

Images and Simulacra of the Soul: reading female allegory in Paolo Veronese and Leone Ebreo

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"In any painting, as in any other work of art, there is always an idea, never a story. The idea is the point of departure, the first cause of the plastic construction, and it is present all the time as energy creating matter. The stories and other literary associations exist only in the mind of the spectator, the painting acting on the stimulus."

JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO (1883-1949), Mexican painter, ["New World, New Races, and New Art," *Creative Art Magazine*, January 1929.]

These words can briefly introduce the main topic of the present paper: an interesting way of seeing, or reading the female allegory of Wisdom. I propose an interesting interpretation of Veronese's painting *Omnia Vanitas*, and his possible reference: Leone Ebreo's *Dialogues of Love*.

What is there in common between Paolo Veronese, the mannerist painter of the Venetian school, and Judah Abravanel, better known as Leone Ebreo the author of a best seller of the Renaissance *the Dialogues of Love*, published for the first time in Rome in 1535?

Certainly they have more in common than the fact that they shared the same century, the 16th century with its historical, cultural, geographical background. Leone Ebreo lived before Veronese. Even though there are no specific dates for Leone's life, his life is believed to span from 1460 to 1525. He was a Jew, a member of the prestigious family of the Abravanel, and the first son of the famous statesman, philosopher and bible commentator Isaac Abra-

vanel, who in Portugal and Spain had a very relevant role at the court of both kings. The Abravanel family in 1492 escaping religious prosecution of Spain, repaired in Italy, firstly in Naples. Due to historical, political circumstances Leone had to adapt to an itinerant life. He traveled from city to city, from court to court, trying to find a safe and peaceful place where to live. His work, the *Dialogues of Love*, were published after his death by Mariano Lenzi in Rome at Antonio Blado's press, but it mainly circulated thanks to the Manuzio editions in Venice of 1541, 1545, 1549, 1550, 1551, 1552, 1553 and 1558. The *Dialogues* are a syncretic opus representing an eclectic, multidimensional, and multicultural standpoint on *Prisca theologia* theorized by Ficino, where theology and philosophy are not considered to be two separate entities. In effect for Leone Ebreo 'philosophy' is equal to 'revelation.' At the base of Leone Ebreo's work, there is a neo-Platonic perspective combined with the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah and different metaphors taken from the Classical authorities, read through Judaic, Arabic, and Christian thought.

Paolo Veronese (1528-1588) was one of the great masters of the Venetian school and one of the most acclaimed painters of the Italian high Renaissance. Originally named Paolo Caliari, he was called Veronese from his native city of Verona. He learned painting in Verona from Antonio Badile, a capable exponent of the conservative local tradition. That tradition remained fundamental to Veronese's style throughout his career, even after he moved to Venice in 1553. In this city he worked for the best part of his life consolidating his fame and becoming one of the most productive painters of the high Renaissance. His painting, *Omnia Vanitas* that we consider in this paper, is now conserved at the Frick collection in New York, and it is not accompanied by any precise information. The description reads:

Yet in spite of its fame and the series of prominent collectors who owned it, many uncertainties persist about its dates, provenance, and subject matter. Critics of arts qualified it as a fairly late work of Veronese, and pro-

bably completed around 1580. It has been proposed that it was commissioned by Emperor Rudolph II, but although the painting certainly belonged to the Emperor, there is no firm evidence that Rudolph actually commissioned it. It is also customarily assumed that this picture accompanied another allegory, 'Honor and virtues post mortem' – and the two are pendants most of all because they have been together throughout their recorded history, not because of any close compositional or iconographic ties. In fact the differences in the scale of the figures and in the types of canvas employed suggest that they may in fact not have been pendants, and the moralizing subjects of the pair are in no way interdependent¹.

Therefore, it is still unknown why *Omnia Vanitas* was painted, and who commissioned it. The current interpretation of this picture is given by the inscription OMNIA VANITAS (All is Vanity) found at lower left of the painting. "Omnia vanitas" is the keynote of the Book of Ecclesiastes, which stresses the supremacy of divine wisdom over worldly things and the labors that produce them. So, the theme, "all is vanity," is conveyed in the contrast between the two figures. The woman in sumptuous brocade, gazing upwards and with a moon/sun (very likely the moon) shining above her head, symbolizes Divine Wisdom. Her superiority over worldly matters is suggested not only by the globe on which one of her feet rests, and the trappings of wealth and power disposed on the ground, but also by the pensive, defeated air of the second figure, a man, identified as Hercules, emblem of physical strength. It is interesting to stress that in the different interpretations of this picture, the meaning of "Cupid" or is ignored or placed within the 'vanitas' to overcome.

We temporarily leave the picture to discuss some useful elements of the *Dialogues* that are in connection with the use of allegory. The subject of this Veronese's painting is an allegory. This is not anything new, considering that in the Renaissance many paintings are allegories, and the best part of them have the effigies of feminine

¹ See: [http://collections.frick.org/obj1013\\$13296](http://collections.frick.org/obj1013$13296).

figures taken from Greek or Roman mythology. We can have in mind Botticelli's 'Spring,' or 'Birth of Venus,' we can recall some representations of Correggio, Bronzino, Raphael, and many other great artists: it is a matter of fact that Holy subjects and allegorical mythological subjects are equally distributed in all the artistic productions in the Renaissance. Cameron Allen observes that:

“To some extent, myth is allegory; or perhaps, allegory is myth; but both modes of imaginative thought are little more than one or more symbols with positive or negative valued attached to some natural object and provided with a predicate.” (Allen, 1970; vii).

So allegory is myth, and myth is allegory because myth is telling, or rather revealing to us the truth that is under the veil of our deceptive reality. This same concept appears in the second Dialogue of Leone Ebreo. When one of the two main characters, Sophia, questions the validity of the lascivious pagan gods as compared to the undefined heavens, the other character, Philo, responds by telling her that the so-called lies of the poets contain important truths.

Sophia: If there is, as you say, such strength of love among celestial bodies, the things poets make up about the love of the celestial gods, like the loves of Jupiter and Apollo, must not be in vain. Except that these poets made this love wanton, like that of male for female, some conjugal and some adulterous; and they even make it generate other gods. Such things are certainly alien to the nature of celestial beings, but, as the common people say, the lies of the poets are many.

Philo: No, the poets did not speak in vain images nor lies, as you believe.

Sophia: How did they not? Would you ever believe such things about the heavenly gods?

Philo: I believe them, because I understand them; and you too would also believe them, if you understand them.

Sophia: Then lead me understand them, so that I may believe them.

Philo: The ancient poets, implied not only one, but many intentions in their poems, and these intentions are called “senses”. First they placed the

literal sense, as a kind of exterior rind, the story of some people and their noteworthy and memorable deeds. Within this same fiction they place, like an inner rind nearer to the core, the moral sense, which is useful to the active life of human beings, in approving virtuous acts and condemning vices. Beyond this, beneath those same words they signify some true knowledge of natural, celestial, astrological, or theological things, and sometimes these two or even all three scientific senses are included in the fable, like the kernels of the fruit beneath its rind. And these core-senses are called “allegorical”. (Leone Ebreo, Second Dialogue²)

Allegory, in its poetic form, could represent the truth in all its various levels, literal or historical, moral, psychological, celestial, and metaphysical. Therefore Myth holds a special role for human self knowledge and revelation; in it *fictio*, the fiction, is blended with *ratio*, the rational and logical part and its same presence maintains in a stable way the most secret and deepest meanings.

This conception was not unique of Leone Ebreo. As Marco Ariani (1984) observes, “myth” in the Renaissance had the function of “*alieniloquium*” and could be included in all the theological traditions from ancient and medieval authorities, such as the school of Chantres, with its exponents William de Conches, Bernard Silvester, Arnulf de Orleans, and Alain de Lille, and their influence in authors such as Dante, and Boccaccio. Pagan myths were considered as “*tropus ibi ex alio aliud intellegitur*” – an idiosyncratic device through which the Truth about this world is represented analogically – and because of this they were the preferred space for the allegory. Yet Leone Ebreo's Dialogues could be seen as a work that gives its contribution to issues that were at the center of a contemporary debate. In effect the Renaissance was rich with books dedicated to mythology, and as Allen remarks:

² The quotations of the *Dialogues of Love* are from Leone Ebreo, *Dialogues of Love*, translation by C.D. Bacich and R. Pescatori, introduction and notes by R. Pescatori, afterward by C.D. Bacich, forthcoming with University of Toronto Press.

(...) most Renaissance mythographers shared Ficino's belief in the divine mysteries found in those pieces, an opinion supported by his worthy disciples, Pico della Mirandola and Cristoforo Landino. Though Gianfrancesco Boccardo only rarely gets off the literal track in his *Deorum genealogiae* of 1498, Pietro Montefacio derived Vesta from 'vi stando,' Mercury from 'medius currens,' and Vulcan from 'volcano.' In a generation or so experts like Antonio Cingale would compose allegories to rival those of Fulgentius and Bernard of Sylvester, but Boccaccio's first sixteenth-century imitator, though a modest one, was Georg Pictor, a German scholar-physician. (Allen, 1970; 218-19)

Leone certainly could give his contribution with his superb amount of knowledge, combined with a methodology of studying and analyzing a text taken from the examples offered by his Jewish background, in particular by his father's exegetic works and by the Sephardic kabbalah, in particular from the book of Zohar³. In the *Zohar* it is possible to find the *trait d'union* with Greek philosophy, in particular Neoplatonism. In the Zohar it is said that the text of Scripture is intricately 'woven' from the name of God, and this notion of the "texture" of the work by which the world is designed tends to give human explicator a more critical role in recomposing the divine "weaving" (arigah). This in Renaissance was also connected to the Neoplatonic notion of a cosmos programmatically 'woven and unwoven' (textit and retexit).

In each allegory there is at least a '*simulacrum*,' (that is a sort of container, an image, a shape, a form alike) or a combination of *si-*

³ *Sefer ba-Zohar* ("the Book of Radiance") emerged mysteriously in Spain toward the end of the thirteenth century. It is a commentary of the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, and it is written in the form of a mystical novel. In the Zohar are found the directives of the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition. See R. FELDMAN, *Fundamentals of Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah*. California: The Crossing Press Freedom, 1999. M. IDEL, "Interpretations of the cabbala," in Ruderman D. ed. *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1992. M. IDEL, *Absorbing Perfections, Kabbalah and Interpretation*. New Haven & London: Yale University press. 2002. G. G. SCHOLEM, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabab, Mysticism, and Talmudic tradition*. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminar of America, 1965.

mulacra. They are models, or better through them we can recall in our mind a thing, or the shape of that thing; they are like the image that we have of ourselves in the water, or in a mirror. The *simulacra* give an iconic healing based on a denotation reached by an analogical association: a gnoseological process, an "*iter*" that goes through *imaginatio/phantasia* to intellectual knowledge to *visio mystica*. The result of this is that through them we have a complete "other language", which condenses in itself a literal, a moral, and an idiosyncratic meaning.

Through the images, or the different simulacra we have the analogy that holds an allegoric meaning. And the vision of the scene makes a new kind of knowledge accessible through an emotional intuition. Leone Ebreo makes Love the principle which governs the whole universe, and emphasizes that in the entire universe there is a radical polarity in terms of Male and Female symbols. The relationship between the two protagonists of the Dialogues, Philo and Sophia, is also determined by this same opposition. They are male and female, lover and beloved; they also represent materiality and spirituality, the inability to reach knowledge, and the desire to acquire knowledge, all at the same time. Thus the double is the symbolic sign of everything. The split between the two opposite genders creates a tension that is the fecund force of the universe itself. In Ebreo's use of allegorical figures, the "feminine" is seen as an important polarity of knowledge, and existence, which is harmonically combined to the 'male' part through Love, which guarantees the *Coincidentia Oppositorum*.

The connection with Veronese's painting will be easier to recognize after reviewing some passages of the Third Dialogue, in particular the first part that deals with the nature of the soul. The world-soul is associated with the moon, and it is observed that its nature partakes of both spiritual and material components. The love that moon has for the sun is compared to that of a female for a male. However the moon is an ambiguous star, because it loves both the

sun and the earth, spirituality and materiality. The soul is defined as an intermediary principle between the physical body and the understanding, a notion that he develops through the analogy that exists between spirit and soul, on the one hand, and sun and moon on the other. Like the soul, the moon is a varying combination of light and darkness, as befits its intermediate position between the earth and the sun. Leone discusses systematically the spiritual meaning of the various phases of the moon. The full moon, for example, whose light is turned toward the dark earth, is an image of the soul turned toward bodily concerns, while the new moon, turned toward the sun, signifies divine contemplation. The highest kind of spiritual experience, union with God, is portrayed by the lunar eclipse, in which the earth is completely overshadowed and the lighted half of the moon is entirely toward the sun. In this state of utter abandonment by the soul's light, the body dies and the soul is joined with the divine intellect, as it was reserved for the blessed Saints Moises and Aaron, who said by Scripture to have died by the 'kiss of God.'

The soul acts as an intermediary between spirit and matter and it is drawn constantly in both directions by these contradictory "loves," and it does so in a cyclical activity. Just as the moon regularly spans the entire range of possible opposition and harmony between sun and earth, the human soul moves from itself to itself, from the its intellectual to its corporeal nature, and then returns from the corporeal to the spiritual, and so in a continual motion. And the presence of this cycle as the most valid metaphorical description of the entire created universe is in its relation to the Creator. The moon is just like the soul, in the same way that was theorized by Augustine in his *De Trinitate* as the effeminate 'Anima,' soul, and the virile 'Animus,' spirit. These two parts are two opposite elements that exist together. The two parts, though, as the two horses of the soul that appear in Plato's *Phaedrus*, conduct towards

two opposite directions. And here the passage of the Dialogue is to be read while contemplating Veronese's painting.

Philo: When the soul is too inclined towards material and corporeal things and destroys herself in them, it loses reason and the intellectual light in everything; in effect it not only loses divine copulation and intellectual contemplation, but also the soul's active life becomes completely irrational and purely bestial, and mind or reason have no place in it nor in its lustful practices. The soul is thus so miserable, being eclipsed from the light of the intellect, that it is at the same level of the soul of the brute beasts and it assumes their nature (and Pythagoras says that such souls as these migrate into bodies of wild beasts and animals). So, just as the moon is sometimes totally and partially eclipsed, the soul, too, sometimes wholly and sometimes partially, loses the intellectual light in all of its acts and sometimes becomes bestial, though not in all acts. Be that as it may, bestiality, in all or in part, is the greatest destruction and absolute defect of the soul; and because of this David says to God: "deliver my soul from destruction, and from the power of the dogs my only one." (Leone Ebreo, third Dialogue).

Does Veronese's painting want to represent these two aspects of the soul representing them as a woman and a man? The two polarities of the soul are represented as two different personifications. One is feminine, the woman who moves toward the light of God. Desiring a spiritual union with God, supreme intellect, she becomes the container of the knowledge and because of this she is wisdom, Sophia. The other is masculine, the man who is attracted to the darkness of matter. Desiring a carnal union with the objects of the reality he acquires the aspect of a 'beast,' (as in the pictures is represented by the lion skin that the male figure wears). The Cupid is Love, which acquires two aspects; a celestial Love, the one of the woman who desires God, and a terrestrial one, the one of the man, who focuses on material and corruptible goods. These two figures embody a polarity for their gender differentiation, and for their different focuses. These two figures are not separated as it would appear at the first impression. It is interesting to notice that the two figures are organized as if they were reflected in a mirror. If we

draw a vertical line between the woman and the man, we can see that they have the same symmetrical positions of the arms, legs and heads, naturally inclined to the opposite direction because reflected. So, these two figures could have been thought, as two aspect of a same entity: the soul. In some way, this painting seems to be an allegory of the soul according to what is theorized in Leone's *Dialogues*.

Even if there are these clear elements that align this picture and the *Dialogues*, we cannot prove that Veronese actually wanted to use the figures offered in Leone's work in his same way and with his same meaning. At the center of the *Dialoghi d'amore* there is the Kabbalistic doctrine of the mystical union of love, which Leone Ebreo transformed into a very powerful element among the philosophical foundations of his system. A system based on gender polarities, whose duplicity resides in everything with the conclusion of a perfect androgyne unity. For Leone, primordial androgyny was first of all a lack of the power of division and a situation of undifferentiated immobility. The split between the two opposite genders creates a tension that is the fecund force of the universe itself. The same principle of division is at work between signifier and signified, between form and content, between *fabula* and *historia*, and is what makes possible a cosmos, and also our reality. The dramatic plot of creation is the story of a paradoxical disintegration, a falling apart, which generated life, and which implies continuous changes: a multiplicity that paradoxically is directed once again towards a unitary final destination. This is precisely one of the basic meanings of the dialogues' two interlocutors. Sofia and Filone represent, in fact, two halves of the androgyne just as their names when put together simply form the composite body that we call philosophy, which metaphorically is also the soul of the book. Veronese's picture probably does not refer to the philosophical system drawn in the *Dialogues*, but it is plausible to think that the painter found useful materials to depict his allegory: *Omnia Vanitas* seems to be referred to the different and paradoxical paths of the soul, towards the

nothingness of the spiritual, which fulfills the soul, or the *omnia*, the wholeness of materiality, which produces a total perdition.

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Intellectual Relationships of Fifteenth-Century Jewish and Christian Scholars in Light of Contemporary Art *

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Since the early Middle Ages, Jews had been viewed by Christians as recipients of profound Biblical knowledge, thus being considered as reliable revealers of a truthful interpretation of the most sacred text. Therefore, notwithstanding the fact that the Church, *verus Israel*, affirmed that only she had authority to interpret Scripture, all throughout the Middle Ages Christian clerics questioned Jewish scholars about interpreting the Bible. Christians wanted to base their interpretive methods also on the authority of the Rabbinic literature, in order to show that the Bible could be read in a far more complex way than that suggested by the Church Fathers, as well as by other traditional Christian Medieval exegetes.¹

Such an attempt to discover new inner meanings in the Biblical text gave rise to a long-lasting series of Jewish-Christian intellectual encounters all over Europe. In Italy the first Christian Biblical scholars who wanted to study the Scripture also on the basis of Jewish exegesis are first documented at the court of the enlightened monarch Frederick II in Naples (first half of the thirteenth century), where scholars of both faiths had joint discussions of their different hermeneutic approaches to the Bible.²

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¹ See, e.g., G. DAHAN, *Les intellectuels chrétiens et les juifs au moyen âge*, Paris, 1986.

² See C. SIRAT, "Les traducteurs juifs à la cour des rois de Sicile et de Naples", in *Traductions et traducteurs au moyen âge*, Paris, 1989, 169-191; R. BONFIL, "La cultura ebraica e Federico II", in *Federico II e le nuove culture. Atti del XXXI Convegno storico internazionale del Centro Italiano di Studi sul Basso Medioevo – Accademia Tudertina & Centro di Studi sulla Spiritualità Medievale dell'Università degli Studi di Perugia*, Spoleto, 1995, 153-171.