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Reed Way Dasenbrock, Imitating the Italians: Wyatt, Spenser, Synge, Pound, Joyce

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Imitating The Italians: Wyatt, Spenser, Synge, Pound, Joyce. By Reed Way Dasenbrock. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991. Pp. xiv + 282. $36.95. 0-8018-4147-X.

This formidably wide-ranging study is founded on the disarmingly simple proposition that imitation, undertaken in a creative spirit, can help a writer to find an authentic voice, whereas dogged replication of another's gestures may lead to an abdication of the flexibility and humanity that keep ideas from hardening into ideologies. Dasenbrock does not treat this as an ahistorical axiom but rather as a transhistorical phenomenon, a condition of artistic creativity that assumes as

many forms as there are imitative and imitable authors and cultures. As a theorist of influence, Dasenbrock shares a central assumption with Harold Bloom: that writers define themselves, personally and artistically, in relation to precursors, and that the act of imitating transforms the past even as it constitutes the self. But Dasenbrock differs profoundly with his flamboyant critical precursor on just about everything else, maintaining that the five authors of his study eagerly and anxiously sought the influence of Italian models, and that by sincerely imitating — whether as translators or as exploiters of themes and forms — they went beyond their sources to discover themselves, a transaction consistent, Dasenbrock notes, with Petrarch's understanding of imitation. Claiming that "for much of English history . . . Italy was one of the key cultures against which England defined itself" (2), Dasenbrock points out that from 1600 until 1900, or between the death of Spenser and the birth of modernism, Italy was, for the English, a demonized "other," a *via negativa* for establishing cultural identity. Dasenbrock chooses to discuss the alternative tradition of actively embracing Italy as a spiritual *patria*. He begins with Sir Thomas Wyatt whose translations and imitations of Petrarch's poems were, he contends, transformations in the tradition of Petrarch himself, imitations that allowed the English poet to find his own idiom. Dasenbrock's discussion of Spenser is more ambitious. He contends that the *Amoretti* has seemed anomalous among English sonnet-sequences because Spenser was departing from Petrarchan love conventions in favor of a new, more balanced conception of love and marriage, one that paradoxically marked a return to aspects of Petrarch's poetry that had been overlooked or resisted by other English poets.

At this point, Dasenbrock turns to Books 3 and 4 of *The Faerie Queen*, arguing that the amorous relationships depicted therein implicitly critique the tendency of Petrarchan paradigms to place the lover in a double bind which "leads to a pathological situation and often to a loss of identity" (57). He brings these assumptions to bear on the vexed question of Queen Elizabeth's allegorical presence in the epic and concludes that the contrast between Belphoebe and Britomart

implies a contrast between, on the one hand, the Queen's imitation of the Italian ideal of chastity (at her court and in her personal embodiment of virginity) and, on the other, a more Protestant and "English" conception that defined chastity as married love. Ultimately, he provocatively suggests, the Queen's Italianism was an unhealthy form of imitation, whereas Spenser's transformative relation to Petrarch looked ahead to a new England and a national identity that would — and here the argument takes a piquant turn — increasingly define itself by means of the anti-Italianism noted earlier. He concludes Part I of the book with a fascinating chapter on John Synge, who translated a number of Petrarchan sonnets into the peasant cadences he famously deployed in his Irish Revival dramas. A delightful instantiation of the thesis that the best imitations combine fidelity to their models with creative resistance to them, this chapter adds appreciably to our understanding of Synge and forms an effective bridge to the discussions of Pound and Joyce in Part II.

Dasenbrock's interest in Joyce's Italianism makes him one of the few American critics to devote serious attention to this crucial dimension of Joyce's life and art. He convincingly shows that Giambattista Vico's interpretation of Homer provided Joyce with a model for his own epic of a society in transition (although I find his reading of the "Aeolus" episode of *Ulysses* somewhat unpersuasive). In a truly innovative chapter, he argues that Joyce's "mythical method" might be more accurately called the "operatic method," for in *Ulysses* Stephen Dedalus is bogged down in a jejune, ultimately debilitating imitation of Wagnerian heroic gestures, while, contra Wagner, Leopold Bloom embodies a healthy Mozartian relish for multiple roles and identities.

In contrast to Joyce's playful, ironic relationship to ideology, Ezra Pound's career reveals the dangers of imitating the Italians not wisely but too well. Dasenbrock's lucid interpretation of Pound's love affair with Italy and Italian culture is a major contribution to our understanding of this great but misguided American poet. He devotes a chapter to the little discussed affinities between Pound and the nineteenth-century poet Giacomo Leopardi, pointing out that both worked to build unified long poems from discrete lyrics

(again following in Petrarch's footsteps). In a later chapter, he examines Pound's interest in the Machiavellian concept of *virtù* — a leader's ability to act decisively and resourcefully in changing circumstances — and shows how this contributed to his admiration for figures as diverse (though for Pound as consubstantial) as Jefferson, John Adams, and Mussolini. Dasenbrock goes on to make the case that Pound's ideal of an enlightened leader was reinforced by his reading of Dante's *De Monarchia* with its argument for the necessity of a supreme secular ruler. Comparing Dante's epistolary fulminations against his native Florentines with Pound's frenzied Radio Rome broadcasts, Dasenbrock shows how Pound's "ideological" imitation of the Italians — unlike Joyce's winking "formal" emulations — led to his downfall and tragedy.

One of the minor felicities of this brilliant study is Dasenbrock's close attention to the volumes (particularly the annotated ones) in Pound's library, housed in the Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas. In this respect as in others, Dasenbrock's humane and readable book is itself a model for imitation, offering a method which others must pursue after him.

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