

Symbolic Images
Studies in the art
of the Renaissance

by E. H. Gombrich

with 170 illustrations

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Introduction to this volume. This new introduction on *Aims and Limits of Iconology* is principally addressed to fellow students of a technique that will remain indispensable to art historians. The aesthetic issue that may concern the art lover even more is discussed in my hitherto unpublished lecture on Raphael's *Stanza della Segnatura*, the greatest of the symbolic cycles of the Renaissance.

However incomplete this lecture may be, it shows, I believe, that the opposition which iconology has frequently encountered for its alleged concentration on intellectual rather than on formal aspects of art rests on a misunderstanding. We cannot write the history of art without taking account of the changing functions assigned to the visual image in different societies and different cultures. In the Preface to *Norm and Form* I argued that the artist's creativity can only unfold in a certain climate and that this has as much influence on the resulting works of art as a geographical climate has on the shape and character of vegetation. I may add here that the function a work of art is intended to serve may guide the process of selection and breeding no less than it does in gardening and agriculture. An image intended to reveal a higher reality of religion or philosophy will assume a different form from one that aims at the imitation of appearances. What iconology has taught us is the degree to which this purpose of art to reflect the invisible world of spiritual entities was taken for granted not only in religious but also in many branches of secular art.

This is the theme of my paper *Icones Symbolicae*, after which this volume is named. It is the longest and, I fear, the most technical of the essays here assembled. In its original form it dealt precisely with the Neo-Platonic notion of images as instruments of a mystical revelation. I have now considerably expanded its scope to pay more heed to the equally influential teachings of Aristotelian philosophy which link the visual image with the didactic devices of the medieval schools and with the Rhetorical theory of metaphor. I have also extended the chronological span of this survey to show the survival of these ideas into Romanticism and down to the theories of symbolism developed by Freud and Jung.

Here, I trust, lies the justification in making such specialized studies accessible to a wider public. The traditions with which they deal are of more than antiquarian interest. They still affect the way we talk and think about the art of our own time. While I was at work on this volume I received an invitation for a one-man show at the Royal College of Art which carried a quotation from the introduction to its catalogue (by Peter Bird): 'An image of something transcendent pointing to an unseen world of feeling and imagination'. The conventional eulogy of the enigmatic symbols created by contemporary artists still echoes the ancient metaphysical notions with which I am here concerned. Knowing their antecedents and their implications will help us to decide how far we want to accept or reject such claims.

In conclusion I wish to thank the editors of journals in which these essays were first printed, most of all my colleagues on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, for permitting me to re-publish them. Mr. David Thomason and Miss Hilary Smith kindly assisted in the preparation of the manuscript and Dr. I. Grafe of the Phaidon Press was as indefatigable and perceptive as ever with his help and advice.

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E. H. G.

Introduction: Aims and Limits of Iconology

There is admittedly some danger that iconology will behave, not like ethnology as opposed to ethnography, but like astrology as opposed to astrography.

Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*,
New York, 1955, p. 32

The Elusiveness of Meaning

IN the centre of Piccadilly Circus, the centre of London, stands the statue of Eros (Fig. 1), meeting-point and landmark of the amusement quarters of the metropolis. The popular rejoicings in 1947 which greeted the return of the God of Love as the master of revels from a place of safety to which the monument had been removed at the outset of the war showed how much this symbol had come to mean to Londoners.¹ Yet it is known that the figure of the winged youth aiming his invisible arrows from the top of a fountain was not intended to mean the God of earthly love. The fountain was erected from 1886 to 1893 as a memorial to a great philanthropist, the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, whose championship of social legislation had made him, in the words of Gladstone's inscription on the monument, 'An example to his order, a blessing to this people, and a name to be by them ever gratefully remembered'. The statement issued by the Memorial Committee says that Albert Gilbert's fountain 'is purely symbolical, and is illustrative of Christian Charity'. According to the artist's own word, recorded ten years later in a conversation, he desired indeed to symbolize the work of Lord Shaftesbury: 'The blindfolded Love sending forth indiscriminately, yet with purpose, his missile of kindness, always with the swiftness the bird has from its wings, never seeking to breathe or reflect critically, but ever soaring onwards, regardless of its own perils and dangers.'

Eight years later another statement of the artist shows him veering a little closer to the popular interpretation of the figure. 'The Earl had the betterment of the masses at heart,' he wrote in 1911—'and I know that he thought deeply about the feminine population and their employment. Thus, with this knowledge added to my experience of continental habits, I designed the fountain so that some sort of imitation of foreign joyousness might find place in cheerless London.' Perhaps Eros is Eros after all?

But another puzzle remains. A persistent rumour has attributed to the artist the intention of alluding to the name of Shaftesbury by showing the archer with his bow pointing downwards as if the shaft had been buried in the ground. At least one witness claimed in 1947 to have heard this explanation from the artist's

own lips before the unveiling of the monument. Alas, Gilbert himself in his statement of 1903 counted this 'silly pun' by 'some ingenious Solon' among the many indignities he had to endure on the revelation of the fountain, which he had not been allowed to complete according to his design. His idea had been a drinking fountain, and he admitted in the same context that the chains by which the beakers were fastened, were developed by him on the basis of Shaftesbury's initials, an idea he evidently thought much superior to the one he was eager to refute.

Close as the story is to our own time—Gilbert died in 1934—the conscientious writer of the *Survey of London* to whose research the above account is indebted, admits to a certain amount of uncertainty. How much meaning did the artist have in mind? We know that he was an opponent of the 'coat and trouser school' of public monuments and keen to persuade the Committee to accept a different image as a monument. He had gained his reputation as a sculptor of such mythological themes as 'Icarus', and he was obviously captivated by the artistic possibilities of embodying in the monument another such figure which demanded a lightness of touch; his Eros, poised on tiptoe, is a variant of the famous sculptural problem so brilliantly exemplified in Giovanni da Bologna's *Mercury* (Fig. 2). Should we not say that this was the meaning of the work that mattered to the artist, regardless of the symbolic reference or punning allusions that have become the concern of the iconologist?

But whatever motives Gilbert may have had in choosing his theme, he also had to persuade his Committee by accommodating his desire to a given commission and situation. The quarrel whether it was the Committee or the artist who was concerned with the 'true' meaning of the sculpture would get us nowhere. What we might find at the end of such a dispute would only be that 'meaning' is a slippery term, especially when applied to images rather than to statements. Indeed the iconologist may cast back a wistful glance at the inscription by Gladstone quoted above. Nobody doubts what it means. True, some passers-by may look for an interpretation of the statement that Shaftesbury was 'an example to his order', but nobody would doubt that the statement has a meaning which can be established.

Images apparently occupy a curious position somewhere between the statements of language, which are intended to convey a meaning, and the things of nature, to which we only can give a meaning. At the unveiling of the Piccadilly fountain one of the speakers called it 'a remarkably suitable memorial to Lord Shaftesbury, for it is always giving water to rich and poor alike . . .'. It was an easy, indeed a somewhat trite comparison to make; nobody would infer from it that fountains mean philanthropy—quite apart from the fact that giving to the rich would not fall under this concept.

But what about the meaning of works of art? It looks quite plausible to speak of various 'levels of meaning' and to say for instance, that Gilbert's figure has a

representational meaning—a winged youth—that this representation can be referred to a particular youth, i.e. the God Eros, which turns it into the *illustration* of a myth, and that Eros is here used as a *symbol* of *Charity*.² But on closer inspection this approximation to meaning breaks down on all levels. As soon as we start to ask awkward questions the apparent triviality of representational meaning disappears and we feel tempted to question the need invariably to refer the artist's form to some imagined significance. Some of these forms, of course, can be named and classified as a foot, a wing, or a bow, but others elude this network of classification. The ornamental monsters round the base (Fig. 3) no doubt are meant partly to represent marine creatures, but where in such a composition does the meaning end and the decorative pattern begin? More is altogether involved in the interpretation of representational conventions than literally 'meets the eye'. The artist depends far more than the writer on what I called, in *Art and Illusion*, 'the beholder's share'. It is characteristic of representation that the interpretation can never be carried beyond a certain level of generality. Sculpture not only abstracts from colour and texture, it also cannot signify any scale beyond itself. Eros in Gilbert's imagination may have been a boy or a giant, we cannot tell.

If these limitations of the image may seem of little concern to the interpreter eager to arrive at the meaning of it all, the next level of illustration presents more serious problems. Clearly there are some aspects of the figure which are meant to facilitate identification—the winged youth as an archer (Fig. 143) calls up one and only one figure in the mind of the educated Westerner: it is Cupid. This applies to pictures exactly as it applies to literary text. The crucial difference between the two lies of course in the fact that no verbal description can ever be as particularized as a picture must be. Hence any text will give plenty of scope to the artist's imagination. The same text can be illustrated in countless ways. Thus it is never possible from a given work of art alone to reconstruct the text it may illustrate. The only thing we can know for certain is that not all its features can be laid down in the text. Which are and which are not, can only be established once the text has been identified by other means.

Enough has been said about the third task of interpretation, the establishment of symbolic references in our particular instance, to show the elusiveness of the concept of meaning. Eros meant one thing to the London revellers, another to the Memorial Committee. The pun of shafts-bury seems to fit the circumstances so well that it might be argued that this cannot be an accident. But why not? It is the essence of wit to exploit such accidents and to discover meanings where none were intended.

But does it matter? Is it really with the intention that the iconologist is primarily concerned? It has become somewhat fashionable to deny this, all the more since the discovery of the unconscious and of its role in art seems to have undermined

the straightforward notion of intention. But I would contend that neither the Courts of Law nor the Courts of Criticism could continue to function if we really let go of the notion of an intended meaning.

Luckily this case has already been argued very ably in a book concerned with literary criticism, D. E. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation*.³ The main purpose of that astringent book is precisely to reinstate and justify the old common-sense view that a work means what its author intended it to mean, and that it is this intention which the interpreter must try his best to establish. To allow for this restriction of the term *meaning* Hirsch proposes to introduce two other terms the interpreter may want to use in certain contexts, the terms *significance* and *implication*. We have seen for instance that the significance of the figure of Eros has changed beyond recognition since the period in which it was set up. But it is because of such situations that Hirsch rejects the facile view that a work simply means what it means to us. The meaning was the intended one of symbolizing Lord Shaftesbury's Charity. Of course the choice of the figure of Eros may also be said to have had *implications* which account both for its meaning and its subsequent change of significance. But while the interpretation of meaning can result in a simple statement like the one issued by the memorial committee, the question of implication is always open. Thus we have seen that Gilbert opposed the 'coat and trouser school' and wished through his choice to bring a note of foreign gaiety into the stodgy atmosphere of Victorian England. To spell out and interpret this kind of intention one would have to write a book, and that book would only scratch the surface, whether it deals with the heritage of puritanism, or with the idea of 'foreign joyousness' prevalent in the eighteen-nineties. But this endlessness in the interpretation of implications is by no means confined to works of art. It applies to any utterance embedded in history. Gladstone, it will be remembered, referred to Lord Shaftesbury in the inscription on the memorial as 'an example to his order'. Not every modern reader may immediately catch the meaning of that term, since we are no longer used to think of the peerage as an order. But here as always it is clear that the meaning we seek is the one Gladstone intended to convey. He wanted to exalt Lord Shaftesbury as a person whom his fellow peers could and should emulate.

The implications of the inscription, on the other hand, are perhaps more open to speculation. Was there a hint of political polemics in calling the Earl 'an example to his order'? Did Gladstone wish to imply that other members of the order interested themselves too little in social legislation? To investigate and spell out these implications would again lead us to an infinite regress.

No doubt we would find fascinating evidence on the way about Gladstone and about the state of England, but the task would by far transcend the interpretation of the meaning of Gladstone's statement. Dealing, as he does, with literature rather

than art, Hirsch comes to the conclusion that the intended meaning of a work can only be established once we have decided what category or genre of literature the work in question was intended to belong to. Unless we try to establish first whether a given literary work was intended as a serious tragedy or as a parody, our interpretation is likely to go very wrong indeed. This insistence on the importance of such a first step may at first look puzzling, but Hirsch shows convincingly how hard it is for the interpreter to retrace his steps once he has taken such a false turning. People have been known to laugh at tragedies if they took them to be parodies.⁴

Though traditions and functions of the visual arts differ considerably from those of literature the relevance of categories or genres for the business of interpretation is the same in both fields. Once we have established that Eros belongs to the tradition or institution of memorial fountains we are no longer likely to go very wrong in its interpretation. If we took it to be an advertisement of theatre-land we could never find our way back to the intended meaning.

Iconography and Iconology

It may be argued that any conclusions derived from an example of late Victorian art are scarcely applicable to the very different situation of Renaissance art which, after all, is the principal subject of these studies. But the historian will always do well to proceed from the known to the unknown, and he will be less surprised to discover the elusiveness of meaning that confronts the interpreter of Renaissance art, once he has discovered the corresponding problem at his very doorstep.

Moreover the methodological principles established by Hirsch, particularly the principle of the primacy of genres—if it may so be called—applies to the art of the Renaissance with even greater stringency than it does to the nineteenth century. Without the existence of such genres in the traditions of Western art the task of the iconologist would indeed be desperate. If any image of the Renaissance could illustrate any text whatsoever, if a beautiful woman holding a child could not be presumed to represent the Virgin and the Christchild, but might illustrate any novel or story in which a child is born, or indeed any textbook about child-rearing, pictures could never be interpreted. It is because there are genres such as altar paintings, and repertoires such as legends, mythologies, or allegorical compositions, that the identification of subject matters is at all possible. And here, as in literature, an initial mistake in the category to which the work belongs, or worse still, ignorance of possible categories will lead the most ingenious interpreter astray. I remember a gifted student whose enthusiasm for iconology so carried him away that he interpreted St. Catherine with her wheel as an image of Fortuna. Since the Saint had appeared on the wing of an altar representing the Epiphany he was led from

there to a speculation of the role of Fate in the story of salvation—a train of thought which could easily have led him to the postulation of a heterodox sect if his initial mistake had not been pointed out to him.

The identification of texts illustrated in a given religious or secular picture is usually considered part of iconography. Like all kinds of historical detective work the solution of iconographic puzzles needs luck as well as a certain amount of background knowledge. But given this luck the results of iconography can sometimes meet exacting standards of proof. If a complex illustration can be matched by a text which accounts for all its principal features the iconographer can be said to have made his case. If there is a whole sequence of such illustrations which fits a similar sequence in a text the possibility of the fit being due to accident is very remote indeed. I believe that there are three such examples in this volume which meet this standard. One identifies the astrological text or texts illustrated in the *Sala dei Venti* in the Palazzo del Te (pp. 109–118), the second explains the version of the story of Venus and Mars in the same Palace (p. 108); and the third fits Poussin's Orion to a text which not only tells but also explains the story, an explanation Poussin embodied in his illustration (pp. 119–122).

Other essays are concerned with more speculative interpretations, but then they deal with iconological rather than iconographic problems. Not that the distinction between these disciplines is very obvious, or that it would be important to make it so. But by and large we mean by iconology, since the pioneer studies of Panofsky, the reconstruction of a programme rather than the identification of a particular text.

The procedure need only be explained to show both its interest and its hazards. There is a number of images or cycles in the art of the Italian Renaissance which cannot be explained as the straightforward illustration of a given existing text. We know moreover that patrons occasionally either invented subjects to be represented or, more often, enlisted the aid of some learned man to supply the artist with what we call a 'programme'. Whether or not this habit was as frequent, particularly in the fifteenth century, as modern studies appear to suggest it is hard to say; but examples of this kind of 'libretto' have certainly come down to us in great numbers from the second half of the sixteenth century onward. If these programmes in their turn had consisted of original inventions or fantasies the task of reconstructing such a lost text from a picture would again be pretty hopeless. But this is not so. The genre of programmes was based on certain conventions, conventions closely rooted in the respect of the Renaissance for the canonic texts of religion and of antiquity. It is from a knowledge of these texts and a knowledge of the picture that the iconologist proceeds to build a bridge from both sides to close the gap between the image and the subject matter. Interpretation becomes reconstruction of a lost piece of evidence. This evidence, moreover, should not only help the iconologist to identify the story which may be illustrated. He wants to get at the meaning of

that story in that particular context: to reconstruct—in terms of our example—what Eros on the fountain is intended to signify. He will have little chance of doing so, if he has little feeling for the kind of programme a Victorian memorial committee was likely to impose on an artist. For taking the work as such, there is no limit to the significance that might be read into it. We have called the fish-like creatures around the fountain ornamental, but why should they not allude to the fish-symbol of Christ or, conversely, be intended as monsters over which Eros-Charity is seen to triumph?

One of the essays in this volume deals with the problems arising from this methodological uncertainty. It raises the question whether Raphael's *Stanza della Segnatura* has not been frequently over-interpreted. While its specific suggestions are unlikely to meet with universal assent, the problem of the limits of interpretation could not well be omitted from a volume concerned with symbolism in Renaissance art. For all iconological research depends on our prior conviction of what we may look for, in other words, on our feeling for what is or is not possible within a given period or milieu.

The Theory of Decorum

Once more we come back to the 'primacy of genres' postulated before. This is obviously not a place to attempt a survey of all the categories and usages of art that can be documented from the Renaissance. Not that such a survey could never succeed. Emile Mâle⁵ has exemplified the principles along which it might be attempted for religious art and Pigler⁶ and Raymond van Marle⁷ have at least made a beginning for secular subjects. But these serve the iconographer rather than the iconologist, listing possible subject matter.

Luckily Renaissance authors have not been totally silent on the principles by which these subjects were to be used in given contexts. They obviously relied on that dominant consideration of the whole classical tradition, the notion of *decorum*. The application of this term was larger in the past than it is now. It signified what was 'fitting'. There is fitting behaviour in given circumstances, a fitting style of speech for given occasions and of course also fitting subjects for given contexts.

Lomazzo in the Sixth Book of his *Trattato*⁸ has a list of suggestions for various types of places, starting, strangely enough, with such places as cemeteries where a number of episodes from the Bible relating to death are mentioned such as the Death of the Virgin, the Death of Lazarus, the Descent from the Cross, the burial of Sarah, Jacob dying and prophesying, the burial of Joseph and 'such lugubrious stories of which we have many examples in the Scriptures' (Chap. xxii). For council rooms, on the other hand, which are used by 'secular princes and Lords',

he recommends such subjects as Cicero speaking about Catilina before the Senate, the Council of the Greeks before sailing for Troy, the conflicts of captains and wise men such as Lycurgus, Plato and Demosthenes among the Greeks, and Brutus, Cato, Pompey and the Caesars among the Romans, or the contest for the arms of Achilles between Ajax and Ulysses. There follows an even longer list of Biblical and ancient subjects for court buildings, of feats of military prowess for palaces, while fountains and gardens demand 'stories of the Loves of the Gods where water, trees and other gay and delightful things' come in, such as Diana and Actaeon, Pegasus calling forth the Castalian springs, the Graces washing themselves by a spring, Narcissus by the well, etc.

These and similar stories were clearly filed in the minds of Renaissance people in such a way that they could easily name, say, Biblical stories involving fire, or Ovidian stories involving water. Nor did this principle of decorum remain a dead letter. Montorsoli's Orion Fountain in Messina (Figs. 4-6) is as good an example as any to show this principle at work, with its decorative marble reliefs described by Vasari,⁹ showing twenty mythological episodes involving water, such as Europa crossing the sea, Icarus falling into the sea, Arethusa changed into a fountain, Jason crossing the sea etc. (Fig. 6), not to mention the various nymphs, river god and marine monsters completing the decoration in accordance with the rules of decorum.

What these examples suggest, then, is a simple principle of selection which is easy to discern. We may call it the principle of intersection—having in mind the use of letters and numbers arranged on the sides of a chequerboard or map which are used conjointly to plot a particular square or area. The Renaissance artist or artistic adviser had in his mind a number of such maps, listing, say, Ovidian stories on one side and typical tasks on the other. Just as the letter B on such a map does not indicate one field but a zone which is only narrowed down by consulting the number, so the story of Icarus, for instance, does not have one meaning but a whole range of meaning, which in its turn is then determined by the context. Lomazzo used the theme because of its association with water, while the humanist who advised on the decoration of the Amsterdam Townhall selected it for the Bankruptcy Court (Fig. 7) as a warning against high flying ambition, while Arion's rescue by a dolphin symbolizes, not water, but insurance against shipwreck (Fig. 8).

Not that the intersection of two such requirements would necessarily satisfy the demand of the Renaissance patron for the most fitting image. The overmantel by Benedetto da Rovizzano (Fig. 9) provides an instance of an even richer interaction: for a fireplace something involving fire was clearly *de rigueur*—the most conventional subject being the smithy of Vulcan (Fig. 10). But here we have the story of Croesus and Cyrus with the pyre meeting one requirement of a fitting subject, the

story of Solon's warning to 'remember the end' the equally important specification for a story with a moral lesson.

There were other requirements to be considered, not least among them the predilections and aptitudes of the artists concerned. It is often implied that the Renaissance programme paid no heed to the artist's creative bent, but this is not necessarily true. The repertory from which to choose was so rich and varied that the final choice could easily be adapted both to the demands of decorum and the preferences of the artist. Again it is not always easy to decide where, in these intersections, priority was to be sought. Describing to Aretino his frescoes from the life of Caesar, Vasari starts with the predilection which his patron has for this hero, which will make him fill the whole palace with stories from the life of Caesar. He had begun with that of Caesar's flight from Ptolemy when he swam across the water pursued by soldiers. 'As you see, I have made a *melée* of fighting nudes, first to demonstrate the mastery of art, and then to conform to the story.'¹⁰

Here, perhaps, Vasari was his own master and could please himself, but we know that artists would not meekly submit to any invention thrust upon them. In this as in many other respects the programmes which Annibale Caro drew up for Taddeo Zuccaro's decorations in the Palazzo Caprarola deserve to be studied as paradigms. The one for the bedroom with mythological figures relating to night and to sleep is easily available in Vasari's *Life of Taddeo Zuccaro*.¹¹ The other, for the studio of the prince, may be even more worth pondering in its implications for the iconologist.¹² Unfortunately these learned humanists had plenty of time and were fond of displaying their erudition. Their writings, therefore, tend to tax the patience of twentieth-century readers, but we may look at some passages to sample the mode of procedure, relegating the full text to an appendix (pp. 23-25), where connoisseurs of the *genre* can explore it further.

The themes to be painted in the Study of the illustrious Monsignore Farnese must needs be adapted to the disposition of the painter, or he must adapt his disposition to your theme. Since it is clear that he did not want to adapt to you we are compelled to adapt to him to avoid muddle and confusion. Both the subjects relate to themes appropriate to solitude. He divides the vault into two main sections, fields for scenes, and ornament to go around.

Caro goes on to suggest for the central field 'the principal and most praised kind of solitude, that of our religion, which differs from that of the Gentiles, for ours left their solitude to teach the people, while the Gentiles withdrew from the people into solitude'. Hence Christ will occupy the middle and then St. Paul, St. John the Baptist, St. Jerome and others if there is room for them (Fig. 11). Among the pagans withdrawing into solitude he suggests some of the Platonists who gouged out their own eyes so that sight should not distract them from philosophy, Timon, who hurled stones at the people, and others who handed their writings to the

people while avoiding contact with them (Fig. 12). Two fields should show the Law conceived in solitude: Numa in the vale of Egeria and Minos emerging from a cave. Four groups of hermits should fill the corners: Indian gymnosophists worshipping the sun (Fig. 13), Hyperboreans with sacks of provisions (Fig. 15), Druids 'in the oak forests which they venerated . . . let them be dressed as the painter wishes, provided they all wear the same' (Fig. 14), and Essenes, 'a Jewish sect solely dedicated to the contemplation of divine and moral matters . . . who could be shown with a repository of the garments they have in common' (Fig. 11).

The ten oblong fields of the decoration Caro proposes to fill with the reclining figures of philosophers and Saints, each with an appropriate motto, while the seven little upright fields accommodate historic figures who withdrew into solitude, including Pope Celestine, Charles V (Fig. 11) and Diogenes (Fig. 15).

There remain twelve tiny fields and since they would not accommodate human figures I would put some animals both as grotesques and as symbols of the theme of solitude. [The corners will take Pegasus (Fig. 13), a griffon, an elephant turning towards the moon (Fig. 13), and an eagle seizing Ganymede]; these should signify the elevation of the mind in contemplation; in the two little squares facing each other . . . I put the lonely eagle, gazing at the sun, which in this form signifies speculation, and the creature in itself is solitary, only bringing up one of its three offspring, casting two out. In the other I place the phoenix, also turned to the sun, which will signify the exaltedness and refinement of the concepts and also solitude, for it is unique.

Of the remaining six small round fields one is to hold the serpent that shows astuteness, eagerness and prudence of contemplation and was therefore given to Minerva (Fig. 11), the next a solitary sparrow, the third another bird of Minerva such as the owl, the fourth an erithacus, another bird reputed to seek solitude and not to tolerate companions. 'I have not yet found out what it looks like but I leave it to the painter to do as he thinks fit. The fifth a pelican (Fig. 11), to which David likens himself in his solitude when he fled from Saul, let it be a white bird, lean because it draws its own blood to feed its young. . . . Finally a hare, for it is written that this animal is so solitary that it never rests except when alone. . . .

There remain the ornaments which I leave to the imagination of the painter, but it would be well to remind him to adapt himself, if he can, in various ways and select as grotesques instruments of solitary and studious people such as globes, astrolabes, armillary spheres, quadrants, sextants, . . . laurels, myrtles and . . . similar novelties.¹²

This point apart, the painter followed Caro, who probably added the further inscriptions and examples necessitating some changes in lay-out.

Two related questions will spring to mind when we read such a programme and compare it with the finished painting. The first, whether we could have found the meaning of the pictures without the aid of this text, in other words, whether we would have been successful in reconstructing the programme from the pictures

alone. If the answer is in the negative, as I think it would have to be, it becomes all the more urgent to ask why such an enterprise would have failed in this particular instance, and what obstacles there are in general which impede this work of retranslation from picture to programme.

Some of the difficulties are fortuitous but characteristic. Caro does not claim to know how to dress Druids, and leaves the matter to the painter's fancy. One obviously would have to be a thought-reader to recognize these priests as Druids. Similarly with the bird 'Erithacus', about which Caro has read in Pliny, who describes its propensity for solitude. We do not know to this day what bird, if any, was meant, and so, again, Caro gives the painter licence to draw on his own imagination. We could not know, and we could not find out.

There are other instances where Caro's programme demands such fanciful scenes that the painter had difficulty in reproducing them legibly: would we be able to guess that one of the Platonic philosophers is represented as gouging out his eyes, or that the tablet emerging from the wood is intended to save its owner any contact with the people? Would even the most erudite iconologist remember these stories and their connection with the Platonic school?

Vasari, at any rate, could not. Though he was exceptionally well informed about Caprarola and was a friend of Annibale Caro, though he knew the main theme of the cycle to be Solitude and correctly reported many of the inscriptions in the room, and identified Solyman (Fig. 12), he misinterpreted some of the action in this panel (Fig. 12), which he describes as 'many figures who live in the woods to escape conversation, whom others try to disturb by throwing stones at them, while some gouge out their own eyes so as not to see'.¹³

But even where the difficulties of identifying the stories and symbols are less formidable than Caro and Zuccaro made them in this instance, we might still be perplexed by the meaning to be assigned to the individual symbols if Caro's text were not extant to enlighten us.

For though they are all assembled here for their association with solitude, nearly every one of them has other associations as well. The elephant worshipping the moon (Fig. 13) is used by Caro himself in the neighbouring bedroom for its association with night;¹⁴ Pegasus, as we have seen, can decorate a fountain for its link with the Castalian spring; needless to say it can also be associated with Poetry or with Virtue. The phoenix, as a rule, stands for Immortality and the pelican for Charity. To read these symbols as signifying Solitude would look very farfetched if we did not have Caro's words for it.

The Dictionary Fallacy

The programme confirms what has been suggested here from the outset, that

taken in isolation and cut loose from the context in which they are embedded none of these images could have been interpreted correctly. Not that this observation is surprising. After all, it is even true of the words of an inscription that they only acquire meaning within the structure of a sentence. We have said that it is clear what Gladstone meant when he called Lord Shaftesbury 'An example to his order', but the word 'order' derives this definite meaning only from its context. In isolation it might mean a command, a regularity or a decoration for merit. It is true that those who learn a language are under the illusion that 'the meaning' of any word can be found in a dictionary. They rarely notice that even here there applies what I have called the principle of intersection. They are offered a large variety of possible meanings and select from them the one that seems demanded by the meaning of the surrounding text. If Lord Shaftesbury had been a monk the term 'his order' would have had to be interpreted differently.

What the study of images in known contexts suggests is only that this multiplicity of meaning is even more relevant to the study of symbols than it is to the business of everyday language. It is this crucial fact that is sometimes obscured through the way iconologists have tended to present their interpretations. Quite naturally the documentation provided in their texts and footnotes gives chapter and verse for the meaning a given symbol can have—the meaning that supports their interpretation. Here, as with language, the impression has grown up among the unwary that symbols are a kind of code with a one-to-one relationship between sign and significance. The impression is reinforced by the knowledge that there exist a number of medieval and Renaissance texts which are devoted to the interpretation of symbols and are sometimes quoted dictionary-fashion.

The most frequently consulted of these dictionaries is Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1593, which lists personifications of concepts in alphabetical order and suggests how they are to be marked by symbolic attributes.¹⁵ Those who use Ripa as a dictionary rather than read his introduction and his explanations—and there are more entertaining books in world literature—easily form the impression that Ripa presents them with a kind of pictographic code for the recognition of images. But if they spent a little more time with the book they would see that this was not the author's intention. It turns out, in fact, that the same 'principle of intersection' that has been postulated of programmes such as Caro's applies to Ripa's technique of symbolization. Luck will have it that he also lists the concept of Solitude and that his description reads like a précis of Caro's much more ample characterization: The Allegory is to be represented as 'A woman dressed in white, with a single sparrow perched on the top of her head and holding under her right arm a hare and in her left hand a book'. Both the hare and the sparrow figure among Caro's symbols, and though we would not usually call the sparrow a solitary creature Ripa quotes the 102nd Psalm which says '*Factus sum sicut passer solitarius in tecto*'. If

anyone, however, now wanted to interpret any hare or any sparrow in a Renaissance painting as signifying Solitude he would be much mistaken.

Ripa establishes quite explicitly that the symbols he uses as attributes are illustrated metaphors. Metaphors are not reversible. The hare and the sparrow may be used in some context for their association with solitude, but they have other qualities as well, and the hare, for instance, can also be associated with cowardice. Ripa was also quite clear in his mind that the method only worked if it was aided by language. 'Unless we know the names it is impossible to penetrate to the knowledge of the significance, except in the case of trivial images which usage has made generally recognizable to everybody.' If we ask, then, why Ripa went to the trouble of devising such unrecognizable personifications, the answer must be sought in a general theory of symbolism that goes beyond the immediate task of deciphering.

Philosophies of Symbolism

It is to this problem that the major essay in this volume is devoted. In *Icones Symbolicae* two such traditions are distinguished, but neither of them treats the symbol as a conventional code. What I have called the Aristotelian tradition to which both Caro and Ripa belong is in fact based on the theory of the metaphor and aims, with its aid, to arrive at what might be called a method of visual definition. We learn about solitude by studying its associations. The other tradition, which I have called the Neo-Platonic or mystical interpretation of symbolism, is even more radically opposed to the idea of a conventional sign-language. For in this tradition the meaning of a sign is not something derived from agreement, it is hidden there for those who know how to seek. In this conception, which ultimately derives from religion rather than from human communication, the symbol is seen as the mysterious language of the divine. The augur interpreting a portent, the mystagogue explaining the divinely ordained ritual, the priest expounding the image in the temple, the Jewish or Christian teacher pondering the meaning of the word of God had this, at least, in common, that they thought of the symbol as of a mystery that could only partly be fathomed.

This conception of the language of the divine is elaborated in the tradition of Biblical exegesis. Its most rational exposition is to be found in a famous passage from St. Thomas.¹⁶

Any truth can be manifested in two ways: by things or by words. Words signify things and one thing can signify another. The Creator of things, however, can not only signify anything by words, but can also make one thing signify another. That is why the Scriptures contain a twofold truth. One lies in the things meant by the words used—that is

the literal sense. The other in the way things become figures of other things, and in this consists the spiritual sense.

The allusion here is to the things which are mentioned in the narrative of the Bible and which are seen as signs or portents of things to come. If the Scriptures tell us that Aaron's rod 'brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds' (*Numbers*, xvii.8) this could be interpreted as foreshadowing the cross, the almond itself providing a symbol, its shell being bitter like the passion but its kernel sweet like the victory of the redemption.

But St. Thomas warns us not to take this technique as a method of translating unambiguous signs into discursive speech. There is no authoritative dictionary of the significance of things, as distinct from words, and in his view there cannot be such a dictionary:

It is not due to deficient authority that no compelling argument can be derived from the spiritual sense, this lies rather in the nature of similitude in which the spiritual sense is founded. For one thing may have similitude to many; for which reason it is impossible to proceed from any thing mentioned in the Scriptures to an unambiguous meaning. For instance the lion may mean the Lord because of one similitude and the Devil because of another.

St. Thomas, as will be perceived, again links this lack of a definite meaning of 'things' with the doctrine of metaphor. But where metaphors are conceived to be of divine origin this very ambiguity becomes a challenge to the reader of the Sacred Word. He feels that the human intellect can never exhaust the meaning or meanings inherent in the language of the Divine. Each such symbol exhibits what may be called a plenitude of meanings which meditation and study can never reveal more than partially. We may do well to remember the role which such meditation and study once played in the life of the learned. The monk in his cell had only few texts to read and re-read, to ponder and to interpret, and the finding of meanings was one of the most satisfying ways of employing these hours of study. Nor was this merely a matter for idle minds seeking employment for their ingenuity. Once it was accepted that revelation had spoken to man in riddles, these riddles embodied in the Scriptures and also in Pagan myths, demanded to be unravelled again and again, to provide the answers for the problems of nature and of history. The technique of finding meanings would help the priest composing his sermons day in day out on given texts which had to be applied to the changing events of the community, it would sanction the reading of pagan poets, which would otherwise have to be banished from the monastic libraries, it would give added significance to the fittings of the church and to the performance of sacred rites.

Nobody who has looked into medieval and Renaissance texts concerned with symbolism can fail to be both impressed and depressed by the learning and ingenuity expended on this task of applying the techniques of exegetics to a vast

range of texts, images or events. The temptation is indeed great for the iconologist to emulate this technique and to apply it in his turn to the works of art of the past.

Levels of Meaning?

But before we yield to this temptation we should at least pause and ask ourselves to what extent it may be appropriate to the task of interpreting the pictures or images of the past. Granted that any of these images could be seen to carry all kinds of implications—to allude to Hirsch's use of the terms—were they intended to carry more than one meaning? Were they intended, as is sometimes postulated, to exhibit the distinct four senses which exegetics attributed to the Holy Writ and which none other than Dante wished applied to the reading of his poem?

I know of no medieval or Renaissance text which applies this doctrine to works of pictorial art. Though such an argument *ex silentio* can never carry complete conviction, it does suggest that the question needs further examination. Such an examination might well take its starting-point from St. Thomas' distinction, quoted above, of the way words and things may be said to signify. Recent iconological literature has paid much and justified attention to the symbolic potentialities of things represented in religious paintings, particularly those of the late Middle Ages.

Panofsky, in particular, has stressed the importance of what he calls 'disguised symbolism' in early Netherlandish art.¹⁷ 'Things' represented in certain religious paintings support or elaborate the meaning. The light falling through the church window in the *Friedsam Annunciation* (Fig. 16) is a metaphor for the Immaculate Conception, and the two styles of the building for the Old and the New Testaments. Even though one might wish for more evidence that these symbols and metaphors were commissioned to be *painted*, there is no doubt that religious pictures do embody things as symbols. It is certainly not for nothing that Botticelli made the Christchild bless grapes and corn, the symbols of the Eucharist (Fig. 17), and that the trees in the background of the *Berlin Madonna* (Fig. 18) were intended as symbols was attested by the scrolls with quotations from the Scriptures.¹⁸

I was exalted like a cedar in Libanus and as a cypress tree on the mountains of Hermon. I was exalted like a palm tree on the seashore, and as rose plants in Jericho, and as a fair olive tree in the plain; and I was exalted as a plane tree.

(*Ecclesiasticus*, xxiv.3, 12-14)

The possibility of making 'things' signify was not lost on such masters as Leonardo, who represented the Christchild playing with a yarnwinder (Fig. 19) recalling the shape of the cross.¹⁹ But to what extent are these and similar examples applications of the principle of several meanings? The event is illustrated and the things figuring in the event echo and expand the meaning. But this symbolism can only function in support of what I have proposed to call the dominant meaning,

the intended meaning or principal purpose of the picture. If the picture did not represent the Annunciation, the windows could not signify by themselves, and if the ears of corn and the grapes were not the object of blessing in a painting of the Madonna, they would not be transformed into the symbol of the Eucharist. Here as always the symbol functions as a metaphor which only acquires its specific meaning in a given context. The picture has not several meanings but one.

In my view this is not contradicted by the best documented application of exegesis to a painting in the Renaissance, Fra Pietro da Novellara's famous description of Leonardo's *St. Anne* (Fig. 20):

It represents the Christ Child, about a year old, as if about to slip out of his mother's arms, grasping a lamb and seeming to hug it. The mother, as if about to rise from the lap of St. Anne, grasps the Child to take him from the lamb, that sacrificial animal which signifies the passion. St. Anne, rising a little from her seat, seems to want to keep her daughter from taking the child away from the lamb: this would perhaps stand for the Church that does not want to have the passion of Christ prevented.²⁰

The learned *frate*, Vice General of the Carmelite Order, was probably puzzled by the amount of movement Leonardo had introduced into a subject which was traditionally represented in the form of a hieratic group. Maybe the artist had the answer ready for those who asked for an explanation. But to interpret the interaction of the figures in terms of the coming drama of salvation does not, by itself, introduce a different level of meaning. The traditional group, such as we see it on a fourteenth-century Sieneese altar (Fig. 20a), had never been conceived as a realistic representation. No one was expected to believe that the Virgin ever settled in the lap of her mother with the Christchild in her arms. The child is the Virgin's symbolic attribute and the Virgin in her turn the attribute of St. Anne. It is the same type of symbolic nexus which is discussed in the essay on Tobias and the Angel in this volume (pp. 26-30). Its symbolism is not hidden, but overt. Admittedly Novellara's tentative identification of St. Anne with the Church introduces an extraneous element which may have been alien to Leonardo's intention.

In this respect Novellara's interpretation differs significantly from that given in a sonnet on the same picture by Girolamo Casio which concludes:

St. Anne, as the one who knew
That Jesus assumed the human shape
To atone for the Sin of Adam and Eve
Tells her daughter with pious zeal:
Beware if you wish to draw Him back
For the heavens have ordained that sacrifice.²¹

In this interpretation, it will be noticed, there is no hint at two meanings. It is only implied that St. Anne had prophetic gifts and interpreted the portent of

'things' at the time. In this version, then, the painting could still be seen as a genuine illustration rather than as an allegory.

The Psycho-analytic Approach

It so happens that the example chosen has also been paradigmatic for the psycho-analytic interpretation of a work of art. In his famous essay on Leonardo Freud saw in this composition a memory of the artist's youth, for the illegitimate child had been adopted into the family, he had had 'two mothers', one of whom may have had reason to hide her bitterness behind a forced smile. It can be shown that Freud was much influenced in his reading of the childhood story of Leonardo by D. Merezhkovsky's historical novel²² and that he was scarcely aware of the iconographic tradition on which Leonardo drew.²³ But too much emphasis on these sources of error would miss the more important methodological point of what is involved in interpreting an image. For even if Freud's reading of the situation rested on firmer evidence, even if Leonardo had been found on the couch to associate his childhood situation with this particular painting, it should still be obvious that the painting does not mean to refer to his mother and stepmother, but signifies St. Anne and the Virgin. It is important to clarify this issue, because the discoveries of psycho-analysis have certainly contributed to the habit of finding so many 'levels of meaning' in any given work. But this approach tends to confuse cause and purpose. Any human action, including the painting of a picture, will be the resultant of many, indeed an infinite number of contributory causes. Psycho-analysis likes to speak in this context of 'over-determination' and the concept has its value as a reminder of the many motivations that may overlap in the motivation of anything we say, do, or dream. But strictly speaking any event that occurs is 'over-determined' if we care to look for all the chains of causation, all the laws of nature which come into operation. If Leonardo's childhood experience should really have been one of the determining causes for his accepting a commission to paint St. Anne and the Virgin so, we may assume, were other pressures which might conceivably be traced to their source. Maybe the problem attracted him for its difficulty, maybe he was just in need of money.²⁴ What would matter in any of these cases is only that the innumerable chains of causation which ultimately brought the work into being must on no account be confused with its meaning. The iconologist is concerned with the latter, as far as it can be determined. The historian should remain aware of the complexity and elusiveness of the first.

Perhaps we best escape from the perplexities posed by the problem of intentionality by insisting more firmly than Hirsch has done that the intended meaning is not a psychological category at all. If it were, a sentence written by a computer

could have no meaning. We are rather concerned with categories of social acceptance, as is the case with all symbols and sign systems. It is these which matter to the iconologist, whatever penumbra of vagueness they may of necessity exhibit.

Benvenuto Cellini's description of his own *Saliera* (Fig. 21) may provide an illustration of this point. It is a clear and conventional application of the principle of *decorum*. Being destined for salt and pepper, products of the sea and of land, he decorated it fittingly with the figures of Neptune and of the personification of Earth. But in describing his famous masterpiece he wanted to stress that this was not all: 'I arranged for the legs of the male and female to be gracefully and skilfully intertwined, one being extended and the other drawn up, which signified the mountains and the plains of the earth.'²⁵ It would be futile to ask whether this little conceit was intended from the outset, nor would it be kind to enquire whether Neptune's knees signify the waves of the sea. Clearly the artist is entitled further to embroider on his ideas and to rationalize what he has done in terms of such explanations. What matters here is surely that the work does not resist this particular projection of meaning. The interpretation produces no contradiction, no jarring split. In looking at a work of art we will always project some additional significance that is not actually given. Indeed we must do so if the work is to come to life for us. The penumbra of vagueness, the 'openness' of the symbol is an important constituent of any real work of art, and will be discussed in the essay on Raphael's *Stanza della Segnatura*.²⁶ But the historian should also retain his humility in the face of evidence. He should realize the impossibility of ever drawing an exact line between the elements which signify and those which do not. Art is always open to afterthoughts, and if they happen to fit we can never tell how far they were part of the original intention. We remember the conflicting evidence about the pun of 'shafts-bury' which had either been saddled on Gilbert's Eros or had been part of his original intention.

Codes and Allusions

It so happens that even the example of such a pun can be paralleled from the Renaissance. Vasari tells us that Vincenzo da San Gimignano carried out a façade painting after a design by Raphael, showing the Cyclops forging the thunderbolt of Jove, and Vulcan at work on the arrows of Cupid.²⁷ These, we read, were intended as allusions to the name of the owner of the house in the *Borgo* in Rome which these paintings adorned, one *Battiferro*, meaning hitting iron. If the story is true the subject was chosen as what is called in heraldry a 'canting device'. The story of such allusions should be quite salutary reading for the iconologist, for we must admit again that we could never have guessed.

Thus Vasari also describes the festive apparatus designed by Aristotile da San

Gallo in 1539 for the wedding of Duke Cosimo de' Medici and Eleonora of Toledo.²⁸ The paintings, which drew on a vast repertory of history, heraldry and symbolism, illustrated episodes in the rise of the Medici family and the career of the Duke himself. But between the story of Cosimo's elevation to the Dukedom and his capture of Monte Murlo there was represented a story from Livy's twentieth book, of the three rash envoys from the Campania, driven from the Roman Senate for their insolent demands, an allusion, as Vasari explains, to the three Cardinals who vainly thought to remove Duke Cosimo from the Government. This is indeed an 'allegorical' reading of history since 'allegory' means literally 'saying something else'. Once more nobody could possibly guess the meaning if the painting were preserved outside its context. But even in such an extreme case it would be misleading to speak of various levels of meaning. The story refers to an event, just as Eros refers to Shaftesbury's Charity. In the context it has one intended meaning, though it is a meaning which it was thought wiser not to make too explicit, since it might have been better not to pillory the Cardinals.

It is characteristic, though, that this recourse to a code was taken in the context of a festive decoration, which would be taken down immediately. Secret codes and allusions of this kind have much less place in works of art intended to remain permanent fixtures.

Codes, moreover, cannot be cracked by ingenuity alone. On the contrary. It is the danger of the cipher clerk that he sees codes everywhere.

Sometime in the dark days of the Second World War, a scientist in England received a telegram from the great Danish physicist Niels Bohr, asking for 'news of Maud'.²⁹ Since Bohr had been one of the first to write about the possibilities of using nuclear fission for the construction of a super-bomb, the scientist was convinced that the telegram was in code. Bohr evidently wanted to have news of M-A-U-D, 'Military application of uranium disintegration'. The interpretation seemed so apt that the word was in fact later adopted as a code word for the work on the atomic bomb. But it was wrong. Bohr really wanted news of an old nanny who lived in southern England and whose name was Maud. Of course it is always possible to go further; to postulate that Niels Bohr meant both his nanny and the atom bomb. It is never easy to disprove such an interpretation, but as far as iconology is concerned it should be ruled out unless a documented example is produced.³⁰

To my knowledge neither Vasari nor any other text of the fifteenth or sixteenth century ever says that any painting or sculpture is intended to have two divergent meanings or to represent two distinct events through the same set of figures. The absence of such evidence seems to me to weigh all the more heavily as Vasari was obviously very fond of such intricacies both in his own art and in the inventions of his scholar-friends. It is indeed hard to imagine what purpose such a double

image should serve within the context of a given cycle or decoration. The exercise of wit, so relished by the Renaissance, lay precisely in the assignment of a meaning to an image which could be seen to function in an unexpected light.

The Genres

We come back to the question of decorum and the institutional function of images in our period. For the exposition of ambiguity, the demonstration of plenitude had indeed a place in Renaissance culture, but it belonged to that peculiar branch of symbolism, the *impresa*. The combination of an image with a motto chosen by a member of the Nobility was not often witty but more frequently the cause of wit in others. I have discussed the philosophical background of this tradition in the essay on *Icones Symbolicae*.³¹ But the freefloating symbol or metaphor to which various meanings could be assigned with such ease and relish differs both in structure and purpose from the work of art commissioned from a master. At the most they were applied to the cover of paintings or were expanded in the fresco cycles which centred on such an image.

But if the iconologist must pay attention to the technique of the *impresa* and its applications, he should not forget to attend to the other end of the spectrum of Renaissance art, the free play of form and the grotesque which could equally be fitted into the theory of decorum. In contrast to the stateroom, a corridor, and especially a garden loggia, did not have to stand on dignity. Here the amusing grotesque was allowed to run riot and artists were not only permitted but even enjoined by Renaissance authors such as Vasari to let themselves go and display their caprice and inventiveness in these 'paintings without rule'.³² The enigmatic configuration, the monsters and hybrids of the grotesque, are professedly the product of an irresponsible imagination on holiday. Take any of these images in isolation and place it in a conspicuous place in a solemn building and everyone would be entitled to look for a deep symbolic significance. The grotesque would become a hieroglyph, asking to be unriddled (Fig. 22). It is true that even in the Renaissance some writers made play with this affinity between the grotesque and the sacred symbols of ancient mysteries, but they did so only in order to defend a kind of art for which the theory of decorum had so little respect.³³ Unlike the serious *letterati*, the laity enjoyed the play of forms and the dreamlike inconsequence of meanings it engendered. I know of no more striking document to illustrate the freedom from logical constraints which was permitted in a Renaissance garden than the description given by Giovanni Rucellai of the shaped shrubs in his Villa di Quaracchi, where one could see 'ships, galleys, temples, columns and pillars . . . giants, men and women, heraldic beasts with the standard of the city, monkeys, dragons, centaurs, camels,

diamonds, little spirits with bows and arrows, cups, horses, donkeys, cattle, dogs, stags and birds, bears and wild boars, dolphins, jousting knights, archers, harpies, philosophers, the Pope, cardinals, Cicero and more such things'.³⁴

No wonder that the owner tells us that there is no stranger who can pass without looking for a quarter of an hour at this display. Still, it is clear that if this list of images occurred in any other context than that of a garden it would challenge the ingenuity of any iconologist to find a meaning in this juxtaposition of the Pope and cardinals with Cicero and philosophers, giants, camels and harpies.

Once more we see a confirmation of the methodological rule emphasized by Hirsch: interpretation proceeds by steps, and the first step on which everything else depends is the decision to which genre a given work is to be assigned. The history of interpretations is littered with failures due to one initial mistake. Once you take watermarks in sixteenth-century books to be the code of a secret sect the reading of watermarks in the light of this hypothesis will appear to you possible or even easy;³⁵ it is not necessary to refer to examples nearer home, nor need we scoff at such failures. After all, if we did not know from independent evidence that Taddeo Zuccari's fresco cycle for which Caro's programme has been quoted was designed for the customary *studiolo* into which the Prince could withdraw from the bustle of the court and that it is therefore devoted to the theme of solitude, we would almost certainly interpret the room as a place of worship of a syncretistic sect.

Iconology must start with a study of institutions rather than with a study of symbols. Admittedly it is more thrilling to read or write detective stories than to read cookery books, but it is the cookery book that tells us how meals are conventionally composed and, *mutatis mutandis*, whether the sweet can ever be expected to be served before the soup. We cannot exclude a capricious feast which reversed all the orders and accounts for the riddle we were trying to solve. But if we postulate such a rare event, we and our readers should know what we are doing.

One methodological rule, at any rate, should stand out in this game of unriddling the mysteries of the past. However daring we may be in our conjectures—and who would want to restrain the bold?—no such conjectures should ever be used as a stepping stone for yet another, still bolder hypothesis. We should always ask the iconologist to return to base from every one of his individual flights, and to tell us whether programmes of the kind he has enjoyed reconstructing can be documented from primary sources or only from the works of his fellow iconologists. Otherwise we are in danger of building up a mythical mode of symbolism, much as the Renaissance built up a fictitious science of hieroglyphics that was based on a fundamental misconception of the nature of the Egyptian script.

There is at least one essay in this volume to which this warning applies. The interpretation of Botticelli's Mythologies in the light of Neo-Platonic philosophy

remains so conjectural that it should certainly not be quoted in evidence for any further Neo-Platonic interpretation that could not stand on its own feet. I have given the reason in a brief new introduction for my including this paper despite its risky hypothesis. I hope it gains some fresh support from some of the general considerations put forward in the essay on *Icones Symbolicae*. But the conclusions of that paper luckily do not depend in their turn on the acceptance of my interpretation of this particular set of pictures. Even if Maud really just meant Maud, some telegrams in wartime meant more than they said.

Appendix: Annibale Caro's Programme for Taddeo Zuccaro

from Bottari-Ticozzi, *Raccolta di Lettere*, III, pp. 249-56

Annibal Caro al P. fra Onofrio Panvinio

L'invenzioni per dipigner lo studio di monsig. illustriss. Farnese è necessario che siano applicate alla disposizione del pittore, o la disposizione sua all'invenzion vostra; e poichè si vede che egli non s'è voluto accomodare a voi, bisogna per forza che noi ci accomodiamo a lui, per non far disordine e confusione. Il soggetto d'ambidue è di cose appropriate alla solitudine. Egli comparte tutta la volta in due parti principali; che sono vani per istorie, ed ornamenti intorno a'vani. Parleremo de'vani, dove hanno a star l'istorie che sono d'importanza. Sono questi vani di quattro sorte; maggiori, minori, piccoli e minimi; e così di quattro sorte invenzioni bisogna fare per dipignerli. Per li maggiori, maggiori; per gli minori, di men figure; per li piccoli, d'una sola figura; e per gli minimi che non son capaci di figure, di simboli, e d'altre cose che non siano figure umane. De'quattro vani maggiori due ne sono in mezzo della volta, e due nelle teste. In uno di quelli del mezzo, che è il principale, farei la principale e più lodata specie di solitudine, che è quella della nostra religione; la quale è differente da quella de' Gentili, perchè i nostri sono usciti della solitudine per ammaestrare i popoli, ed i Gentili, dai popoli si sono ritirati nella solitudine. In uno dunque de'gran quadri del mezzo farei la solitudine de' cristiani; e nel mezzo d'esso rappresenterei CRISTO nostro signore, e dagli lati poi di mano in mano, Paolo apostolo, Giovanni precursore, Ieronimo, Francesco e gli altri (se più ve ne possono capire) che, di diversi luoghi uscendo dal deserto, venissero incontro ai popoli a predicar la dottrina evangelica; fingendo dall' una parte del quadro il deserto, dall'altro le genti.

Nell'altro quadro d'incontro a questo farei, per lo contrario, la solitudine de'Gentili, e metterei più sorte di filosofi, non che uscissero, ma che entrassero nel deserto, e voltassero le spalle ai popoli; esprimendo particolarmente alcuni de' Platonicis, che si cavassero anco gli occhi, perchè dalla vista non fossero impediti di filosofare. Ci farei Timone, che tirasse de' sassi alle genti; ci farei alcuni che, senza esser veduti, stendessero fuor delle macchie alcune tavole o scritti loro, per ammaestrare le genti senza praticar con esse. E queste due sarebbono l'istorie degli due vani principali di mezzo, che conterrebbero la materia della solitudine in universale. In uno di quelli delle teste, che verrebbe ad essere il terzo maggiore, verrei al particolar del legislator de Romani, e farei Numa Pompilio nella valle d'Egeria, con essa Egeria Ninfa, a ragionar seco appresso a un fonte, con boschi ed anti, e tavole di leggi d'intorno. Nell'altro dell'altra testa di rincontro, farei Minos, primo legislatore della Grecia, che uscisse d'un antro con alcune tavole in mano, e che nell' oscuro dell'antro fosse un Giove, dal quale egli diceva d'aver le leggi.

Negli quattro quadri minori faremo le quattro nazioni trovate da voi. E perchè il pittore intenda, in uno i Ginnosofisti, nazione d'India, pure in un deserto, ignudi, in atto di contemplanti e di disputanti; e ne farei alcuni volti al Sole, che fosse a mezzo del cielo, perchè lor costume era di sacrificare a mezzogiorno. Nel secondo, gli Iperborei Settentriionali, vestiti, coi gesti medesimi di disputare e contemplare, sotto arbori pomiferi, con sacchi di riso e di farina intorno, di che viveano; e non sapendo il lor abito, me ne rimetto al pittore. Nel terzo i Druidi, magi de' Galli, fra selve di querce, le quali aveano in venerazione; e senza le loro frondi non faceano mai sacrificio: e 'l vischio che nasceva in