

Logos and pathos in the paintings of Sandro Botticelli

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Abstract

The Author focuses on the representation of the anatomical defects detected in Botticelli's paintings as a process of individualization of the sitter. It seems coherent with the non idealistic patterns brought about by the newest acquaintance with the Flemish painture, pursued in Italy thanks to the innovative style of Antonello da Messina. It is seen as closely related with the dramatization and the emotional effect of the portrayal, a challenge between logos and pathos, between drawing and color, rationale and emotional.

Keywords

Botticelli, *Portrait of a Young Man*, Italian Renaissance, facial deformity in art, non idealistic naturalism.

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In his remarkable essay “*Cranio-facial deformity in the Botticelli’s ‘Portrait of a Young Man’ (NG626)*” [1], Francesco Velardi, Pediatric Neurosurgeon, speculates that, in this young man’s portrait painted in 1483, Sandro Botticelli reveals an anatomical defect of the sitter, a “cranio-facial deformity”. Keeping in mind that his investigation is dealing with a portrait and not with a real man, Velardi has the capacity to confirm the evidences he claims through a detailed analysis, inclusive of a comprehensive 3-dimensional reformatting of the face, together with diverse modelling.

In this paper, the highlighting of the facial deformity of the sitter appears very stimulating, as it converts the subject in a determined individual character, even without taking into account his identity. This process of individualization appears of utmost importance when referred to the Italian Renaissance, a period in which it was clear that the art of painting was operating within an idealistic realm.

The urgency to idealize is evident in Raffaello’s “*Stanza della Segnatura*” (1508-1511), where the artist syntetises in a mythological contest the figurative representation of the philosophical, theological and artistic Platonic ideals during the Florentine Renaissance. From this point of view, it is possible to state, according to the Hegel’s notion, that Man pursues the Truth just through Art, Religion and Philosophy. This perspective is adherent to the standpoint of humanistic Artists, Literates and Philosophers; hence, it was allowed to represent the great founding Platonic-humanistic ideas in the form of myths and images, other than through concepts.

In the Botticelli’s portrait, the “Ideal” was not overshadowed. Instead, it is coupled and melted within a framework of reality. As Velardi emphasizes, the onset of this perspective, in connection with the Neo-Platonic ideal of Beauty theorized in Florence by Marsilio Ficino, is undoubtedly the effect of the newest acquaintance with the Flemish painture, pursued in Italy thanks to the innovative style of Antonello da Messina. This groundbreaking Northern pattern is remarkably dominated by the depiction of deformities and, more in general, by a naturalism that remains totally outside the ideal Beauty.

Undeniably, Ratio and Harmony, founded upon the rules of perspective established by Piero della Francesca, are the canons of Beauty determining the pictorial language in the Italian Renaissance, most of all when it comes to represent the human

physiognomy. In Northern European countries, the search for a “non idealistic naturalism”, that can be defined “fabulous” or “fantastic”, was fostered instead: it is thanks to this “naturalism” that the Flemish style appears as revolutionary, compared with the Neo-Platonic Italian models. Hence, in the art-works by Bruegel and Bosch we find, indeed, a “fantastic naturalism”. Nonetheless, in these masterpieces the “subject” of the painting has to be considered “fantastic”. That is to say, “what” the painter represents is fantastic, not “how” he depicts it, since the style refers to the traditional naturalism. On the contrary, analyzing “*Guernica*”, a modern masterpiece by Pablo Picasso, we realize that, in this case, what we recognize as “anti-naturalistic” is not the “subject”, that appears realistic – the condemnation of violence – rather the “form”, that appears cracked and discontinuous. More in general, it is possible to state that, with the Flemish paintings, the depiction of an imperfect humanity earns in dignity. The rendering of imperfect bodies or deformities is not an exception, it becomes obvious that Beauty manifests even through imperfections and asymmetries, because Beauty belongs not to the subject itself, instead to its “form”.

Once Antonello da Messina settled in Venice in 1475, hailing from the Flemish countries, Venetian painters, Giovanni Bellini first within others, learned to favour oil instead of tempera. Indeed, oil-binded colors, used by Flemish painters, enable overlapping layers of paint, ensuring subtle color tone gradients and never-perceived-before light effects. In addition, they begin to experience the use of canvas as painting support, in the place of the more traditional ones, namely wood. In actual facts, the expressive potential of the combined effect between oil (as a binder) and canvas (as a support) becomes increasingly striking. Although clearly defined lines were at the basis of the Florentine draughtsmanship, in accord with the artistic concepts argued by Vasari, painters no longer favour forms laid out by markedly defined outlines. Venetian artists, Giorgione and Sebastiano del Piombo in the first place and Titian masterfully thereafter, handle their weightless brush to spread thin coatings of saturated color tonalities, perfectly suitable for replicating the shades of the sitter’s complexion. This relevance of color and attention to its handling becomes the dominating style in Venice, in contrast with the Florentine draughtsmanship. Two antipodal attitudes: markedly defined outlines for the

Florentine style, splashes of warm color tones typical of the Venetian patterns.

Nevertheless, after the introduction in Italy of the Flemish style, operated by Antonello da Messina, the “imperfection” is not regarded any more as a negative point within representations.

According to the Aby Warburg’s claims [2], the “Pathosformeln” (“forms of pathos”) derived from the Greek art may be recognized in the Italian Renaissance paintings. Italian painters would renew these elements to express “pathetic” scenarios and to emphasize individual idiosyncrasies, albeit within defined human types. In Botticelli’s paintings the connection between logos and pathos, i.e. between “Ideal” and “Real”, is worked out from these perspectives. With good reasons, Velardi considers Botticelli’s style as new and, at the same time, ancient, typical as well as individual. Displaying the physical defect, the Painter underlines the individuality of his depiction, closely related with the dramatization and the emotional effect of his portrayal, indeed the true elements of “pathos”. For these reasons the challenge logos-pathos, i.e. drawing-color, is predominant in Botticelli, even though the feature expressing the logos, thus the drawing, has always been considered predominant in his art production.

As such, a peculiar balance between line and color can be observed specifically in Botticelli, so much that it is impossible to make clear where the line vanishes and the color dawns. This balance create the living source for the “gracefulness” expressed by the Painter. Not surprisingly, it is possible to perceive, in Botticelli’s paintings, a sense of melancholy, expressed with different connotations in all his works, both secular and religious. This emotion may be the source of the mysterious fascination differentiating Botticelli from his coeval artists. The emotion that arises while regarding at his lines and volumes, at his depthless compositions, at his hesitation between the earthly and the celestial world, even that melancholy, are perceived as the awareness of the forever-lost heaven.

As regards the lack of deepness in the Botticelli’s picture arrangements, it should be observed that space and time are never presented in a preset form in his paintings. The Painter defines an “anti-prospective” type of representation as the key benchmark to set-up vision. As well, he shrinks time within an “atemporal” scale. Therefore, such an arrangement of spatial representation prevents any illusion of deepness. Space shows no adequately

perceivable depth. Likewise, volume and masses of the figures are underemphasized. Along with human figures, perspective space is nothing more than an impression and a symbol as well. Thus, we are confronting with a bi-dimensional figuration and a depiction finalized at creating the illusion of depth. Botticelli, “neglect and transgress” the rules of perspective he is certainly familiar with. More than that, he goes beyond, he “transcends” within an essentially “a-physical” dimension, virtually as a definite compositional choice, antithetical to the one adopted by Leonardo. As a result, Botticelli’s paintings are strongly “a-prospective”, with an “evocative” more than “descriptive” style. Botticelli represents the characters within the framework as they had no body-weight. This attitude clearly manifests the painter’s detachment from the physical elements of reality. Even colour fades away and vanishes in his textural components, to be given back as pure “quality”, whereas light itself loses essence, density and source, and remains only as a vague, poorly defined, “spiritual” irradiation.

Warburg [2, 3] emphasizes the occurrence of “pathetic” characters in Botticelli’s paintings. He underlines that Italian Renaissance artists refers to the Classic Greek motifs because of their Apollonian as well as Dionysian character, thus, as such, heavy with “pathos”. Accordingly, the Italian artists of the 13th century mention the ancient Greek models for reasons in contrast with the image of the classical sculpture left behind by Johann Winckelmann. While, according to Winckelmann, the majesty of antiquity entails the “stillness” and a kind of “unabashed serenity”, Warburg claims that in 1400’s the interest for antique models is closely related to those “Pathosformeln” from which the artists of Italian Renaissance derived their images of passion and sorrow. Thus, the “noble simplicity” (peaceful grandness) that Winckelmann observed in the Greek statuary is not the rule, at least not the only rule, for the Greek style. From this point of view, according to Warburg, Botticelli produced pictures representing from within a connection between “Pathetic” (or Psychological) and “Apollonian” (or Formal) realms, being such a relationship the equivalent of the ratio between “colour” and “line”.

The relationship and the ever-unstable balance between these two concepts give place to a kind of “disquiet”, distinctive of Botticelli’s works. Following Warburg’s advice, this is the origin for the “dreamy” or “pensive” beauty of his characters,

who look as they were just waking up from a dream, with their conscience still permeated by oneiric images. Warburg, referring to the “*Primavera*” (1478-1482) and the “*Birth of Venus*” (1484-1486) [2], debates on a certain dualism between “Involvement” and “Detachment”, i.e. between “Pathetic” and “Apollonian” elements. He states that in those figures “the eyes, it’s true, appear turned toward the objects of the world outside, but not exactly staring at any of those”. In this way, the “Placid Beauty” of Botticelli paintings brings some remnants of sleep, allowing glimpses of the nightlife. This is a way, for the ancient “Pathos”, to be revealed.

Therefore, whatever is “intelligible” (i.e. the Apollonian elements) may not be conceived before having been grouped and unified with its “pathos-sensible” elements (i.e. with his Dionysian characters). Thereby, “Beauty” itself turns out to be drenched with “pathetic” elements, the ones that Warburg recognizes as signs of the “surviving paganism”. In his opinion, “observing” an image is not merely “looking at” something. Instead, it entails a process of “bringing back to memory”, through which the impact of primal forces and emotions do not dissolve, rather manifest in ever new and always different forms. This memory, embodied in the picture, or rather in his perceptible components, provides reasons for the multi-layered stratification of different values (i.e. depiction). The opportunity to find an ultimate and definitive meaning, manifestly evident within the image, is precluded, since it would have granted merging the “Sensible” into the “Intelligible”. The denial of the ultimate meaning is also the denial to “Enlighten” and to provide a meaning for the “Beginning”, for the “Origin”, that have proved to be unavailable for the human understanding. The “Origin” may be included only in “Myths”. As for a mythical source it may just be narrated, again and forever. “*The Birth of Venus*” is a testimony. Warburg describes the Botticelli’ Venus – actually the concept also applies to all the Botticelli’s figures, including the “*Portrait of a Young Man*” that is the topic of Velardi’s essay – as she were arousing from a fading-away dream. He describes her gaze as suspended between waking and sleeping, wobbling amidst dreams and reality. Warburg knows that Botticelli was aware of the details and the deep meanings related to the mythology of the Goddess birth. Botticelli knew it through the description that Angelo Poliziano replicated from Hesiod. According to the legend, Venus rises from

the foam of the sea, that represents the seminal fluid of Urano, burst out from his phallus, when cut away with a scythe by his son Chronos.

The “*Birth of Venus*” is preceded by horror and violence. This implies that “Beauty” emerges from a foreground of cruelty, since it is strictly related to that irredeemable imperfection. Erwin Panofsky, in “*Renaissance and Resuscitations in Western Art*” [4], agrees with the theory of Warburg. He emphasizes that Venus plays in the “*Primavera*” and in the “*Birth of Venus*” as the main character. Both paintings, based upon the “*Giostra*” by Poliziano, are closely bound together and form an indissoluble unity. The two works should be intended as representing “the Two Venuses” mentioned by Plato and the Neo-Platonists. The “*Birth of Venus*” would represent the “Heavenly Venus” and should be understood as a glaring theophany. Conversely, in the “*Primavera*” we face the “Venus Naturalis”, or “Venus Humanitatis”, as referred to by Marsilio Ficino. In this case, the scene is to be intended as a great celebration rather than a theophany. Edgar Wind, in “*Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*” [5], states that the theories expressed by Ficino, Poliziano, and even Botticelli himself, may help to clearly understand Botticelli’s works. Accordingly, the role of Mercurius in the “*Primavera*” should not be interpreted as representing a complete detachment from the mundane passions, rather in a dynamic relationship with Zephyrus. They represent the two complementary forces of love. Mercurius, the power of reason, indicating the path, Zephyrus indicating the strength of passion. Venus negotiates between the two forces.

According to the idea of Nietzsche, asserted in “*Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*” [6], the two foundations presiding over an artwork, the “Apollonian” or “Figurative” one and the “Dionysian” or “Aniconic” one, are never separated. No matter how hard Dionysus, God of Music, would hesitate and shy away from any image Apollo, God of the Image, would give him. Nonetheless, it is impossible to conceive Music not bringing with it an Image or a figure. It does not mean that Music is the Image of something external. Images are inspired by the Music, even though no one of those images shall be capable to decipher it totally. Since Dionysus, God of Pathos, inextricably linked with the emotional feature of images, eludes any image that Apollo attempts to assign him, in the world of emotions it “implies” that something fatally eludes the “Transvaluation” (“Umwertung” in German) within the realm of the “Intelligible”.

For Dionysus, the No-Face, no “migration” may be foreseen from the “a-idios” to the Apollonian “eidos”. Nevertheless, Art is the combined domain of both Dionysus and Apollo. There is no “Formless” without “Form”, there is no “A-idios” without “Eidos”, there is no “Sensible” without “Idea”, there is no “Shadow” without “Light”, just because even the contrary is true as well.

Hence, Beauty is drenched with pathetic features, rather than complying with the Neo-Classic ideals outlined by Winckelmann. For these reasons, Warburg claims that the influences of primordial forces and emotions never dissolve, rather mutate during the following ages, still persisting as a basilar element of the representation. Indeed, the Warburg’s concept “Pathosformeln” comes from here, images archetypically displaying the “pathetic” element within the “sensible” ones.

The reputation and majesty of Botticelli came back to light at the end of 17th century. In England the Pre-Raphaelites loved in his works the close connection between corporeity and spirituality. As well, in France the link between Marcel Proust and Botticelli, declared by the Author in the “*Recherche*”, specifically in the chapter entitled *Swann’s Way*, helps to grasp the deeper meaning of the Proustian masterpiece. Swann is writing an essay about Botticelli. He will never finalize the work, due to his compulsion toward the aestheticism, opposed by Proust himself, which forces him to overlap art with real life. Art is not a “different issue”, completely separated from Life. As Proust alleges and declares in the “*Recherche*” [7], Art is nurtured by Life, but may never become confused with it. This same interconnection between Art and Life, intended as a link between eternity and ephemerality, may be found in Botticelli. Swann meets Odette at the Verdurin house. At the beginning he recognizes she is not pretty and rather boring. All of a sudden, he realizes that her profile resembles that of Sephora, the daughter of Jethro depicted by Botticelli in the Sistine Chapel. Henceforth he falls in love with her. In the “*Recherche*” the allusion to Botticelli is not coincidental. The Proust work represents the effort, pursued for four thousands pages, to attain “Absolute” and “Eternity”, to redeem the “Bounded” and the “Ephemeral”, i.e. the “Accidental”, to assert and give the life an ultimate “Sense”. On the other hand, the Author realizes that “Eternity” cannot be achieved unless going through “Time”. The paintings by Botticelli are

distinguished by the same imperative connection between “Eternity” and “Ephemerality”, from which the melancholy for losing the no more attainable “Paradise”, the “Eternity”, comes.

According to the Warburg’s analysis of the Botticelli’s paintings, in Proust the “Wakening” represents the striving between memory and neglect, visible and invisible, discernible and indistinct, since images have no permanence at that stage. As this appears to be the scope of the Proustian narrative, the “Story-Teller” is forced to reveal his “inadequacy to disclose everything”, that he may testify with his work. With Albertine’s death, the “Story-Teller” assumes to be able to overcome time, reaching in this way the “Absolute”, since Albertine represents for him the “Great Goddess of Time”. Conversely, the death of Bergotte occurs in front of “*A view of Delft*” by Vermeer, a picture the “Story-Teller” considers endowed with an absolute, thus perpetual, beauty. Thence, he discards the idea of “Beauty” as an ultimate purpose, and indicates that “Beauty” and “Eternity” are permeated by “Time”. Once the “Story-Teller” recognizes that “Beauty” is revealed through “Time” and that his work should connect “Eternity” and “Ephemerality”, most predictably he may eventually finalize his narration.

All these remarks may be applied also to the Botticelli’s paintings, remarkably to the “*Portrait of a Young Man*”, exhibited in London at the National Gallery. In this portrait the representation of the physical defect combines “pathos” with “logos”, both expressed through the majesty of draughtsmanship. The coupling between “Ephemerality” and “Eternity” generates a “disquiet”, that is expressed by his nearly absent-minded gaze that watches without seeing. It is a kind of “voyance”, turning in to “present” whatever is “absent”, although still unintelligible. It allows us to “perceive” the “invisible” and “indiscernible” in the realm of the “visible” and “discernible”, leaving everything as it is, invisible indeed.

Declaration of interest

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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