

UT PICTURA COMOEDIA

Among the dicta of classical criticism which were destined to stimulate human thought for many later centuries, the well-known analogy between poetry and painting, ascribed by Plutarch to Simonides of Ceos and also mentioned by Horace, has an outstanding place. The story of its influence, interpretations, elaborations, etc. is a long and interesting one and has frequently attracted the attention of modern scholars. The analogy has been studied chiefly in connection with descriptive poetry, which is perhaps what one should expect after Lessing's brilliant analysis. However, the 'speaking picture' idea has been used in other contexts as well.

An interesting application of Simonides' dictum to the province of dramatic literature we find in some sixteenth and seventeenth century theoretic treatises. The first traces of this more specific variant of the classical analogy are to be found in Renaissance discussions of painting in which, of course, the comparison figured as often as in literary treatises. Moreover, since the Renaissance art critic had no classical foundation to build on, as the literary critic had, Simonides' comparison between poetry and painting offered a convenient solution of the problem. If poetry is similar to painting, then the theoretic principles valid for poetry are also applicable to painting. As a result of such reasoning we sometimes find a mechanical and totally unfounded application of the 'precepts' of Aristotle to painting.

In the dialogue *L'Aretino, ovvero di Pittura* (1557) by that prolific Renaissance writer Lodovico Dolce, Aretino, one of the interlocutors, draws the parallel between the poet and the painter and says that both are similar ('*quasi fratelli*') in the sense that both imitate nature, the only difference being that the painter imitates by means of lines what is perceived with the eyes, whereas the poet imitates by means of words both what appears to the eye and what is comprehended by the mind. Having thus established the analogy, Dolce proceeds to apply freely Aristotle's *Poetics* on painting. Thus speaking of various elements of a good painting Dolce says that the subject matter of a picture should be presented in such a way that the onlookers remain convinced that the events depicted could not have happened in any other way than that in which the artist has painted them. The order of represented things, Aretino continues, should be the same as that in which they actually happened. At this point Aretino's companion in the dialogue, Fabrini, makes a specific reference to Aristotle's discussion of the drama: 'Questo

istesso insegna Aristotele nella sua *Poetica* agli scrittori di tragedie e di commedie¹⁾).

In another passage Dolce tries to impose the laws of Renaissance criticism on painting. According to him, the painter should not introduce too many figures into his picture because the eye will soon get tired of such a multitude. This, of course, derives from the precept, which applied in the first place to tragedy, that the number of characters in a play should be limited. Besides, Aretino goes on to say, it is not *verisimile* that so many things should present themselves to the painter at one time.²⁾ This argument clearly points to the contemporary dramatic criticism. The limitations based on the inflexible Renaissance conception of the *verisimile* played a most important role in the dramatic criticism; they were the real source of the 'Aristotelian' unities, which were being explicitly formulated at the time of Dolce's treatise. It was not *verisimile* that many places should be represented on the same stage, so the action of a play was to take place on one single spot; it was not *verisimile* that an action should last several weeks or several months when it only took a couple of hours to perform it, so its duration was to be limited to one revolution of the sun; here it is not considered *verisimile* that a painter could see a great number of people at one time, so he is to limit the number of figures portrayed. Obviously, the last (and least logical) restriction is made by way of analogy with the former two.

It is therefore all the more surprising to find in Spain this relationship between painting and dramatic literature employed in a totally different way. In Dolce, as we have seen, the parallel was used as an argument in favour of imposing the limitations, already accepted in Italian dramatic criticism, on painting; in Spain it was made use of in an attempt to oppose the strict dramatic rules imported from Italy. The Spanish national drama, with its neglect of the pseudo-Aristotelian rules, was in search of a theoretic justification of its practice and the parallel between poetry and painting came as a welcome argument.

The suggestion may well have come from Vives, in whose *De Causis corruptarum artium* occurs probably the first reference in Spanish criticism to the parallel between the drama and painting. It is characteristic that in Vives' treatise the analogy is mentioned in the section devoted to comedy. 'Venit in scenam poesis populo ad spectandum congregato'—says Vives—'et ibi sicut pictor tabulam proponit multitudini spectandam, ita poeta imaginem quandam vitae, ut merito Plu-

¹⁾ *L'Aretino ovvero Dialogo della pittura*, Biblioteca rara, Vol. X, Milano, 1863, p. 25.

²⁾ 'Basta a dire, che... il pittore... non elegga più che un numero convenevole di figure, considerando ch'egli le rappresenta all'occhio del riguardante, il quale confuso dalla troppa moltitudine s'infastidisce; nè è verisimile, che in un tempo gli si appresentano innanzi tante cose.' At this point Fabrini makes another implicit reference to Aristotle's *Poetics*: 'Così vogliono i giudiciosi che si dia al Poema, e massimamente alle commedie ed alle tragedie, una lunghezza mediocre: adducendo per ragione, che se una cosa animata è troppo grande, è abborrita; se troppo picciola, vien diletteggiata.' *Ib.* pp. 29—30).

tarchus de his dixerit, poema esse picturam loquentem, et picturam poema tacens, ita magister est populi, et pictor, et poeta³⁾.

This passage helps us to explain some of the factors which contributed to the transformation of the classical parallel 'painting-poetry' into the more specific one 'painting—drama'. The link is suggested in the first place by the element of visual perception which the drama, in contrast to all other literary kinds, has in common with painting. Another factor which in all probability also played an important role, and the phrasing of Vives' passage makes it seem even more probable, was the famous description of comedy, ascribed to Cicero by Donatus, as *imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis et imago veritatis*.

Vives' parallel is resumed and elaborated later on by the champions of the Spanish national theatre in their fight against the dramatic unities. The chief of them, Lope de Vega, does not himself put the dictum to the service of the justification of his type of comedy; he merely elaborates the analogy by saying that the poet imitates the subject he has chosen by means of the words, the pen, the metre and the harmony of sounds, just as the painter imitates the acts and appearances of people by means of the paint-brush, the panel, the canvas and various colours⁴⁾.

However, one of Lope's contemporaries, José Alcázar, an ardent admirer of Lope, who boldly asserted that the old 'regular' writers were ignorant of the art of writing comedies, and that it was first discovered by Lope, employs the already established analogy between painting and comedy in an attempt to invalidate the classicistic unities of time and place. It is not reasonable to demand that the writer should represent only actions which could have taken place in two hours, says Alcázar, obviously having in mind Castelvetro and his followers who demanded that the duration of a dramatic action and the time required its performance should be identical. Comedy is very similar to painting, and since it is possible to depict the whole earth, and even the sky in a small picture, why it should not be possible to represent the whole life of a man in a short drama which does not last more than one or two hours⁵⁾. The apparent logic of Alcázar's argument is, of course, based

³⁾ *De Causis corruptarum artium*, p. 367 in the 1555 ed., quoted by G. G. Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, Oxford, 1950, 2 Vols., 1.386.

⁴⁾ '... como el pintor con los pinzeles, tabla, lienzo y diversidad de colores va imitando a la naturaleza los actos, la semejanza de hombre... hasta sacar la imagen y retrato; assi el poeta con la lengua, pluma, numeros y harmonia adorna, pinta y retrata aquel sujeto, de que él hizo eleccion para su ingenio'. *La Arcadia*, Book III, *Obras sueltas*, 21 Vols., Madrid, 1776—79, Vol. VI, p. 233. Lope's passage seems to be an elaborate version of Pinciano's interpretation of the parallel: 'El poema es una tabla, la fabuila la figura, el metro los colores.' *Tablas poeticas*, quoted by Menéndez y Pelayo, *Istoria de las ideas esteticas en España*, 1st ed., 2. 2. 352.

⁵⁾ 'Es cosa vana que se haya de representar en dos horas lo que pudo suceder en dos horas, no más. La comedia es semejantísima á la pintura. Pues si en una pequeña tabla se puede pintar toda la tierra, y áun tambien todo el cielo, por que no se podrá representar en una breve comedia, que no exceda una ó dos horas, toda la vida de Neron?' Some of Alcázar's manuscripts were published by B. J. Gallardo in his

on an equivocation, and in his attempt to vindicate the Spanish *comedia* in face of the peripatetic criticism, he shows just as little critical insight and unprejudiced consideration as Dolce did in his endeavour to extend the principles of the Aristotelian poetics to art.

In his long literary career Cervantes did not have at all times the same attitude to the specific type of Spanish national drama. His adverse criticism of it in Chapter XLVIII of *Don Quijote* is well-known. Similarly, in a drama of his he mocks the practice of his contemporary fellow-dramatists, above all Lope, whose heroes are born in the first act, grow beards in the second and finally become kings of countries never heard of⁶⁾. In his play *El Rufian dichoso*, however, Cervantes joins the camp of Lope. In a dialogue at the beginning of Act II Cervantes defends the Spanish national drama which disregards the unities. Among other arguments he also uses the analogy between a pictorial and a scenic representation. Drama is like a map, says Cervantes, where one can see London and Rome, Valladolid and Ghent separated by less than an inch. It little matters to the spectator whether the dramatic characters move in one instant from Germany to Guinea without leaving the theatre⁷⁾.

Ricardo del Turia (1616) bases his defence of the *comedia* on national grounds, but he still finds use for the already established parallel between painting and the drama. Lope de Vega, says Ricardo del Turia, has acquired great fame and popularity just because he has refused to follow the established rules of dramatic criticism. He could have followed them, and easily too, since it is much easier to learn the rules once for all and proceed to write according to them, than to try to satisfy the constantly changing demands of the audience. Lope was right in abandoning the classicistic rules because he perceived that the Spanish mentality was more inclined to painting than to history; a picture displays its whole contents at once, whereas a history is more difficult to take in since it is expounded in successive books or chapters. The Spanish *comedia*, Ricardo del Turia seems to think, achieves a similar completeness and, in view of the subject matter covered, instantaneousness of impact to that of painting⁸⁾. Precisely in what way does

Ensayo de una biblioteca española de libros raros y curiosos, 4 Vols., Madrid, 1863, 1.108—118. The quotation is from 1.110.

⁶⁾ *Piedro de Urdemalas*, end of Act III.

⁷⁾ 'Ya la comedia es vn mapa, donde no vn dedo distante. veras a Londres, y a Roma, a Valladolid, y a Gante. Muy poco importa a oyente que yo en vn punto me passe desde Alemania a Guinea, sin del teatro mudarme.' (*El Rufian dichoso*, ed Academia, Vol. V, f. 97).

⁸⁾ '... la cólera española está mejor con la pintura que con la historia; digolo porque una tabla ó lienzo de una vez ofrece quanto tiene, y la historia se entrega al entendimiento ó memoria con mas dificultad, pues es paso de los libros ó capitulos en que el autor la distribuye. Y así, llevados de su naturaleza, querrian en una co-

the comparison as used here support the author's argument, it is hard to see. Does Ricardo del Turia imply that the story of a man from his birth to his death as the Spanish taste, according to him, demands, can be presented on the stage in a more concentrated way than by mere narration? Or does he simply identify the spatial organisation of the material in a picture with the chronological sequence of events in a drama? In either case the argument has no real value and shows that *ut pictura comoedia* formula has become an empty convention in dramatic criticism.

It was in Tirso de Molina's brilliant defence of the Spanish national theatre that the analogy was used to the best advantage as an argument against the 'Aristotelian' unities. Unlike his predecessors, Tirso does not confuse the spatial and the temporal 'dimensions' of the comparison between painting and comedy, and his justification of the Spanish *comedia* is characterised by coherent reasoning and sound common sense. His basic argument is that a work of art demands a different approach from ordinary reality and that every attempt to make it conform to the standards of real time and space must lead to the weakening of its effect. This is a fact recognised in all forms of mimetic representation and there is no reason to treat dramatic works otherwise. A drama is based on psychological probability, not on physical reality, and consequently a fully developed action, covering a long period of time, is usually more convincing than the one limited to twenty four hours, which must needs abandon every effort at proper psychological and emotional motivation of dramatic events. A great fault of the non-classicistic drama, says Tirso, in the opinion of certain critics is that the on-lookers watch, without moving from the theatre, events which happened in many days. But as a man who reads history learns in a few hours of events which happened in various places and over long periods of time, so the action of a drama, which is a visual representation of a sequence of events, can extend over a period of time. Moreover, it has to do so, says Tirso appropriating the chief weapon of the opposite camp, because it is not *verisimil* that all these events should have happened on a single day. It is not without reason that poetry is called living painting, continues Tirso de Molina adapting Simonides' dictum, and if a painting can represent extensive stretches and objects wide apart and still convince the eye of the truth of its subject matter, it is only fair that the same liberty should not be denied to poetry. This freedom should be even more readily granted in view of the fact that even painting, which is mute, succeeds in communicating its meaning; poetry, which employs articulated, meaningful words can achieve this aim much more persua-

media, nó solo ver el nacimiento prodigioso de un príncipe, pero las hazañas que prometió tan extraño principio, hasta ver el fin de sus dias, si gozó de la gloria que sus heróicos hechos le prometieron'. *Apologético de las comedias españolas*, in *Dramaticos contemporaneos a Lope de Vega*, ed. Ramon de Mesonero Romanos, 2 Vols., Biblioteca de autores españoles, Vols. XLIII and XLV, Vol. 1, p. XXV,

sively⁹⁾. Thus Tirso uses the analogy between painting and the drama not as a conventional element but as a proof that art and literature are separate provinces conforming to their own laws of probability and that there is no justification in excluding the drama from these provinces.

The usage of the comparison between painting and the drama in sixteenth and early seventeenth century criticism is interesting in several respects. In the works of writers such as Dolce, it represents another manifestation of the well-known tendency of some Renaissance critics to try to discover general principles operating in all forms of representation and to reduce all arts to a common denominator. In Spain, the *ut pictura comedia* formula is interesting as evidence of the early opposition to the three unities. As such, its importance lies in the first place in the emphasis it lays on the necessity of adopting different attitudes to works of art and to the ordinary reality — a point which seems obvious to us but which at that time threatened to invalidate the basic tenets of the classicistic theory of the drama. And, finally, the specific form of the analogy between poetry and painting discussed above may be useful as a reminder that the dictum ascribed to Simonides of Ceos was not at all times related primarily to descriptive and narrative poetry.

Belgrade.

Veselin Kostić.

⁹⁾ '... Estos inconvenientes, mayores son en el juicio de cualquier mediano entendimiento que el que se sigue de que los oyentes, sin levantarse de un lugar, vean y oyan cosas sucedidas en muchos días. Pues ansi como el que lee una historia en breves planas, sin passar muchas horas, se informa de casos sucedidos en largos tiempos y distintos lugares, la Comedia, que es una imagen y representación de su argumento, es fuerza que cuando le toma de los sucessos de dos amantes, retrate al vivo lo que les pudo acaecer; y no siendo esto verisimil en un día, tiene obligación de fingir passan los necesarios para que la tal acción sea perfeta; que no en vano se llamó la Poesia *p i n t u r a v i v a*, pues imitando à la muerta, ésta, en el breve espacio de vara y media de lienço, pinta lexos y distancias que persuaden a la vista á lo que significan, y no es justo que se nieque la licencia, que conceden al pincel, á la pluma, siendo ésta tanto mas significativa que essotro, quanto se dexa mejor entender el que habla, articulando silabas en nuestro idioma, que, siendo mudo, explica por señas sus conceptos'. *Cigarrales de Toledo*, ed. Victor Said Armesto, Biblioteca renacimiento, Madrid, 1913, pp. 125. - 6.