Aristotle in the Renaissance

(A context for Spenser's ethics and poetics)

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Aristotle is not a newcomer in the Renaissance. Instead, there is a long tradition of medieval Aristotelianism which will be the background against which the new knowledge will develop: "It was (...) the reference frame against which changes in attitudes towards Platonism, Scepticism, or Stoicism are to be viewed" (Schmitt, *Survey* 28). Renaissance Aristotelianism has often been presented as backward looking, a strain of medieval thought which lingers on during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. But in fact there is no such thing as a Renaissance Aristotelianism: there are many different sects which agree only in the barest essentials.

Aristotle had become known to the West first through Christian adaptations (St. Albert, St. Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scot, William of Ockham), some of them indebted to Averroes (John of Jandun, Siger of Brabant). In the Renaissance there is a continuation of these traditions, as well as a return to classical commentators (Alexander of Aphrodisias) and to Aristotle's original texts. All these lines of thought are influenced by each other and by contemporary revivals of the Platonic and Stoic philosophies, to such an extent that one can barely speak even of a variety of Aristotelian schools in the Renaissance: instead, there are loosely Aristotelian thinkers who combine in various ways the influence of these old schools. And indeed "[s]ome thinkers, while believing that they were being very anti-Aristotelian, were actually emphasizing an equally Aristotelian doctrine to overthrow another one of which they particularly disapproved" (Schmitt 46).

The Aristotelianism of the Renaissance has often been assumed to be stagnant and dogmatic. But modern scholars emphasize its continual

evolution and adaptations to the new cultural atmosphere of which it was an important part. It has been argued (Randall) that it was one of the influences that shaped the new scientific method. The development of science can therefore be said to stem gradually from the Middle Ages and the introduction of Aristotle in the West, rather than a sudden outgrowth around the end of the sixteenth century. Most scholars, however, refuse to accept this and stress indeed Galileo's rejection of Aristotelianism in favour of a mathematical basis for science. However, the Aristotelianism of William Harvey is widely recognized: Aristotelian biology was more successful and lasting than Aristotelian physics. Francis Bacon, too, thought he was a radical anti-Aristotelian, but he is now considered to be a late Aristotelian.

In his study of the editions of Aristotle's work in the sixteenth century, Cranz notes a steady increase from the previous century until a small peak is reached around 1510. There is then a decline for about twenty years, which is at the same time a sign of evaluation and crisis in the interpretive tradition. In this first phase it was mainly the texts and commentaries from the medieval tradition which were being used; the humanist commentaries are still a small part of the whole. From the late thirties on the number of editions soars up again, this time with a majority of texts which are either in the original Greek or Latin translations by contemporary humanists; around the middle of the century there were about 25 Aristotelian editions per year. There is slow decline in the number of editions during the second half of the 16th century and the 17th century.

Paradoxically, the decline of Aristotelian thought is linked to a better knowledge and diffusion of the original Greek texts; this helped "to see the serious shortcomings and inconsistencies of the Aristotelian system" (Schmitt 34). The influence of Aristotle did not die out simultaneously in all disciplines. It was pervasive in the sixteenth century; in the seventeenth century his natural philosophy was overthrown by the rise of experimental science (Galileo is the standard example), but Aristotelian logic and ethics were still doing fine, "and indeed, the influence of his *Poetics* was reaching its apogee" (Schmitt, *Survey* 32).

Aristotle's *Poetics* had been available in the Middle Ages through a Latin translation of Averroes' commentary, and had not enjoyed the critical attention given to the rest of Aristotle's work. The actual work was recovered and assimilated during the Renaissance: it was at the heart of the critical polemics of the late Renaissance in Italy ("the age of criticism" for

Baxter Hathaway). According to Bernard Weinberg, "there is no doubt that the signal event in the history of literary criticism in the Italian Renaissance was the discovery of Aristotle's Poetics and its incorporation into the critical tradition" (349). The poetics of the renaissance can be said to be basically Aristotelian, and the standard theoretical work of the age is a commentary or an annotated edition of Aristotle's Poetics (Robortelli, Maggi, Pigna, Speroni). But some of Aristotle's commentators, like Castelvetro and Scaliger, are constantly opposing their points of view on specific issues to those of Aristotle. Most of the theorists start from the basic Aristotelian idea of poetry as imitation, but then they often go on to debate this idea, f.i. Patrizzi (*La deca disputata*), who developed a theory of poetry as creation, invention or expression, or Beni and Scaliger, who found inconsistencies in the Aristotelian concept of imitation. Even Castelvetro, the main commentator of Aristotle's Poetics, is all the time pointing out the insufficiencies of his system and further developing it. We must remember that Aristotelian imitation did not mean a photographic copy of reality, but rather an universalization; history deals with particulars, but poetry is more philosophical than history and points to the universal behind the particular.

The critics of the Renaissance often raise important questions: is any kind of narrative an imitation? Is lyrical poetry, which does not contain narrative, an imitation too? Is such thing as a prose poem possible? What is it that makes possible to find the universal in the particular? And so on. Each commentator stresses the aspect of Aristotelian doctrine which is more convenient for his own aims: Tasso, for instance, went on to interpret Aristotelian universalization in the direction of allegory and idealization of character. There are three main influences which bear on the Renaissance readings of the Poetics : the influence of Horace's *Ars poetica,* which is itself a kind of commentary on the *Poetics,* the influence of Neoplatonic esthetics and theories of poetic creation (the poet as divine madman, and so on) and the current alliance of poetry and rhetoric. The poetics of the Renaissance is a rhetorical poetics, that is, there is a constant concern for the practical, moral effects of poetry on the reader.

The Greek text of the *Poetics* had 15 editions during this century, and four different Latin translations, with a total of 40 editions; that by Pazzi was the most widespread (19 editions). There are three translations into Italian, and several commentaries. It may be significant that the most important of these commentarie's, Castelvetro's *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta* went through two editions, while the traditional commentary by Averroes was

reprinted five times.

There was no English translation of either Aristotle's *Poetics* or the work of the Italian commentators. Sir Philip Sidney wrote the best known of the English poetic treatises, *An Apology for Poetry*, which follows their line of poetry as a useful discipline, and shows an acquaintance both with Aristotle and maybe with some of his modern commentators, at least with Scaliger, where we can find the original of Sidney's idea of poetry opposing a golden world to the brazen world of nature.

> "Aristotelian writings on moral and political philosophy were still much read during the Renaissance and into the seventeenth century, though this is hardly reflected in modern scholarly studies. There were an enormous number of new commentaries written and medieval ones, e.g. Buridan's commentary on the *Ethica Nicomachea*, continued to be reprinted frequently. Still, little of value has been contributed in this area by modern scholars other than some rather vague statements pointing out the humanists' interest in Aristotle's moral philosophy." (Schmitt).

Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics* went through 55 different editions in Greek, Latin or commentaries; the *Nicomachean Ethics* had more than three hundred different editions, translations or commentaries. Twenty-two of them were in Greek, but the best known was the Latin translation by Johannes Argyropylus, which had 65 editions, the vast majority of them in Italy and France. There was only one edition of the English translation by John Wilkinson from the compendium by Brunetto Latini: *The ethiques of Aristotle, that is to saye, preceptes of good behauoure and perfighte honestie, now newly translated into English* (1547).

Spenser is generally acknowledged to derive some of his moral ideas form Aristotle: the idea of the golden mean as constituting a virtue between two vices is the organizing principle of the Nicomachean Ethics . But no direct connection need be established, as these ideas were very widespread in this century. According to Davis (*Edmund Spenser* 213), "Probably Spenser owed most of his knowledge of Plato and Aristotle to recent Italian commentators" and not to the direct sources, and even that was admired as a rare accomplishment in Dublin. Roche (Yale ed. of *The Faerie Queene*, 1108) and Renwick (*Edmund Spenser*) refer to the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a possible source with similar qualifications. The passages on temperance in

the *Nicomachean Ethics* (49, 79) make clear that Aristotle's golden mean is not a mean at all: it leans more or less to one of the poles: "In some cases it is the deficiency and in others the excess that is more opposed to the median. For example, it is not the excess, recklessness, which is more opposed to courage, but the deficiency, cowardice; while in the case of self-control [temperance] it is not the defect, insensitivity, but the excess, self-indulgence which is the more opposite" (49).

Aristotle's moral philosophy was never completely discarded; instead, it influenced the ethical systems developed by the new philosophy of the seventeenth century, e.g. by Leibniz.

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