Introduction

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Criticism and crisis are etymological friends. Throughout history, literary criticism and cultural crisis have tended to follow convergent trajectories. Renaissance humanism, above all, was responsible for generating a language that would not only reflect the cultural crisis at hand, but base that crisis in its own distinctiveness as a period.[1] The deepest, most central impulses of humanism are thus critical. If, as Frank Kermode asserts, crisis 'is a way of thinking about one's moment, and not inherent in the moment itself',[2] then one may infer that crisis, and with it criticism, speak in a discourse peculiar to this temporal displacement. The critical temper, in its cultural as well as literary dimension, fixes the Renaissance view of time squarely within the Greek concept of κρίσις [*krisis*] as designating a moment both of *separation* and of *decision*. The present volume has as its chief aim to register the discourse – the voices and modulations, as it were – of this moment.

The process by which Renaissance humanists sought to apply their systematic scholarly judgement to the encyclopaedia [*decision*] together with their sense of a time ripe for cultural reappraisal and self-identity [*separation*] is at the fulcrum of the literary-critical initiative that extended throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The scale of this enterprise is complex and multiform. Strongly resistant to chronological segmentation as it is to enshrinement in ordered, self-contained units of critical activity, any history of reading – and that, arguably, is what this volume undertakes to scan for the period in question – founders on the temptation to 'read' the literary past as an edifice of integrated building stones, permanently set in critical mortar and in danger of collapse when the canon inscribed on those blocks is reconfigured by successive generations. Ian McFarlane has drawn attention to the pitfalls of trying to freeze the literary map for a period in which the world picture was shaped by a convergence of syncretist and sometimes muddled strands of thought

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[1] On the Renaissance view of time and Petrarch's role in shaping those notions, see Donald J. Wilcox, *The measure of times past: pre-Newtonian chronologies and the rhetoric of relative time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 153–86.

[2] Frank Kermode, *The sense of an ending: studies in the theory of fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 101.

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linking together the domains of science, theology, classical scholarship, cosmogony, rhetoric, poetics, and philosophy.[3] A sense of critical moment intersected with each of these fields, helping to sharpen and focus the distinctive profile constructed by Renaissance thinkers to account for the rift of a *medium aevum* – the cultural divide through which the Renaissance saw its identity framed in a distant, yet revitalized classical past. Small wonder that visions of fatherland, national identity, and vernacular culture could flourish and be refracted through the prism of the classical landscape, a place whose permanence was preserved in memory acting both as a fictive and as an actualizing resource.[4] The 'places' so rooted in the memories and obsessions of Renaissance thinkers looking across to the familiar scapes on the far side of the medieval divide were no less textual than they were topographic. The distant inhabitants of those places – the texts through which ancient culture was transmitted – continued to speak across time and space to a culture bent on inscribing its collective self-identity within a paradox: the assertion that antiquity, dead, interred, poignantly removed in time, remains in conversational touch with a present drawn into an ongoing dialogue with textual artefacts. Literary-critical reappraisal together with a sense of critical moment and dialogue are coextensive postures in the Renaissance mind. What Thomas Greene has referred to as Petrarch's 'self-subverting confession' of temporal and spatial estrangement from the Homeric past, 'Quam longe absis intelligo' ['I realize how far from me you are'], enacts if nothing else the engagement of the critic with his materials, the immanence of distant textual topographies within a vocal present.[5] Petrarch's addressee is fully within audible range of his voice.

It is scarcely surprising that the Renaissance literary critic tends frequently to read texts as though they are participants in an act of conversation. Criticism is pre-eminently a mode of discourse and thus frequently dialogic in structure. As a consequence, Renaissance literary-critical texts commonly occur in a framework of discussion and affirmation of distinctiveness from other critical positions. The light they presume to shed on rediscovered texts is contingent on an uttered darkness against which that light is profiled, a 'middle' age which sets irrevocably the terms of the dialogue and promotes a sense of larger cultural self-identity. It is difficult to overstate the degree to which this emerging self-identity constitutes a sea change in the cultural awareness of the early modern period. In his

3 I. D. McFarlane, *Renaissance France* (London and Tonbridge: Ernest Benn, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1974), p. 7.
4 Compare Simon Schama, *Landscape and memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), pp. 14–15, 517–38.
5 Thomas M. Greene, *The light in Troy: imitation and discovery in Renaissance poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 29.

analysis of this phenomenon, Stephen Greenblatt situates the process –
what he terms 'self-fashioning' – within the hypothesis that self-identity is
achieved only within a framework of alterity, the presence of an alien struc-
ture whose stress lines lead to a new configuration of self-representing
features both for the individual and the culture at large.[6]

The plan of the present volume owes much to the above paradigm.
Renaissance readers and literary critics, from the more unsystematized
intuitions of the early periods of the sixteenth century to the formaliz-
ing tendencies of the seventeenth century, found it hard to discuss and
interpret literature without marking their separation from earlier critical
positions. On the premise that literary criticism is linked to a sense of
moment and thereby separation from what has gone before, the essays
contained herein record to varying degrees the changes on the literary map
initiated by humanist culture. These shifts embrace philosophies of lan-
guage, approaches to reading and interpretation, the crafting of poetics
as a tool for describing how texts function, the refinement and expansion
of literary forms, polemical rivalries, aesthetics, structures of thought,
and the postulate that all literary criticism is situational, shaped by its
own contextual habitat.

Reading and interpretation

Poetics, taken in its widest sense as a taxonomy for describing works of
prose and poetry alike, is rooted in a distinctive set of conditions having
to do with notions of language, reading, and interpretation. The Renais-
sance contribution to the history of poetics is doubtless its single most
important legacy to the discourse of modern literary criticism; hence,
the scale of its coverage in the second part of the present volume. This
achievement, however, has as much to do with an awareness of how read-
ing occurs within a distinct linguistic environment as it does with the
quest for a meaningful taxonomy to describe how the text is put together.
Indeed, it is doubtful that any understanding of Renaissance poetics could
take place without first addressing the issues broached in the first part of
this survey, namely, the revolution heralded by far-reaching reappraisals
of the way language functions and how readers read in an age that so
unblushingly advertised and promoted its own critical significance. The
field of textual philology became the main beneficiary of an erosion in the
deeply held belief – in scholastic thought – that words are representa-
tional pointers that help inventory the objects of cognition. Renaissance
thinkers, prominent among them Lorenzo Valla, laid the groundwork for

[6] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and
London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 9.

this revolution by giving technical expression to Petrarch's sense of his-
torical distance by revealing language in general, and Latin in particular,
to be subject to historical transformation. Reading and, by extension,
interpretation engage their practitioners in the discovery that strategies
of meaning inhere in the cycle of change to which all languages are sub-
ject. Discourse is specific to the time and milieu that help generate it.
In turn, this revolution in the way scholars described the semantic process
of secular texts set into play conditions that led eventually to a radical
reappraisal of approaches to sacred texts. From its inception, Reformist
doctrine tended to undermine the long-established belief that sacred lit-
erature is made accessible to readers by a fourfold methodology giving
high profile to the allegorical interpretation of truths revealed in divine
statement. Once again, scholastic thought would see its most cherished
assumptions arraigned as Evangelical reformers, chief among them Erasmus,
viewed revelation as an ongoing discourse emerging, *mutatis mutandis*,
through a restorative attention to the process of utterance, of speech
[*sermo*] over the atomized particles [*verba*] contained within it. At the
very core of this doctrine was the assertion that rhetoric rather than
philosophy, discourse rather than intellection, helps bring the reader into
communion with the Divine by demystifying the tools of scriptural ana-
lysis and by renewing the potency of statement mediated from God to
Man through Christ the Logos.

To read, in this developed Evangelical view, was to practise conversa-
tion and, therefore, to be drawn into open-ended theological dialogue
with the Scriptures and through them, with the Creator. Evangelical
approaches to the text helped thereby to ensure that reading and interpreta-
tion would always be subject to constant re-reading and reinterpretation,
never closed to further refinement. Every reading implied a strategy for
contemporizing the text and adapting it to new cultural climes and con-
texts. Criticism, while always tied to an act of rupture, also re-enacted the
discovery of an originating document. In the case of poetics, no more com-
pelling originating voices could be found than those of Aristotle, Horace,
Cicero, and Quintilian.

In a real sense, these four poetico-rhetorical theorists of antiquity spoke
in converging and overlapping registers to literary critics of the sixteenth
and seventeenth centuries. The work of transmission by which Renais-
sance readers assimilated the texts of these ancient theorists tended to
betray the contemporary interests of a rhetorical culture unable to separ-
ate issues of form from those of expression and content. Above all, these
texts fed into what is arguably the predominant poetic issue of the entire
period, that of imitation. And to the degree that commentators on these
works tried frequently to construct a unitary theoretical dialogue from
their critical distinctiveness as texts – Horatian tenets conflated with

Aristotelian ones, Ciceronian proposals with those of Quintilian – the instances of commentary themselves worked to actuate their own significance as vehicles of imitation. They were their own best promotion of the activities so single-mindedly championed in the wider arena of speculative writing on poetics. In Cinquecento Italy, Aristotelian scholarship, especially that practised at Padua in the 1540s, superposed on an entrenched Horatian tradition a fragmented and even distorted view of the *Poetics*, using such Aristotelian tenets as probability and *catharsis* to work through the interpretative issues raised in the *Ars poetica*. In time, the linkage of the *Poetics* to relevant sections of the *Ars* was accompanied by the tendency to use Aristotle's treatise to help craft a typology of genre outside the classifying structures defined by the Stagirite. Part of a much older, more tenacious exegetical tradition, readings of the Horatian text as early as the late fifteenth century likewise exhibited a syncretism in which commentators poached on aspects of the Ciceronian programme to reveal explicit correlations between the missions of poet and orator. Humanists as diverse as Cristoforo Landino, Josse Bade, Aulo Jano Parrasio, and Denys Lambin were each unable to isolate the *Ars poetica* from the refracted voices of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and (in the case of Lambin) even Plato. Commentary is nurtured on acts of critical emulation and reassessment, a dialogue with antecedent texts. With the early fifteenth-century recovery of the Latin rhetorical canon (Cicero, Quintilian, and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*), the stage was set not only for the pursuit of a discourse that would harmonize the interests of poetics with those of euphonious prose style (the *dictamen prosaicum*), but invest that discourse in the pedagogical initiatives of the Renaissance classroom.

Poetics

Nothing distinguished poetics more, perhaps, during this period of humanism's cultural hegemony than the scope of its aesthetic prerogatives. No longer classed among the restrictive medieval domains of natural and moral sciences, poetry came to assume the panoply of political, rhetorical, scientific, philosophical, artistic, and moral achievement. The texts so often the catalysts of these issues were, for the most part, written in Latin by Italian writers. Girolamo Vida's *De arte poetica* (1527) was, much like Horace's *Ars*, a poem about poetry. Its syncretist focus drew together the various strands of Horatian concern with the exemplarity of the past, the development of a rhetorical system through which literary expression could be imitated and formalized, and the apotheosis of the Poet as intercessor with the Divine. Writers like Fracastoro, Minturno, Scaliger (albeit a Franco-Italian), and Viperano expanded and refined

these principles by addressing the poetic text both as macro- and as micro-structure, a composite of elements from a larger artistic vision, yet fashioned around discrete replicable forms and methods. Playing a central role in this incorporative approach to poetry was Julius Caesar Scaliger, whose *Poetices libri septem* (1561) contained the first attempt to formalize literary-critical method as a comparison of spatially juxtaposed texts. The result is a theoretical resonance that transforms the act of literary criticism into a work of transmittal in the profoundest sense.

As writing came to be seen increasingly as a demonstration of artistic effect and a reworking of textual models, imitation began to assume a place both of pedagogical dominance in the Renaissance classroom and of theoretical ascendancy within works and manuals on poetics, namely, with such Latinists as Dolet, Omphalius, Ricci, and Vida. With the canonizing of Petrarch's *Rime sparse* by Pietro Bembo in the early 1500s and by other later commentaries, a vernacular poet was brought into the vanguard of imitative models, taking his place in the pantheon of ancient authors and establishing his exemplary status with respect to later generations of aspiring poets. Petrarchism quickly took root as the predominant poetic discourse of the lyric in Italy, France, and England and frequently drew the reader into the deeper philosophical question of how source texts migrate from their point of origin, appropriated by a contemporary poetic voice. As a full-blown poetic agenda, imitation emerged from the older, more entrenched humanist fascination with *interpretatio* [translation] as a creative activity. Central to the writings of Salutati, Bruni, Manetti, and, later on, of Dolet and Humphrey, translation embraced a notion of language and culture founded on the conviction that a textual past is a replicable artefact. Imitation together with translation referred to activities that address the phrasing, wording, and expressive resources of source and target texts (in rhetorical terms, their *elocutio*). Textual appropriation, however, was not limited to compatibilities of style. With the burst of attention directed at Horace's *Ars poetica* and at the Ciceronian *œuvre* in the early 1500s, the process of 'recovering' a textual past carried with it the prerogative of 'finding' [*invenire*] those larger units of expression in which style functions: the subject-matter or materials of invention. Retrieved so as to promote a new creative project, these materials tended to be viewed as the mechanisms through which new, but not wholly original, subjects are contemporized in the language and culture of the 'inventor'. Eventually, the notion of invention, with its technical allegiance to the fields of rhetoric and dialectic, would assert its autonomy from this restrictive environment by legitimizing imagination as an agent of composition.

The belief in a migration of words [*translatio verborum*] and cultures [*translatio studiorum*] across the medial span of the Middle Ages was

arguably the most tenacious principle to shape the complex of cultural, social, psychological, and intellectual forces that came together in the Renaissance classroom. Under humanist tutelage, the same process of textual rediscovery and transmittal that had made philology the authoritative scholarly method in early modern culture led to the equally forceful assumption that schools are primarily in the business of teaching a mastery of discourse and through it a fashioning of selfhood. This assumption, of course, survived largely intact from the pedagogical formats handed down in the mature rhetorical works of Cicero and in Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. As a student, to move from the assimilation of rhetoric's technical inventory to the status of practitioner served like no other activity, perhaps, to erase the boundaries between discourse, epistemology, and ontology. To speak was, concurrently, to know, and to know carried with it the assumption of accrued authenticity within the circle of humanist citizenry. With Justus Lipsius, late in the sixteenth century, this development culminated in the presciently neoclassical assertion: 'the style reveals the man'. And so it was that the Renaissance classroom became the primary site for the critical examination and assimilation of literary texts in a process which, in turn, set into play a process of self-awareness, the student absorbed in the critical interrogation of authors whose resonance was amplified through his own power of utterance and identity.

Without the focal place accorded to rhetoric in the Renaissance classroom, it is doubtful whether rhetorical approaches to literary expression could have had such a radical impact on the discourse of poetics. The principal issues shaping literary criticism were invariably those related to the view that texts are vehicles of persuasion. The tendency to view poetic writing as a branch of rhetoric was less a failure to emancipate poetics from the constraints of metre, cadence, and formal structure than it was the means to establishing a critical vocabulary whose versatility would extend with equal ease to prose and poetic genres alike. Indeed, recent thinking has tended to confirm that for the so-called 'grands rhétoriqueurs' distinctions between prose and verse were largely secondary to the goal of uncovering new expressive reserves in speech, of enhancing thought itself through the power of cadence. Instead of pitting the art of 'Second Rhetoric' against mainstream poetics whose sights are fixed on more transcendent poetic issues, the concerns of the 'rhétoriqueurs' could be viewed as part of a gathering critical momentum which, during much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, would seek to create coalitions between levels and modes of style, varieties of cadence, and contexts of ideology. Speakers and writers, inclusive of the literary critic, could be classed politically, philosophically, and theologically by their adopted voice. Concepts of style implied a set of strategic choices which embed aesthetics within the tastes and tendencies of the surrounding culture.

Quite apart from their assignment to a typology of utterance, such terms as 'Attic', 'Asiatic', 'plain', 'middle', and 'grand' tended to reflect, as Debora Shuger confirms in the present volume, the ideological climate in which they had evolved.

To the extent that cadence and euphony were in the service of an imagined audience – a receptor agent responsive to rhetorical effects – it was probably inevitable that the exchange between text and audience (that is, the reader) be seen in terms of its relative authenticity as a creative event. For that event to appear authentic, poetics needed to base the process on the premise that words have the power to make things seem present, to enact a credible fiction. Again, the arts of poetry and prose were poaching here on common ground as *ekphrasis* and a host of other related terms for literary description were reworked from the ancient rhetorical stockpile and used to define the visualizing potential of all utterance, whether poetry or prose. Some of the most eloquent literary theorists of the age (Scaliger, Castelvetro, Dolce, Tasso, Sidney, Dryden), not to mention an array of art theoreticians (Alberti, Dufresnoy, Félibien, Bellori, de Piles), all grappled with the prescriptive analogy between painting and poetry, although, like so many other instances of Renaissance Horatian criticism, this was based on a profound misreading of the *Ars*. In the case of Sir Philip Sidney's *An apology for poetry*, this analogy was at the centre of a searching reappraisal of aesthetic conception and the projection of mental images on to a written surface. The noetic power of poetry, its capacity for making palpable the products of inner contemplation, was thought to transfigure the very environment of literature, enabling it to bring the audience into direct communion with visible truths. And never far away was the injunction underpinning all rhetorical poetics: the call to stir emotions. It was precisely this concern with the affective impact of literature that gave rise to some of the period's most thoughtful meditations on the mechanisms of reader response, none of these more compelling than that surrounding Longinus and sublimity.

There is little question that what contributed most to the Renaissance text's air of modernity was its preoccupation with the status of the reader as the recipient of the literary utterance. The analogy with the orator/audience in the rhetorical tradition was paramount in helping articulate the dynamics between writer and reader during the early modern period. What made this analogy especially meaningful, however, was not its mere allusiveness as an image, but its emergence from the most ponderous typology of utterance ever devised: the rhetorical *paideia*. As a way of viewing and articulating the world, rhetoric depended on the resources of classification. Both at the point of delivery and of reception a statement was shaped by the particular strategy invested in its presentation, its formal arrangement according to the *genera dicendi*. Transposed to the

realm of literature, rhetorical formalism, therefore, provided Renaissance theoreticians with a structural framework around which to build a taxonomy of genre or, as it is frequently called, of 'kind'.

The perils of addressing questions of genre loom conspicuously over any survey of Renaissance literary criticism. The period's unflagging energy for dipping back into ancient inventories of 'kind' (whether Aristotelian, Horatian, or conventionally rhetorical), coupled with its inventive verve and tendency to amplify and conflate the recipes for generic types, makes any enquiry into genre-systems, at least in surveys like the present one, an unsatisfactory, if not risky, undertaking. Alastair Fowler has argued convincingly that generic categories are under the continual stress of modification from the very works which purport to mime their configurations in the first place.[7] This lack of fixity is inherent in the nomenclature itself, prompting a recent thinker on genre to refer to the 'statut bâtard' [hybrid status] of generic terminology.[8] Terms collude with the very history of the forms they propose to designate, thereby ensuring that 'kind' is, at best, an acculturated norm, what Rosalie Colie calls '*ideas* of form, established by custom and consensus'.[9]

Clearly, the attempt at genre coverage in the present survey is not intended to be exhaustive, nor could it be. Colie's analysis of the elasticity of generic schemes during the Renaissance – what she terms their 'inclusionism' – amply justifies the more limited coverage given here to the major generic groupings. Such uncanonical forms as Rabelaisian narrative, for instance, resist formulation precisely because they represent internally a dispersion of the normative, a multiplication and intermingling of generic 'kinds'. The forms represented here, on the other hand, constitute for the most part the prevailing classes of literary structure, though the genres of dialogue and essay are arguably uncanonical in their resistance to methodology. What is especially striking about this coverage is the way the various studies tend to corroborate Colie's assertion that the Renaissance genre-system 'offers us not a second world but an array of ways to look at the real world, offers us a special way to make of culture a *common place*'.[10] In the lyric, many of the same ontological questions implicit in the rhetorical *paideia* – questions having to do with identity, subjectivity, the shaping of individual consciousness through interpretation of the physical world – extend its versatility as a literary form. The epic, though ostensibly derived from Aristotelian patterns, gradually found

[7] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of literature: an introduction to the theory of genres and modes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 170–90.
[8] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), p. 65.
[9] Rosalie L. Colie, *The resources of kind: genre-theory in the Renaissance*, ed. B. Lewalski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 128.
[10] *Ibid*., p. 119.

itself by the 1550s absorbed in a process of self-renewal and refinement, with Giovambattista Giraldi Cintio and Giovanni Battista Pigna each endorsing the acculturated value of the romance as against the anachronistic strictures of ancient epic. The very debates to which these efforts gave rise led to searching discussions of the nature of epic and its susceptibility to theoretical formulation.

And nowhere was genre a subject of more protracted dispute than in notions of tragedy, where questions of vernacular appraisal, political and ethical topicality, and the transfiguration of the inner being all grappled with the intersection of ancient rules and contemporary habits of thought. The case of Elizabethan England and the vitality of its dramatic production, however, was not easily contained in any allegiance to theoretical definition or prescriptive technical format. Here, the affective appeal to audience tended to override or at least limit the kinds of theoretical speculation to which continental commentators on tragedy were given, resulting in a genre that reflected the homogeneous expectations of the masses rather than conformity to any critical template. This tendency led inevitably to an indigenous dramatic form whose objectives were centred on the moral, and hence frequently political, interaction of the characters rather than on adherence to an overarching neoclassical design. It is probably a mark of the theoretical vitality of literary 'kind' that few issues were settled in the attempt to canonize definitions. The most telling example of this resilience, it would appear, is that of comedy which, by the time of Molière, had been so thoroughly hybridized that no consensus ever developed over the aesthetic criteria of this genre so indebted to a diverse literary tradition. The English scene once again accentuates this subversion of structural uniformity by promoting such dramatic amalgams as the history play and the tragicomedy.

Other 'kinds' of literature, notably the dialogue and the essay, though for internal reasons conforming less to a stylistic format, were likewise the product of an age that viewed language as a vehicle of discussion. Discussion, in turn, engendered images of competing voice. And while dialogue by the late sixteenth century had all but abandoned its heuristic mediation of truth, the essay ensured that the sustaining principles of dialogue, namely, its open form and spirit of enquiry, would be carried over in the seventeenth century to a new literary form: the art of conversation. At the other end of the literary spectrum were the epigram and emblem, both serving to concentrate the action of truth rather than disperse it, as with the dialogue and essay. Each of these shorter poetic forms, associated as they were with notions of inscribed space and abbreviated truth, tended to highlight the characteristic Renaissance dabbling with mnemotechnic devices and the retrieval of knowledge as a medium of visual presentation. By the seventeenth century the epigram had become one of the principal