

# A Metaphor to Build Empires: Imitatio<sup>1</sup> and the Politics of Representation in European Humanism

**Fouzi Slisli**

Ph.D. in Literature (Literary Criticism), King Faisal University, Kingdom of  
Saudi Arabia  
fslisli@kfu.edu.sa

## Abstract

In Western criticism and philosophy, Renaissance discussions of imitation have often been seen as both a legacy of Greece and Rome, and as the foundation of modern theories of art and literature. This investigation shows that the discussions of imitation that spread throughout the Renaissance were indeed adopted from Latin Roman discussions of poetry and rhetoric, but they have no connection to the famous Greek philosophical concepts of mimesis/imitation that are found in the work of Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, European concepts of imitatio/ imitation, as this study shows, developed their conceptual potential before Plato's and Aristotle's discussions of mimesis became familiar in Europe. Furthermore, Renaissance discussions of imitation were not theories of art and literature, as is commonly believed. They were simply an educational pedagogy that organized the appropriation of the canons of description of classical Latin into the vernaculars. The peculiarity and the scale of this pedagogy become evident when located within its geopolitical context. In the early modern era, neither the dead Latin language nor the vernaculars were equipped to manage the wealth or the administrative and

---

<sup>1</sup> This procedure [imitation] is so alien to modern practice that we cannot easily understand what it implies (Bolgar, 1954: 272). Here, then, Frenchmen! March boldly on this beautiful Roman city... Pillage without conscience the sacred treasures of this Delphic temple (du Bellay, 1936: 107).

cultural needs of ascending European states. Like Rome at the height of its power, European states were emerging empires in need of a language and a culture. And just like the Romans resorted to the imitation of Greek masterpieces in order to develop their language, Europeans advocated the imitation of Latin masterpieces to develop their vernaculars. But while the Romans resorted to imitatio often with resentment and bitterness at the impossibility to match the Greek achievement, European humanists considered imitatio to have been a resounding success [sic]. By adopting the Roman practice of imitatio, European cultures appropriated and internalized Roman ambivalence without solving or even identifying it.

**Keywords:** Imitatio, Imitation in the Renaissance, Poetry and Humanist Education, Literature and Empire, Renaissance Literature and the Classics, Renaissance Criticism.

## Introduction

In Western criticism and philosophy, Renaissance discussions of imitation have often been seen as both a legacy of Greece and Rome, and as the foundation of modern theories of art and literature. In European cultures, imitatio, imitation and mimesis represent what is most classical and what is most admirable in the pursuit of knowledge, education and art. “It is to imitation that we owe our glory,” Louis Racine would say in the nineteenth century, “this very same imitation from which the ancients derived their grandeur” (Racine, 1808: 399). This study investigates the discussions of imitation that spread in European culture during the Renaissance and it shows that while these theories or ideas were indeed adopted from Latin Roman discussions of poetry and rhetoric, they have no connection to the famous Greek philosophical concepts of mimesis/imitation that are found in the work of Plato and Aristotle. Indeed, this study shows that European concepts of imitatio/imitation developed their conceptual potential before Plato’s and Aristotle’s discussions of mimesis became familiar in Europe. Furthermore, Renaissance

discussions of imitation were not theories of art or literature, as is commonly believed. They were simply an educational pedagogy that organized the appropriation of the canons of description of classical Latin into the vernaculars. The peculiarity and the scale of this pedagogy become evident when the latter is located within its geopolitical context. In the early modern era, neither the dead Latin language nor the vernaculars were equipped to manage the wealth or the administrative and cultural needs of ascending European states. Like Rome at the height of its power, European states were emerging empires in need of a language and a culture. And just like the Romans resorted to the imitation of Greek masterpieces in order to develop their language, Europeans advocated the imitation of Latin masterpieces to develop their vernaculars. But while the Romans resorted to imitatio often with resentment and bitterness at the impossibility to match the Greek achievement, European humanists considered imitatio to have been a resounding success [sic]. By adopting the Roman practice of imitatio, European cultures appropriated and internalized Roman ambivalence without solving or even identifying it.

### **1. Imitatio, Mimesis or Literary Imitation?**

In *The Light in Troy*, Thomas Greene rightly looks at Renaissance imitation within the context of “decline” (of the classical tradition) and (the attempt at its) “revival” (Greene, 1982). The discovery of the ancient world imposed “enormous anxiety upon the humanist Renaissance,” according to Greene. But unlike the theories and practice of Roman imitatio which, he says, codified the exchange with the Greek past “artificially” and “mechanically,” Renaissance imitation scored “a series of victories over anxiety” (ibid: 80). The key factor in this process, Greene says, is “a courage that confronts the model without neurotic paralysis and uses the anxiety to discover selfhood” (ibid: 31). Obviously, the notion of imitation, for Greene, is a question of success or failure. The successes are celebrated and the failures do not

have meaningful consequences. The history of imitation, in that sense, is an epic that traces the glorious victory of the Western self over the anxiety that the discovery of the ancient world imposed. When imitation “vanquishes” anxiety and inspires poetic creativity, the critic explores the success for the reader in a celebratory narrative. Short of producing poetic masterpieces the modern critic would approve of, and no matter how pervasive the imitation debate is in the culture, it does not have consequences worth enquiring into.

“It is true,” Greene says, “that my own reflection [on imitation] has been heavily influenced by the thought of the Renaissance itself” (ibid: 3). What this means basically is that Greene adopts the mantra, tirelessly repeated in renaissance texts, that “proper” application of imitation leads to creativity and originality. Following this renaissance logic, contemporary literary critics assume that a successful application of imitation was the driving force, the successful formula behind the European Renaissance. Studies of renaissance imitation, as a result, adopt this conceptual framework and go out to prove it in their studies. The instability, not to say conceptual contradictions, of the concept of imitation in the Renaissance tend either to be ignored or rationalized as the natural obscurity or confusion that comes with super-concepts like mimesis/imitation. Although Greene is aware that the imitation debate and practice in the Renaissance were “repeatedly shifting,” and “repeatedly redefined,” enough remains “constant,” he says, to constitute “a real subject, whose literary applications lead deep into the imagination of a civilization” (ibid: 1).

In order to study imitation in the Renaissance, modern criticism goes through specific texts and tries to isolate layers of stylistic imitation, thematic and formal, outlining therefore a movement of referencing between the text under study and other texts which function as models or influences. Respected authorities of Renaissance imitation, like Thomas Greene, delight in these exercises. They

patiently and “arduously” outline “intimate,” “delicate,” and “subtle conversations” between texts of different eras (ibid: 94). Greene says that the renaissance poem should be “scrutinized for subterranean outlines or emergent presences or ghostly reverberations.” The critic should “penetrate” the “visual or verbal surface,” and submit the text to “an ‘archaeological’ scrutiny” (ibid: 93). Greene describes the pleasurable state both poet and critic are in during this exercise as being “intoxicated by sweetness” (ibid: 94).

The problem is that in cultures where literature is consciously structured around literal or metaphoric interpretations of imitation, as Roman literature and renaissance literature both were, then two obstacles arise for literary critics studying imitation. First, almost every text would have traces of model texts. As theory, post-renaissance imitation is too broad and imprecise to account for a mass cultural production phenomenon like this one. Second, following G.W. Pigman, one could say that a computer “which had been fed the Roman poets and any collection of renaissance neo-Latin verse could spit out line after renaissance line with some phrase from an ancient poem” (Pigman, 1990: 200). One would end up with a massive printout of similar and identical phrases. Renaissance imitation theories cannot outline the repetitions, the reminiscences, the emulations, the apings, and the digestive processes. Ann Moss makes the same point:

What [humanist imitation theory] does not provide is any formula for determining exactly what the status of textual recall may be in any given instance, whether it is merely an element in the genesis of the work, an unconscious reminiscence, an accidental coincidence of phraseology within a fairly circumscribed literary vocabulary, a marker for judging the skill with which an author has ‘improved’ on a previous text, or an agency for amplifying or perhaps undermining the sense of a passage (Pigman, 1980: 112).

Neither Pigman nor Moss has an answer to this problem. Pigman makes the point that not all the references and repetitions in imitative literature are significant and consciously made: “a large proportion of the repetitions is due to coincidence and unconscious reminiscence” (Pigman, 1990: 200). Given the fact that humanist education was centrally organized on “learning to write Latin like the Romans by means of ‘regimented note taking, rote-learning, repetition and imitation,’” the chances, Pigman rightly argues, of the material previously digested “slipping in unawares,” must have been “rather high” for renaissance poets. Pigman does not take the argument any further. Using Vida’s playful attitude to imitation and his infamous celebration of theft and plagiarism from ancient texts, he simply hints at a looser definition of imitation through which the critic would take into consideration unconscious reminiscence as an aspect of imitative practices:

Vida can joke that successful disguise will lead even the disguiser to forget whose work he is plundering, but that is hardly consolation for the reader who wants to track down the imitative poet and who might at this point want to modify Schlegel and cry ‘who will save us from all of these echoes’? (Ibid: 208).

What Pigman hints at is that renaissance theories of imitation are not theoretically equipped to explain the dialectics of imitation in their complexity. Elsewhere, he describes renaissance imitation debates as expressing a “bewildering variety of positions,” and exhausting themselves in “vindictive and ferocious ad hominem polemics,” and “sterile and fruitless” discussions (Pigman, 1980: 1-2). As a debate and a practice, renaissance imitation was fairly disjointed. The categories of imitation, emulation, reminiscence, and borrowing, cannot adequately evaluate the problem of intertextuality for contemporary concerns. Not only that, but the divisions of imitation theory do not always match the categories of imitation practice, either. There is no fine line to distinguish the interplay between copy and original textually and then to isolate categories according to the logic of renaissance

imitation. Critical rehearsals of Petrarchan journeys to the ancient world and back basking in the joy of erudite recognition work better when the subtleties and shades of imitation are not obvious. Aside from this, one could attempt to contrast renaissance theories of imitation against each other and hopefully a more flexible conception of renaissance imitation would emerge. Vida, with his celebration of theft and plagiarism from ancient texts, has been used in this regard to point to a more elastic definition of imitation that can account for a wider variety of inter-textual exchange.

Other contemporary scholars approach European imitation theory in the Renaissance or the seventeenth century as if it were the Greek theories of mimesis. Timothy Reiss, for example, discusses the systems of representation developed by the emerging European states out of a combination of absolutist political theory and classicism as a manifestation of “mimesis.” Reiss does not address at all the relationship of this controversial Greek concept to late seventeenth-century representation (1982). In fact, Reiss uses the term “mimesis” with no consideration of the classical context at all. “[S]ome aspects of such relationships may have been important in antiquity,” he says (p. 215, my emphasis). From Augustine, who saw some value in secular texts like Ovid’s and Virgil’s, to the seventeenth century, through Erasmus and Descartes, Reiss argues that a progressive secularization of representation took place. The term “mimesis” is used, it seems, simply because the contemporary concept of representation is loosely associated with the ancient term mimesis. Unlike Reiss, Christopher Wulf and Gunter Gebauer devote the first chapter of their book to an analysis of mimesis in Plato and Aristotle. They do not consider the Roman debate at all, and when they look at seventeenth century representation, as the title of their chapter makes clear, they too discuss the French state system of representation as a manifestation of “mimesis” (1995). The relationship of the Greek concept to seventeenth-century representation is not considered; it is taken as a given. Wulf and Gebauer’s decision to locate the

relevance of antiquity in Plato and Aristotle without considering the Roman debate allows them to justify their use of the term mimesis, but it leaves an embarrassing contradiction in their approach to European imitation. Post-renaissance Europe was a neo-Latin culture, and the origin of European imitation theory and practice is Roman, not Greek (Tatarkiewicz, 1980: 270).

The familiarity with Latin, still used in the Renaissance throughout Europe in church, government and domestic life, favored the emergence and easy adoption of Latin metaphors of imitation rather than ancient Greek concepts. Greek had been a dead language for a long time, and people who read and spoke it, like Erasmus, were rare in Europe (Stevens, 1950: 240-48). This arrangement created an awkward situation. In fact, the Renaissance adopted the Roman desire to imitate the Greeks without much knowledge of the Greeks. As Richard Marback notes, “students of the classics, like Petrarch, could only admire the fourth-century Greeks through the praise of Latin authors” (Marback, 1999: 46). Although Renaissance scholars recognized that much of Roman art and culture were derived from the Greeks, they could not discern, as Glynne Wickham notes, how plagiaristic this derivation was. Hence, the grotesque Renaissance rankings of Horace as a higher dramatic theorist than Aristotle, and of Seneca as a more accomplished dramatist than Sophocles and Euripides (Wickham, 1965: 158). Not surprisingly, Roman authors, with their loose imitation logic, emerged in the Renaissance not only as glorious models to imitate, but also as sound theorists of imitation. The irony of this situation is lost on scholars of imitation who, like Timothy Reiss, ignore antiquity in general as an originating context for European theories of imitation or, like Wulf and Gebauer, consider the Greek context and ignore the Roman one.

The intellectual register of European theories of imitation is accepted to be Latin, not Greek. The term mimesis was erroneously applied to European imitation after the reappearance of Aristotle’s Poetics. Remarkably, though, the Poetics was simply



used to reinforce the Latin principles of decorum deeply entrenched in the cultures of modern Europe. Aristotle's Poetics became an illustration of a poetic practice that was essentially Roman, Ciceronian and Horatian:

The Poetics were invariably interpreted within the existing moralistic framework of literary-critical thought deriving from Horace, and already by the mid-sixteenth century there had occurred what has been called a 'fusion' of Horatian and Aristotelian criticism. Robertello and Maggi both wrote commentaries on Horace's *Ars Poetica* complementary to, and published together with, their commentaries on Aristotle; and a century later, Dryden, in his *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), can speak of Horace's *Ars Poetica* as 'an excellent Comment' on Aristotle's Poetics (Cronk, 1999: 201, also Herrick, 1946).

The result of this subordination of Aristotle's Poetics to Horace's *Ars Poetica* is the European confusion of the Greek mimesis with European theory and practice of imitation, a confusion that remains widespread even today. When studies of specific periods are conducted they confirm the radical difference between the European Aristotle and the Greek Aristotle. The Aristotelianism of French Classicism, says René Bray, "seems to have done without knowing Aristotle" (Bray, 1927: 49). As late as the eighteenth century, firsthand knowledge of Aristotle, even in translation, "seems to have been exceptional":

Walpole mentions him five times in his letters – usually coupled with Bossu and the 'Rules'; and Cowper, at the age of fifty-three, had 'never in his life perused a page of Aristotle.' The Poetics were much revered, but little read; and the interpretation of mimesis depended almost altogether upon secondary sources. Some writers in fact seem to have used it without any thought of an Aristotelian origin (Draper, 1921: 373-4).

Until the late eighteenth century, Rome remained the primary model of imitation in culture and politics. Europe had territorial, temporal, linguistic and even religious

continuity with Rome. As Frank Turner notes, “Caesar had recorded the conquest of Gaul and the invasion of Britain, and Tacitus had described the life of ancient Germans.” Roman law and literature and the Latin Church Fathers “had dominated Europe’s cultural experience.” “Roman walls, forts, bridges, baths, theatres, roads, and aqueducts” were part of the European landscape. The Greeks, by contrast, “had not directly touched the life of Western Europe.” They had no tangible or pervasive influence. Even the broad enlightenment appeal to antiquity, as Turner notes, focused on Rome (Turner, 1981: 1-2, Foucault, 1977: 146).

European imitation needs to be isolated from the common conception of mimesis as a legacy of the ancients, whereby Greeks and Romans are mixed up together. If it is misleading to select a conception of imitation from modern literary criticism and carve out an area of the Renaissance to fit with it, as Thomas Greene does, it is equally misleading to select one conception of mimesis from Ancient Greece and carve out an area of the Renaissance to suit it, as do Reiss, Wulf and Gebauer. These two poles can both provide some general definition of both mimesis and imitation that can certainly make sense in areas of the Renaissance or the seventeenth century taken in isolation. They cannot account for the conceptual chaos that characterizes the European imitation phenomenon, let alone explain it. They leave the actual origins of European imitation in specifically Latin antiquity inadequately explained, and fail to explain or even account for the pervasiveness and strong formative influence of imitation on modern Europe.

## 2. The Peculiarity of European Imitatio

It was the ‘*questione della lingua*’ (the controversies over the vernacular) that gave imitation theory and practice the momentum that would make them central in European cultures (Cottino-Jones, 1999: 569). Imitation emerged in Renaissance humanism’s and French classicism’s quest for true Latinity. Humanists’ acute attention to linguistic forms and usages led to the elementary realisation that

language is subject to vocabulary and grammatical changes. Renaissance scholars realised that the Latin they spoke and inherited from the middle ages was different from classical Latin. Language was practically established, here, as a historical phenomenon. By the 1440s, Lorenzo Valla could confidently argue that meaning in language is created by humans and shaped by history, not given by God and nature:

Indeed, even if utterances are produced naturally, their meanings come from the institutions of men. Still, even these utterances men contrive by will as they impose names on perceived things... Unless perhaps we prefer to give credit for this to God who divided the languages of men at the Tower of Babel. However, Adam too adapted words to things, and afterwards everywhere men devised other words. Wherefore noun, verb and the other parts of speech per se are so many sounds but have multiple meanings through the institutions of men (Gravelle, 1988: 376).

Valla's work was path breaking. His *Elegantia* (1440) was one of the most influential and frequently reprinted books of the Renaissance. It is a catalogue of change in the usages of Latin but it deviated from current practice. Valla surveyed actual usages without prescribing rules. Besides triggering the wrath of his contemporaries, the inductive and descriptive approach he used would go on to become the method of comparative philology in the nineteenth century and of linguistics in the twentieth (Waswo, 1999: 29). The success of the *Elegantia* diffused Valla's textual method enormously. It provided a systematic framework and a working method for the interpretation of texts. In history, the result was the West's still standard periodization of itself as ancient, medieval and modern. In religion, the encounter between humanist textual methods and Europe's sacred text resulted in the Reformation.

The realization of the difference between medieval and classical Latin created a short era of intense neo-Latin imitation. For ancient thought to be revived, for the lessons of Rome to be properly grasped, humanists advocated the revival of

classical Latin. It was felt among some humanists that Latin had to become, again, the natural and familiar mode of organizing experience for that experience to equal that of the ancients. To that end, the imitation of Cicero in prose and Virgil in poetry was advocated. This textual practice of imitation reached its peak with a fixation on Cicero as the only worthy model. As illustrated in Roger Ascham's *The Schoolmaster* (1570), Ciceronianism was a strict form of imitation. Students would translate a passage from Cicero into English and then they would translate it back into Latin to compare how close they were to the original and close, therefore, to being "Ciceronian" (the procedure is described in Weinbrot, 1985: 121, Gebauer and Wulf, 1995: 91-94, Bolgar, 1954: passim).

The polemics over whether Cicero should be the only model for imitation were short-lived in Europe, and the new conception of language soon undermined Latin as the privileged language of learning. The central tactic in the attack on the monopoly of Latin was the production of grammar books for the vernacular. These demonstrated that vernaculars could be reduced to the same kind of rules as Latin. In their sense of pride and their defense of the vulgate, flickers of a conception of culture democratically encompassing the learned and the popular can be felt in Italian and French writers. "Let no one scorn this Tuscan language as plain and meagre," says Poliziano, "if its riches and ornaments are justly appraised, this language will be judged not poor, not rough, but copious and highly polished" (Gravelles: 381) "What sort of nation are we, to speak perpetually with the mouth of another?" writes Jacques Peletier (1930: 114). Joachim du Bellay takes issue with the Roman's labelling of the French as barbarians. They "had neither right nor privilege to legitimate thus their nation and to bastardize others" (du Bellay: 35).

According to Richard Waswo, the process and the motivation of this anti-Latin campaign show it to be a form of "cultural decolonization." It was an attack, he says

on what was conceived to be a foreign domination, and its implicit concept of culture that assumed it to be the property of the small minority of Latin speakers:

To have learned to speak with one's own mouth means to value that speech as both an object of knowledge and the embodiment of a culture worth having. It is to declare that the materials and processes of daily life are as fully 'cultural' as the ruined monuments and dead languages of the ancient world. It is to overthrow the internalized domination of a foreign community, to decolonize the mind (Waswo, 1999: 416).

Renaissance theories of language like Valla's destroyed the traditional separation between language and reality and left the new method of philology in charge of finding the meaning of words in contexts of use. That meant that interpretation was freed, in principle, to seek meaning without a need for an extra-textual reference, whether religious or ideological. There was here a potential for a genuine liberation of thought, which explains a great deal of Renaissance cultural creativity and its euphoria about the revival of learning. The historicisation of language also highlighted the monopoly of classical reality as the sole legitimate subject of knowledge and of Latin as the sole legitimate medium. "Each language has its own perfection," said Hans Baron, "its own sound, and its own polished and learned diction" (Gravelle: 383). Everyday life and everyday language were legitimated here in what seems to be a liberated conception of knowledge.

Remarkably, though, challenging the monopoly of Latin did not lead to the equality of languages or to the abandoning of imitation. Subsequent humanists appropriated Valla's practice and tastes, but at the same time held on to the scholastic conception that meaning in language and its relationship to things come from God. "Almost any writer on language in the sixteenth century," writes Waswo, "will exhibit some degree of oscillation" between conceiving language as a human production and treating it implicitly as given and ordained by God (Waswo, 1999: 30). In this

relapse, imitatio re-emerged as a set of educational strategies organizing this time the systematic assimilation of the canons of description from Latin into the vernaculars. Humanists and classicists believed that the Romans followed the same process. They enriched their Latin tongue by extrapolating linguistic and rhetorical structures from the Greek. “Everyone understands,” wrote Landino in 1481, “how the Latin tongue became abundant by deriving many words from the Greek.” The Italian tongue would become richer, he deduced, “if every day we transfer into it more new words taken from the Romans and make them commonplace among our own” (Gravelle: 382).

In the European practice of imitatio that develops, the Latin heritage is openly seen as a storehouse of linguistic and rhetorical nuggets and imitation is routinely advocated simply as an act of “plunder.” “[M]arch boldly on this beautiful Roman city,” du Bellay incited his countrymen, and “pillage without conscience the sacred treasures of this Delphic temple.”<sup>2</sup> Vida’s call to plunder is well known in this regard, and when Ogier tries to make a distinction in his *Apologie pour Balzac* (1627) between “imitating” the ancients and “plundering” them, he simply makes a distinction between “plundering their words,” which he opposes, and “plundering their ideas,” which he advocates:

There is a difference between imitating and plundering the ancients... Imitation is always praiseworthy when it is accompanied by invention, as when we choose an excellent model to imitate and we imitate only his most excellent aspects ... It is therefore a question of plundering the art and the spirit of the ancients rather than their words (Bray: 166).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “Là donc, Français, marchez courageusement vers cette superbe cité romaine, (...), ornez vos temples et vos autels. (...) Pillez-moi sans conscience les sacrés trésors de ce temple delphique” (p. 107).

<sup>3</sup> “Il y a bien de la différence entre imiter et dérober les anciens... L’imitation est toujours louable lorsqu’elle est accompagnée d’invention, lorsque nous choisissons un excellent patron pour l’imiter et que nous l’imitons en ses plus excellentes parties... Il est donc question de dérober l’art et l’esprit des anciens plutôt que leur paroles” (Bray: 166, my translation).

As one looks more into it, it becomes apparent that the open calls to plunder were not the only instance where European imitatio was conceived in violent terms. Pigman notes that imitatio during the Renaissance had connotations of “envy,” “contentious striving”, and “jealous rivalry” (Pigram, 1980: 24). Howard Weinbrot observes that imitatio found an inspiration in Virgil’s conception of writing as a battle with the precursors. In the beginning of his third Georgic, Virgil boasts of being the first Roman who came back from conquered Greece bringing “trophies,” “foreign spoils” to adorn his own country, and to raise a pleasing temple, in the middle of which he said he placed Augustus (Weinbrot, 1985: 125). Weinbrot adds that imitatio’s conception of writing as combat, strife and envy persisted in European dictionaries and encyclopaedias until the 1780s, when the definition of imitatio began to be softened to reflect a peaceful rivalry and a peaceful desire of resemblance (ibid: 127).

But it is when one looks at the implementation of imitatio as an educational pedagogy as outlined in the teaching methods developed by humanists like Chrysoloras, Agricola, and Vives that the association of imitation with connotations of violence and plunder cease to sound metaphorical. The details of the implementation of imitatio as an educational pedagogy highlight an institutional side to the doctrine of imitatio that is hardly noticed in contemporary studies. Rather than stylistic exercises practiced by individual writers, imitatio spread as an educational pedagogy that dominated European curriculum from the fifteenth century to, at least, the nineteenth. A brief outline of this pedagogy will illustrate the point.

“Pedagogically,” says Bolgar, “the Renaissance started with Chrysoloras.” The Byzantine schoolmaster settled in Florence in 1396 as a municipally paid lecturer. His teaching methods were novel. In opposition to scholastic methods of textual analysis emphasising general structure, Chrysoloras paid more attention to small

linguistic details as the true site of textual excellence. Students were to focus their attention not only on words and syllables, but also on tropes, figures and the ornaments of style. The practitioners of imitatio started from the assumption that the impression made by a piece of writing was the sum total of separate impressions, each one can be traced to some distinct part of the language used. A poem or a prose passage can, therefore, be divided into various elements: varieties of arguments, ideas, illustrations, metaphors, figures of speech, specific use of single words, and speech rhythms, down to isolated sound effects. Eloquent writing, for Italian humanists, consisted in the combination and sum total of these elements. To imitate this eloquence, they organised writing and speaking as the judicious recombination of those elements extracted from classical texts.

Chrysoloras' teaching methods were in general use in Italy after 1450. They gave momentum to the already popular practice of imitating the classics. Most humanists practised them, and the procedures were written down in a number of treatises by prominent Italian humanists like Lorenzo Valla and Francesco Pico (Bolgar, 1954: 268-9). The need was soon felt for a more detailed system of classification. Knowledge was useless, humanists like Agricola said, unless one had it at one's fingertips. Agricola advised scholars to arrange their material under certain headings like "virtue," "vice," "life," "death," "learning," "ignorance," "good will," "hatred," and so on. Everything learned from the classics was to be organised under these headings. By repetition, the writer would be able to bring to mind everything classified under the headings, and use it. As Bolgar notes, Agricola simply turned a common medieval technique to humanist use. The idea was borrowed from a field of popular scholarship that humanists tended to deride. Preachers had been using sermon books full of anecdotes or exempla, since the thirteenth century, to help them illustrate their argument, and the material was arranged under headings representing topics for discussion. The notebook and heading method soon became the central accessory in humanist imitation practice. Vivès illustrates the practice:



Make a book of blank leaves of a proper size. Divide it into certain topics, so to say, into nests. In one, jot down the names of subjects of daily converse: the mind, body, our occupations, games, clothes, divisions of time, dwellings, foods; in another, idioms or formulae docendi; in another, sententiae; in another, proverbs; in another, difficult passages from authors; in another, matters which seem worthy of note to thy teacher or thyself (Bolgar: 273).

The most complete account available of this pedagogy is Erasmus's *de Copia*. In the first part of the treatise, *Copia Verborum*, Erasmus deals largely with vocabulary and the various ways of using and arranging it according to the headings and notebook method. But words, according to Erasmus, were not the only instruments of eloquence. In the second half of the treatise, *Copia Rerum*, he lists the different forms in which a writer can present his illustrative material: simile, metaphor, fable, apophthegms, fictitious narrative and allegory. Erasmus shows how a single example could illustrate several morals, and he advises the writer to consider the different aspects of his examples and what specific topics they could serve. The last part of *de Copia* illustrates the method by which these examples are to be collected, and one is brought back to Agricola and Vives. Take a notebook; divide it into sections each one divided into headings and subheadings, and so on. In the practice of imitation, the aim of reading was clearly extrapolation, and writers were advised to go through the whole classical heritage in this way at least once in a lifetime, presumably before they start writing. At an incredibly fast pace, almost the entire Latin heritage was transformed into a series of notes constituting a body of material that could easily be retained, and reused. European imitation, as Bolgar accurately notes, "Is so alien to modern practice that we cannot easily understand what it implies" (p. 272).

With astonishing speed, European educators, politicians, chancellors and secretaries worked to implement imitation as a procedure in educational programs throughout

northern Europe (Moss, 1999: 145-54). The contemporary poetic model that humanists followed was Petrarch. Commentators cut and categorized every situation, and every verbal and stylistic technique in Petrarch's texts. The *Canzoniere* was made available for Italian and European imitators in the form of small pieces of wisdom and lists of clever phrases that were ready to use. Petrarchism spread very fast as the predominant poetic discourse in Italy, France and England. In this fashion, imitation spread throughout Europe acting both pedagogically and stylistically.

It is doubtful if any written heritage was ever subjected to such a systematic extrapolation process as the Roman heritage was in modern Europe. It is equally doubtful if any other civilization in the history of humanity ever subjected the development of its written culture on such a large scale to such a raw conception of imitation. It is certainly telling that the advocacy of imitation as plunder is often accompanied in humanist and classicist texts by the unconvincing reassurance that there is no shame in imitation. There is nothing shameful about imitating the ancients and borrowing from them, says Petrarch. On the contrary, "it is a sign of greater elegance and skill for us, in imitation of the bees, to produce in our own words thoughts borrowed from others" (Petrarca, 1975: 42). Du Bellay, too, enjoins the reader not to be "ashamed" to write in his native tongue in imitation of the ancients (du Bellay: 107).<sup>4</sup> It is "no vicious thing, but praiseworthy," he says, "to borrow from a foreign tongue sentences and words to appropriate them to our own" (ibid: 49).<sup>5</sup> Du Bellay wished that his tongue "were so rich in domestic models that it were not necessary to have recourse to foreign ones," but that was not the case (ibid: 51).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> "[T]u ne dois avoir honte d'écrire en ta langue" (du Bellay: 107).

<sup>5</sup> "[C]omme ce n'est point chose vicieuse, mais grandement louable, emprunter d'une langue étrangère les sentences et les mots, et les approprier à la sienne" (ibid: 49).

<sup>6</sup> "Je voudrais bien que notre langue fût si riche d'exemple domestiques, que n'eussions besoin d'avoir recours aux étrangers" (ibid: 51).

### 3. Imitatio and the ‘Glory of Arms and Letters’

European humanists and classicists were not philosophers (Kristeller, 1961). They were a class of professional teachers, chancellors and secretaries, who were connected to European courts through a patronage system. They composed documents, letters and orations, and they included princes, politicians, businessmen, artists, jurists, theologians, and physicians. Humanists and classicists adopted the Roman’s partiality to imitation and applied it diligently and efficiently, but the dialectical processes involved in imitation and their social and political implications never seem to have excited European minds the way these processes excited the minds of the Greeks. Imitation - though central in organizing humanist and classicist educational programs - was always spared dialectical scrutiny. Nevertheless, humanists’ interest, adoption and application of imitatio procedure and pedagogy betray a reasoning and a logic of sorts...

In the absence of unfettered dialectical scrutiny, the pursuit of learning - and the adoption and application of imitatio to facilitate that pursuit - were often governed by rules extracted from poetry and rhetoric. The sweeping claims that Roman writers made about the power of oratory and poetry to arouse the crowd and glorify the nation, were applied after the Renaissance to “all forms of literature” (Gray, 1963: 503). Principles of poetry and rhetoric often affected, therefore, the entire field that is called today humanistic or liberal studies. Europe’s pursuit of imitatio and of learning, in that sense, was over-determined poetically and rhetorically, but received little philosophical or dialectical input. Joel Kraemer does not exaggerate when he says that Western humanism has been “primarily a literary phenomenon” that shunned the various braches of philosophy. It belongs to “the Western rhetorical tradition which has its roots in a Ciceronian educational and cultural program” (Kraemer, 1986: 6).

Primarily, the dominance of poetry and rhetoric in humanist and classicist education meant that in Europe, as in Rome before, the purpose behind the adoption of imitatio was the creation of a museum culture of masterpieces and the development of a national language primarily as an “aid” or an accessory to political and military ascendancy. What distinguished the Roman Empire and made it particularly worthy of imitation, humanists and classicists were agreed, is the fact that Rome had a “multitude of writers” who inspired feats of glory in their countrymen and immortalized the deeds in the annals of art and letters. Rome did not only conquer; it acquired fame and immortality. The reason why les gestes [the glorious deeds] of the “Roman people” were “unanimously” celebrated and preferred to the deeds of the rest of humanity, Joachim du Bellay explains in the 1520s, was because they had “a multitude of writers.” That is the reason, he says, why “in spite of the passage of time, the fierceness of battle, the vastness of Italy, and foreign incursions, the majority of their deeds (gestes) have been in their entirety preserved until our time.”<sup>7</sup> Imitatio here ceases to be an individual writer’s appropriation of stylistic features of classical texts. It aims at the creation of an order of scribes, as it were who, in a regimented fashion, would act to lift Europeans to Rome’s level of glory and then immortalize the “deeds” for posterity. France, Italy, or England, in that sense, would not only be powerful empires; they would equally be inducted in the annals of letters - the parallel world of glory and immortality that textuality mysteriously bestows on lucky individuals and nations.

The close association between knowledge and political and military ascendancy that characterized the practice of imitatio in Rome emerged intact in European imitatio. It crystallized in the famous European doctrine of the “glory of arms and letters.” For humanists and classicists, Rome’s appeal as a model consisted in its combination of conquest with a culture of eloquence and a legacy of masterpieces.

<sup>7</sup> (du Bellay: 36). du Bellay uses the term ‘gestes’ in the same way it is used in the expression ‘chanson de gestes.’

“[T]he purity of Speech and greatness of Empire have in all Countries still met together,” says Thomas Spratt. The Greeks, he says, “spoke best when they were in their glory of conquest. The Romans made those times the Standard of their Wit, when they subdu’d and gave Laws to the World.” The logic is that conquest and learning go together. The pursuit of learning should, therefore, be a pursuit of conquest. Imitatio and its famous revival of letters were part and parcel of the imitation of Rome as a political and military model. Humanist and classicist texts are very comfortable with this subordination of learning to political and military ascendancy, and they often candidly prescribe the role that letters and learning should play in this alliance. Poetry and rhetoric, as William Davenant demands in *Gondibert* (1650), should be addressed to the “Leaders of Armies” because it is they who are:

[T]he painful Protectors and enlargers of Empire, by whom it actively moves; and such motion of Empire is as necessary as the motion of the Sea...; For God ordain’d not huge Empire as proportionable to the Bodies but to the Mindes of men, and the Mindes of Men are more monstrous and require more space for agitation and the hunting of others than the Bodies of Whales (Reiss. 1982: 230-2).

Davenant is clearly comfortable with empire being a monstrosity. What is frightening is the parallel he draws between empire as a monstrosity and the human mind, and his description of the latter as a hunting whale scouring oceans to kill and feed. The pursuit of learning that Davenant promotes here is vastly different from the mythical conceptions of renaissance learning as an innocent culture of creativity and artistic exuberance that are still common today. Davenant is even specific in outlining the role that poetry and learning should play in empire building. Government, he says, has four chief aids: “religion, armes, policy, and law.” By themselves, he adds, they are weak and need to be strengthened by “some collateral help, which I will safely presume to consist of Poesy.” John Dennis, in 1712,

advocates the same prioritization of poetry and rhetoric in humanistic learning, and the same subordination of learning to conquest and empire building. From Moses to Richelieu, he says, all great statesmen wrote and appreciated poetry. Richelieu, for example, “laid the Foundation of the French Greatness,” and “wrote more than one Dramatick poem, with that very right Hand which dictated to the cabinets of so many Sovereign Princes, and directed the successful Motions of so many conquering Commanders” (Reiss: 1982: 233).

The imitation of Latin and its masterpieces, for European humanists and classicists, was part of a larger imitation of Rome as an empire. Moreover, this subordination of learning to imperial ambitions was not imposed on the pursuit of learning from the outside. It seems to have rather crystallized as a synthesis within the revival of learning itself. What transpired from the renewed study of the past is the idea that knowledge and learning are natural partners in the creation of empire and are its natural by-products. The violence of conquest, renaissance texts often argue, brings civility and the flourishing of arts and letters. English humanists often cite the case of their own country in support of their argument. The English were once unruly, they say, but Roman conquest brought them to civility and helped the development of poetry and “correct speaking”: “This I write unto you as I do understand by histories of thyngs by past,” writes Thomas Smith, “how this contrey of England, ones as uncivill as Ireland now is, was by colonies of the Romaines brought to understand the lawes and orders of thanncient orders” (Canny, 1973: 588-9).

Smith and his contemporaries were not merely illuminating a past historical event (Roman conquest of Britain). They were justifying the then ongoing English conquest of Ireland. The violence of conquest is brazenly justified as a civilizing force and the work of the mind is openly deployed as a willing accomplice in the process. It was England’s civic duty to educate the Irish “in virtous labour and in justice, and to teach them our English lawes and civilitie and leave robberyng and

stealing and killyng one another,” writes Smith. The English, according to Smith, were the new Romans coming to civilize the Irish, just as the old Romans did once with ancient Britons. Edmund Spenser repeats Smith’s statement verbatim. The English, he says, were as “stout and warlike a people” as the Irish, but it was obvious now that they had been “brought to that civility that no nation in the world excelleth them in all goodly conversation” (Canny, 1970: 589). Fifty years later, Sir John Davies is still referring to Julius Agricola, the Roman general who civilized “our ancestors the ancient Britons” (Canny, 1970: 590).

Roman allusions are central in the development of English colonial theory in the sixteenth century. David Armitage notes that the writings of Cicero, Latinized versions of Aristotle, as well as Roman historians Sallust, Livy and Tacitus, “provided the intellectual framework for at least the first half-century of British colonial theory.” The earliest Elizabethan reports of voyages to the Americas, and the first writings in favor of colonization, “repeatedly invoked the language of classical republicanism” and justified their ventures by appealing to the potential benefits to the commonwealth (*res publica*). Accounts of Martin Frobisher’s first voyage to the Americas (1576), for example, began with reference to Cicero’s moral dictum that “man is borne not only to serve his owne turne (as Tullie sayeth), but his kinsfolke, friends, and the common wealth especially, loke for some furtherance at hys handes, and some frutes of his laboure.” Conquest and the expansion of knowledge and trade, it was conveniently thought, benefit the commonwealth and fulfill one’s duties (*officias*) towards it as recommended by the leading classical moralists (Armitage, 1988: 106).

Learning and colonial violence went together for Smith, Davies and Spenser. And as Nicholas Canny notes, the equation between learning and colonial violence does not place Smith and Spenser outside the tradition of Renaissance Humanism. It was a mainstream humanist belief that Christians had “an obligation to use force to

defend and promote the truths of religion, to maintain order at times of popular insurrection, and (...) to extend the boundaries of civility into ‘barbaric’ regions.” Canny also notes how Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, where the subjugation of the Irish is argued, rigidly adhered to the humanist guidelines governing the justifications of war (Canny, 1971: 3-26).

## Conclusion

By the seventeenth century, Lorenzo Valla’s discovery of the historicity of language, discussed earlier, was safely buried and forgotten under much theorising of imitation. Ideas about the equality of languages receded, and French and English classicists could again idealize one language above the others just as their scholastic ancestors did with Latin. Instead of logic or dialectics, it was grammar – mostly French, Italian and English – that became erroneously associated with thinking. Bacon, Galileo and Descartes all saw ordered writing as a reflection of ordered and correct thinking. By the 1640s, it was commonly assumed that the correct use of language corresponded through its grammar with the universal rational order of nature. Whatever could be said grammatically and eloquently in French or English must be true and logical. Boileau and the neo-classicists turned this grammar-based “logic” into the general reason of mankind, which was equated with the order of nature. Beauty and eloquence, according to Boileau, Pope and Dryden, are equivalent to truth and nature. Beauty is nature and nature is truth. Nothing is beautiful, according to these rules, except what is true, and truth is defined as both nature and the beautiful. As for logic, Boileau reassuringly said that nature brings its own evidence, and it is usually felt (Schutze, 1920: 70).

Though it was poetry and rhetoric that provided the rules and set the tone of the European doctrine of *imitatio*, humanism and classicism still presented their educational program as if it wielded the authority of reason and dialectics. Indeed, the classical tradition was commonly assumed to wield the authority of reason and



science, and Europe's practice of imitation, though excessively ideological, was conveniently presented as wielding the authority of reason that the classical tradition represented. Imitatio itself was often considered, both as pedagogy and as a stylistic technique, to be an enactment of logical procedures [sic]. Homer and Virgil were seen as representatives of a dialectical tradition...

## References

- Armitage, D. 1988. Literature and Empire. In: The Oxford History of the British Empire, vol. I: The Origins of Empire, pp. 99-123. Ed, Nicholas Canny, Oxford University Press.
- Bolgar, R.R. 1954. The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries. Cambridge University Press.
- Bray, R. 1927. La formation de la Doctrine Classique en France. Librairie Hachette: Paris.
- Canny, N. 1973. The Ideology of English Colonisation. William and Mary Quarterly. 30: 575-98.
- Canny, N. 2001. Making Ireland British: 1580-1650. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cottino-Jones, M. 1999. Literary-Critical Developments in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Italy. In: The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, vol. 3: The Renaissance, pp. 566-77. Ed: Glyn P. Norton, Cambridge University Press.
- Cronk, N. 1999. Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus: The Conception of Reader Response. In The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, vol. 3: The Renaissance, pp. 199-204.
- Ed: Glyn P. Norton, Cambridge University Press.
- Draper, J.W. 1921. Aristotelian 'Mimesis' in Eighteenth Century England. PMLA. vol. 36, no. 3: 372-400.
- du Bellay, J. 1936. La défense et l'illustration de la langue française. Nelson Editeur: Paris.
- Gravelle, S. 1988. The Latin-Vernacular Question. Journal of the History of Ideas. 49: 367-86.
- Gray, H. 1963. Renaissance Humanism: The Pursuit of Eloquence. Journal of the History of Ideas. 24: 497-514

- 
- Greene, T. 1982. *Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London.
  - Hale, J.R. 1971. Sixteenth-Century Explanations of War and Violence. *Past and Present*. 51: 3-26.
  - Herrick, M.T. 1946. *The Fusion of Horatian and Aristotelian Criticism, 1531-1555*. University of Illinois Press: Urbana.
  - Kraemer, J. 1986. *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age*. Brill: Leiden.
  - Kristeller, P. 1961. *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic and Humanist Strains*. Harper: New York.
  - Mabrack, R. 1999. *Plato's Dream of Sophistry*. University of South Carolina.
  - Moss, A. 1999. *Literary Imitation in the Sixteenth Century: Writers and Readers, Latin and French*. In: *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 3: The Renaissance*, pp. 107-18. Ed: Glyn P. Norton, Cambridge University Press.
  - Moss, A. 1999. *Humanist Education*. In *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism Vol. 3: The Renaissance*, pp. 145-54. Ed: Glyn P. Norton, Cambridge University Press.
  - Peletier, J. 1930. *L'art poetique*. Les Belles Lettres: Paris.
  - Petrarca. 1975. *Rerum familiarium libri I-XIII*. New York State University Press.
  - Pigman G.W. 1990. *Neo-Latin Imitation of the Latin Classics*. In: *Latin Poetry and the Classical Tradition: Essays in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. Eds: Goodman & Murray, Clarendon Press: Oxford.
  - Pigman, G.W. 1980. *Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance*. *Renaissance Quarterly*. vol. 33, no. 1: 1-32.
  - Racine, L. 1808. *Réflexions sur la poésie*. In: *Oeuvre de Louis Racine*. Ed: Julian L. Geoffrey, Paris.
-

- 
- Reiss, Timothy. 1982. Power, Poetry and the Resemblance of Nature. In: Mimesis: From Mirror to Method. Ed: John Lyons and Stephen Nichols, The University Press of New England: Hanover and London.
  - Schutze, M. 1920. The Fundamental Ideas in Herder's thought. Modern Philology. vol. 18, no. 2: 65-78.
  - Stevens, L.C. 1950. How the French Humanists of the Renaissance Learned Greek. PMLA. 65: 240-48.
  - Tatarkiewicz, W. 1980. A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Esthetics. Polish Scientific Publishers: Warszawa.
  - Turner, F.M. 1981. The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain. Yale University Press: New Haven & London.
  - Waswo, R. 1999. "Theories of Language" In the Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, vol. 3: The Renaissance, pp. 25-35. Ed: Glyn P. Norton, Cambridge University Press.
  - Waswo, R. 1999. The Rise of the Vernaculars. In: The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, vol. 3: The Renaissance, pp. 409-16. Ed: Glyn P. Norton, Cambridge University Press.
  - Weinbrot, H.D. 1985. 'An Ambition to Excell': The Aesthetics of Emulation in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. The Huntington Library Quarterly. 48: 121-139.
  - Wickham, G. 1995. Neo-Classical Drama and the Reformation in England. In Classical Drama and Its Influence. Ed: M. J. Anderson, Methuen.
  - Wulf and Gebauer. 1995. Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society. Trans: Don Reneau, University of California Press.