Introduction

"I take it for a rule," Thomas Mann wrote in the diary he kept while reading *Don Quixote,* "that the greatest works were those of the most modest purpose. Ambition may not stand at the beginning; it must not come before the work but must grow with the work, which will itself be greater than the blithely astonished artist dreamed; it must be bound up with the work and not with the ego of the artist. There is nothing falser than abstract and premature ambition, the self-centered pride independent of the work, the pallid ambition of ego."[1] This book is about three English Renaissance poets who broke Mann's rule, three poets whose ambition preceded and determined their work, three poets who strove to achieve a major literary career and who said so. The first is Edmund Spenser. In 1579, at the age of twenty-seven, he presented himself to the reading public as the New Poet, the English successor to Virgil. Two decades later and at the same age, Ben Jonson let it be known that he might henceforth be regarded as the English Horace. And in 1628 the nineteen-year-old John Milton broke off the Cambridge vacation exercise over which he was presiding to reveal his intention of one day singing "of kings and queens and heroes old" as "wise Demodocus" had done at the feast of Alcinous. The ambition so "prematurely" announced—the

1. Thomas Mann, "Voyage with Don Quixote," in *Essays of Three Decades,* trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Knopf, 1947), p. 460.

ambition not only to write great poems but also to fill the role of the great poet—shaped everything these men wrote in the remainder of their active and productive literary lives. As well as presenting poems, masques, plays, and pamphlets, they were always presenting themselves.

But neither "great" nor "major" quite gets at what Spenser, Jonson, and Milton were attempting. They did seek to be better than other English poets and thus different in degree. But they also wanted to be different in kind. Theirs was to be a role apart. But apart from what? A "different" kind implies other kinds. Indeed, it implies the existence of a system whose individual elements take meaning from their relationship to the whole. The success of these poets' self-presentation thus depended on more than individual talent and an individual desire for greatness. It depended as well on a system of authorial roles in which that ambition might make sense.

This book is also about that system, a system which stands in particular need of description. For where others that intersected it—the system of genres, modes, and styles in poetics or the system of ranks, offices, and guilds in society—possessed well-established and widely accepted sets of names and definitions, it had none.[2] Neither Plato nor Aristotle had talked of authorial roles and their relation to one another, nor had Horace, Quintilian, or the medieval encyclopedists, though they had talked of other things—most significantly the differences between nature and convention, between logic and rhetoric, between the philosopher and the sophist—that would contribute greatly to its articulation. Rather than being a settled and stable structure, perpetuated by education and the rules of society, the system of authorial roles was only emerging in late sixteenth-century England. Though literary and cultural

2. For a brilliantly suggestive discussion of some of these other systems, see Claudio Guillén, *Literature as System: Essays Toward the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 375–419.

theory were committed to imitation and revival, a sudden increase in the production of poetry was bringing into existence an essentially new configuration of what Michel Foucault has called "author-functions."[3] Identifying themselves with Virgil, Horace, and Demodocus, the poets themselves labored to deny the newness. But Virgil had known nothing of Renaissance courtiership or of courtly love; Horace had never written for the public theaters; Demodocus was no literary latecomer in a generation of cavalier poets. Thus even as the new writers proclaimed their ancient lineage, they were contributing to the manifestation of a system that had no precise counterpart in antiquity.

Among the problems that faced them was the lack of a word that could be relied on to designate the role they wished to play. It was easy enough to name a pastoral or a duke, but what was one to call a writer of this particularly ambitious sort? "Poet" had, they felt, been taken over by lesser men performing a lesser function, and there seemed no way of getting it back. The repeated efforts of Spenser, Jonson, and Milton themselves and of such other English defenders of poetry as Sidney, Puttenham, or Webbe either to find some name that would suit the dignity to which the poet was ideally entitled or to clear away the muck that made the usual name unsuitable do, however, speak eloquently of their concern. They dismissed the usurpers as poetasters, versifiers, or riming parasites and elevated the great writers as *vates*; they translated "poet" into "maker," equated it with "priest," "prophet," "lawmaker," "historiographer," "astronomer," "philosophist," and "musician," and adorned it with adjectives like "good," "right," and "true." But all their efforts to establish a single term that would unequivocally denote the function they

3. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structural Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 141–160.

strove to exercise ended in failure. The necessary distinction could thus be made only with the circumlocution of self-presentational gesture.

It is perhaps worth noting, as an index of our difficulty with these poets, that we still have no satisfactory way of designating them. Hence the "laureate" coinage that gives my book its title. The other most obvious possibilities seem to me either too narrow, too loaded, or too broad. *Vates,* the term Virgil revived to distinguish himself from the mere *poetae* of his age, works no better now than it did in the sixteenth century. Though it clearly affected Spenser's and Milton's conception of their role, it excludes Jonson, who had no prophetic ambition. Jonson would again be excluded were we to borrow from the system of genres and use "epic" or "heroic." In the Renaissance, role and genre were closely associated. But even for Spenser and Milton, genre was secondary—a sign of the role rather than the role itself. The term *public poet* that occasionally appears in modern criticism has at least the virtue of excluding no one, but it leads too readily to an opposition with *private man,* an opposition the poets would have been the first to deny.[4] There may, in fact, have been such an opposition, though I suspect that the conflicts we attribute to it originate more often within the role itself or within the man who chose it than between the two, but, wherever we finally agree to locate the conflicts, we should not adopt a term that answers the question before we ask it. As for the still more common *professional,* it is still more objectionable. Sometimes, as in John Buxton's *Elizabethan Taste,* it assumes its etymological sense and refers to "professed" poets, to the exclusion of publicly less ambitious writers like Dekker, Heywood, and Shakespeare—writers who, in Buxton's words, were "hors concours" to the world of courtly patronage. But just as often, as in G.E.

4. See, for example, George Parfitt, *Ben Jonson: Public Poet and Private Man* (London: Dent, 1976).

Bentley's *Profession of Dramatist in Shakespeare's Time* (and in the remainder of this book), "professional" specifically excludes the "professed" poets and is reserved instead for the Dekkers, Heywoods, and Shakespeares, the writers who made their living from the public theater. And sometimes, as in J. W. Saunders' *Profession of English Letters,* it means either or both indiscriminately.[5] Yet the differences between Buxton's professionals and Bentley's are significant enough to require the introduction of a second term like *laureate.*

Second terms spring from difference, opposition, antithesis. As I have been suggesting, opposition is essential both to the construction of a system, like the system of authorial roles, and to the meaning of any particular utterance, including the utterances of authorial self-presentation, that derives from it. Mann's dislike of "premature ambition" is a function of one such system, the system of Romanticism and its Modernist descendant. The adjectives I have been reviewing, however inadequate they may be, map one corner of another. To list the second terms they imply is to locate more precisely the point toward which our poets were tending. *Great* opposes itself to *small, mediocre,* or *poor*; *vatic* to *poetic* (obviously a problem, especially for Spenser and Milton); *epic* to *lyric* or *dramatic* (a problem for Jonson); *public* to *private* (private poet as well as private man); *professional* to *amateur.* From this play of opposing terms, the shadowy image of the Elizabethan literary landscape begins to emerge even before we consider the historical individuals who peopled it. Nor would it be difficult for anyone familiar with the period to name actual small poets, lyric and dramatic poets, private poets, and amateurs. Were any of these functions left unfilled, we would notice the gap.

5. John Buxton, *Elizabethan Taste* (London: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 317 and 335; G.E. Bentley, *The Profession of Dramatist in Shakespeare's Time, 1590–1642* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 11–37; and J.W. Saunders, *The Profession of English Letters* (London: Routledge, 1964), pp. 31–67.

The Elizabethans would also have noticed it. They did, in fact, see many such gaps in the 1570s and 1580s and hurried to fill them. Before Spenser occupied it, the role of great English poet was repeatedly said to be vacant. The system thus recruited the man, but it remained for the man to show that he met the requirements of the system. Could he pull this particular sword from its stone?

Not only *vatic* and *epic,* but each term, taken in the net of its differences, points to an area of difficulty, to a question the poet had to answer in the course of his self-presentation. What relation has his greatness to that of other significant cultural protagonists, literary and nonliterary? What is the nature of his inspiration and thus of his authority, and is that authority compatible with poetry? What are the literary genres appropriate to his role? What contribution does he make to the collective interests of the nation and the state? What is his source of income and what does he owe those who supply it? Left by his scrivener father with a small but adequate fortune, Milton was able to ignore the last of these questions, but he had to deal with the others. Spenser and Jonson had to face them all.

Born of its opposition to *professional, laureate* too suggests questions: What recognition could such a poet hope for? And what position might he expect to fill? For clearly the poets themselves thought of both recognition and position in the quasi-official terms implied by the word *laureate.* "Thou shalt ycrouned be" is the promise held out in *The Shepheardes Calender* and the image of crowning echoes not only through Spenser's work but through that of his successors as well. Jonson spent half his nights and all his days, or so he said, "To come forth worth the ivy or the bays," and Milton imagined himself sitting "with the ivy and laurel of a victor." In the reigns of Elizabeth, James, and Charles, the laureateship had, however, no settled institutional basis. Academic crownings of the sort that made Skelton "poet laureate" of Oxford and Cambridge had fallen out of use (though Jonson did get an honorary M.A. from Oxford), and the office of Poet Laureate had not yet been officially established. By the time it was, with the appointment of Dryden in 1668, a split had opened between the idea of a laureate poet and the possibility of any office that could be granted by a mortal king. The publication of *Paradise Lost* in 1667 announced the split, and it widened with each new royal nomination, until in 1757 Thomas Gray could refuse the succession, remarking that "the office itself has always humbled the professor."[6] Little more than a decade earlier, Pope had elevated the then current incumbent, Colly Cibber, to the bad eminence of chief dunce of *The Dunciad.* By the mid-eighteenth century, to be Poet Laureate had come to mean that one was quite decidedly *not* a laureate poet. Thus a man who aspired, as Pope did, to stand in the line of true greatness might in this new age make opposition to the official Laureate a powerful sign of his own authorial integrity.

But neither Spenser nor Jonson could have foreseen the full measure of that future separation and decline. Not even Milton could foresee it, though the example of his career helped bring it about. For all three the laureate crown figured not the *translatio stultitiae* of Pope's *Dunciad,* but rather the *translatio studii* of the *Aeneid* and of the Renaissance itself. Instead of the ignominy of Shadwell, Tate, Eusden, and Cibber, they would have remembered the Renaissance fervor of Petrarch's Capitoline coronation. Spenser and Jonson both advertised the near relation of poet to monarch and both accepted royal pensions. As a defender of regicide, Milton could hardly have done as much (Davenant was the poetic pensioner of Milton's generation), but, until the writing of *Paradise Lost,* he too conceived of the great poet as the anointed spokesman of the nation. It

6. Thomas Gray quoted by Kenneth Hopkins in *The Poets Laureate* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1954), p. 79.

was in his official capacity as Latin Secretary to the Council of State that he wrote his *Defense of the English People,* a work he compared to an epic poem and thought would secure his literary fame. In this expectation he was wrong, but his mistake grew naturally from an idea of the great writer that he shared with Spenser and Jonson, an idea implied by the word *laureate.*

These writers lived, as Laurence Manley has demonstrated, in a time of unusually acute "normative crisis."[7] Humanist and Protestant reform had broken the continuity of European history, calling into question the bases on which art, society, and the self reposed. Was their ultimate sanction nature—absolute, immutable, and universal—or merely transitory custom? In their laureate self-presentation, Spenser, Jonson, and Milton all found themselves pulled toward the absolutist side. A laureate could not be a timeserver. Rather he was the servant of eternity. In his work and in his life, he felt constrained to express the orthodox ethical norm not only of his time but of all time. The suspicion that there might be no such entity rendered his undertaking particularly doubtful, even Quixotic. Dryden, the first official Poet Laureate, was already much closer to the opposite pole.[8] The opening of his most famous poem suggests the difference:

> In pious times, ere priestcraft did begin,
> Before polygamy was made a sin . . .

The exquisitely complex irony of these lines derives in part from the fact that they are not altogether ironic. There *was* a time when polygamy was not a sin. Values *do* change. Right and wrong vary from age to age, from place to place, from party to party. "Wit and fool," it can now be admitted, "are

7. Laurence Manley, *Convention, 1500–1750* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), p. 137.

8. See Manley's interesting discussion of Dryden's criticism, pp. 290–321.

consequents of Whig and Tory."[9] Dryden is the first English poet of laureate ambition to strike so casual a pose. By his own admission, he wrote *Absalom and Achitophel* to serve a political faction, and, though he thought it, "in its own nature, inferior to all sorts of dramatic writing," he wrote comedy to satisfy popular taste. "I confess my chief endeavors are to delight the age in which I live. If the humor of this be for low comedy, small accidents, and raillery, I will force my genius to obey it, though with more reputation I could write in verse."[10] No previous laureate would have allowed himself such a confession. Nor would any have modeled his self-presentation, as Dryden did, on Montaigne's. A self *ondoyant et divers,* a shifting, unstable self whose adherence to the governing political and religious norms of the age was only a matter of convenience required by a generally corrosive scepticism, would have been regarded as incompatible with a laureate's profession.

From their attempt to maintain an ethically normative and unchanging self arise the deepest tensions in the work of Spenser, Jonson, and Milton—tensions that reveal themselves in such persistently problematical episodes as the destruction of the Bower of Bliss, the punishment of Mosca and Volpone, and the deflation of Satan. In each, readers have long felt that the poet was of the antagonist's party without knowing it. The seductive, exuberant, self-regarding energy the laureates condemn bears a troubling likeness to the energy of their own art. Surely Spenser owes as much to the sensual delight of Acrasia, Jonson to the Protean role playing of Volpone, Milton to the rhetorical brilliance and heroic rebelliousness of Satan as any of them does to the counterforces of morally righteous judg-

9. *The Poems of John Dryden,* ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), I, 215.

10. John Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays,* ed. George Watson, 2 vols. (London: Dent, 1962), I, 145 and 116.

ment. It is precisely here, in this involvement of the poet as conscious prosecutor and unconscious defendant that such passages differ from an otherwise similar episode in Shakespeare, the rejection of Falstaff. Shakespeare does not get rid of Falstaff; Hal does. Judgment comes from within the play as a function of Hal's kingly office, not from without as a function of Shakespeare's poetic one. Shakespeare is simply not there. The laureates are. Like Hal, they have an office to fill and an identity to establish. Spenser along with Guyon destroys the Bower of Bliss; Jonson puts "the snaffle in their mouths that cry out, we never punish vice in our interludes"; and Milton pronounces judgment on Satan. Their laureate self-fashioning demanded rigorous exorcism and denial of them, for the threat was always the same: metamorphic loss of identity.

To define himself and to fend off change, the laureate isolated one part of himself, which was also a part of the collective cultural structure by which he was constituted, and treated it as "the other"—that against which his particular rectitude might best be known. "Self-fashioning," as Stephen Greenblatt has written, "is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threating Other . . . must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed."[11] Greenblatt presents this as a general phenomenon in the Renaissance, and to the extent that Renaissance men and women felt it necessary to construct an identity (rather than, for example, merely inheriting one) that is so. But that necessity lay with particular weight on poets of laureate ambition. An official self of the sort they aspired to embody required more decisive excision of the other than did less seriously manifested selves. In the late sixteenth century, differences between the serious and the ludic self were a principal feature of the system

11. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 9.

of authorial roles, and they will consequently be a principal subject of my first chapter. But here we can more easily define the particular quality of the Renaissance poets by another glance into the Laureate future. Dryden, too, identified various reprehensible others—royalists when he was a Cromwellian, Catholics and Puritans when he was an Anglican, Anglicans when he was a Catholic. But then, as often as not, he openly went over to the other's side—particularly when the other attained power. This accommodating pliancy, associated from Dryden's time on with the official Laureateship, opened him and his eighteenth-century successors to repeated attacks on their integrity, and it still makes them seem at best marginal members of the true laureate company.

In one respect, however, both Dryden, the first official Laureate, and Pope, the first anti-Laureate laureate, bear a striking resemblance to the Renaissance forebears from whom their separate lines diverge. Both invested much effort in their self-presentation. Pope's is conspicuous enough to have prompted several recent studies devoted to it alone, and Dryden's provoked Swift (in the person of his Grub Street hack) maliciously to remark: "Our great Dryden . . . has often said to me in confidence that the world would have never suspected him to be so great a poet if he had not assured them so frequently in his prefaces that it was impossible they could either doubt or forget it."[12] Like Pope and Dryden, Spenser, Jonson, and Milton felt it necessary to keep reminding the world of their greatness. But even as we recall the sometimes annoying obtrusiveness of these assurances, we should remember too that they are often an integral part of the laureate's finest poetry. Self-presentation has its supreme triumphs as well as its costs. Without it we would have no Colin Clout. Nor would we have the invoca-

12. Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, ed. A.C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith (1920; 2d ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 131.

tions to Books 1, 3, 7, and 9 of *Paradise Lost* or the great moment in the Cary-Morison ode when the poet's own name bridges the stanzas like a mythical giant joining heaven and earth.

> Call, noble Lucius, then for wine,
> And let thy looks with gladness shine.
> Accept this garland, plant it on thy head,
> And think, nay know, thy Morison's not dead.
> He leaped the present age,
> Possessed with holy rage,
> To see that bright eternal day,
> Of which we priests and poets say
> Such truths as we expect for happy men.
> And there he lives with memory and *Ben.*
>
> *The Stand*
>
> *Jonson,* who sung this of him, ere he went
> Himself to rest,
> Or taste a part of that full joy he meant
> To have expressed.

"Ben" is with memory and Morison, "Jonson" here below with Cary.[13] The laureate mediates between the eternal realm of perfect form and the temporal realm of death and birth. Whether it is Jonson bestriding the stanzas or Colin piping to the Graces on Mt. Acidale or Milton receiving the "nightly visitation unimplored" of his Celestial Patroness, such a poet presents a self whose authority derives from inner and outer alignment with the unmoving axis of normative value. His laureate function requires that he speak from the center.

He does not, however, get to that still point easily. For a poem like the Cary-Morison ode to work, the poet's name must already mean something. "Who knowes not Colin

13. See Richard S. Peterson's discussion of this point in *Imitation and Praise in the Poems of Ben Jonson* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), p. 221. I follow Peterson in printing the full stop after *"Ben."*

Clout?" Spenser asked in reintroducing his pastoral persona in the new context of *The Faerie Queene.* Such gestures suppose the prior achievement of an acknowledged position, as Milton's allusions in *Paradise Lost* to his blindness and political isolation suppose our recognition of him as the man who spent his sight "In liberty's defense, [his] noble task, / Of which all Europe talks from side to side." Only a poet whose career had become a public fact could successfully imitate, as both Spenser and Milton did, the Virgilian (or pseudo-Virgilian) *Ille ego,* "I am the poet who in times past . . . ," or refer, as Jonson did, to the "shutting up of his circle." At such moments, the poet draws on an account to which he has been making deposits for many years.

But how did he establish the credit to open the account in the first place? And how does he maintain that credit in periods of crisis? These are questions that particularly preoccupy me in this book. I give more attention to how the poet gets to his laureate destination than to what he does when he gets there, more attention to such liminal works as *The Shepheardes Calender,* the three Comical Satires, and the *Poems* of 1645 than to *The Faerie Queene, Volpone,* or *Paradise Lost.* For in those crossings of the threshold, when the author first appears before his audience, the pressure on self-presentation is greatest. To some extent, each beginning—beginnings of individual works as well as beginnings of careers—brings a renewal of self-presentational pressure. I thus talk often of proems, prefaces, and prologues. Pressure falls too on endings and on intermediate passages of transition or challenge, when the role seems no longer to fit the world, and these will also demand attention. Whenever the voice of the poem becomes in some fairly explicit way the voice of the poet, whenever the speaking becomes a justification of the speaker and his authority, then we will want to pay special heed. That such occasions do arise so much more

often in the work of poets like Spenser, Jonson, and Milton than in that of their amateur and professional contemporaries is one of the best signs of their relation to one another and of the distinctness of the role they sought to play.

As laureate poets, Spenser, Jonson, and Milton closely resemble one another. As members of distinct literary generations, they are, however, quite unlike. Though each presented himself as a poet of the laureate sort, each had also to relate his self-presentation to the demands of a particular moment, a moment shared with other writers (whether aspiring laureates or not) born in the same span of years. Each had to speak to his own time in a language it might be expected to understand, even if only to say that he was of all time. Without making some such accommodation, he could hardly hope to perform the mediating function that was ideally his. Instead he would appear merely absurd, like Thomas More's philosopher, reciting Seneca's speech to Nero from the *Octavia* in the midst of a comedy by Plautus. But if, realizing this absurdity, he took his cue, adapted himself to the drama in hand, and acted his part neatly and well, could he retain his identity as philosopher?[14] More struggled with this dilemma, and so did the Renaissance laureates. Truth is one, but times change. The poet who hopes to present a normative self is caught between the two.

In the course of my work on this book, precise temporal location has come to seem more and more important, and so has the shared quality of that temporal location. Some of the resulting interest in generations has spilled over into a separate paper on generational theory and the generational structure of English Renaissance literature.[15] But much of it remains in this book where its products include most of those arguments in the

14. I here paraphrase Robert M. Adams' translation of *Utopia* (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 28.

15. "The Generations of English Renaissance Literature," presented at the Modern Language Association Convention in Houston (December, 1980).

chapters on Spenser, Jonson, and Milton that depart furthest from our usual understanding of these writers. It seems to me that very little in their self-presentation is gratuitous and far less is the product of individual temperamental vagary than is commonly thought. I do not, for all that, pretend to reduce each to a point at the intersection of two lines, one labeled "laureate" and the other "generation." Only a part of their meaning can be read from so restricted a perspective. But it is a part we often miss. Limited as it is, this bilinear charting does serve to locate social and cultural constraints that do not appear on other maps and to discover significance in gestures that before seemed empty or odd. A generation is the temporal location in which a certain language is spoken. "I am a laureate" is the statement each of our poets wanted to make. The problem that faced them was whether that statement could be convincingly made in the language of their own particular generation. An appreciation of that problem can only make their accomplishment more humanly important, more relevant to the struggle of men and women in any age to achieve a position of individual authority and preeminence. These poets sought to play an exemplary role. In studying that effort and the difficulties it encountered, we make them exemplary in a way they could not have fully intended. We make them examples of the very human placement in time and in culture that they strove to transcend.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a large number of the brightest and most energetic young Englishmen were drawn to the collective project of creating a national literature. Following the lead of the Greeks and Romans, the Italians had developed a significant vernacular literature in the fourteenth century and massively renewed it in the early sixteenth. In the 1540s the French and the Spanish undertook similar projects. Now it was the turn of the English. Sidney was only one of many to ask "why England (the mother of excellent

minds) should be grown so hard a stepmother to poets"[16] and only one of many to help, by the strength of his own poetic contribution, remove that unflattering title from England's name. And if England needed a literature, it also needed a laureate poet—a Homer, a Virgil, an Ariosto, or a Ronsard. With the position so obviously open, many men showed they had considered applying, and several, besides Spenser, Jonson, and Milton, entered a serious claim: Chapman, Daniel, Drayton, Wither, Davenant, and Cowley. Of these, Wither, who probably expended more energy on self-presentation than any English poet before Wordsworth, falls between the generations that most concern me and thus receives only cursory notice. The others get more. Chapman, Daniel, and Drayton figure along with Spenser and Jonson in the first chapter, which deals with the initial articulation in two dynamic lead generations of the system of authorial roles, and Cowley and Davenant share a section in the chapter on Milton, where I talk about the erosion of that system in a belated generation.

But to confine attention to the laureates, even to this expanded group of laureates, would be to miss the larger matrix of authorial roles within which theirs was distinguished. I have thus examined the self-presentation of some ninety-five English writers born between the late 1530s and the early 1620s. Not all of them are quoted or discussed individually in the following pages. For reasons of expository economy, one has often to stand for many. But all participated in the systems of role type and generation that I describe. And the thousands of individual gestures they made in presenting themselves provide the only access to those systems. Our task will be to avail ourselves of that access, to move from gesture to system and back again, hoping that in the circling (not to say "circularity") of argu-

16. Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (1965; rpt. Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1973), p. 131.

ment that is an inevitable part of most humanistic research we will come better to understand what greatness of the sort the laureates sought means—*what* it means and *how* it means.

As many readers will by now have remarked, this book is itself a part of a collective project—a project that is engaging the energies of my generation of American literary scholars in something of the way that poetry engaged the generation of Elizabethan courtiers to which Spenser and Sidney belonged. I speak, of course, of semiotics and its application to the study of literary discourse. In company with a growing number of students, I find myself borrowing heavily from the insights of structural linguistics in an effort to uncover the symbolic codes on which the institution of literature has been based. This was not my intention when I began work on this book. I started rather with an historical question. In an earlier study of the writers who dominated English literature in the 1580s—the decade that first thrust England toward the mainstream of European Renaissance literature—I found the marks of an extraordinary and quite surprising uncertainty about the whole literary enterprise. These men had been taught by their fathers and schoolmasters that poetry was wasteful folly and that folly led inevitably to repentance. At first they rebelled against this iron law, but in the end they submitted and gave up writing, condemning all they had done as the outbreak of licentious youth. In doing so they were fitting their own literary activity to the commonplace definition of a poet as a young man culpably distracted from the real business of life. Obviously this self-image left no place for a fully developed poetic career. How then, I wondered, did Spenser, the immediate contemporary of these men, achieve such a career? My first inclination was to look for antecedents, to study the tradition of the great poetic career diachronically, tracing this element of Spenser's self-presentation to Virgil, that to Chaucer, and still another to Ariosto. But gradually the axis of my interest rotated from the

diachronic to the synchronic. Spenser did not ignore the other writers of his generation to make himself over in the image of some illustrious predecessor. Rather he was constituted by the same set of relations as were his coevals, different though their careers might be. His self-presentation was a function of theirs. From here it was a short and perhaps inevitable step to full engagement in the project of semiotic analysis.

That engagement does not, however, mean that I have left behind either my interest in history and historical change or my sense that men like Spenser, Jonson, and Milton possess an irreducible and active individuality—though both inclinations go against the grain of much current semiotic theory and practice. To some, a semiotic history seems a contradiction in terms. As critics have repeatedly remarked, the fundamental semiotic notion of system is ahistorical, perhaps even antihistorical. Semiotics provides tools for analyzing synchronic relations, but not change. Yet change is an undeniable part of our historical experience. My emphasis on generations is meant to address this problem. Though change is constant in literature, as in society and culture generally, its rate is not. There are moments when, for men of a similar age, a configuration of relations holds still, allowing them to make it the enabling basis of their collective self-presentation. As Emile Benveniste has said (with no reference to generations), "The legitimacy of diachrony, considered as a succession of synchronies, is thus reestablished."[17] In defining a generation as the temporal location in which a certain language is spoken, I had this succession of synchronies in mind. Each generational synchrony lends itself to semiotic analysis. Nor do we necessarily leave the realm of semiotics in asking how one is transformed into another, for often such transformations are themselves the intended source of meaning. A new generation defines itself with reference to the old. The legitimacy of synchrony, considered as a system of diachronic differences, is thus in turn reestablished.

17. Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics,* trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, Florida: Univ. of Miami Press, 1971), p. 5.

As for the irreducible and active self, it impresses itself on the consciousness of anyone who spends much time in the presence (I use the word advisedly) of my three poets. Clearly, they each speak as well as being spoken through. If one swing in our interpretive circling from gesture to system tends to dissolve the single intending self, the swing back reconstitutes it. Meaning is in difference, the possibility of meaning in a system of differences. But someone must be there to make and to mark the difference. Some one particular person says what has not been said before, what would not be said in the same way, if at all, were he not there—and someone else understands. Without those two agents (who may on occasion be one), there can be no communication. This is not to posit a transcendental self, a self of whom it could be sensibly asked, "What would he do were he living now?" Move the birth of a Spenser, Jonson, or Milton by a few years, or a few miles, or a few notches on the social scale and he would cease to be. Of the codes that constituted him only the genetic would survive. The literary works of these men were made possible by the situations in which they occurred. Their meanings could not have been imposed unless they were understood, unless the conventions that made understanding possible were already in place.

I have paraphrased these last two sentences from Jonathan Culler, who, though he accepts as an accomplished fact "the death of the author," has recently noticed "a paradox inherent in the semiotic project and in the philosophical orientation of which it is the culmination"—a paradox that readmits the prematurely deceased author to life. For, as Culler writes, "our whole notion of literature makes it not a transcription of pre-

existing thoughts but a series of radical and inaugural acts: acts of imposition which create meaning."[18] Such acts, I think we may safely assume, have authors, though authors who are themselves authorized by the systems that make those acts possible. Neither the author nor the system can be discarded. Each deconstructs the other, but each also constructs the other. If we are to understand literary utterances, including the utterances of authorial self-presentation, we must know, whether implicitly or explicitly, the literary system. But we must also know Spenser, Jonson, and Milton. They, after all, make our knowledge of the system worth having.

18. Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), p. 39.

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