

Inspiration and Technique

If anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by means of technique (*ek technês*), without the Muses' madness (*mania*), he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds.

(Plato, *Phaedrus* 245a)

John Roe and Michele Stanco (eds)

Inspiration and Technique

*Ancient to Modern Views
on Beauty and Art*



PETER LANG

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così, lasso, talor vo cerchand'io,
donna, quanto è possibile, in altrui
la disiata vostra forma vera.

Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, 16

Foreword

The present book springs from a seminar which was organized by the editors and took place at the ESSE-6 Conference (Strasbourg, 30 August – 3 September 2002). The seminar was concerned with the relationship between ‘forms’ and ‘matter’, ‘ideas’ and ‘texts’, ‘inspiration’ and ‘technique’.

The editors wish to thank all the participants in the seminar as well as the scholars who joined the research project at a later stage: Glyn P. Norton, Edward Nye, Adrian Grafe, Peter Robinson, Peter J. Conradi, Brian Caraher and Ivan Gaskell.

It is thanks to the enthusiasm and the continuing patience of each contributor and the group as a whole that the edition has finally turned from an ‘idea’ into a ‘text’.

John Roe and Michele Stanco

MICHELE STANCO

Introduction

Aesthetic Forms: Ancient and Modern*

THESEUS

[...] as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name
(W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,
V.i.14–17).

These forms of beauty have not been to me,
As is a landscape to a blind mind's eye:
But oft [...] I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration [...]
(W. Wordsworth, *Lines Written a Few Miles Above
Tintern Abbey*, ll. 24–31).

One of the most debated – and most controversial – questions in aesthetic research is the relationship between the artist's invention and the finished artistic product. In fact, different aesthetic theories have differently posited the line or the threshold between the author's 'idea of the work' and 'the work itself',¹ and have thus differently read the

* I wish to heartily thank John Roe for his many helpful observations, and Maria Mansi for her precious linguistic suggestions.

1 I am here paraphrasing Sidney's well-known distinction between the 'Idea or fore-conceit of the work' and 'the work itself' (*An Apology for Poetry*, Ed. with an Introduction by G. Shepherd, 1973; 3rd edn. Revised and Expanded by R.W. Maslen, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002, p.85). Sidney's comparison between the idea living in the artist's mind and its realization into the work of art was a common one both in classical and Renaissance criticism: cf. L. Anceschi, 'Comportamento dell'Idea nelle poetiche del Seicento', in *Tre studi di estetica* (Milan: Mursia, 1963), pp.11–28.

crucial moment when the author's mental picture realizes or trans-fuses itself into the artistic matter.

The notion of 'form', as well as of its quasi-synonym 'idea', has been central in this concern.²

A brief note on the different meanings which have been commonly associated with the term may thus prove useful. In classical languages, 'form' (from the Latin *forma*, which in turn derives by metathesis from the Greek *morphê*) could both indicate the actual shape of something and an archetypal form, exempt from any imperfection.

In the first case, 'form' was used in a fairly neutral sense; in fact, the shape of the object could either be beautiful or ugly.

Vice-versa, in the second case, 'form' conveyed positive connotations and implied the presence of beauty; in fact, having form meant having a perfect form and hence being beautiful (Gr. *morphêeis*; Lat. *formosus*). On the other hand, lack of form, or a deviation from form (*amorphia* / *amorphos*; *informis* / *deformis*), implied ugliness. Therefore, it is not surprising that for the Romantic poets forms were, almost invariably, 'forms of beauty'.

'Form' also suggested the presence of a rational scheme, and was thus opposed to matter and formless chaos. Significantly enough, Plotinus describes knowledge as a 'battle for victory of form over the formless',³ that is as a battle for victory of reason and beauty over chaos and ugliness.⁴ Similar meanings and semantic associations also occur in Shakespeare's definition of love as 'Misshapen chaos of

2 On the concept of 'idea' or 'form' in aesthetic theory, see E. Panofsky's *Idea. A Concept in Art Theory*, trans. J.S. Peake (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1968). Panofsky's work, far from being obsolete (its original German version dates back to 1924), has been a starting point for most of the critical points which will be proposed in the following pages; however, Panofsky's observations have been filtered from more recent critical perspectives – especially those of linguistics and (post)structuralism.

3 *Ennead* I. 6. 3 (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. S. MacKenna, Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1992); cf. Panofsky, pp.27 and 187n.

4 The very notion of chaos is that of matter without forms: cf. the Greek *ulê* and the Latin *sylva* (the etymological link between *ulê* and *sylva* is also pointed out by Mario Equicola, in his *Libro di natura d'amore* (1526): excerpt in P. Barocchi (ed.), *Scritti d'arte del Cinquecento*, 2 vols. (Turin: Einaudi, 1979, vol.I).

well-seeming forms',⁵ or in Milton's definition of the uncreated world as 'formless infinite'.⁶

Those meanings of 'form', as a beautiful and a rational model, also characterized the aesthetic debate, and were alternatively used to assert or deny the presence of beauty and rationality in works of art.

Indeed, a 'form' (of beauty) was thought to impress itself in the artist's mind, through various processes – from supernatural causes (such as divine inspiration) to organic-psychological ones (such as the body's response to a certain stimulus). The artist's mental 'form' would then be transferred to the 'form' of the work.

This transposition of the inner or mental form onto the outer or material form was not a simple one, and implied a number of difficulties. Some philosophers maintained that the author's supernatural vision of a form of beauty could not but be marred by his/her attempt to give it a material shape. These philosophers, thus, preferred to concentrate their critical attention on *the internal form in the artist's psyche* (the *forma mentis*), rather than on its imperfect artistic materialization. Others, by contrast, strongly asserted the importance of the finished artistic product, and thus chose to mostly – or exclusively – focus their attention on *the external form of the work* (the *forma operis*).

In sum, this dual view of 'form', and of its complex relation to matter, may be said to be at the basis of a dual approach to aesthetic issues – a *psychological* and a *textual* one – which, albeit in a different way, still characterizes contemporary aesthetics.

What follows is an attempt to reconstruct – although, inevitably, in a provisional and a sketchy way – the historico-philosophical reasons behind this age-old dichotomy in the aesthetic debate.

*

The reasons why certain aesthetic theories have concentrated on *the internal form in the artist's psyche*, whereas others have focused on

5 *Romeo and Juliet*, I.i.177. References to Shakespeare are to the 'Arden' editions. Significantly enough, Romeo suggests that what appear as 'forms' are nothing more than chaotic shapes.

6 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Ed. John Leonard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000): III.12.

the external form of the work, should probably be sought in the classical philosophical tradition. As far as the western tradition is concerned, most of these reasons may be found in Plato's and in Aristotle's respective notions of ideas or forms.

As is well known, while Plato regards ideas as separate, transcendent entities, which cannot be transferred to matter,⁷ Aristotle interprets them in a much more material and dynamic way.

For Plato, knowledge is a search for, or a recollection of, 'ideal forms of beauty' (*to ep'eidei kalon*). He describes the cognitive process from both a metaphysical and a psychological viewpoint. In some of his dialogues – like *Phaedrus* – he maintains that human beings catch a glimpse of ideal forms when their souls are possessed by a god and/or migrate towards a place beyond heaven. However, they lose this knowledge of true beauty once they regain consciousness, and it is only in certain, special circumstances that they may be able to recollect it.

In other dialogues, Plato presents knowledge as the result of the impression of 'forms' in the psyche; in fact, he compares the psyche to a wax-tablet upon which forms are engraved (*Theaetetus*, 191d–e).⁸ Even in this case, the permanence of forms in the psyche is rather brief: forms are easily erased from the mind's wax-tablet, since memory is a rather fragile mechanism.

Because of the elevated but ephemeral character of inspired visions – and, thus, of the short-lived presence of ideas in the human psyche – the poet can only reproduce them as long as he is out of himself.⁹ As Plato observes in *Ion*: 'none of the epic poets, if they're

7 Although Plato's ideas are transcendent entities, existing in themselves, human beings can have a glimpse of them in some particular circumstances – and thus, at least partially, internalize them. The discussion about the 'metaphysical' and/or the 'psychological' meaning of Plato's ideas has always been a central one in Plato's studies; its bibliography is thus much vaster than may be accounted for here.

8 References to Plato are to the English translation: *Complete Works*, Ed. J.M. Cooper (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1997). Cf. also the analysis of Plato's passage in G. Agamben, 'Eros at the Mirror', in *Stanzas. Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.75.

9 Needless to say, whenever I use a male pronoun or adjective to refer to an individual's poetic or artistic activity, this is not because I do not conceive of

good, are masters of their subject; they are inspired (*entheoi*), possessed, and that is how they utter (*legousi*) all those beautiful poems'. In fact, as Plato also observes, the rhapsode Ion completely loses his poetic energy once his manic state comes to an end.¹⁰ Poetry is thus associated with inspiration and orality: since poets do not speak with their own voice, but with the voice of the god who is possessing them, they are no longer able to compose their poetry once the god has left them. Indeed, when the poet or the artist is not 'inspired' all he can do is to copy or imitate, by means of his 'technical' knowledge of his work, the imperfect reflections of ideas in the sensory world (*The Republic*, X, 595–99).

Hence, another obstacle to the material reproduction of ideal forms lies in the debased character of artistic matter which, being part of sensible reality, shares all its imperfections. This point is suggested by Plato in several dialogues, but is perhaps formulated even more clearly by Plotinus:

suppose two blocks of stone lying side by side: one is unpatterned, quite untouched by art; the other has been minutely wrought by the craftsman's hands [...]. [T]he stone [...] brought under the artist's hand to the beauty of form is beautiful not as stone – for so the crude block would be as pleasant – but in virtue of the Form or Idea introduced by the art. *This form is not in the material*; it is in the designer before ever it enters the stone; and the artificer holds it not by his equipment of eyes and hands but by his participation in his art. *The beauty*, therefore, exists in a far higher state in the art; for it *does not come over integrally into the work; that original beauty is not transferred*; what comes over is a derivative and a minor: and even that shows itself upon the

the idea of a female poet or artist, but because the author I discuss did not consider such a possibility.

- 10 Cf. *Ion*, 533e–534a. See also the observations which follow soon after: 'The same goes for lyric poets if they're good: just as the Corybantes are *not in their minds* when they make those beautiful lyrics, but as soon as they sail into harmony and rhythm they are *possessed by Bacchic frenzy*' (my emphasis). Thus, the utterance of a poem is, so to say, secondary to inspiration, which is the main (or even the only) cause of poetry. Since a poet is not master of his art, once his frantic state is over, he is no longer able to produce poetry. As we shall see below, a somewhat similar notion will reappear in the Romantic age, and more particularly in Coleridge.

statue not integrally and with entire realization of intention but only in so far as it has subdued *the resistance of the material*.¹¹

Given the difficulty, or even the impossibility, of transposing the ‘original beauty’ of ‘ideas’ or ‘forms’ into matter, Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophers end up by depreciating the final artistic product and by concentrating their attention on the artist’s previous mental conception of it (or the artist’s ‘participation in his art’).¹²

**

On the other hand, Aristotle, considering matter as an essential part of all living things, also reevaluates the material components of artistic production. In fact, his dynamic view of reality as the combination of ‘form’ (*eidos* or *morphê*) and ‘matter’ (*hylê*) does not only apply to his theory of being, but also involves his theory of knowledge and his theory of art. Thus, for instance, in the process of generation, the form (which is associated with the masculine), by means of movement, impresses itself into matter (which is associated with the feminine);¹³ in sense perception, the form of the object impresses itself on the percipient’s soul (since the soft matter of the psyche receives, so to say, the form of the object).¹⁴ Finally, in the production of art

11 Plotinus, *Ennead* V.8.1, p.485: my emphasis. I shall discuss this passage at length in the chapter “‘Madness’ and ‘Technique’”. Psychological Theories of Beauty and Linguistic Theories of Art’, in the present volume. Of course, Plato’s and Plotinus’ aesthetic views are rather different (cf. Panofsky, pp.25–32); however, from the general, taxonomic viewpoint of our perspective, differences are less important than similarities.

12 To Plato, the mental conception of the work corresponds with the phase when the artist is able to communicate with a higher world. On the other hand, the ultimate art work inevitably participates in the corruptible character of the earthly world and its lower degree of truth.

13 Cf., for instance, *Generation of Animals*, I.xxi.730a; *Physics*, I.ix.192a. References to Aristotle are to the ‘Loeb’ editions.

14 See, for example, the description of sensation in *On the Soul*, 424a. Cf. also Agamben’s observations on this passage, p.75. The psyche, according to Aristotle, receives only the ‘form’ of the object without the matter, ‘just as the wax receives the impression of the signet ring without the iron or the gold’ (*On the Soul*, 424a); in fact, in sensation, the relationship between form and matter

(*technê*), the form which the artist receives in his mind is dynamically transposed by him into the form of the work.¹⁵

In some cases, the substantial differences among those otherwise similar transformative processes are marked by terminological distinctions: the form in the mind (and the origin of all things) is generally termed *eidos*; the form in a sensible thing is either termed *eidos* or *morphê*;¹⁶ lastly, the form or the shape of something which is produced by means of technique is usually referred to as *morphê* or *schêma*.¹⁷ Yet, those distinctions were not always univocal or consistent and cross-usages did occur, both in ordinary and in rhetorical language.¹⁸

In Aristotle, it would seem, the terminological difficulty arises from the very dynamic character of his theory: in fact, it was almost impossible to find appropriate and consistent names for the different phases the form undergoes in its various degrees of ‘materialization’.

However, in spite of such difficulties, Aristotle shows a constant preoccupation in distinguishing, even from a terminological viewpoint, the *inner form* or the *idea* from its *material concretization* – for instance, the internal form (*endon eidos*) in the orator’s mind from the external form or the shape (*schêma*) of his speech,¹⁹ or a sculptor’s

consists of the interaction between the psyche or the sense organs (matter) and the form of the object.

- 15 *Metaphysics*, VII.vii–viii; *Generation of Animals*, I.xxi.730b; II.i.735a.
- 16 In the *Metaphysics*, for instance, Aristotle suggests that, once it combines with the matter of a ‘sensible thing’, the form should properly be defined as *morphê* (rather than *eidos*): ‘the form [*to eidos*], or whatever we should call the shape [*morphê*] in the sensible thing’ (*Metaphysics*, VII.viii).
- 17 Artificial things, which are not ‘substances’, do not have a form (*morphê*) strictly speaking, but their *eidos* is simply a shape (*schêma*). That is why the Aristotelian philosopher in Molière’s *Le Mariage forcé* (1664) gets indignant when someone hints at the ‘form’ (instead of the ‘shape’) of a hat (cf. Vittorio Mathieu, *Storia della filosofia*, Brescia: La Scuola, 1967, p.111n).
- 18 Likewise, the Latin terms *forma* and *species* were mostly used as synonyms.
- 19 Indeed, the expression *schêmata lexeos*, forms of speech, was commonly used in rhetoric to indicate the outward aspects of discourse. Yet, as observed, those terminological distinctions were not univocal; thus, in common speech, the outward form of a discourse could also be referred to as its *morphê* (cf. the expression *morphê epéon*=the form of words/narratives/poems).

idea of a sphere (*eidos*) from the form (*schêma*) of the geometrical figure.²⁰

As anticipated above, the materialization of ‘form’ is a constant pattern, which creates a link between otherwise hardly comparable processes – for instance, between the creation of a work of art and the creation of a new living being. In fact, Aristotle compares the two processes on several grounds: if art is the dynamic impression of the artist’s mental form (*eidos*) into the material (*ulê*), generation similarly consists in the transmission of the father’s ‘form’ into the ‘matter’ of the mother.²¹ Indeed, in his analyses of the activity of a sculptor and a carpenter,²² Aristotle even compares the dynamics of the artistic process to the movement of copulation: as a craftsman impresses his mental form into the material thanks to the movement of his arms, similarly a male animal transmits his ‘form’ to the ‘matter’ of the female through the motion of his body:

it is *the shape and the form* (*ê morphê kai to eidos*) which pass from the carpenter, and they come into being by means of the movement in the material (*dia tês kinêseôs en tê ulê*). It is his soul, wherein is the ‘form’ (*to eidos*), and his knowledge, which cause his hands [...] to move [...]; his hands move his tools and his tool move the material. In a similar way to this, Nature acting in the male of semen-emitting animals uses the semen as a tool [to produce new living beings].²³

Therefore, the artist’s mental form – as an originating principle – is compared to the semen of a male animal; hence, his creative act is viewed as the fertilization of formless matter.²⁴

20 *Metaphysics*, VII.viii.1033b.

21 A comparison between ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ generation (*genesis* and *poiêsis*) occurs, for instance, in the *Metaphysics* (VII.vii.1032a–b).

22 See the description of the coming into being of a bronze sphere (*Metaphysics*, VII.viii.1033b), and the analysis of the carpenter’s artistry (*Generation of Animals*, I.xxii.730b).

23 *Generation of Animals*, I.xxii.730b: my italics. As anticipated above, Aristotle associates the semen of male animals to ‘form’.

24 ‘The male contributes the principle (*arkhê*) of movement and the female contributes the *material* (*ûle*). This is why on the one hand the female does not generate on its own: it needs some source or principle to supply the material with movement and to determine its character’ (*Generation of Animals*: I.xxi.730a: my emphasis). Cf. also I.xix.727b, I.xx.729a, II.736a, II.739b, etc.

These associations between the ‘forms’ involved in the sexual and the artistic acts have had a *longue durée* in cultural history, and have been reformulated in various ways in philosophical treatises, the visual arts, and in literary works. One of these is the impassioned description of the protagonist’s literary and biological creation in Chico Buarque’s *Budapeste*: ‘I made her pregnant, and in her belly the book started taking on *new forms (novas formas)*’.²⁵

Evidently enough, Aristotle’s position is rather different from the Platonic one. Indeed, in Aristotle there is nothing like the (Neo)-Platonic ‘resistance’ of matter to forms of beauty.²⁶ Aristotle’s ontological principles prevent him from considering beauty as something separate from its artistic realization – he thus only focuses on that kind of beauty which, according to him, can be transposed (or ‘substantiated’) into the artistic matter. Therefore, in the *Art of Rhetoric* and especially in the *Poetics*, he devises a set of ‘rules’ which are meant to give a textual ‘form’ to the author’s ‘idea’ of the work.

Although both Plato and Aristotle link the notion of art with the notion of beauty, with the Stagirite the critical focus shifts from the *internal* form in the artist’s mind (*to eidos en tē psychē*)²⁷ to the *external* form or the final shape of the work:

[concerning, for instance, a bronze sphere] we describe the matter (*ulē*) as bronze, and the form (*eidos*) as such-and-such a shape (*schēma*); and this shape is the proximate genus in which the circle is placed.²⁸

and *Physics*, I.ix.192a (for practical reasons, in the transliteration of Greek terms, these have been given in the nominative case). The consequence of Aristotle’s theory of generation is that women contribute nothing but matter to their offspring; in a similar way, his theory of art only contemplates the possibility of a male artist. Obviously enough, feminist critics have contested these positions: see Bat-Ami Bar On (ed.), *Engendering Origins. Critical Feminist Readings in Plato and Aristotle* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), Cynthia A. Freeland (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Aristotle* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

- 25 Chico Buarque, *Budapeste* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003), p.40: my transl. and emphasis.
- 26 ‘Aristotle is far from attributing to matter an inherent resistance, or even a basic indifference, to the process of becoming formed’: Panofsky, p.28.
- 27 *Metaphysics*, VII.vii.1032b.
- 28 *Ibid.*, VII.vii–viii.

Therefore, while Plato and the Neoplatonists mainly consider art from a *metaphysical* and/or a *psychological* viewpoint and associate it with supercelestial forms of beauty, Aristotle considers art from a *linguistic* and *communicative* viewpoint, and sees it as a text which is supposed to follow a given set of rules if it is to be beautiful.

However, Aristotle's approach to art is also interesting – and strikingly modern – from another viewpoint. Aristotle's rules do not only dictate the form which a text should have, but also indicate the actual form or the shape which it does have. In other words, Aristotle's rules and critical observations are not only evaluative and *prescriptive* but also taxonomic and *descriptive*.²⁹ Thus, although Aristotle's prescriptive rules imply that art is associated with beauty (in that they give advice on how to achieve certain aesthetic effects), his descriptive rules suggest that the analysis of art may even be separated from the analysis of beauty (in that they tend to leave aesthetic values out of consideration, and merely consider the work of art in terms of its internal structure).

In sum, (Neo)Platonic and Aristotelian aesthetics may be said to differ not only in the relationships which they postulate between author and work, but also in the very object of their enquiry. In fact, while Plato and the (Neo)Platonists mainly consider aesthetic issues from the viewpoint of *the author's mind*, Aristotle and the Aristotelians primarily consider them from the viewpoint of *the work of art*. Moreover, while the (Neo)Platonists focus their attention on a somewhat *unreachable ideal beauty*, Aristotle and the Aristotelians do not consider *beauty* in itself, but regard it *in terms of its artistic realization*. Finally, and even more interestingly, in several of their rhetorical analyses, they also describe *art as such*, in its purely structural components, thus implying that *the notion of art can be dissociated from the notion of beauty*.

Therefore, although the 'Platonic' and the 'Aristotelian' approaches to aesthetic issues are much more complex and controversial

29 From this standpoint, Aristotle's rules may be defined as 'generative' in an almost Chomskyan sense.

than can be shown here, from a generalizing viewpoint they may be said to embody two rather different critical positions. On the one hand, the (Neo)Platonic line may be defined as *a psychological analysis of beauty*; on the other hand, the Aristotelian one may be mainly considered as *a textual analysis of the artistic language*.

In spite of intersections and reciprocal influences, this 'original' dualism would profoundly affect the later aesthetic theorization, so as to give origin to *two distinct lines of enquiry*. As I shall attempt to show, differences were to concern both the critical *themes* and the *methods*.

As to *the (Neo)Platonic position*, its most important legacy to the criticism that followed may probably be found in its emphasis on ideal forms of beauty and its disregard for matter and technique. Subsequent Neoplatonic critics would likewise be more concerned with the beauty in the artist's mind than with the actual form of the work.

Although not a Platonist strictly speaking, Cicero similarly maintains that the 'form' of beauty (*species pulchritudinis*) living in the sculptor's (or the orator's) mind by far surpasses the beauty of his statues (or his speeches). Cicero also adds that this *species pulchritudinis* does not derive from the artist's sense perception (the senses being only able to transmit an inferior form of knowledge), but from those patterns of things (*formae rerum*) which Plato termed 'ideas'.³⁰

As has already been indicated, Plotinus' position – as well as that of other third-century Neoplatonists – shares many common points with the Platonic one. Indeed, even if Plotinus explicitly criticizes some of the aesthetic positions expressed in Plato's *Republic*, his theses about the 'idea' of beauty living in the artist's mind (*Ennead*, V.8.1), and the superiority of ideas over the material, are not too far from the theses informing Plato's description of the inspired poet in *Phaedrus*.

30 Cicero, *Orator*, II.8–9: trans. H.M. Hubbel, 'Loeb Classical Library' (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962). Cf. also Panofsky, pp.11–12.

As is well known, *Phaedrus* – like all of Plato’s dialogues, except *Timaeus* – was lost in the Middle Ages. Yet, the notion of the poet’s divine inspiration survived. Indeed, ‘a platonizing philosophy was active throughout the Middle Ages’.³¹ This was made possible by a second hand acquaintance of Plato’s dialogues, through the writings of authors such as Macrobius, Martianus Capella, Augustine, Boethius – as well as via Calcidius’ translation of *Timaeus* (in the fourth century).³²

Thus, the platonizing notion that the poet or the artist has a fleeting vision of beauty and that this occurs when his outer senses are asleep also persists in the Late Middle Ages. It may be observed both in critical works and in creative literature. Indeed, the very textual structure of a medieval dream poem may be said to embody the Platonic thesis that poets can only deliver their visions as long as they are under the spell of inspiration, or as long as their mind’s eye catches sight of forms of beauty: in fact, the ending of the narrative systematically coincides with the ending of the dream vision.³³

Similar principles concerning the nature of the poet’s inspiration were still to be held by fifteenth-century Neoplatonists. As Marsilio Ficino puts it in the thirteenth book of his *Theologia*, ‘in their madness they [the poets] sing many admirable things which afterward, when their fury has lessened, they do not well understand themselves, as if they had not themselves made the utterance’.³⁴ Like

31 P.O. Kristeller, ‘Neoplatonismo e Rinascimento’, *Il Veltro*, XXXV, 1–2 (1991), p.37. Cf. also A. Baldwin, ‘The Early Christian Period’, in A. Baldwin and S. Hutton (eds), *Platonism and the English Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.21–6.

32 Janet Bately, ‘Boethius and King Alfred’, in A. Baldwin and S. Hutton (eds), *Platonism and the English Imagination*, p.38. On St. Augustine’s Christianization of Plato, cf. Panofsky, pp.35–9.

33 As for the Platonic influence on the medieval dream poem, see below, A. Petrina, ‘Creative *ymagynacioun* and Canon Constraints in the Fifteenth Century. James I and Charles d’Orléans’. Of course, as Petrina clearly argues, medieval dream poems reflect a Christianized version of Plato’s theories.

34 Quoted from P.O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. V. Conant (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p.309. On Ficino’s *furor poeticus* cf. also William O. Scott, ‘Perotti, Ficino and *furor poeticus*’, *Res Publica Litterarum. Studies in the Classical Tradition*, IV (1981), 273–84; A. Chastel, *Marsile Ficin et l’Art* (Genève: Droz, 1975); Kristeller, ‘Neoplatonismo e Rinascimento’; M.J. Allen ‘Renaissance Neoplatonism’, in G.P.

Plato, Ficino attributes the unconscious character of the artistic creation to the fact that ideas only dwell in the artist's soul until he is in a frantic state.

Even the metaphorical description of the cognitive process in terms of 'forms' which are temporarily impressed on the mind's wax-tablet still continues throughout the sixteenth century. Indeed, many such descriptions may be found in Shakespeare:

from the *table* of my memory
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
 All saws of books, all *forms*, all pressures past
 That youth and observation copied there,
 And thy commandment all alone shall live
 Within the book and volume of my brain,
 Unmix'd with baser *matter*
 (*Hamlet*, I.v.98–104: my emphasis).³⁵

The artist's, the lover's, and the madman's visions are especially evanescent, since the airy forms which have been impressed in their souls disappear as soon as the subject regains consciousness:

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
 Are of imagination all compact:
 [...]
 The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
 And as imagination bodies forth
 The *forms* of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to *shapes*, and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name
 (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.7–17: my emphasis).

Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp.435–41. On Marsilio Ficino's Platonic theology, cf. also J. Roe, 'Refined Eros in Sidney's *Astrophil & Stella* and Chapman's *Ovids Banquet of Sence*', in the present volume.

35 Even the process of generation is described in very similar terms: as we learn from Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a daughter (in the specific case, Hermia) is 'but a *form* in a *wax*' imprinted by her father (I.i.49–50: my emphasis).

Shakespeare here seems to suggest that the ideal ‘forms’ which have been captured by the poet in the course of his inspired vision can only be turned into imperfect ‘shapes’ once the vision is over. Both in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and in *The Tempest*, the actors are associated with the ‘airy’ demons which generate forms in the artist’s mind. The actors, the spirits, and the forms thus vanish when the dream vision comes to an end:

These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
(*The Tempest*, IV.i.150).

Finally, the play itself – like a medieval dream poem – is described as an ‘airy nothing’, or the ‘baseless fabric’ of the author’s airy vision.³⁶ Like a medieval dream poem, it comes to an end when the vision which has generated it vanishes.

The notion that an artist’s inspired vision is more true than ordinary vision, but also extremely evanescent, would reappear over and over again in the following centuries. Romantic philosophers and poets, in particular, would give it a special emphasis. Significantly enough, in his note to *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge identifies his poem with the lines which he *imagined* in his ‘reverie’ – rather than with the *actual* text written afterwards, which to him is nothing more than a bare ‘fragment’.³⁷

Even Wordsworth’s main poetic principles, namely the exaltation of ‘forms of beauty’ and the need to recollect them ‘in tranquillity’, in their own way, evoke the Platonic notion about the short-lived presence of forms in the soul, and the (consequent) view of knowledge as recollection. The very Wordsworthian idea that ‘forms’ are first ‘felt in the *blood*’, then ‘felt along the *heart*’, and finally pass into the ‘purer *mind*’ suggests a hierarchical notion of the psychological process (in the transmission of forms from the lower to the

36 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.i.16; *The Tempest*, IV.i.151.

37 On the Romantic oneiric poem, see below, C. Corti’s ‘Visionary Aesthetics and Opiate Texts in British Romanticism’.

higher organs) which may be traced back to Plato, or to a platonizing philosophy.³⁸

On the other hand, as far as concerns *the Aristotelian position*, its clearest influence on subsequent aesthetics and literary theory may be observed in some thematic and methodological aspects, such as the focus on the *form of the work* (rather than the author's *forma mentis*) and the *descriptive approach* in the analysis of the artistic language.

From a general viewpoint, pertaining to the 'philosophy of composition', Aristotle's followers would likewise share his conviction that the final form of the work mirrors the original form in the artist's soul. This position would be supported, among others, by Thomas Aquinas.³⁹

From a practical viewpoint, this conviction meant that a number of critical works were produced, which attempted to describe the formal and structural components of works of art. Above all, Aristotle's influence made itself felt on a number of treatises on poetics and rhetorics.⁴⁰ The aim of such treatises was to investigate the language of poetic texts and rhetorical discourse.

It would be impossible here to trace in any detail the influence of Aristotelianism in the history of poetics and rhetorics.⁴¹ A few scattered notes will thus have to suffice. The text of Aristotle's *Poetics* 'became available only at the very end of the fifteenth century and became generally known only toward the middle of the

38 W. Wordsworth, 'Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', in *A Selection of His Finest Poems*, Ed. S. Gill and D. Wu (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp.57–8: my emphasis. On the classical and Renaissance notions of psychology and their links with poetry, cf. W. Rossky, 'Imagination in the English Renaissance. Psychology and Poetic', *Studies in the Renaissance*, V (1958), 49–73.

39 On Thomas Aquinas' notion of form, see Umberto Eco, *Il problema estetico in Tommaso d'Aquino* (Milan: Bompiani, 1970; 2nd edn. 1988), especially pp.94ff.

40 I am here following Paolo Valesio's distinction between 'rhetoric' (rhetorical discourse) and 'rhetorics' (the theory of rhetorical discourse): *Novantiqua. Rhetorics as a Contemporary Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

41 On this topic, cf. B. Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), especially vol.I, chapters ix–xiii, pp.349–714.

sixteenth'.⁴² However, although it was mainly thanks to Robortello's commentary (1548)⁴³ that the *Poetics* came to the foreground in Renaissance poetic criticism, Aristotle's philosophy of poetry had long been absorbed within the Western cultural tradition thanks to other kinds of textual mediation, which have only partially been reconstructed.⁴⁴

The influence of Aristotle's philosophy of poetry may be clearly discerned in Elizabethan literary criticism. With their focus on *elocutio* and their analysis of 'utterances', English Renaissance treatises on poetics and/or rhetorics – such as Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* (1553, 1560) and George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589; probably drafted in the late 1560s) – testify to a renewed interest in poetry qua language.

Subsequent linguistic and rhetorical analyses of poetry would mostly follow this route.

A close attention to the 'formal' elements of texts also characterizes twentieth-century critical theory – especially Russian formalism, French structuralism and semiotics. All these schools, with their emphasis on the 'formal method', try to establish a 'literary science'.⁴⁵ This is based on a scrupulous analysis of texts, and the linguistic description of their structural features. The sum of these linguistic features is what has been defined as 'literariness'.⁴⁶

42 Weinberg, vol.I, p.349.

43 Francesco Robortello, *In librum Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes* (1548). For an analysis of Robortello's commentary, see Weinberg, vol.I, pp.388ff.

44 See, for instance, Averroës' twelfth-century Arabic commentary, its thirteenth-century Latin translation by Hermannus Alemanus, as well as the medieval Latin translation known as *De arte poetica, Guillelmo de Moerbeke interprete*, Ed. E. Valgimigli (Bruges-Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1953). Cf. Weinberg, vol. I, pp.352ff.

45 Boris Eichenbaum, 'The Theory of the "Formal Method"', in *Russian Formalist Criticism. Four Essays*, trans. with an Introduction by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p.106.

46 Cf. the whole of Roman Jakobson's critical theory (*Language in Literature*, Ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1987).

In fact, formalists, structuralists and semioticians assume that what is really significant in literary analysis is the form or the structure of the text. Even when they distinguish, as does Umberto Eco, between an *intentio auctoris* and an *intentio operis*, they conclude that whatever was in the author's mind may only be grasped – and, thus, in a sense, only exists – as far as it is translated into the final form of the work.⁴⁷ In other words, the *intentio auctoris* ends up by being assimilated into the *intentio operis* – a principle which is not too far from Aristotle's idea that the form in the artist's mind translates itself into the final form (or shape) of the work.⁴⁸

The analysis of the above outlined double line of enquiry is the main scope of the present volume. The following essays explore – each in its own way and with a special emphasis on a given historical theme – the relationship between Platonic and Aristotelian positions, inspiration and technique, the *forma mentis* and the *forma operis*, views of art as a mental product and as a text, as well as the interplay between theories of beauty and theories of art.

By analyzing the meanings and the implications of 'inspiration' and 'technique' both in classical and modern authors, *a first group of essays* focuses on the very beginning of critical theory and compares it to its subsequent developments. The essays particularly highlight the double function of criticism, as a cultural theory of *taste* (providing an ideal definition of the beautiful) and a linguistic theory of *art* (describing the discursive structures of artistic texts).⁴⁹ A special focus is given to the rather different role which was played by poetry

47 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).

48 An interesting difference, however, can perhaps be found in the semioticians' thesis that the work is even 'wiser' than his/her 'empirical' author in that it may reveal an *intentio* which the author was unaware of (cf. Eco, *The Role of the Reader*): in other words, a text may say more than his/her author was aware of. This possibility, in a sense, marks a complete reversal of the (Neo)Platonic hypothesis of a text being unable to fully reproduce the author's original 'idea'.

49 See below, M. Stanco, "'Madness' and 'Technique'". Psychological Theories of Beauty and Textual Theories of Art'.

in rhetorical treatises, from the Attic orators to Aristotle's *technê rhêtorikê*.⁵⁰ Concerning Latin rhetorics, an analysis of Quintilian's notion of *kairós* (or extemporaneity) shows how even some of the most technical rhetorical concepts were not completely disjoined from inspirational elements. Indeed, in extemporaneous speech 'the pulse of expression migrates from the frontal prominence of lips and mouth to the hidden recesses of imagination, feeling and inspiration', thus suggesting a sense of proximity to the divine.⁵¹

A second group of essays reconstructs the absorption and the inevitable transformation of critical theory from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Although many Renaissance writers adhered to Platonic and classical theories about divine inspiration, others preferred to concern themselves with more secular theories about the imagination. Psychological views of art as the product of the 'imagination' thus coexisted with rhetorical and linguistic analyses of art as a form of 'textuality'. The essays explore the permanence of this dual path of aesthetic enquiry by means of combined analyses of critical and poetic texts (from *The Kingis Quair* to *Fortunes Stabilnes*,⁵² from *Ovids Banquet of Sence* to *Astrophil & Stella* and *The Defence of Poesy*,⁵³ from Renaissance treatises on poetry to *The Advancement of Learning*).⁵⁴ Some essays also highlight the relationship between eros and beauty – that is, between affectivity and aesthetics.⁵⁵ Even if this relationship may, once more, be traced back

50 See below, Michael J. Edwards, 'Rhetoric and Technique in the Attic Orators and Aristotle's *technê rhêtorikê*'.

51 See below, Glyn P. Norton, 'Improvisation and Inspiration in Quintilian. The Extemporalizing of Technique in the *Institutio Oratoria*'.

52 See below, Alessandra Petrina, 'Creative *ymagynacioun* and Canon Constraints in the Fifteenth Century. James I and Charles d'Orléans'.

53 See below, Patricia Kennan, 'The Ideal versus the Text in Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*'; and John Roe, 'Refined Eros in Sidney's *Astrophil & Stella* and Chapman's *Ovids Banquet of Sence*'.

54 See below, Angela Locatelli, 'Larger than Science? Bacon's Idea of Poetry in *The Advancement of Learning*'. Locatelli interestingly points out the role of poetry within Bacon's overall project of a new learning.

55 The well-known Neoplatonic formula, which defines love as a 'disio di bellezza', that is as the yearning of the soul after beauty, clearly suggests that 'beauty' is closely connected with love and desire. Thus, beauty is both seen as an *objective* quality and the result of a *subjective*, emotional response – beauty being the 'object' we love (cf. also Agamben's observations on Guido Caval-

to Plato (particularly to the theory of love as a desire to enjoy beauty, expounded in *Phaedrus*), in some Renaissance authors – and most manifestly in Chapman – Platonic notions of idealized beauty contrastingly coexisted with anti-Platonic, extremely sensuous, conceptions of eros.⁵⁶

A third and fourth group of essays analyze the further developments of the notions of ‘inspiration’ and ‘technique’ (as well as other related terms), from the eighteenth century to the Romantic and the Victorian age, both in England and on the continent. While eighteenth-century critical theory asserted (although with some notable exceptions) the importance of technique and – thence – of ‘textuality’ and ‘rules’,⁵⁷ the Romantics appropriated and reformulated in their own way the Platonic notions about poetic ‘inspiration’ and ‘visions’. In the first part of the third section, the critical focus shifts from eighteenth-century England to contemporary France, more particularly from Pope (*Essays*), Addison (*Pleasures of the Imagination*), and Hogarth (*The Analysis of Beauty*)⁵⁸ to French Rationalist and Sensationist aesthetics (with particular reference to the works of such pivotal figures as Diderot, Condillac, and Crousaz).⁵⁹ As to Romantic aesthetics, particular emphasis is given to the visionary quality of poetry, and the altered state of consciousness which is supposed to generate poetic visions.⁶⁰ Both aspects – visions, and mental dissociation – may be traced back to earlier cultural models,

canti’s poetry: ‘Spirits of Love’, in *Stanzas. Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, p.105).

- 56 On the association between eros and beauty – and the influence of affective responses on the appreciation of aesthetic forms – see below, J. Roe, ‘Refined Eros in Sidney’s *Astrophil & Stella* and Chapman’s *Ovids Banquet of Sense*’.
- 57 Among the most significant exceptions, see for instance Addison’s and Johnson’s observations that genius and imagination may conflict with rules and technique (particularly in their comments on Shakespeare).
- 58 See below, Maria Laudando, ‘The Double Nature of Art in Eighteenth-century England’.
- 59 See below, Edward Nye, ‘Rationalist and Sensationist Aesthetics in Eighteenth-century France’.
- 60 See below, Claudia Corti, ‘Visionary Aesthetics and Opiate Texts in British Romanticism’.

from primitive shamanism to the Platonic exaltation of madness.⁶¹ As shown in the fourth section, an extremely original revision of Plato's view of 'inspiration' (re)appeared in the late nineteenth century, notably in G.M. Hopkins's critical and poetic discourse, and particularly in his 'rapture'. Interestingly enough, Hopkins's critical observations also manifested a parallel focus on 'technique' (in his well-known theory about the 'sprung rhythm'), thus combining in a peculiar way both inspirational and technical elements.⁶²

The fifth and final group of essays not only analyzes the historical developments of criticism in the twentieth century, but also proposes new theories, and presents new perspectives on 'genres' and on 'art' in general. Some of the essays focus on the continuing presence of Platonism in contemporary critical theory and literary practice (for example, in such authors as Iris Murdoch),⁶³ others use Plato's genre theory as a starting point for a new classification of literary genres, and a rediscussion of literary form.⁶⁴ Particular attention is paid to 'aesthetic judgement', whose very possibility is analytically questioned.⁶⁵

The volume closes with the analysis of one of the most thorny questions in aesthetic theory, namely the distinctiveness of art. In contrast to Platonic and Neoplatonic theories which regarded 'matter' as incapable of reproducing the artist's original and eternal idea, art is here clearly defined in terms of its material constituents and their physical change. The traditional question 'what is art?' is thus replaced by the new, more challenging question 'when is art?'⁶⁶

61 E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1951). On the Platonic elements in Romantic poetics, see also P. Murray, 'Introduction' to *Plato on Poetry. 'Ion', 'Republic'*, Ed. P. Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.1–33.

62 See below, Adrian Grafe, 'Hopkins's "one rapture" and its Inscription in Time and Eternity'.

63 See below, Peter Conradi, 'Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*. Dancing the Dance of Creation'.

64 See below, Brian G. Caraher, 'Genre Theory. A Sociolinguistic Approach to the Aesthetics of Literary Form'.

65 See below, Peter Robinson, 'Wittgenstein's Aesthetics and Revision'.

66 See below, Ivan Gaskell, 'After Art, Beyond Beauty'; cf. also Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).

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