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Mit in pogled
El mito y la mirada
Le mythe et le regard
Myth and gaze

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Marko Uršič

The Gaze of the Soul and of the Angel in the Renaissance Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino *

Keywords: Marsilio Ficino, angel, soul, symbolic form, Sandro Botticelli

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The Renaissance did not merely rediscover the “human being” – as is commonly known – but also discovered *anew* (perhaps even primarily) the human *soul*. The most prominent Florentine philosopher of the second half of the *Quattrocento*, Marsilio Ficino,¹ defined the soul in terms of “the bond of the world” (*copula mundi*) that binds the lower and upper levels of being, this Here and that There: “The soul is the middle level of being. It links and unites all the levels above it and below it when it ascends to the higher and descends to the lower levels” (Ficino, 2002, 21). In his book titled *Theologia Platonica* (The Platonic Theology), Ficino associated classical Platonism (i.e. Plato himself) and particularly Neoplatonism (Plotinus, Proclus et al.) with Christian theology and biblical tradition. The subtitle of his book is “On the Immortality of Souls” (in the plural), since Ficino, by referring to Plato, tried to prove the immortality of the individual soul. Furthermore, a prominent role in his Renaissance Platonism is assumed by *symbolic thought* (analogies, metaphors, images as *imagines* in general) which is quite different to the conceptually abstract Aristotelian scholastics of the late Middle Ages. In accordance with Renaissance reverence for a human being, Ficino says:

This [the human soul] is the greatest miracle in nature. For the remaining things below God are each individually something singular in themselves, but this essence is all things together. It possesses within itself images of things divine (*imagines divinatorum*) on which it depends, and these images are the reasons (*rationes*) and paradigms (*exemplaria*) of the lower entities which in some sense it produces (Ficino, 2002, 25).

* The Slovene version of this article is available on: <http://revije.ff.uni-lj.si/arshumanitas/>. Slovenska različica članka je dosegljiva na <http://revije.ff.uni-lj.si/arshumanitas/>.

1 Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), being the court philosopher of Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici, established the “Platonic Academy” in Florence. He revered Plato, Plotinus and Hermes Trismegistus as well as translators of their works from Greek into Latin. The main three Ficino works include: “The Platonic Theology” (*Theologia Platonica*, 1482), “On Love” (*De Amore*, the first version dating from 1469, the final from 1484) and “On Obtaining Life from the Heavens” (*De vita coelitus comparanda*, 1489). I have written extensively on Ficino in my book *O renesančni lepoti* (On Renaissance Beauty; see Uršič, 2004).

Consequently, the emphasis on the *individual* soul denotes that the soul in Ficino's Renaissance (Neo)Platonism, as is generally the case with Renaissance philosophy, becomes increasingly linked with space and time, or, in other words, the soul becomes increasingly through one's body, of course – located in space and time. It is precisely the very “location of the soul” or rather its gaze which is essentially associated with the Renaissance discovery of *perspective*, of “viewpoint”. The term ‘perspective’ stems from the Latin word *perspecto* – “I look through”, meaning through “the window” of a two-dimensional picture into a three-dimensional space. The perspectival “illusion” is made possible by two means: the Euclidean geometry and the location of the beholder's viewpoint, the subject of seeing. As is generally accepted, the principles of perspective were discovered in the early Renaissance art predominantly by two painters, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca, and the architects Brunelleschi and Alberti. The latter introduced the notion of a “visual pyramid” stretching from the eye or viewpoint, thus forming its apex boundlessly far away in space, whereas in a picture it is represented by one of the rectangular flat planes of the pyramid.



Fig. 1: The interior of the Basilica di San Lorenzo (Basilica of St Lawrence).
("Einblick LH2 San Lorenzo Florenz" by Stefan Bauer.)

Fig. 2: The colonnade in front of Ospedale degli Innocenti. Both were designed and built by architect Filippo Brunelleschi in the mid-15th century (photo by M. U.).

In Renaissance architecture the location of a beholder is characterised by the visual connection between the interior and the exterior of buildings. Filippo Brunelleschi was the master of linking the interior with the exterior, which is seen, for example, when

relating the colonnade of the main nave of the Basilica di San Lorenzo to the colonnade of the *loggia* in front of the building Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence (Figs. 1 and 2): the gaze slides from “the inner exterior” of the basilica to “the outer interior” of the *loggia* and backwards; it “observes” the space from several different locations (*perspecto* also means: I observe, i.e. “examine closely”). Along with the parallel lines of the Euclidean geometry the essence of perspective resides in the beholder's location, the viewpoint of the subject or, in the old term, – of a human *soul*. This passing-through of the soul in the Renaissance space is obviously very different in relation to the medieval attitude towards architectural exterior and interior: a gothic cathedral, for example Notre-Dame in Chartres, certainly one of the most beautiful buildings of all times, stands in a little town which was not really large in the Middle Ages and now may even be seen as one of the smaller ones. It was not particularly beautiful in relation to the magnificent cathedral into which a pilgrim walked as if stepping onto the threshold of a heavenly kingdom where the marvellous stained glass windows under rib-vaulted and “in transcendence” oriented fractured ceiling was intended for the angelic rather than a human gaze. In the Middle Ages the contrast between the secular exterior and sacral interior was tremendous, while in the Renaissance town planning corresponded to the interior architecture of buildings, the connecting link between the two being the *loggia* as an “open stage” in the middle of a town.



Fig. 3: Beato fra Angelico, *The Annunciation*, around 1440, fresco in the Convent of San Marco in Florence.

Fig. 4: San Marco, the monastic atrium (photo by M. U.)

The next connection of great relevance in Renaissance aesthetics is the connection between the real and the virtual space. The wonderful Fra Angelico picture *The Annunciation* (around 1440) in the Convent of San Marco in Florence (Fig. 3) displays semi-circular vaults of a kind of *loggia*, i.e. *hortus conclusus*, in which the Archangel Gabriel visits Virgin Mary. Here, the perspectively-painted vaults display a straightforward continuum of the real architectural space of the very same Dominican convent which was renovated in the middle of the *Quattrocento* by the architect

Michelozzo, i.e. the space adorned with a colonnade in the atrium surrounding the monastic garden (Fig. 4) and the interior of the prominent library in the first floor where one climbs the staircase at the top of which his or her gaze is captured by Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*. The perspective of virtual and real architecture is harmonised as much as possible, the interior interacts with the exterior, and the real building continues in the virtual space of the fresco. Of course, one could come across many such paintings, but the aim of this article is not to elaborate on the retrospective of the Renaissance perspective, but rather to relate it to the gaze of the soul and the angel in Renaissance philosophical and/or theological thought.

The Renaissance also brings forward architectural utopias, that is, paintings of “the ideal city” (*città ideale*). One of them may be seen in the Ducal Palace of Urbino (Fig. 5). The utopia, i.e. “the place which does not exist” (literally, “no place”), stems from Antiquity, from Plato's *Republic* as well as from Plotinus' idea according to which he would build *Platopolis*, the city of philosophers, with the help of the Roman emperor Gallienus (3rd century). Thomas More was the first to use the term *Utopia*, namely, in 1516 as the title of the book in which he imagined the ideal city (or state) in terms of a social and political project in order to criticise the growing social stratification of early capitalism. Nevertheless, it is already in the paintings of the *Quattrocento* that there emerge utopian cities characterised by “geometry” or urban planning which were influenced by the Florentine Platonism inspired by “Platonic ideal solids” (regular polyhedra in *Timaeus*). Although it seems that the human being is almost absent from such cities, small and lost as he is in the middle of high and accomplished architecture, a human/a beholder is very much present in the perspective, i.e. in the invisible “foreground” as the observing, seeing, thinking subject – of course, this gaze is not the gaze of an angel, it is not even classically Platonic, but the gaze of a *human*, the gaze from the “location” of an individual soul.²

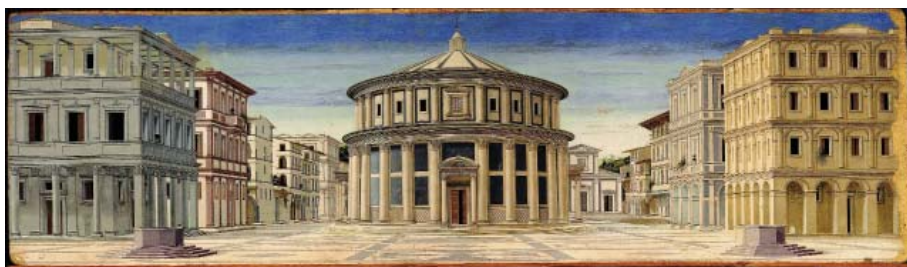


Fig. 5: Luciano Laurana (?), *Ideal City*, 15th century,
Galleria nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.

2 More on the “ideal city” is written in the first book of my tetralogy *Štirje časi* (Four Seasons) titled *Pomlad – Iskanje poti* (Spring – The Quest of a Path), p. 175 (see Uršič, 2002).

The perspective may also assume the role of “symbolic form”. This thought was first conceptualised by Erwin Panofsky, the founder of modern iconology, who was influenced by Ernst Cassirer, a philosopher, and who wrote the treatise titled *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927). In the treatise he developed the thought – known to painters since the discovery of perspective – that perspective is not only a painting technique, but a *symbolic form* of fine arts' expression of content and meaning; therefore it is a component of the painting's “content”. This may well be represented by Piero della Francesca's renowned painting *The Flagellation of Christ* (Fig. 6). In this painting, the focus of perspective (i.e. the point where the picture plane cuts through the rectangular perspectival “ray” stretching from the eye or viewpoint) is set much lower than “usual” which means that a beholder is either a child or he is himself “humbled” in the face of Christ's demeaning flagellation or something completely different. For example, one might say that from the earthly point of view the conversation among the three rich citizens in the foreground is more relevant than the evangelical scene of flagellation, etc. In the case of this painting the interpretations differ, but the “location” of the observing soul is the key part of the symbolic iconography of the painting.³



Fig. 6: Piero della Francesca, *The Flagellation of Christ*, around 1455, Galleria nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.

Fig. 7: Rafael Santi, *The School of Athens*, 1510, Vatican Museums, Rome.

The second example of the Renaissance painting in which the symbolic message conveyed by perspective is more obvious is the renowned Vatican fresco by Rafael titled *The School of Athens* from 1510 (Fig. 7). The two greatest Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, are placed at the centre of the painting surrounded by Socrates, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Diogenes, Euclid, Epicurus, Ptolemy et al., but in the farthest right corner there is also Rafael himself, the artist's self-portrait. All the distinguished Greek sages are

3 Similarly, the position of the camera in films is obviously of utmost importance, not only from the aesthetic point of view, but also from the conceptual and symbolic point of view. Let us mention an example: the classical Japanese director, Jasujirō Ozu (1903-1963), shot the majority of his films, especially the interior scenes, from the height of around one meter which gives his films quite special *conceptual emphasis*.

gathered in this Renaissance “projection plane”, and spiritual simultaneity has overcome temporal dissimultaneity, including spatial differences as well as differences of conviction that had historically divided them. The gaze of the beholder is spatially centred and temporally de-centred, since this scene embraces a period of a thousand years. One might say that the spatial perspective is human and the temporal perspective is angelic.

In his book *Florence and Bagdad, the Eastern and Western History of Gaze* (*Florenz und Bagdad: Eine westöstliche Geschichte des Blicks*, 2008) Hans Belting, a prominent art historian and theorist, compares Renaissance art to the Arabic medieval sciences, particularly mathematics, which are essential for the subtle nature of Islamic non-ionic ornaments. He comes to the conclusion that in spite of the very accomplished geometry of Islamic art one cannot possibly find the located visual focus, because the de-centred viewpoint of this art is outstandingly “angelic”. It is characterised by the omnipresence of God's gaze and not by the viewpoint of a human beholder, neither by an individual or incarnated soul that would be placed in the real space and time of the world. Belting highlights that perspective is not only a geometrically optical but also cultural phenomenon when, in relation to the discovery of perspective in the Renaissance, he says: “Perspective was a cultural technique and a matter of concern not just for artists, since it came to symbolise the right to perceive the world with one's own gaze” (Belting, 2011, 15). Therefore, it is not a coincidence that painters, sculptors and architects re-discovered perspective (no sooner than) in the Renaissance: not because the geometry and/or optics before had not been developed enough, but because the medieval theocentric world did not need the human “realistic” perspective, since the spiritual content of the art object was incomparably more relevant than either the three-dimensional illusion with perspectival regular size of figures placed at various distances or the eye-point-location of the beholder, individual soul. Belting continues: “Space in perception exists as space for the gaze. The picture plane in perspective art is a metaphor for the presence of the observer, who is constructed as a function of the picture” (*ibid.*). The Renaissance perspective announces individuality of the modern subject who in Renaissance art still does not prevail over the platonic-divine order and harmony of nature and world. The individual human and the cosmos remain harmonically balanced in the Renaissance, as was also stated by Ernst Cassirer in his highly influential book *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (*Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*, 1927). Being the historian of ideas, he emphasised “how the new universal life sought by the Renaissance leads to the demand for a new cosmos of *thought*” (Cassirer, 2000, 6) – i.e. according to the modern world of thought which was established in philosophical terms after the period of the Renaissance by Descartes with his most famous thought (and one he believed to be the most clear and distinct) *Cogito ergo sum*. And by paraphrasing this renowned sentence in the context

of perspective as symbolic form one could say: *Perspecto ergo sum* (“I see, therefore I am”). In both cases the subject sees/thinks object(s) “at a distance” as if looking on the world through “the window” of his mental images and thoughts.⁴

However, the Renaissance is by no means uniform; it is rather complicated, complex and also internally contradictory from the historical as well as the spiritual and the cultural point of view. By placing a human being at the centre of the cosmos (and emphasising an individual soul etc.), the cosmos becomes increasingly de-centred, beginning with the metaphysical cosmology of Nicholas of Cusa, who considered the universe as “a sphere of which the centre is everywhere, and the circumference nowhere”, through the greatest cosmological revolutionary, Nicolaus Copernicus, who replaced geocentrism with heliocentrism, and finally to the ecstatic infinitist theorist Giordano Bruno, who was burned at the stake by the Inquisition due to his teaching on the infinite and completely de-centred universe. The Renaissance, therefore, demonstrates two temporally parallel but opposite processes of thinking: the centralisation of the human being (an individual) and decentralisation of the world.

Leonardo da Vinci, given his ingenious intuition, certainly must have foreseen the arrival of modern conflict between anthropocentrism and theocentrism, which would eventually (as was the case with Bruno's pantheistic and cosmological vision) de-centre and thus relativise the place and meaning of a human being in the cosmos. But the Renaissance in Leonardo's time, i.e. at its height, still managed to maintain the sensitive balance between man and God or between soul and angel if we apply Ficino's distinction we shall elaborate further on. In Leonardo's immortal – albeit very “mortal” in the real time – *Last Supper* (around 1490) there is a certain less known “code” which conceals “the double reading” of this famous picture: the earthly and the heavenly, the human and the angelic. This “code of transcendence” (as Karl Jaspers would put it) is concealed in the very double perspective of *The Last Supper*, i.e. in the *virtual* perspective of the fresco as opposed to the *real* perspective of the hall (refectory) of the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. If one looks at the painting while standing on the ground (or sitting by the table as monks used to do; see Fig. 8), the perspective lines *are fractured* (as the holy bread) when passing from the real into the virtual plane. But if one was lifted up off the ground for around four metres (i.e. if one “levitated” in the middle of the hall while looking at the fresco; see Fig. 9), the same perspective lines would “flatten out” and continue without disruption

4 In Belting's treatise the connection between perspective and portrait in terms of the two associated symbolic forms is of special interest: “The Renaissance represented the human subject, whom it celebrated as the individual, in two ways, once by painting portraits of individuals and once by painting the viewer's gaze. The portrait and perspective are independent of each other, but they were invented at the same time. Both grant a symbolic presence to a person in the picture, the former with the face as it appears in the portrait and the latter by depicting an individual gaze. Both perspective and portraiture are symbolic forms” (Belting, 2011, 18).

from the real space of the hall into the virtual space of the painting. Leonardo's gaze in this "code" is again de-centred although it is merely doubled here, split into two planes – the "immanent" and the "transcendent" planes of *The Last Supper*. Therefore, the symbolism of this evangelical event is doubled in much the same way as the liturgy of the Eucharist. The perspectival duality is almost certainly not a coincidence, since with Leonardo there is no such coincidence. (Let us follow a thought-experiment and imagine that we have two eyes separated in space at a distance of more than four metres: how would we see the perspective lines of the *Last Supper*?)

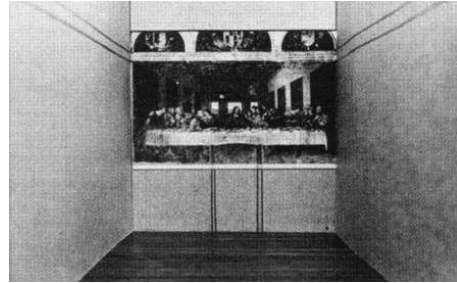
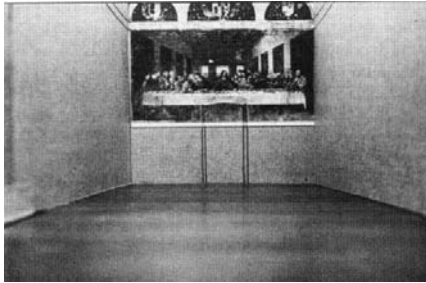


Fig. 8 (left): View of Leonardo's Last Supper from the ground of the refectory in the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan.

Fig. 9 (right): View of the fresco from a height of approximately 4.5 metres. The figures 8 and 9 are taken from the Ernst Ženko's book *Prostor in umetnost* (Space and Art), 2000, p. 69.

Now, let us return to the main topic of this article, the gaze of the soul and the angel in the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino. At the beginning, we stated that Ficino in his *Platonic Theology* defined the human soul as "the bond of the world" which assumes the central position in the cosmos – in the material as well as in the spiritual one, because the soul links lower levels of being with higher ones. The angel in the pentadic scheme of being and/or beings which Ficino adopted from Plotinus and Proclus is placed on the next level of the hierarchy *above* the soul. Let us list the five levels of being (see Ficino, 2001, 212 ff.) which are organised in a hierarchical order in terms of the relation between many and one (*multum-unum*). The first and the lowest level of being is the body (*corpus*). Bodies are characterised by multiplicity; all bodies are different; therefore they are merely "many" (*multa*). The second level of being is "quality" (*qualitas*), i.e. the quality or characteristic. Multiplicity also applies for the quality which already contains one (e.g. one quality of many bodies); therefore qualities are "many and one" (*unum et multa*). The third level of being is the soul (*anima*) which is "one and many" (*unum et multa*). Oneness is of key relevance to the soul. Souls are many, however, each one of them participates differently in the oneness of the intellect – all of them just imperfectly due to being associated with body, motion

and time. The fourth level of the hierarchical scheme is the angel (*angelus*) who is “one-many” (*unum-multa*), because angels are many, however, each one of them is perfect, immobile and eternal, each reflects divine perfection in its own way. And on the top of the ladder, on the fifth level, there is God (*deus*) who is pure oneness – from the philosophical point of view, it is seen as the (Neo)Platonic highest One (*unum*). We see that according to Ficino the entire metaphysically theological pyramid is hierarchically structured in relation to one-many: from above there descends creation, from below there ascends knowledge and on the top the great circle joins together. In the pagan Platonism the top of the pyramid or this closure is called Good-One, whereas in Christianity, God.

One of the key statements in Ficino's *Platonic Theology* is as follows: “Above the mobile soul is the motionless angel” (*Super animam mobilem est immobilis angelus*) (Ficino, 2002, 58). What does that mean? What is the meaning of the angel's “motionless” gaze in Ficino's philosophy? Why is it placed “higher” than the gaze of the soul? First, it needs to be said that Ficino's angel is motionless in the sense of “immobile”. Therefore, by being an angel it cannot move or “be moved” in time, because it is “substantially” and not only “accidentally” (actually) immobile and timeless.⁵ Angels in Ficino's theology are motionless, like “fixed” stars which maintain their unchangeable “constellations” (as it was believed), while the mobile human soul is changeable, like the Moon with its phases or, as Ficino says in his *metaphor on the star and the Moon*, “Justly, therefore, angel is above soul like a star above the Moon, refulgent with the light of its Sun, entire, forever, unchanging” (Ficino, 2002, 11). Moreover, the Renaissance Platonic thinker explains the essence of the angel in relation to the soul as follows:

So far we have discovered some sort of form above the body's complexion, which we shall call rational soul. Its essence always remains the same. This is proved by the stability of the will and the memory. Its activity, however, is liable to change, in that it does not think about all things simultaneously, but step by step; nor does it nourish, increase and generate the body in a single moment, but over the course of time. [...] The life that is at once whole, united with itself, and not distant from itself is more pure and complete than the life that, having been extended over various different moments of

5 In order to illustrate the distinction in meaning, let us compare it with a difference between the motionless angel in an old icon and its image in a particular “snapshot” of a modern film. In an old icon the angel's immobility has an aim *per se*, it does not lack anything in its “substantial” immobility although it may be “caught” by a painter while flying. It is painted in the precise moment, for example, when it has just landed in front of the amazed Virgin Mary – whereas in a particular “snapshot” of a film the angel is merely “accidental” motionless, since its momentary immobility has its aim only in motion, i.e. outside itself. Of course, if angels are still present in films and if we can recognise them, for example, in Wim Wenders's renowned film *Wings of Desire*, where two angels come to Earth in human form and mingle with people.

time, is pulled apart from itself, one might say, in accordance with its inner actions and feelings. So above this form whose external activity wanders over intervals of time, and whose life, that is, internal activity, is dispersed as it were in a flood, we must posit another form, more sublime, whose activity is constant and whose life is at once whole and united. [...] Above what changes because it is deficient there must be something which does not move because it never needs anything or because it is already completely full. [...] What naturally lacks an end-point must be given one by something more perfect (Ficino, 2001, 59–63).

... and that “something” which transcends the soul is, according to Ficino, called “the angel”. It involves the spiritual ascent from time to eternity, from mobility to immobility, from soul to angel (in classical Platonism from the world of senses to the world of Forms). According to Ficino, angel is thought of *and* seen as a symbolic form which is neither only a myth nor merely an abstract thought, but above all intellectual vision grounded on belief (here it is also true: *Credo ut intelligam* – I believe, so that I may understand). Angel is the transcending *télos* of the soul. And a particularly surprising thought here is the one stating that the angelic immobility contains *life*, which is even “more alive”, more whole than the mobile life of the soul – because within the angel there is the Intellect who *lives eternally!* This paradoxical thought, which is quite difficult to understand for a modern man, is not originally Ficino's: it was outlined already in Plato's late dialogues and more clearly expressed by Plotinus, Proclus and the Christian Platonic thinker Dionysius the Areopagite. With Platonic thinkers the Intellect and the angel are tightly knit: the essence of the Intellect is angelic. From Plotinus' vision of the Intellect as “a richly varied sphere [...] of all faces, shining with living faces”⁶ to Ficino's Renaissance angels to whom souls ascend through intellectual contemplation, there is a long but continued development which leads from pagan to Christian Platonism. Here, the Intellect is not perceived merely as Reason, but also as the heart of all creation, since the angel unites knowledge and love. In this development, the essential role is attributed to the “Neoplatonic or mystical interpretation of symbolism” as Ernst H. Gombrich says, because in it “the *symbol* is seen as the *secret language* of the divine” (Gombrich, 1990, 38). Thus we may say that in the Christian Renaissance Platonism the Platonic ideas are transformed into *icones symbolicae* and revealed in the images of angels.

6 Plotinus in the *Sixth Ennead* compares the universal Intellect with “richly varied sphere” and attributes it eternal *life*: “And so, if one likens it to a living richly varied sphere, or imagines it as a thing [of] all faces, shining with living faces, or as all the pure souls running together into the same place, with no deficiencies but having all that is their own, and universal Intellect seated on their summits so that the region is illuminated by intellectual light – if one imagined it like this one would be seeing it somehow as one sees another from outside; but one must become that, and make oneself the contemplation” (Plotinus, *Enn.*, VI.7.15.25–33). See also (Uršič, 1997).

Ficino's *metaphor of the eye* is directly linked with the title of this symposium "The Myth and the Gaze". When referring to the ascent of the mobile soul towards the immobile angel and providing the answer to the question on *how* can a soul in its intellectual contemplation recall its heavenly origin, i.e. its angelic nature, Ficino uses the following metaphor:

Your mind is to your soul what your eye is to your body. Your mind is the eye of your soul. [...] Imagine your eye growing so that it fills your whole body, and, when every species of limb has disappeared, that the universal body is a single eye. [...] Now imagine that your mind has such power over your soul that with the rest of the parts of the soul effaced, those concerned with imagination, sense and generation, your whole soul is one mind alone. This remaining sole, uncontaminated mind will be angel (Ficino, 2001, 83).

The metaphor of the "all-physical" eye reminds us of some of the medieval depictions of angels' wings "scattered" with many eyes, e.g. the seraph from the Church of St Clement of Tahull in Catalonia (Fig. 10), though an even closer comparison would be "the winged eye", the symbol of all-seeing and all-knowing which originates from the Egyptian mythology (Horus as the Falcon God). The Fig. 11 shows the Renaissance medal with an inscription QUID TUM ("What then?") which was made by the Veronese jeweller Matteo de' Pasti as an emblem for Leon Battista Alberti. With this phrase Cicero hinted at "what may be foreseen only by God" (Huxley, 1990, 53). Alberti, being a great admirer of Cicero, clearly associated the falcon gaze of the winged eye with his aesthetic convictions and, at least indirectly, also with the notion *concinmitas* characteristic of him (further reading in Komelj, 2007, 193 and 208 ff.).

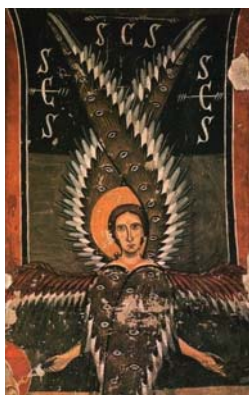


Fig. 10: Seraph, St Clement, Tahull, fresco, 13th century (from Huxley, 1990, 81).

Fig. 11: Matteo de' Pasti, medal of Leon Battista Alberti, 15th century (*ibid.*, 53)
By anonymous engraver or photographer (scan from 19th century book).

In his metaphor of the eye, which is filling up the whole body, Ficino knowingly or unknowingly followed the same symbolic traditions, and being a Platonic thinker himself, he particularly emphasised the importance of sight – sensual as well as intellectual – for human knowledge, for the ascent of the soul to the angel. And here, we may form a question: why is it that sight is given advantage over the other four senses when the soul ascends to the angelic perfection? In philosophy, this question goes all the way back to Plato and Aristotle. In the sixth and seventh books of *The Republic*, Plato compared the eye to the Sun and the Sun to the highest Good. Aristotle, in *On the Soul*, thought in a more analytical way and gave primacy to the sight because it reaches the farthest in relation to all five senses (but even further reaches Reason, which enables us to ponder upon the things we cannot see). Different to the Greek culture and to our modern consciousness is, generally speaking, the Jewish tradition where hearing precedes sight, because God addresses human beings with a word, with His voice. However, even in Greek culture the leading position of sight is not absolute, since the philosophical tradition says, for example, that in the “Epicurean Garden” the primacy was given to taste. In our modern contemporary culture which is more prone to sensuality in relation to traditional cultures, it is the touch, more particularly the erotic touch, that frequently struggles with sight, which generally still assumes the position of the first among the five senses. Let us imagine such modification of the metaphor of the eye in which the whole body would not only be the eye as the organ of sight, but the eye as a thorough erogenous zone ... of course, this bizarre thought draws us away from Ficino's “Platonic love” and/or Christian etheric *agápe*, but on the other hand it is interesting to note that in the Renaissance there emerges a thought on “sensual pleasures in heaven” as is the case with Lorenzo Valle's *De voluptate* (further reading in Uršič, 2004, 128 ff.).

Let us return to the angelic gaze in *The Platonic Theology* by Marsilio Ficino. The angel *simultaneously* sees *everything*, “beyond” space and time. The soul's motion and all its temporalisation is present to the angel in a single eternal, time-transcending moment. The soul and its one-in-many does give, or rather enable, the identity of an individual person – its own as well as that of other persons and things – however, the soul sees, feels and thinks the world *in time* by successively “travelling” from one adventure to the other, from one thought to the other. In Neoplatonism, this form of temporalisation was called the soul's “audacity” (*tólma*), since the soul does *not* want to see/know everything at the same time, and this is precisely its adventure, but at the same time its “fall” from the perfection of the transcendent One to the plurality of the world. According to Ficino's Platonic-Christian teaching, an individual soul is also immortal, and the angel to which it ascends, does not live “always” but *eternally*, i.e. “beyond” time – or as Plotinus says in his well-known treatise *On Eternity and Time* (*Enneads* III, 7):

“eternity as a life which is here and now endless because it is total and expends nothing of itself, since it has no past or future” (Plotinus, *Enn.*, III.7.5.26-28). Ficino’s angel, the being of eternity, is without the past and the future, because if it had them, it would not contain the life in its totality, towards which it attracts and raises the soul.

Ficino’s philosophically theological treatment of the relationship between the gaze of the soul and the gaze of the angel is also important for understanding Renaissance painting. For example, Botticelli’s *Primavera* surely represents some sort of “angelic” scene, albeit depicting pagan figures. First, when the eye embraces the painting in all its totality, we are taken aback by its superabundant, heavenly beauty. Then, the eyes follow the details: the gaze slides from one figure to the other, from one flower in the meadow to the other, but the totality remains “potentially” present “in the background”, although we cannot see the whole scene *and* all individual details *all together* – because the soul contemplating the scene lives in time and space. The angelic view, however, would *truly* see the totality with all, even the smallest details, in one “instant”, in timeless eternity. Nevertheless, Marsilio Ficino in his philosophical work does not mention Botticelli’s paintings – although they surely knew and saw each other in Florence, since Ficino was the court philosopher of Lorenzo the Magnificent and Botticelli was the most favourite painter of the Medici family – but when reading Ficino’s metaphor on Apelles and the meadow, one cannot resist the assumption that the philosopher had Botticelli’s *Primavera* in mind when he wrote the following (*Theol. Plat.*, III.1.14):

When Apelles admired a meadow, he tried to paint a picture of it with colors. All the meadow instantaneously appeared and instantaneously excited Apelles’ desire [to paint it]. This instantaneous appearance and incitement can be called act it is true, since it does something, but not movement, since it does not act step by step. For movement is act that traverses moments in time. But the [subsequent] act of observing and painting which occurs in Apelles is called movement because it does take place gradually. He looks first at one flower, then at another, and he paints them in the same way. To be sure, it is the meadow that makes Apelles’ soul see it and yearn to paint it, but in does this instantaneously. It is Apelles’ soul, not the meadow, that makes him look first at one blade of grass then at another over various moments of time and to depict them in the same gradual way. And it is the nature of his soul not to examine various blades of grass and represent them all at once but to do so gradually. The beginning and the end of this movement which consists in seeing and painting is the meadow; for the painter’s observation began with the meadow and his desire is directed towards it. But the source by means of which such an act occurs gradually over time and is called movement is the soul of the painter himself (Ficino, 2001, 229).



Fig. 12: Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera* (detail), around 1482, Uffizi, Florence.

The metaphor on Apelles and the meadow assists us in penetrating the thought that *the soul contemplating the angel temporalises eternity* or, in Ficino's words which also reflect a certain metaphor, "this movement properly does flow out of the soul's own nature as its own fountain of movement defined as activity within time; but it is aroused by those above, as by a beginning and end outside itself" (Ficino, 2001, 229). The meadow may be understood as a metaphor of the Platonic "world of ideas" that the soul "reads" in time, but when it ascends to the angel, intellect and/or spirit, it instantly contemplates its totality while keeping all the details in view. A painted work of art is a moment "stopped" in eternity, it is the *panopticum* of the world that the soul experiences in space and time. We presume that Leonardo da Vinci regarded painting higher than any other form of art (I do not argue here that he was right, probably not) also due to its Platonic, "angelic" totality, represented in a painting. In *A Treatise on Painting* we read: "Painting manifests its essence to thee *in an instant of time*,—its essence by the visual faculty, the very means by which the perception apprehends natural objects, and *in the same duration of time*,—and in this space of time the sense-satisfying harmony of the proportion of the parts composing *the whole* is formed" (Leonardo, 2005, 19, italics M. U.).

Finally, let me draw attention to the paradoxical duality of the Renaissance once again, i.e. the duality of centralisation and de-centralisation: on the one hand the Renaissance gradually put a human into the centre, an individual soul, a person, a seeing, thinking subject – and this centralisation of the human point of view is revealed in Renaissance art also through the discovery of perspective – on the other hand this is properly the period when de-centralisation of the world, nature and cosmos begins, starting with Copernicus' heliocentrism and proceeding to Bruno's infinitism. And if one forms a question on whither in the late Renaissance and in the following centuries "fled away" that spatially de-centred, but spiritually centred angelic gaze that Marsilio Ficino wrote about in *The Platonic Theology*, we could say (*cum grano salis*): it moved on to modern *science*. For Galileo Galilei and his successors wanted to transcend any subjective gaze in their new science, any subjective view point of the beholder, because it is precisely this methodological "de-centralisation" of the human gaze that enables "objectivity" of science – while a human as a social, historical and spiritual being is increasingly "subjectivised". We might say, following Ficino's metaphor, that the soul in modern times is becoming more and more withdrawn from the angel, from the spiritual

wholeness seeing the whole along with all the details. On the other hand, modern art once again establishes the de-centred gaze, which is of course quite different in relation to the Renaissance. Mostly, it is no longer angelic, but it is surely more secular – scattered, fragmented, fractal, frequently broken as a discarded mirror ...

Finally, let us briefly go back to the main topic of the article – the Renaissance Platonism of Marsilio Ficino. In the Florentine Golden Age, Ficino with his philosophical brightness expressed and co-created the conviction that beauty is the key to happiness and intransience, that it is the humanly divine beauty which lifts the soul to the angel – whereas now, half a millennium later, we can see in the Renaissance angel at least a “symbolic form” which nostalgically connects the almost forgotten myth with our postmodern gaze, over-enlightened by the modern age of enlightenment.

Translated by Mateja Petan

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Marko Uršič

Pogled duše in angela v renesančni filozofiji Marsilia Ficina

Ključne besede: Marsilio Ficino, angel, duša, simbolna forma, Sandro Botticelli

Renesansa je znova odkrila dušo: postavila jo je v središče sveta. Marsilio Ficino dušo imenuje »sponka sveta« (*copula mundi*), ki povezuje zemeljski in nebeški svet, imanenco in transcendenco, čas in večnost. Po drugi strani pa se v renesansi središče sveta vse bolj relativizira, duša postaja vse bolj individualna ter živi v času in prostoru. Njeno gledišče je v renesančnem slikarstvu določeno s perspektivo, ki jo odkrivajo Masaccio, Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca idr., pri čemer sama perspektiva nastopa kot »simbolna forma« (Erwin Panofsky). Toda nad vsako posamezno in »gibljivo« dušo se pnejo krila »negibnega« angela: *super animam mobilem est immobilis angelus*, kot zapiše Ficino, ki se v svojem renesančno prenovljenem krščanstvu vrača k platonsko-gnostičnemu mitu o vsevidnem angelskem pogledu. Arhetip angela mu pomeni metaforo za vseprisotni Um, h kateremu se dviga človeška duša. Ficinov novoplatonizem je močno vplival tudi na Botticellijevo slikarstvo, kar dokazuje Ernst Gombrich v razpravi *Botticellijeve mitologije*.

Marko Uršič

The Gaze of the Soul and of the Angel in the Renaissance Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino

Keywords: Marsilio Ficino, angel, soul, symbolic form, Sandro Botticelli

The Renaissance rediscovered the soul as the focus of the universe. Marsilio Ficino calls the soul the “bond of the world” (*copula mundi*), because it connects the earth and the heaven, immanence and transcendence, time and eternity. On the other hand, the centre of the world becomes more and more relative during the Renaissance period, and individual souls live more and more in their particular times and spaces. In Renaissance paintings, a soul's point of view is determined by perspective, as developed by Masaccio, Fra Angelico, Piero della Francesca et al., and the very position of the eye also features as a “symbolic form” (Erwin Panofsky). However, above each individual and “mobile” soul there are the wings of the “motionless” angel: *super animam mobilem est immobilis angelus*, as Ficino says in his renaissance Christianity, in reviewing the Platonic-Gnostic myth of the omnipresent angelic gaze. In the archetype of the angel Ficino perceives a metaphor for the all-knowing Intellect, towards which the human soul ascends. Following the iconology of Ernst Gombrich, this paper also takes notice of the influence of Ficino's philosophy on Botticelli's paintings.

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