

## THE IMAGE'S STATUS DURING THE RENAISSANCE – A GATEWAY TO TRUTH AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

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**Abstract:** *The influence of Platonic philosophy during the Renaissance is undoubtedly vigorous. However, during Quattrocento and Cinquecento, Plato's negative view about image is no longer shared by the scholars of that time. It seems that during the Renaissance the honor with which the logos are invested by Plato begins to be attributed to the image, too. Thus, the image becomes an indispensable tool in the process of knowledge and in the philosopher's search of truth. There are some main reasons which underlie this change of perspective and which deserve to be called into question.*

**Keywords:** *image, Renaissance, logos, Plato, knowledge*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

An obvious statement, almost a cliché: Platonic philosophy underpins the conceptual construction of the West.

However, this is a statement from which anyone who wants to know and understand the tortuous threads of the Renaissance way of thinking or of the other major time periods in the history of Europe is bound to return.

During the Renaissance in particular, the updating of Neoplatonism, the translation and the interpretation of Platonic dialogues, and the general orientation of the educated people towards the Greco-Roman philosophy and morals certainly justify the attempt of building a parallel between the Renaissance and the Platonic views.

Assuming that language, either verbally or visually, reflects the profound beliefs of those who use it, I want to focus my attention on the relation between *image* and *word* as Plato presented it in his written dialogues, and then to investigate the changes this perspective had suffered during the Renaissance.

Thus, I will try to enrich and also to clarify the definition of this relation as it appears in the Renaissance.

Undoubtedly, there are differences between the way the rapport *εἰκὼν/λόγος* is understood by the Renaissance Neoplatonists and the way it is formulated by Plato.

My hypothesis is that during the Renaissance, *the images cease to be mere copies of sensitive world – they become channels of communication with the divine, with the intelligible world, just as logos is the bridge between the sensible world and the Ideas in Plato's view.*

A notorious figure serves me as a landmark in the world of Renaissance: one of the most dedicated philosophers in the search of ancient thought vestiges, namely Marsilio Ficino<sup>1</sup>.

I will begin my study by presenting the role of the *logos* in Plato's philosophy, and then I will discuss about the status Plato confers to painting and image in general.

I will return to later XIV-XVI centuries AD, focusing my attention on the signs' reception and on the magic valences of meaning contained in that specific manner of reception<sup>2</sup>.

1 Thomas Noble, Barry Strauss, Duane O'Shea, Kristen Neuschel, Elinor Accampo, "The Renaissance" in *Western Civilization. Beyond Boundaries*, Boston, Wadsworth Publishing, 2010, p. 328 (Ficino is the first author of the Platonic dialogues that were translated into Latin, being thus a great contributor to the reopening of the Platonic Academy).

2 I will base my claims on Michael Foucault's theory from *Words and Things* (Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1966, pp. 57-77).

As Ernst Gombrich<sup>3</sup> had pointed out, Botticelli's *Primavera* is, as it will be revealed at the end of this study, a case in which it is highlighted the similarity between the main function of *logos* (in Platonic philosophy) and the image's main function during the Renaissance period.

## 2. THE *LOGOS* IN PLATO'S VIEW

“For Paganism, no tree carried a forbidden fruit.”<sup>4</sup> The Pantheon, which is inhabited by capricious gods and heroes, seems less distant to people than the Heaven Adam has been chased away from. For many ancient Greek (Pythagorean, Socratic, Peripatetic) schools of philosophy achieving the knowledge of good and evil and the knowledge of truth becomes the core of the philosophical research and the very meaning of life. From the exoteric teachings<sup>5</sup> of Plato's dialogues, a complex worldview is revealed: Plato argues that the changeable and perishable material world is categorically split by the intelligible world of ideas, of pure, eternal, unchangeable forms; and that the human soul, because of its similarity with the Ideas, it can and should transcend the material limitations of this world so that to return to the lofty spheres where it belongs (*Phaedrus*, 245c-249B). The material world is knowable through the senses, whereas the intelligible world can be achieved only through reason and recollection. Only the reason and the connections inside the process of thinking (*logos*) allow the soul to access its forgotten knowledge (*Phaedrus*, 249A-250C). Thus the searched truth, the truth that claims universality, is paradoxically the inner truth of a human being.

3 Ernst H. Gombrich, “Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Platonic Symbolism of His Circle”, in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 8 (1945), pp. 7-60.

4 Gebhart Mile and Victoria Charles, *Botticelli*, New York, Parkstone Press, 2010, p. 77.

5 There are many scholars who tend to believe that Platonic esoteric philosophy is inaccessible to us since Plato preferred to transmit it orally only (Glen Most, “Plato's exoteric Myths” in Collobert, Destrée & Gonzalez, *Plato and Myth. Studies on Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, Leiden and Boston, Brill Publishing House, 2012, pp. 20-21).

Truth cannot be taught, but it needed to be found inside the individual self. Hence, the knowledge of good and evil becomes possible only through self-knowledge.

What is, therefore, the role of the word in such a philosophical system? The Greek translation of the term *word* is *logos*, but *logos* also mean *speech, reasoning, explanation* or *proportion*<sup>6</sup>. *Logos* – as Plato defined it – is the bridge between the physical world and the intelligible plan. It does not belong to any of them; neither is it emanated by things, nor is arbitrarily chosen by people<sup>7</sup>; that means *logos* is only the instrument of knowledge, not containing the knowledge itself. Since the words are often used without taking into account their true meaning and significance, reality can be distorted and the untruth is designed precisely through them. Words are thus those that enable the knowledge, but they are also those that can sink the human soul into an even more pressing confusion than that caused by the senses.

The meaning of the words can be questioned through the dialectic process so that this danger to be removed. Plato argues that the dialectical method is the main method by which reason can be educated/practiced: by examining a subject (often a concept/word such as *virtue* or *beauty*) through dialog, a vague and generic declaration can be clarified and the essence of the subject can be revealed (deduction) or a sure and punctual statement can be developed until it turns into a general and valid statement (induction) (*Phaedrus*, 265d-265E). In dialectics, the word becomes the gateway to understanding – the word correctly used empowers the man to fight against oblivion, to reconstruct lost memories, to “transpose the existing relations within being into the human soul.”<sup>8</sup>

6 <http://www.upm.ro/cercetare/CentreCercetare/DictionarCritica/Logos.pdf>, accessed at: 22/12/2014.

7 In *Cratylus*, Plato claims through his personage Cratylus that there are elementary words whose origin is divine – primordial words of which all the other words are drawn – “I believe [...] that a power more than human gave things their first names and that the names which are thus given are necessarily their true names.” (438c).

8 Leon Robin, *Platon*, Bucharest, Teora Publishing House, 1996, p. 64.

But, as I noted above, the misuse of words estranges man from truth. Many scholars believe that Plato criticizes the rhetoric for its power to help man to deceive others and to delude him/herself with empty but nicely polished words. Actually the issue is more nuanced<sup>9</sup>, but what appears necessary to bear in mind is that for Plato *logos* is not a “powerful master” (as Gorgias define it in the *Encomium of Helen*, 8) but *logos*’ power seems to depend on how it is used.

The relationship between dialectics and rhetoric is investigated in the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*, the rhetoric being associated with writing (whereas the dialectics is, at least in Socrates’ opinion, dependent on the word of mouth). Both the writing and the painting are subject to comparisons, and these comparisons emphasize the negative similarities between them, namely that neither the written speech, nor the painting can clarify perplexities that are awoken by themselves in the reader/viewer mind; the written speech and the painting offer themselves to anyone – to those who are ready to receive their information, but also to those unprepared to receive it – to all in the same form; and since they have been wronged, they are unable to defend themselves, requiring that their father – the creator of the text or of the image – to come to their aid (275d-275e). Speech writing and painting are thus disregarded, being understood as inanimate copies of the sensible world, the sensible world itself being just a reflection of the divine. Plato calls the writing *φαρμάκων* through the character of Socrates (*Phaedrus*, 275a). Jacques Derrida points out the bivalent meaning of the term, as *cure*, but also as *poison*<sup>10</sup>. The writing claims to be helpful for the memory but, in fact, it harms the memory, because it ceases to be practiced; a man could memorize a text without understanding its meaning. Extrapolating, the image is as misleading as the writing is.

9 In my Bachelor’s Thesis, I had demonstrated that rhetoric in the process of knowledge, in Plato’s view, is as important as dialectics is (*Rhetoric in Plato’s View – a Tool of Knowledge of the Truth*, 2014).

10 Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy”, in *Dissemination*, London, The Athlone Press 1981, p 70.

Fascinated by the image, the viewer believes he is in the presence of the represented object, when in fact he sees only a representation, a second-hand reality – the painted image.

Thus, the painting is considered an “*eloquent art*”, through which the painter can obtain the enjoyment, the excitement and eventually the persuasion of the viewer<sup>11</sup>.

Therefore, in Plato’s view, the close rapport between word and image, between speech and painting is not favorable to the image/painting.

However, unlike the word (which can be ennobled by dialectics), painting remains an occupation, in any case, of low quality. In the next pages of this study we will see that, during the Renaissance, the perspective described above has changed.

### 3. THE IMAGE’S STATUS DURING THE RENAISSANCE

During Trecento, a moral structure of the state is accepted for the first time, independent of religious or philosophical traditions<sup>12</sup>, which gives freedom to sight to see beyond the limitations of these traditions and it also leads to the construction of an anthropocentric system – humanism – in which the man enthrone himself in the center of the world, where “the miracles of the spirit are [considered to be] greater than those of the sky.”<sup>13</sup>

In this historical period, it is evident the attempting to update (to copy and to combine) classical elements with early Christian items because these traditions are considered as giving the formula of a superior society to the medieval one – the traditional values are rediscovered, and based on these tradition, man has the possibility for further assessment and interpretation of the Christian conceptions<sup>14</sup>.

11 Victor Jerome Stoichiță, „Critica de artă la Veneția și dilemele picturalității”, in *Creatorul și umbra lui*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2007, p. 84.

12 Jacob Burckhardt *apud* Thomas F. X. Noble *et alii*, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

13 Jean Seznec, “The Physical Tradition”, in *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1953, p. 60.

14 Thomas F. X. Noble *et alii*, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

In addition to these two dimensions – the Christian theological view and the Neoplatonic philosophy – there is a third *magical* dimension of the existence that encompassed and altered the other two.

A good example of how these three dimensions (the philosophical, the theological, and the magical one) overlap is given by the Paracelsian theories. For Paracelsus the signs had appeared as a result of the original sin (as a form of coercion, but also as a form of help offered by God to man in order to enable him to regain the understanding he held in Heaven)<sup>15</sup>. Man, although conditioned by the heavenly forces, can “submit” these forces provided that he understands the signs by which it was conditioned in the first place. Thus man regains his right to maintain “his inner sky” “autonomous”<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, knowledge frees the human being, just as for Plato truth frees the soul from the vagaries of body. Knowledge becomes possible through signs, and through their interpretation<sup>17</sup>. To interpret is a faculty of reason, but reason cannot overcome by itself the plausibility in order to accede to the truth. The signs – videlicet the images of the things – are the ones who offer the proper information to the reason, helping the reason to discover in them what is real (and not just what seems to be so). The signs are animated by the *signatures* – a sign “idle and silent” comes to life because of the signatures<sup>18</sup>. The sign is the evidence of a resemblance, and the signature is precisely the relationship between the sign and the likeness; the signature is the element that makes possible for the sign to indicate a resemblance.

The mentality which sustains such a perspective integrates a ternary system of signifying the world, as Michel Foucault argues – a system of correlations and similarities, in which knowledge can be gained only through the observation of likeness, by deciphering the signs which make up the visible world<sup>19</sup>.

15 Giorgio Agamben, “Theora des signatures”, in *Signatura Rerum sur la méthode*, Paris, Library philosophique J. Vrine, 2008, pp. 37-39.

16 Paracelsus *apud* Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

17 Michel Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

18 Jakob Böhme *apud* Agamben Giorgio, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

19 Michel Foucault, „Partie I”, in *op. cit.*

The reception of signs involves three levels of meaning: “the mark’s formal domain”, the content they indicate and “the similarities that links the marks to the designated things”<sup>20</sup>.

The mark is what can be seen – that is the image.

Behind what can be seen lay the hidden meanings and the true knowledge that the divinity has scored into things (“the primary text”) and that man has the duty to discover.

Between humans and images there are interposed the interpretations which are nothing else then the human attempts to reach the primary text.

Regarding the language, it is not an arbitrary construction, but a part of the vast distribution of the signatures and similarities and therefore it should be studied as a natural thing, too.

From this perspective, the language can be considered as a sign of the things it denotes<sup>21</sup> – *the word and the image merge into the same category*.

In this train of thought, each nature’s tiny item indicates another item, and thus the nature’s matrix is branched through symmetries and reflections, so that the image becomes a gateway to understanding something else then itself; each image is a gateway to understanding the essence of the thing it represents.

Through image, the Renaissance man seeks not only to establish links between things, to know and to communicate with them or to gain their forces, but *he especially seeks to get to know himself* (by getting to know them).

In the process of knowledge, it is important to consider that man observes the similarities between things by him/herself – he or she, as a part of the whole, is the one who ascertains, unravels and establishes the validity of these links by the sympathies and antipathies between him/herself and the things.

Man – a microcosm built alike the macrocosm – is able to know the outside world based on what he notices in him/herself and *vice versa*, observing the outside world he/she gets to know he/herself.

20 Michel Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

21 *Ibidem*, p. 74.

As Protagoras asserts, man is the measure of all things (*Theaetetus*, 152a), but for Renaissance people the assertion's meaning is not the one given by Protagoras, namely that things judged by man to be true are true as long as the judgment is plausible, but that the outer world's truth is reflected in the inner world's truth of a human being.

Both in the Renaissance Neoplatonicians' view and in Plato's view, the truth comes from inside.

So the possibility of deciphering the sign's meaning exists only if the sign's meaning had been stated in the human soul as a kind of analogous information. Reality is reflected in man's *pneuma*, and so man is reflected in the outer reality.

Man is looking outside for what he carries inside him/herself, but he/she cannot understand what it is outside him/herself without understanding his or her own inner world.

The process of knowledge is circular. The images can be understood as a projection of the human's phantasmal world, projection which correspond and communicate with the external reality.

However, the communication is not linear (like from a transmitter to a receiver), but it is a circular one, in which the receiver is also a transmitter.

This perspective can be recognized in the Ficinian philosophy, too. In Marcilio Ficino's view, everything in the world is connected, maintaining a continuous exchange of information. Ficino illustrates the relationship between *body* and *soul* – the communication between them is possible thanks to the *spirit* who is an intermediary between the two.

The spirit receives through the senses the stimuli generated by the body, and then translate these stimuli into images, into *phantasms* that can be recognized by the soul<sup>22</sup>.

For Ficino, "thinking is the main activity of the soul" – the soul moves/operates through thought<sup>23</sup>.

22 Petru Culianu, *Eros și Magie în Renaștere. 1484*, Bucharest, Nemira Publishing Press, 1994, pp. 55-56.

23 Marsilio Ficino, „Asupra iubirii”, in *Banchetul*.

Because the sight is the chief sense that helps the man to build images, and because the images are needed in the process of thinking, the sight acquires the status of the noblest of the senses<sup>24</sup>. The connections and similarities between things can be recognized by dint of the; the phantasms bring about realities. Even the heavenly forces can be persuaded to work in the support of the magician just with the aid of the *phantasms*, as communication with these forces cannot be done otherwise than through them. *The task of logos is taken in Ficino's view by the image*.

Concerning the ability of knowing, we have to take into account that in the ideal citadel described by Plato, the teaching of *logos* (i.e. the exercise of reason) is available only to those prepared to reach it, which means that not everyone has the traits and the required capacities in order to receive the knowledge.

The position of the Renaissance philosophers towards the teaching of the image's subtleties is exactly the same.

It is considered that only the wise can acquire the deeper meanings of the images and that knowledge can be transmitted only to those worthy enough to receive it.

Some of the roots of the Renaissance system of signification come from the Arabic collection of magic and astrology, *Picatrix*. *Picatrix* is highly-cherished by the intellectuals of the time (like Paracelsus and Ficino).

One of the premise-beliefs on which this collection was drawn is that the images "were meant to stimulate the spirit, using secret signs and veiled forms which would only be understood among the wise"<sup>25</sup>.

However, the difference that occurs between Platonic perspective about the *logos* and the Renaissance view about the *image* appears in the function Plato assigns to the *logos*: for Plato, *logos* has the power to save the soul; on the other hand, the function assigned to the image during the Renaissance is not only about the spiritual fulfillment of the man, but also about the material achievements.

*Asupra iubirii*, Oradea, Editura de Vest, 1992, p. 120.

24 Petru Culianu, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

25 Christopher Warnock, *Picatrix. Picatrix. Selected Translations Edited with Commentary*, p. 4.

As it is stated in *Picatrix*, the magic and the astrology main aim is “to improve the conditions of spiritual, physical, mental and social needs of the operator himself and of his client”<sup>26</sup>.

During the Renaissance, *the image* is undeniable rehabilitated, not only by means of the humanistic philosophers' theories, but also through the work of painters and Maecenas. In painting, the beauty becomes a resort to the higher spheres (and this is exactly the assumption that Plato uphold about the beauty). At a social level, during the Quattrocento, “the concept of *mimesis* becomes the *modernity's* guarantee of the artistic field”, claims the art critic Victor Ieronim Stoichiță; the new breakthroughs about the pictorial and the study of proportion and perspective invest painting with the prestigious “state of *science*”<sup>27</sup>. The study of perspective emphasizes the possibility of a painting to manifest itself: the space is conceived as “an open window”; the image itself is beyond the frame/window<sup>28</sup>. Thus, the composition, the light, the colors harmonize with each other in the pictorial space and so the parts of the painting get to form something more than their sum – a whole from which the Idea transpires. Leonardo da Vinci stated that the painting “must comprise the unity, not the multiplicity”; it follows that what the artist seeks to capture is not the object (from a multitude of objects), but its essence<sup>29</sup>. The same vision appears differently worded by Michelangelo for whom images are more than a mere copy of the world – they are “a copy of the perfection of God and a reminder of the divine painting”<sup>30</sup>, a direct reflection of the divine, just as the Platonic *logos* is a reflection of the divine truth of Ideas.

In his study of Botticelli's *Primavera*, E.H. Gombrich notes that the Renaissance paintings with mythological themes are probably inspired not only from ancient (Greek and Roman) texts, but also from some philosophical *programs* of contemporary humanists.

Gombrich claims that *Primavera*, painted for Lorenzo di Pierfranceso de Medici, a Ficino's student, was designed in line with Ficino's views about Venus. Several letters that Ficino had addressed to Lorenzo di Pierfranceso have to be considered, as the scholar does, as a main source of information in the attempt to interpret this painting. These letters serve as a support for the hypothesis such as the representations of the mythological figures aim to establish a link between the viewer and the Idea contained in those figures and, therefore, the painting aim is also to facilitate the knowing of man's inner sky or, in Platonic terms, to facilitate the soul's process of remembering<sup>31</sup>. Memories about the Images are reawakened in the soul through painted images. The deities that govern the stars also govern the tendencies of the soul which correspond to the defining traits of those deities, “because all the heavens are within us”<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, the image of Venus in *Primavera* is not just an appeal addressed to the goddess Venus, but also a way to determine her to offer her gifts to the caller.

The painting invokes Venus's powers, powers which man already holds and which, by the instrumentality of the goddess' image, are awakened in him. In this context, the image makes possible the vertical communication with the heavenly forces and it represents a key to spiritual evolution, too.

The gathering of Venus, Mercury, Eros, Flora, Chloris, and Zephyr in the same composition is very meaningful.

Although the composition scenes seem separate from each other and hence the characters seem to ignore the presence of the other characters around, the overall view of the composition brings about a certain interpretation of the painting.

The characters mirror each other, allowing different aspects of the viewer's self to reflect through them in the picture.

26 Petru Culianu, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

27 Victor Ieronim Stoichiță, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79.

28 *Ibidem*, pp. 115-116.

29 *Ibidem*, p. 117.

30 Michelangelo *apud* Stoichiță, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

31 For example, “Your Luna – the continuous motion of the soul and the body – [...] should fix her eyes on Venus herself, that is to say on Humanity (*Humanitas*)”; “If you thus despoise the heavenly signs [...] you will escape all the threats of fortune” etc. (Ficino *apud* Gombrich, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.)

32 Ficino *apud* Gombrich, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Venus alongside Flora is defined as a regenerative force, and through her association with Eros (Cupid), she appears as the goddess of love. The story, so stated in painting, leads the viewer's soul to recall about itself.

Images have an educational role: for Ficino “nothing seems more natural than to translate [the teachings] into visual reality” in order to explain to young Lorenzo astrology<sup>33</sup>. The fascination exerted by the images on the viewer can condition him both in a negative and in a positive way. Precisely for this reason achieving accurate visual reproductions of the deities is an issue of a prime importance – the “real essence” of the gods was believed to be revealed through the way they were portrayed<sup>34</sup>. Through images, useful information is “inoculated” almost instantly in the viewer's mind, so the level of effectiveness of this teaching method is highly appreciated. *Thus, both logos and images are necessary tools in the process of knowledge, but their effects are beneficial only if they are used properly.*

### CONCLUSIONS

As Culianu stated, “Renaissance culture was a culture of the fantastic” and phantasms “are nothing else but idols begotten by the internal sense”<sup>35</sup>, *carved shapes* into imagination, shapes which are worshiped by people. The concepts and different perspectives are covered in pictures – the image is placed above a matrix of beliefs and ideas. During the Renaissance (as during any other historical period), the visible is placed on an ideological mold and that mold – i.e. the archetype that dwells in the depths of the human being – is believed to come from the Divine, from a space beyond man's logical comprehension. Undoubtedly, the demonstration can be carried forward to the thread of alchemy's study, because alchemy is a part of the magical dimensions of the existence, so that new facets of image/word rapport to be revealed. A further research could, therefore, be fruitful.

Up to this point of the research, however, we can conclude that the relationship between image and word (*logos*) has a different meaning for the Renaissance's Neoplatonics than it had for Plato: if for Plato *logos* is the main instrument through which knowledge can be acquired by man, the image being rejected and blamed, during the Renaissance the picture is revalued and revived, assuming a certain share of the function of *logos*.

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33 Ernst H. Gombrich, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

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