

Rhetoric across the Humanities
Aristotelian Rhetor-Ethics and the Formal Kinship
of Art and Literature

Lasse Hodne
The Norwegian Institute in Rome

The art historian may consult a written document for information about the life of an artist or details on a certain work of art. Furthermore, some texts may also provide explanations to iconographical questions regarding signs and semantics. But "meaning" is, in the philosophical sense, not constituted by words alone; it is also statements and assertions. If we assume that expression of meaning in the visual arts must share some characteristics with verbal expression, we see that a consideration on the possible internal relationship between a text and, for instance, a painting cannot be prompted solely by the simple gathering of iconographical information. We must search for similarities between the arts at a more complex level than that of the single sign, and it is for this reason that I propose to apply the terms "form" and "composition" in a discussion which is allowed to exceed its usual domain of the purely aesthetical.

A way to proceed in this direction is indicated by topomorphology,¹ which has its origin in rules set forth by Aristotle regarding the composition of the period. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle explicitly states that "long periods assume

¹ Topomorphical strategy involves an analysis of the distribution of *topoi* (signifying place, as well as topic), or textual segments devoted to them, with reference to their shape and structure (*morphe*).

the proportions of speech.”¹ The period in which this proposition is uttered is, by means of repetitions, divided in three parts, and by this he implicitly states that, following this example, the ideal period should always be composed of three parts. A period thus composed will correspond with rules which he, in a more explicit fashion, declared as valid for the whole: “A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end.”² Following this principle we will have a structure in which some periods function as nuclei, mirroring the plot of an entire story. The use of repetitions as well as synonyms and contraries to create an emphasis on particularly significant passages in the story represents a method by which the author is enabled to compose his story in such a way as to let the content be reflected in its form.

Aristotle, furthermore, explains the beginning as that which does not follow from anything and the end is that from which nothing follows. Well constructed plots must not begin or end at random. He explains the role of composition in a story by means of a simple analogy: “As ... creatures and other organic structures must have a certain magnitude and yet be easily taken in by the eye, so too with plots: they must have length but must easily be taken in by memory.”³ His comparison between the visual world and poetry is extremely valuable to us and belongs to the definition of a well ordered whole and his explanation of the arrangement of incidents. He also gives a clue as to why such a treatment is necessary: A simple arrangement of the story is easier to remember than a complex one. The art of memory, as we will understand, is more essential to oral deliverance and the genres associated with it, and circumstances of oral performance frequently provide the

¹ Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, London and Cambridge Massachusetts (Loeb) 1923, Book III, Ch. IX, (p. 389).

² Aristotle, *Poetics*, London and Cambridge 1932, Ch. VII, 3 (p. 31).

³ *Ibidem*, Ch. VIII, 1.

context for situations discussed in his *Rhetoric* and also, to some degree, in his *Ethics*.

For this reason, the *topos* I have chosen is one that occurs in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and reappears in his *Nichomachean Ethics*. My discussion will concentrate on how this topic is employed in literature and art, and, since it would be impossible here to execute a detailed topomorphical investigation, I will, in general terms, try to indicate how one could proceed from Aristotle's simple analogy. Hopefully I will also be able to suggest the consequences that these new insights could have for an art historian in our use of written documents.

Taking as our point of departure the rules of ancient poetics, it is obvious that topomorphology represents an analytical strategy in harmony with what has been regarded as a good use of language. Uncovering known principles shared by a community, it constitutes a practice which is in harmony with established ideals for verbal expression of meaning. It does not, however, deal directly with words and semantics, but rather, as indicated above, with meaning on a superior level: It has to do with the composition of a text in the form of a period or more complex units, about form in literature.

In our attempt at demonstrating that certain concepts of form are common to literature and painting, it is necessary to find a topic which appears in both. I have chosen the allegorization of human virtues and vices, and my example from the visual arts is represented by a series of allegorical figures executed in fresco by Giotto in the Paduan Arena Chapel. Giotto's personification of virtues and vices occupies the lower register along the chapel's side walls, below scenes from the lives of the Virgin and Christ (Fig. 1 and 2). In Aristotle's philosophy the "virtues and vices" is a *topos* which pertains to *Rhetoric* and *Ethics*. Among the four reasons enlisted by Aristotle to explain the usefulness of rhetoric, he mentions that it, along with the art of dialectics, enables the

orator to prove opposites. Epideictic oratory deals with praise or censure, the noble and the disgraceful, virtue and vice, and the reason why it is a theme proper to his *Ethics* as well as his *Rhetoric* is that its categories make certain assumptions about the nature of the human soul. The components of the human character is described thus:

Justice is a virtue which assigns to each man his due in conformity with the law; injustice claims what belongs to others, in opposition to the law. Courage makes men perform noble acts in the midst of dangers according to the dictates of the law and in submission to it; the contrary is cowardice. Self-control is a virtue which disposes men in regard to the pleasures of the body as the law prescribes; the contrary is licentiousness.¹

Additional virtues are Liberality, Magnanimity, and Practical wisdom, but it is the first four he regards as the more important, as they correspond with the platonic division of the soul from where Christianity has its four cardinal virtues.²

¹ Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, Book I, ch. IX, (p. 91).

² Plato, *The Republic*, London and Cambridge 1937, Book IV (p. 365): "we have made out these three forms [fortitude, prudence, and soberness] in our city to the best of our present judgement. What can be the remaining form that would give the city still another virtue? For it is obvious that the remainder is justice." This type of reasoning reappears in his *Timaeus* where the same "forms" are presented as parts of the soul. The divine part of the soul (wisdom) is placed in the head and the mortal (temperance, controlling the body and its vices) in the chest, so that they may stay separate. He also mentions "loving victory" (fortitude). (Plato *Timaeus*, Massachusetts and London 1942, p. 179-181.) The same argument is elaborated further in the Pseudo-Aristotelian *On Virtues and Vices*: "If in accordance with Plato the spirit is taken as having three parts, wisdom is goodness of the rational part, gentleness and courage of the passionate, of the appetitive sobriety of mind and self-control, and of the spirit as a whole righteousness and liberality and great-spiritedness; ...". (Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution. The Eudemean Ethics. On Virtues and Vices*, Massachusetts and London 1952, p. 489.) According to the Platonic conception, then, three

(3) Finally we consider the address which Christ Our Lord delivers to His servants and friends as He sends them out on this enterprise. He recommends them to be ready to help everyone; first, by drawing everyone to the highest spiritual poverty, and secondly, by drawing everyone to the desire for insults and contempt. For from these two things follows humility. Therefore there are three steps, first, poverty as opposed to riches, secondly insults and contempt as opposed to worldly fame, and thirdly, humility as opposed to pride; from these three steps Christ's servants can lead everyone to all the other virtues.¹

Having thus made a synthesis of Ignatius' meditation, we observe that it is composed of two parts, each containing three steps or, rather, "images". The first image of the first part is the ruler of Babylon, the Enemy. The corresponding image in the second half is a portrait of Christ at his humble seat in Jerusalem. Secondly, enemy forces of demons are to be conquered by disciples and apostles. Finally our desire for riches, honour, and pride is set against the ideals of poverty, suffering, and humility.

There is, of course, an obvious connection between written meditations and visual art since these are mental images. But even more interesting in our context is the space constructed by the text's special composition. Through mentioning the Enemy, the demons, and all the vices before invoking the name of Christ, it is obvious that these all belong to the territory of Babylon which, besides, is designated as a "great plain". The reader (or, rather, the meditating friar) is situated at the border of this territory, and when all its aspects have been thoroughly meditated upon, he turns around and "applies his imagination to the supreme and true commander". Then follows a perfectly equivalent but inverse description of Jerusalem and the

¹ This summary of Ignatius' second spiritual exercise is based on the english translation in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Personal Writings*, edited by J. A. Münitz and P. Endan, London 1996. (Cf. p. 140 ff.)

Kingdom of Christ so that, by means of repetitions and oppositions, the text formally constructs a visual image of the places it describes.

As will be evident, Ignatius' two Kingdoms are based on a biblical topography just as much as the medieval *Allegorie cristiane*. As regards the *Allegorie*, the mountain of oration is described in the *Caccia dell'anima* as well as the *Corte di Dio*. For the author, the mountain of oration is identical with the mountain where Moses received the commandments, the mountain of the Transfiguration, and, importantly, the Mount where Christ held his Sermon.¹ The text even quotes the Sermon on the Mount: "Beati li poveri di spirito, però che loro è il regno del cielo." In the Gospel of Luke, the Sermon reads:

How blest are you who are poor;
 the Kingdom of God is yours.
How blest are you who now go hungry;
 your hunger shall be satisfied
How blest are you who weep now;
 you shall laugh.
How blest you are when men hate you,

when they outlaw you and insult you,
and ban your very name as infamous,
because of the *Son of Man*.
On that day be glad and dance for joy;
for assuredly you have a rich reward in heaven;

In just the same way did their fathers treat the prophets.

But alas for you who are rich;
 you have had your time of happiness.
Alas for you who are well-fed now;
 you shall go hungry.
Alas for you who laugh now;

¹ The *Monte dell'orazione* is also a precursor to Dante's Mount Purgatory. Cf. Francesco Palermo, *Allegorie Cristiane dei primi tempi della Favella*, Florence 1856, p. 31 ff.

you shall mourn and weep.
Alas for you when all speak well of you;

just so did their fathers treat the false prophets.

(Luke 6, 20-26)

The Sermon starts with addressing the blessed. It is the repetition of the word "blessed" in the first part and the word "alas" in the final which denote types of virtues and vices, respectively. There are four groups of blessed people, but seemingly only three rewards. This is because people's suffering here becomes one with that of the Son of Man, mentioned in this central paragraph. So instead of designating any special kind of reward, it is said that this reward is in Heaven, i.e. salvation.

One may also note that the fourfold mention of man's suffering and the threefold mention of his reward constitute the holy number seven. The analogy to the seven virtues in Arena, representing the four cardinal virtues – which are of the world, just as our suffering is – and the three theological virtues, is not wholly fortuitous even if the scheme of seven cardinal and theological virtues is of Medieval origin.

The seven initial lines are, as we see, perfectly mirrored by the final seven ones. We also note that there is a total of 19 lines, and that the 10th and central line reads "because of the Son of Man". This means that the name of Christ is inserted as a separation between the two, precisely as confirmed by the Gospel according to Matthew (25, 31-46): "the Lord will come to separate sheep from goats."¹ Here the analogy to the

¹ Also the prophecy of the second coming of Christ that we find in Matthew is composed in verse with two antithetical parts, first an appraisal of the just and then a condemnation of the unjust. But instead of mentioning the name of the Lord at the middle, his position is carefully described. Christ is presented as a judge on his throne, separating sheep from goats, placing good to his right and evil to his left.

Scrovegni Chapel is clear (fig. 1). Giotto has represented Christ at the entrance wall with ranks of the blessed on his right and the damned on his left. The scheme is continued on the side walls, with the seven virtues at the right hand side (as we enter the chapel) and the vices at the left.

One might say that the *Psychomachia* is the Aristotelian *topos* presented in prose, while the *Sermon* is composed in verses. A version of the latter type, contemporary to Giotto, is represented by Bonvesin de la Riva's *Libro delle tre scritture*. It is probably written shortly before the year 1300 and is commonly considered as a precursor to Dante's *Divine Comedy* because of its description of *Inferno* and *Paradiso*. It begins with a description of the sinner's death, thus pretending, just as the other versions we know from the High Middle Ages (and diversely from the early *Psychomachia*), to be a vision of the afterlife. Then follows a description of the twelve penalties to which the sinner is subjected in Hell. A new torture is, in each section, brought upon a person who is neither an individualized character like Dante in the *Divine Comedy* nor an allegorical knight, but simply the sinner (*peccatore*) in general.

Following earlier examples, the first part of the poem, the so-called *Scrittura negra*, is opposed by the final part, the *Scrittura dorata*, which, of course, is about the righteous and his reward in Heaven. The *Dorata*-part is also composed of twelve sections, so in agreement with the scheme from the *Sermon on the Mount* and in analogy with the Scrovegni Chapel frescoes the first diabolic punishment finds its counterpart in the first of Heaven's pleasures. The stench in *Inferno* is contrasted to the smell of flowers in *Paradise*, the cries of demons are contrasted to the Songs of angels, the ugly face of Satan is contrasted to the sweet face of the Virgin, and so on. A common denominator of the *Sermon* as represented by Luke, Giotto's Arena Chapel frescoes and Bonvesin's text, then, is that they all are composed with "wings" which mirror

each other in an antithetical manner and, moreover, with Christ at the center.

In the above examples we see how a text is composed in such a way as to make the content of a story be reflected in its form. The text is not limited to predicate an opposition between good and evil but formally demonstrates it in being composed with parts which mirror each other respectively. Good and Evil are analogous, but takes on the opposite values; virtue is opposed by vice, apostles are opposed by demons. Inferno consists of just as many departments as Paradise, and the part it occupies in the text is of equal length. A text composed in such a way constitutes a visual configuration similar to a map which may comprise, for instance, the territories of Babylon and Jerusalem. The type of form one arrives at is one that makes us understand how a certain topic can be common to both literature and the visual arts.

Illustrations

Fig. 1:
The Virtue "Fortitude" from the Arena Chapel's south wall.

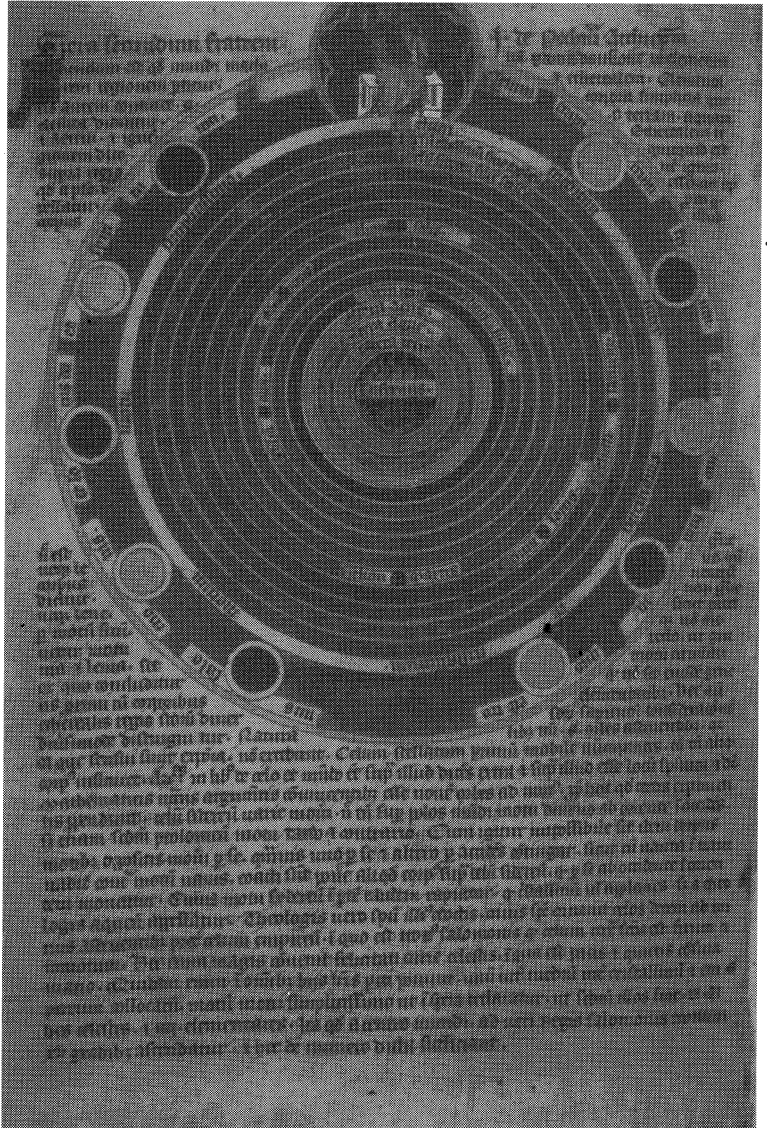
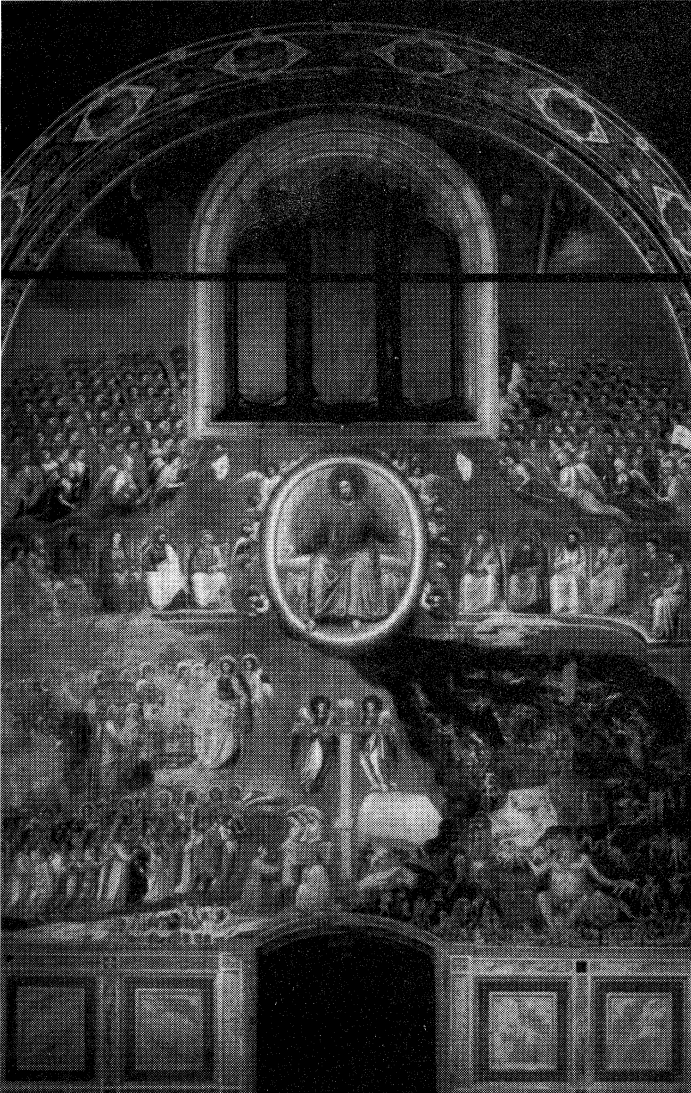


Fig. 2:
Schematic visualization of the Arena Chapel interior.



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Fig. 3:

The Last Judgement is at the entrance wall, connecting the virtues (to the left) and the vices (to the right).

