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Torquato Tasso

1544–1595

Among the greatest of the poets of the Renaissance, Tasso is also well known for his critical writings, especially the discourse in which he defended his own epic practice. The best known of his epics is *Jerusalem Delivered* (completed 1575, published 1581), on the subject of the First Crusade. The *Discorsi del Poema Eroica* was written after *Jerusalem Delivered* was completed and before it was revised and extended into the poem *Jerusalem Conquered.* Tasso was well aware of the major critical issues of his time and the pressures to which poet and critic had to respond. As Cavalchini and Samuel point out in their introduction to their translation of the *Discorsi,* "Tasso took them all into account, reconciling society's demand that poetry should entertain, the Church's demand that poetry should encourage the faith, the humanist's veneration for antiquity, the modernist's self-applause—and managed not to degrade poetry into entertainment, confuse it with propaganda (in the original sense of that term), disparage ancients, medievals, or moderns; he even managed not to be anti-Aristotelian or anti-Platonic."

Indeed, in Book One, Tasso follows an Aristotelian procedure in producing a definition of epic that is somewhat in parallel and contrast to Aristotle's definition of tragedy, though it is not stated completely in any one place, but is accumulated as he goes along. The aim of Book One is to set forth a definition as the basis for a general theory of epic. Thus Tasso begins by asking what the *idea* of a heroic poem is by raising the question of poetry in general. Aristotelian imitation is invoked as a common property of all poetry, and poetry's purpose is defined as "to help men by the example of human deeds" and to provide "pleasure directed toward usefulness," usefulness having human virtue as its end.

Tasso places the epic under poetic imitation, employing "imitation" in the broader sense to include narration, while still contrasting it with tragedy with respect to mode of imitation. Rather than purgation, which is the end Aristotle gave to tragedy, epic moves its reader to wonder, though it is not the only genre that does so. It is an "imitation of a nobler action, great and perfect, narrated in the loftiest verse, with the purpose of moving the mind to wonder and thus being useful." At the conclusion of the sixth and last book of the *Discorsi,* Tasso offers a contrast between epic and tragedy that shows wonder to be at the service of human improvement: ". . . if there are two ways of improving us through example, one inciting us to good works by showing the reward of excellence and an almost divine worth, the other frightening us from evil with penalties, the first is the way of epic, the second that of tragedy, which for this reason is less useful and gives less delight."

The standard edition of Tasso's *Discourses* is *Discorsi dell' Arte Poetica e del Poema Eroica,* edited by Luigi Poma (1964). See Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (1961).

From

Discourses on the Heroic Poem

Book One

To begin with then, I say that in all things one must consider the end, as Aristotle declares in his *Topics*. But the end, being single, cannot be found in many particulars. Still, by considering the good in various particular goodnesses, we form the idea of the good, just as Zeuxis formed the idea of the beautiful when he wished to paint Helen in Croton.[1] And this is perhaps the difference between the ideas of natural things in the divine mind and those of artificial things which the human intellect figures to itself: with one the universal exists before, and with the other after the things themselves. The idea of an artistic product is formed after consideration of many things, among which that one is best which most closely approximates to the idea. And since I have to show the idea of the most excellent kind of poem, the heroic, I must not offer only one poem, even the most beautiful, as example, but, collecting the beauties and perfections of many, I must explain how the most perfect and most beautiful can be fashioned.

But first we must find out what the heroic poem is, or rather what its genre is, and then examine the idea, since from the idea, as Aristotle says, again in the *Topics*, one knows if the definition is right. Although in some things this principle does not in fact work well, in the matter of which we are speaking we may certainly consider idea and definition together. Furthermore, if—the arguments being so many—we ought to look at the exemplar, let us turn to the idea itself, since the idea is the true exemplar. Indeed, we may use the complete definition in place of rule and example, as Alexander of Aphrodisias teaches when expounding that same passage in Aristotle. Let us therefore study first what a poem is, or poetry in general, and then we will find the definition of this species—I mean the heroic or epic poem, as it may be called.

Poetry has many species: one is the epic; the others are tragedy, comedy, and songs accompanied by the cithara, bagpipes, reedpipes, or other pastoral instruments. They are all alike in that they imitate. We may therefore affirm that poetry is nothing other than imitation. But painting, sculpture, and other similar arts also imitate; and hence the necessity of clarifying the differences that separate poetry from the other imitative arts. Clearly they do not differ because of the subjects imitated, since the same subject—the Trojan war or the wanderings of Ulysses—may be taken by painter and poet; it is not then a difference in the actions imitated that makes the arts different, but rather that one uses colours and the other words, either with or without meter.

Poetry then is an imitation in verse. But imitation of what? Of human and divine actions, the Stoics said. It follows that those who do not sing human or divine actions are not poets. Thus Homer was not a poet when he described the war between the frogs and the mice,[2] nor Virgil when he described the customs, laws, and wars of the bees.[3] On the other hand, he who describes divine actions is a poet. Thus Empedocles was a poet when he taught how Love and Discord corrupt this perceptible world and generate the intelligible one; and Plato too when he had Timaeus narrate how God the father, calling together the other lesser gods, created the world[4]—or if he was not a complete poet, because he did not use verse, at least he deserves the name by virtue of what he imitated. But if this is so, then, since all the acts of nature are governed by divine providence, whoever describes them would be a poet. Nor do I think epic poets would have excluded from their number Homer, Empedocles, Parmenides, Oppian, or others who borrowed true poets' verse like a cart, as Plutarch says.[5] Perhaps they would have excluded Lucretius, since he denies their ancient notion of πρόνοια, and makes the creation of the world not a divine act but the work of chance. Such acts are not, in Aristotle's opinion, appropriate for poetry. Someone, however, may ask why only divine and human actions are appropriate and not the actions of the elements and other natural forces.

If all actions can be imitated, then the kinds of action being many, the kinds of poem must also be many; and since in this equivocal genre [of action], as Simplicius says in [his commentary on] the *Categories* [of Aristotle], the first species is contemplation, which is the action of the intellect, acts of contemplation can also be imitated by poets. Some indeed contend that the subject of Dante's poem is a contemplation because that voyage of his to Hell and Purgatory has no meaning other than the speculations of his mind.[6] Others pre-

DISCOURSES ON THE HEROIC POEM. *Discorsi Del Poema Eroica* was first published in Naples in 1594. This selection is reprinted from *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* by Torquato Tasso translated by Mariella Cavalchini and Irene Samuel (1973). © Oxford University Press. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

[1][All footnotes except for local references are by the translators.] Cicero tells the story in *De Inventione* 2. I. 1–3.

[2]*Batromyomachia.*

[3]The Fourth Georgic.

[4]*Timeaus* 41A ff.

[5]*How to Read the Poets* 16.

[6]Notably the position of Jacopo Mazzoni in his *Difesa della Commedia di Dante* (Cesena, 1587).

fer to call his subject a dream, like the *Trionfi* of Petrarch and the *Amorosa Visione* of Boccaccio. But those who hold this view oppose his subject, even more than Plato opposes imitation itself on the ground that the idea has the first degree of truth, the natural form or thing itself the second degree, and the imitation or image the third.[7] For the imitator who represents not a true action but a dream would be still more imperfect—giving the image of an action still further removed from the truth. Plato's doctrine permits no other conclusion, although Synesius wrote that fables originate in dreams and that a dream may perfectly well be the end, as it is the beginning of a fable.

Now Aristotle, although he maintains that Empedocles is more physicist than poet, does not conclude that he is not a poet at all. And if he is in some sort a poet, the actions of the elements do constitute a subject for poetry, though at the lowest level. Therefore Lucretius and Pontano are poets too, and others who have written in verse about nature. If this definition is correct, poetry ought not to be defined as the imitation of human and divine actions, since that would exclude imitation of the elements and other natural phenomena, and imitations of animals, and thus exclude the work not only of Empedocles, Lucretius, and Oppian but even some of Homer's.

For another thing, it seems to me that no divine action is imitated as such, since, so far as it is divine, it cannot be imitated by any of the means proper to poetry. Still Aristotle writes in the first book of his *Politics* that many represent the lives, appearances, and features of the gods in the semblance of man; and Isocrates said that the poetry of Homer and the first tragedies were worth marvelling at because, having considered the nature of the human mind, they used both forms in an unusual way, he handling the wars and battles of the demigods in fictions, they presenting their fables directly to the eyes.[8] And Marcus Tullius Cicero said that Homer approximated the human to the divine, *mallem divina ad nos*,[9] meaning that he described the gods as men and human passions as divine, because to speak and to consult are human acts, as getting angry and feeling pity are human passions. Athanasius too—to add a religious writer to so many pagan ones—in his book *Contra Gentiles*[10] stated that the gentiles' god is a mixture of the reasonable and the unreasonable, since his form joins the human and the bestial—as for example the Egyptians' Dog-headed Anubis—and that they even attributed to their gods deeds almost bestial. Hence, if the painter when he portrays Jupiter and Mars, Isis and Osiris, paints nothing but a human or animal form, since he cannot imitate divinity, so too the poet is an imitator not of divine forms and deeds, but mainly or properly of human ones. The difference between the imitator of divine and human things is thus as great as that between ideas proper and what we call images and likenesses. Among ideas too, as Aristotle observes in the first book of his *Metaphysics* (and his commentator Alexander agrees), there is this, or a comparable, difference between the rational and the irrational. It is no wonder, then, if images are similarly formed. But going back to Homer, I say that if he imitates the gods under the almost opposite guise of human forms, deeds, and passions, we may assert that he is an imitator of human actions and of those of the gods in so far as they are human. So too, in his battle of the frogs and mice, he transfers to animals words, feelings, and habits which are proper to men. I would therefore conclude that poetry is nothing but an imitation of human actions, which are properly imitable, and that all others are imitated not in themselves but by accident, and not as principal but as accessory. In this manner it is also possible to imitate the actions not only of animals, such as the battle of the unicorn and the elephant, or of the swan and the eagle, but also of nature, as sea storms, pestilence, floods, fire, earthquakes, and the like.

Furthermore, since, as we have said, every definition should look to the best, in defining poetry we have to set before ourselves an excellent purpose. But the best purpose is to help men by the example of human deeds, since the example of animals cannot be equally useful and that of divine actions is not suited to us. Poetry, therefore, should be directed to this purpose. Poetry, then, is an imitation of human actions, fashioned to teach us how to live. And since every action is performed with some reflection and choice, poetry will deal with moral habit and with thought, which the Greeks called διάνοια.[11] And although such imitation affords immense pleasure, one cannot say that the purposes are two, one being pleasure, the other utility, as Horace seems to have suggested in the line,

> Poets aim either to benefit, or to amuse,[12]

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[7]See Plato, pp. 18–19.

[8]See Isocrates, *To Nicocles* 48–9. The passage presents a number of difficulties. We follow Poma's reading *usarono* (for *usiamo* in the text of 1594—see Poma, p. 300, note to 65, 26), and translate *falsamente* 'in fictions' to approximate Tasso's words both to the passage in Isocrates and to his own meaning.

[9]'The divine rather to us.' Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* I. 26. 65. Cicero in fact writes *divina mallem ad nos*, and Tasso slightly blurs the point of the passage: 'Homer . . . attributed human feelings to the gods: I had *rather* he had attributed *divine feelings* to us.'

[10]I. 9. 20B ff.

[11]From Aristotle's *Poetics* VI. 16. See p. 53. Tasso uses *costume* (usually in the plural *costumi*) to translate ἦθος and *sentenzia* (elsewhere *sentenza*, the equivalent of Latin *sententia*) to translate διάνοια.

[12]Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae. (*Ars Poetica* 333.)

for one single art cannot have two purposes, one independent of the other. Either it should set aside the benefit of warning and advising, as Isocrates holds, and in accordance with the example of Homer and the tragic poets turn the whole force of its words entirely to delight; or, if it wishes to be useful, it should direct its pleasure to this end. It may be that pleasure directed to usefulness is the end of poetry. That is why we read in Isocrates's second oration[13] that the ancient poets left instructions for life, as a result of which men became better, and in the *Panathenaicus* that poetry deters us from many crimes. That is why no other training is more suitable for the young. Its usefulness, however, is rather to be judged by the art which is the architect of the others: the statesman is the one who ought to consider what poetry and what delight to forbid so that pleasure, which should be like the honey smeared on a cup when one gives medicine to a child, may not affect us like deadly poison or keep our minds idle. The poet then is to set as his purpose not delight—the opinion incidentally of Eratosthenes, which Strabo picked up, defending Homer against accusations—but usefulness, because poetry, as that author, following the view of the ancients, held, is a first philosophy which instructs us from our early years in moral habits and the principles of life. Indeed his followers held that only the poet is wise.

We should at least grant that the end of poetry is not just any enjoyment but only that which is coupled with virtue, since it is utterly unworthy of a good poet to give the pleasure of reading about base and dishonest deeds, but proper to give the pleasure of learning together with virtue. Hence perhaps the purpose of pleasure (as Fracastoro held in his *Dialogue on Poetry*)[14] is not to be scorned; on the contrary, to aim at pleasure is nobler than to aim at profit, since enjoyment is sought for itself, and other things for its sake. In this respect it is like happiness, which is man's goal as citizen; indeed nothing can be found more like happiness. Besides, it favours virtue since it exalts human nature, as we read in Athenaeus; wherefore those who love enjoyment usually become generous and magnificent. But the useful is not sought for itself but for something else; this is why it is a less noble purpose than pleasure and has less resemblance to the final purpose. Then if the poet as such has this aim, he will not wander far from the mark to which he should address his thoughts as an archer points his arrows. But as a citizen, or at least in so far as his art is subordinate to the queen of the arts, he seeks the sort of profit that is virtuous rather than useful.

Of the two ends, therefore, that the poet sets himself, one pertains to his art, the other to the higher art. But in regarding his own end, he must be careful that he does not through excess fall into the very opposite, for virtuous delights are contrary to vicious ones. They merit no praise at all, therefore, who have described amorous embraces in the fashion of Ariosto depicting Ruggiero with Alcina, or Ricciardetto with Fiordispina. And perhaps Trissino too might better have kept silent about many things when he virtually sets before our eyes the amorous pleasure that the emperor Justinian took in his wife. But he meant to imitate Homer, who feigns that Juno and Jupiter on the summit of Mount Ida were covered by a cloud, an invention that [Bernardo] Tasso charmingly carries over in his *Amadigi*,[15] when he describes the embrace of Mirinda and Alidoro, as though to hint that the rest must be hidden under a cloud of silence. Virgil is decidedly modest about the love-making of Aeneas and Dido, and only briefly mentions what followed the rain sent by Juno:

'To the same cave came Dido and the Trojan chief, etc.'[16]

Thus, as we have said, poetry is an imitation of human actions with the purpose of being useful by pleasing, and the poet is an imitator who could, as many have, use his art to delight without profiting. If he avoids that, he is a good poet, and in this perhaps like the orator, who is judged, as Aristotle held,[17] not only for his skill but for his will, and unlike the dialectician, who is esteemed not for his disposition but for his talent. Occasionally a definition defines not the thing simply, but the thing in its perfection, as Aristotle himself says in the *Topics*. To this type belongs the definition of the orator as the man who knows everything worthy of belief on any matter whatever, and overlooks nothing—he is indeed the faultless orator. Perhaps this definition is what moved Strabo, the first to say that the poet's virtue accompanies that of the man, and that no one can be a good poet who is not a good man.[18] Later Quintilian was inspired to define the orator as a good man trained in speaking, disregarding the words of Aristotle, which call him not a good man, but a good orator.[19] I doubt, however, that this definition of Quin-

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[13] *To Nicocles* 43.

[14] Girolamo Fracastoro, *Naugerius, sive De Poetrica Dialogus*, tr. Ruth Kelso (Urbana, Illinois, 1924), especially pp. 66–71, where Navagero explains the great utility of poetry.

[15] Canto 34.

[16] Speluncam Dido dux et Troianus eandem deveniunt, etc. (*Aeneid* 4. 165–6.)

[17] *Rhetoric* 1, 2, 1356ª.

[18] The *locus classicus* on the poet as a good man appears in Strabo's *Geography* 1. 25.

[19] Tasso may have in mind Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 2. 15. 33–5 and Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2. 1. 3–7.

tilian's deserved the reproach of Cavalcanti, since the perfectly equipped orator could not really be defined otherwise. To be sure, goodness is no part of his skill, but a perfection of his moral nature. But if any objection is to be made, that of Alexander of Aphrodisias is applicable: this kind of definition defines not the whole but the part. And perhaps Quintilian did not mean to apply his definition to all, but only to the perfect orator. Similarly, in the definition of the poet, whoever says that the poet is both a good man and a good imitator of human actions and moral habits, whose purpose is profit with delight, may not be giving a definition that fits all poets; but he does define the most excellent.

Well then, if the poet is an imitator of human actions and habits, poetry will be an imitation of the same things; and if he is a good imitator, his poetry will be good. Some, however, have maintained that the poet is not to regard the goodness of things so much as their beauty. Among them is Navagero, in Fracastoro, where he proves that the poet's aim is to consider the idea of the beautiful,[20] and almost contradicts the view of Aristotle in his *Ethics* that the idea is not practically useful at all. But whatever Aristotle held on that point, and however his Greek commentator explained it, I certainly cannot object to the poet's concentrating on the idea of beauty. Still, if the ideas to which the orator is accustomed to direct his gaze are several, as Hermogenes liked to think, I don't know why the poet must consider only that of beauty, and not the other six as well. But apparently Navagero thought that the form of beauty contains all the others or that the beautiful appears in all of them, in as much as the beautiful is inherent in clarity, grandeur, swiftness, passion, gravity, and truth. And if I am not mistaken, Navagero wanted clarity to be not only clear, but at once clear and beautiful; and so with all the other forms. But since this issue belongs particularly to diction, I shall deal with it when I come to discuss the art of using words.

Now, the opinion of Maximus of Tyre does not seem to me contemptible, that philosophy and poetry are two in name but of a single substance, as light is in respect to the sun. He defines poetry as a philosophy ancient in time, metrical in sound, fictitious in subject. But philosophy, according to him, is a youthful poetry, looser in rhythm, and more open in its arguments. Now my view is that the manner of considering things differentiates one from the other: poetry considers them in as much as they are beautiful, and philosophy in as much as they are good, as the same author elsewhere notes, saying that Homer had to do two things, one pertaining to philosophy, the other to poetry, that there he regarded virtue, here the image of the fable.[21] Poetry then seeks and yearns for beauty and strives to reveal it in two ways: one narration, the other representation, both of which are contained under imitation as their genus. But sometimes it is named from one particular manner of imitation. Those therefore who have defined poetry as a narration of a memorable and possible human action have offered a definition applicable not to all kinds of poetry but only to the epic poem, or the heroic, if we prefer that name; they have excluded tragedy and comedy, unless the term narration involves an ambiguity which they might have cleared up better with the help of Aristotle's authority, as I have occasionally done, and others too more perfectly. We shall say then that narrating is proper to the epic, the name used for those who write of the deeds of heroes, as by Cicero, for example, and Eustathius, the commentator on Homer. And a further difference between epic poetry and tragedy, besides the mode, arises from the difference in the means or instruments employed to imitate; for tragedy, in order to purge the soul, uses rhythm and harmony in addition to verse. Epic and tragedy differ then in two ways: in the means they use to imitate and in their mode of imitating. They agree in one element, the things imitated, since tragedy too, as Aristotle says in the *Problems,* represents the actions of heroes. But from comedy the heroic poem differs in every way since it differs also in the things and persons imitated. Let us put aside tragedy and comedy, as well as the kind of narrative which resembles comedy as the *Iliad* resembles tragedy in that it imitates base things as Homer did in the *Margites,* in imitation of which perhaps our poet created Margut.[22] My chief intention is not to discuss these and other species.

I say that the heroic poem is an imitation of an action noble, great, and perfect, narrated in the loftiest verse, with the aim of giving profit through delight, so that the delight may get us to read more willingly and thus not lose the profit. But all poetry, of course, profits by delighting: tragedy profits by delighting, and so too comedy. Now the end of each ought to be peculiar to it: as the art of making bridles has one aim and that of making halberds another, although both are subordinate to the art of war and directed to the single goal it sets, in the same way tragedy should have one

[20] Cf. *Naugerius,* tr. Kelso, p. 69.

[21] The first reference to Maximus of Tyre is to *Dissertationes* 29, end of 169, where poetry as compared to philosophy is said to be 'tempore vetustior, harmonia metrica, argumento fabulosa'. The second reference is apparently to 16. 95B, where philosophy is compared in this respect with painting, but at the end of the passage Homer is said to have done two things in his books, 'quorum alterum ad poësin pertinet, et fabulae speciem habet: alterum ad Philosophiam, et virtutem commendat, veritatem docet'.

[22] Tasso writes *nostri poeti* implying that Margut also appears in works other than Pulci's *Morgante.*

end, comedy another, the epic poem another still—or another effect since the form of each thing is distinguished by its proper effect. Now the effect of tragedy is to purge the soul by terror and compassion, and that of comedy is to move laughter at base things (as Maggi declares in his separate study *De Ridiculis*). From this effect comedy derives its usefulness, since as we laugh at the baseness we see in others, we grow ashamed to commit similar baseness. The epic poem ought therefore to afford its own delight with its own effect—which is perhaps to move wonder, an effect that seems far from peculiar to it, since tragedy too moves wonder, as the words of Isocrates that I have already cited suggest: 'That is why Homer's poetry and those who first conceived of tragic plays are worthy of admiration.'[23] Still we may argue that if wonder arises from novelty, Homer's poetry might seem wonderful, but not tragedy, which dealt many years later with the same subjects, long familiar to everyone throughout Greece—unless perhaps it was the new mode of handling that made what was worn by time and use seem marvellous, as it no longer did in later tragedians. Still many statements in Aristotle's *Poetics* imply that tragedy should move wonder, and particularly this:

> since tragedy represents not only a complete action but also incidents that cause fear and pity, and this happens most of all when the incidents are unexpected and yet one is a consequence of the other. For in that way the incidents will cause more amazement than if they happened mechanically and accidentally, etc.[24]

Moreover, marvellous events make horror and pity easier to induce. And comedy too moves wonder, baseness alone without wonder being insufficient to make us laugh at things that seem ugly: when the wonder or novelty stops, laughter too stops. All the same, to move wonder fits no kind of poetry so much as epic: so Aristotle[25] teaches, and Homer himself in Hector's flight; for the wonder that almost stuns us as we see one man alone dismaying an entire army with his threats and gestures would be inappropriate to tragedy, yet makes the epic poem marvellous. Nor would the death of Hector or others be appropriate on stage; these, as Philostratus tells in the *Life of Apollonius,* were forbidden by Aeschylus, who indeed won the name 'father of tragedy' because he largely mitigated its crudity. Nor would the metamorphosis of Cadmus into a serpent, which Ovid quite properly narrated, be appropriate to the stage, nor that of Arethusa, or the nymphs transformed into ships[26] in Virgil, or Proteus into the many shapes described in the *Georgics* and earlier in the *Odyssey,* nor that in the circle of thieves of which Dante boasts: 'Let Ovid be silent about Cadmus and Arethusa; for if in his lines he turns him into a serpent and her into a fountain, I do not grudge it to him.'[27] So too with the metamorphosis in Boccaccio of Fileno[28] into a spring, or in Boiardo of the sorcerer into various shapes,[29] or of Ariosto's Astolfo into myrtle.[30] And so too with many other transformations that we read of with wonder in many other poets, ancient and modern. We gladly read in epic about many wonders that might be unsuitable on stage, both because they are proper to epic and because the reader allows many liberties which the spectator forbids. The use of machines is seldom therefore praised in tragedy, while in the epic gods and angels frequently descend from heaven and participate in human actions, giving counsel and help, as Apollo and Minerva do in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer and in the *Ercole* of Giraldi, Venus in Virgil's *Aeneid* and in Bolognetti, and many other gods in these and other poems. So too the angel Michael descends in *Orlando Furioso*[31] and the angel Palladio and Nettunio in the *Italia Liberata.*[32] Thus all these poems seem conceived and brought to a conclusion virtually by providence itself, to which tragedy grants scarcely any role since there it would also cause indignation, which Aristotle did not allow.[33] Giraldi and others, therefore, should not have introduced Nemesis on the stage. Moreover, other kinds of poem move wonder in order to move laughter or compassion or some other emotion. But the epic poet has no other purpose, moves compassion in order to move wonder, and in fact moves it much more powerfully and more often. We shall then say that the epic poem is an imitation of a noble action, great and perfect, narrated in the loftiest verse, with the purpose of moving the mind to wonder and thus being useful.

The epic poem, like any other thing that is a whole, has its components. Its qualitative components are doubtless four: [First is] the fable, which Aristotle defines as the imi-

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[23] Tasso gives the passage from *To Nicocles* 48–9 in Italian.
[24] *Poetics* IX, 11–12. See p. 55.
[25] *Poetics* XXIV, 8. See p. 63.

[26] Tasso miswrites *delle ninfe converse in navi* (of the nymphs transformed into ships) for the transformation of the ships into nymphs in *Aeneid* 9. 80–122.
[27] Taccia di Cadmo e d'Aretusa Ovidio;
ché se quello in serpente e questa in fonte
converte poetando, io non l'invidio.
(*Inferno* 25. 97–9.)
[28] In *Filocolo.*
[29] *Orlando Furioso* 6. 26–53.
[30] Cantos 5 ff.
[31] Malagigi in *Orlando Innamorato.*
[32] Canto 14.
[33] *Poetics* XV, 7.

[34] *Poetics* VI, 7–18.
[35] *Morgante* 27. 149–53.

tation of the action and for its sake of those who perform the action—this part he calls the first principle and soul of the poem. The second is the moral habit of the persons introduced in the fable. The third is thought. The last is diction.[34] But the number of quantitative parts is more doubtful, although they can perhaps be divided into another four thus: in the first part, which corresponds to the prologue of tragedy, the poet proposes, narrates, declares the present state of things, and supplies information about the past, as Homer does in his poems, particularly the *Odyssey;* in the second part, things become disturbed; in the third they begin to unravel; in the fourth they reach their end, their completion, so to speak. And if we wish to use their proper names, they can be called the introduction, the perturbation, the reversal, and the conclusion. Among these I have not counted the episode, although this part is proper to both tragic and epic poems, more in fact to epic, since there its place is not fixed, as the quantitative parts must be. One might also take the quantitative parts as only three: the beginning, the middle, and the end, as Aristotle calls them in defining the whole. But this division is more appropriate to poems whose fable is not involved but simple. The parts of the fable are three. [First is] the reversal, which the Greeks called peripeteia, a change from good to bad fortune or from bad to good; in the heroic poem it is a double change, because some characters pass from prosperity to adversity and others the reverse. Still it ought always to be a change for the better because the happier ending is more suitable to this kind of poem. Pulci, therefore, does not merit much praise for ending with the death of Orlando and other paladins.[35] The second part of the fable is recognition, a passing from ignorance to knowledge of persons once known and later forgotten, whether simple, as that of Ulysses, or mutual, as between Iphigenia and Orestes; and this passage should cause either happiness or misery. The third part is *pathos,* that is a grievous perturbation full of anxieties, such as deaths and wounds and lamentations and complaints, which can move pity; and this part can be seen at the end of the *Iliad.*

Now, having ascertained the nature of this noblest kind of poem and its parts, we may proceed to consider with what art they may be composed, and then judge the definition of the idea. We shall also give some attention to the material, because artificial forms involve consideration of their material. And by the material of poetry I do not mean letters, syllables, words, as Scaliger did, since these may be the materials of both speech and verse; the material of poetry to my mind is properly defined as the subject which it undertakes to treat. As Porphyry says, in all things a certain something is usually present that corresponds proportionally to matter and form; and this is not properly the end, as Scaliger thought, because the matter is never the end, nor are the material and the final cause the same. Rather, the formal and final causes usually go together; as the Latins say, they coincide. The end, therefore, is the form given by the skill of the poet, who, by adding, diminishing, and varying, disposes the matter and gives another aspect to the action and things he deals with.

Here I would make a fresh start in my treatment of the poet's art if I were not faced with an objection Castelvetro makes against Aristotle: that he ought not to have dealt with the poetic before the historic art, since just as history precedes poetry and truth verisimilitude, so the art of setting down the true should be given first, and then that of adorning the verisimilar—which might not be necessary after the first. Such an opinion strikes me as based on two fundamental concepts, one altogether false: that history precedes poetry. For poets are the most ancient of all writers, and historians began to write centuries later; for which reason we ought not to call that art first whose matter was born later. Moreover, if the historian's art allows a place to rhythm, ornament, and figures of speech, who does not know that these were virtually lent to the writer by the poet? Neither the orator nor others who write prose have therefore anything that is not, so to speak, usurped. But if Castelvetro or others should reply that history, although perhaps second in time, comes first in nature in as much as it sets down the true, which precedes its semblance, I would answer that the poet considers the verisimilar only as it is universal, and therefore it was correct to give precedence to the art of writing on the universal. Nor need we argue whether the universal exists before or after particular things; as Aristotle said more than once, it is enough that it is better known. Aristotle did not give instructions for writing history, perhaps because he thought it a simpler matter. If it belongs to the orator, rhetorical precepts are enough; and if it has some things of its own, as Demetrius Phalereus[36] implies (assigning one kind of sentence structure to the historian, another to the orator), this is not enough to justify a distinct and separate art. The same skill can be employed on the true and the verisimilar. In fact when Aristotle says that poetry deals rather with the universal, he implies the function of history, which is to narrate the particular. But this is not imitating, since imitation is by its nature linked not with truth, but with verisimilitude. Historians, then,

[34] *Poetics* VI, 7–18.
[35] *Morgante* 27, 149–53.
[36] *On Style* 1, 19–21.

ought not to imitate; and if the speeches they include are not without imitation, it is usually because the historian does not narrate what was said in the senate or the army, but what is likely to have been said. Indeed the kind of oration appropriate to the historian is the indirect rather than the direct, as Trogus Pompeius thought. In many speeches in the Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon, and others later, one sees almost a poetic imitation, where the historian, not content with his own territory, seems to trespass on the confines of poetry. But these things, if I may, I shall examine in the proper place, putting on one side of the scale the judgement of Polybius, who both wrote history and taught how it should be written, and of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who wrote a commentary on Thucydides, and on the other the authority of Thucydides himself and the other two historians named above, as well as Livy and Sallust, the most highly esteemed Latin historians, who, if I am right, imitated the Greeks. This imitation, however, is not the kind we are discussing, nor the kind Fracastoro meant,[37] which is unsuitable to the historian. Thus, given the diversity of writers and their views, it will not seem superfluous to deal with the historian's art. But now I propose to write of the things I have begun.

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[37]See Fracastoro, *Naugerius*, tr. Kelso, pp. 56 ff.