Introduction

‘The study of poetic imagery needs justification’ – when H.W. Wells began his *Poetic Imagery* of 1924 with these words, the age of image-hunting had not yet dawned. In view of the mass of critical material on figurative language which has accumulated since the twenties, there would appear nowadays to be no compulsion to soothe the sceptical. In a different sense, though, Wells’s statement is still valid today, inasmuch as a study like the present one – dealing as it does with a single ‘image’ only – may well seem to involve an excessive narrowing of range in an already saturated field of inquiry. Any justification for the kind of ‘study of poetic imagery’ undertaken here must be based, at least in part, on uneasiness about the existing theoretical underpinnings of research into imagery. The most convincing argument for a realignment of method, however, has to do less with theory than with the practical value for further research of a study such as this – a tacit argument best left to the reader’s judgement, not the author’s. I shall thus restrict myself in the following to setting out as clearly as possible the aims pursued and procedures followed in the present book; existing studies of literary imagery will be touched on only when directly relevant to these procedures.

a. The fascination of the mirror: selection of a central metaphor

In his impressive account of the heritage left to mediaeval literature by classical Antiquity, Ernst Robert Curtius provided historical categories for the treatment of topics, following this by an ‘historical metaphorics’ for the antique treatment of ‘figures’ (*European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Ch. 7, p. 128). Leaving aside the essential unity of *topos* and *figura* in the historical study of imagery, it is clear that Curtius, in his survey of selected categories of metaphor (nautical, personal, alimentary, corporal, theatrical in Ch. 7; the book as metaphor and symbol in Ch. 16), has given us an exemplary indication of the ways in which such a metaphorics might be handled in practical terms. Commenting on Goethe’s thoughts about figurative expression, Curtius sees him as

1
The mutable glass

furnishing a sketch of a programme for a ‘tropics’ or metaphors of world literature in all periods (p. 303).

Such a programme, however – not yet adopted by modern literary ‘science’ by the time Curtius was writing in the late 1940s (p. 303) – can only proceed piecemeal. Indeed, Curtius’s own ambitious project restricts itself to Western culture, and to a very narrow range of metaphors originating in classical literature. Even here, there is no attempt at exhaustiveness of coverage, notwithstanding the general nature of the subheadings to his book. The category of ‘nautical metaphors’, for example, does not embrace seafaring generally, but rather the narrow area of the composition of a literary work seen as a nautical voyage. And even in Curtius’s historical examination of the various aspects of the book as symbol, it is clear that the time-span and variety of literatures involved in these few pages are too broad to allow precise conclusions to be drawn regarding the employment of the metaphor in specific historical contexts. Discussion of Shakespeare’s use of the book-metaphor, for example, follows on immediately from Dante, and although there are side-glances at John Heywood, Sidney and Samuel Daniel, and quotations from other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English writers in the earlier subsection on the ‘book of Nature’, Curtius’s treatment of specific areas of English literature seems more a concatenation of loosely-related examples from the memory-bank of an enormously well-read literary historian than a thoroughgoing ‘history of metaphorics’. The same applies to any other national literature or literary period one might hope to pursue in more depth.

Of course, one could argue that Curtius was only showing the way, and that, within the severe confines of a brief chapter, he still managed to provide exactly the sort of memorable illustrative reference that would allow one to sift more minutely. Supposing this latter aim to be desirable, one would have to restrict radically the field of inquiry. It is only by so doing that individual literary images can be studied closely in terms of their historical dimension, continuity of occurrence, and shifts in valency. Such a procedure has been adopted in studies of historical metaphorics undertaken in other disciplines: for example, Hans Blumenberg’s fascinating examination of the central metaphors of philosophical discourse, or Percy Scherr’sm’s impressive discussion of iconographical symbolism in its politico-cultural context. Studies like these also make it clear, of course, that restricting one’s field of inquiry is not a random business, but involves concentration on those images or metaphors which were of central significance in the literature, art and world-view of a given historical period.

The present study, which is by and large limited to English literature
Introduction

from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, has been conducted on the assumption that one such central image or metaphor (or, rather, one concept capable of a wide variety of metaphorical applications) is the mirror. The validity of such a working hypothesis rests ultimately on the illustrative material presented; the richness of this material has, at any rate, served to confirm my initially somewhat vague surmises regarding the potency and centrality of the mirror-metaphor.

This will come as no surprise to those acquainted with mediaeval and early Renaissance literature in English, inasmuch as the mirror-metaphor is frequent enough in earlier texts for one to be able to speak of a ‘fashion’ for the metaphor. Apart from its mere frequency of occurrence, the mirror was also clearly suited to a particularly noteworthy variety of symbolic, analogizing and metaphorical applications: indeed, it is evident that it met all the prerequisites for a use of metaphor that can be regarded as characteristic of a specific period in the history of literature.

This is not to deny the significance of the mirror-metaphor in other, yet earlier literatures: Pöschl’s bibliography of works dealing with figurative language in Antiquity lists over sixty relevant studies. Those dealing with the speculum verses in the Epistles to the Corinthians are the most interesting, by virtue of the broader range of illustrative text-material they draw upon; Norbert Hugedé’s magisterial study is a brilliant conspectus of this type.

Even more conspicuous, however, is the widespread occurrence of the speculum metaphor in the titles of Latin writings of the Middle Ages. Paul Lehmann and Sister Ritamary Bradley have drawn attention to this phenomenon, and a good proportion of the present study will also be concerned with tracing its lineaments. At least one group of works – the ‘mirrors for princes’ or ‘mirrors for magistrates’ – has been intensively examined and has become well known to literary historians (though these works need not bear mirror-titles as such). It is well known, too, that mirror-metaphors also occur within texts of which the most important categories are theological writings and love-poetry (particularly the mediaeval courtly lyric).

Despite the existence of such works as those by Sister Ritamary and W. Kleinecke, we are not so well informed about the mirror in mediaeval and early Renaissance literature in English, though the relevant entries in the MED and the NED, and even in earlier lexicographical works, do offer a valuable initial orientation; Ruth Anderson’s essay on the ‘mirror concept’ and Renaissance drama is also useful, as are isolated observations in other literary studies. Although there is no general survey of the mirror in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, information on particular aspects can be gleaned from such works as Abrams’s The Mirror and the
The mutable glass

Lamp, from more specialized investigations such as those by Maria Wickert and Peter Ure, or from the recently presented Sorbonne thèse on the miroir de l’esprit in late Elizabethan and Jacobean drama by Marie-Madeleine Martinet (this, the first book-length study of the mirror-metaphor since the original German edition of the present work, came to my attention too late for detailed consideration here; its chief virtue lies in its analyses of metaphor within the total context of individual plays, albeit within a much looser framework of historical convention than I argue for here and argued for then).

Of particular interest is the fact that the mirror occurs in the titles of English works (especially Elizabethan and seventeenth-century broadsheets and pamphlets) at least as frequently as in the Latin literature of the Middle Ages. Little attention has hitherto been paid to this, although it is a matter central to the investigation of the wealth of mirror-references in the literature of the period under review — not least because authors often advert to their title-metaphor within the text itself, or even provide the reader with elaborate explications of a title’s significance in their argument.

The employment of the mirror in metaphorical contexts is so frequent and deliberate a strategy in the English literature of the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries that the mirror can be said to constitute the central image for a particular world-view; the literary evidence marshalled in the following chapters should serve to make this clear. There are also more general cultural reasons for the popularity of the mirror in literature. Twelfth-century Europe had relearned the ancient art of making glass mirrors, and the thirteenth century saw the beginnings of a process whereby the polished metal mirrors of Antiquity and the Middle Ages gradually became ousted by their glassy rivals; by the early 1500s, the Venetian glass-manufactories had advanced their technical expertise to a stage where relatively inexpensive, small-format, mass-produced looking-glasses were made available to the general public. Backings of steel, lead or silver were supplanted by an amalgam of tin and mercury, and the convex, round or oval segments cut from blown cylinders of glass gradually became larger and flatter. The manufacture of these glittering objects soon spread to Germany, Flanders, France and (by the early seventeenth century) England; glass mirrors exercised an unprecedented fascination by virtue of the material they were made of and its optical characteristics, and not least through the charm of their novelty and their high status as a technological marvel of the age, like the photograph in the nineteenth century. This sense of wonder revealed itself in numerous areas of everyday culture, and glass mirrors became admired, coveted and indispensable accessories of popular fashion. Small mirrors were set in
Introduction

cases of ivory or precious metal, or attached to ribbons or finely wrought chains and worn around the waist. Larger hand-mirrors or standing-mirrors were fashioned from gold, silver, steel, tin, rock crystal or beryl, and were set in ornate frames sometimes studded with precious stones.

In Antiquity, the backs of mirrors were decorated with scenes depicting social and erotic activities appropriate to the ritual uses of the looking-glass (catoptromancy, toilet-scenes and the like), while mediaeval mirror-cases bore allegorical motifs. The mirror has always figured in works of art, whether as a symbolic attribute in mediaeval and Renaissance sculpture or on the margins of manuscripts, in religious panel-paintings, in allegorical tapestries, pictures, woodcuts and engravings, in Flemish and Dutch genre-paintings or in the depictions of Venus by such artists as Titian, Rubens and Velázquez. Small mirrors were at first installed in churches, then appeared in larger format in secular buildings, and finally became the visual centre of attention in the halls of mirrors in seventeenth-century palaces and châteaux.

More than just an item of fashion or an element in pictorial compositions, the mirror also became the object of scientific inquiry again, as fascinating to the Renaissance philosopher as it was to the common man and as it had once been to Euclid and Lucretius in Antiquity or to the Persian philosophers and European schoolmen of the Middle Ages. Leonardo advocated the mirror as a useful guide to painters, and even used mirror-writing in his manuscripts. Cardano and Athanasius Kircher were among those who busied themselves with explaining the optical characteristics of the mirror, while Giambattista della Porta experimented with distorting mirrors and sketched plans for mirror-cabinets with infinitely recursive reflections. As for the black arts, there was no need for the necromancers to rediscover what had been an essential part of their arsenal of devices ever since the mantic mirrors of Antiquity.

In view of the mirror’s immense cultural significance during the period under consideration, it would be surprising indeed if no evidence of its magnetic attraction were to be found in popular superstition and systems of belief, in the proverbial lore documenting this, or in literary texts. It is one purpose of the present study to show that the literary evidence for such a fascination with the mirror is more persistent and more delicately differentiated in its typology than even those who acknowledge the mirror-metaphor’s ubiquity may have realized.

b. Convention and originality: the literary use of the mirror

Historical metaphors is concerned with tracing literary conventions which extend beyond the peculiarities of individual works, the œuvre of a
The mutable glass

writer, genres or even the whole literary production of an age. Curtius largely discusses Western literature – all such writings from one geo-cultural domain that have survived the ravages of time and change. A historical survey of one kind of figurative usage, however, must also take into account historical changes, shifts in valency within genres and literary periods – all that helps distinguish particular literary forms and intellectual periods.

An investigation of conventionality in figurative language presupposes that a given metaphor can to some extent be treated in isolation, apart from the complex pattern of meanings woven into the particular work in which it occurs. As with the study of a literary genre, some individuality of expression has to be sacrificed on methodological grounds if the essential nature of the conventional is to be captured. Similarities in discrete figurative usages become apparent only at a certain level of abstraction; where the uniqueness of a literary work of art (and of the specific function of its constituent elements) is taken fully into consideration, comparisons and conventions become, strictly speaking, an impossibility.

This needs stressing, because close reading of texts over decades has involved the analysis of literary metaphor according to its functional significance within individual works and/or within the œuvre of a particular writer. The most valuable results of this very fruitful mode of analysis can be seen in Wolfgang Clemens’s work on Shakespeare’s imagery. That this method has also encouraged the discriminating appraisal of subtle aesthetic effects is demonstrated impressively in other studies, too, by such critics as G. Wilson Knight, Edward Armstrong, Robert Heilman and Donald Stauffer. Compared with the sort of biographically oriented contentual analysis of imagery performed by Caroline Spurgeon, the advances here are unmistakable.

Yet J.E. Hankins and others had as early as the fifties shown equally unmistakably that New Critical methods, at least in Shakespeare criticism, failed to do justice to the historical dimension of imagery. The historical metaphors ideally required would not only serve to place the interesting interpretations of more recent critics in a proper (and sometimes soberingly corrective) historical framework, but would also, and more importantly, bring to light those additional historical connotations of metaphor which are not otherwise extractable by even the closest of close readings. No matter how skilfully one might be able to identify the subtle effects achieved by single images or patterns of imagery in individual works or within a writer’s œuvre, it would be wrong to believe that the nature and effect of figurative language can be properly evaluated without an adequate acquaintance with the relevant literary conventions.
Introduction

In aesthetic terms, of course, it is very important to know how a writer intends his imagery to function, and how he optimalizes local effects: but the extent of his specific achievement, particularly in regard to the originality of his use of figurative language, can only be judged against the background of conventional figurative expression. There is a world of difference between deciding whether an original twist has been given to a convention worn cliché-smooth, and being able to see that a metaphor has been revitalized after going underground for decades or centuries. The particular effect of an individual metaphorical usage can be pinpointed and correctly gauged only when it is seen to be the outcome of the fruitful tension between a text-specific function of metaphor and the potential force of conventional metaphors current at a given time.

Not that this is anything new; most critical editions pay due regard to historical conventions, borrowings, echoes and so forth in commenting on literary imagery, particularly when the difficulties presented by a phrase or line or passage cannot be resolved with the aid of the text’s own resources. A prime example is afforded by the many studies of imagery in *The Faerie Queene* which have appeared over the last couple of decades. The fruits of this research seem convincing; ‘difficult’ images are rendered plainer, apparently ‘simple’ ones now appear more complex than one had assumed, once they are placed within the right historical context. But one often gets the uneasy feeling that the literary or iconographical parallels drawn, though instructive enough in respect of the individual point being argued or clarified, have been picked at random or stumbled upon fortuitously – that they are not so much *examples* of the possible range of relevant metaphoric conventions as perhaps the only parallels the critic happens to be acquainted with. Such a suspicion can be hard to allay: and the only way to do so is to be able to refer to some source-book which has surveyed thoroughly the conventions concerned. Only then is it possible to determine which conceivable interpretations of a passage possess a sufficient degree of historical plausibility and to measure the extent to which a metaphorical usage can be said to possess originality. Such a procedure does not have to mean that no room is left for semantic multivalency in a given metaphor: it does mean, however, that one can at least make certain that an apparent instance of multivalency is not artificially created through lack of historical competence on the part of reader or critic.

There are, then, more effective and less effective ways of bringing knowledge of historical metaphors to bear on a particular instance of figurative language. When, for example, Giles Fletcher describes the enchantress Panglory in *Christs Victorie on Earth* as holding an imperial orb in the form of a hollow glass sphere which reflects the whole world, and
The mutable glass

when he goes on to compare this with a soap-bubble, a certain degree of familiarity with iconographic conventions will doubtless permit one to cite parallel instances of glass spheres, looking-glasses and soap-bubbles functioning as stock symbols of earthly vanity. But the reader or critic cannot necessarily be assumed to know that the original significance of the imperial orb as an indicator of supreme dominion is identical with that of the sphaera mundi or terrestrial globe; that the reflection of the world in Panglory’s glass orb is actually nothing more than the refurbishing of this old convention; further, that the hollow glass ball itself stands iconographically for the sphaera mundi, which could also be conventionally indicated verbally or pictorially via the spherical form of the evanescent soap-bubble. The comparison between imperial orb, glass sphere and soap-bubble is more than a matter of superficial similarity: but it is only comprehensive studies like Percy Schramm’s Sphaira, Globus, Reichsapfel that permit one to trace the relevant interconnexions.

Now, it is easy enough to advocate the detailed consideration of figurative conventions in their historical context when interpreting literary works, but far from easy to follow through with such a programme. Given the wealth of conventional figurative expression that has passed down to us in literature over the ages, it is obvious that wide-ranging investigations and painstaking attention to detail are called for in establishing a firmer basis for study than ingenious speculation can provide. This should be regarded as a challenge to students of literature to help create a new basis for an improved understanding of the function of conventional metaphors within our literary heritage – a challenge which has, happily, already been taken up in detailed studies by such writers as M. H. Abrams, Samuel Chew, Hans Galinsky and Werner von Koppenfels.

The present book follows along similar lines, in that it selects one root metaphor – the mirror – from the broad field of conventional metaphors. If the method applied here is a different one, then chiefly with the intention of offering the reader an instrument of maximum practical assistance in interpreting the English literature of five centuries – a literature in which the mirror occupied a central position. The widespread popularity of, or fashion for, the mirror helped generate a wider range of figurative conventions in literature than the mere existence of such an obvious quotidian utensil might otherwise have stimulated; the resulting mass of potential illustrative material thus precludes this study from dealing in interpretative detail with all applications of the mirror in all the many possible literary works involved. The most that could be done was to order the many hundreds of examples in such a way that they helped reveal the configurations of the most significant conventional usages; to


Introduction

illustrate briefly how a knowledge of these conventions helps determine one’s reading of specific literary passages; and to demonstrate how the various possibilities afforded by such a metaphor as that of the mirror serve to reveal an originality in the handling of imagery which is specific to the literary time-span under review. The close connexion between the literary and the iconographical treatment of conventional metaphor also made it necessary to pay some attention to the role of the mirror in the visual arts. The pictorial matter in this book has not been included for its decorative value, but rather as an indication of how the parallels between verbal and visual conventions go beyond the purely literary and become representations of a specific, conventional but long since vanished world-picture, in which the mirror fulfilled a central orientating function.

c. Identity and change: the verbal fixation of the mirror

Metaphoric conventions can be examined along several fundamentally differing lines. One can, for example, isolate those metaphors which express a particular idea, thought, or argument – in other words, the vehicles attached to a given tenor. This is the method adopted by M. H. Abrams in The Mirror and the Lamp, which discusses in part the various metaphors of radiant projection used to express the Romantic conception of the creative process. The various figurative means of bodily forth such areas of speculation or experience as love or the transcendental can be similarly investigated. The inverse of this approach is to register all the relevant tenors expressed through one particular vehicle – to examine the range of possible meanings carried by one central metaphor, as Curtius does sketchily in his chapter on ‘The book as symbol’.

Alternatively, study may be concentrated on the coupling of one tenor and one vehicle within a variety of contexts: for example, when Curtius seeks to determine the persistence of the view of literary composition as a sea-voyage or a giving birth, or of the world as a stage. Finally, this method (on which Werner von Koppenfels has made pertinent observations, p. 12) can itself be extended to include the synchronic analysis of neighbouring metaphors within a semantic field, as Harald Weinrich has done.

The present study generally adopts the second of these four approaches, concentrating on determining where and how the mirror is employed metaphorically in English literature within a specific time-frame. Such a concentration on the vehicle or concrete, reifying part of a metaphor permits easier access to relevant tenors, given that ‘the tenor is the master, the vehicle the servant for the men of the Renaissance’ (Legouis 1971: 197). As a historical record of ideas, literature must be studied first and
The mutable glass

foremost for its concretization of these ideas. Apart from the kind of confirmation offered by external cultural circumstances, the popularity of the mirror can be explained only in terms of the broad spectrum of such concretizations and the resulting distillate of conventions. One can thereby hope to avoid the pitfalls involved in seeing literary figuration as merely the outward and generally ornamental garb of thought. Such assumptions about the function of figurative language can prevent one both from seeing how far ideas are themselves guided by central metaphors, and from considering the multivalency of metaphors, their potential for realizing several meanings simultaneously. A search for the figurative ‘equivalent’ of a thought can all too easily yield merely that narrow perspective on a metaphor which is the outcome of an equally narrow angle of inquiry: that level of significance in a metaphor which serves to express the idea most evidently present in a text. It is for this reason that all literary means of utilizing the mirror have been taken into account, not just such manifest strategies as metaphor, simile, emblem or symbol. Much depends on the critical reader’s biases and level of competence in deciding whether an occurrence of a mirror is literal, metaphorical or symbolic – so much, indeed, that it seems advisable to assume that literary fictions of whatever kind will always involve significances which are at least potentially non-literal.

In determining the conventional literary uses of the mirror, it is of secondary importance whether such uses are literal, comparative, analogical, emblematic, catachrestic, metaphorical or symbolic, however crucial such distinctions may be in the stylistic and aesthetic evaluation of a particular expression in a given context. As already noted, some degree of abstraction from particular contexts is mandatory in establishing which images are conventional, and this methodological principle applies equally to the formal presentation of an image. Theoretically, of course, it would be possible to classify applications of the mirror according to whether they are metaphors or similes (leaving aside the peculiar difficulties attendant on distinguishing between merely ‘literal’ applications and those which are emblematic or symbolic). In terms of conventional imagery, however, the ‘literal’ mirror of the eye, in which lovers see themselves, has far more in common with the metaphor of the eye as a mirror of the soul, and with the mirror-image in the eye as a symbol for erotic union, than with other ‘literal’ mirrors, mirror-metaphors or mirror-symbols. It is precisely by not taking cognizance of the specifics of stylistic presentation that one is able to establish image-conventions and their affinities with each other. As previously stated, this should in itself prove to be no obstruction to the subsequent analysis of stylistic characteristics in individual passages of a text.