Valerio Viviani*

Nashe's (Self-)Portrait of a Town

Abstract

Thomas Nashe took refuge in Yarmouth after his involvement in *The Isle of Dogs* scandal. In the coastal town he found hospitality and in 1598, during Lent, he started working on his pamphlet *Lenten Stuff*: an encomium of Yarmouth and of its major resource, the herring, in which history and myth are freely intermingled. With a focus upon the relation between that play and that later mock-encomium, the aim of this paper is to analyse and discuss Nashe's peculiar mythical method as a means of celebrating the town and, above all, his own writing.

Keywords: Thomas Nashe; encomiastic literature; parody

Around 29 BC, Virgil was commissioned to write a poem celebrating the heroism, greatness and prosperity of Rome. By that time, the town was dominating a vast empire ruled by its emperor Octavianus Augustus.

Virgil's task was to compose a national epic in Homeric style that would link the mythical and heroic age depicted by his Greek predecessor to the founding of the town and the present Augustan era. Rome already had a history of success and prosperity, but Augustus wanted to consolidate his position by creating a myth that would magnify the origins of the town and *his* origins: the *gens* Iulia (Bringmann and Schäfer 2002).

It is the same old story. When nations reach the peak of their power, they do not make recourse to historiography but to mythopoeia, for historical truth might reveal that "this also . . . has been one of the dark places of the earth", to quote Conrad's Marlow's meditation on a ship at the sea-reach of the Thames (Conrad 1999: 33). Historiography, in fact, might disclose unpleasant circumstances, such as barbarity, savageness, brutality, and it could be quite embarrassing and unbecoming for civilized people to acknowledge that their ancestors were unrefined and humble beings, whose behavioural standards were far from being heroic or noble.

Powerful nations take for granted that they have the assurance of a sort of eternal safe conduct pass to an a-historical dimension, in which they do not stand under the law of the historical principle of – in Samuel Johnson's words – "original savageness" (1825: 5.612), on the one hand, and of future decline or decadence, on the other. They seem to ignore Herodotus's words: "those [cities] which in old times were great have for the most part become small, while those that were in my own time great used in former times to be small: I know that human prosperity never continues steadfast" (1890: 1.5).[1]

[1] "τὰ γὰρ τὸ πάλαι μεγάλα ἦν, τὰ πολλὰ αὐτῶν σμικρὰ γέγονε, τὰ δὲ ἐπ᾽ ἐμεῦ ἦν μεγάλα, πρότερον ἦν σμικρά. τὴν ἀνθρωπηίην ὦν ἐπιστάμενος εὐδαιμονίην οὐδαμὰ ἐν τὠυτῷ μένουσαν" (Herodotus 2011: 4).

* University "Della Tuscia", Viterbo – vviviani@unitus.it

When celebrating the glory of a town, of a state, of a nation, it is more expedient for those in power to omit historical facts and to tell a story in which the real diachronic perspective of events disappears, to be replaced by a legendary/mythological prospect: a cyclic self-renewal, where at least one, possibly identical, progeny remains undifferentiated and capable of passing down wisdom, heroism and other ideal and eternal values to their natural heirs, thus linking two or more cultures in a sort of synchronic and a-temporal dimension in which past, present and future intermingle, as we can see from this passage from Virgil's *Aeneid*:

> Now turn your eyes this way and behold these people,
> your own Roman people. Here is Caesar and all the line of Iulus
> soon to venture under the sky's great arch.
> Here is the man, he's here! Time and again
> you've heard his coming promised—
> Caesar Augustus! Son of a god, he will bring back the Age of Gold
> to the Latian fields where Saturn once held sway.
> (2006: 6.788-94)[2]

In this a-historical dimension, even mediaeval Britain can be imbued with the very same nobility of Troy, thanks to Aeneas's nephew, Brutus, "the first king of the Britons" ("primo rege Britonum"), and to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*:

> The island was then called Albion, and inhabited by none but a few giants. Notwithstanding this, the pleasant situation of the places, the plenty of rivers abounding with fish, and the engaging prospect of its woods, made Brutus and his company very desirous to fix their habitation in it. They therefore passed through all the provinces, forced the giants to fly into the caves of the mountains, and divided the country among them according to the directions of their commander. After this they began to till the ground and build houses, so that in a little time the country looked like a place that had been long inhabited. At last Brutus called the island after his own name Britain, and his companions Britons; for by these means he desired to perpetuate the memory of his name. From whence afterwards the language of the nation, which at first bore the name of Trojan, or rough Greek, was called British. (1999: 1.1; 1.16)[3]

The legendary, poetical way of celebrating the glory of towns and nations is, at the same time, a sort of self-celebration of the writer who glorifies them. Indeed, the

[2] "Huc geminas nunc flecte acies, hanc adspice gentem / Romanosque tuos. Hic Caesar et omnis Iuli / Progenies, magnum coeli ventura sub axem. / Hic vir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis, / Augustus Caesar, Divi genus: aurea condet / Saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arva / Saturno quondam" (Vergilius 1969).

[3] "Erat tunc nomen insulae Albion, quae a nemine, exceptis paucis gygantibus, inhabitabatur, amoeno tamen situ locorum et piscosorum fluminum copia, nemoribusque praeelecta, affectum habitandi Bruto sociisque inferebat. Peragratis ergo quibusque provinciis, repertos gygantes in cavernas montium fugant, patriamque donante duce sortiuntur. Agros colere incipiunt, domos aedificare, ita ut brevi tempore terram ad aevo habitatam censeres. Denique Brutus de nomine suo insulam Britanniam, sociosque suos Britones appellat; volebat enim ex derivatione nominis memoriam habere perpetuam. Unde postmodum loquela gentis, quae prius Trojana sive curvum Graecum noncupabatur. Britanniaca dicta est" (Geoffrey of Monmouth 1854: 3, 18).

connection with illustrious ancestors is felt both by the powerful people who commission the work and by the poet himself who creates this connection thanks to his imagination and poetic ability: Augustus considers himself to be the legitimate descendant of a great hero, Aeneas, and maintains that the town he rules is 'another Troy'; Virgil considers himself to be the legitimate disciple of a great poet, Homer, and maintains that his work is a new *Iliad* or a new *Odyssey*.

Another time, another place: 1598, Lent time, Thomas Nashe's primary concern is to produce an encomium of Yarmouth in Norfolk.

The year before he had taken refuge in the coastal town after his involvement in *The Isle of Dogs* scandal. The satirical play, co-written with Ben Jonson and performed by the Pembroke's Men, had offended the City authorities of London. Jonson and two actors of the company had been jailed (Forse 1993: 167-8), while Nashe had fled, in order to escape the same legal consequences:

> The strange turning of *The Isle of Dogs* from a comedy to a tragedy two summers past, with the troublesome stir which happened about it, is a general rumour that hath filled all England, and such a heavy cross laid upon me as had well near confounded me. . . . That infortunate imperfect embrion of my idle hours, *The Isle of Dogs* before mentioned, breeding unto me such bitter throws in the teeming as it did, and the tempests that arose at his birth so astonishing outrageous and violent as if my brain had been conceived of another Hercules, I was so terrified with my own increase, like a woman long travailing to be delivered of a monster, that it was no sooner born but I was glad to run from it. (Nashe 1972: 377-8)

He had hidden out in Yarmouth, where he had been kindly welcomed:

> *post varios casus*, variant knight-errant adventures, and outroads and inroads, at Great Yarmouth in Norfolk I arrived in the latter end of autumn. Where, having scarce looked about me, my presaging mind said to itself: '*Hic Favonius serenus est, hic Auster imbricus*; this is the predestinate fit place for Pierce Peniless to set up his staff in.' Therein not much diameter to my divining hopes did the event sort itself, for six weeks first and last, under that predominant constellation of Aquarius, or Jove's Nectar-filler, took I up my repose, and there met with such kind entertainment and benign hospitality when I was *Una litera plusquam medicus*, as Plautus saith, and not able to live to myself with my own juice. (378-9)

"My luck was", he goes on, "to bend my course to such a courteous-compassionate clime as Yarmouth" (380), and so he resolves to write an encomium of the town and its inhabitants: *Lenten Stuff*.

It has been pointed out that that lost play and *Lenten Stuffe* are in fact connected in many respects, not only because *The Isle of Dogs* incident forced Nashe into exile at Yarmouth, but also because of a disingenious attitude common to both works (see e.g. Bennett 2014). Hadfield noted that, despite the seemingly humble tone of Nashe in the above-quoted passage, the fact that the "comedy" was turned into a "tragedy" was no accident and the play "must have insulted many of the great and good" (2011: 76). Here I will argue that *Lenten Stuff* responded to that lost play also in other ways concerning the rhetorical and stylistic strategies aimed at both self-defence and self-celebration.

Lenten Stuffe begins with a survey of the history of the town – "I purpose not . . . to leap over the laudable pedigree of Yarmouth" (383) – but he soon realizes that the task is not an easy one, because of the scarcity of historical documents (only two documents exist, i. e. "a worm-eaten parchment", 384, and "a chronographical Latin table, which they have hanging up in their Guildhall", 386) which reflects the irrelevance of the town.

Moreover, Nashe is not a professional historian. He is a poet and he knows that the best way to exalt and ennoble a place is to turn to myth, following the tradition of "that good old blind bibber of Helicon", as he jokingly calls Homer (379).

Like Virgil for Rome, he wants to provide a mythological background for Yarmouth, and, to do so, he refers to an ancient legend. According to the Elizabethans, this is the story of "the first two lovers that ever muse shrined in the temple of memory", written by a venerable "divine and eternal" author: Musaeus.[4]

"Let me see," Nashe asks in *Lenten Stuff*, "hath anybody in Yarmouth heard of Leander and Hero, of whom divine Musaeus sung, and a diviner muse than him, Kit Marlowe?" (Nashe 1972: 424)

Then he goes on telling the whole story of the two unfortunate young lovers. Hero, a virgin priestess of Aphrodite who dwells in Sestos, is seen, during a festival, by Leander, a handsome man from Abydos, the town on the opposite side of the Hellespont. They fall in love. However, to conceal their passion from Hero's parents, Leander has to swim every night across the strait to visit her. To guide him safely, Hero places a burning torch on the top of the tower where she lives. One stormy night the light is extinguished and Leander eventually gets lost and drowns. When Hero sees his body washed ashore, she drowns herself likewise.

A famous myth indeed, but what is the connection with Yarmouth? Virgil could refer to the old tradition *of* Aeneas *as* the cultural ancestor of Roman upper classes, but there were no traditional associations between Hero and Leander and the English town.

Moreover, at the time of Augustus and Virgil Rome was *caput mundi*, while Yarmouth was – both culturally and historically – an unimportant town at the time of Nashe, and the connection with a serious myth might be inappropriate as well as ridiculous. It would be inadequate to create a pompous pedigree for Yarmouth, a town that was known only for its herrings and its food: again, the red herring.

[4] The quotation is from George Chapman's Prefatory epistle to his continuation of Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (Marlowe 1971: 41). We now know that this Musaeus was an Alexandrian poet of the fifth century AD, but his venerability was the result of the erroneous Renaissance belief that he was the mythical Musaeus, a supposed ancestor of Homerus: for instance, Sir Philip Sidney writes in his *Defence of Poesie*: "Let learned *Greece* in any of his manifold Sciences, be able to shew me one booke before *Musaeus, Homer*, and *Hesiod*" (Sidney 1968: 4); while in the title page of his translation of *Hero and Leander* (1616) George Chapman writes that Musaeus "was a renowned Greek Poet, born at Athens", who "lived in the time of Orpheus", the very father of poetry, and that he was the author of the first of all books: *The Divine Poem of Musaeus. First of all books. Translated according to the Originall* (Chapman 1875: 94). In Renaissance belief, the author of *Hero and Leander* was mistaken for "the best of Poets" whom Aeneas meets in the Fields of Elysium in *The Aeneid*: "Musaeus first, who holds the center of that huge throng, / his shoulders rearing high as they gaze up toward him" (Virgil 2006: 6. 667-8) ("Musaeum ante omnes – medium nam plurima turba / Hunch abet, atque humeris extantem suspicit altis", Vergilius 1969).

Yarmouth was neither Rome nor London. In their works, Virgil and Geoffrey of Monmouth were allowed to make hyperbolic references to the heroic tradition, because the places they were celebrating, by the time they were writing, had already reached heroic status. Nashe cannot "praise Yarmouth so rantantingly" (392), he cannot "break out into a boundless race of oratory, in shrill trumpeting and concelebrating the royal magnificence of her government", because that would be preposterous and "would be a theme displeasant to the grave modesty of the discreet present magistrates" (383).

He, therefore, harks back to another classical tradition, that is, the Ovidian one of metamorphoses,[5] and adds a sequel to the story, in which the gods regret the tragic end of the two young lovers and try to make amends for their deaths:

> The dint of destiny could not be repealed in the reviving of Hero and Leander, but their heavenly-hoods in their synod thus decreed, that, for they were either of them sea-borderers and drowned in the sea, still to the sea they must belong, and be divided in habitation after death as they were in their lifetime. Leander, for that in a cold dark testy night he had his passport to Charon, they terminated to the unquiet cold coast of Iceland, where half the year is nothing but murk-light, and to that fish translated him which of us is termed ling. Hero, for that she was pagled and tympanized, and sustained two losses under one, they footballed their heads together, and protested to make the stem of her loins of all fishes the flaunting Fabian or Palmerin of England, which is Cadwallader Herring, and, as their meetings were but seldom, and not so oft as welcome, so but seldom should they meet in the heel of the week at the best men's tables, upon Fridays and Saturdays, the holy time of Lent exempted, and then they might be at meat and meal for seven weeks together. (429)

Hero's old nurse undergoes a transformation as well, and becomes a condiment for fish: "And hence it is that . . . Hero and Leander, the red herring and ling, never come to the board without mustard, their waiting-maid" (430).

It might appear disrespectful to "divine" Musaeus, but Nashe advocates the value of competing traditions in literature – for instance, he does not agree with Sidney, that "in it selfe antiquity be venerable" (Sidney 1968: 4), and maintains that his friend Christopher, or Kit, Marlowe, who had given his own version of the story, is "a diviner muse" than Musaeus (424). Moreover, his comic sequel of the myth allows him to connect it with Yarmouth in two ways: from the historical and economical point of view, since the herring had been and was (and still is) the major resource of the town, and from a literary point of view, as the comic reworking of a serious legend – that is, the deflation of myth – appears to be the most appropriate means of relating to an undistinguished place: "In *Lenten Stuff* . . . Nashe assures the reader that prose can record the economy of the world, and create its own mythic economy, and that the two can coexist without doing violence against each other" (Barbour 1993: 110).

[5] In *Lenten Stuff*, Nashe also identifies with Ovid emotionally: he compares his current plight of exile to that of the Roman writer, who had been sent by Augustus away from Rome and into exile (*relegatio*) in a remote province on the Black Sea: "I may justly complain with Ovid, *Anchora iam nostram non tenet ulla ratem,* my state is so tossed and weather-beaten that it hath now no anchor-hold left to cleave unto" (380).

To celebrate his un-heroic town, Nashe develops a literary genre in which the allure of myth and the mythologizing of reality are preserved, but the scale is drastically reduced thanks to the reworking of parody. The essentials of his method may be explained in that he recalls the tradition of paradoxical encomium of trivial and/or odd things and mock-epic (Brown 2004: 83-4; Scott-Warren 2005: 97; Andersen 2013: 45-62), starting from the *Margites*, also known as *The Battle of Frogs and Mice* (the lost mock epic attributed to Homer by Aristotle in his *Poetics*) and then listing a long catalogue of objects that have been mockingly praised by different authors in time: the flea, the hazel-nut, the grasshopper, the butterfly, the parrot, the popinjay, sodomy, the strumpet errant, the gout, the sciatica, folly, and so on:

> The application of this whole catalogue of waste authors is no more but this: *Quot capita tot sententiae* (so many heads, so many whirligigs). And if all these have terlery-ginked it so frivolously of they recked not what, I may *cum gratia et privilegio* pronounce it, that a red herring is wholesome in a frosty morning, and rake up some few scattered syllables together in the exornation and polishing of it. (405)

Nashe confesses that "it is [his] true vein to be *tragicus Orator*" (376). In this specific case, however, he has to mix the tragic with the comic, Hero and Leander with a herring and a ling. Here is the full title of the work:

> *Nashe's Lenten Stuff*
> CONTAINING
> The Description and first
> Procreation and Increase of the Town of
> Great Yarmouth in Norfolk
> With a new play never played before,
> of the praise of the
> RED HERRING
> Fit of all Clerks of Noblemen's
> kitchens to be read; and not unnecessary
> by all serving men that have short
> board-wages to be remembered.
> (371)

In Nashe's culinary terms, we may say that he revises a literary recipe – that of the traditional, serious encomium – by adding his personal, comic ingredient: "Now you must accept of it as the place serves, and, instead of comfits and sugar to strew him [this Marine Magnifico] with, take well in worth a farthing worth of flour to white him over and wamble him in, and I having no great pieces to discharge for his benvenue, or welcoming in, with this volley of Rhapsodies or small shot he must be pacified" (401-2).

In short, to imbue the town with a former glory, Nashe resorts to a conventional austere literary paradigm solidified in tradition, but reworked through parodic displacement, following the tradition of Renaissance paradoxical literature (Cole 1966: 269). In so doing, he produces, despite comic deflation, his own original encomium, in which the real fish that nourishes the Yarmouthians and the fish symbolically and metaphorically transfigured by poetic imagination and discourse are the

focal point of a mythopoeic work. It is a work written in a magnificent prose style full of witty linguistic neologisms and sophisticated rhetorical devices that endows a town regarded as worthless with the merit of being treated with the same literary care and artfulness as it would be in serious narratives; a work which will provide, according to Nashe's optimistic vein, a literary model worthy of future emulation:

> some of the crumbs of it (like the crumbs in a bushy beard after a great banquet) will remain in my papers to be seen when I am dead and under ground; from the bare perusing of which, infinite posterities of hungry poets shall receive good refreshing, even as Homer by Galataeon was pictured vomiting in a basin in the temple that Ptolomy Philopater erected to him, and the rest of the succeeding poets after him greedily lapping up what he disgorged. (379)

And indeed, a similar parodic method will be adopted by other authors, such as Fielding (who, in the Preface to *Joseph Andrews*, affirms the role of parody in framing his new kind of romance or "comic epic poem in prose", that is, the novel) and Alexander Pope (who wants to align his poetry with ancient epic models in order to portray the aristocratic society of his time. His world, however, is no more inhabited by heroes and it would be indeed improper – according to the neoclassical rule of decorum – to depict it as if it were such, with great gods, noble deeds and in solemn terms. So, Pope parodically reworks the traditional form and subject matter, and the rape of Helen of Troy becomes *The Rape of* [*a*] *Lock*) – by the way, Joyce will do the same with his parody of the *Odyssey*, in which an ordinary man, Leopold Bloom, becomes the modern alternative to the Homeric Ulysses *in* an age of moral and cultural decadence (Wells 2015: 20).

The value of *Lenten Stuff*, however, does not lie only in its originality and possible relevance for English literature. As is often the case with parody, the dialectical antithesis between past and present works involves a critical process and a metafictional reflection on the genre itself and on literary creation in general (Billi 1993), which, in this case, manifest themselves in the attempt to unmask the artificiality of the traditional, serious conventions of the encomium and of literary forms:

> at the first sight of the top-gallant towers of Yarmouth, . . . my muse was ardently inflamed to do it some right; and how to bring it about fitter I knew not than in the praise of the red herring, whose proper soil and nursery it is. But this I must give you to wit. . . . Of my note-books and books else here in the country I am bereaved, whereby I might enamel and hatch-over this device more artificially and masterly, and attire it in his true orient varnish and tincture . . .. Had I my topics by me . . . , I might haps marshal my terms in better array, and bestow such costly coquery on this Marine Magnifico as you would prefer him before tart and galingale, which Chaucer preheminentest encomionizeth above all junketries or confectionaries whatsoever. (Nashe 1972: 401-2)

While complaining about his exile – he is now writing *Lenten Stuff* in an unspecified place during Lent time –, Nashe denounces the artificiality of the literary process: that is, the ability of poets to fill the gaps of history, "artificially and masterly", thanks to the power of their imagination and invention. They fabricate a world of their own creation where anything is *alchemically* possible: where, for

instance, a common, dark-skinned fish becomes the "golden-coated herring", "the golden Hesperides red herring" (423, 457), the heir of the mythical Hero, *the first girl celebrated in the first of all books*:

> How many be there in the world that childishly deprave alchemy, and cannot spell the first letter of it! In the black book of which ignorant band of scorners it may be I am scorned up with the highest. If it be, I must entreat them to wipe me out, for the red herring hath lately been my ghostly father to convert me to their faith; the *probatum est* of whose transfiguration *ex Luna in Solem*, from his dusky tin hue into a perfect golden blandishment, only by the foggy smoke of the grossest kind of fire that is, illumines my speculative soul, what much more, not sophisticate or superficial effects, but absolute essential alterations of metals, there may be made by an artificial repurified flame. (451)

The poet is a kind of alchemist who transmutes a base metal into a precious one, dissolving and exalting, still "artificially and masterly", the otherwise mediocre, trivial, un-heroic reality.

In his *Defence of Poesie*, Sir Philip Sidney had praised the poet's ability to produce a better world than that created by nature: "Nature never set foorth the earth in so rich Tapistry as diverse Poets have done, neither with so pleasaunt rivers, fruitfull trees, sweete smelling flowers, nor whatsoever els may make the too much loved earth more lovely: her world is brasen, the Poets only deliver a golden" (1968: 8). Similarly, as Nashe remarks in *Lenten Stuff*, poets, through their "alchemical" art of imagination and rhetorical artifices and devices, recast our ordinary, historical reality *into* an archetypal imaginative shape. They write "volumes of immortality" in which the phenomenal world can achieve the highest degree of idealization which is the eternal, mythical dimension pertaining to stories of great symbolic depth:

> That good old blind bibber of Helicon [*id est* Homer], I wot well, came a-begging to one of the chief cities of Greece, and promised them vast corpulent volumes of immortality if they would bestow upon him but a tender out-brother's annuity of mutton and broth, and a pallet to sleep on; and with derision they rejected him. Whereupon he went to their enemies with the like proffer, who used him honourably, and whom he used so honourably that to this day, though it be three thousand year since, their name and glory flourish green in men's memory through his industry. (379)

For this reason, poets should not be despised or prosecuted. Rather, they should be held in high esteem and praised for their work or "industry". In *Lenten Stuff*, as in other works,[6] Nashe complains about the often indigent and wretched condition of poets – "bounty is bankrupt . . . that poetry, if it were not a trick to please my Lady, would be excluded out of Christian burial" (374) – and, above all, about the common

[6] In *Pierce Pennilesse*, for instance, whose opening lines read: "Having spent many years in studying how to live, and lived a long time without money, having tired my youth with folly, and surfeited my mind with vanity, I began at length to look back to repentance, and address my endeavours to prosperity. But all in vain I sat up late, and rose early, contended with the cold, and conversed with scarcity: for all my labours turned to loss, my vulgar Muse was despised and neglected, my pains not regarded, or slightly rewarded, and I myself, in prime of my best wit, laid open to poverty" (Nashe 1972: 51-2).

misinterpretations of their works. He himself had just experienced the dangers and distress caused by the misinterpretations of his latest play, *The Isle of Dogs*, and we might reasonably infer that the gallimaufry of intertexts and the abundance of literary artifices of *Lenten Stuff* function both as a defensive posture against those misinterpreters (Hutson 1989: 246-8; Kendrick 2004: 238-87; Mukherjee 2015: 57-8) and as a strategy of diversion designed to hide the real object of his praise:

> what with these lawyers and self-conceited misinterpreters, so long that my red herring, which was hot broiling on the coals, is waxed stark cold for want of blowing. Have with them for a riddle or two, only to set their wits a-nibbling and their jobbernowls a-working, and so good night to their signiories, but with this indictment and caution: that, though there be neither rhyme nor reason in it (as by my good will there shall not), they, according to their accustomed gentle favours, whether I will or no, shall supply it with either, and run over all the peers of the land in peevish moralizing and anatomizing of it. (446)

It is worth recalling that "to draw the red herring across the track" means, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, "to attempt to divert attention from the real question" (OED, *n.*, 'red herring', 2.b). And indeed, in *Lenten Stuff*, the "real question" is not only, and principally, to pay tribute to Yarmouth or to the red herring (Brown 2004: 83). The lavish, elevated manner in which Nashe approaches a trivial subject, his lofty style, the dazzling display of verbal virtuosity, the rhetorical devices and magniloquence and the imaginative richness of *Lenten Stuff* become the ontological reality of the text itself, eventually prevailing over its openly declared referent, the town of Yarmouth and its encomium:

> Let me speak to you about my huge words which I use in this book . . . , not caring for this demure, soft *mediocre genus*, that is like water and wine mixed together. But give me pure wine of itself, and that begets good blood and heats the brain thoroughly. I had as lieve have no sun as have it shine faintly, no fire as a smothering fire of small coals, no clothes rather than wear linsey wolsey. (376-7)

In this pamphlet Nashe pushes artificiality to its farthest point, by emphasizing the discrepancy between the signifier (his magniloquent and refined enunciation) and the signified (the trivial object of the encomium). The enlarging of the gap between his polished form and style, i. e. the product of his own artistry and invention, on one side, and content and subject-matter, on the other, enables him to enact a self-referential encomiastic process aimed at raising the profile of his own art. He even implies that his literary task is more difficult – and therefore worthier of praise – than that of his eminent predecessors such as Homer and Virgil, for they drew their matter from lofty sources and wrote about a heroic world in which it was easy to rise to epic standards:

> Every man can say Bee to a Battledore, and write in praise of virtue and the seven liberal sciences, thresh corn out of the full sheaves and fetch water out of the Thames; but out of dry stubble to make an after-harvest, and a plentiful crop without sowing, and wring juice out of a flint, that's Pierce a-God's name, and the right trick of a workman. (376)

Despite the lack of historical relevance of the object portrayed, Nashe produces a refined comic literary work in which, in the end, Yarmouth and especially the immortal nature of the work itself are celebrated nonetheless. "Through his industry", he has transfigured everyday reality into the "starry sublimity" (383) of art: "the significance of *Lenten Stuff* lies in the fact that Carnival, displaced into prose style, assumes a directly utopian role by making Yarmouth a fantastic place, and thus lifting it into figurative status" (Kendrick 2004: 287). In other words, we might say that Nashe has painted a portrait of a town worthy of being hung in a gallery alongside with other previous eminent literary, austere, mythological paintings, and, at the same time and above all, a self-portrait of his own ingenuity. A little more than a century later, in the already mentioned *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope reaches a very similar conclusion about the eternalizing power of his parody, when in the very last lines of the poem, he, or rather his narrator, tells the heroine to stop mourning the "ravish'd Hair" because "This lock, the Muse shall consecrate to fame, / And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name!" (2011: 5.149-50).

***

Around 29 BC, Publius Vergilius Maro began to write, at Augustus's behest, his epic poem in praise of the Roman Empire. He was not keen on the assignment, but he had to try his best to please his readers, the noble, powerful Romans, and, of course, the greatest emperor of the world, Augustus, who had commissioned the work.

1598, Lent time, Thomas Nashe is writing his pamphlet in praise of Yarmouth. He likes his self-assignment and wants to please the modest, humble inhabitants and fishermen of Yarmouth, but, most importantly, he wants to celebrate the superiority of poetic invention, and of *his own* poetic invention, over reality: "This is a light friskin of my wit, like the praise of injustice, the fever quartan, Busiris, or Phalaris, wherein I follow the trace of the famousest scholars of all ages, whom a wantonizing humour once in their lifetime hath possessed to play with straws, and turn mole-hills" – that is, base reality – "into mountains" (376) – that is, base reality elevated by poetic transfiguration.

Works Cited

Andersen, Jennifer (2013), "Blame-in-Praise Irony in *Lenten Stuff*", in Stephen Guy-Bray, John Pong Linton, and Steve Mentz (eds), *The Age of Thomas Nashe: Text, Bodies and Trespasses of Authorship in Early Modern England*, London and New York: Routledge: 45-62.

Barbour, Reid (1993), *Deciphering Elizabethan Fiction*, Newark: University of Delaware Press.

Bennett, Kristen Abbott (2014), "Red Herrings and the 'Stench of Fish': Subverting 'Praise' in Thomas Nashe's *Lenten Stuffe*", *Renaissance and Reformation /Renaissance et Réforme*, 37 (1): 87-110.

Billi, Mirella (1993), *Il testo riflesso. La parodia nel romanzo inglese*, Napoli: Liguori.

Bringmann, Klaus and Thomas Schäfer (2002), *Augustus und die Begründung des römischen Kaisertums*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

Brown, Georgia (2004), *Redefining Elizabethan Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chapman, George (1875), *Works: Poems and Minor Translations*, London: Chatto & Windus.
Cole, Rosalie (1966), *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Conrad, Joseph (1999), "Heart of Darkness", in "*Heart of Darkness" & Other Stories*, ed. by Gene M. Moore, Ware: Wordsworth Classics.
Forse, James H. (1993), *Art Imitates Business: Commercial and Political Influences in Elizabethan Theatre*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
Geoffrey of Monmouth (1854), *Historia Regum Britanniae*, ed. by Albert Schulz, Halle: Eduard Anton.
— (1999), *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. by Aaron Thompson, with revisions by John Allen Giles, Cambridge, ON: In parentheses Publications.
Hadfield, Andrew (2011), "*Lenten Stuffe*: Thomas Nashe and the Ficton of Travel", *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 41 (1): 68-83.
Herodotus (2011), *Histories I* (Greek text), ed. by John H. Sleeman, London: Bloomsbury Academic.
Herodotus (1890), *Histories,* trans. by George Campbell Macaulay, London: Macmillan.
Hutson, Lorna (1989), *Thomas Nashe in Context*, Oxford: Clarendon.
Johnson, Samuel (1825), *Works*, ed. by Robert Lynam, London: George Cowie & Co.
Kendrick, Christopher (2004), *Utopia, Carnival, and Commonwealth in Renaissance England*, Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press.
Marlowe, Christopher (1971), *The Complete Poems and Translations*, ed. by Stephen Orgel, London: Penguin
Mukherjee, Ayesha (2015), *Penury Into Plenty: Dearth and the Making of Knowledge in Early Modern England,* London and New York: Routledge.
Nashe, Thomas (1972), *'The Unfortunate Traveller' and Other Works*, ed. by John Barry Steane, London: Penguin.
Pope, Alexander (2011), *'The Rape of the Lock' and Other Major Writings*, ed. by Leo Damrosch, London: Penguin.
Scott-Warren, Jason (2005), *Early Modern English Literature*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
Sidney, sir Philip (1968), "The Defence of Poesie", in *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. by Albert Feuillerat, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, vol. 3.
Vergilius, Publius Maro (1969) *Opera*, rec. brevique adn. crit. instr. Roger Aubrey Baskerville Mynors, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Virgil (2006), *The Aeneid*, trans. by Robert Fagles, New York: Viking.
Wells, Stanley (2015), "Introduction", in Stanley Wells (ed.) *Thomas Nashe: Selected Works*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge.