

1. Evidence

TYPES OF EVIDENCE

It is seldom possible to prove that a writer of a former age intended to use any particular literary form. All the same, we sometimes achieve a high degree of probability in our critical statements. Believing rhymes to be common in the eighteenth century and specifically in Pope's poetry, we can say that he very probably rhymed 'way' with 'Bohea' and 'mind' with 'join'd'. And our familiarity with puns makes some of us sure that Donne meant more than one word-play in 'We can die by it, if not live by love'. These convictions cannot quite be proved, but neither can they easily be dismissed. And it is the same with probable statements about the numerical or spatial organization of works by authors no longer living.

Evidence for the intentional character, even for the mere existence, of a device in past literature generally belongs to one or more of the following categories: (1) *authorial statement* or other explicit external sign of intention (always rare and not always trustworthy); (2) *internal consistency* of the device with other elements (usually too implicit to be persuasive, except to those familiar with the work); (3) *commentary* by critics more nearly contemporary than ourselves, showing the response once to be expected from readers (even if commentators are hardly ideal readers); (4) *contemporary theory* about the use of the device (patchy evidence, since theorists and poets share few interests); and (5) *imitation* in later literature, which, if close enough, proves at

least the imitator's belief in the existence of the device. All five types of evidence are hardly ever available for any particular device. Usually, though, it seems to be thought enough to have one or two types. Thus, for the sixteenth century there is some critical theory about rhyming, but practically no evidence of the other four types. Yet we never doubt that Elizabethan poets meant their rhyme words to rhyme. Similarly with ambiguity: there is no evidence of types 1, 3, 4 and 5; only the semantic 'fit' of the device with the theme, perhaps, of the poem, or with the tone of the context. In this instance, the evidence of contemporary critical theory actually counts against belief in the device, since ambiguity was generally dismissed by rhetoricians as a fault of style. But this does not make us view with scepticism all discussions of ambiguities in Donne. Why should it? We are used to the idea of ambiguity.

With numerological patterning, things are different. In a sense this device is better documented than many others, since all five types of evidence can be produced. It is rarely practised nowadays, however, so that we are not used to the idea that Elizabethan poets organized their poems spatially. Those of us without much historical sense may even, like Nelson, put a blind eye to the telescope and pretend that numerology never existed. For number symbolism is not quite respectable: we associate it with cranks or lunatics, not with great authors and serious scholars. It would be instructive to trace the interplay of belief, superstition and scepticism about number symbolism since the time of the Church Fathers. First, belief in number symbolism was general and often rational (St Augustine): later, some argued sceptically (Selden) while others were superstitious or believed rationally (Browne, Fludd): later still, rational belief grew more difficult and number symbolism became the domain of eccentrics such as Francis Webb: and finally a new superstitious prejudice arose—the pretence that rational belief had never existed.

Recent numerological studies have done a little to dispel this prejudice. But some readers may still wish to hear evidence for the bare existence of the device, before consenting to relearn its enjoyment.

AUTHORS' STATEMENTS

Authorial statements about numerological patterns occur, though seldom in connection with poetic works of the highest merit. Thus

Henry Constable prefaces one arrangement of his sonnets with a fairly elaborate account of ‘The order of the book’, beginning ‘The sonnets following are divided into 3 parts, each part containing 3 several arguments, and every argument 7 sonnets’,¹ and followed by cross-headings above each heptad of sonnets. But both Sidney and Drayton use the same climacteric number 63 in arranging their sonnets without advertising the fact (p. 176). Nevertheless, I shall touch on a few indiscretions of this type, committed by celebrated authors: notably Pico della Mirandola, Du Bartas and La Primaudaye.²

More frequently the author contented himself with a hint in the title of list of contents. The title of Spenser’s *Shepherd’s Calendar* describes it as ‘containing twelve eclogues proportionable to the twelve months’. And anyone who cared to could list whole chiliads of works entitled Enneads, Decades, Centuries, Weeks, Pentamérons, Decamérons, Tetrachordons, Decachordons, Heptapli, Zodiacs, etc., all divided accordingly.³ A late example is Gay’s *Trivia* (1716) in 3 books. Sometimes the author or his printer could be quite laborious about numbering items numerically organized, as when verses pre-

¹ *The Poems of Henry Constable* ed. J. Grundy (Liverpool 1960) 114; also her Pl. facing 113 reproducing the relevant folio in the Todd MS. See further below, p. 176.

² Pp. 137, 138 and n. Patristic prose writers sometimes explain their book divisions very explicitly; see Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism* (New York 1938) 87 and Maren-Sofie Røstvig, ‘The Hidden Sense’ in *The Hidden Sense*, Norwegian Studies in English IX (1963) 8, on St Augustine’s division of the *De Civitate Dei*, as well as on Cassiodorus’ explanation of his division of a book into 33 chapters on the ground that 33 is ‘a number acknowledged to correspond with the age of the Lord when he offered eternal life to . . . those who believed’.

³ A few instances must suffice: Heinrich Bullinger, *Sermonum decades quinque* (1587) and *A hundred sermons upon the apocalypse* (1561); Owen Feltham, *Resolves, a duple century* (1628–9); Thomas Watson, *The ἑκατομηθία or passionate century of love* (1582); Thomas Traherne, *Centuries* (not published until 1908) and Barnabe Barnes, *A Divine Century of Spiritual Sonnets* (1595); Du Bartas, *Divine Weeks* tr. J. Sylvester (1605), with other hexaemeral works discussed in Ch. 7 below; Giovanni Battista Basile, *Il pentamerone* (50 stories told 10 per day); Boccaccio, *Decameron*, ‘wherein are contained a hundred tales told in ten days by seven ladies and three young men’; William Watson, *A decachordon of ten quodlibetical questions* (?Douay 1602); Johann Saubert, Δωδεκάς emblematum sacrorum (Nuremberg 1625); Pico della Mirandola, *Heptapli* (1489); Marcellus Palingenius, *Zodiacus vitae* (Venice ?1535; over 60 Latin edns, the first in England being 1569; tr. Barnaby Googe 1565); R. Dodoens, *Stirpium historiae pemptades sex, sive libri xxx* (Antwerp 1583).

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paratory to Drayton's *Polyolbion* have it that Prince Henry 'by that virtue in the treble trine'¹ will add to his own goodness

These several glories of the eight English kings;
Deep ¹knowledge, ²greatness, ³long life, ⁴policy,
⁵Courage, ⁶zeal, ⁷fortune, ⁸awful majesty.

Since what we are dealing with is properly an elegance, however, explicit authorial signposts are inevitably rare. They would be clumsy, even self-destructive. And it would be an improbable accident indeed that would preserve foul papers showing an author's numerical scaffolding. Nevertheless, such an accident has occurred, in the case of a prose history of England projected by the Elizabethan antiquary Henry Ferrers, which was to have been called 'The Enneads of England'. This is how Ferrers begins:

9 times 9 is 82 / The whole history nine enneads / every ennead nine books /
every book 27 chapters that is thrice nine / 81 books / 2177 chapters.²

For Ferrers, at least, the planning of a work began with numerical divisions: these were subsequently filled in, like the spaces on a blank form. An interesting feature of the draft is the magnitude of the numbers involved. If the planning of a prose history could deal in numbers running into four figures, what arithmetical complexities may we not expect in the more highly organized world of poetry?

INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

The internal consistency of a spatial pattern with the subject or theme, a *sine qua non* from the critic's point of view, may also provide evidence of a kind. Such consistency can even sometimes be self-evident.

¹ Ed. J. W. Hebel iv p. iv (superscript figures in original). Numbering in text or margin was particularly common in accounts of pageants. See e.g. A. H. Thomas and I. D. Thornley, *The Great Chronicle of London* (1938) 161; also Alastair Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (1964) 239 n. on an example in Blennerhasset (1582).

² See Elizabeth K. Berry, 'Henry Ferrers, an Early Warwickshire Antiquary, 1550-1633', *Dugdale Society Occasional Papers* xvi (Oxford 1965) 30, from the volume of Historical Collections in the Archer MSS at Shakespeare's birthplace, fol. 85v. For this reference I am indebted to Dr R. W. Hunt of the Bodleian and to Mr R. M. Cummings. When Ferrers writes $9 \times 9 = 82$, we should not immediately conclude that his arithmetic is bad: totals just exceeding or falling short of an expected number were sometimes deliberate finesses. Professor Maren-Sofie Røstvig has drawn my attention to several discussions of this device in arithmological authors: on $999 = 1000 - 1$ see Francesco Giorgio, *Problemata* (Paris 1574) II iii 132, fol. 82r; on $53 = 54 - 1$, Fabius Paulinus, *Hebdomades* (Venice 1589) iii 2 and 4.

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The line total of Chapman's 'A Hymn to our Saviour on the Cross', for example, obviously matches the subject, since 300 regularly symbolized the cross, being the number denoted by the cross-shaped Greek letter Tau.¹ Such inorganic, arbitrary and trivial organization, however, has little interest for the critic.

The more organic and complex forms with which this book is mainly concerned have more interest, I hope. On the other hand, being far from self-evident, they are not designed to convince sceptics. This is particularly true when the internal consistency is with another constituent, such as imagery or verbal ambiguity. In Chapman's 'The Amorous Zodiac', a verbal narrative of the sun's course round the ecliptic is so repeatedly and so closely related to the poet's progress through the poem that few sympathetic readers could miss his broad hints at a spatial organization (pp. 141–6). Certain phrases, in fact, almost amount to authorial statement. But to catch these hints the reader must be willing to listen for overtones in phrases customarily treated as crude or vapid. Self-referring passages generally seem empty when the structural patterns they refer to are not grasped, so that critics tend to ignore or deride rather than interpret them. Merely explaining such ambiguities would not necessarily make them good poetry; but at least it might protect them from automatically being dismissed as bad. And perhaps it would clarify something of the mannerist poet's preoccupation with formal style.

COMMENTARIES

Early commentaries drawing attention to spatial patterns are rare. But then, descriptive criticism of any kind is rare in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such commentaries as we have were mostly written by humanist scholars interested only in textual, mythological and rhetorical matters, or else by edifying allegorists using the literary work as a point of departure for moral generalizations. Nevertheless, more than one commentator on Virgil finds time to discuss the numerology of his book division. Writing in 1563, Sebastianus Regulus interestingly foreshadows Brooks Otis's analysis of the *Aeneid* into

¹ See Pietro Bongo, *Numerorum mysteria*, 'De numero CCC' (Bergamo 1591) 605: 'Tricentenus numerus in Tau littera continetur, quae crucis speciem tenet, cui si supertransversam lineam, id quod in cruce eminent, adderetur, non iam crucis species, sed ipsa crux esset.' Both in Hebrew and in Greek, letters served orthographically as numbers.

two matching parts. Regulus is in no doubt that the book division had a basis in number symbolism:

I think Virgil wished to divide this poem into 12 books, so that it would seem an absolute, perfect and complete work, even in its numerical aspect. For the ancients divided both the day and the night into 12 unequal hours; the heavens are divided into 12 signs; and a perfect year is completed in 12 natural years. Indeed, I even think that the poet recalled the esoteric Pythagorean philosophy of numbers. For by 6 the ancients meant a symbol of marriage, and in these books of the *Aeneid* nuptials are celebrated twice—first those of Dido and Aeneas, then those of Lavinia and Aeneas; from which the greatest part of the work is developed. On these grounds I am persuaded that Virgil chiefly wished by this number to show us the perfection of his whole work.¹

With the first part of this interpretation, the later Jesuit commentator Jacopo Pontano (1542–1626) is broadly in agreement. As might perhaps be expected, however, he imparts a more pious tone to his own discussion of the book division, introducing Scriptural associations with the duodecad:

The whole work is seen to be divided into 12 books. 12 for this reason, that by this very number its highest perfection may be judged, since we perceive that many other complete and perfect things are similarly contained in the duodecad. Let us imagine this by means of examples. There are 12 months: 12 hours of day and as many of night: the unit of measure is divided into 12 equal parts.² The same number is often used in Holy Scripture. Thus there are 12 tribes of Israel, 12 fountains, 12 apostles, 12 gates of the New Jerusalem in the Apocalypse, and a crown of 12 stars.³

The purpose here is more homiletic. But both commentators evidently start from the assumption that external divisions of a literary work are likely to have symbolic meaning.

Apart from Virgil, no secular poet seems to have attracted commentary of this kind—except that much of the early criticism of Dante, as of Spenser the English Virgil, dealt with number sym-

¹ Sebastianus Regulus, *In primum Aeneidos Virgilii librum ex Aristotelis De arte poetica et rhetorica praeceptis explicationes* (Bologna 1563) 20f. See the discussion of this and the following quotation in R. M. Cummings, 'Two Sixteenth-Century Notices of Numerical Composition in Virgil's *Aeneid*', *N & Q* cciv (1969) 26f.

² Probably misunderstanding Regulus and taking *assis* = *axis*, the heavens, for *assis* = *as*.

³ Jacopo Pontano, *Symbolarum libri xvii. Quibus P. Virgilii Maronis Bucolica, Georgica, Aeneis ex probatissimis auctoribus declarantur, comparantur, illustrentur* (Augsburg 1599) 9f. See below pp. 13, 136.

bolism in the content.¹ But with sacred literature it was different. In 1617 Hendrik Van der Putte published a whole treatise on the spatial symbolisms in a single verse by Bauhuis in praise of the Virgin.² More important than this *tour de force* was the ancient and normal practice of interpreting the Bible numerologically. Here I am not primarily thinking of cabalistic interpretation, which some Reformation and Counter-Reformation theologians already regarded as dangerously unsound. Less secretly, poetical parts of Scripture such as the *Psalms* were known from Patristic times to be arranged in symbolic spatial patterns. A good example is Vulgate *Psalms* cxviii, which consists of 22×8 verses, 8 for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Patristic, medieval and later writers might interpret this acrostic pattern variously (Hebrew the source of all wisdom, $22 = 10$ for the commandments + 12 for the counsels of the gospel, etc.),³ but its presence could hardly be ignored.

The occurrence of the alphabetic number here and elsewhere in the Bible was so well known that it came to be applied as a compositional device. St Jerome even cooked the book total of the Old Testament by grouping and subdivision until he got the required 24, the number of letters in the Greek alphabet.⁴ Continuity of tradition extends from the Bible, through Patristic commentators and theologians, then through medieval and later commentators, encyclopaedists and arithmologists, to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century compositions on a numerological basis. It was well known, for example, that *Lamentations* is divided into 5 verse elegies, the first 4 of which consist each of 22 acrostic stanzas, arranged alphabetically. The third elegy has a more demanding form, the appropriate letter not only beginning each stanza but also each verse. (The fifth elegy, though in 22 verses, is not acrostic.) So Origen speaks of Jeremiah 'mourning the destruction of

¹ See Fowler 260 ff., citing Digby and Austin. Early commentators on the *Divina commedia* discussed the symbolic dimensions of the inferno, which they explained as based on the 11 of transgression.

² *Eryci Puteani pietatis thaumata in Bernardi Bauhusei e Societate Iesu Proteum parthenium, unius libri versum, unius versus librum, stellarum numero, sive formis M.XXII. variatum* (Antwerp 1617); see Fowler 238 and n.

³ Røstvig, 'The Hidden Sense' 10f.

⁴ 12 minor prophets e.g. are treated as one. Bongo (446) notes that this numerological pattern was recognized by the Tridentine Council (whose decree on the canon is still prefaced to editions of the Vulgate). By a little manipulation he manages to square the book total also with the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet.

his city in quadruple alphabet': Cassiodorus quotes Origen's saying and arranges his own *De universo* in 22 parts: and St Augustine does likewise in his *De Civitate*.¹ In 1591 the arithmologist Pietro Bongo is still repeating Origen's saying, significantly with elaborations that account for more of the spatial pattern in symbolic terms: 'The *Lamentations* of Jeremiah, composed in Hebrew verse forms, number 4, and are divided by a fourfold alphabet, because in them Jeremiah mourns the sins not only of the Jews, but of the whole world.'² On the number 23, Bongo cites Cassiodorus' numerological explanation of *Psalms* xxiii: namely, that its number alludes to the language of eloquence (the Latin alphabet having 23 letters, as against the 22 of the Hebrew and the 24 of the Greek).³ And in 1617 Van der Putte arranges his numerical commentary on Bauhuis in 24 chapters corresponding to the letters of the Greek alphabet.

Numerical composition might thus be an inspiration of the Christian Muse. Poets looked for a form analogous to that of Biblical poetry, and according to a main doctrine of Biblical Poetics the composition of the Bible followed the same creative method referred to in *Wisdom of Solomon* xi 20: 'thou has ordered all things in measure and number and weight.'⁴ Biblical commentaries must be regarded not merely as evidence of a habit of numerological interpretation but also as an effective cause of the practice of numerological composition itself.

CRITICAL THEORY

At first sight the almost complete absence of contemporary critical theory about numerology counts very strongly against thinking the practice widespread. True, Minturno's *De poeta* asserts the poet's possession of mathematical and musical lore:

The doctrine and wisdom that flowed from the Orphic fount through to Pythagoras and then to Plato ordered the universe according to a musical principle. And since . . . the ordering of sounds is divided into numbers and melody, you will certainly find all the elements of music in the art of poetry.

¹ See Røstvig, 'The Hidden Sense' 8, 10 f., who cites other patristic comments of a similar kind. Her own description of the pattern of *Lamentations*, however, is incorrect: the central chapter is not divided into 3, and the 'quadruple alphabet' does not refer to Chs. i, ii, iv and v, but to Chs. i–iv, the acrostic chapters.

² Bongo 644, 'De numero MDC'.

³ *Ibid.* 442.

⁴ See Harry Bober, 'In principio. Creation before time', *Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky. De artibus opuscula xl* (1961) 18, *cit.* Røstvig, 'The Hidden Sense' 8.

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For it is beyond question that numbers have always been common to all poets together with musicians.¹

Or again: ‘The wise ancients believed that there is a great power in numbers, and that this must be familiar to poets.’² But probably Minturno means ‘numbers’ only in the sense of metre or rhythm. And it is no more conclusive when he proves Virgil’s acquaintance with Pythagorean number symbolism by citing monads and dyads in the action of the *Aeneid*.³ So with other renaissance critics. Either they apply the *Wisdom* text to poetic creation in such a way that they could be referring simply to metre—

L’invenzion, la favola, il poema,
e l’ordine e ’l decoro e l’armonia

.

Seco il numero, il metro e la misura,
si prendon de la musica la cura.⁴

—or else, like Henry Reynolds, they talk so generally about Pythagorean secrets that they might mean mysteries concealed in the content. Reynolds’ *Mythomystes* (1633) exhorts poets to steep themselves in the cabala and in the lore of Pythagoras the Master of Silence. But though he gives a useful list of arithmological authorities, he himself is a master of vagueness: he never quite explains how poets are to apply this number symbolism.⁵

On second thoughts, however, we see the situation to be much as we might have expected. The tone of Reynolds’ *Mythomystes* shows, after all, that he thought number symbolism an esoteric mystery. It was hardly an aspect of the art of poetry lending itself to treatment in systematic prescriptive treatises: that would have spoilt the whole game of secrecy. (With numbers in renaissance architecture, as we know, it was much the same. No one now doubts that some at least of

¹ Antonio Sebastiano Minturno, *De poeta* ii (Venice 1559) 91; see Fowler 241 f., and n.

² *De poeta* 89.

³ *Ibid.* 89f.

⁴ *L’Adone* v 123. Cf. Richard Wills, *De re poetica* (1573) tr. and ed. Alastair Fowler (Oxford 1958) 62–4: ‘The origin of metrical form is from God the almighty creator, in that he created this universe and whatever is contained in its sphere with a fixed design, as it were by measure; to such an extent that Pythagoras has asserted that there is a harmony in celestial and in earthly things. For how could the universe exist, unless it were governed by a fixed order and established numbers (*certa ratione ac definitis numeris*)?’

⁵ *Mythomystes* is reprinted in *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* ed. J. E. Spingarn i (Oxford 1908).

the number symbolisms discovered by Professor Wittkower were intentional; but it would be hard to find contemporary theory that went beyond general sentiments about proportion.) A further reason for the absence of numerology from renaissance arts of poetry lies in the traditional range of their topics. It was not one of the conventional topics of a genre that had developed under exclusively rhetorical influences. As Curtius has remarked, rhetorical theory had little to say about the compositional arrangement of large units.¹ To put it in another way, rhetoricians were only interested in the verbal organization of poetry, whereas numerology depended on a spatial approach. Consequently the theorists left number to iconographers and arithmologists.

The silence of the theorists is thus less significant than at first appears. It is also to some extent illusory. When we read with sympathy and attention, we see that renaissance critics often imply numerological conceptions that could not form their direct subject. And, very occasionally, they will treat these conceptions more or less directly. Thus Francesco Patrizi devotes a volume (*Deca dogmatica universale*, 1587, MS Pal. 421) to the division of poetic form into 'parts'. His elusive conception of 'part' must to some degree be numerical, since he discusses the division of the *Divina commedia* 'into three "total" parts and one hundred "partial" ones'.² Moreover, the endless renaissance debate about the unity of time had, as we shall see, numerological overtones.³

In England, Puttenham's approach is strikingly spatial. His *Art of English Poesy* (1589) deals with poetic form in a book called 'Of Proportion Poetical', beginning with the usual allusion to *Wisdom*:

It is said by such as profess the mathematical sciences, that all things stand by proportion, and that without it nothing could stand to be good or beautiful. The doctors of our theology to the same effect, but in other terms, say: that God made the world by number, measure and weight: some for weight say tune, and peradventure better.⁴

¹ Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* tr. W. R. Trask (1953) 501, *cit.* Gunnar Qvarnström, *Poetry and Numbers* (Lund 1966) 36.

² Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* ii (Chicago and Toronto 1961) 779.

³ See below, Ch. 6.

⁴ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy* ed. Gladys D. Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge 1936) 64.