

E. H. Gombrich, Review of Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts*, Burlington Magazine, Vol. 114, 1972, pp.345-6 [Trapp no.1972K.1]

Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts. By Mario Praz. 261 pp. + 121 ills. (Princeton University Press; Oxford University Press, London), £5.25

These seven lectures by the doyen of English studies in Italy can be read on two levels. We may enjoy them as we would enjoy the table talk of a famous scholar who is out to entertain and occasionally to provoke. We may then regard this book as a modern version of the keepsake, an anthology of pictures and quotations ranging from ancient architecture to Salvador Dali and from, say, a sonnet by Pietro Bembo to the typographic whimsies of E. E. Cummings. Full page illustrations of such famous masterpieces as *Joachim among the Shepherds* by Giotto or Bernini's *David* alternate with less familiar examples such as C. F. Hansen's *Church of the Virgin in Copenhagen* or I. I. Shishkin's *The Ryefield* of 1878.

It is gratifying to find that in talking about the parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts the author rejects fashionable but trite comparisons such as that of Botticelli's *Primavera* with Poliziano's *Stanze* or of Watteau with Mozart. On the other hand he does not object to the equally frequent comparison between Giotto and Dante. Sometimes his juxtapositions of texts and pictures can be illuminating as when he emphasizes the kinship between Jan Brueghel's *Allegory of the Five Senses* and Marino's *Adone*. Chronology often takes second place as when Chaucer not only reminds the author of the great unfinished Cathedrals but also of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Pontormo is compared with Donne, Herrick with Terborch and so we glide through the centuries till we reach the parallelism between *The Waste Land* and the desolate landscapes of the surrealist painters.

It would be unjust, on this level, to quarrel with the remark that 'the very subject of the *Rape of the Lock*—a spiral lock of hair, a curl—seems to condense into a symbol the essence of a whole century of rococo', though it remains somewhat disconcerting to read that the author 'feels tempted to liken the succession of styles from the Renaissance to the Baroque and Rococo to the emphasis one might give to the various parts of a woman's body in turn, from the head and shoulders to the waist and flanks, and finally to the lower portion of it' (p.146).

Even disregarding these *obiter dicta* the book is less likely to convince on a theoretical level. Professor Praz is of course well aware of the opposition which the search for correspondences between the arts has aroused. Indeed he has the fairness to quote a relevant passage from Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* stressing the autonomous evolution of the individual arts. But he appeals to two arguments which, he believes, will dispose of these objections.

One of these arguments in favour of an all-pervasive *zeitgeist* is derived by Professor Praz from the history of forgery and discussed in his chapter *Time unveils Truth*. He accepts the comforting belief that forgeries reveal so strong a period character that they are invariably detected by the next generation. It is hard to see how this hypothesis can avoid circularity, for clearly the forgeries which have not been detected as yet cannot be used as counter-examples. Even so, it may be granted that it is not easy for a forger to avoid betraying his training and his taste which are rooted in his own period. But can this observation really be used to support a belief in some mysterious fluid pervading all the arts of a given age? Skills are rooted in motor habits and taste is made up of small and large choices between alternatives. Once these habits are formed and these choices have become

automatic they are not easily eradicated. Hardly anyone can learn to speak a foreign language without betraying the accent and the cadence of his mother tongue. No doubt even the way we dress or we furnish our rooms bears similar marks of tell-tale choices which betray our background and experience, but interesting as these facts no doubt are, and fascinating as it would be to investigate them in detail, they throw no light on the problem in hand which concerns, after all, the comparison between different arts. Is there really a necessary link between a person's accent and his sartorial taste?

Yet it is the second argument from the history of costume that the author considers decisive. He is impressed by Mr James Laver's juxtaposition of the Delphi Charioteer with a Greek column and of the Burgundian *hennin* with a Gothic turret. He does not allude to the fact that this is an argument which was made popular by Heinrich Wölfflin in his *Renaissance of [sic] Baroque* of 1888 where, incidentally, the German philosopher Hermann Lotze (1817-1881) is quoted for his interest in the links between fashion and art. More than 100 years ago, moreover, none other than Baudelaire wrote of the 'impartial student' of history in *The Painters of Modern Life*:

.. if to the fashion plate representing each age he were to add the philosophic thought with which that age was most preoccupied or concerned—the thought being inevitably suggested by the fashion plate—he would see what a profound harmony controls all the components of history, and that even in those centuries which seem to us the most monstrous and the maddest, the immortal thirst for beauty has always found its satisfaction'.

There is a certain persuasiveness in this old doctrine which may well point to a real problem. The cycles of preference for the loud or the demure, the taut or the relaxed in clothing are quite likely to be connected with other fluctuations in social manners or fashionable taste. But clearly the obstacles in the way of substantiating this intuition are much more formidable than Professor Praz admits. It is only too easy to pick out one feature of a current fashion and to illustrate it side by side with a contemporary work of art. But the pointed *hennin* was a much more passing fashion than were Gothic turrets, and some headgears worn by men and women in those centuries might be better compared with Baroque cupolas. A genuine theory of such correlations would need a much more rigorous procedure to avoid all counter-examples to be swept under the carpet. It appears for instance, (as Dr D. S. Chambers recently emphasized in his book on The Imperial Age of Venice) that Venetians favoured black for their attire, which is surely out of keeping with our image of Venetian style and taste. Conversely it is never difficult to find a striking parallel between two manifestly unrelated features—there are more spirals in Maori art than there ever were in the decoration of Pope's villa.

Experimental psychologists have invented a game in which subjects are asked to say of three apparently disparate items which two they consider more similar. Faced with a flower still life, a bunch of real flowers and a portrait miniature, an art historian is likely to group the two paintings together while a gardener may select the flowers as closest to the still life. The way in which experiences are grouped, in other words, tells us a good deal about the way anyone categorizes his world. Art historians and critics might well be invited to join in a variant of this game in which photographs, quotations and other cultural documents are drawn out of a hat, the task being to establish and to justify affinities between two. We might find ourselves confronted with a poem by Catullus, a Rhapsody by Brahms and a photograph of the Taj Mahal and asked to explain which we find essentially like and therefore most unlike the third. I could not imagine a greater pleasure than to play this game of analogies with Professor Praz. He would be sure to win every time.