
RAREFACTION
METAPHYSICS, ETHICS, AND
PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE:
IMAGES OF METAPHYSICAL
PEACE IN VENETIAN RENAISSANCE
PAINTING (1480–1510)

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1.

In his *Geburt der Tragödie* Friedrich Nietzsche quotes a famous painting by Raphael, the *Transfiguration*, as a perfect way to explain the power of Apollinism to hide the dark side of existence by projecting it over an Empyrean sky of archetypal perfection¹. Such transfigurative power² perfectly summarises the variety of emotions we are driven to feel whenever we face an Italian Renaissance painting, with its perfect bodily proportions and calibration of gestures – indeed it looks as if they occur almost effortlessly – as well as the seemingly timeless atmosphere encompassing all the characters. Everything is set against a perfectly calibrated geometrical background, which can happen to be either an architectonical frame, or a landscape, or sometimes both. Nietzsche says that the power of transfiguration is what allows the Gods to walk on earth: it is the dream of a human life lived by the Gods – “the only possible theodicy”³. He does not, however, highlight the fact that this almost hypnotic fascination with classicism proceeds from a strong effort of de-materialisation, in order to ensure that everything in the work of art conjures the creation of an atmosphere of *rare* harmony,

¹ F. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 4, in *Werke*, Bd. III/1, De Gruyter, Berlin – New York 1972, p. 35.

² *Op. cit.*, 3, p. 32: “Einen verklärenden Spiegel”.

³ *Op. cit.*, 3, pp. 31–33; p. 32: “Die allein genügende Theodicee!”

where everything connected to heaviness and gravity is banned⁴. It is not pretentious, then, to state that Renaissance beauty mostly consists in rarefaction. No matter how sad is the story told in the painting, no matter how tragic and frantic is the action portrayed in it (say, a battle), everything looks as still as if a supernatural force had descended into the physical world in order to calm and slow down the natural flow of events. Rarefaction, in Italian Renaissance art, is thus the image of a perfect and transcendent – i.e. metaphysical – peace. It is almost a truism that Renaissance art portrays the ideal world of Platonic archetypes and ideas, which constituted the intellectual spine of the philosophy of the time⁵; yet these archetypes, far from consisting of a completely secluded, self-contained world, are surprisingly represented without any sort of mediation, simply standing in front of the beholder, sometimes even staring at him. This did not imply, however, that the archetypal dimension had suddenly become at hand; in fact, there was a sort of double enjeu that made such dimension accessible to those who were pure, while at the same time protecting it from those who were not. Only through a deep training in philosophy and by leading a virtuous life could the wise learn how “to see the intelligible form” buried within the bodily matter, in order to achieve an intellectual and then spiritual ascension⁶; that is, a spiritual understanding arising in the mind of the scholar when interpreting the visual images⁷, in a mutual involvement between ethics, metaphysics and philosophy of nature. To profane this

⁴ It is worth noting that Nietzsche's strive towards achieving an *innocence* of Dionysism may also be seen as a quest for a non-Apollonian way to lightness.

⁵ The decisive event for the spreading of Neoplatonism in Renaissance Italy was the foundation, in 1462, of the Florentine Academy under the patronage of the lord of Florence, Cosimo, from the Medici family. Led by outstanding intellectual figures such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the Academy exerted an enormous influence over Renaissance artists of the like of Botticelli. On the importance of Platonism in the context of Italian Renaissance see R. Baine Harris, *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, Dominum, Norfolk 1976; J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols., Brill, Leiden 1990; id., *Humanism and Platonism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols., Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Roma 2003–2004; on Ficino: M. J. B. Allen, V. Rees (eds.), *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, Brill, Leiden 2002; on Pico: M. V. Dougherty (ed.), *Pico della Mirandola: New Essays*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge (Eng.) 2008.

⁶ J. Gregory, *Neoplatonists*, Routledge, London 1999, p. 4.

⁷ A. Payne, *Antiquity and its Interpreters*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge (Eng.) 2000, p. 112.

spiritual dimension was impossible – or at least very difficult – for the unwise man would not be able to decipher the often esoteric references disseminated in the pictures; however, they were not so for the sake of being enigmatic in themselves, but in a clear analogy with the embodiment of the archetypes within earthly realities, which was at the same time both a self-manifestation and a self-concealment of the purely intellectual and spiritual realities. Thus the visible was such in the first instance not because it could be *seen*, but because the *invisible* buried in it could be perceived only by the purified mind, albeit with the help of the physical eyes.

2.

This in turn led to consider the power of art and the artist himself as almost divine entities, a view that conflicted with Plato's well-known criticism of art as imitation⁸. In fact, Plato tends to criticise art only as a form of *bad imitation*, not because it is an imitation in itself – nor, for that matter, does he criticises imitation *in itself* for being an imitation. For instance, the philosopher is said to be but a pale imitation of the god: he is someone who, as his very name says, “*pursues the goal of being a knower (philo-sopheî)*”, while the gods do not because they are *already* such⁹. In the *Theaetetus* Plato more explicitly calls this process “[to become] as similar as possible to a god (*homóiosis theôî katà tò dynatón*)”¹⁰, that is to strive to imitate him as far as possible by divinising ourselves: yet we would seek in vain here for a condemnation of philosophy for being an imitation. Therefore not all imitations are bad for Plato, nor are they bad in themselves, despite their obvious lower ontological status face to the originals (a remark that, in the eyes of Plato, comes as a perfectly objective one, and not as a sort of “moral condemnation”). This distinction is just as essential as it is too often overlooked. Moreover, it would be more correct to say that Plato cri-

⁸ On Plato's criticism of art, see I. Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun. Why Plato Banishes the Arts*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1978; Ch. Janaway, *Images of Excellence. Plato's Critique of the Arts*, Oxford UP, Oxford 1998.

⁹ Plato, *Convivium*, 204a.

¹⁰ Id., *Theaetetus*, 176b.

ticises *artists* rather than art. If man must essentially imitate the gods, then the artist stands for a *bad* imitation, because, if he is a real artist, he's inspired by the "divine fate and possession" (*theíai moírai kài katokochéi*), while the philosopher, on the contrary, is the best possible imitation of gods, he's god-like and divine, not least because of the perfect self-awareness and control he exerts over himself, never to be lost for any reason, not even faced with death, as Socrates himself had so masterfully shown. In the *Ion* Plato states that a true artist is such only when he is moved by a divine power: on such an occasion, he is by rights the last link in a long chain that extends back to the one of the great, "archetypal" poets, and through this chain the power of divine inspiration flows back and forth, thus annulling the otherwise unchallengeable men/gods divide¹¹. Such power was traditionally considered to belong to poets and musicians only; however, already in the ancient world the great Latin poet Horatius had highlighted the similarity between poetry and painting (*ut pictura poesis*)¹² because of their common resorting to images (*picturae*). At length, this led to an overturning of the ancient view on the status of painters and sculptors, whom, being "hand-workers", were not considered to be "real artists" in Antiquity because of the contempt surrounding manual work at the time. While poets and musicians followed divine inspiration, painters and sculptors had instead to rely on the *technical* rules of art (*téchne*, in Greek) in order to create their works, which in turn were considered second-tier ones: they were therefore "technicians" and closer to craftsmen. Things started to change during the late Middle Ages¹³; by 1435, in Leon Battista Alberti's treatise on painting¹⁴ the painter had been recognised as

¹¹ Id., *Io*, 535b – 536d.

¹² This favourite *topos* comes from Horatius' *Ars poetica*, 361, but is also present in other classical sources. It seems to date back to a formula by Simonides from Keos ("painting is inarticulate poetry, poetry is articulate painting") quoted and commented by Plutarch (*De gloria Athenensium* [*Bellone an pace clariores fuerint Athenienses*], 3, 346f – 347a) and Cicero (*Tusculanae Disputationes*, 5, 39.114), while Aristotle linked painting and poetry to imitation as their common origin (*Poetica*, 4.2–6, 1448b).

¹³ On the emancipation of artists (notably architects) in the 13th century as part of a then thriving "urban professionalism", see E. Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, The Archabbey Press, Latrobe (Penn.) 1951, ch. 2.

¹⁴ L. B. Alberti, *Della pittura*, 3.52: the painter has to be "a good and well-lettered man" ("uomo buono e dotto in buone lettere"); "learned, as far as it's possible to him, in all the liberal

an artist and intellectual in his own right. However, he could still not claim to be directly inspired by God – to be “divine”, as it would be claimed for Raphael and Michelangelo in their times. Painters likely owed this last but essential achievement to Piero della Francesca. Piero not only took the command of the perspective technique in painting to unprecedented heights but also placed it within a clear intellectual frame, of which he was also the author. The usage of perspective, based as it was on strict geometrical and mathematical rules, marked a clear break with the ancient notion of the artist: he was no longer led by the force of inspiration but had instead become someone in possession of the inner (if hidden) rationality of the world, as well as being charged with the duty of making it manifest. If, during the Middle Ages, the realm of art had been allegory, now it looked more like “hard” science (*scientia, epistème*)¹⁵. By not contenting himself with painting, since he also wrote tractates¹⁶, Piero was not only in line with an age in which artists had achieved the status of intellectuals, he also showed that, in sharp contrast with Plato’s views, the painter could equal the poet or the musician in becoming divine, this time not by inspiration but by means of his fully rational art. The painter, then, imitated God as far as is conceded to a man because he was *a philosopher* at heart, and could then achieve that “divine” status, which had always been denied to Greek and Roman artists¹⁷. Therefore the *poetry* of rarefaction in early Italian Renaissance paintings comes as the outcome of a godly – that

arts, but above all in geometry” (“Piacemi il pittore sia dotto, in quanto e’ possa, in tutte l’arti liberali, ma imprima desidero sappi geometria”: 3, 53). On the position of Alberti, Brunelleschi, Piero and Leonardo see the classical study by R. Wittkower, “Brunelleschi and ‘Proportion in Perspective’”, in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 16 (1953), pp. 275–291. On the evolution of the status of the artist and its link to the mechanical arts see Paolo Rossi, *I filosofi e le macchine (1400–1700)*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1971, pp. 29–31; see also note 23 below.

¹⁵ Piero indeed calls perspective “scientia”: *De prospectiva pingendi*, it. transl. by G. N. Fasola, Sansoni, Firenze 1942 [repr. Le lettere, Firenze 2005], p. 128.

¹⁶ Beside his *De prospectiva pingendi* Piero wrote also the *De abaco* and the *Libellus de quinque corporibus regularibus*, in all of which he showed a deep interest in geometry and algebra.

¹⁷ On the subject of the divinity of the artist see P. Emison, *Creating the “Divine” Artist: From Dante to Michelangelo*, Brill, Leiden 2004. Such divinity could well have also resulted in the tendency, more and more common during the Renaissance, shown by artists to self-portray themselves in Christ-like fashion, of which the best example is of course Dürer’s famous self-portrait at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich.

is a rational, *philosophical* – power exerted by the artist in the name of God himself: what the artist paints is a sketch of the divine world as it is, without being veiled, and the meaning of his artwork – despite its appearing in front of us drawn in lines, figures and colours – is not immediately perceivable, just as Platonic ideas can be only hinted at from the physical realities in which they are concealed. Moreover, the *shape* – we could also call it the *language* – in which these ideas appear to be embodied, is marked by the contrast between the sweet poetry of harmoniously drawn and softly crafted figures and the perfectly calculated geometric frame in which they are set, dominated by perspective – the hidden and concrete mathematical fabric, of which the world is made. This adds to another (if newly claimed) power of the artist that also made him so similar to Plato's philosopher: he could mediate between the vagary and freedom of the creative dimension and the severity of the necessary and unchangeable laws of "hard" knowledge. Therefore, the perfect harmony achieved in Italian Renaissance paintings is the outcome of an extremely difficult balance between two realms – emotionality and intellectuality; ultimately the divine and the human – that are often in strident contrast, if not perpetually at war.

3.

This notion of rarefaction as a perfectly still and resolved harmony was very common in early Renaissance artists, who basically shared the same Platonic culture. But at the end of the 15th century, for the first time in modern Western art, Leonardo da Vinci introduced an essential element, which all the pictures made by his predecessors, despite their bright colours and harmonious character, had nevertheless lacked: air, or rather the atmospheric pictorial rendering of it¹⁸. This was not surprising, given that the world portrayed in those pictures was an *ideal*

¹⁸ On the rendering of atmospheric air by Leonardo – a technique known as the "sfumato" or gradient – see H. Ruhemann, "Leonardos' use of sfumato", in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 1 (1961), pp. 231–237; J. Bell, "Sfumato, Linien und Natur", in F. Fehrenbach (ed.), *Leonardo da Vinci. Natur im Übergang. Beiträge zu Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technik*, Fink, München 2002, pp. 229–256; Id., "Sfumato and acuity perspective", in C. Farago (ed.), *Leonardo da Vinci and the Ethics of Style*, Manchester UP, Manchester 2008, pp. 161–188; E. J. Olszewsky, "How Leonardo invented sfumato", in *Sources* 31 (2011), pp. 4–9.

one; yet to say that Leonardo was preoccupied with rendering the world of real phenomena because he was a scientist in the first place seems off the mark. Arguably, in the deeper sense of the term previously outlined, Leonardo was less of a scientist than an artist; that is to say, the artist-cum-philosopher that Piero della Francesca had led to the centre of the intellectual and spiritual stage. Indeed Leonardo shares with Piero a belief in the inner mathematical essence of reality, which he calls – philosophically enough – “necessity” (“neciessità”)¹⁹. However, in his undeniably mathematical experimentalism, it is not possible to see “the founding act of the experimental model of modern science”²⁰. Indeed, it may not even move beyond a capricious *curiositas*²¹: Vasari described him – not without irony – as a man who loved “whimsically philosophising about natural things”, who thought of himself as “more of a philosopher than a Christian”²². Leonardo’s careful observation and descriptions of natural phenomena therefore owes less to an anachronistic (for his times) development of a “scientific mindset” than to an intellectual curiosity, which pointed towards a perfect imitation and rendering of nature pursued for its own sake. In other words, Leonardo was moved by a curiosity that was not scientific but essentially *artistic*, whose aim was basically to perfectly transpose the immense variety of natural forms in sketches, paintings and endless drawings (of which there is, definitely not by coincidence, a large number in Leonardo’s notebooks)²³. Apart from this, Leonardo did not distance himself from Piero’s conviction

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Richter (ed.), *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*, n. 1135, Phaidon, London 1970, vol. 2, p. 285: “La neciessità è maestra e tutrice della natura; la neciessità è tema e inventrice della natura e freno e regola eterna”. On Leonardo’s “philosophy” see Rossi, *op. cit.*, pp. 32–37; K. Jaspers, *Lionard als Philosoph*, Francke, Bern 1953; E. Cassirer, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*, Meiner, Hamburg 2013 (esp. pp. 177 sg.); M. Kemp, *Leonardo*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2004; id., *Leonardo da Vinci. The Marvellous Works of Nature and Man*, Oxford UP, Oxford 2006.

²⁰ Rossi, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 34–36.

²² G. Vasari, *Le vite de più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architetti*, Einaudi, Torino 1986, p. 550: “E tanti furono i suoi capricci, che filosofando delle cose naturali, attese a intendere la proprietà delle erbe, continuando et osservando il moto del cielo, il corso della luna e gli andamenti del sole. Per il che fece ne l’animo un concetto sì eretico, che e’ non si accostava a qualsivoglia religione, stimando per avventura assai più lo essere filosofo che cristiano”.

²³ Witness Leonardo’s famous letter sent to the Duke of Milan (*Codex Atlanticus*, f. 391 r.a., Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan), in which he speaks of himself as an engineer, an architect *and* an artist (see note 14 above).

about the mathematical foundations of reality; therefore, the novelty of the introduction of the pictorial rendering of atmospheric air cannot be seen as marking a concession to “realism”. The world portrayed by Leonardo is as ideal as Piero’s; it is only the way it is approached that changes. Air is indeed a sort of veil between our eyes and the physical objects of the world: we never experience objects as sharp and clean-cut as they appear in Italian masterpieces of the 15th century. In Leonardo’s works, a thin veil of humidity surrounds all things, from the bodies of his Madonnas and angels to the trees painted in the background of his pictures. Colours become darker, with a predominance of brown; special attention is given to hues and gradients, and the boundaries of figures fade in evanescence. Truth – the divine and necessary mathematical essence of reality, “neciessità” – is better rendered not by a timeless perfection secluded from the dim unhappiness of our world but rather by denying that it can be contained within a single meaning or representation. Leonardo denies that the sense of meaning in general consists in a closure, i.e. that every meaning is well determined and given once and for all: hence also his perpetually restless *curiositas*. There is a close analogy between this conception of meaning and truth and the use of the line in the field of figurative arts. The line precisely symbolises such semantic closure: it’s the boundary that divides every object from the rest of the world. By introducing the rendering of atmospheric air, Leonardo weakens the power of the line – unchallenged until then – and abandons the confrontational notion of reality of early Renaissance in favour of a *porous* one, in which the boundaries between one object and another are neither clearly defined nor in principle definable. Reality is an infinite communication, an unstoppable passage of information between all the objects in the world, while air is the medium, at the same time physical and symbolical, which makes such a passage and communication possible. This also helps to explain the subtle eroticism underlying Leonardo’s works since Eros is precisely a demonic figure in charge of endlessly linking the sphere of the human with the sphere of the divine, binding the gods themselves together in just the same way as he binds together all the inhabitants of our physical world. According

to Plato's account in the *Symposium*²⁴, Eros is perfectly equipped to do this because he's the quintessential *philosopher*.

4.

In 1504, Leonardo spent a short period of time in Venice. A young and exceptionally gifted artist, Giorgione, who had independently come to similar conclusions, was therefore given the opportunity to become fully acquainted with the Florentine's innovative approach²⁵. As a result, he went even further, supplanting air with *light*. This was an all-philosophical choice in itself, since light is of course deeply connected to Neoplatonic philosophy²⁶, according to which the world is but the product of the descent of God's light from the Heavens until it reaches the darkest regions of pure matter. Giorgione refused the traditional technique of painting, which consisted of first sketching a drawing in order to later fill the spaces in it with colour: he opted instead not to define the figures first, but to shape them out from "colour stains". Wood was also abandoned as the support material in favour of the canvas, which is more flexible and adapted to a technique that, not contemplating the help of drawing, was far more difficult to execute, and exposed to mistakes and mind-changes. Giorgione saw physical reality and even matter – so heavy, irrational and unspiritual as it may seem – precisely as the outcome of the never-ending interplay of *colours*. Colours, in turn, are but *light*: thus body flesh and its nuances, the colours of nature, the trembling light over a silk dress, the icy sparks flashing out of an armature, no matter how different they look and indeed are, still are all generated by the angle of incidence according to which the bodies are struck by light. Thus bodies – and reality in general – are best described and rendered not by using lines – which, in a drawing, define and bind them – but by colours; indeed, in the artworks of Venetian

²⁴ Plato, *Convivium*, 203d.

²⁵ Cf. for instance P. Holberton, "Giorgione's sfumato", in S. Ferino-Pagden (ed.), *Giorgione entmythisiert*, Brepols, Turnhout 2008, pp. 55–69.

²⁶ On the Neoplatonic background of the Venetian culture of the time see W. Melczer, "Il Neoplatonismo nel Veneto all'epoca di Giorgione (1490–1510)", in R. Maschio (ed.), *I tempi di Giorgione*, Gangemi, Roma 1994, pp. 64–72.

painters, bodies become just a set of “colour stains”. If we look closer at each one of them, we see that the boundaries, which make the figure intelligible, disappear the closer we get to the canvas: figures re-emerge as well-determined characters, objects or locations only as we distance ourselves back from it.

5.

This artistic revolution brought about a completely different sense of the philosophical poetry of rarefaction. We already mentioned that every Italian Renaissance artwork encompasses a resolution of the contrast between the preternatural sweetness shown in the painted scene and the mathematical essence of the world that animated it. This contrast may of course be found also in Venetian painting. On the one hand, it's an extremely idealistic art, since it is conceptually as well as technically based on the usage of light, which is the most immaterial i.e. “unreal” existent reality – a sort of borderline concept that is also a borderline reality. On the other hand, Venetian painting marks the triumph of a deeply naturalistic tendency that combined Leonardo's atmospherism²⁷ with Northern European taste for minutiae in general and landscape-painting in particular. Besides inventing a new, drawing-less painting technique and introducing the use of the canvas, Venetian painting also regularly featured landscapes as the main character of its creations. The presence of landscape in paintings dates back to the late Middle Ages²⁸; in early Renaissance masterpieces it is manifested as a highly intellectua-

²⁷ Such atmospherism was already present in a famous drawing of a Valdarno landscape (Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, Uffizi, Florence) sketched by a young Leonardo, which is also his first work to be dated (August 5th, 1473). The close tie between this technique and *landscape* is very likely not coincidental, and helps confirming the thesis here exposed. On landscape in Leonardo see E. Beuys Wurmbach, *Die Landschaften in den Hintergründen der Gemälde Leonardos*, Klüser & Schellmann, Munich 1974.

²⁸ On the history of landscape see N. Büttner, *Landscape Painting. A History*, Abbeville Press, New York 2006; on landscape in Renaissance art see E. H. Gombrich, “The Renaissance Theory of Art and the Rise of Landscape”, in *Studies in the Art of the Renaissance, I: Norm and Form*, Phaidon, London 1966, pp. 107–121; on landscape in Venetian painting see A. Mariuz, “Il paesaggio Veneto del Cinquecento”, in *Tiziano. “La fuga in Egitto” e la pittura di paesaggio*, catalogue of the exhibition (Venice, August 29th–December 2nd, 2012), Marsilio, Venezia 2012, pp. 25–39; M. Lucco, “Da “paese” a “paesaggio”: le molte facce della natura veneta”, in *Tiziano*

lised reality that plays an ancillary role as sophisticated scenery designed to strengthen the sensation of great distance laying between our world and the sphere of pure archetypes. On the contrary, the landscapes in Venetian painting are, as a general rule, actual ones, describing the real places where artists were born and lived, where actual trees and herbs grew, beneath real yet distant mountains that can always be seen from the plains stretching at their feet and the hilly regions in-between, with genuine small villages and castles dotting the countryside almost everywhere; finally, with the high skies of the Veneto region seen at different times of the year (generally in spring and summer) or during the day (at dawn, midday, afternoon, dusk).

This choice has dramatic consequences. (i) First, if it is actual nature, not an idealised one, that becomes an almost perfect mirror of the divine, then *the whole of* it becomes “divine”, including the heaviness of matter, the seeming brute-ness of the bodies of animals, who are deprived of reason – even the dullness of trees and herbs, incapable of moving as they are. Yet, from a philosophical point of view, this is pure Neoplatonic orthodoxy: reality is nothing other than Light. Indeed we should not be surprised that the first greatest painter of animals in Western art, Jacopo Bassano, belongs to the third generation of Venetian painters. (ii) Secondly, this coming centre-stage of the landscape often confines human figures in a corner, rendering them as tiny or even making them almost disappear. As a result, landscape in Venetian painting is never a mere background, to the extent that “every tree eventually becomes a character”²⁹ of the elegant and complicated Neo-Platonic allegories these artists loved so much to paint.

6.

Therefore the philosophical poetry of rarefaction created by Venetian painters differs completely from that of their central-Italy predecessors – not only in the way it is represented but also in its meaning, which re-

e la nascita del paesaggio moderno, catalogue of the exhibition (Milan, February 16th–May 20th, 2012), Giunti, Firenze 2012, pp. 17–35.

²⁹ Mariuz, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

versed the static conception of 15th century classicism. If metaphysical peace stems now from the representation of *actual* nature – and not an ideal one – then this new dynamic equilibrium, in which nature is represented, cannot also exclude imperfection and uncertainty. It comes not as a timeless dimension but on the contrary is often a matter of a single ecstatic instant, just as in Giorgione's *Tempest*. Here nature is definitely an idyllic and luxurious Arcadia, as in Sannazzaro's eponymous poem, which was among the literary reference texts of these artists³⁰; nevertheless, it is also untamed. It hosts human houses and villages but is not itself humanised; the landscape is innervated by a deep sense of almost unbearable tension, adding to a general and disturbing feeling of *fragility*. Such hidden tension is not a peculiarity of the *Tempest*; on the contrary, fragility became a subject in itself to be represented, as in the two paintings by Titian showing the immediate *aftermath* of the interruption of a concert³¹ (a concert is of course the very embodiment of harmony), while the *Tempest* shows an equilibrium immediately *before* it cracks, broken by the thunderbolt³².

7.

The philosophical poetry of rarefaction displayed in the images of metaphysical peace in Venetian painting could then be defined as the poetry of an “imperfect perfection”, the like of which we can experience *in real life*. Indeed life's instability may, at a closer glance, reveal an immensely generative power, both splendid and terrible, of ever-new possibilities. Therefore in Venetian painting the artist is not just the shamanic bridge between the human and the divine, as it was in early Italian Renaissance painting, nor just he is aware of the never-ending labyrinthine nature of the real that is the key to understand the myste-

³⁰ Cf. J. Sannazzaro, *Arcadia*, ed. by C. Vecce, Carocci, Roma 2013. The poem was written between 1485 and 1504.

³¹ The *Concert in the countryside*, now at the Louvre, and the *Concert interrupted*, at the Galleria Palatina of Florence.

³² An almost complete list of the many interpretations of the *Tempest* may be found in M. Paoli, *La “Tempesta” svelata. Giorgione, Gabriele Vendramin, Girolamo Marcello e la “Vecchia”*, Pacini Fazzi, Lucca 2011, pp. 9–109.

ries of nature, as it was in Leonardo's view. Here the painter is rather someone who, by means of light (the most divine nature in the physical world, far higher in lineage than air), is capable of reproducing in his creative process the same patterns of God's creation and creativity; he does so by representing the poetry of the infinite generative power of nature as seen in the harmonious but fragile perfection of its dynamic equilibrium, doomed in any case not to last any longer than a single instant. Finally, as in the previous early Renaissance conception, this notion of metaphysical peace has also ethical implications. If harmony is at the same time divine and natural, dynamic and harmonious, instantaneous rather than eternal, then we cannot rely only on *theoretical* knowledge and its fixed schemes and boundaries to lead our lives, but we must also lean on *wisdom*. As a virtue that is itself in balance, being at the same time theoretical and practical, wisdom comes as the very embodiment of harmony: it is art's sister. Indeed it lies in art's very essence to come to terms with imperfection (witnessed for instance by technical difficulties, changes of mind...); the same goes for wisdom, since it is the "art of living". By not excluding the imperfection of actual nature from its notion of metaphysical peace, but instead making it the undisputed protagonist of its artworks, while at the same time giving it a necessary role as well as a "divine" status (thus still coupling it with perfection), rarefaction in Renaissance Venetian painting came to eventually fulfil the goal of humanism: to reconstitute a truer image of the Human as a Whole.

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