CHAPTER ONE

THE HISTORY AND THEORY OF RECEPTION

Peter Burke

Quidquid recipitur, ad modum recipientis recipitur.
Thomas Aquinas

In what follows I shall argue (1) that the concept of reception (German Rezeption, French réception, Italian recezione, etc.) is older than is generally thought; (2) that, even so, the recent ‘turn’ in this direction is a significant one; (3) that the concept of ‘cultural translation’ is useful in reception studies; (4) that a number of problems plague scholars who try to trace the history of the reception of particular texts or other cultural artefacts; and (5) that despite the problems, this approach continues to illuminate intellectual history. Examples from the cultural relations between Europe and East Asia will be privileged, on the grounds that the more distant two cultures are from each other, the more visible the reception process becomes.

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In common with so many apparently new ideas, the idea of reception has a longer history than we may think. As a term of art, it was current in scholarly circles, especially in Germany, about a hundred years ago, in the contexts of Roman law and of Renaissance humanism.1 The term was also used by English-speaking literary scholars and, a little later, by some historians of religion.2

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1 Carl Adolf Schmidt, Die Reception des Römischen Rechts in Deutschland (1868: repr Leipzig: Zentralantiquariat der DDR, 1969); Paul Laband, Rede über die Bedeutung der Rezeption des römischen Rechts für das deutsche Staatsrecht (Strasbourg: University of Strasbourg, 1880); Max Herrmann, Die Reception des Humanismus in Nürnberg (Berlin: Wiedmann, 1898); Stefan Schuler, Vitruv im Mittelalter: Die Rezeption von “De Architectura” von der Antike bis in die frühe Neuzeit (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999).

The idea of reception has also attracted interest from students of literature, art and ideas who did not make use of the word. Classicists in particular speak of ‘tradition’.\(^3\) In Germany, an alternative term is ‘afterlife’ (*Nachleben* or *Fortleben*).\(^4\) In Italy, the favoured term was and is *fortuna*.\(^5\) Some writers in English preferred and indeed still prefer ‘influence’, especially in studies of literature, but in intellectual history and art history as well.\(^6\) Others chose and still choose ‘legacy’.\(^7\)

Most if not all of the studies mentioned so far have looked at reception essentially from the point of view of the donor, treating recipients as relatively passive, as followers: Machiavellians, Erasmians, Lutherans and so on. Terms such as ‘transmission’ or ‘transfer’ (as in the case of the ‘transfer of technology’) also emphasize donors.\(^8\) Studies of reception, transfer, tradition, and legacy generally depend on the assumption of fidelity or continuity, taking it for granted that what was received or inherited was the same as what was given or handed over. In this respect scholars follow the people they were studying, from classical antiquity to early modern times, when favoured terms were *traditio* and *translatio* (in the sense of ‘transfer’).

Traditions might of course be criticized as corrupt, as reformers criticized the traditions of the Catholic Church, but the criticism implied that purification or a return *ad fontes* was possible. A similar point might be made about the critique of some translations as unfaithful, as in the famous

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