with imitation, and he was at pains to argue that whereas poetry might on occasion draw on other disciplines such as astrology (or astronomy), these disciplines in their turn drew on painting.(5)

Because painting was generally supposed to have much less to do with ideas than poetry, one would expect that the question of meaning would arise correspondingly less in discussions of the artist's achievements. But even in poetry richness of meaning was not always considered important. In Florence, certainly, it was believed that great poetry, as exemplified above all by Dante, necessarily involved mastery of all the liberal arts, but this claim was not generally conceded even by Florentines to painting. Moreover, the Florentine view of poetry as something requiring encyclopedic learning was not always accepted elsewhere in Italy; instead, following Bembo, it was often supposed that the principal mark of poetic excellence was mastery of language.

In literary and artistic criticism the discussion of meaning appears in the context of invention. But relatively little attention was paid to this topic, because poets were usually expected to choose an appropriate theme from an existing repertoire. The same was true of painters, who were generally given even less choice in the figures or stories which they represented. In practice critics tended to limit their treatment of artistic invention to an analysis of decorum, or else they conflated it with disposition, dealing with both under the heading of disegno; in other words, they were concerned with figurative, rather than iconographic, invention. This was a logical strategy, because it involved something which directly reflected skills specific to painters, unlike iconographic invention, which could be the responsibility of the patron or even of those humanist advisers so often invoked by modern scholars.

The most famous example of iconographic invention is the Calumny of Apelles, which was singled out for praise by Alberti.(6) Its excellence depended on the selection of appropriate personifications to convey a rather straightforward allegory, on the provision of suitable attributes and on the disposition of the figures across the painting: in short, on something very different from the many levels of meaning now routinely invoked in discussions of Renaissance works of art. Yet it was usually this kind of unambiguous allegory - or else a selection of appropriate historical themes - that learned scholars were usually asked to provide. Such programmes, though often ingenious and apposite, do not seem to have attracted much attention from Renaissance critics of literature or art, because invention itself was not very highly regarded; and this is surely why the advisers seem to have lavished much of their care on the aspect of their task which demonstrated their own literary prowess, the composition of inscriptions.

The most conspicuous example of a well-known work of art which was thought possibly to possess several levels of meaning comprehensible only to learned people was Michelangelo's Last Judgement. That Michelangelo should have been singled out in this way is not surprising, given that he was regarded as the counterpart in painting of Dante; and Dante was the one modern poet whose work was regularly thought to contain abstruse allegories. But it is significant that the claim was made specifically about the Last Judgement, not about Michelangelo's work in general, and that it came up first in Dolce's dialogue L'Aretino, of 1557, where the supposed presence of allegorical meanings was mentioned by one of the speakers, Fabrini, in response to the charge that the nudity of the figures was a gross breach of decorum.(7) But Fabrini's arguments were meant to seem unconvincing and misguided. To defend the Last Judgement for its abstruse iconography was to defend it in inadequate terms.

If Renaissance critics were remarkably consistent in the kind of criteria by which they evaluated works of art, and if they gave little indication that richness of meaning was a desirable or even possible

quality, it might still be argued that this is just due to the limitations of the genre in which they wrote, in other words that the criticism itself does not tell the full story. This would seem to be the view of many modern scholars. In defence of their position they could argue that there are many Renaissance paintings which even rather learned people now find difficult to understand, such as Botticelli's Primavera. Because the meaning is not self-evident, it is tempting to suppose that it must be complicated. This supposition is reinforced by the procedures commonly adopted for deciphering such paintings. The normal strategy is to assume first, quite rightly, that they reflect in some way the culture in which they were produced; then to try to gain access to that culture by intensive reading of contemporary texts; and then, because these texts seldom produce anything precisely corresponding to what the artist painted, to attempt to reconstruct the 'programme' by combining ideas and images from a variety of written sources.

Underlying this approach are two assumptions: first, that the kind of culture and knowledge reflected in paintings rather closely reflects the text-based high culture of the same period; second, that by reading we are putting ourselves in the position of the original viewers, who were able and disposed to apply to pictures a whole series of ideas then in common currency, but now only accessible to a scholar who immerses himself in the more learned texts of the time. Both these assumptions are highly dubious. For the first, there is very little evidence at all. Patrons, letterati and painters do not in general seem to have supposed that the arts of literature and painting were equivalent in the kind of ideas which they expressed. The second assumption is even more questionable. Renaissance secular paintings were often not produced for the public at large, even for the educated public, but for private patrons. These people presumably knew about the subject-matter of the pictures which they owned, either because they told the artist what to paint, or because the artist had explained the imagery to them. And any visitor coming to see such pictures had only to ask the patron for an explanation. In other words, Renaissance pictures are sometimes baffling today not because we lack the cultural equipment of educated Italians of the period, but because we cannot ask anyone about them. We are like visitors in a museum of unlabelled paintings; but Renaissance pictures were not painted for museums. We think that the process of understanding them is somehow analogous to that of understanding a text. But when paintings are produced it is not always assumed that they will enter the public domain, as texts do when they are published; and so the artist may not provide the information necessary for them to be understood.

It is therefore no accident that almost all the famous iconographical problems of Renaissance art involve works painted for domestic settings. If we want to get an idea of the kind of knowledge which educated viewers might normally have brought to art, we should look instead at works intended for public exhibition, especially at state entries and the decoration of public buildings. In these cases there often exist written programmes and published descriptions, which indicate very clearly the principles under which such schemes were devised. It is evident from these texts that people were not expected to recognise a wide range of subject-matter and that obscurity or ambiguity of meaning was not considered desirable. This is hardly surprising, since the subjects represented in public contexts were almost always chosen to make some specific point, whether by means of episodes or characters from history, which provided exemplary lessons or apt historical parallels, or of personifications, or a combination of the two. The significance of such imagery was frequently made explicit by inscriptions. Indeed, without such written explanations, most personifications - apart from traditional ones like Justice - could not have been identified at all.

When scholars today try to identify such figures in Renaissance art they often draw on texts published after the works themselves were produced, notably Ripa's Iconologia, on the assumption that Ripa

codified and summarised a mass of ideas and associations then in common currency. This is not the case. Ripa himself did not expect people to decipher his inventions unless they were labelled, nor did he make much use of existing painted imagery. Instead he often invented personifications by combining attributes taken from Valeriano's manual of symbolism, the Hieroglyphica, choosing in an arbitrary way among the various interpretations given to these attributes by Valeriano.(8) Even if earlier iconographic advisers had exploited Valeriano in the same way, and even if they had used the same attributes, there is no reason to suppose that they would have given them the same meaning as Ripa. In fact, before the publication of the Iconologia personifications were devised in a variety of ways. Thus in the schemes which he provided for the Palazzo Vecchio Cosimo Bartoli often invented personifications principally on the basis of rather obvious associations of ideas - suggesting that Eternity, for example, should be shown as a young woman seated above a pile of weapons, books and works of art.(9) By contrast, Vincenzo Borghini, who worked on many Florentine schemes of the same period, liked personifications derived from classical coins.(10) In Venetian iconographic programmes compiled in the second half of the sixteenth century, too, a variety of different methods was adopted.(11)

Before the appearance of Ripa's book, which soon to some extent standardised the appearance of personifications, there was therefore no sure way of deducing what most of them signified except by inscriptions. This did not always matter, as Veronese's ceiling of the Sala del Collegio in the Doge's Palace shows very clearly. The major panels in the centre of the ceiling are quite comprehensible, because most of the figures are familiar personifications like Justice and Peace, and there are even helpful inscriptions. But no one could have identified all the young women at the sides: some have attributes taken from Valeriano, others from classical coins, and one from a woodcut in Marcolini's Sorti, an illustrated fortune-telling book. In theory, perhaps, people might have been expected to decipher these figures by recognising the small historical scenes painted in the frieze just below, which exemplify the qualities which the women personify. But in practice these frieze scenes are extremely difficult to see, so no visitor would have been able to work out the full meaning of the ceiling without assistance. Evidently this did not trouble the patrons or the artist; otherwise the figures would have been labelled. It is enough that these women were recognised as personifying good qualities of the Venetian government. The opulence and beauty of the decoration communicated its real meaning, proclaiming the power, wealth, culture and integrity of the Venetian state.(12)

Again, in the decoration of the Palazzo Bindi-Sergardi in Siena, by Beccafumi, all but one of the painted histories, which are taken from Valerius Maximus, have explicit inscriptions pointing out the exemplary lesson. The unlabelled scene shows by far the most familiar of all the stories represented, the Continence of Scipio. The educated visitor was expected to be able to recognise this scene and understand its significance; but not the others. In Beccafumi's ceiling in the Town Hall of Siena the inscriptions do not explain the stories, but merely identify the principal figures. Here, perhaps over-optimistically, it was no doubt assumed that the councillors, with this assistance, would be able to remember the relevant lesson to be drawn from Valerius Maximus, though their task was made easier by the inclusion of labelled personifications in the centre of the vault.(13) Such a combination of historical scenes and personifications was very common, the Palazzo Vecchio decoration being another conspicuous example.

One common modern assumption about historical subjects is that they were meant to be understood both as representing notable historical events and as coded allusions to events in the life of the patron. And, to judge from the scholarly literature, much more importance is now placed on the second of these meanings. Underlying this approach is the idea that patrons, when commissioning painted decorations for their residences, generally regarded it as acceptable and indeed

desirable to glorify themselves, and that people in the Renaissance read and used history in this way. But written history, according to the well-known formula, was meant to give utility and pleasure. The same, presumably, was true of painted history. Besides giving the artist an opportunity to paint beautiful pictures and tell attractive stories about famous and exotic figures of the past, it was supposed to provide exemplary lessons in human conduct. If a patron wished to glorify himself, it is difficult to see why he should not have commissioned paintings of his own achievements. But patrons very seldom did this, presumably because it would have made them seem vain. Modesty is a virtue, even in a ruler; and rulers, in particular, need to learn the lessons which history provides. They are also expected to try to live up to the achievements of their predecessors and ancestors; and this would quite adequately explain, for example, why Julius II and Leo X devoted most of the Vatican Stanze to scenes of church history.

The Stanze are a particularly good example of the tendency of modern scholars needlessly to complicate things. Thus the stories on the walls of the Stanza d'Eliodoro have been seen not just as historical episodes of significance in themselves, but as cryptically alluding either to events in the life of Julius II or to the office of the papacy. According to the first type of interpretation, the Repulse of Attila is supposed to commemorate the Pope's expulsion of the French from Italy, the Punishment of Heliodorus his severe treatment of schismatic cardinals, and so on. But in two frescoes Julius himself appears as a spectator, contemplating the events depicted. It is hardly likely that he is complacently admiring his own achievements. The alternative theory that all these scenes relate to the office of the papacy fits some of the subjects, but cannot readily be reconciled with the Mass of Bolsena. It has been argued that this exemplifies the ultimate authority of the papacy in matters of doctrine. But it would be difficult to think of a less suitable story, because the miracle concerned a priest who had doubts about the doctrine of transubstantiation; far from seeking reassurance from the Pope, he prayed to God, and was rewarded by the miracle of the host bleeding on the napkin.

If we do not try to introduce secondary levels of meaning the whole scheme is very simple. On the walls are four stories from different periods of human history. Like the Old Testament paintings on the ceiling, these show the miraculous intervention of God in the affairs of men.(14) But unlike the ceiling paintings the scenes on the wall specifically show God intervening through and on behalf of the priesthood. This reading, which could hardly be more suitable for a papal chamber, fits all the stories in the most obvious way. God punishes Heliodorus for robbing the temple in Jerusalem, in response to the prayers of the High Priest. He frees the first of the Popes, Peter, from prison. He protects the states of the Church from Attila. And in the final scene the important point surely is not that it is a particular miracle at Bolsena which is shown, but the miracle of transubstantiation, a miracle which takes place whenever a priest says mass, and by means of which God continues to intervene and manifest himself in human affairs, through the priesthood. These frescoes illustrate the workings of Divine Providence through the institution of the Church.

The Stanza dell'Incendio, with its episodes from the lives of Leo III and Leo IV, is equally straightforward. Here again the various stories have been interpreted as cryptic representations of events in the life of the patron, Leo X.(15) There is some justification for this in the fact that the early popes both have Leo X's features. But the idea of showing protagonists in stories with the features of contemporaries is common enough in the Renaissance; and there is no evidence that such historical scenes were for this reason meant to be read as modern stories. Gregory the Great, for example, in Vasari's painting of The Supper of St Gregory, is a portrait of the current pope, Clement VII, and the bystanders have the features of the artist's friends and benefactors.(16) But it remains a story of Gregory the Great, not of Clement. Unless we are to accuse Leo

X of extreme vanity, we must therefore assume that he chose these stories of his Leonine predecessors because they provided examples of conduct which he wished to have permanently before his eyes, as models for his own behaviour. After all, he had chosen the name Leo precisely because he wished to emulate the achievements of his namesakes. The Fire in the Borgo shows the proper care of a pope for his diocese of Rome, the Battle of Ostia the correct way to deal with armed infidels. The Oath of Leo IV would have reminded Leo X (and anyone else) that popes are not subject to earthly rulers, and the Coronation of Charlemagne indicates that they have the power to appoint even the emperor. All these lessons were timely in the pontificate of Leo X, and in choosing to have them painted he was doubtless making his policies and preoccupations clear; but there is no reason to suppose that he was being vainglorious.(17) Why scholars argue that somehow the frescoes would be better if they contained a second-level meaning about the life of Leo X is not easy to reconcile with Renaissance views of the function either of paintings or of history. Moreover, even discounting these modern interpretations the programmes of the Stanze are still outstandingly ingenious and original by the standards of the time.

There are two well-known instances of ancient historical subjects being chosen to commemorate more recent events; but in both cases the circumstances were unusual. One involved a group of pictures of the life of Duke Cosimo de' Medici, which formed part of the decorations for his marriage. Here the presence of Cosimo was acceptable because the pictures were for the enlightenment of the bride and other distinguished visitors. One painting showed an episode from Livy, when three proud Campanian envoys were dismissed by the Roman senate as a result of their presumptuous demands. Vasari tells us that this alluded to the unsuccessful attempt of three Roman cardinals to deprive Cosimo of his dukedom. Obviously here it was politically impossible to show the real event, because it would have been insulting to the Pope; so this historical parallel was substituted.(18)

The other example involves two stories painted in the Salone of Poggio a Caiano: Cicero being given the title of Pater Patriae on his return from exile, and Caesar receiving a gift of exotic animals in Egypt. These subjects were devised by Paolo Giovio, and already in the sixteenth century it was recognised that they alluded to the return of Cosimo il Vecchio from exile, and to the gift of animals, including a giraffe, to Lorenzo il Magnifico by the Sultan of Egypt.(19) But why did Giovio chose to celebrate the achievements of the early Medici in this strange classical guise? The answer is simple: Poggio a Caiano was a recreation of a classical villa, and, as in all Renaissance villas, decorum required that the subjects painted there should also be classical. If Giovio was required to celebrate the early Medici, he could only do so by choosing antique parallels. But it is significant that he could not find a real historical parallel for both the events which he had to commemorate. The episode of Caesar in Egypt is a fabrication which does not correspond to anything in an ancient text.

Scholars who suppose that paintings of historical subjects were meant to be more than exempla often seem convinced that this makes them better or more interesting as works of art. To people today this may well be true; but there is little evidence that anyone in the Renaissance would have agreed. Modern attitudes to representations of subjects taken from classical mythology, usually called poesie or favole, are equally curious. For example, many scholars now seem unwilling to accept that a painting like Titian's Rape of Europa is simply the representation of a familiar story from Ovid; it has to be an allegory too. This assumption is usually justified on the grounds that people in the Renaissance customarily regarded the Ovidian myths as allegorical. It is certainly true that since late antiquity various allegorical meanings had been applied to the myths, either to explain their origin or to make them acceptable to pious Christian readers; and such meanings were regularly included in scholarly commentaries to the Metamorphoses. But it

is unlikely that people in the sixteenth century normally read Ovid because of these allegories, or supposed that they had any bearing on his achievement as a poet. Indeed, the greatest mythographer of the century, Giraldi, dismissed such allegories as childish.(20) Moreover, most sixteenth-century patrons do not often seem to have read classical Latin for pleasure. They preferred the translations of the Metamorphoses, which included at best only a small selection of the allegories, often very banal ones, such as the suggestion that the Flaying of Marsyas shows what happens when people place too much trust in their own powers and dare to challenge the gods, or that the Rape of Europa was really the story of a prince who came to seize a princess in a ship called The Bull.(21) It is significant that Lodovico Dolce did not bother to include any allegories in the early editions of his translation of Ovid; they appear first in 1568, presumably in response to the new climate created by the Council of Trent. Even then Dolce took very little interest in these allegories, often simply remarking, as in the case of the myth of Callisto, that the story 'has more to do with pleasure than morality'.(22)

When Titian called his Ovidian paintings poesie, it does not therefore mean that he wanted them to be regarded as allegories. Instead, he was claiming to be emulating Ovid, telling the same poetic stories in his own poetic way. If people chose to interpret his paintings allegorically this obviously had no bearing at all on his performance - because no one would have supposed that he, any more than Ovid, was devising new allegories, or would have thought that he, any more than Ovid, would or should have manipulated the stories in order to bring out a particular allegorical reading. In this connection it is significant that when Bernardo Vecchietti, the Counter-Reformation spokesman in Borghini's Il Riposo of 1584, recommended that artists follow the canonical versions of myths as provided by Ovid, because otherwise the allegorical meaning would be lost, he proceeded to criticise Titian's uncanonical rendering of Venus and Adonis not on these grounds, but on the basis of decorum, suggesting that Titian's account, according to which Adonis left Venus, rather than setting off to hunt after her departure, was psychologically implausible.(23)

Another reason for discounting the idea that subjects such as this would normally have been chosen by painters for their allegorical significance is that this seems an absurdly convoluted way of creating an allegory. If an artist was required to paint an allegory, the normal way was not to thumb through the Metamorphoses looking for something suitable, but rather to show a group of personifications interacting, as Apelles had done in the Calumny. This at least would call for genuine invention of a kind that some people might have admired. Of course, a very few myths did have a self-evident moral meaning, for example the story of Icarus; and these could be used almost like historical exempla. But this does not apply to most of the subjects popular among painters and patrons.

Modern attitudes to painted poesie closely resemble current ideas about religious stories. We are now often reminded that scripture can be read in up to four different ways, and then told how this works in the case of individual pictures. In the same way, enormous ingenuity is devoted to the exegesis of altarpieces and other images, which, it is often said, are filled with allusions to sophisticated theological ideas. Both approaches, I believe, are generally inappropriate.

The text of the Bible is divinely inspired, and it can be interpreted in different ways because this is how God planned it. The narrative may be paraphrased or embroidered for simple people; but the various kinds of significance of sacred history are explained by means of commentaries. Exegesis, in short, is something that is applied to the biblical text, and it is quite separate from the text. Unlike written texts, painted stories cannot, by their very nature, be accompanied by commentaries. As Gregory the Great explained, paintings are the Bible of the unlettered, reminding and instructing the faithful about the main tenets of their religion. In other words, the main purpose

of religious art is didactic, and it is meant to be easily understood. Moreover, because painted stories, unlike the Bible itself, are intended principally for laymen without theological training, artists are seldom criticised for not following the biblical text with complete fidelity. Instead they are expected to follow pictorial tradition, for example in the convention that Christ is bearded, and attached to the Cross by three nails. Pictures are therefore closer counterparts to volgare devotional texts and paraphrases of sacred history than to the Bible itself. The artist is supposed to tell familiar stories vividly, with due respect and with clarity; and there is no reason to suppose he requires or could normally use any sophisticated knowledge of theology.

Religious painted stories, in short, are just stories. In general people would not have thought it appropriate if the artist manipulated the subject to bring out complex theological ideas; nor would they have looked for such ideas in paintings. Obviously this does not exclude, for example, simple allusions to typology, when these are made explicit, as in the combination of Old and New Testament subjects; but here it is the combination of different subjects, not the way in which individual ones are represented, that normally conveys the typological significance. To speculate about the typological meaning of Old Testament subjects shown on their own, as so often happens today, is surely misguided. In the same way, in the case of altarpieces and other images it is hardly likely that artists or their patrons would have understood cryptic allusions to, say, the Immaculate Conception in pictures of the Virgin produced around 1500, as is now frequently suggested. At that period the familiar iconography of the Immaculate Virgin had yet to be established, and when artists were required to characterise her in this particular way they had to include inscriptions explaining what they were doing.(24)

The task of painters was to tell stories or to represent famous individuals in a beautiful and appropriate way. They were praised for what they showed, not for what the subjects might signify to a philosopher, a classical scholar or a theologian. As Annibale Caro put it, when recommending the Fall of the Giants as a suitable theme for the decoration of a castle belonging to Virginio Orsini: 'I speak only of the paintings, because it would be beyond what you asked me if I were to write at length on that which one cannot paint of this myth, on the mysteries, significances and various opinions that there are.'(25) Of course Orsini and Caro might have discoursed at length on such topics when they actually saw the paintings. But they would have been well aware that they were talking about the myth, not evaluating the artist's performance in representing that myth.

In modern studies of iconography this simple point seems often to have been overlooked. We talk rather loosely about the interpretation of works of art, as if we are thus making some assessment of the achievement of the artist. But people in the Renaissance did not normally interpret works of art at all, even though they had an elaborate system of criticising them. If we want to find Renaissance works of art which fit modern preconceptions, which are multi-levelled in their meaning and which resist immediate understanding, the place to look for them is in combinations of picture and text - in emblems and imprese. But here, as almost everywhere else, the picture is supposed to be comprehensible. The problem comes with the inscription. As usual in the Renaissance, it is texts that call for interpretation, not visual images.

1. See especially Michael Baxandall, Giotto and the Orators (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp.121-139, and D.R. Edward Wright, 'Alberti's De Pictura: its Literary Structure and Purpose', Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 47 (1984), pp.52-71.

2. Baxandall, Giotto, pp.121-139; Cennino Cennini, Il libro dell'arte (Florence: Marzocco, 1943), p.20.
3. Paola Barocchi, Scritti d'arte del cinquecento (Milan and Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1971-77), 2, pp.1551-62. I am grateful to François Quiviger for drawing this text to my attention.
4. Barocchi, Scritti, 2, p.1581.
5. Barocchi, Scritti, 1, pp.235-48.
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