E. H. Gombrich, Personification in R. R. Bolgar (ed.), *Classical Influences in European Culture AD 500-1500*, Cambridge, 1971, pp.247-57 [Trapp no.1971C.1]

In standing before this learned audience I really feel like Ignorance personified. I have never worked in the fields of which you are masters. But perhaps it is not entirely unfitting that Ignorance should be asked to open the proceedings of this Conference [1] for if I understand its purpose we have really come together to discuss that perennial Socratic or Petrarchian theme, our own ignorance. We have not been invited to tell each other what we know but what we would like to know. It is said that one fool can ask more questions than seven wise men can answer, and in the presence of so many wise men I willingly accepted the assignment of that fool. For quite honestly I do not owe the honour of heading the list of speakers to any contribution I have made or can make to the study of classical influences between 500 and 1500. I owe it, I suppose, to the undeniable fact that I happen to be the only holder of a University Chair specifically devoted to the History of the Classical Tradition. The title is somehow bound up with the Directorship of the Warburg Institute which was dedicated by Aby Warburg to the untranslatable question *Was bedeutet das Nachleben der Antike*?-what is the significance of the classical heritage for Western civilisation?[2] The very form of a question into which Warburg cast his theme may serve to remind you of the fact that he was not simply an advocate of classical education or classical studies. What really concerned him was the value of this tradition for human civilisation, which he conceived of as a precarious and most vulnerable achievement. What elements we derive from ancient civilisation have helped or hindered Western man in achieving psychological poise and rationality and keeping the powers of passion and of unreason at bay? Warburg's final answer was, I believe, that the classical heritage remained both a danger and a boon to our culture. The symbols we derive from antiquity may provoke a regression to that pagan mentality to which they owe their origins, but they may also help us to achieve what he called orientation, in other words they can serve as .instruments of enlightenment.

Now if there is one element in the classical tradition which allows us to probe this view it is the habit of Personification. I need not enlarge on the ubiquity of this habit in the period under discussion for it is as familiar to historians of literature as it is to historians of art.[3] In fact, it seems to me sometimes that it is too familiar; we tend to take it for granted rather than to ask questions about this extraordinary predominantly feminine population which greets us from the porches of cathedrals, crowds around our public monuments, marks our coins and our banknotes, and turns up in our cartoons and our posters; these females variously attired, of course, came to life on the medieval stage, they greeted the Prince on his entry into a city, they were invoked in innumerable speeches, they quarrelled or embraced in endless epics where they struggled for the soul of the hero or set the action going, and when the medieval versifier went out on one fine spring morning and lay down on a grassy bank, one of these ladies rarely failed to appear to him in his sleep and to explain her own nature to him in any number of lines.

Confronted with such a baffling problem the line of least resistance in scholarship seems to me the suggestion that we should now go and make a survey of all personifications in our period and put their names and attributes on punched cards for computerisation. I do not want to spoil the pleasure of anyone who might propose such an enterprise, but I am not sure how much we would ultimately profit by it. Much more, in my view, can be gained by tracing the derivation and proliferation of individual personifications in the way the late Rosemond Tuve attempted in her masterly Notes on the Virtues and Vices.[4]

But even here, I feel, we might have profited more if we were a little clearer in our mind what the whole mode of personification is really about. I know that some of the most eminent students of our subject and our period have devoted some telling pages to the problem of personification in medieval literature; the chapters in C. S. Lewis, *Allegory of Love* [5] and of course the pages on the personal metaphor in Ernst Robert Curtius's book on *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages* [6] would have to form the starting point of any future investigation. Both these authors have dwelt on the derivation of these personifications from classical antiquity, their link with classical mythology and what might be called their ambiguous origin in the twilight zone between the gods of Olympus and the abstractions of language.

To understand these antecedents we would have to ask our colleagues in Classics who have meditated about the strange disposition of Greek thought to turn concepts into gods and gods into concepts.[7] It is rarely possible to say at any particular point whether we are confronted with an abstraction or a divinity, not to say a demon. What is Nike or Kairos, the Tyche of a city or the Liberality of a Prince? St Augustine, as I have learned from Professor Perosa, made fun of the pagans who erected temples to such entities as Febris, only to serve Poliziano with a personification he could use in a poem.[8]

Personification has indeed been called by Professor T. B. L. Webster a Mode of Greek Thought,[9] and this mode, in its turn, has been linked with the peculiarity of the Greek language, matched, I believe by the Latin language, of forming abstract feminine nouns which are indistinguishable from the designation of female divinities. Max Mueller termed mythopoeic thought a disease of language, and it is indeed tempting to see in this habit one of the snares which language prepared for the unwary. In that case the belief in the literal existence of a personification would be a special case of the literal interpretation of the metaphors of language. When victory settles on the prow of the conqueror's ship she can be conceived of as a beneficent sprite or as a figure of speech.

I am sure that this description of the origins of personification is correct, as far as it goes, but I still think it leaves many questions unanswered. The first of these seems to me the most obvious one, but alas, I am not competent to discuss it: if it is true that personification can be explained psychologically through the structure of language one would like to know how far the habit is indeed shared among language communities other than the classical ones.

It was this I had mainly in mind when I asked at the outset whether we do not take personification a little too much for granted. Is it a more or less universal feature or is it confined to the classical tradition? If it is not, how far is it tied up with Indo-European languages? Clearly not totally, for we all remember some of the most telling and most lasting coinages from the Hebrew Psalms, such as the beautiful verse which the Vulgate renders as *iustitia et pax osculatae sunt*.[10] Could this be an echo of a Greek or Persian conceit, or is there an independent tradition of this kind in Semitic languages and literature?

The point of method which prompts me to raise this question is indeed a rather worrying one. Is it at all possible to study the classical tradition if one studies it in isolation? May not the distinctive features which give it its character escape us if we neglect looking out of the window at other traditions? The charge is frequently made nowadays against the humanist outlook that it is parochial and, as the jargon has it, Europocentric. I do not want to accept this charge, for I do think we have a perfect right to study our own tradition, first because it happens to be our own, and secondly also because it is the heritage of the Greco-Roman world which has, for good or ill, conquered and transformed the civilisation of the entire globe. But so much, I think, we can learn from this criticism, that we should

never neglect comparative studies in order to find out what is distinctive in our Western modes of thought. I am lucky enough not to have to go far if I want to know how things were ordered in ancient India, for my son is a Sanskritist. I have learned from him that Sanskrit can form similar abstractions which can be and are personified. Take these charming lines of a petitioner which I quote in the translation by Daniel Ingalls from Vidyakara's *Treasury* dating from our early Middle Ages:

Lady Speech, lend pure accent to my tongue.
O Heart, be calm. Dignity, stand aloof.
Shame, turn aside your face awhile
And let Desire come forth;
That I, foul sinner, may tell the rich man
My humble sentence 'Give'. [11]

There exists a most interesting Sanskrit play dating from the late eleventh century A.D. which its first English editor called *The Moon of Intellect*.[12] Here Love and Passion, Hypocrisy, Avarice, Anger, Reason, Devotion, Religion and Tranquillity all make their appearance as in a medieval mystery play, and the question must inevitably arise in the mind of the Western reader whether this work, which appears to be almost totally isolated in Indian literature, may owe something to foreign influence. I do not think that this question has ever been investigated nor could I find a comparative study of the 'bounteous Immortals' in the Zend Avesta which include Good Mind, Truth or Righteousness, Rightmindedness and other *hypostases*.[13] It seems to me strange that nobody has made a cross-cultural study of this subject, but my hunch is that even within the Indo-European family the classical tradition of personification stands out. In the West these beings have not only a higher birthrate, but also a higher expectation of life. They become more fully assimilated to the immortals than they generally appear to be in the East.

Inevitably, then, our question concerning classical influences involves questions concerning the nature of the classical heritage itself. Curtius has drawn attention without much comment to the way in which classical authors draw up a kind of kinship system for Gods and personifications alike. For Homer, as he reminds us, Flight is the companion of Panic and Panic the son of Ares while Infatuation figures as the eldest daughter of Zeus, whose daughter in Hesiod is none other than Justice. Thus the personifications are drawn into the network of systematic rationalisation which characterises the development of the Olympian religion. I doubt if there is a parallel to this momentous development elsewhere. It involved, of course, the fusion, of local deities and the assignment to the god of those definite roles with which a later tradition has made us familiar. It is in this tradition that the gods themselves become interchangeable with what we call abstractions, Eros becomes a mere token for love and Ares for war.

This was one of the ways in which Greek rationalism dissolved and sterilised the gods and prepared them for their survival within the Christian tradition. I do not think this particular development has a parallel in Eastern thought where the question whether the demons and the divinities of mythology really exist is bypassed in favour of other problems which may be more profound but do not permit this characteristic creation of a twilight zone between mythology and metaphor.

Be that as it may, the Greek way with the gods appears to me to have had another lasting influence on the Western heritage of personifications. I believe that it may be in this process of rationalisation that the most characteristic feature of this tradition is rooted, their characterisation by 'attributes'.

The images of Gods both in East and West are nearly always marked by distinctive features which permit easy identification. In the West, at least, these so-called attributes can usually be interpreted as minimal allusions to the role of the divinity; Zeus holds the thunderbolt and Athene is characterised by the Gorgoneion on her shield, the trophy of her victory over the monster.

But at some time in the history of Greek thought these attributes of the images were given a more rational or moral interpretation. Rudolf Pfeiffer, in a brilliant paper on 'The Image of the Delian Apollo and Apollinine Ethics',[14] has reconstructed a poem by Callimachus which must have offered such an interpretation in dialogue form. Thus Apollo is asked why he carries the bow in his left hand but holds the Graces in his right and made to reply that he uses the left because he is slow to punish mortals but the right 'always disposed to distribute pleasant things'. Pfeiffer connects this rationalisation of an ancient image with the Stoic movement and points out how frequently this form of dialogue was to be imitated later on. If you invert the procedure you have indeed the normal way of constructing an allegorical personification in which the nature of a concept is made visible by the attribute the figure displays, be it the tongues on the garment of Virgil's Fama or the forelock of Kairos whose bald hind-head will elude our grasp.

It is in this way, as we all know, that an image or a concept can be explicated by means of attributes and it is really a matter of taste or tact how far the poet or artist wishes to go in piling up these specifications, how many attributes he wants to give Prudence to match her definition.

We need not perhaps wonder at the fact that this technique survived in the Christian era, particularly as we know that the dependence of Christian poets and artists on classical models went so far as even to include representations of Nature divinities such as Sun, Moon, the Earth and Mount Bethlehem in biblical illustrations.[15] And yet we may ask whether there were not additional factors present to secure not only the survival but the proliferation of personification in our period.

Among the questions I should like to broach is first that of the Platonic tradition with its hierarchy of beings, its habit of hypostasis. In the Neoplatonic universe, I think, the personification of Justice or of Divine Wisdom can easily be conceived as a denizen of the intelligible world. The fact that the image approximates a definition and allows us to see the nature of the abstraction may have helped this process of assimilation. This, at least, is what I suggested in a paper I called *Icones Symbolicae*,[16] and though I am no longer quite happy with all the sections of that paper I should be grateful for critical reaction to my assertion that the picture of Justice can somehow be conceived as a kind of portrait or likeness of the Platonic idea of the concept.

When I wrote my paper I did not yet know Battista Fiera's little dialogue *De Iusticia Pingenda* which was published by Wardrop in 1957.[17] I would not want to overrate the evidence offered by this slight and half-humorous piece in which Mantegna complains of the conflicting advice he was given by philosophers whom he had asked how he should represent Justice. The dialogue is probably intended to echo the hunt for Justice in Plato's Republic rather than to tell us about the relation of artists to humanists; and yet it fits in with my interpretation that we are told that the learned scholastic theologian, the Carmelite Battista Mantovano, insisted that Justice cannot be depicted at all because she is identical with the will of God. The Dialogue thus points to the dangers and absurdities of attempting to portray the virtue; throughout our period art always had a difficult stand vis-à-vis the intellectuals.

True, there were alternative ways of justifying these images before the court of reason. One of these has recently been rediscovered and explored - I mean the tradition of the Art of Memory so brilliantly

elucidated by my colleague Frances Yates.[18] This tradition certainly created a climate that was favourable for the translation of abstract ideas into complex and striking images. And just as, in Ridewall's curious descriptions of the moralised gods known as the *Fulgentius Metaforalis*,[19] the appearance of these abstractions is distilled into little *versus memoriales*, so, I would surmise, the definition of an abstract concept could be fixed in the minds of the student by means of a painted definition.

And yet I do not think that we should overemphasise these rationalisations at the expense of what I would call the psychological problem of personification: Those who have emphasised that our languages which endow nouns with genders will tend naturally to personification are of course right.[20] In these language communities at least the disposition is always there. The real questions seem to me rather what part we should assign to this disposition and how it interacts with the tradition I have sketched. The natural dwelling place of personifications, if I may personify them in this way, is in the house of art. Art in our period is certainly conventional rather than spontaneous. It relies on precedence and this precedence points back to antiquity. If we ask what it was that led to the marriage between poetry and personification the true answer lies hardly on the purely intellectual plane. It lies less in the invention of suitable defming attributes than in the attractions of psychological and physiognomic characterisation. In describing Envy in her cave Ovid could make us visualise the evil hag who is Envy personified.

To be sure she has a serpent as her attribute but the character and feeling tone of such a creation extends far beyond the features which can be distinctly enumerated. Artistic characterisation differs from rational defmition in that it creates symbols rather than signs.[21] What I mean is that the artistic personification is inexhaustible to rational analysis. It is to this that it owes what might be called its vitality or simply its vividness. While we are under its spell we are unlikely to ask whether such a creature really exists or is merely a figment of the artist's imagination. And thus the arts of poetry, of painting and sculpture, of drama and even of rhetoric aided by tradition can continue the functions of mythopoeic thought. Potentially personifications can always come to life again.

But what is potential and what actual in such psychological situations? Students of the ancient world could at least agree on a rough and ready rule of thumb by which to distinguish divinities from mere abstractions - the presence or absence of a cult. With the establishment of Christianity, of course, this simple criterion disappears, but the problem remains. How can we tell in any particular instance how a personification was seen and experienced by its creator and by his public? Should we consider the possibility of an unofficial mythology continuing into the Christian era and permitting a belief in such entities as *Natura* and *Sapientia*, Time or Death? Or is belief here too crude a category? Huizinga has suggested in an important chapter on our subject [22] that perhaps the marriage of St Francis to Poverty should be seen under the aspect of homo ludens, what children call pretending, and such pretending certainly extends beyond the realm of art. Don't we all pretend every year that Christmas personified will arrive in a sledge pulled by reindeers, or at least that our children believe that he will? What will a future historian make of our beliefs when he examines our Christmas cards? And what, to return more closely to the core of our problem, would be the conclusions of a visitor from Mars whose data are confined to our language habits but who could not know where figures of speech end and figures of thought begin?

Warburg certainly believed that in these matters one could and should take language at its word. One of the boldest and most imaginative passages in his paper on Francesco Sassettis letztwillige Verrugung' (1907)[23] attempts a psychological interpretation of the mentality of the Florentine merchant through an analysis of his last will and testament. Sassetti twice refers to Fortuna

personified. 'I do not know', he writes, 'where Fortuna will take us in these dangerous and upsetting affairs, may it please God to grant us the favour of reaching the haven of Salvation', and again in commending their country palace to his sons, he adds 'However, if Fortuna should harass you, you will have to be content to sell it'. Warburg had no doubt that these words were meant to be taken literally. He speaks of Sassetti not shirking the fight with the pagan goddess who stands tangibly before his eyes, as an embodiment of the hostile world, 'an uncanny storm demon that may seize and wreck the frail ship of his life'. With that skill of forming historical associations that characterised Warburg he linked this passage in Sassetti's will with the impresa of another Florentine merchant, Giovanni Rucellai, who had a figure of Fortuna with the bulging sail on his crest and who testified to his interest in the goddess by entering in his Zibaldone a letter by Ficino about the power of Fortuna and its limits.

I must refer you to Warburg's text for the rich and subtle way in which he uses this analysis as evidence in the psychological diagnosis of these Florentine merchants. It is a diagnosis which created a profound impression even on such men as Max Weber.[24] But needless to say our admiration for the boldness and profundity of Warburg's question does not commit us to accepting his answer. Is it true that in referring to Fortuna Francesco Sassetti was betraying a pagan outlook? Was such a turn of phrase felt to be at all unchristian? Did Sassetti or Giovanni Rucellai believe in the bodily existence of the goddess Fortuna?[25] Maybe they did believe in her when they did not think about it, though surely they would have denied any such belief if asked at pistol point.

But though it is true that Warburg's specific interpretation is open to criticism, I would not have referred to it in conclusion if I did not think that he asked the right kind of question. For complex and elusive as the real answer may prove to be, I think that if we gave up the search we would surrender the beleaguered fortress of the humanities to the enemy. What makes it worth while to busy ourselves with the period between 500 and 1500 is not, after all, that it provides material for the academic industry, but that people of flesh and blood lived at that time whom we would like to understand. If we give up this ambition we are left with the empty, husk of forms and formulas.

They would not be worth preserving in our libraries and museums if they did not point to a living experience. But we have no right to assume that they always point in the same direction; it is a false dichotomy to assert that those words and symbols which do not immediately reflect or express the inner life are mere empty conventions. Cultural conventions, in their turn, react back on their users, they are handed down by tradition as the potential instruments of the mind which may sometimes determine not only what can be said but also what can be thought or felt. I believe that the degree of this determination is at present being hotly debated in linguistics. I do not know whether it would be wise or foolish for the cultural historian to join this debate, but after all, I am always entitled to remind you of my role as the herald of Ignorance whose castle you are assembled to assail.

E. H. GOMBRICH

Notes:

1 This was the first paper of the first day of the conference.

2 Cf. now my book *Aby Warburg, An Intellectual Biography* (London, 1970).

3 Jacob Burckhardt's lecture of 1887, 'Die Allegorie in den Künsten', *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Emil Dürr (Stuttgart, 1933), pp. 419-38.

4 In *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XXVI (1963), 264-303, II, XXVII, 42-72; see also the same author's book, *Allegorical Imagery. Some medieval books and their posterity* (Princeton, N.J. 1966).

5 (Oxford, 1936), especially chapter II.

6 (London, 1953), pp. 131-3.

7 The standard article is L. Deubner's entry Personifikationen in W. H. Roscher, *Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1902-9), supplemented by F. Stassl's entry under the same heading in Pauly-Wissowa's *Real-Encyclopädie der Classichen Altertumswissenschaft*, xxxvii (1937). See also Roger Hinks, *Myth and Allegory in Ancient Art*, Studies of the Warburg Institute, 6 (London, 1939).

8 Alessandro Perosa, 'Febris: a poetic myth created by Poliziano', *J. Warburg and Courtauld Inst.* ix (1946), 74-95.

9 T. B. L. Webster, 'Personification as a Mode of Greek Thought', *J. Warburg and Courtauld Inst.* xvii (1954), 10-21.

10 LXXXIV, II; for the influence see Samuel C. Chew, *The Virtues Reconciled* (Toronto, 1947), chapter II.

11 Daniel H. H. Ingalls, *Sanskrit Poetry, from Vidyakara's 'Treasury'* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1968), no. 1477.

12 *The Prabod'h Chandro'daya or The Moon of Intellect*, translated by J. Taylor (London, 1812). For a bibliography of later editions and translations see M. Schuyler in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, xxv (1904), 194-6. For the date see J. W. Boissevain, *Het indische Tooneelstuck Prabodhacandrodaya*, Proefschrift (Leiden, 1905), and Jai Dev., *The Prabodhacandrodaye of Krsnamisra, A critical edition of the text with an introduction and an essay on the development of allegorical literature in Sanskrit* (unpublished London Ph.D thesis, 1952).

13 These are the terms used by R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (London, 1961), p. 5. For a discussion of their status see Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Symbols and Values in Zoroastrianism* (NewYork, 1966), pp. 25-39.

14 R. Pfeiffer, 'The Image of the Delian Apollo and Appollinine Ethics', *J. Warburg and Courtauld Inst.* xv (1952), 232-7.

15 Ferdinand Piper,*Mythologie und Symbolik der christlichen Kunst* (Weimar, 1847), is still worth consulting. A more modern survey is Raimond van Marle, *Iconographie de l'Art Profane au moyen Age et à la Renaissance*, 2 (The Hague, 1932), and the entry 'Allegorie' by J. Held in O. Schmitt, *Reallexikon zur deutschen Kunstgeschichte* (Stuttgart, 1937).

16 *J. Warburg and Courtauld Inst.* XI, 163-92.

17 The Lion and Unicorn Press, London. The first edition dates from 1515, but the dialogue is set in Rome in 1489.

18 Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London, 1966).

20 Hans Liebeschütz, Fulgentius Metaforalis, *Studien der Bibliothek Warburg*, 4 (Leipzig, 1926). Beryl Smalley, *The English Friars and Antiquity in the early Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1960).

20 For a survey of theories see I. Fodor, 'The Origin of Grammatical Gender', *Lingua*, VIII (1959), 1-41 and 186-214.

21 Cf. my paper 'The use of Art for the Study of Symbols', *The American Psychologist*, XX (1965).

22 Johan Huizinga. *Homo Ludens* (Haarlem, 1938), chapter VIII.

23 A. Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leipzig, 1932), I, 127-63.

24 As we know from Warburg's correspondence.

25 For the background see Howard R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature* (Cambridge, Mass. 1927). Professor Robert Browning has kindly drawn my attention to the letter of a Byzantine tenth-century scholar who was in two minds about the status of Fortuna. He has published a summary in *Byzantio*n, XXIV (1954), 417, and the full text in *ΕΠΕΤΗΡΙΣ ΤΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΩΝ ΣΠΟΥΔΩΝ* xxvii (1957), 192-3.