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# Perception as a Function of Desire in the Renaissance

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# Perception as a Function of Desire in the Renaissance

*De amore*, or the *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, was written in 1469, after Marsilio Ficino had finished translating the works of Plato for the Medici family. It was not published until 1484, when it was included with Ficino's translations of Plato's works from Greek to Latin. Ficino's definition of beauty follows the Platonic definition as depending on a universal principle, that is, as given by language. According to Ficino, that which pleases the soul must be an incorporeal beauty, a conceptual representation not based in sense perception. In *De amore*, II.9, "beauty of the soul also is a splendor in the harmony of doctrines and customs,"<sup>1</sup> in the matrix of language which creates the identity of the subject in terms other than sense perception. Desire in *De amore* is not a physical, instinctual desire, but a desire created by language in the construction of perception. In II.2, "For it is the same God whose beauty all things desire, and in possessing whom all things rest. From there, therefore, our desire is kindled." Desire is governed by knowledge of God, knowledge of the archetypal principle in language. Perception, and judgments of beauty, are governed by the desire which is a function of language. Perception and desire are constructed through language. The desire for the good in the *circuitus spiritualis* through the hypostases is that which governs artistic expression.

The hypostases are described in the first speech in *De amore*, made by Giovanni Calvalcanti, a friend of Ficino's, to explain the speech made by Phaedrus in the *Symposium* of Plato. The hypostases are the Angelic Mind, the World Soul, from Plato, and the World Body. God himself is not accessible to the hypostases, as He is infinitely simple, and not of the world, which is necessarily multiple, and ornamental, that is, a product of perception. Both the ornamental machine of the world and the ideas behind the machine are created by the inaccessible God, just as the archetypal forms are created by the children of the demiurge in the *Timaeus*. The inaccessibility and infinite simplicity of the origin are qualities of the One of Plotinus. The world prior

to the creation of forms is chaos, formless and dark. Chaos turns to order through the creation of the substance of the mind, the archetypal idea, which is its essence. The essence, which is itself formless and dark, is imbued with a desire to “turn towards God,” as it is born from God. The essence of mind, the archetypal idea, is in Plotinus the Intellectual, that part of mind which understands the intelligibles, and in which the divine idea participates.

Sensible objects have no connection with each other, or with the perceiving subject. Without the ordering process of reason and perception, of which language is a function, the sensible world would not exist. Desire for God, or order, is a desire for human reason in relation to the sensible world, a validation of human thought in relation to the sensible world. “Turned toward God,” Calvalcanti says, the essence of mind, or the Intellectual Principle, “is illuminated by His ray,” and the appetite or desire of the intellectual is increased by the splendor of the ray. As the intellectual reaches toward God in its desire, “it receives form. For god, who is omnipotent, imprints on the Mind, reaching out towards Him, the nature of all things which are to be created.” In perception, the mind creates the form of all things perceived prior to the actual perception, prior to the making of the imprint of the sensible object in the eye. The imprint is determined *a priori* by reason, not in conscious reasoning, but in the essence of mind, which is the intellectual of Plotinus. The concept that the form of the imprint of the sensible object is determined prior to the perception of the object can be found in the writings of Plotinus.

In *De amore*, everything which is perceived is painted on the Angelic Mind, from which are created the forms of all sensible objects, the spheres and the vapors, like the archetypal forms which are created by the children of the demiurge of Plato. The forms of things are conceived in the celestial mind, and are called the Ideas, as they are in the *Timaeus*. The form of each type of sensible object is given a mythological character, to reinforce the fact that the forms are products of the celestial mind, that they determine perception of the sensible world, rather than being determined by it. The form or idea of the heavens, or the sphere of the fixed stars, is Uranus. The forms of the first two planets are Saturn and Jupiter. The form of fire is Vulcan, the form of air is Juno, the form of water is Neptune, and the form of earth is Pluto. Without the ordering of the sensible world by reason in perception, the world would only appear as disconnected chaos. Such perception is a function of the desire created in mind by reason itself for the operation of the human being in the sensible world, which depends on its ordering by reason,

but in a process which is inaccessible to reason itself, which escapes the self-consciousness of reason, and is thus a function of the essence or intellectual.

The first turning of the essence of mind to God from chaos is the birth of love, the infusion of the illuminating ray of God is the nourishment of love, and the forming of the ideas is the perfection of love. The forms and ideas of the intellect form a *mundus* or *cosmos*, which is the ornament, and the grace of the ornament is beauty. That which is most beautiful in the sensible world is that which most conforms to the forms and ideas in intellect, as the form and idea interact with the imprint of the sensible object in perception. Love attracts the mind to the beautiful, and allows the mind to become beautiful, as it becomes more aware of the divine idea. The beauty of the ideas in the mind corresponds to the beauty of sensible objects, because it is the ideas in the mind which form sensible objects. Thus “the mind is turned toward God in the same way that the eye is directed toward the light of the sun,” in which it perceives the colors and shapes of things, which are formed from the inner light, which is the basis of the imagination.

As the mind looks toward the illumination of the divine idea, “it is informed with the colors and shapes of things,” to which the sensible world conforms in the process of perception. Perception is a mechanism of the desire of the divine idea, the intelligibles, which order the sensible world, and allow it in turn to be loved by the perceiver. One loves to look at nature because one loves the way that it conforms to their idea of the order of the world, as in mathematics and geometry. One loves the sensible world because it reinforces intellect, and the inaccessible source of the generation of ideas within it. The World Soul, the structure of the cosmos, turns toward the same ideas, from formlessness and chaos, and its turning is caused by love also. The world around the subject desires what the subject desires. The world becomes a world when it has received the forms from the mind, that is, when it is perceived. Without love, without the subject being present to perceive it, the world would just be formless matter, disconnected and haphazard. But love is innate in it, and it turns toward order.

Love is the desire for beauty in *De amore* I.4, for “this is the definition of love among all philosophers.” Beauty is a three-fold grace which originates in harmonies: the harmony of virtues in souls, the harmony of colors and lines in bodies, and the harmony of tones in music. Harmony in soul is known by intellect, harmony in body is known by visual perception, and harmony in sound is known by aural perception. It is through the intellect and perception that love is satisfied, as opposed to through bodily functions.

The harmony in intellect corresponds to the harmony in vision and sound. The visual form of a work of art corresponds to the form of the ideas in the mind, and is thus considered beautiful, and incites desire, for beauty in form and virtue in mind. The work of art is successful if it incites that desire, the desire for God, and never satiates that desire, as desire for the infinite and inaccessible can never be satiated. Thus the viewer would always have the desire to return to the work of art, and see it again, because it conforms to the desire of the intellect for the good, or the idea of forms which orders the world in perception, and language as well, as a function of perception.

The “beauty of the human body requires a harmony of different parts” in the same way that perception requires a harmony of forms and colors and language requires a harmony of words in a syntax. The harmony of the different parts of the body is itself a syntax. The form of each sensible object in perception which is shaped by the idea in the imprint is seen as a sign, or a signifier, as in language. To the signifier as form corresponds an idea, in the intellectual, as signified, just as an idea corresponds to a word in language. The sign in perception, a head or leg in a body, for example, corresponds to an idea of the head or leg in the intellectual. The harmony of the parts of the body is not given by the body, but by perception and intellect, as a function of desire; without the perceiver, the body is a chaotic, disconnected, arbitrary assemblage of parts, which in the Renaissance would be defined as the ugly.

Love, and desire, are functions of the graces, in intellectual, visual, and aural harmony. The “appetite which follows the other senses is not called love, but lust or madness.” Love between two people is a mutual desire for beauty, a reciprocal understanding of what beauty is, in both body and intellect. In *De amore* II.9, love of the body is only in the visual perception of the body, in the beauty of the “splendor itself in the ornament of colors and lines.” The “desire to touch is not part of love...but rather a kind of lust and perturbation of a man who is servile.” Love in intellect is a mutual desire for those laws and customs which are seen as harmonious and beautiful. “Beauty of the soul also is a splendor in the harmony of doctrines and customs.” Platonic love, the idea of Ficino and not Plato, is the reciprocal desire for beauty in soul, the shared love of God.

When “we are attracted to a certain man as part of the world order,” as Carlo Marsuppini, a student of Ficino, suggests in the fifth speech of the *Commentary on the Symposium*, we find the person beautiful in so far as they conform, either physically or intellectually, to our idea of beauty as it exists in and is defined by the matrix of laws and customs in which we operate, that

is, the ornament of the world, the *cosmos*. In V.5, we are attracted to that certain person “especially when the spark of the divine beauty shines brightly in him,” that is, his form corresponds to the light in our imagination. We find a person beautiful when “the appearance and figure of a well-constructed man correspond most closely with that Reason of Mankind which our soul received from the author of all things and still retains.” Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and beauty is culturally conditioned.

As the beauty of a sensible object depends on its correspondence with the form of the imprint in perception as determined by the idea, “it happens that the external form of a thing, striking with its image the Form of the same thing depicted in the soul, either disagrees or agrees with it...” Whether the sensible object agrees with the form of the imprint or not depends on “a certain natural and hidden incongruity or congruity,” and then “moved by this hidden opposition or attraction, the soul either hates or loves the thing itself.” The hidden quality is that part of mind which is not accessible to discursive reason, the active intellect of Aristotle, or the Intellectual Principle of Plotinus. The intellectual is the higher part of mind which is able to understand intelligibles, ideas in forms which are not apparent to logic or conscious reason. Marsuppini paraphrases *Enneads* I.6.2 and V.3.3 of Plotinus.

At the end of his speech Marsuppini asks, if “anyone asked in what way the form of the body can be like the Form and Reason of the Soul and Mind, let him consider...the building of the architect.” The harmony of proportions of the work of art corresponds to the harmony of proportions in music, and the harmony of proportions in mathematics and geometry, instruments of the *explicatum* or unfolding of the intelligibles in intellect into the forms of discursive reason, as elaborated by Nicolas Cusanus. The analogy of the building of the architect, taken from the tenth book of the *Republic* and the sixth tractate of the first book of the *Enneads*, illustrates the correspondence between the architecture of the building and the architectonic, the transcendental idea, of the architect. The architectonic is the ornament or structure of the cosmos, as in the geometrical solids molded by the children of the demiurge in the *Timaeus*. The transcendental idea is the idea which pre-exists perception, the concepts which order the sensible world but do not exist in it, and all the proportional relations derived from them in mathematics and geometry in discursive reason.

The design of the building is the form of the sensible object which corresponds to the idea of the architect. All forms in architecture and art are necessarily ideas pre-existent in the mind of the architect or artist, even if they

are arrived at by chance. The architecture of the building exists completely independently of its matter; architecture requires no matter at all, as it is the form of the architectonic. "Therefore go ahead," Marsuppini says, "subtract its matter if you can (and you can subtract it mentally), but leave the design. Nothing of body, nothing of matter will remain to you." The form of the art or architecture is identical to the idea in the mind, in the process of the imagination which is the *Vorstellung*, picture thinking, which is ordered in language, as well as mathematics and geometry. In the *Vorstellung*, pictures are transformed into words as they become mnemonic residues. The mnemonic residue of the imprint becomes the word in language as the spirit of the divine becomes the *logos*, and the order of the syntax of the language, of words or forms, corresponds to the order of the idea.

In the seventh speech, by Tommaso Benci, the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*, the representation of the representation in perception, is explained. The medium by which the forms of the ideas are transferred to the imprints of sensible objects is the spirit. In VI.6, images of external bodies "cannot be imprinted directly on the soul because incorporeal substance...cannot be formed by them through the receiving of images." Images cannot be immediately or directly perceived; there must be an intermediary which translates the images in perception, as Plotinus held. The soul, though, "easily sees the images of bodies shining in it, as if in a mirror." The image can only be a reflection or representation of the idea, the image in the soul or intellect. The intellect, through the medium of the spirit, corresponds the form of the idea with the form of the imprint or impression of the sensible body, and this operation is called the imagination. Imagination consists of the formation of images in intellect which are representations of imprints in perception which are representations, determined by intellect, of sensible objects. Such images of the imagination retained in intellect constitute memory, and generate words, from the mnemonic residues, in picture-thinking. The linguistic correspondent of the representation of the image facilitates the memory of it.

This process is generated by the desire or appetite of the intellect, the essence of mind, for the ideas, and it is perpetuated by desire generated by the gaps created between the perceiving subject and on the one hand the inaccessible source of the generation of ideas, and on the other hand the sensible world. The eye of the soul is "aroused to contemplate the universal ideas of things which it contains in itself," and at the same time "the soul is perceiving a certain man in sensation, and conceiving him in the imagination..." In both parts of this dual operation, desire is generated and perpetuated. While

the soul, or lower intellect, or discursive reason, can preserve an image in memory, in the retention of the mnemonic residues, or imprints, the eye in perception and the medium of spirit, as physical operations, “can receive images of a body only in its presence,” and can only reflect it, like a mirror. Once the image is not present, it is lost. It can only be retained, and transformed in the imagination, through the operations of intellect. The soul, or discursive reason, is dominated by the eye and spirit, and also requires the presence of the image, and thus can only reflect it as a mirror. Intellect, the essence of mind, is required for imagination. The desire for the sensible object outside of visual perception is found in discursive reason as well as sensual experience; the desire for the sensible object as a form of the idea again requires intellect and imagination. The sensual desire is created by the gap between the object as a relation in a syntax, as given by logic, and the object as the form of an idea, as given by intellect, as well as the gap between the perceiving subject in discursive reason and the sensible object.

Tommaso Benci sums up the theses of the *Commentary*. In VI.8, the form of a body, the shape of a sensible object, is received by the eye, and by penetrating the spirit, corresponds to the figure of the idea of the body which is contained in divine intellect. The correspondence “pleases the soul,” producing the grace of love which is beauty, because it “corresponds to those Reasons which both our intellect and our power of procreation preserve as copies of the thing itself,” the power of procreation being the imagination, the reasons being the linguistic equivalent of the figure in the picture thinking, the basis of memory. In perception, an imprint of a figure is received by the eye, and it is matched to a figure in the imagination, and transferred to reason in language, and through the intervention of divine intellect, the figure is understood in relation to the architectonic of the cosmos, which results in beauty and love.

In VI.13, all things are understood by the light of the divine intellect, “but the pure light itself and its source we cannot see in this life,” as it is that part of soul or intellect which is inaccessible. Intellect “can turn to this light whenever it wishes,” through “purity of life and intense concentration of desire,” and in so doing “it shines with the sparks of the Ideas.” Accessing the essence of mind, divine intellect, in reason requires effort, and each individual is free to either make the effort, or to live a life among shadows, being manipulated in thought by sensual forms and sensual desires.

Cristoforo Marsuppini, another student of Ficino, further summarizes the *Commentary* in the seventh speech. In VII.1, memory in intellect is described



as a mirror which reflects an image of the figure of a sensible object like a ray of light through the eyes, so that another image is formed, as if a piece of wool next to the mirror might be set on fire by the light reflected by the mirror, and the blazing wool would be an image of the sun. The image of the blazing wool in the imagination is a splendor of the first image, “by which the force of desire is kindled and loves,” as perception is a function of desire.

In the summation of Marsuppini, “love, kindled in the appetite of sense, is created by the form of the body seen through the eyes,” as perception is a function of desire, but in perception or imagination the form of the body is without matter. The lack of the matter of the form of the body in vision creates desire, the desire caused by lack, in the disjunction between form and matter. When the figure of the form of the body in the imagination is transformed to or made to correspond to the figure of the form of the archetype in intellect, it is transformed from a particular form to a universal idea in a process of abstraction. Thus “there immediately appears in the intellect another species of this image, which no longer seems to be a likeness of one particular human body, as it was in the fancy, but a common Reason or definition of the whole human race equally.” The particular form becomes an instrument in reason by which a universal abstraction is made, as in the *Symposium*, by which an idea is formed which orders experience.

As Plato divided beauty into the terrestrial and celestial, *venere vulgare* and *venere celeste*, as illustrated in the *Birth of Venus* of Alessandro Botticelli, so love is divided by Marsuppini into bodily love and intellectual love. A “love inclined toward the senses” resides in “the appetite of sense devoted to the body,” while “another love which is very foreign to commerce with the body” resides in or arises from “intellect’s universal species or Reason.” As sensible objects can only be given as representations in intellect, so the love which resides in the senses can only be given by the love which resides in intellect, and can only be seen as false, without essence, as are objects outside of perception.

### Perspectival Construction

The premise of perspectival construction is that the real world is not immediately perceived, that it is given to us through the intermediary of geometry and mathematics, that vision is a conceptual process. Perspective in painting reproduces the world as geometrically constructed. A scene constructed with perspective appears more real or natural to us precisely because it is not real

or natural, because our perception of the world around us does not correspond to the world as it actually exists. This is the thesis of Immanuel Kant, and it is also a basis for the theory of perception of Plotinus. The *Enneads* of Plotinus were translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino in the Renaissance. Although there is no reference to Plotinus' theory of perception in the major treatises on perspectival construction written during the Renaissance—that is, the *De pictura* of Leon Battista Alberti or the *De prospectiva pingendi*, *On Perspective in Painting*, of Piero della Francesca—Plotinus' development of Plato's theory of vision is present in the theoretical basis of Renaissance perspective. References to Plato by Alberti and Piero form the basis of the Neoplatonic element of Renaissance artistic theory. But Ficino did not begin the translation of Plotinus until 1484, fifty years after Alberti's treatise and ten years after Piero's treatise.

Perspectival construction, or *costruzione legittima*, was seen as both a model of vision and a geometrical allegory of Neoplatonic emanation, in Leon Battista Alberti's *De pictura* and Piero della Francesca's *De prospectiva pingendi*. In the *De prospectiva pingendi*, perspectival construction is a form of *commensuratio* in painting, or proportion, based on the progression from point to line to surface to body. Such a progression serves as a model for the unfolding or *explicatum* of the material world, as can be found in the *Timaeus*, Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, and Proclus' *Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's Elements*, all available from medieval translations. The geometric progression corresponds to Piero's pyramid of vision, following the theory of vision of Alberti in *De pictura*, and corresponding to Ficino's model in the *Theologia Platonica* of 1482.

Of the three parts of painting, Piero declared at the beginning of *De prospectiva pingendi*, only *commensuratio* would be discussed, or perspective, but "mixing in parts of *disegno*, without which it is impossible to demonstrate perspective."<sup>2</sup> Color would be left out, but the parts of painting would be discussed "that can be demonstrated with angled lines and proportions, that is, the points, lines, surfaces and bodies."<sup>3</sup> These classifications correspond to the definitions of Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*. Piero identified five elements that need to be considered in the perspectival construction of a painting: sight, or the eye; the form of the thing seen; the distance from the eye to the thing seen; the lines that connect the eye to the extremities or bordering lines of the thing seen; and the area between the eye and the thing seen.<sup>4</sup> These five elements need to be understood in order to understand perspectival construction.

The eye is defined as that in which are represented all of the things seen under different angles. Objects appear as images in the eye depending on the angle of projection of the lines from the extremities of the objects to the eye; the larger the angle, the closer and larger the object. Objects in space occupy a hierarchy of being, or value, given by the variation in the relation to the angle of projection. This is stated in the Eighth Theorem of Euclid's *Optica*.<sup>5</sup>

Sensible things, or objects in the sensible world, are therefore abstracted and transformed into images in the eye through geometry. The images in the eye exist as copies of the sensible objects, and the objects become intelligible in the mind's eye, or objects of the intellect. This is a core idea in the *Enneads* of Plotinus. In the *Enneads* V.5.7, "actual seeing is double; take the eye as an example, for it has one object of sight which is the form of the object perceived by the sense, and one which is the medium through which the form of its object is perceived, which is also itself perceptible to the eye; it is different from the form, but is the cause of the form's being seen..."<sup>6</sup> The forms and proportions of sensible things are constructed in the mind, from the idea of the things, or the intelligibles, which are translated to the sensible world through mathematics and geometry, by way of perspectival construction as it plays a role in vision. It is the form of the thing, according to Piero della Francesca, rather than the thing itself, without which the intellect cannot judge nor can the eye comprehend the thing. For Plotinus, in III.6.1, "sense perceptions are not affections but activities and judgments concerned with affections..." Things in the real world cannot be received immediately through sense perception as themselves, because sense perception itself is a cognitive process. In the twentieth century, David Layzer writes, in *Cosmogony: the growth of order in the universe*, "Human visual perception is a cyclical process in which the brain constructs, tests, and modifies perceptual hypotheses. In order to have a percept, we must construct it."<sup>7</sup>

Leon Battista Alberti, in his treatise on painting written in 1435, *De pictura*, which has many similarities to Piero's *De prospectiva pingendi*, constructed a theory of vision in which rays of light are arranged in a pyramid. Surfaces are defined and measured by rays of light which serve to translate visual matter into intelligible matter, giving it the qualities of proportion and arrangement, as for Piero. Certain rays of light, which Alberti called "extrinsic rays," define the outline, measure and dimension of surfaces. The extrinsic rays define the outline of the pyramid of light in vision. The pyramid is formed between the surface of the matter and the eye, which is the source of an inner light. As Alberti explained, "The base of the pyramid is the surface

seen, and the sides are the visual rays we said are called extrinsic. The vertex of the pyramid resides within the eye, where the angles of the quantities in the various triangles meet together” (I.7).<sup>8</sup> Extrinsic rays of light measure quantity, which is “the space across the surface between two different points” (I.6), defined by geometry.

Contained within the pyramid of light, and enclosed by the extrinsic rays, are another type of ray, which is called the “median ray.” Median rays, which are weaker than extrinsic rays, are not strong enough to define outlines and measurements, but instead are variable and absorb light and color to varying degrees. They extend between the vertex of the pyramid and the surface of the matter, and fill in the color and shadow found within the outline of the matter. Among the median rays, one in the center of the pyramid stands out among them as the strongest, which is the “centric ray,” which corresponds to the vanishing point of perspectival construction. The centric ray forms a direct line from the vertex of the pyramid to the center of the surface, exactly perpendicular to the surface. The position of the centric ray, along with the distance of the ray from the vertex, determines the disposition of the outline of the surface. The location of the centric ray determines the position of the outline.

Following Alberti, in *De prospectiva pingendi*, Piero described the extrinsic rays in the pyramid of vision as lines which present themselves from the extremities of the thing and end up in the eye, in between which the eye receives and discerns them. Piero described the border of the object which is described by the rays of the eye in proportion and measure. It is the border of the thing, established through measure and proportion by the extrinsic rays from the eye, that determines how things diminish in size in relation to the eye, corresponding to the sharpness of the angle in vision. Thus it is necessary to understand the linear qualities of objects in a picture plane so that they can be represented, in their ideal beauty, as copies of the patterns of intelligible objects.

Following the definition of the elements of the painting, Piero proceeded in the treatise to discuss the elements of *commensuratio*, or perspective, in particular, in the first book: points, lines, and plane surfaces. The point is defined as that which has no parts, something which is imaginative, according to geometers, a thing which is as small as the eye can comprehend, and that which does not contain quantity. This follows the definition of the point in Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry* as that which has no parts. Proclus, in the *Commentary on the First Book of Euclid’s Elements*, held that the point is

without parts because it is the closest of all things in matter, or the Unlimited, to the One or the Limit, that which precedes all things in unity and simplicity, as described by Plotinus. The point is without parts in the same way that the soul and the Intellectual Principle, or Nous, the divine intellect, are without parts. Material forms that are more uniform and concentrated, without a plurality of parts, are closer to the origin of matter, closer to the Limit, in the same way that the point in perspectival construction is at the origin of the lines of construction in space, the rays from the eye that determine the boundaries of objects. The point in the eye in Alberti's cone of vision corresponds to the origin of all things, the One, as it is located among the intelligibles in the mind.

Following the definition of the point in *De prospectiva pingendi*, Piero defined the line as an extension from one point to another. The line plays a particularly important role in vision, the virtue of which is found in the point and the lines which depart from the point to the extremities of an object. The lines departing from the extremities of things and terminating in the eye, or the point, form the angle under which the thing is represented. These characteristics of the line follow the definitions of the line given by Euclid in the *Elements of Geometry*: a line is length without breadth; the limits of a line are points; lines are the limits of a surface; and a figure is that which is contained by boundaries.

In the *Enneads* IV.7.6, Plotinus distinguishes between perception and what might be called apperception, or multiple perceptions. Actual perceptual experience is multiple and diversified; perceived objects have no necessary connections in size or position, and can be perceived in a variety of ways by the different senses. But in human perception all objects and acts of perception are unified to form a coherent whole which structures the world around us. When the fragmented and variable objects of perception "reach the ruling principle they will become like partless thoughts..."; they are organized in a conceptual process. Perception entails the intersection of the immediately perceived image, the *percipi* or *imago* in psychoanalytic terms, with a conceptual process, which involves what might be called *a priori* concepts, in Kantian terms, and concepts which are activated by sensory activity. The possibility of the *a priori* concept in Plotinus' model of perception is suggested by Mike Wagner in his dissertation, *Concepts and Causes: The Structure of Plotinus' Universe*. According to Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, space and time are conceptual structures which do not exist in the real world, or are not given by the senses. The nature and existence of the

world around us outside of our ordering of it in the structures of space and time is unknowable to us. We can only know the world as our own geometrically constructed version of it, as our representation of it to ourselves. Perspectival construction, as defined by Alberti and Piero, constitutes the world as we can know it as a representation of it to ourselves in abstract and minimal, universal terms.

Plotinus describes perception as a dialectic of the universal and particular, to put it in Hegelian terms. The perceived object is both whole and divided into parts. In the process of perception “there will come to be an infinity of perceptions for each observer regarding the sense object, like an infinite number of images of the same thing in our ruling principle.” It is the conceptual process which structures the infinite subdivision of perception, as in the *explicatum* of Nicolas Cusanus; the unity of perceptual experience is inaccessible, as is the vanishing point of perspective in relation to the lines of emanation, or the unity of the One in the point. Plotinus suggests what Jacques Lacan confirms in the twentieth century; we are inherently fragmented beings in our representation of the world to ourselves in perception as a function of our conceptual processes. We are caught in a perpetual cycle of desire to overcome our own fragmentation, which manifests itself in the concept of the metaphysic. Perspectival construction represents the dialectic of the inescapable fragmented and multiple nature of perception and the metaphysical unity towards which desire leads us; perspectival construction is thus a graph of desire, for our own unattainable unity, and for the real existence of the world around us beyond our representation of it to ourselves.

For Plotinus, perception is a function of this desire, and a mechanism of the conceptual process, and memory in particular. He asks, “does our remembrance of the things we desired accompany our power of desiring...?” (IV.3.28). The conceptual process is composed of the perceived object, desire, and memory. “On this assumption the desiring power is moved by what it enjoyed when it sees the desired object again, obviously by means of the memory. For why should it not be moved when something else is seen, or seen in a different way?” Thought in Plotinus, as a kind of Hegelian picture-thinking, is composed of mnemonic residues of perceived objects, what Plotinus calls “imprints” in “recollections.” In V.3.2, “as for the things which came to it [that is, soul] from Intellect, it observes what one might call their imprints...and it continues to acquire understanding as if by recognizing the new and recently arrived impressions and fitting them to those which have long been within it: this process is what we should call the ‘recollections’ of

the soul.” Our thoughts are propelled by the desire created by the multiple and fragmented images of perception, by the desire to reconnect the mnemonic residues of images given by the senses in our minds to the world around us. As Plotinus describes it, “the reasoning power in soul makes its judgment, derived from the mental images present to it which come from sense-perception, but combining and dividing them...”

The desire is always thwarted because of the barrier put up by our *a priori* conceptual structuring of the world, so the desire is perpetual and never satiated. The mnemonic residue would be defined by Sigmund Freud as the *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*, the representation of the representation, as derived from Hegel; and the mnemonic residue is at the core of the Plotinian concept of the Intellectual Principle, or Nous, that which is other than discursive reason in mind. Renaissance perspectival construction is generally seen by twentieth-century scholars as being a limited and prohibitive form of representation in art because it does not allow for the uninhibited role of the *imago* or the mnemonic residue, as in dreams, to exist outside of discursive reason. Perspectival construction posits discursive reason as an absolute regulator of perceptual experience, because the metaphysical is only accessible through logic. This is the legacy of the Renaissance.

Plotinus does not deny that what we perceive in the world around us is actually there, as George Berkeley might, but he suggests that things appear to us as they are modified by our perception; ultimately we see the form of the thing, but not the thing itself. A perceived object is only known to us as a mental perception, and a mental perception is only known to us as a memory; the production of the mental perception in memory constitutes cognition as an “image-making power,” as in Hegelian picture-thinking. In *Enneads* IV.3.29, “nothing will prevent a perception from being a mental image for that which is going to remember it, and the memory and the retention of the object from belonging to the image-making power...” Through this process, perception as a form of cognition arrives at a conclusion, as the perception of the form of the image is absorbed into a cognitive process, and the fragmented and multiple apperception is transformed into perception, which involves the superimposition of a conceptual structure onto the perceived world, as in perspectival construction. “If then the image of what is absent is already present in this, it is already remembering, even if the presence is only for a short time.” The mnemonic image replaces the perceived image which replaces the thing, exactly as in Freud’s *Vorstellungsrepräsentanz*.

Given that we can only know the world around us as images reproduced in cognition, we can only know the world around us as an absence. Such an absence is represented in perspective, which precludes any other possibility of knowing the world around us outside of our cognition of it. The absence is present in the vanishing point, as a Negative Theology; in Platonic terms, the essence of the world is unknowable. In Lacanian terms, the absence is the Real, that which is inaccessible to either the Symbolic, the structures of language and perception, or the Imaginary, the immediately perceived *imago*, which can only be known as it is absorbed into cognition. The Real is that around which desire circulates; we are defined by a continual dialectic of presence and absence, of our representations of the world to ourselves and the unattainable source of those representations.

The vanishing point of perspectival construction in the Renaissance corresponds in architecture to the altar at the end of the nave of the church, to the location of the transubstantiation in the Eucharist, to the point at which the material world, or our representation of it to ourselves, becomes immaterial, and inaccessible. The system of perspective, as developed by Filippo Brunelleschi for the design of the basilica church, entailed this symbolic aspect. In a painting such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* in the refectory of the Church of Santa Maria della Grazie in Milan, the vanishing point of the perspective corresponds to a void through a painted window in the center which corresponds to the location of the figure of Christ as the material manifestation of the immaterial. The receding lines which construct the illusionistic space from the vanishing point also continue beyond the picture plane to construct the space of the refectory itself. We not only perceive this illusionistic space, but we inhabit it, and we are drawn through it to the point at which it fails to exist outside our own perception and cognition. In Baroque representation, the regular geometry of the emanation of the illusionistic world is replaced by irregular tumult and chaos in relation to the ineffable vanishing point, as in the *Assumption of the Virgin* in the Cathedral of Parma by Antonio Correggio, for example. In the Baroque it is no longer possible to approach the point at which reason fails through reason itself, because reason itself, or reason in perception, is seen as fragmented and multiple and inadequate, corresponding to the model of Plotinus.

According to Plotinus, in IV.3.30, "The intellectual act is without parts and has not, so to speak, come out into the open, but remains unobserved within, but the verbal expression unfolds its content and brings it out of the intellectual act into the image-making power, and so shows the intellectual



act as if in a mirror, and this is how there is apprehension and persistence and memory of it.” Beyond language and perception the intellectual act is inaccessible to us, except as a reflection in hindsight. Beyond the scaffolding of our thoughts and perceptions, we are inaccessible to ourselves, as in psychoanalysis the unconscious is inaccessible to conscious thought except through the fragments of dream images, according to Freud, or the fragments of linguistic functions, according to Lacan. For Lacan, meaning in language only exists as a reflection in hindsight after the speech-act has taken place. What lies behind our own thoughts is only accessible to us as fragmented and diversified mnemonic images in picture-thinking, which constitute a reality as ordered by the vanishing lines in perspective. The vanishing point is that point at which we can see behind the mirror, and we can see that there is nothing there.

<sup>1</sup> Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, trans. Sears Jayne (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Piero della Francesca, *De prospectiva pingendi* (Firenze: Sansoni Editore, 1942), pp. 63–64: “mescolandoci qualche parte de disegno, perciò che senza non se po dimostrare in opera essa prospectiva...”

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64: “che con line angoli et proportioni se po dimostrare, dicendo de puncti, linee, superficie et de corpi.”

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: “La qual parte contiene in sè cinque parti: La prima è il vedere, cioè l’occhio; seconda è la forma de la cosa veduta; la terza è la distantia da l’occhio a la cosa veduta; la quarta è le linee che se partano da l’estremità de la cosa e vanno a l’occhio; la quinta è il termine che è intra l’occhio e la cosa veduta dove si intende ponere le cose.”

<sup>5</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> David Layzer, *Cosmogenesis: the growth of order in the universe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 261–262.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972).