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THE ANALOGY BETWEEN POETRY AND PAINTING IN GIAMBATTISTA VICO'S LETTER TO GHERARDO DEGLI ANGIOLI

1. Ut Pictura Poesis in Vico's Thought

Giambattista Vico's primary aim in his *Principles of New Science* (1744) is to extend the domain of science to the «common nature of nations»¹. This involves identifying the constant elements that mark the evolution of every civilization through its stages of «springing forth, progress, maturity, decadence, and end» (Vico 2020, 94, §245)². Indeed, the foundation of a science implies the establishment of principles on which to base the object of study: thus, it is only by focusing on what unites different peoples – rather than on what divides them – that the principles of a new science, embracing the institutions through which humanity constructs and inhabits society, can be outlined.

¹ This study refers to the final version of the *New Science* from 1744 – mentioned simply as *New Science* or *Principles of New Science* – as well as to the *first* version from 1725 (also abbreviated as *Sn25*), two texts that differ at times in content and, more notably, in the organization of their material. Vico's masterpiece, in fact, exists in three editions: 1725, 1730, and 1744. While the first edition constitutes a distinctly separate work, the two subsequent versions are more closely aligned, although they exhibit significant variations. As indicated in the final bibliography, the translation of the *New Science* used for this article is the 2020 version by Jason Taylor and Robert Miner, which includes the numbered paragraphs (here cited and followed by the symbol '§') introduced in the editions by Fausto Nicolini (1911-1916, 1928) and retained in the various English translations. However, the original Italian version of each quoted passage – taken from the critical edition of Vico's works edited by Paolo Cristofolini and Manuela Sanna – is also provided in a footnote. This edition preserves the italics that constitute the distinctive «iconism of typographic signs» (see Battistini 1984-1985, 173-177) of the *New Science*. For non-literal references within the main text, citations include in parentheses the relevant passage from the English translation, followed by the corresponding page number in the Italian version (abbreviated as *Sn44*), separated by a slash '/'. The original versions, in either Italian or Latin, are also provided for the other Vichian extracts quoted.

² «[...] sorgimenti, progressi, stati, decadenze, e fini» (Vico 2013, 75).

In this perspective, the concept of 'principle' assumes a dual significance, not only as element of science but also in the sense of beginning, opening event of a phenomenon. We can refer, in this regard, to the famous axiom XIV of the first book of the *New Science*: «The nature of things is nothing other than their coming-into-being at certain times and in certain fashions» (Vico 2020, 79, §147)³. Thus, if the nature of a thing lies in its beginning, in order to investigate the evolution of civilisations, Vico is firstly interested in the birth of human society and, consequently, in primitive mentality.

It is precisely through this archaeological excavation into the minds of early humans that the new Vichian science contributes to the emergence of modern philosophical aesthetics. Assuming a gradual manifestation of those rational structures by which humanity elaborates abstract thought, Vico conceives the original conformation of knowledge as a sensible image and thus compares the first men to poets. For this reason the concept of 'poetic wisdom', which encompasses the multiple domains of primitive thought (law, science, morality, history), cannot be reduced to poetry in the modern sense of the term. The link between the primitive mindset and the poetic phenomenon is to be understood in an analogical sense: the first humans are poets insofar as they are creators who think and construct reality through images, as poets or painters do today, in the age of reason.

This relation between poetry and painting is in fact constitutive of the concept of 'poetic wisdom' which, as we have seen, is both a cognitive form and a creative activity, engaging humankind in the early phases of its social evolution. As a creative activity, 'poetic wisdom' aims at the production of images, the 'imaginative universals'. These are ideas sensitively expressed by a humanity still incapable of abstracting concepts from their material representation, and are comparable to both poetic (in the modern sense) and pictorial images. In the interplay of the faculties that belong to the «first operation of the mind» – memory, imagination and *ingenium* (which can be translated as 'ingenuity' or 'invention') – it is above all the imagination (*fantasia*) that performs the task of re-visualising images and, by extension, painting them (Vico 2020, 295, §699 / Sn44, 229).

³ «*Natura di cose* altro non è, che *nascimento* di esse in *certi tempi*, e con *certe guise*» (Vico 2013, 63).

This consideration of poetry and painting as sister arts comes to Vico from a millenary tradition, which can be traced back to the famous statement attributed to Simonides that painting is a silent poem and poetry a painting with words. This twinning, implicit in Plato's conception of art as mimesis, is then adopted by Aristotle, decisively influencing the discourse on art throughout antiquity. The most renowned outcome of this idea is undoubtedly Horace's *Ars poetica*, centred precisely on the equivalence of poetry and painting, immortalised by the expression *ut pictura poesis*⁴. The legacy of Horace's epistle will be very long-lasting, providing a model for poetic creation even during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. In this context, the *Ars poetica* assumes a particular importance also for understanding, not only in its assimilation of word and image but also in its political and social implications, Vico's conception of 'poetic wisdom' (see Nanetti 2012). Moreover, Vico himself, in his notes on the *Ars poetica*, defines the second book of the *New Science* – dedicated to the concept of 'poetic wisdom' – as a «perpetual commentary» on the verses in which Horace recounts the domestication of savage humanity by Orpheus and Amphion in function of social edification (Vico 1998, 193).

Returning now to the central point of this analysis, the association of painting and poetry reveals how Vico is a child of his time; for this aspect, the last theorist of an age close to its decline, the Baroque age (see Carmello 2021; Patella 2022, 51-70). It is, indeed, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), spokesman of a new sensibility, who will break this consolidated link in his *Laocoön* (1766), whose subtitle is precisely *Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (*About the Limits of Poetry and Painting*). In order to construct a system of the arts that gives each its expressive limits, the German philosopher will emphasise the gap between painting and poetry, positioning the former into a synchronic spatiality, within which figures are positioned side by side, and the latter into a diachronic temporality, where words follow one another in sequence.

This shift actually has an even more profound consequence in the history of aesthetics. In fact, the divorce between poetry and painting undermines the mimetic paradigm of art: once freed from

⁴ An essential point of reference on this topic remains the classic study by Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut pictura poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (Lee 1967).

what Lessing describes as the «narrower limits of painting», poetry is understood as an art that is no longer bound to the task of reproducing reality. Paving the way for the aesthetics of Romanticism, the main source of poetic activity is identified in invention (*Erfindung*), rather than in the representation of a natural model, which remains mostly the field of painting⁵.

2. From 'Poetic Wisdom' to Poetry

My aim now is to demonstrate how Vico challenges the mimetic paradigm – like Lessing – but without questioning the principle of *ut pictura poesis*, thereby taking an alternative path to the one that will be developed in the *Laocoön*. To do so, I will focus on a text contemporary with the first edition of the *New Science* (1725) – where the language of primitive peoples is already described as a «painted speech»⁶ – specifically, a letter written as a commentary on some sonnets sent to him by the young poet Gherardo degli Angioli (1705-1783). The letter, dated December 26th 1725, is particularly significant because it is here that Vico explicitly applies to poetry certain conclusions that he had earlier outlined in the broader framework of the first *New Science*.

As already stated, the term 'poetry' in the *New Science* is closely tied to the concept of 'poetic wisdom', which encompasses history, morality, law, and other aspects that we moderns tend to distinguish from poetry: it is a way of thinking through metaphors and images that Vico compares to poetry, strictly speaking. Although 'poetic wisdom' doesn't directly correspond to the

⁵ A more comprehensive list of references to the concept of *ut pictura poesis* in the works of Vico – who, in this respect, can be seen as a late representative of the Baroque – along with a related comparison with Lessing – a thinker with a predominantly Neoclassical orientation, though not without openings toward Romanticism – is provided in the essay *Vico, Lessing e la tradizione delle arti Sorelle* (Bensi 2012). Indeed, the history of aesthetic theory reveals an alternation between periods that favor the blending of the arts (such as the Baroque or Postmodernism) and those, more Classicist in orientation, that tend instead to identify and isolate the distinctive features of each individual art (see D'Angelo 2019).

⁶ Especially, in the third book of the first *New Science*, titled *The principles of this science concerning language* (Vico 2002, 147-224 / Sn25, 137-152), Vico presents an extensive discussion on the origin of coats of arms, which he later omitted from subsequent editions. In this section, heraldic arms and medals are interpreted as products of a pictorial thought, corresponding to an early stage of human society and symbolising the institution of land ownership (see Lenner 2024).

modern meaning of the term 'poetry', the *New Science* allows us to gain insights into poetry, precisely because of the connection that Vico establishes between the primitive form of knowledge and poetic expression.

This aspect becomes clear in a text on a *stricto sensu* poetological subject, such as the letter to Gherardo degli Angioli. Here, probably the writing in which Vico comes closest to drafting his own *Ars Poetica*, the observation of the decadence of the arts is related with the widespread of a philosophical intellectualism that, distrusting sensitive knowledge, tends to eradicate the possibility of any poetic creation:

First and foremost, you have come into the world at a time made excessively lean by analytical methods, too set in its ways by the severity of criteria, and so much under the sway of a philosophy which professes to deaden all those faculties of the soul which come to it from the body, and above all that of imagination, that this particular faculty is nowadays detested as the mother of all human errors. And, in a word, you have come into the world during times characterized by a knowledge which benumbs all that is magnanimous in the best poetry, poetry which knows how to reveal itself only through rapture, makes the judgement of the senses its guiding light, and imitates and depicts things, customs, and emotions true to life, imagining them strongly and thus feeling them vividly. (Vico 1996, 348-349)⁷

For Vico, the malady of his century lies in an oblivion of the body – the polemical reference is to certain outcomes of Cartesianism – which represents the greatest harm to an artistic practice nourished by sensory stimuli. In this context, Vico emphasises the distance that separates the poems sent to him by Gherardo degli Angioli from the refined poetry of the 18th century, instead linking them to a more ancient Italian tradition. Dante Alighieri, a poet of 'choleric wit' (*collerico ingegno*), stands as an antithesis to the taste of a delicate, 'subtle' (*sottile*), age, which is no longer accustomed to metaphorical richness and to the communicative violence rooted in

⁷ «Primieramente ella è venuta a' tempi troppo assottigliati da' metodi analitici, troppo irrigiditi dalla severità de' criterj, e sì di una filosofia, che professa ammortire tutte le facoltà dell'animo, che li provvengono dal corpo, e sopra tutte, quella d'immaginare, che oggi si detesta, come madre di tutti gli errori umani; ed in una parola, ella è venuta a' tempi d'una sapienza, che assidera tutto il generoso della miglior poesia: la quale non sa spiegarsi, che per trasporti; fa sua regola il giudizio de' sensi; ed imita, e pigne al vivo le cose, i costumi, gli affetti, con un fortemente immaginargli, e quindi vivamente sentirli» (Vico 1992, 121-122).

the sacred and ritual origins of poetic knowledge. According to Vico, only in an age so close to the primitive condition, such as the Middle Ages, could a poet like Dante exist. In fact, Vico alludes here to a thesis that will be fully developed in the final version of the *New Science* (see Vico 2020, 421-424, §§1046-1056 / *Sn44*, 323-326): the interpretation of the long period after the fall of the Roman Empire as the age of the «returned barbarous times» and thus the comparison between Dante, as the mythologist of the wild barbarism of Italy, and Homer, the national genius of the Greek people in its heroic age.

This original assessment of Dante's work⁸, and its comparison with the Homeric poems, is accompanied by a further allusion to some unspecified English tragedies, which evoke the brutality of ancient Greek theatre:

Both [Homer and Dante], furthermore, interspersed their stories with such atrocities that they evoke compassion in this humanity of ours, and were a source of pleasure to the audience then, just as the English nowadays, little softened by the refinements of the century, do not enjoy tragedies unless they contain elements of atrocity. In the same way the first preference of Greek theatre, while still in its savage state, was certainly for the nefarious dinners of Thyestes and the pitiless massacres perpetrated by Medea on her brothers and children. (Vico 1996, 352)⁹

Leaving aside these references to Homer, Dante and, perhaps, Shakespeare – of which Vico, according to Benedetto Croce, possibly received a «belated and vague» information (Croce 1913, 225) – what we need to emphasise now is Vico's invitation to

⁸ Indeed, this represents an original judgment within the context of the early eighteenth century, especially considering that the significant reappraisal of Dante's poetry would mainly begin in the latter part of the century. On Dante and Vico, see the essays contained in the collection *Dante e Vico. Alle radici della vita civile* (Lomonaco-Megale 2021). It is no coincidence that this letter to Gherardo degli Angioli is primarily recognized among scholars studying Dante's reception, and that the English translation I am using is drawn from an anthology of studies on Dante. This explains why the translation includes only the first part of the letter, which pertains to Dante, while I will personally translate the excerpts from the second part.

⁹ «[...] ed entrambi di tanta atrocità vi sparsero le loro favole, che in questa nostra umanità fanno compassione, ed allora cagionavan piacere negli uditori: come oggi gl'Inghilesi poco ammolliti dalla dilettezza del secolo, non si dilettano di tragedie, che non abbiano dell'atroce: appunto quale il primo gusto del teatro greco ancor fiero, fu certamente delle neferie cene di Tieste, e dall'empie straggi fatte da Medea di fratelli e figliuoli» (Vico 1992, 124-125).

recover those virtues of the body that have been neglected by the «refined» intellect of moderns. In this sense, Vico does not urge his young poet to merely imitate a model, but instead encourages him to reopen his gaze, in order to reawaken those faculties that can counteract the crisis of poetic language: «That is why you do not seem to me to be an imitator of Dante, because certainly, when you compose, you do not think of yourself as an imitator of Dante; but because of your melancholic wit, your austere habit, your inclination to poetic expression, you are a young man of poetic nature of Dante's time» (Vico 1992, 125; my translation)¹⁰.

3. Painting as a Creative Act

Rejecting the idea that poetry should imitate pre-established models, like Dante, the mimetic function towards the «excellent nature» has here an inventive significance¹¹. In fact, the concluding part of the letter outlines the three «poetic properties» shown by Gherardo's poems, which reflect, from a literary point of view, certain conclusions advanced, from a more general perspective, in the *New Science* (see Sanna 2001). The first property focuses on the capacity of imagination to «enter into things themselves», to appropriate reality in a visualising act that constructs a new poetic object, truly felt, as a faithful re-creation of its empirical counterpart. This process involves a transfiguration of the object, dictated by an absence of rational clarity, which makes the imagination a deforming faculty: «for the shadows of your melancholy, as in the shadow objects appear greater than they truly are, with a heightened sense as well; which, by nature, must thus convey expression with magnitude, vehemence, sublimity» (Vico 1992, 125; my translation)¹². From this immediately follows the second property, which specifies how poetic sentiments are «expressed by the senses, not understood by reflection». Vico

¹⁰ «Per ciò, che si è detto, ella non già mi sembra essere imitatore di Dante, perché certamente, quando ella compone, non punto pensa d'imitar Dante; ma con tal melancolico ingegno, tal severo costume, tal'incetta di poetici favellari, è un giovinetto di natura poetica de' tempi di Dante».

¹¹ In this sense, and as will be seen below, the letter is closely related to the themes that Vico had addressed in his most famous oration, *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (*On the study methods of our time*), and in particular in paragraph XII, *De optimis artificum exemplis* (Vico 1990, 70-71).

¹² « [...] per le ombre della vostra malinconia, come all'ombra gli oggetti sembrano maggiori del vero, con senso anche grande: il quale perciò si dee per natura portar dietro l'espressione con grandezza, veemenza, sublimità».

refers here to the dichotomy of poetry and philosophy that underlies the diachronic structure of the *New Science*: the former working by connections of *ingenium* and drawing sensible images, the latter reasoning by concepts and intelligible forms¹³.

This distinction between poetic and philosophical ‘sentences’ – two modes of thought and language with different cognitive qualities – leads finally to the third fundamental property, where the analogy between poetry and painting reappears. In a certain sense, this last property combines the previous two, as it clarifies why imagination is a deforming faculty and at the same time explains the dichotomy of philosophical and poetic ideas established in the second property:

Because your compositions are the same as the subjects of which you speak: because you don’t seek them in the ideas of the philosophers, as they claim – for this reason false praise is a true reproach for what they lack – but you find them in the ideas of poets, as in those of painters, which are the same, differing only in words and colours; and so they are ideas in which the subjects participate to some extent. Therefore you meritoriously accomplish them; outlining them over these ideas, just as divine painters accomplish the men or women they portray on their canvases over certain ideal models; so that the portraits represent the originals in a better way and enable us to recognise them. (Vico 1992, 126; my translation)¹⁴

¹³ «53. At first, men sense without noticing; then, they notice with a troubled and agitated spirit; finally, they reflect with a clear mind. This Axiom is the principle pertaining to poetic sentiments, which are formed by passionate and affective sensation; these are different from philosophic sentiments, which are formed by the rational reflection. Hence, the more the latter rise to the level of universals, the more they apprehend the true; the more the former appropriate particulars, the more certain they are» (Vico 2020, 90, §§ 218-219).

«LIII. Gli uomini prima sentono senz'avvertire; dappoi avvertiscono con animo perturbato, e commosso; finalmente riflettono con mente pura. Questa Degnità è 'l Principio delle sentenze Poetiche, che sono formate con sensi di passioni, e d'affetti; a differenza delle sentenze filosofiche, che si formano dalla riflessione con raziocinj: onde queste più s'appressano al Vero, quanto più s'innalzano agli Universali; e quelle sono più certe, quanto più s'appropiano a' particolari» (Vico 2013, 72).

¹⁴ «[...] perché i vostri componimenti sono propj de' subietti, di cui parlate: perché non gli andate a ritrovare nell'idee de' Filosofi, per cui i subietti tali dovrebbono essere; onde le false lodi sono veri rimproveri di ciò, che loro manca; ma li rincontrate nelle idee de' Poeti, come in quelle de' Pittori, le quali sono le stesse, e non differiscono tra loro, che per le parole, e i colori; e sì elleno sono

Vico introduces here an aspect that requires closer examination: the images of painters are explicitly defined as «ideas», expressed through plastic figures and colours¹⁵, which have their counterpart in the words constituting the literary-poetic language. The ambiguity and complexity of the concept of *idea*, as well known, comes from its etymology, from *iδεῖν* ‘to see’, indicating something that sensitively appears¹⁶. In this regard, it is useful to remember that Vico invites us to read his *Scienza nuova* as a «History of human ideas» (*Storia d'umane idee*): the intelligible essences, the concepts, are understood in this perspective as the last moment of a process starting from sensible images (see Vico 2020, 118, §347 / *Sn*44, 93). These in fact represent the core of man's detachment from pure naturalness: the idea appears when man, imitating nature, constructs something alternative to it.

It is for this reason that poetry, like painting, does not produce *εἰδωλά* (copies of reality), but *εἰδη* (ideas). In this way, the pictorial-poetic space becomes the archetype of an imagined world in which artefacts transfigure reality. The mimetic attitude of painting towards the natural model must be understood as an overcoming of nature itself: the world is not reproduced in the image but recreated, giving rise to new figures that represent the originals ‘in a better way’, and constructing original syntheses. In poetic reality, mimesis is not confined to a representational function that merely facilitates the recognition of models through equivalences. Its

idee, delle quali essi subjetti partecipano qualche cosa: onde con merito li compite; contornandoli sopra esse idee; appunto come i divini Pittori compiscono sopra certi loro modelli ideali gli uomini, o le donne, che essi in tele ritraggono; talché i ritratti in una miglior aria rappresentino gli originali, che tu puoi dire, che è quello, o quella».

¹⁵ The example of colour is particularly significant in the tradition of rationalist thought as it demonstrates the insufficiency of the sensory datum for the purpose of obtaining adequate knowledge (see Sanna 2001, 20).

¹⁶ In some respects – particularly in the emphasis on an ideal model from which the artist shapes his creations – Vico seems to reconnect with a long tradition rooted in the famous passage of Cicero's *De Oratore* (II, 7-10), where the ‘idea’ is linked to a form of beauty existing in the artist's mind. For the history of this concept and its development from antiquity to the 18th century, a seminal essay is *Idea. A concept in Art Theory* by Erwin Panofsky (1924). Later, in the second half of the 18th century, reflections on ideal beauty gained prominence, especially with the rise of neoclassical taste, as evidenced by the theories of Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Anton Raphael Mengs. A systematic overview of 18th century debates surrounding ideal beauty and its application to individual arts can be found in E. De Arteaga's *Investigaciones filosóficas sobre la belleza ideal considerada como objeto de las artes de imitación* (1789).

ability to portray reality is subordinate to the participation of the 'subjects' to the ideas, and thus linked to a creative power that allows for a comparison – although they operate on different planes – between the poet-painter and God, creator of the natural world¹⁷.

Reading this letter in the light of Vico's theory of imagination, most extensively elaborated in his *New Science*, it becomes clear how the Neapolitan philosopher challenges the mimetic paradigm of the arts, even if he formally preserves it. What Vico seems to demand of artists is a return to the original condition that made possible the foundation of the «civil world», the human world; a condition that coincides with the point of view of a «contemplation of the heavens with the eyes of the body», when primitive men first observed the sky, combining the natural disorder of the stars into figures and attributing meanings to the planets (Vico 2020, §391, 141 / *Sn44*, 109). While Vico acknowledges that this condition, in its totality, is impossible to recover, he also suggests that understanding primitive poetic activity is still attainable through a reconstructive effort, writing in the *New Science* (1744) that «the poetic nature of those earliest men is for our gentle nature completely impossible to imagine, and it is only with great toil that we are permitted to understand it» (Vico 2020, 27, §34)¹⁸. Modern reason cannot identify with primitive thought directly, as profound transformations have occurred since, but it allows us to retrace the «modifications» through which the human mind has evolved¹⁹. Poetry, art, is, in a sense, the last depowered residue of this first creative activity from which human civilisation began.

¹⁷ We can refer here to another important work by Vico, *De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia* (1710), where the comparison between the divine and human ways of knowing is illustrated through an artistic metaphor: «Divine truth is a solid image like a statue; human truth is a monogram or a surface image like a painting. Just as divine truth is what God sets in order and creates in the act of knowing it, so human truth is what man puts together and makes in the act of knowing it» (Vico 1988, 46). «[...] verum divinum est imago rerum solida, tamquam plasma; humanum monograma, seu imago plana, tamquam pictura; et quemadmodum verum divinum est quod Deus, dum cognoscit, disponit ac gignit, ita verum humanum sit, quod homo, dum novit, componit item ac facit» (Vico 1971, 63).

¹⁸ «[...] perocchè tal *natura poetica* di tai primi uomini in *queste nostre ingentilite nature* egli è affatto impossibile immaginare, e a gran pena ci è permesso d'intendere» (Vico 2013, 31).

¹⁹ It is no coincidence that Vico – given his role as an explorer of what lies repressed beneath the successive layers of the mind and of history – has often been linked to both psychoanalysis and anthropology (see Sanna 2016, 14).

When Vico adopts the conception of art as imitation, the discourse appears influenced by a deeper theory of creative production that induces an understanding of mimesis, not as a conforming copy of nature, but as an expression arising from poetic sensibility. The invitation – formulated in the oration of 1708, *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (Vico 1988, 71, §XII) – to engage with the great artists by imitating the «excellent nature», rather than replicating their works, becomes now an exhortation to approach the psychological background that made the first *ποίησις* possible. This attitude is evident in the immediacy of the pictorial gesture, which imitates nature by instantly transfiguring it into visual images. Thus, if the essence of artistic praxis in general lies in pictorial mimesis, poetic-literary creation, according to Vico, must come as close as possible to the *modus operandi* exemplified by painting. The latter, indeed, constructs its images in a manner that is immediately sensible, without passing through the abstraction inherent in articulated verbal language, where the original interweaving of meaning and signifier is necessarily lost.

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