

**E. H. Gombrich, Topos and Topicality Annual Lecture of the Society for Renaissance Studies, delivered at University College, London, 10 January, 1975. [Trapp no.1974A.1]**

When the Secretary kindly invited me to give this year's annual lecture, I replied that I could only accept this honour if I was not expected to give a formal address, but rather discuss certain problems in an informal way. It was not only laziness which prompted me here. I have become increasingly sceptical of the value of that survival of epideictic oratory called "the formal lecture". I was all the more happy to see, that this scepticism is shared by the supreme master of the genre, Lord Clark, who really said all there is to be said on this topic in his splendid self-portrait. "Historical truth," he says, "is usually complex and frequently dull, and anyone with a sense of style or a love of language is tempted to take short-cuts and omit the qualifications that would make a statement less telling". "The lecture form" he remarks, "encouraged all the evasions and half-truths that I had learned to practice in my weekly essays at Oxford". With this damning accusation in mind I suggest that this Society should spawn a Society for the Reform of Lecturing with a radical wing agitating for its total abolition. I would at least plead for the abolition of lectures which are subsequently to be published. I believe that what is most suitable for discussion in front of an audience are precisely those half baked ideas and arguments which are not yet ripe to be printed. Which at last brings me to the ideas or worries I should like to air here tonight. I have called the talk "Topos and Topicality in Renaissance Art," and I'd better explain what I had in mind with this punning title. Topos, of course, is the technical term in rhetoric for the commonplace, the general theme with a universal application, topicality is the term we use for a specific reference or allusion to events of the time, to things in the news, as it were. My contention will be that the monumental art of the Italian Renaissance is generally concerned with great and universal themes and that it is a mistake to look in such works for topical allusions. What prompts me to make this point is the tendency I find in many very excellent works to regard it almost as a point of honour to find such topical allusions in the works of the past. This, of course, is part of the general tendency to look for meanings. It is a tendency that is often connected with the Warburg Institute, and if that is true it behoves me all the more to warn against a distortion or perversion of this method. What Warburg was after had nothing whatever to do with the academic parlour game in which he who has found most meanings wins and expects his results to be published in the Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes.

Not that the search for topical meanings is peculiar to our own period. Only the type of meaning preferred has changed. In the nineteenth century the art historian saw himself as a kind of tourist guide to the past, eliciting human interest stories. He read into the works of art what he knew from other sources about the persons who were involved. Let me give you a late and somewhat extreme example of the genre.

In 1923 that leading German Renaissance scholar Paul Schubring published a little volume on Italian early Renaissance medals in a popular series (*Die italienische Medaille der Frührenaissance*). This is how he described Vittore Pisano's medal of Cecilia Gonzaga, or rather its reverse, which he calls "a deeply moving hymn":

"In the early prime of her youth, that daughter of a prince had taken the veil to avoid being forced to follow a man she did not love. In a silent moonlit night she sits on the hills and her eyes gaze across her beloved homeland. Her youthful naked body shimmers in Luna's mild silvery rays. The gigantic unicorn slumbers tamely near the inviolate one. Her melancholy dreams range over the silent landscape as if she were meditating on the right to happiness, of which she had been deprived."

I hope there is no relation of Schubring's in the audience and even if there were he would probably admit that after some fifty years the passage sounds funny. Nobody would think that the artist would have represented an aristocratic nun without clothes on. Even less would one suggest that such nuns had themselves represented meditating on their alleged right to worldly happiness. My purpose in introducing this extreme example of sentimental anecdotalism, however, is not to make fun of Paul Schubring. It is that from the point of view of method it may be impossible to disprove his interpretation. *Negativa non sunt probanda* as the lawyers say, we cannot prove that such ideas were not in the minds of the artist or the patron, we can do so even less if we adopt the idea of several "levels of meaning" which has gained such currency in our generation. The fact that what we see is obviously a personification of chastity, as befits a nun, and that Luna, as the emblem of Diana belongs to this meaning, as does the unicorn would then not exclude any number of other meanings to be found in the image, some of which might be general, some topical. All the conscientious historian can say, is that we have no documented evidence which suggests that in that period or indeed in any period medals were struck and distributed to convey this kind of meaning.

This, in a way, is the problem of method we are confronting. Topical interpretations whether of a personal or a political kind can rarely be conclusively disproved, and as long as prestige attaches to their discovery they are likely to be produced. I therefore had to think of some cases where a great authority lent his prestige to this practice and can more or less be shown to have been mistaken. This must be my excuse for criticising two of the most illustrious scholars in our field. If anyone wants to warn mountaineers of the risks of a particular route he will cut little ice by saying that unpractised amateurs have come to grief there. It is only the fact that the most renowned mountain guides were in danger of losing their grip which can give substance to his warning. In any case the old adage still applies, *amicus Socrates, amicus Plato, maior amica veritas*.

And so let me turn to my first example, the topical allusion which Professor Richard Krautheimer found in Ghiberti's Second door of the Florentine Baptistery in his book on Ghiberti, Princeton, 1956. The publishers of the second edition of this important monograph have honoured me by printing on the dust cover some words of admiration which I naturally wrote when reviewing this great achievement; I stand by these words, and this I hope, exempts me from further protestations.

In interpreting the so-called Gates of Paradise the author makes use of all the tools and procedures developed in the last few decades to extract, as they say "the last ounce of meaning" from Ghiberti's masterpiece. He starts from the assumption that the artist must have followed a theological programme and that this programme was symbolic rather than narrative. The ten Old Testament scenes represented on the door must, in Krautheimer's view have been chosen not so much for their literal meaning but for their typological significance. In other words he draws on the famous doctrine of the fourfold meaning of the scriptures and tries to extract these many meanings from the choice of scenes. I must confine myself to the six folio pages in which Krautheimer discusses the meaning or meanings of the last relief, that representing the *Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon*, and naturally I cannot do justice to the richness of his arguments. Briefly he tells us first that that Old Testament episode had been frequently interpreted as prefiguring events in the Story of Salvation or to allude symbolically to figures and facets of afterlife. It was seen to have forecast the *Adoration of the Magi* and thus signified the pagan world submitting to the glory of Christ, it had also symbolized the blessed in heaven or the marriage of Christ and the Church. As *sponsa Christi* the Queen of Sheba had also prefigured the Virgin, and her meeting with Solomon forecast both the Marriage and the Coronation of the Virgin. "Very likely" writes Professor Krautheimer, the scene on the Ghiberti gates "carries one or more of these traditional meanings". Why very likely? —if I may rudely interrupt. Should we not here make a distinction between potential meaning and actual meaning? No doubt the

episode *could* stand for all these and possibly other meanings, but this only implies, as far as art history is concerned, that it could so be used in typological cycles. Place it opposite the Adoration, as frequently in the *Biblia Pauperum*, and the context makes it refer to the Adoration, tie it together with the Coronation of the Virgin and it is this meaning that will impress itself on the beholder. To bring these modes of significance into play you need the particular framework or context. Hence the literal meaning recedes and the symbolic meaning also tends to dominate the artistic style. The stories of Samson and the Gates, and of Jonah, both types of the Resurrection are represented on the 12th century portable altar from Stavelot (now in the Cinquantenaire Museum in Brussels) in an almost pictographic abbreviation because they are not here in their own right but as adumbrations of the event pictured below. Surely it is different with the work of Ghiberti the Goldsmith who depicts for us the scene as a richly embroidered dramatic narrative. To me that is precisely the point of Ghiberti's reliefs. Krautheimer sees it differently. He even sees in the composition of the scene an allusion to the marriage of the Virgin and to pictures of the Coronation which would, in his view, support the interpretation of the episode as fore-shadowing these events. I have yet to find a documented example of such a mode of signifying in Renaissance art, the stylistic borrowing of a compositional schema from another scene in order to hint at another meaning. I wonder whether we have to accept it here?

The first thing, surely, any historian must do is to consult the Biblical text the artist must have had in front of him.

This is what we read:

“When the Queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon she came to prove Solomon with hard questions in Jerusalem with a very good great company, and camels that bare spices, and gold in abundance, and precious stones..and when the Queen of Sheba had seen the wisdom of Solomon and the house he had built....and his ascent by which he went up into the house of the Lord, there was no more spirit in her. And she said to the King, it is a true report which I heard.”

I believe Ghiberti's composition can pass muster as a very literal illustration of that text, we see the throng with the camels, we see the ascent of the house where the Queen gracefully and humbly acknowledges her conviction of Solomon's might and glory. Krautheimer rightly stresses that the composition has no exact precedent, in Italian art, but I think formally it is not totally new. The artist was confronted with the task of showing Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, and this, maybe, led him to the scene of the *presentation* of the Virgin which figures among the Giottesque frescoes in the lower Church of Assisi (Beda Kleinschmidt, *Die Basilika San Francesco in Assisi*, 1926, II, p.226). I don't want to exaggerate the similarity, but I think it is there and extends even to the rendering of the altar screen and the grouping of the bystanders — should we take this as a hint that what Ghiberti's story really means is the presentation of Christ? I don't see why we should; who among the crowds who admired the gates could in any case have remembered the composition from Assisi?

The study of compositional schemata is one thing, the study of meanings another; the schema Ghiberti possibly derived from this humble fresco had of course a glorious afterlife culminating in Raphael's School of Athens, but this is a very different problem.

In any case, for Krautheimer the typological meaning he wants to see in the panel is only the starting point of another, a topical interpretation. To quote his own words, “these anagogical and symbolical connotations appear to be interwoven with a definite allusion to a specific ecclesiastico-political ambition of the early fifteenth century: the reconciliation of the Greek and Latin Churches.”

Let us grant it that the temptation to see such an allusion in this panel is very real. The Gates, after all, were destined to confront the Florentine Cathedral where, in July 1439, the decree of the Union between the Eastern and Western Church was solemnly promulgated. Here is an episode of an Eastern Queen coming to Jerusalem to acknowledge the power and might of its great ruler; would it not have been a suitable memorial to this event? Krautheimer is convinced that it was. He even found that some years later an Abyssinian delegation to the Pope made a speech in which they compared their coming with the coming of the Queen of Sheba — not in itself, perhaps, a farfetched comparison for them to make, for after all they came from Abyssinia where the Kingdom of Sheba might have been located.

But the trouble with this interpretation, as Krautheimer knows of course very well, is that the relief antedates by several years the event it should thus commemorate. The proclamation, as I said, was in July 1439. The documents tell us that the relief was cast and ready to be chased at the latest two years earlier in April 1437, but even this is a conjecture not free of special pleading: the recorded date, admittedly in a copy, is really three years earlier in April 1436, and since Ghiberti was a slow worker he must have started the composition at least 5 years before the event it is alleged to have commemorated.

You will have noticed therefore, that Krautheimer does not say that the relief alludes to the union itself, but rather to the ambition of the early fifteenth century to achieve the reconciliation of the Greek and Latin Churches.

I hope you will not accuse me of quibbling, if I also question this formulation. It was not conciliation which the Church of Rome was after but submission. To most of the followers of the Pope the Byzantines were surely a bunch of obdurate heretics who refused to acknowledge the supremacy of St. Peter's successor and who, moreover did not include in their Creed the words "filioque" — stating that the Holy Ghost proceeded from the Father and the Son. The history of these efforts at what Krautheimer calls conciliation is really rather a sorry tale. Moreover it is a tale which only by accident involved Florence. It was only in September 1437, after the relief was cast, that Eugene IVth proposed that a Council should be convened at Ferrara; nearly all through 1438 the Council debated the filioque in Ferrara, and only when the plague broke out there and several of the delegates had fallen victim it was transferred to Florence in February 1439 where, as I said, the fragile Union was achieved. It was, of course, promptly denounced again by the Byzantines who refused to ratify it. Given the political situation it was indeed a sorry tale.

By now you may well accuse me of stacking the cards against Krautheimer's interesting interpretation; for I have left to the last the reason which makes him consider such an allusion likely, despite the obvious discrepancy in dates. He does so because he is convinced that Ambrogio Traversari had something to do with the doors and Traversari was also involved in the negotiations with the Eastern Church, indeed it was he who welcomed the Greeks on their arrival in Ferrara.

In conjecturing this role for Ambrogio Traversari Krautheimer was following a most interesting clue he was the first to have discovered. It is a most intriguing passage in Traversari's correspondence alluding to the second pair of gates, dating from the time when the first doors were near completion and when the commission for another pair was under consideration. In June 1424 Traversari wrote to his friend the humanist merchant Niccolò Niccoli, obviously in answer to a remark made by him: "I understand and agree with your feelings about the narrative reliefs (*historiae*) which are to be made for that third door. I am only worried that those who are charged with this enterprise should not be too rash. I hear they have consulted Leonardo Aretino and I conjecture the rest from this glorious

beginning". Krautheimer does not believe that Traversari meant what he said. He reads irony into the passage about the "glorious beginning", because the Chancellor Leonardo Aretino Bruni was not always on the best of terms with Niccolò Niccoli and Traversari. But even if he is right, which I doubt, we can never know what the issue was to which he alludes. Why need it have had anything to do with the proposed iconographic scheme of the doors? Traversari was replying to Niccolò Niccoli and told him he agreed with his sentiments. Is it not at least as likely, given the situation and the habits of the Florentines, that Niccoli had raised the question whether the next doors should necessarily be allocated once more to Ghiberti? Meanwhile Donatello had come onto the scene, and there may well have been a lobby demanding at the very least that yet another competition should be held before the work was finally assigned. If this was the case the remark about rash actions would refer to the choice of an artist. The remark about Bruni would be meant to reassure Niccoli, for the matter had gone to the Chancellor which was not a bad thing in such a situation. We know in fact that when Bruni wrote his famous opinion about the third door (fully discussed by Krautheimer), he was most careful not to mention any particular artist; he only stressed that whoever is assigned the work should consider certain principles.

Now we know that Bruni's programme for the doors was not finally adhered to. Ghiberti himself tells us that he was given full freedom to carry them out as he liked. Once more Krautheimer refuses to believe this, and so he conjectures that Traversari must have come into the picture, eliminated Bruni's programme and devised one of his own into which he inserted the allusion to the hoped for reconciliation of the Churches since he was much involved in this negotiations. It needs a little effort after reading Krautheimer's persuasive conjectures to realise that after 1424 there is no mention of Traversari in any of the further texts or documents connected with the doors.

Such, however, is the power of the historical imagination that Krautheimer found what he looked for. He sees a portrait of Traversari in one of the figures in the crowd of the relief. One can only admire his range and ingenuity, for the profile portrait in a contemporary manuscript he illustrates has a certain resemblance with the head of the figure he tentatively identifies with Traversari. We have a cast of the doors in London and I must say that there, given a different illumination, the resemblance is less persuasive. Not unexpectedly this background figure exhibits a type, with the corners of the mouth drawn down and with its scowling face, which occurs several times on the doors, even in the figure next to the alleged Traversari. But there is once more a more important point to be considered; a point of method. Would it be altogether likely for Ghiberti to honour the alleged inspirer of the programme with such a thumbnail sketch in a crowd of bystanders? The head is in fact almost exactly the size of my thumbnail. Remember that Ghiberti placed his own portrait and that of his son and work-companion very conspicuously among the much larger heads of the frame.

But let us step back and consider this whole ingenious chain of arguments which, admittedly, I reproduced very incompletely. Given Traversari's interest in trying to make the Greeks submit to the Papacy, given also his diplomatic tact, would it have been tactful and prudent to anticipate this submission in a relief cast in bronze at a time when no council was even in sight? Was it not giving hostages to fortune to anticipate a success which, of course, never materialised and be landed with an awkward reminder of this tragic failure on the gates of the central Church in Florence? For this seems to me the principal argument against political allusions, even if they happen to be allusions not to future events but to contemporary or past happenings. Situations change but works of art remain. It is different, of course, with pageants and such temporary structures as triumphal arches erected for a particular occasion, they can and must include topical references to particular hopes and aspirations.

I believe that in front of a monument of our kind we should ask different questions. To put it briefly, I do not think that the door poses a great problem of interpretation that calls for so much theological and historical learning. To be sure, there is the fact that the scene of the Queen of Sheba was not originally included among the episodes proposed by Bruni. What Bruni suggested for the doors was twenty scenes from the Old Testament, from the Creation to the Judgement of Solomon. This glorification of Solomon's wisdom was to have been preceded by two stories from the life of David, the Slaying of Goliath, and "David made King amidst the cheers of the people". The reduction of the stories from twenty quadrifolds to ten framed narrative reliefs necessitated the fusion of the David scenes into one relief. Not unnaturally the dramatic episode of the slaying of Goliath takes up the foreground, and the acclamation of the victor had to be pushed into the background where it fails to make much effect. Now Bruni himself had postulated that the guiding principle for selection should be that stories represented should give opportunity for both "splendour" and "significance". There being now less splendour in the David story, with the festive throng moved almost out of sight, I do not think it needed a great theologian to propose that there was another episode in the story of Solomon that allowed for a maximum display of splendour, that is of course the story of the Queen of Sheba who had actually come to Jerusalem attracted by the ruler's power and wisdom.

Both Bruni's selection and that carried out take the story of the chosen people from the creation to its worldly culmination in the figure of Solomon. Can we not use Occam's razor and say that there is enough internal logic in this change for the historian to be satisfied? I am aware, as I said, of my failure to pick up all Krautheimer's arguments, but for my purpose here this will be *satis superque* about one individual monument.

Indeed you will not expect me now to go round with Occam's razor to shave off all the old venerable beards which Renaissance works of art have grown in the course of centuries. I have tried to do this in my volume on *Symbolic Images* with one of the most hirsute of all these masterpieces, Raphael's *Stanza della Segnatura*. I don't know whether anyone at all has been happy with my proposal to consider the limits rather than the richness of the symbolic allusions in that great cycle; but in any case these were philosophical or theological rather than topical themes. It is different with the next of the Stanze, the *Stanza dell'Elidoro*. That cycle has been read by many as a kind of topical political manifesto by Julius II and his successor.

A relatively recent article by Joerg Traeger, "Raffaels Stanza dell'Elidoro und ihr Bildprogramm" in the *Römische Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* of the Hertziana of 1971 goes over these questions over no less than 70 pages which I certainly cannot and will not summarise. On the contrary, I should again like to ask in not much more than 70 seconds whether that programme is really in need of that much exegetic ingenuity and learning? Granted that it contains something like an allusion, the scene of the Liberation of Peter is obviously chosen because Julius II had been cardinal of S. Pietro in Vincoli, but do we also have to remember the rival councils and all the involvements of the Warrior Pope to understand the choice of the other themes? They all deal with divine intervention, miracles or, if you like, theophanies, the liberation of St. Peter by God's angel, the legend of Attila being turned away from Rome by the apparition of Peter and Paul, the story from the Maccabees of Heliodorus the temple robber punished by an apparition from heaven, and the miracle of the Host at Ostia in which the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament manifested itself visibly as blood. The ceiling takes up this theme of theophany in extremis, in the story of God speaking to Noah, in the Sacrifice of Isaac where the angel prevents the consummation of the sacrifice in the nick of time, in the scene of Jacob's Ladder and finally in the apparition of the Lord speaking to Moses from the fiery bush.

Is it really so hard to understand the principle of cohesion behind this choice? Need it have taken any clergyman long to pick out these examples and to explain them to Raphael? There is a German proverb, *Wo die Not am grössten ist, ist Gott am nächsten*, where the need is greatest God is nearest. I have not made any researches into the equivalents of this proverb in Italian or Latin. I have no doubt that the sentiment cannot be alien to any religious group. I do not wish for a moment to rule out the possibility that someone, perhaps the Pope himself experienced this sentiment most poignantly when the need for divine intervention was indeed felt to be great. But even if such a sentiment was the topical occasion for the basic choice of subject, are we not again entitled to say that the room was intended to transcend the immediate occasion and to continue as a reminder of the Lord who would manifest Himself in the future as He had done in the past? "O God, our Help in Ages past" — it is an anachronism to quote this hymn, but is it not a greater anachronism to think that the Stanza dell'Elidoro stands in need of seventy pages of learned Commentary?

Please do not misunderstand me. I do not wish to argue that art historians should not read theological tracts or sermons, not even that they should refrain from using the Index to Migne's *Patrologia* which offers such a dangerously easy access to the exegetic literature of the Middle Ages. One always learns from any fresh piece of information, but one also wants to consider its relevance to the problem in hand.

I realise, however, that it would be both unprofitable and boring for me to continue brandishing my razor. And so I turn to my last, and in a way — my main example of the problem of topos and topicality, in which I shall not only use the razor but also, I hope, a trowel.

It is an example which needs quite a special apology for it concerns the greatest master of our craft, the late beloved Erwin Panofsky. I must ask your indulgence in presenting my case in a very personal way because I would not want it to be thought that I only come out with my criticism now that he is dead.

When I made my regular pilgrimage to Princeton in the spring of 1959 to visit Panofsky I was glad to see him totally absorbed in the problem of Correggio's Camera di San Paolo. His table was covered with photographs and he was happy to talk about his efforts to interpret this beautiful and enigmatic cycle of images — doubly happy, as he said, because somehow he had passed through a depression and had had the feeling that his life-work was over and he lacked new ideas. He regarded his work on this cycle almost like a late-born child on which he bestowed special love and I was deeply touched when he suggested that the Warburg Institute of which I had just become Director should publish his results. He only made one condition indicating the importance he attached to this project, he wanted it to be a book rather than an article, and naturally I agreed.

It was thus with eager anticipation that I started reading the manuscript when it arrived late in 1959 and I am afraid I found his interpretation strained and unconvincing. What to do? Those who have read the book, *The Iconography of Correggio's Camera di San Paolo* which appeared in 1961 as Volume 26 of the Studies of the Warburg Institute will remember that Panofsky's interpretation of the cycle takes its starting point from one of the few incidents we know of the life of the Abbess of the convent, Donna Giovanna Piacenza: she had come into conflict with the curia over the interpretation of the rules of Clausura, the access to be allowed to men into the convent. The confrontation between Pan blowing his horn (Panofsky fig. 11) and a female figure with a bird on her right hand (Panofsky fig. 14) was interpreted as the defiance by Integrity of blustering authority. You will also remember that this topical interpretation does not fit the whole cycle but Panofsky certainly thought of the conflict as the main incident to be commemorated in Correggio's murals. As it happened this interpretation

which I found hard to accept proved a godsend to me. It lent itself to another topical twist. After all Panofsky was known to his friends as Pan and had been so addressed for many years by Saxl and other colleagues. If the abbess could confront Pan, so could I, and so I composed a Latin letter on that theme not without having it vetted by my son who was then going through the mill of Latin proses at Oxford.

I hope you will not be insulted if I first read an English paraphrase.

“I would compare your pipes, o Pan, to the Orphic lyre of which everyone knows that its sounds compell everything. Where you command, if I may say so, all enigmas take to flight. Here and there, I confess I also seem to hear amid the din of battle the sound of that seashell that strikes fear in all hearts because of the boldness of the conclusions. Integrity herself, — as you taught me — compells me to this candour. However these pyrrhonic suspicions in no way weaken our joy and pleasure that your book, a true present of the Muses and the Graces, will be published by the Warburg Institute.”

“Tibias tuas, O Pan, Orphicae comparem lyrae qua sonante cuncta compelli quis nescit? Te duce enigmata, ut ita dicam, in fugam vertuntur. Interdum, fateor, intra proelii clamoribus me etiam concham istam marinam audire credo quae terrorem instillat cordi propter conclusionum audaciam. Ipsa integritas — ut me didicisti — talem cogit candorem. Quibus suspicionibus Pirrhoneis gaudium atque laetitia minime debilitantur librum tuum, verum Musarum Graciarumque donum, ex officinis Warburgensibus exiturum. Q.F.F.S.”

Needless to say, Pan understood perfectly what I was driving at and in the lucid and elegant Latin letter with which he responded he wrote that he was not at all surprised that this book contained unusual matter which appeared to me incredible. I myself, he added, while writing often got frightened, “my hair stood on end and my voice failed me.” Nor did he doubt that posterity would either totally or in part emend his daring conjectures.

“Quod quae libellus ille continent inusitata, quin etiam incredibilia tibi videantur, minime miror. Ipse, cum scribebam. saepenumero “obstupui, steteruntque comae et vox haustibus haesit.” Nec mihi dubium est, quin quae conicere ausus sum posteritas vel ex toto vel per partes emendatura sit.”

I should like here to begin this process of revision which Panofsky himself did not doubt would take place. To begin, not to complete it, for I cannot present so detailed and erudite an interpretation for what I have come to call the “lunatic alternative”, lunatic not only because it ventures to defy Pan but also because it entirely centres on the lore of the moon.

The coat of arms of the abbess was three crescents and the centre of the fresco is the fireplace over which we see the figure of Diana, the goddess of the moon. It was not far-fetched, I believe, to turn the family crest of an abbess into an erudite tribute of this kind because Diana is of course the chaste goddess, despite the several affairs she was supposed to have had. I believe it is far from rare in Italian Renaissance iconography to make the name, crest or personal device the starting point of the so-called programme. These humanist tributes derive from the tradition of the panegyric, the elegant and often empty praise of the prince or patron. Their purpose is not to impart information, even less to commemorate a rather unpleasant row, but rather to celebrate the family and the virtues of the patrons with all the grace and wit at the command of art.

Let me anticipate how I envisage the procedure of the humanist who was confronted with this task of composing a painted eulogy on the theme of the moons in the coat of arms. Thanks to the work of

Panofsky and his predecessors we know that Correggio must have been asked to base many of these sixteen images in the niches on Roman coins. I suggest that the task the humanist set himself was to find as many such images as possible — and where they were lacking to invent others — which could in any way be linked with the figure of Luna or Diana (which is the same thing). I believe that in principle this task was less difficult than it might appear to you and me, because, and that is the hub of my argument, — Luna was proverbial among the learned mythographers for her changeability, for appearing in any number of guises and under any number of names.

There is in fact an important religious tradition connected with this search for identity amid the bewildering variety of the ancient gods. Macrobius in his *Saturnalia* sets out to prove that there really is only one god, which is Sol, the sun, and that all other divinities can be interpreted as manifestations of the sun. It so happens that this part of the dialogue which concerns the Roman calendar is preceded by a remark that originally the Romans had based their calendar on the moon. It was a tempting exercise to do a kind of Lunar Macrobius and to present the goddess in her many aspects.

I have said that basically, such an enterprise may not even have appeared to be difficult or far-fetched and that for a simple reason. The only mythological handbook available at the time when the frescoes were painted in 1518 was still Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum*. We tend to think of that vast compilation as a very medieval affair which learned humanists might have despised, but remember that even fifty years later the pageant of the newly founded academy of the arts in Florence was based on the *Genealogia Deorum* as was Vasari's fresco cycle in the Palazzo Vecchio. Boccaccio's main aim was to record and reconcile all the references to the gods he could find in mythographic literature and in the poets. To do so he always had to take recourse to a number of curious devices explaining away contradictions. In drawing up the family tree of the gods he often came across different pedigrees and concluded that there must have been several personages of the same name, because one of his ruling methods was that of euhemerism, the idea that the gods had really been ordinary mortals who lived at various times and who were conflated and confused in the tradition. Another of Boccaccio's interpretations, of course, is that of identifying the gods with various powers of nature. The book certainly makes no easy reading and one may doubt whether any person alive except the editors of the new Boccaccio edition have ever read through it. I certainly have not but I have made use of that *pons asinorum*, the index and have chased Luna and Diana through the pages of the book. I cannot claim that this exercise yielded the perfect key to Correggio's cycle but I do think that it supported my original hunch that this is what the cycle is basically about.

There is certainly no problem in linking the figure of Diana over the mantelpiece with Boccaccio's text, for Boccaccio in Book IV Chap. XVI cites Isidor's Etymologies for the fact that Diana's chariot was pulled by two horses, one white, the other black, which of course stand for day and night. This is rather common form, though, and I would not attach too much importance to it. Let me rather quote in support of my hunch the passage in the same chapter where Boccaccio lists the many names of the goddess, prior to explaining them all. "They also call her by various names, such as Luna, Hecate, Lucina, Diana, Proserpina, Trivia, Argentea, Thebes, Ceres, Arthemis, Mena and many others."

These make eleven, but as if this were not enough, we learn in the ninth book, Chapter I, that Luna is really also identical with Juno, and Juno, in her turn, is known by even more names such as Lucina, Matrona, Curitis, Mother of the Gods, Fluonia, Februa, Interduca, Domiduca, Unxia, Cinthia, Soticena, Populonia, and Proserpina. You see we have plenty to choose from for these are another thirteen of which, it is true, the names Lucina and Proserpina, belongs to both, which of course favours the identification.

I hope you will not suspect me of dodging the issue by starting in fact with Juno because Juno was recognised by Panofsky and others, unmistakably in the illustration of her punishment when Zeus suspended her from heaven with an anvil tied to her feet (Panofsky fig.59). Boccaccio who tells this also says in the same chapter that Juno, the queen, the goddess of power and riches is described by Fulgentius with a veil over her head and a sceptre in her hand which would fit the image (Panofsky fig.66) taken, as usual, from a classical coin. We also learn that as mother of the gods she is intended to signify the earth, the mother of all, and Panofsky rightly identifies the seated figure (Panofsky fig.61) as the Earth. As a warrior goddess we learn she was given arms and there is such a warrior goddess in the cycle (Panofsky fig.22) whom Panofsky also calls Bellona.

Both Luna and Juno are identified by Boccaccio with Lucina, the goddess of birth, who is invoked by women in Labour and there is no difficulty in seeing her in the woman with the child (Panofsky fig.49) in Correggio's cycle. Both Luna and Juno, again, are identified with Ceres or Proserpina who has often been seen correctly, I believe, in the woman with the torch and the fruit (Panofsky fig.51). Boccaccio stresses in Book IV, Chapter XVI, that the principal name of Luna was *Trivia* or *Triformis*. She is identified with Hecate who stands at the crossroads and is often represented as a triple figure and, if we may continue this game of equations just a trifle beyond what Boccaccio actually says, Hecate can easily be identified with the three fates or *parcae* represented in the cycle (Panofsky fig.42), all the more since one of the *Parcae* is Fortuna and Fortuna in her turn is very closely allied to the moon. She is easily recognisable in her image with the rudder, the ball and the cornucopia (Panofsky fig.28). I confess that I have no text in Boccaccio for the other triformis image, the three Graces (Panofsky fig.26) who correspond to the three *Parcae*. It is easy to see how they could not be left out of the tribute, but whether our humanist could have given chapter and verse for this inclusion I cannot tell. It is true that Boccaccio says somewhere that Gratia was the daughter of Erebus and Night, and so were the *Parcae*, but at this point he does not give a favourable interpretation of Grace. If you allow me to abandon Boccaccio for one of his sources, Phurnutus, *De Natura Deorum*, says in his chapter 15 that the Graces are "fabled" by some to be the daughters of Jove and of Juno.

I have no names for the two ladies, one of whom is holding flowers (Panofsky fig.17) another a bird (Panofsky fig.14). I would dearly love to identify the flower with Dittamen because this herb plays a part in Boccaccio's Juno chapter, where he says she is also called Ilithyia, Dictamus or Dictamnus because of its heavy scent and because it is said to facilitate birth. It seems to me that it may well be argued that this woman is pregnant, at any rate she appears to hold her hand under her garment and I find it a little unconvincing that she should be described as virginity. However all this is very conjectural. So is the problem of the bird on the right hand of the figure whom Panofsky called Integrity. It remains to account for the four male figures in the cycle. We know about Pan (Panofsky fig. 11). He is mentioned right at the beginning of Boccaccio's chapter on Luna (Book IV, Ch. XVI). Nicander the poet says that she was loved by Pan, the God of Arcady, who for the price of the gift of a veil made of white wool was embraced by her. The association was celebrated in Virgil's *Georgics* and in the Luna cycle by Zuccaro in the bedroom of the Farnese at Caprarola (Vasari's *Life of Taddeo Zuccherro*). Next, of course, we learn that she was loved by the shepherd Endymion and while I cannot prove that the beautiful young man with the staff (Panofsky fig.30) must be this fair shepherd, you will agree that he might be. I am on safer grounds with the figure of a boy pouring a libation on the altar (Panofsky fig.69). In the preparatory drawing by Correggio (Panofsky fig.64) he is even younger. Now according to Boccaccio Book IV, chap.XVII, the son of Diana was Ros, Dew, the dew of the morning after the night and this seems to be quite a reasonable interpretation. I agree with Panofsky that the seated man with the ear of corn in his hand and the somewhat melancholy posture (Panofsky fig.46) is Saturn, and he was the father of Juno, though Luna had Hyperion as her father. I have left the image of the temple last because, frankly, I do not even know whether the figure seated

inside is male or female. Boccaccio says of Juno at the end of Book IX, Chap.I, that according to Varro she was nursed on the island of Samos which had been called Parthenia where, having grown up, she was married to Jove. Therefore a most noble and ancient temple was built for her on Samos with an image of Juno represented in the guise of a bride, where every year nuptial sacrifices are celebrated.

I would hesitate to present so shaky a case to you were it not for collateral evidence, which in my view, strongly supports the lunatic alternative. One is the proliferation of shells and horns. Shells are the special product of the moon and they grow in the sea when the moon is waxing and Pan blows on a shell. The horns are not only prominent in the rams' heads under the niches, they are also the attribute, as cornucopia, of three of the figures. The metal implements suspended under the niches remind one of the ritual din that is made according to Vitruvius and other authors during periods of lunar eclipse when metal vessels are used for making this noise. I hope you will not consider me entirely frivolous if I also remind you of the name we all give to these niches, which is, after all, lunettes, little moons, a word which also existed in Renaissance Italian.

This, roughly, completes my case such as it is. I cannot coordinate the scenes of the putti or putte in the same way as Panofsky did with such learning and ingenuity. That most of their actions simply allude to Diana's hunt seems to me very likely, but Diana, of course, would be accompanied by nymphs rather than by children.

I am not even sure that all the children are girls. Correggio has left the evidence obscure; and this in turn may suggest an explanation. After all a throng of 35 scantily clad nymphs disporting themselves on the ceiling of the Abbess would have posed a problem of decorum even for a broadminded nun. One other explanation has crossed my mind but I almost hesitate to confess it. What if the children were the same as the lunettes? i.e., crescents? But is this not one of the coincidences that lie in wait for the eager interpreter?

In any case I am at a loss how to explain the putto — male or female — carrying what Panofsky thinks is a heavy stone, an action he explains with so much erudition. I have looked at the figure with binoculars in Parma, because somehow I cannot quite believe that such a hefty piece of rock could be carried with so little effort but I did not get much wiser. I'd rather it were a bundle of something, perhaps a net or some other implement of the chase. I even toyed with the idea of it being salt used by gamekeepers, but all this is far fetched and I do not know what Correggio intended.

Nor can I make any more sense of the inscriptions than Panofsky could. Many of them, as you may know, are in the Araldi room, and neither he nor I could really claim to have deciphered the decoration of that earlier room — it is one of the scandals of our discipline that as far as I know the cycle has not even been properly photographed.

I wish I could at least offer a good hypothesis about the inscription over the fireplace, the Pythagorean injunction not to stir the fire with the sword. But then, as Panofsky stressed, these things were meant to be enigmatic and I am not sure that it is ever possible to solve these enigmas completely.

This may be a fainthearted way to end, but it has sometimes seemed to me that the greatest weakness of some interpretations — not of course Panofsky's — derives from the confidence that all riddles can be solved and that the historian can become omniscient if only he tries hard enough. In any case, as Lord Clark has reminded us, historical reality or historical evidence are rarely as tidy as lectures are supposed to be.

\* This paper is based on a communication presented to the North Central Conference of the Renaissance Society of America at York University, Toronto, Canada in April 1974 which was devoted to the Methodology of Renaissance Studies.