

E. H. Gombrich, Idea in the Theory of Art: Philosophy or Rhetoric?, Idea: VI Colloquia internazionale, Roma, 5-7 gennaio 1989: Lessico intellettuale europeo, Rome, 1990, pp.411-20 [Trapp no.1990D.1]

According to the much-quoted remark of Whitehead the whole of Western philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. If he was right, as I think he was, the twenty-one relazioni of this colloquio have added at least 20 new and important footnotes, and since these were commented upon in the discussion there are more footnotes to these footnotes. I am sure you will appreciate that if I now attempted in my turn to comment on these footnotes and their progeny we would arrive at an infinite regress, or possibly at an infinite congress. Admittedly this transition to eternity would not frighten us, the participants, for who would not enjoy to continue these discussions and to benefit forever from the hospitality of our wonderful hosts? The question is only, how long our hosts could sustain the burden of such an infinite congress and I must limit myself therefore to a few remarks only in addition to those you have seen printed in the "Messaggero" and displayed on the notice board of this aula.<1>

What struck me, as a student of art, in these contributions is the frequent reference to the experience of seeing, of visual perception, in the many transformations of the concept of idea. Not that this is surprising. We have learned from Professor Saffrey's introduction, that in ancient Greek the word idea clearly signified «the outward appearance of things perceived by the sense of sight». I believe that many of the subsequent contributions offered interesting reminders of the fact that the very word "seeing", or its equivalents, prefigures the multiplicity of meanings which the term idea inherited, as it were.

I would never complain about this multiplicity. I side with those who have reminded us of the value of plasticity in the use of words. If every term of the language were only allowed one meaning that excluded any metaphorical use, we could never acquire such a vocabulary let alone use it for communication. I hope that some of you will see this danger.

I believe in fact that it is only in the encounter with concrete problems that the ambiguity of language can be noticed and resolved. As a student of art interested in representation I remember that the artist could be asked to represent faithfully what he sees, let us say his hand, and that there are means of checking whether he has achieved this aim. But when he is asked to represent to us how he sees his hand while, for instance, focussing elsewhere, the task becomes more elusive. Critics from Roger de Piles and Hogarth to the Impressionists have reminded us of this difficulty<2>which ultimately undermines the whole concept of mimesis.

We know that from the outset Plato devalued seeing and therefore mimesis as mere belief, doxa. But he held fast to the episteme mediated by geometry. The famous inscription over the gate of the Academy - however apocryphal it may be: ... (Let no one enter who does not know geometry)<3> provides the most useful paradigm of his theory of knowledge. Nobody has ever seen or drawn a real triangle of which the three angles add up to 180°, but we can all think of it and of the consequences of this fact. We can think of it, because we have seen the real triangle before our soul entered our body and it is this doctrine of anamnesis which explains our limited grasp of ideas.

Professor Gregory has reminded us yesterday of the central role which theology plays in the history of Western philosophy. The fact that the doctrine of anamnesis clashes with the central belief of Christianity in the divine creation of every individual soul at the moment of conception seems to me to be of much importance in the further modifications of Plato's wholly self-consistent system of thoughts. True, his firm belief in the immortality of the soul recommended him to theologians, but pre-

existence had somehow to be glossed over or eliminated. There is no such pre-existence in Aristotle, but then his view of the soul as the form of the body was not so easily reconciled with immortality, as Pomponazzi was bold enough to show.

I think it is before the background of these momentous issues that we must see the debate to which this colloquium has been devoted, and not least also those concerned with the theory of art. Remember for instance the solemn words which Vasari devoted to Michelangelo's Last Judgment: «E questo nell'arte nostra è quello esempio è quella gran pittura mandata da Dio agli uomini in terra, acciocchè veggano come il fato fa, quando gli intelletti dal supremo grado in terra discendono, ed hanno in essi infusa la grazia e la divinità del sapere»⁴. Vasari does not use the word idea here but the sentiment derives of course from the Theologia Platonica. It may therefore serve me as a transition to the topic of my relazione as I had originally planned it, I refer to the famous book by Erwin Panofsky, *Idea. Ein Beitrag zur Begriffsgeschichte der älteren Kunsttheorie*, originally published by the Warburg Institute in Hamburg in 1924, about 65 years ago⁵.

In reluctantly yielding to the request of preparing a revised edition in 1960 the author somewhat distanced himself from his early work. He explained very frankly how far he considered it out of date, but merely added a bibliography of writings which had been published on the topic in the intervening decades. I must leave them and many other points on one side because I think that Panofsky's *Idea* in its original form still deserves to be called a classic. It represents a highly significant stage in the historiography of ideas and may therefore be all the more useful to us in pointing to certain problems of method which have, in my view, contributed to a change in our point of view.

The book is very short, only 72 pages of text though almost as many pages of notes and appendices in smaller print. Naturally I cannot offer an adequate summary and I must hope all the more that this brief outline and any critical remarks which will follow will not prevent you from reading the original text which must give anyone pleasure who can appreciate intellectual ingenuity combined with immense erudition.

The first chapter on the ancient world lends itself comparatively easily to a precis. Taking Plato's theory of ideas and his views on art more or less as read, Panofsky opens the discussion with a brilliant analysis of the passage in Cicero's *Orator* where the perfect orator is described as an idea that cannot be found in reality but only conceived by the mind. Cicero compares this image with the creations of artists who must strive to transcend the beauty of real things and even the beauty of previous works of art.

Though Cicero refers to Plato in this passage it is clear that he has transformed his views. He has offered a synthesis between Plato's doctrine and that of Aristotle who had located eidos in the mind of the artist, identifying it, for instance, with the architect's plan for a house before that house is ever built. In thus setting up the Platonic view as his thesis, the Aristotelian as his antithesis and the Ciceronian passage as his synthesis, Panofsky arrives at a cognitive map onto which he can enter other currents of thought. Seneca, in talking of the painter interprets the idea almost exclusively as a psychological notion, a mental image. Plotinus, of course, reverts to Platonic metaphysics but concedes the possibility of the artist being granted a vision of the supernatural idea.

Having thus established these contrasting positions Panofsky proceeds to describe their subsequent evolution and interaction, demonstrating how they cross, intertwine, separate and join again almost like the dancers in an intricate ballet. Passing rather quickly over the middle ages, mostly in the thrall of the Aristotelian view, and the earlier writers of the Renaissance, not yet touched by the Neo-

Platonic revival that dominated philosophy, he concentrates on the period of Mannerism, which had of course just come into view in the early twenties as a hitherto neglected period in the history of art. He aims at finding parallels to the various currents of artistic style which had just been postulated by Friedlander, playing on the instrument of dialectics with a virtuosity to which only long quotations could do justice. Very briefly, he finds an intrinsic tension in Mannerist art between the rejection of rules and their eager acceptance, a tension he finds also reflected in the contradictory attitudes of theoreticians who for instance both despised and advocated systems of proportion. While in his view the antithesis between subject and object had not troubled the writers of the Renaissance it is now recognised as a problem. He claims that it is for the first time in history that the question is posed how artistic creation is altogether possible, in other words how the artist's mind, in confronting reality through the senses, can ever conceive ideas. Art theory, in Panofsky's view, is now faced with the task of legitimising artistic activities by asking in accents that must remind you of Kant: «How is artistic representation and, in particular the rendering of beauty, at all possible? » *Wie ist die künstlerische Darstellung, und insbesondere die Darstellung des Schönen überhaupt möglich?*). It is in answering this question, or rather these two questions, that Panofsky sees the theorists using the traditional notion of idea in two typically antithetical ways. He dwells at some length on Federico Zuccari's *L'idea de Pittori, scultori ed architetti* of 1607 which draws on the Aristotelian tradition by stressing the idea in the artist's mind, which Zuccari calls the *disegno inferno*, while following St. Thomas in regarding these ideas as mere reflections of the perfect ideas in the mind of God and the near perfect ideas in the minds of angels. For Panofsky this ricorso to Scholastic ideas is of profound symptomatic significance, because it acknowledges the gap between subject and object he finds so characteristic of Mannerist art. He sees Zuccari's approach complemented by Lomazzo's reversion to Ficino's Neo-Platonic conception of beauty which, as Panofsky was the first to notice, he simply plagiarized. The chapter concludes with a psychological diagnosis of the spirit of the age: «Divorced from nature, and the human spirit seeks refuge in God in an emotion that is both helpless triumphant and that we recognize in the sad and proud physiognomies and gestures of Mannerist portraits and of which the Counter-Reformation is but one expression among many».

The subsequent chapter on the Neo-Classical theory which Panofsky sees emerging in the 17th century again proceeds dialectically to another antithetical position codified in Bellori's famous oration on the Idea. Bellori is shown to have called in the notion of the idea as an ally for his fight on two fronts - the fight against Mannerism which is said to rely on formulas and against Naturalism which is said to neglect the artist's vocation of improving on nature. Thus the metaphysical creed of the late Cinquecento which attempted to resolve the opposition between subject and object by taking recourse to God, was followed by an attitude that tried to achieve an immediate harmony between subject and object, Spirit and Nature, which manifests in Panofsky's view that return to the doctrine of purified nature that was summed up in the slogan of the Ideal. In a sense, it is here that the book should end, but Panofsky appended a chapter on Dürer and Michelangelo whose ideas he could not quite fit into his intellectual epic.

I hope I have at least given you the flavour of that remarkable tour de force though I must still refer you to its concluding paragraph in which the producer of that ballet of ideas steps before the public and explains that it was all an idle play, because that antithesis between idealism and naturalism which continued to engage the minds of philosophers is really nothing but a dialectical antinomy, since we now know - if I may cruelly over-simplify Panofsky's involved argument - that what we call reality is in itself nothing but the product of our minds<6>. Soon afterwards Panofsky gave substance to this conviction in his famous essay on Perspective as a Symbolic Form<7> in which Cassirer's philosophy is again linked with the same kind of deterministic dialectic which he saw as uniting the

successive world views with the evolution of human consciousness and human art, a vision of history surely derived from Hegel.

Ladies and Gentlemen, having explained, when speaking to this forum a year ago, why I personally cannot accept any such version of historical relativism, I hardly need spell, out why my admiration for Panofsky and my profound respect for his intellect has not sufficed to make me accept his reading of Renaissance artistic theory. As a realist in the modern, not the mediaeval sense of the term, I remain convinced that intellectual history should not be a ballet of abstractions, however enticing, but an investigation of enduring problems.

Take another passage from Vasari, this time one where he does use the term idea. In his Life of Titian Vasari defends the Tuscan emphasis on drawing, alleging that Giorgione and the other Venetians shunned preparatory sketches and painted directly on the canvas: «non s'accorgeva, che egli è necessario a chi vuol bene disporre i componimenti, ed accomodare l'invenzioni, ch'e' fa bisogno prima in più modi differenti porle in carta, per vedere come il tutto torna insieme. Conciossiachè l'idea non può vedere né immaginare perfettamente in se stessa l'invenzioni, se non apre e non mostra il suo concetto agli occhi corporali che l'aiutino a farne buon giudizio»^{<8>}.

Here the word idea is used in its psychological meaning as identical with consciousness or mind, but what I find interesting in this passage is that Vasari was right in stressing the importance of what we now call 'feed-back' in art, though of course he was wrong in claiming that the Venetians never made drawings. I am equally convinced of the fact that the problem of universals which had originally given rise to Plato's theory of ideas continues to confront us in various forms and that the historian has to take a stand in these matters.

It so happens that I had an opportunity of exemplifying my conviction precisely in relation to Raphael's famous letter on the Idea. Having suggested a link between that formulation and a passage from the younger Pico's *De imitatione* (1512) I also attempted to show that we can express the problem he broached in our own terms when we consider the relation of Ideal and Type in Renaissance Art^{<9>}. I even went so far as to express my view that there are not only objective standards of fidelity to nature but that even the ideal of beauty should not be regarded as a purely subjective notion.

What sense we can make of Zuccari's disegno inferno I have tried to show in my book on Art and Illusion where I investigated the role of what I call the schema in representation^{<10>}.

Somewhere in this direction I'd be tempted to look for the answer to the question which Panofsky attributes to Zuccari of how painting is possible, but frankly I'm not persuaded that this was ever Zuccari's concern. If you read him you will find that what he desires to prove is not the possibility but the dignity of his art. It is strange that this concern is not mentioned by Panofsky. We realize increasingly how much more these questions of hierarchy of dignity and nobility mattered to the past than they matter to us.

Donald Hirsch in his book *Validity in Interpretation*^{<11>} has made the important point that we cannot begin to interpret a text before we have decided to what genre it belongs. I think it is clear that Zuccari's treatise belongs to the genre of eulogies or panegyrics in praise of a particular vocation or discipline. In writing such a panegyric, the orator will be at pains to praise, among other things, the noble connections of his subject. If he praises a prince he will dwell on his ancestry and if he praises a discipline he will have to demonstrate its direct line to Almighty God. If you had honoured me with an invitation three hundred years ago to speak at your convegno you would have expected me to begin

by saying that the first lexicographer was God whose sacred work you are now continuing and to produce many learned quotations to back up my claim.

It is not by accident, I believe, that some of Zuccari's arguments for the divinity of painting are anticipated in Leonardo's *Paragone* of a century earlier exalting the nobility of painting. Being the genius that he was, Leonardo condensed the whole lengthy argument in the wonderful passage: «Come il pittore e Signore d'ogni sorte di gente e di tutte le cose. Se'l pittore vol vedere bellezze, che lo innamorino, egli n'e signore di generarle, et se vol vedere cose mostruose, che spaventino, o'che sieno buffonesche e risibili, o'veramente compassionevoli, ei n'e signore e Dio... e in effetto ciò che nell'universo per essentia, presentia o'immaginatione, esso l'ha prima nella mente e poi nelle mani; equelle sono di tanta eccellentia, che in pari tempo generano una proportionata armonia in un solo sguardo qual' fanno le cose»^{<12>}.

Even Zuccari's claim that disegno governs all the liberal arts would not have surprised Leonardo. Needless to say, Panofsky was fully aware of the contents and import of Leonardo's *Paragone*, he even prints the passage I have cited in one of his many footnotes relating to a different topic, but he obviously did not wish to discuss it in the context of *Idea*, because Leonardo did not use that word and his text could therefore not find a place in Panofsky's *Begriffsgeschichte*. I am sure that every lexicographer must be familiar with the problem posed by this decision. Should he concentrate on words, or on the thoughts behind the word? If he does the former, as Panofsky decided to do, he may be in danger of missing important clues, if the latter he may lose the thread which he decided to follow.

Take the example I have just mentioned, the oration in praise of the dignity of certain disciplines or arts: in his useful volume of 1899 *Reden und Briefe italienischer Humanisten*^{<13>} Karl Millner collected a fair sample of such showpieces as inaugural lectures to university courses and letters on similar topics from the 15th century. The recent reprint^{<14>} also contains a useful index of words where I find fifty entries for dignitas, forty for gloria, twenty for summum bonum, but only one for *Idea* in a quotation from Cicero's *Academica*. No doubt this observation may be of relevance to the lexicographer, but the question remains whether the genre of epideictic oratory offers the right kind of evidence for *Begriffsgeschichte*, the historical analysis of philosophical concepts? Are we not in danger of doing violence both to philosophy and to rhetoric in analysing a speech such as Bellori's *Idea* too closely for contradictions and inconsistencies in the sources on which the speaker drew? Did he really mind whether he employed the word *idea* in its Platonic, Aristotelian or Neo-Platonic sense? Is it indeed always legitimate to ask which of the meanings he was after, given the fact that it had been the aim of so many philosophers of these centuries to demonstrate the concordance of these various schools of thought? So many, after all, held fast to the conviction that ancient wisdom must have been one and undivided and would not admit that of two contrasting systems only one could be true?

In raising this question in relation to Panofsky's *Idea* I do not wish to conceal from you that similar doubts may also apply to one of my own studies, my article on *Philosophies of Symbolism and their bearing on Art*^{<15>} for which I chose as a starting point precisely such an oration, Cristophoro Giarda's speech on *Icones Symbolicae*, and attempted to sort out the Platonic and Aristotelian crosscurrents in the theories of allegorical and emblematic images, without perhaps paying sufficient heed to these syncretistic tendencies.

But if the words which occur in this kind of text should not necessarily be used as evidence of the writer's or speaker's allegiance to one or the other philosophical system, how should we look at them?

I know no better answer than the one given by Arthur O. Lovejoy. I well remember that at this meeting last year we heard a certain amount of criticism of Lovejoy's approach some of which may have been quite justified, but to the best of my memory one of Lovejoy's contributions was not mentioned, his notion of metaphysical pathos which he explains in the methodological introduction to his book *The Great Chain of Being*^{<16>}. He sees it exemplified «in any description of the nature of things. . . in terms which, like the words of a poem, awaken through their association. . . a congenial mood or tone of feeling on the part of the philosopher or his readers». True to his habit of classifying and subdividing his topics Lovejoy offers us «a good many kinds» of metaphysical pathos. «There is, in the first place, the pathos of sheer obscurity, the loveliness of the incomprehensible... the reader does not know exactly what they mean, but they have all the more on that account an air of sublimity; an agreeable feeling at once of awe and of excitation comes over him as he contemplates thoughts of so immeasurable a profundity...» Lovejoy concludes this witty and astringent section with the words: «The delicate task of discovering these varying susceptibilities and showing how they help to shape a system or to give an idea plausibility and currency is a part of the work of the historian of ideas».

I think it is also a legitimate task of the lexicographer because it may be precisely in the context of such emotional exaltation that terms tend to lose their precision and gain in flexibility. Idea and ideal became words to conjure with, words which would be sure of creating an effect and this, maybe, was how the inflation set in that led to the devaluation and trivialisation of the term. There is a nice little restaurant in London that is called "The Good Idea ". One wonders whether Plato would have frequented it. Tayllerand is supposed to have said that words exist to conceal our thoughts. They may also arouse the most surprising thoughts or emotions. There is a famous English anecdote about an old lady who thanked the pastor after his sermon for that comforting word Mesopotamia. Before we laugh at her, let us remember how many intellectuals have found comfort in outlandish words which they experience as grand and dignified - I mentioned these O. K. words in one of my interventions last year.

In stressing this psychological aspect of language I have the support of a highly intelligent pioneer of aesthetics who was also a great orator, Edmund Burke. Towards the end of his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*^{<17>} Burke discusses the effects of words. He comes to the surprising conclusion that the clarity of speech often militates against its emotional effect. In a passage almost reminiscent of Vico he writes: «Uncultivated people are but ordinary observers of things, and not critical in distinguishing them; but, for that reason, they admire more, and are more affected with what they see, and therefore express themselves in a warmer and more passionate manner. If the affection be well conveyed, it will work its effect without any clear idea; often without any idea at all of the thing which has originally given rise to it» (Part V, section 1). Burke, in short, denies the accepted view that words tend to conjure up images in our mind. True, he writes, «It seems to be an odd subject of dispute with any man, whether he has ideas in his mind or not» (Part V, section 5). He would have argued that the word idea itself conjures up no clear picture in his mind.

It so happens that his opinion anticipates the memorable dispute about the very topic of idea which was mentioned this morning by Professor Hinske, the episode described in Goethe's *Annalen oder Tag- und Jahreshefte*, for the year 1794, of the first meeting between Goethe and Schiller^{<18>} when Goethe sketched his theory of the *Urpflanze* and Schiller replied: «Das ist keine Erfahrung, das ist eine Idee» (This is not a concrete observation but an idea). Professor Hinske's context did not demand that he also told us of Goethe's gruff reply: «It must indeed be welcome news to me that I have ideas without knowing it, and that I even see them with my own eyes». As Goethe sums up this encounter, «Schiller took for an idea what I called a concrete observation (Erlebnis)». Maybe you

allow me a different conclusion: what Goethe might have said to Schiller was that his Urpflanze came closer to an Aristotelian entelechy than to a Platonic or Kantian idea. He saw it as a principle that worked inside the botanical creation to secure the basic requirements of any plant, the roots, the stem, the leaves, the blossoms and ultimate fruits in their order and function.

Had Goethe explained his view to Schiller today he might perhaps have said that plants are 'programmed' to follow this pattern in their development and that this programme is encoded in the sequence of their genes. But this novel and useful metaphor should not hide from us that with this idea of biological programming anamnesis has entered by the back door, as it were. If we or other organisms were not programmed to see, to interact with the world, we would not survive, but since our programming is not perfect it is only the fittest that do survive.

<1> The reference is to an article in "Il Messaggero", 2nd January 1989, p. 14, on the eve of the conference.

<2> Cf. my book *The Sense of Order*, Oxford 1979 (Italian edition *Il Senso dell'ordine*, Torino 1984), Ch. IV, Sect. 2-3.

<3> For the sources see A. Swift RIGINOS, *Platonica, The anecdotes concerning the life and writings of Plato* («Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition» ed. W. V. Harris et al., III) Leiden 1976, pp. 138 ff. The argument derives essentially from Republic, 510, D, E.

<4> G. VASARI, *Le Vite*, ed. Milanesi, VII, Firenze 1881, pp.214-215.

<5> The Italian translation, Firenze 1952, has a preface by Edmondo Cione.

<6> See my chapter «From Careggi to Montmartre. A footnote to Erwin Panofsky's Idea», in *"Il se rendit en Italie". Etudes offertes à André Chastel*, Paris-Rome 1987, p. 674 and note.

<7> E. PANOFSKY, Die Perspektive als symbolische Form, «Vortrage der Bibliothek Warburg», 1924-25, Italian in *La prospettiva come 'forma simbolica' e altri scritti*, Milano 1961.

<8> VASARI, op.cit., p. 427.

<9> In *New Light on Old Masters*, Oxford 1986, Italian in *Antichi maestri, nuove letture*, Torino 1987.

<10> *Art and Illusion*, Princeton-London 1960, Italian as *Arte e illusione*, Torino 1965.

<11> E. D. HIRSCH JR., *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven-London 1967.

<12> *TEXT* *Tratato della pittura, Codex Urbinus Latinus 1270, 5 r* (ed. A. P. McMahon, Princeton, 1956).

<13> Wien 1899.

<14> München 1970.

<15> *In Symbolic Images*, London 1972, Italian as *Immagini simboliche*, Torino 1978.

<16> Cambridge, Mass. 1936.

<17> London 1756.

<18> «Erste Bekanntschaft mit Schiller», in *Paralipomena zu den Annalen*, 2, in GOETHE, *Sämtliche Werke*. Jubiläumsausgabe, n.d., XXX, pp. 389-391.