

Few modern scholars believe that past events can be known other than inferentially. National pride, personal bias, and a reverential respect for one's ancestors have been typical reasons for historians of all ages to distort the framework of the past. Historical feats are invariably greatly exaggerated, and the calamities, if mentioned at all, are understated or attributed to the wrath of God. Nevertheless, in earlier times men have maintained that past deeds have had something to tell them about the present and the envisaged future. Such an assumption that past experience can and should dictate present and future actions was totally accepted in the Middle Ages and, for a number of reasons which will be discussed in this essay, it obstinately persisted into the otherwise 'modern' world view of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain.

The medieval attitude towards lessons of the past was part of a comprehensive conception of the universe far removed from present-day ideas of scientific objectivity and progress. A brief glance at any medieval history verifies a substantial lack of belief in the past being different in quality from the present; and this intemporal conscience of contemporaneity was aggravated both by an uncritical attitude towards evidence as well as by a complete disinterest in material causation.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, the major reasons for an inadequate sense of history lie in the peculiar world view of the medieval scholar, who considered the universe absolutely closed to any kind of novelty or invention. Since there is a final truth regarding every subject, a thoughtful scribe at the court of Alfonso the Wise must have told himself, then there is no purpose in striving to discover new answers to old problems. Galen has said all there is to say about medicine, Euclid has revealed the secrets of geometry, and the truth about physics can be found in Aristotle. All knowledge is thus an established, finite body of material, and the scholarship of this matter is not a question of investigation and discovery, but rather of compilation and communication. An enterprising scholar may revamp ancient lore with interpretations and commentary, but essentially the corpus of information remains the same. In the words of the eminent Belgian scholar Edgar De Bruyne: "We should not, therefore, expect to find new and original definitions in the Middle Ages, for the medieval thinkers sought neither to discover nor to defend such definitions. They were satisfied with what they found in the old texts because, in their opinion, the latter conveyed not only the thought of Antiquity but also the very axioms of common sense, which is at the same time correct judgment."<sup>2</sup>

The task of the medieval scholar is thus relegated to the assimilation of this encyclopedic knowledge so as to pass it on to later generations; he is like the Patronio of Juan Manuel's *Conde Lucanor* who, faced with a contemporary problem, delves into recorded wisdom to draw up a similar circumstance which will guide him in understanding the present situation. As with Patronio, the transmission of knowledge is always the same: "Los enxiemplos más provechosos ... de las cosas que acaescieron."<sup>3</sup> As explained by José Antonio Maravall in a perceptive essay entitled "La concepción del saber en una sociedad tradicional": "Dos son las fuentes de toda doctrina, y éstas son: *praeceptis scilicet et exemplis*. Y aun se puede decir que las dos se reducen a una sola, puesto que el ejemplo es el hecho cuya observación

nos dará la ciencia y el precepto es la sentencia en que, tras la observación del ejemplo, se destila el saber que de él se saca. Ejemplo y precepto son las dos caras de un mismo saber.”<sup>4</sup>

The basis for the strong position of the exemplum in medieval literature is not difficult to ascertain. The thought of the times is permeated with the idea that everything in the terrestrial world is created by God for a purpose and therefore has some meaning to its existence: *Deus et natura nihil frustra faciunt* (Aristotle) is a popular commonplace of the age. There is therefore a logical preference for allegory, which objectifies the abstract ideas of the invisible universe, and symbolism, which gives meanings and purposes to the objects in the visible world. Man, for the medieval thinker, holds the loftiest position on the hierarchical scale which makes up this physical universe, all below existing for his use and purpose. Since the world is a fixed plenitude of symbols and examples at his service, man can consult nature as if it were a marvelous book of wisdom and consolation that invariably offers the best advice and guidance. As expressed in a later time (1640) by Diego de Saavedra Fajardo in *Idea de un príncipe político-cristiano*: “Todas las cosas animadas o inanimadas son hojas deste gran libro del mundo, obra de la naturaleza, donde la divina Sabiduría escribió todas las ciencias para que nos enseñasen y amonestasen a obrar.”<sup>5</sup> The numerous collections of examples so popular in the Middle Ages are in substance, then, direct imitations of the examples inherent in nature, presenting to the reader in a distilled and more coherent form the same material that, given enough time and experience, one could learn directly from the outside world.

Related to this exemplary view of nature is the archaic mentality of traditional cultures towards past events. In his penetrating study on the myth of the eternal return, Mircea Eliade dedicates a section to the dominant place exempla held in primitive societies. His basic premise is that “an object or an act becomes real only insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. Thus, reality is acquired solely through repetition or participation; everything which lacks an exemplary model is meaningless, i.e., it lacks reality. Men would thus have a tendency to become archetypal or paradigmatic.”<sup>6</sup>

Such a world view, Eliade declares, is characteristic of all societies that lack a sophisticated appreciation of chronological time; and any sense of ‘reality’ is relegated to its degree of participation in the timeless blueprint of actions in the remembered past. Thus, a person who wished to achieve a feeling of accomplishment from his deeds would have to coordinate them along the lines of a traditional model. In Eliade’s words: “The warrior, whoever he may be, imitates a hero and seeks to approach this archetypal model as closely as possible” (*Cosmos and History*, p. 37).

To complete the process, moreover, there is a constant in the human psyche of all cultures to ‘mythologize’ their great men to fit an exemplary model, the success of the warrior’s personal efforts notwithstanding. “This mythicization of the historical prototypes who gave the popular epic songs their heroes,” continues Eliade, “takes place in accordance with an exemplary standard; they are ‘formed in the image’ of the heroes of ancient Myth” (*Cosmos and History*, p. 42). Eliade thus finds that “the memory of historical events is modified, after two or three centuries, in such a way that it can enter into the mold of the archaic mentality, which cannot accept what is individual and preserves only what is exemplary.”<sup>7</sup>

It would seem that such a world view of space, time, and knowledge would be wholly incompatible to the breeding of any kind of objective historical consciousness; but with

the writings of Petrarch the medieval universe begins to crack. According to Myron P. Gilmore,<sup>8</sup> Petrarch's conception of history has three components, two distinctly modern, and one hauntingly traditional. In a modern vein, Petrarch achieved a sense of historical distance in his writings, clearly differentiating between classical antiquity and the Christian era; and he strived for a correct understanding of the ancients by critical and philological studies of the texts. In the medieval vein, however, Petrarch adhered to and even expanded the concept of historical exempla. Gilmore says: "There is the conception that to the extent to which this past can be recovered it provides moral lessons for a future generation. History is philosophy teaching by example in which the past, if correctly understood, informs and instructs the present" (*Humanists and Jurists*, p. 18).

Gilmore does not explain why the exemplary tradition should so interest Renaissance historians; in fact, he states that the idea passes out of use around 1600.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the inherent tendency of the human mind to idealize its heroes according to a fundamental blueprint of actions is an ever present factor in the persistence of exempla. For Petrarch, however, as for the entire Renaissance, a more immediate influence was the popularity of Neo-platonism and related ideas of formal perfection. Castiglione's *The Courtier*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and many other handbooks presenting an archetype of ideal actions were characteristic of Renaissance man's striving for universal forms. The contemporary historiographers were definitely within the mainstream of this literary Neo-platonic current, and attempted to portray through history the universal ideal of a warrior, statesman, or politician. As stated by the modern scholar Peter Burke: "What mattered to the Renaissance historian was not to convey any precise indication of the individuality of *this* man, or to describe precisely what was said or done on *this* occasion, but to give a general impression of *a* leader, *a* battle, *an* oration. If the evidence was not available, it was permissible – and here is the rub – to invent" (*The Renaissance*, p. 106, italics his).

The medieval notion of the example, then, persisted for various reasons without interruption into the Golden Age; and, characteristically, the finite body of wisdom illuminated by exempla included the history of past actions and events. The many medieval tales relating the deeds of such ancient figures as Alexander, Julius Caesar, or King David were considered as worthy of intellectual and moral consideration as was the visible world of nature; and with the appearance in the late Middle Ages of *Estorias* and *Crónicas* the influence of history as a source-book of illustrative lessons became progressively stronger.

By the Golden Age a significant change of focus has occurred, for the intellectual climate has finally reached the cultural level to appreciate the glories of the immediate past. Writers therefore urge their readers to consider the examples of their national heroes and kings as proper objects for imitation. Such a shift from ancient types to remembered ancestors is especially apparent in the historical and political writers of the period. Gerónimo de Zevallos tells Felipe IV: "Buen ejemplo tiene V. Magestad en los señores Reyes sus progenitores, siguiendo el valor del señor Emperador Carlos quinto, la prudencia del gran Monarca del mundo Felipe segundo, la piedad y Christiandad de la Magestad del señor Felipe tercero. Haziendo lo que haze un pintor que retrata una imagen. Porque de otra suerte (como dize Isocrates) torpe cosa sería que no obre un hijo (imitando sus padres) lo que haze un pintor retratando la pintura."<sup>10</sup> In another treatise, written in 1656, one reads: "Sirvan de espejos al Príncipe los retratos de sus progenitores";<sup>11</sup> and Diego de Saavedra Fajardo affirms that "la historia le refiere los heroicos hechos de sus antepasados, cuya gloria, eternizada en la

estampa, le incite a imitación" (*Idea de un príncipe*, p. 13).

As acknowledged in these illustrations, the use of the visual or intellectual example is so ingrained in historical thought that literary artists view the careers of certain heroes and kings as a blueprint of actions for virtually every aspect of politics. The diligent reader sees in the life of an honored person an immense example *in toto* worthy of imitation, where the hero's birth, childhood, historical deeds, and death represent necessary aspects of the highly coordinated central exemplum. Such an idea of the hero and his function as a model allows Juan Márquez to employ the example of Moses in setting forth the ideal picture of the Christian governor,<sup>12</sup> and Juan Pablo Mártir to recount the lives of Romulus, Seneca, Maecenas, and the Duke of Birón in an attempt to present the reader with perfect examples of famous men whose footsteps are worthy of following (see Juan Pablo Mártir Rizo, '*Norte de príncipes*' y '*Vida de Rómulo*', ed. José Antonio Maravall [Madrid, 1945]). José Laynez adheres to the exemplary tradition in his treatise entitled *El privado cristiano deducido de las vidas de Joseph y Daniel* (Madrid, 1641), while Francisco de Moncón sets the figure of Solomon before the reader as the mirror for Christian princes.<sup>13</sup> In each case, the Golden Age author depicts a particular hero as an outline of the virtues, strengths, and astuteness necessary for the making of a worthy prince. These past heroes, many of which are quasi-legendary, come to represent for future generations the fundamental examples *par excellence* of the perfect leader. They lose any human aspect they might have possessed and emerge as external models of an ever present contemporaneity, in which the past becomes the counselor of the present. As the modern historian Felix Gilbert observes: "History can encourage man by calling into his mind the achievement of the *virii illustres*.... It provided illustrative material for the teaching of moral philosophy."<sup>14</sup>

One of the fundamental purposes of Spanish Golden Age historiography, then, is to offer archetypal examples of virtuous and malign men and events to the future which are worthy of either imitation or reprobation; and for the literary critics of the period there is little doubt but that history is capable of accomplishing such an effect. As pointed out by the contemporary scholar Luis Alfonso de Carballo in the following passage, history is by its very nature doctrinal: "Por ella [history] sabemos los hechos ajenos, por donde venimos a conocer y corregir los propios; ella enseña lo que se debe huir, y lo que se ha de seguir, sirve de freno a los tyranos, de espuelas a los magnanimos Reyes."<sup>15</sup>

Because historical literature offers to the reader such highly stylized past experiences by means of doctrinal examples worthy of imitation, the effect is, as well as doctrinal, educational. José Antonio Maravall, in his valuable study *La teoría española del estado en el siglo XVII* (Madrid, 1944), presents a precise definition of the purpose for these works: "La siembra de ciertas convicciones en la mente del lector para que después los actos de la persona respondan a la doctrina de aquél. Y esto es la educación. El fin práctico de estos libros es educar al que los lea" (*Teoría española*, p. 33). It follows that the reader will perceive in these exemplary histories that certain military and political exploits achieve desirable results and that, conversely, other ill-motivated deeds bring disaster; and he will strive accordingly to formulate his future policies along the lines of past successes. Eventually, the accumulation of efficacious examples will lead to the formation of a storehouse of intellectual tools to solve virtually any problem. He will have acquired certain procedural habits which, being habits, will automatically influence his every action. "Lo que ahora se persigue," continues Maravall, "es educar a la voluntad, de modo que una norma conocida

intelectualmente influya y oriente el acto y que por la reiteración de éste se consiga un hábito de la voluntad."<sup>16</sup>

Diego de Saavedra Fajardo, perhaps the most important political theorist of the period, succinctly summarizes this whole schema, embellishing it with a key addition: "La historia es maestra de la verdadera política, y quien mejor enseñará a reinar al príncipe, porque en ella *está presente la experiencia de todos los gobiernos pasados y juicio de los que fueron*" (*Idea de un príncipe*, p. 19, italics mine). Clearly, the formation of empty habits in the will would not be enough to guarantee a public figure success in world affairs; there would have to be some spiritual substance present to validate the habit's worth. And this is where the reader's imagination and own psychosomatic disposition takes a part. He must in some way experience within himself the deeds of which he reads, for it is the inner experience that makes the exempla worthy of imitation. Furthermore, the very fact that history presents itself as an experience to the reader's emotions gives solid authority to past deeds: "Historia y experiencia son dos aspectos de una misma realidad, y una y otra son, para el hombre del XVI y XVII, recíprocamente reversibles; la historia es experiencia, la experiencia historia."<sup>17</sup>

The above statement by Enrique Tierno Galván implies that, since history and experience are one and the same thing, the reader can gain an experience by reading the histories of his predecessors that is similar in its psychological impact on the ego to the original one; it has the same effect on the peruser as if he himself had accomplished such glories. In speaking of history, Luis Alfonso de Cañballo states: "Tienen otro bien las historias que mediante ellas podemos dezir somos viejos, pues sabemos lo que pudieramos saber si fuéramos nacidos en aquellos tiempos que sucedieron" (*Cisne*, II, 47). History, in effect, *is* experience. It is not merely hypothetical reliving of past deeds recorded in chronicles that the reader undergoes; rather he actually 'lives' the events in his own psychological and physical self. The reader gains the experience *qua* experience, for he becomes a "viejo" who has formed such habits for good works that he instinctively imitates *ad litteram* the examples presented in history. To carry the analogy one step further, the introspective reading of history is thought to be more efficacious than the original experience, for the vicarious reader can ponder the deed and squeeze out the very essence of meaning and significance. Miguel de Cervantes writes in his *Persiles y Sigismunda*: "Las lecciones de los libros muchas veces hacen más cierta experiencia de las cosas, que no la tienen los mismos que las han visto, a causa que el que lee con atención repara una y muchas veces en lo que va leyendo, y con esto excede a la lección la vista" (Book III, Chapter VIII).

To believe that such an experiential process could be valid, these scholars and critics must have adhered to a theory of history that viewed all human actions as fundamentally uniform in execution and outcome. Indeed, they maintained that the attentive reader who conscientiously applied the lessons history presented to him would be accomplishing precisely the same deeds as heroes of the past. Accidentally, the situation was different, being in another time and place; but substantially it was the same. A representative thinker of the time, Tomás Cerdán de Tallada, thus views history as a constantly recurring, never changing series of events: "Con la memoria de las cosas passadas y que en otros tiempos han sucedido, se ve a los que puede acaescer en los tiempos venideros, y en los hechos, y acaescimientos del mundo, vemos que los casos y cosas que suceden, por la mayor parte, son semejantes a las que ya en otros tiempos acaescieron."<sup>18</sup> And the Jesuit Francisco Garau presents as still deeper insight into the correlation of timeless history and the validity of imitating past



archetypes: "Quien quiere antever lo que ha de sucederle, deve estudiar en las historias lo que en otros reynados sucedió. Porque en los acontecimientos humanos, si se pasan los siglos y los individuos se mudan, las causas y los sucessos o son muy parecidos o los mismos. Passan y se mudan continuamente las aguas; pero siempre se queda el mismo río. No siempre son los mismos los que son Vassallos y Reyes; pero siempre son Reyes los que mandan y Vassallos los que obedecen: y en lo que pasó en los passados deve prevenirse lo que passará en los presentes. Si aquí concurren y se cevan las causas que allí obraron, é cómo no han de producir los mismos efectos?"<sup>19</sup>

The pedagogical role of the exemplum in medieval literature thus persists in Golden Age thought with a vitally new persuasive force. Since the records of past events are considered part of a finite, given, never changing body of material, and since the structure of heroic deeds is constantly repeated throughout time, historical literature continues to possess the doctrinal capability to present exempla of past deeds that should be faithfully imitated, for similar occurrences assuredly will recur in the predictable future. The eventual result of this intellectual ability to prepare for future events is no less than the attainment of man's most precious item, Prudence: *Id enim est sapientis providere; ex quo sapientia est appellata prudentia* (Cicero). In the words of Francisco Garau: "La estudiosidad de la historia suele ser la madre más feliz de la Prudencia, y la que la pare con menos dolor. Ella con ayuda de un reparo observante y reflexo sobre los acaecimientos presentes, notando los errores y precipicios de lo pasado, sabe prevenir y burlar los imminentes y convertir en aciertos los peligros. Sin esto no creo que se pueda ni poseer la Prudencia adquirida ni reynar con alabanza" (*Tercera parte del Sabio*, p. 230).

In many ways, such an empirical rationalization of history's purpose is decidedly modern; but on the whole the blind faith in exemplary truths is persistently medieval. Yet no matter the age, with the attainment of Prudence, the reader will have achieved the doctrinal goal of every exemplum, whether in literature, art, science, or history.

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## Notes

- 1 For a more detailed discussion see Peter Burke, *The Renaissance and the Sense of the Past* (New York, 1969), pp. 1-7.
- 2 *The Esthetics of the Middle Ages*, trans. Eileen B. Hennessy (New York, 1969), p. 1.
- 3 Don Juan Manuel, *El Conde Lucanor*, ed. Angel González Palencia (Editorial Ebro, 1960), p. 20.
- 4 In *Estudios de historia del pensamiento español: Edad Media* (Madrid, 1967), pp. 225-226.
- 5 BAE, XXV, 108.
- 6 *Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1959), p. 34.
- 7 *Cosmos and History*, p. 44. A number of recent articles have demonstrated the propensity of Golden Age writers, the dramatists in particular, to fashion their heroes after ancient models, especially King David. See William C. McCrary, "Guillén de Castro and the *Moçedades* of Rodrigo: A Study of Tradition and Innovation," *Romance Studies in Memory of Edward Billings Ham* (Hayward-California, 1967), pp. 89-102; Russell P. Sebold, "Un David Español, o 'Galán divino'; El Cid contrarreformista de Guillén de Castro," *Homage to John M. Hill* (Indiana University, 1968), pp. 217-242; and my article "The Unity of *Las paces de los reyes y judía de Toledo*," *Symposium*, XXV (1971), 225-235.
- 8 "The Renaissance Conception of the Lessons of History," in *Humanists and Jurists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 1-37.
- 9 The use of historical exempla assuredly fell into disuse in most parts of Europe by 1600; yet, as Monroe Z. Hafer points out in *Gracián and Perfection* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), "while the use of this material waned after the fifteenth century elsewhere in Europe, exempla continued to attract Spanish orators and writers throughout the seventeenth century. They are a well-established vehicle of exposition in all the treatises on prin-

- ces, heroes, and courtiers" (p. 10).
- 10 *Arte real para el buen gobierno de los Reyes, y Príncipes, y de sus vassallos* (Toledo, 1623), "Dedicatoria al Rey."
  - 11 Diego Enríquez de Villegas, *El Príncipe en la Idea* (Madrid, 1656), p. 42.
  - 12 *El Governador Chistiano* (Madrid, 1651).
  - 13 *Libro primero del Espejo del Príncipe Chistiano* (Lisboa, 1571).
  - 14 "The Renaissance Interest in History," in *Art, Science, and History in the Renaissance*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore, 1967), p. 376.
  - 15 *Cisne de Apolo*, ed. Alberto Porqueras Mayo (2 vols.; Madrid, 1958), II, 45.
  - 16 *Teoría española*, p. 41. The pedagogical elements in the instillation of virtue as the motive for the political treatises has also been treated extensively by María Angeles Galino Carrillo, *Los tratados sobre educación de príncipes: Siglos XVI y XVII* (Madrid, 1948). In Chapter VII ("El hábito virtuoso, culminación de la pedagogía," pp. 139-160), Galino stresses that the purpose of education is to form a habit in the will to do good works *naturally*, since, as she says, "la educación sería incompleta si cada vez que la voluntad ha de prevalecer sobre el apetito inferior se viese obligada a realizar un alarde de fuerza, dado caso que 'la inclinación del hombre según su interior naturaleza jamás se ajusta a la ley de la razón'" (p. 147). Neither Galino nor Maravall, however, perceive the necessary role of experience to complete the educative process.
  - 17 Enrique Tierno Galván, *El tacitismo en las doctrinas políticas del siglo de oro español* (Murcia, 1949), p. 55.
  - 18 *Verdadero gobierno desta monarchía* (Valencia, 1581), 15<sup>v</sup>-16<sup>r</sup>. There is no doubt about the commonality of these ideas in Golden Age literature. Lope de Vega expresses the same sense of history in one of his poems: "El mundo ha sido siempre de una suerte: / ni mejora de seso ni de estado; / quien mira lo pasado / lo por venir advierte" ("Egloga a Claudio," *Obras escogidas*, ed. F. C. Sainz de Robles, II [Madrid, 1961], 261); and Fray Luis de Granada maintains that "la memoria de lo pasado es muy familiar ayudadora y maestra de la prudencia, y . . . el día presente es discípulo del pasado, como dice Salomón, lo que será, es lo que fue; y lo que fue, es lo que será. Y por esto, por lo pasado podremos juzgar lo venidero y lo presente, y por lo presente lo pasado" (*Guía de pecadores*, ed. M. Martínez Burgos [Madrid, 1966], p. 174).
  - 19 *Tercera parte del Sabio, instruído de la naturaleza* (Madrid, 1710), pp. 232-233.