

**In my End is my Beginning**  
Dialectical Images in Times of Crisis  
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# Painting in Vernacular Languages at the Crossroads in Sixteenth-Century Venice

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**Abstract** Identifying the *questione della lingua* as a moment of rupture for the cultural scenario of sixteenth-century Italy, the paper addresses Aretino's reaction to the anachronistic ideas of Pietro Bembo, which urge the author to promote a language derived from the experience of nature, in contrast with tradition. In such context, the Tuscan writer finds in Titian's style his pictorial counterpart. An analysis of the principles that characterize the naturalistic poetics adopted by both painter and poet leads to a mutual comparison of Aretino's *Humanità di Christo* and Titian's depiction of Magdalen, where words and brushstrokes tend towards each other.

**Keywords** Aretino. Titian. Nature. Language. Style.

**Summary** 1 Ephemera. – 2 Language Against Tradition. – 3 Art as *Habitus*. – 4 Perpetua.



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Sólo hay originalidad verdadera cuando se está dentro  
de una tradición. Todo lo que no es tradición es plagio.  
(Eugenio d'Ors, *La Veu de Catalunya*,  
31 October 1911)

## 1 Ephemera

In the collections of graphic works of the Albertina Museum in Vienna lies a nearly unexplored document, a voice in the wilderness: a broadsheet (a single sheet printed on one side only) measuring 29.9 × 22 cm, commonly referred to as an *in quarto*, dating back to the second quarter of the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The sheet features a woodcut in the upper half, followed by three distinct poetic compositions below, organized in separate columns [fig. 1]. Each section is given equal space, with no visual hierarchy imposed: image and text coexist, engage in dialogue, yet do not translate one another; they are not ekphrastic in nature.

The woodcut depicts a shepherd seated, leaning against a felled tree trunk, as he recites verses addressed to a winged mermaid floating among the clouds, surrounded by a crown of stars. Executed using the chiaroscuro technique with two blocks, it serves as the frontispiece for the *Stanze in lode di Madonna Angela Serena* by Pietro Aretino, a collection of verses celebrating the poetess Angela Tornimbenza, published in Venice in 1537 by Francesco Marcolini.<sup>2</sup> Although the identity of the engraver remains uncertain, likely drawn from Aretino's circle or found possibly in the publisher himself, the invention of the design is now confidently attributed to Titian.<sup>3</sup> The painter is believed to have produced the final drawing, faithfully reflecting the fifth *stanza* of Aretino's poem.<sup>4</sup>

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**1** This refers to the document cataloged under the inventory number DG2002/544. For the catalogue entry, see Bartsch 1811, 144.

**2** Aretino dedicates his verses to an oxymoronic 'angelic mermaid', imbuing her with a religious devotion that overcomes the seductive nature typically associated with the mermaid (cf. Luchs 2010). In doing so, he plays on the wordplay created by the poetess's name, Angela Serena. For the genesis of the work and its publication history, see Waddington 2018, 10-12.

**3** Although well-known and thoroughly analyzed, the frontispiece has only partially been connected to the woodcut production derived from the drawings of Titian and to the broader context of the illustrated Venetian book: Muraro, Rosand 1976, 118: 43; Takahatake 2018, 191-3: 78; Bisceglia, Ceriana, Procaccioli 2019, 150-1: 3.18. For the only survey of the broadsheet here discussed, see Urbini 2020.

**4** "Il Toscano Pastor [...] sopra un tronco assiso | Gli occhi al ciel volti, e la sua Dea il pensiero | Così a dir move in suon piano, et altero" (The Tuscan Shepherd [...] upon a trunk reclined | His eyes to heaven raised, his thoughts on his fair Goddess | Thus he begins to speak in voice both soft, and proud; Aquilecchia, Romano 1992, 226; Author's transl.).



IL BEVAZZANO AL  
A RETINO.

M. PIETRO ARETINO  
ALLA SIRENA.

IL BEVAZZANO AL  
A RETINO.

F uor del uogo orto de l'ingegno uostro  
Opre uegiamo usâr ricche de l'arte,  
Chiare da i lumi e da le gratie sparte  
Da pareggiarui à quei del sommo chiostrò.  
H or de le misse col piu uisuo inchiostrò  
De la costa Sirena pinto nu carte  
Le marauiglie haurete, è posse in parte  
Daue ir non sa chi ueste il mortal uostrò.  
D al gran rumor di queste lode estreme,  
Di cantando a uoi farvi boggi uicino  
Si uegogna il desir, manca la sseme.  
G ià qual fusse nel dir Pietro Aretino  
Quindi scorderà il mondo, e sopra insieme  
Quanto appressar si pò l'huomo al diuino:

Q uesta del ciel SIRENA ha ne' bei chini  
I roggi, che i copei fan biondi al Sole:  
Ne gli occhi ha il foco, del qual arder sole  
Il puro zelo a li spirti diuini.  
H a ne le guancie i uiui color fini;  
Cb'accendono le rose et le uiole:  
Ha l'angelico suon ne le parole;  
Che parton fra le perle e fra i rubini.  
H a nel pio lampeggiar del Santo riso,  
Et nel fisar del guardo quel diletto;  
Che si proua lassuso in Paradiso.  
L e tempore ha del desio nel cisto petto:  
Di Natura i miracoli nel uiso:  
Et cio, ch'è di gentil, ne l'intelleto.

A retin mio; mentre a la casta, & bella  
Sirena ordite de la gloria il manto,  
Et celebrate quel, ch'è in lei; ch'è qua:  
Non diete altrui mai largità di stella:  
D e le uirui del dir fitta una scèbiera  
Conforme al bel desir, che u'arde; tan  
Insieme col subietto alzate il canto,  
Che giunge al sommo ciel di spera in sfera:  
I nài mostrate quanti fregi & fiumi  
Habbi la lingua piu elegante, & pura,  
Donde le piante al uolo il cor s'impian:  
Q uanti ha for la poetica pittura  
Fate uedere; & quanto d'ombre & le  
Vn'ingegno arricchir puo la Natura:

Figure 1 Pietro Aretino and the Mermaid, with text. Ca. 1540. Print with chiaroscuro woodcut in two blocks, 29.9 × 22 cm. Vienna, Albertina Museum

In this instance, however, the image is detached from its original book context and printed separately to be paired with three independent sonnets. In their arrangement, the first and third compositions are signed by Agostino Beaziano, a poet from Treviso, and are dedicated to honoring the author of the central sonnet, who is none other than Aretino himself. Although the origin of Beaziano's

compositions remains undocumented, the Tuscan's sonnet can be traced to the final pages of the *Stanze*, where it is likewise dedicated to his 'Sirena'.<sup>5</sup>

As of today, the sheet has primarily been examined for its engraving, rather than for its ephemeral nature, perhaps considered too fleeting to be fully explored. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to situate it within the publishing tradition that Salzberg (2014, 19-20) defined as "cheap print" – a category of ephemeral material characteristic of sixteenth-century Venice, which allowed news and texts to circulate more quickly and widely than ever before. Closely tied to quotidian events and shared experiences, cheap print was often read aloud or performed in some way (98-9), but it also played a key role in the widespread distribution of printed images. As a rapid and responsive medium, it could be used to quickly disseminate information to the public, spread ideas, and advertise new book releases. In other words, it was highly accessible, serving as a crucial threshold into the world of print for everyone, while also holding the potential to be a powerful tool for mass communication.<sup>6</sup>

As Murano and Rosand (1976, 195) suggest, the Vienna sheet should be treated as a "broadside". However, the piece does not align with any known category of popular print production in sixteenth-century Venice.<sup>7</sup> Given the ephemeral nature of such publications, the surviving examples are too scarce to fully contextualize their distribution and fruition. This might explain why Achim Gnann (2013, 272-3), when discussing the document in the Viennese museum, made no mention of this cultural legacy, nor did those who followed or preceded him.

While one might consider pursuing certain research paths, the specific interest raised here by the Albertina sheet relates primarily to

<sup>5</sup> It is possible to partially reconstruct Aretino's attempt to obtain, through his collaborator Lodovico Dolce, a sonnet from Pietro Bembo in praise of the *Stanze* (Procaccioli 2015, 47-2). We also know that Aretino received several sonnets for the same occasion from Benedetto Varchi, Francesco Maria Molza, and Giulio Camillo, which were although never published (Procaccioli 2003, 293: 304). Eventually, the only sonnet paired with the one from Aretino would be that of Veronica Gambara, Countess of Correggio (Aquilecchia, Romano 1992, 246).

<sup>6</sup> Grendler (1993, 476-8) has proposed that some of these characteristics also indicated that a work was popular in a broader cultural context, meaning it was easily accessible to a wide audience, including those with a low level of education, or "intended for a non-critical audience which read for pleasure".

<sup>7</sup> I am primarily referring to the classifications outlined in the title of Corongiu (1999), further elaborated in Rozzo 2008, 29. Regarding broadsheets, the most frequent cases involve the publication of notices, almanacs, and *pronostici* (many of which were authored by Aretino himself), as well as woodcuts with brief commentaries related to significant events.

its visual layout.<sup>8</sup> Considering its context of origin, the distribution of image and text on the page not only establishes a synchronic relationship between the two media but also identifies this synchronicity as a means for widespread cultural diffusion. As Gombrich (1967, 136-41) noted, later echoed by Bredekamp (2015, 39) in his theorization of the Image Act, although ephemeral literature is intended for a transient use, the display of images along with words prompts an intuitive pause, making the reader linger on the textual surface longer than expected. Indeed, the visual medium allows to engage more thoughtfully with the object, fostering an awareness that every image extends beyond its mere representation. Since Titian's invention of the shepherd does not visually describe the accompanying sonnet by Aretino, it instead suggests to the observer an echo beyond itself, referencing the book it aims to promote. The text, in turn, complements the role of the image, hinting the reader at the content of the publication by means of the evocative power of poetry. Through this compelling dialectic, the woodcut and the sonnet establish a relationship of domesticity, where observer and reader become deeply intertwined.

The Vienna broadside is an exemplary symptom of a tradition that was increasingly examined throughout the sixteenth century, especially in Venice. This exploration extended beyond the fields of publishing and visual arts to encompass the broader notion of 'language' as a mode of expression: that is the unity of purpose between words and images.

## 2 Language Against Tradition

In this scenario, the role played by both Aretino and Titian stands emblematic.<sup>9</sup>

In a letter of December 18, 1537, dedicating the sixty *stanze* of his poem to empress Isabella of Portugal, the Tuscan poet effectively points out a chiasmatic proportion:

<sup>8</sup> As for circulation, documents produced for personal or private interests were not typically subject to the regulations of the commercial publishing market, except for what regards the publisher's mandatory license, which in 1543 was extended by the Council of Ten to include "Quelle veramente che vendeno de tal libri et opere pronostici, hystorie, canzone, lettere, et altre simel cose sul Ponte de Rialto et in altri loci de questa città" (Those who sell such books and works, prognostications, stories, songs, letters, and other similar things on the bridge of the Rialto, and in other places of this city; ASV, CX, Parte comuni, f. 32, fasc. 234). However, regarding more 'literary' texts, it is likely that in most cases, the entire print run was handled by the patron and intended as material to distribute among friends and acquaintances (Rozzo 2008, 24). In the case of the Viennese example, it could be a broadsheet commissioned by Aretino and Marcolini themselves, who likely requested Beaziano's laudatory sonnets for the publication of the *Stanze*.

<sup>9</sup> On the topic of the mutual friendship between the two, and their relation to each other's work, see especially Waddington 2019

Tiziano, nobile Isabella (amato dal mondo per la vita che dona lo stil suo a l'imagini de le genti; e odiato da la natura perché egli fa vergognare i sensi vivi con gli spiriti artificiosi), infiammato dal desiderio di mostrare per virtù de le sue mani Cesare istesso a Cesare proprio, fece sì [...] che Carlo consentí che rassemplasse la fatale effigie sua. [...] Onde io, bramoso che il nome vostro diventi simulacro de le carte mie, mosso dal giudicio del saggio pittore, tento, [...] tal che gli inchiostri, e le penne da me apparecchiaste per fare statua del candido nome de la vostra inclita Maestade, si assicurino a cominciare di intagliarla.

Titian, noble Isabella (beloved by the world for the life that his style breathes into his painted depictions; and despised by nature, for he makes living senses blush before his crafted spirits), inflamed with the desire to show, by the power of his hands, Caesar to Caesar himself, moved such that [...] Charles consented that he might render his own fateful effigy. [...] Thus I, eager for your name to become the emblem of my writings, driven by the judgment of the wise painter, attempt [...] so that the inks and pens, prepared by me to sculpt the pure name of your renowned Majesty, assure their beginning in engraving it. (Procaccioli 1997, 423-4: 307; Author's transl.)

Just like Titian portrays the figure of Charles V in painting, Aretino aims to ensure that by sending the empress a sample of his own poetic work, he may begin to sculpt her virtues in verses. While this is mainly a rhetorical move designed to forge a strong connection with the emperor,<sup>10</sup> it is crucial to observe how the poet constructs this parallel. Referring to Titian, who appears to have encouraged sending the *Stanze*, Aretino reflects on the painter's language: nature, in fact, resists him out of jealousy, given how he manages to render figures vibrant and alive through mere brushstrokes. In the painter's effort, the poet identifies his own intentions and draws a comparison between Titian's objective and his own, seeking to follow his footsteps in the attempt to vividly represent human nature – only this time, through words.

Throughout Aretino's epistolary, the poet frequently engages with Titian's artistic language, clearly identifying the pictorial counterpart to his own poetic ambition. By drawing this connection, he establishes a fundamental parallel between painting and literature, both of which are dedicated to the vivid representation of nature.

Similarly, though less often, Titian also refers to his own artistic creations in literary terms: in a letter to his patron, Philip of Spain,

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**10** Regarding the strategy Aretino developed toward a more secure relationship with the imperial court, see Checa 2019.

probably of September 10, 1554, Titian referred to a series of paintings with mythological subject that he was painting for the young Habsburg prince and future king (Puppi 2012, 213: 177). Here the artist sounds confident in his decisions on what to portray: he is not seeking approval, but rather informing his patron with the choices he has made regarding the pictorial narration.<sup>11</sup> When addressing the paintings, Titian calls them *poesie*. In his use of such term, instead of *istorie*, or *quadri* or *pittura*, can be traced a sense of creative authority. Although the most immediate answer to what the term *poesia* meant is that the subject of these works relied on poetry, another answer may arise. In calling his pictures *poesie*, Titian may be claiming that his paintings share certain qualities and effects with the poems they are based on, that they make stylistically visible the poetic nature of the particular text, or of poetry in general (Puttfarken 2005, 10). This comparison with poetry implies that, rather than looking for scholarly knowledge or the painter's erudition expressing itself through intellectually charged themes, one should instead focus on the inherent poetic nature of the art of painting. Therefore, if Titian set for the painter the same rank as that of a poet, both relying on different media to pursue the same purpose with the same language, Aretino did so conversely.

This will not be the occasion for an in-depth analysis of the ontological relationship between the arts and literature.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the aim is to identify the practical outcome of a theoretical approach deeply rooted in sixteenth-century Italy, as exemplified by the relationship between Titian and Aretino. What makes this comparison particularly significant is that the interplay between the poet's language and the painter's style takes shape during a pivotal historical moment, when the various Italian regions were undergoing a crucial transition in defining their cultural identity.

The so-called *questione della lingua* – a broad debate over the normative standards of the Italian language – engaged court humanists and intellectuals for centuries, spanning from the time of Dante to

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**11** This is not the only instance in which such term is used by Titian in reference to painting: *poesie* seems to appear for the first time in a letter to Philip of March 23, 1553 (Puppi 2012, 200-1: 165).

**12** The theory of the equation between poetry and painting is also grounded in the supremacy of the sense of sight: both poets and painters think through images, with one expressing them through poetry and the other through painting. Thus, the idea that painting, sculpture, and poetry share a common origin – namely, the thought expressed through imagery – is a concept that unites a whole humanistic tradition, from Simonides of Ceos (who is credited with the first comparison between poetry and painting) to Aristotle, from Horace's *ut pictura poësis* to Giordano Bruno's *Sigillus sigillorum*. For further insights, see especially Yates 1984, 234-7.

the unification of Italy.<sup>13</sup> In its initial phase, the discussion primarily focused on legitimizing the vernacular in contrast to Latin. But it is during the second phase, which occurred in the early Cinquecento, that the discussion on which regional dialect should form the basis of a unified Italian language took place. Although this phase was marked by intense disputes and personal conflicts, most participants reached a consensus on one key issue: the Italian language should be rooted in the finest literary models (Ruffini 2011, 137).

The most representative voice of early modern thought on language and literature is found along the *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525) by the venetian Pietro Bembo, the most influential treatise on the matter. In its early stages, this debate centered on Bembo's proposal that poetry and prose should be written in a Tuscan language modeled on Petrarch and Boccaccio.<sup>14</sup> Bembo's critical stance on the use of literary Tuscan prevented Venetians from proposing their own dialect as a valid alternative for literary production. Being a folk language, the Venetian dialect lacked the prestige to be considered a national language due to its absence in a distinguished literary tradition. Thus, it could not contribute to shaping the language Bembo sought to establish (Hochmann 2004, 35). However, Bembo's position, considered by many to be conservative, faced one of its main opponents in Venice itself, and nonetheless, in a Tuscan poet: Pietro Aretino precisely.

Although Aretino's relationship with Bembo has been often inspected, his role as an 'antipedantic' has received little recognition in the broader study of the history of the Italian language, aside from specialized research on the poet himself.<sup>15</sup> Opposed both to the courtly ideas (Golfetto 2023, 88-9) and to the approach promoted by

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**13** The discussion covers a long timespan, but regarding the sixteenth century see at least: Vitale 1960, 22-63; Migliorini 1994, 309-28; Trovato 1994.

**14** Its main alternative was courtly or common language, that is the adoption of the finest dialects spoken in the courts across the Italian peninsula. Advocates of this alliance, popular in Urbino, Mantova, and Rome, challenged the primacy of Tuscan but agreed with Bembo on the need for a literary foundation for the language. Only a substantial minority stood against this ideal and it was championed by a group of Florentine intellectuals: their perspective shifted the terms of the debate by asserting that language evolves naturally, independent of its literary formulations: they argued that a literary masterpiece was not inherently the best model to address from the perspective of the language. Using Vincenzo Borghini's metaphor, they likened the relationship between literature and language to that of fruit and a tree: literature is a product of language, not the source of its growth ("Una lingua parlata senza scrittori non si può definire lingua"; A spoken language without writers cannot be called a language; Author's transl.), in stark contrast to Bembo's statement (Migliorini 1994, 210). On the ideas of the Florentine writers (namely Pierfrancesco Giambullari, Carlo Lenzone, Cosimo Bartoli, and Vincenzo Borghini, also editors of Vasari's *Lives*), see Ruffini 2011, 137-60.

**15** On the relationship between Bembo and Aretino, see Weinapple 1995; Procaccioli 2002. On Aretino's own literary direction, Borsellino 1995; Cottino-Jones 1995.



Bembo and his supporters, Aretino articulates on these matters in a programmatic letter of June 25, 1537 written to Lodovico Dolce, in which he discusses his naturalistic poetics.<sup>16</sup>

The tone of the letter is driven by a sharp critique of the slavish literary use of outdated terminology, which writers feel entitled to employ solely because it revives the language of great poets.<sup>17</sup> This rigid reliance on the forms and stylistic features of a bygone tradition only serves to make poetic texts seem archaic, distancing them from the contemporary reality in which they are situated. According to Aretino, few poets still use language that truly reflects their own time and everyday life. He urges poets not to imitate the obsolete works of ancient poets in an attempt to elevate their own; instead, they should draw inspiration from nature, capturing its vitality in words without clinging to any reference other than their own experience and judgment. In this letter, Aretino declares himself *scriba Naturae* (Marini 2016, 128 fn. 22), affirming his belief in the supremacy of nature (that which is alive) over tradition (that which belongs to the past). In doing so, the Tuscan writer breaks away from Bembo's pedantic historicism and paves the way for a vital renewal of literature, one rooted in the present.

With a seamless transition, Aretino shifts to discussing painting. Just as he had criticized literary imitation, he now condemns passive imitation of nature, praising Michelangelo and his drawings for transcending mere reproduction.<sup>18</sup> In this way, Aretino bridges literature and the visual arts, establishing a meaningful parallel between the two disciplines:

Sì che imparate ciò ch'io favello da quel savio dipintore, il quale nel mostrare a colui che il dimandò chi egli imitava [...] volse inferire che dal vivo e dal vero toglieva gli essempli; come gli tolgo io parlando e scrivendo.

<sup>16</sup> Procaccioli 1997, 229-32: 155. Initially addressed to Niccolò Franco in the first edition of the first volume of the *Lettere*, but featuring Dolce as the recipient in subsequent printings.

<sup>17</sup> "Andate pur per le vie che al vostro studio mostra la natura, se volete che gli scritti vostri facciano stupire le carte dove son notati [...]. E per dirvelo, il Petrarca e il Boccaccio sono imitati da chi esprime i concetti suoi con la dolcezza e con la leggiadria con cui dolcemente e leggiadramente essi andarono esprimendo i loro, e non da chi gli saccheggia non pur de i 'quinci', de i 'quindi', e de i 'soventi', e de gli 'snelli', ma de i versi interi [...]. O turba errante, io ti dico e ridico che la poesia è un ghiribizzo de la natura ne le sue allegrezze, il qual si sta nel furor proprio, e mancandone il cantar Poetico diventa un cimbalo senza sonagli, e un campanil senza campane [...]. La natura istessa, de la cui semplicità son secretario, mi detta ciò che io compongo [...]. Si che attendete a esser scultor di sensi, e non miniator di vocaboli" (Procaccioli 1997, 231: 155).

<sup>18</sup> "Che onor si fanno i colori vaghi che si consumano in dipingere frascariuole senza disegno? La lor gloria sta ne i tratti con che gli distende Michelagnolo, il quale ha messo in tanto travaglio la natura e l'arte, che non sanno se gli sono maestre o discepolo" (Procaccioli 1997, 230-1: 155).

Learn, then, from what I say, just as from that wise painter who, when asked whom he imitated, wished to imply that he drew examples from life and from truth; just as I do in my speaking and writing. (Procaccioli 1997, 231-2: 155; Author's transl.)

With this statement, the poet formulates a powerful analogy, not merely between painting and literature, but more specifically between painting and language: both seek to grasp the vivid energy of nature (*enargeia*; Rosen 2000, 186-97) to translate it into brushstrokes and words respectively.

While Aretino's praise of Michelangelo throughout his epistolary aligns with the sixteenth-century artistic literature that celebrated the artist as the one who surpassed the ancients, he finds the true parallel to his own naturalistic poetics in Titian's painting language.<sup>19</sup>

Enthusiastic appreciation for Titian's brushwork is hardly novel: since his own contemporaries, the master's canvases were brilliantly invested with value and meaning, though Aretino was the first to publicly address them (Rosand 1982, 16). Since his arrival in Venice in March 1527, the poet frequently invoked the distinctive abilities of the painter from Cadore in rendering the vividness of flesh through colour, enhancing his reputation. Publishing Titian's name in many of his dialogues and comedies soon reflected the intention of portraying him as a synonym for the art of painting beyond nature. Indeed, at the heart Titian's work lies a profound engagement with nature and an immanent vision of beauty. However, over time, there can be traced a mounting transcendence of traditional figurative abilities: the artist's body of work increasingly centers the representation of nature not simply as a passive subject, but as an active, life-giving force (*natura naturans*; Gregori 1978, 303-6), a dynamic principle that operates from within and animates his compositions.

But it is in Aretino's epistolary – itself the first ever *libro di lettere* in vernacular and the main workshop for the poet's poetics – that one traces the painter's transformation of nature into art becoming both the inspiration and foundation for the author's literary work. In this way, Titian's techniques and style were not just subjects to be described in ekphrastic sonnets, but integral elements that infused and informed the structure and substance of Aretino's writings (Rosand 2010, 184-5).

Nevertheless, such sphere of influence must have operated the other way round as well. Titian's formal education may have been

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<sup>19</sup> Studies on the stylistic permeability between literary and pictorial texts are not new in scholarly literature, though they are relatively uncommon. Notable considerations can be found in Longhi [1940] 1956, 160; as well as more comprehensive discussions in Nova 1994; Riccomini 2008.

limited: joining a painter's workshop at a young age likely meant he missed out on a traditional grammar school education and never learned to read Latin (Puttfarken 2005, 71). However, this lack of formal learning did not diminish his prominence as a painter of *poesie*.

Being contemporaries in Venice, Titian and Aretino maintained a long and close relationship, sharing common cultural and artistic experiences, many of which developed around the Venetian circle that Aretino himself likely pulled around him – a subject still under further exploration. Such intellectual circle, around which gravitated Paduan academicians, fellow artists, *poligrafi* and noble men, embraced Titian, and his limited formal education was never seen as a barrier to engaging with the foremost thinkers in Venice.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Titian's deep understanding of art and narrative allowed him to contribute to the intellectual currents around him, even without the scholarly credentials of some of his peers.

### 3 Art as *Habitus*

In the 1530s, when Aretino polemically rejected Bembo's lead, it was his voice that felt discordant with the prevailing opinion. He reasoned that Trecento Tuscan was a dead language, to be read to understand its contextual significance, but not to be taken up anymore. Thus, Bembo's idiom hovered at one remove from life, but Aretino wanted his to be derived from nature directly. Also, an ability to perform without models indicated independence and artistic stature. This was as true for leaders of style in painting, such as Michelangelo and Titian, as it was for poets. And it meant that inborn talent, not just training, was crucial to creativity. Whereas *arte* was the skill or competence that was learnt by rule and imitation, *ingegno* was the innate talent that could not be learnt (Baxandall 1971, 15) and this notion became an inalienable part of Aretino's theory on the arts. For the Tuscan author the coupled *arte* and *ingegno* became a necessity for both poets and painters, once again compared with the same creative and controlling principle, which becomes manifest in the finished work.

The most effective function of Aretino's letters on the arts was to provide a theoretical discussion of what style should be: literature and painting were not to be understood through their representation of the subject, but rather through form and aspect. The interpretation of nature in Aretino lies in the process of creation (the

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<sup>20</sup> There are several instances in which Aretino discusses academic meetings and informal gatherings among the members, but the most relevant in this occasion appears to be the infamous letter addressed to Gianiacopo Leonardi on 6 December 1537, called *Sogno del Parnaso* (Procaccioli 1997, 383-90: 280). On Titian's portraits of some members, see Puttfarken 2005, 71.

how), just as David Rosand argues (1981, 85) about Titian's pictorial structure, whose meaning is not to be found in the iconographical depictions (the *what*), but in the affective and mimetic function of the painter's brushstrokes.

As far as it concerned both the artist and the poet, especially in Venice during the Cinquecento, style is their main preoccupation, matter his servant. Learning to examine a work of art for what it truly is means focusing on its execution, its *maniera*, autonomous from its resemblance, expression, or moral purpose. To appreciate its appearance is to see the work as it requires to be seen: in this sense, style turns from being a mere technical skill to a demonstration of the act of creation itself. This objective is the approach through which art historian Robert Klein delves into sixteenth-century art history.

Klein finds in the manner of making art both a disposition of the being and a conduct theorized in practice, a *habitus* in the Aristotelian sense (Koering 2024, 64). And to posit such a conceptual construct, the art historian uses Benedetto Varchi (1503-1565) as the starting point of his inquiry, an academic figure whose relationship with Aretino was very close.<sup>21</sup>

The principle of finding in nature, our own and that which surrounds us, the guideline for artistic production, places Aretino and Titian among those *artifices vitae* that Klein identifies in a number of stylized lives during the Renaissance.<sup>22</sup> Again, his ideas intertwine visual art and poetry, as well as intending style as the product not of acquired and reproducible art, but of a germinative phenomenon, mixing inborn qualities and experience.

Considering the points discussed thus far, the perspective explored in Klein's studies appears to be the most suitable for conducting an insightful comparison between one of Aretino's works and a painting by Titian, both sharing the same iconographic subject: Mary Magdalene.

Published in March 1535, the four books of the *Humanità di Christo* were partially preceded by a single part called *Passione di Gesù* in 1534, then profoundly revised and included as the third chapter of the life of Christ on earth. When first published, this religious text stood out as a significant departure from the satirical writing for which Aretino was best known. However, it is important to note that his sacred works – which would continue through 1551-52, with new volumes and reprints – did not constitute a separate phase in his career,

<sup>21</sup> "L'arte è un abito fattivo, con vera ragione, di quelle cose che non sono necessarie, il principio delle quali non è nelle cose che si fanno, ma in colui che le fa" (Barocchi 1960, 9; "Art is a factive *habitus*, accompanied by true reason, by those things that are not necessary, and the principle of which is not to be found in the things that are made, but in the one who makes them", Koering 2024, 64).

<sup>22</sup> On this topic, see Klein 1979, 201; 2017, 229.

nor a separate field within his body of work. Rather, Aretino's *corpus* as a whole is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of his long literary and socio-cultural trajectory, which encompassed both sacred and profane themes (Boillet 2007, 25-42).

Frequently examined for its content as evidence for the author's alignment with Nicodemism,<sup>23</sup> what is important in this context is the value of simplicity emphasized by Aretino's narrative style, as he himself asserts throughout the *Humanità* (308). While declaring a straightforward use of paraphrase, as Agostino Ricchi suggests in his letter to the poet included in the *Salmi* (1534), Aretino clarifies that the work will serve as evidence for the author's doctrine, stemming from an unconventional study of religious sources, tied to his poetics of invention in opposition to tradition, and of nature in contrast to art (601).

The episode of Mary Magdalene's conversion exemplifies the creative use of language to express the Saint's profound devotion, making it one of the literary peaks of Aretino's work as a religious writer. Although none of the evangelists directly narrate this episode, Aretino develops the whole story of Lazarus's sister and her intimate relationship with Christ. Having in mind the traditional portrayal of Magdalene as a repentant courtesan, the author unfolds a sensuous narrative, whose elaboration spans a few pages in the *Humanità di Christo*, reflecting his unique interpretation of the figure.

Upon entering the temple, her eyes meet those of Christ, and she feels struck by that first encounter. Christ commences transforming her earthly beauty into spiritual grace, her erotic desire into divine love. Speaking in a poetic language of transcendence, he uplifts the astonished Magdalene, praising her new spiritual light, and recognizing the nobility of her eternal soul. In this moment, however, the blush that once colored Mary's cheeks shifts to shame, and Aretino starts depicting the downfall of the woman. Now in her room, Magdalene locks herself in, she undresses and tosses her jewels, and the poet follows her tormented penitence, her self-denunciation of the vanities that made her sinful, and eventually her self-flagellation conveyed through a visceral, carnal description of the scene:

Percotendosi le carni con quella crudeltà che se le percuote la stoltizia de la disperazione, ecco spruzzare fuori il sangue cadendo per la delicatezza del nettissimo corpo. [...] Mentre le pioveva pel dorso l'umore che nutrica gli spiriti de la vita dentro le vene, Maddalena [...] parlava con Dio confessandogli le colpe sue senza aprir bocca.

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<sup>23</sup> For insights on the Nicodemite tendencies within the book, see Waddington 2006; 2009.

Striking her flesh with the cruelty that the folly of despair inflicts, behold, blood spurts forth, falling from her delicate, pure body. [...] While the essence that nourishes the spirits of life within her veins rained down upon her back, Magdalene [...] spoke with God, confessing her sins without uttering a word. (Boillet 2017, 349-50; Author's transl.)

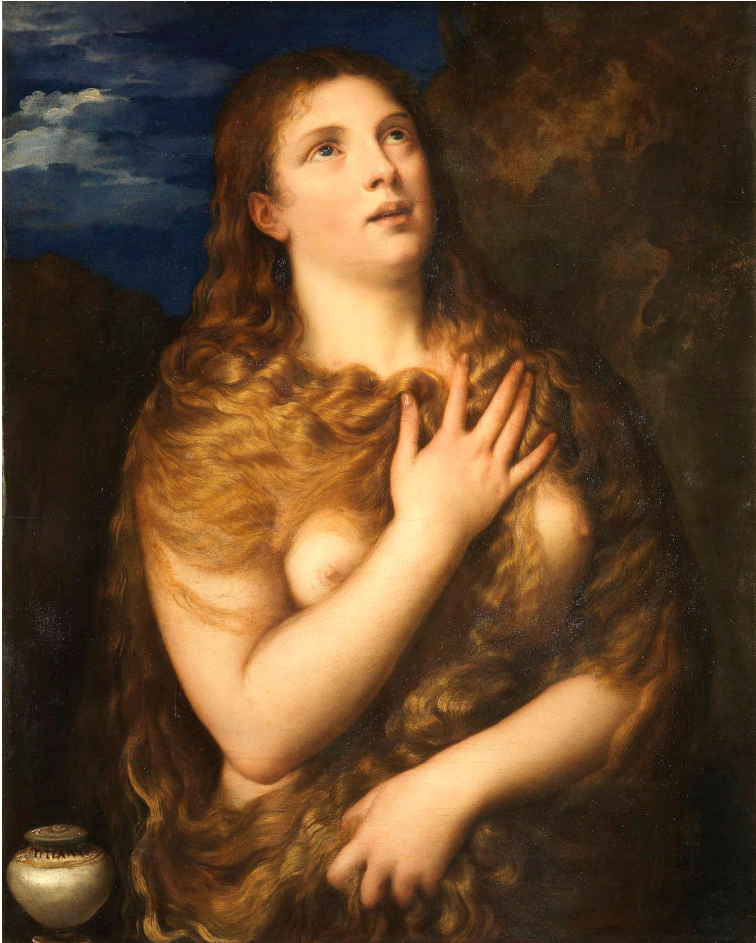
The following horror of her maids upon discovering the terrible spectacle of the bloodshed, and the comforting intervention of Martha, carry the reader to the final transformation of Magdalene, finally consumed by wholesome love:

Maddalena [...] astratta con l'animo ne la imagine di Cristo che ella aveva ne la mente, era già ripiena de lo splendore del fuoco d'Iddio, e a poco a poco divenuta ingorda de la dolcezza de le sue fiamme, quasi ebbra fuor di se stessa, sentiva consumare da lo ardore divino quanto le era piaciuto del mondo. [...] E di queste proprie fiamme ardano tutti gli angeli e tutte le anime che fruiscono la gloria de lo amore eterno; perciò, essendone non pur calda ma bollente la femina di ch'io parlo, si discostò tanto dal mortale, che non se le poteva più dir donna.

Magdalene [...] absorbed in the image of Christ that dwelled in her mind, was already filled with the brilliance of God's fire. Gradually, she became intoxicated by the sweetness of His flames, feeling consumed by the divine ardor for all that she had cherished in the world. [...] And from these very flames, all angels and souls basking in the glory of eternal love shall burn; thus, the woman I speak of was not just warm but boiling with fervor, so much so that she distanced herself from the mortal realm, perceiving herself no longer simply a woman. (Boillet 2017, 352; Author's transl.)

Aretino's use of language recollects the episode while having the reader picture the scene and feel the ongoing change of feelings, something the author allows through vivid images and evocative descriptions. In doing so, apart from the more poetic discourse Christ adopts, the tone never loses its vernacular feature of simplicity, which directly conveys the vitality of the description. As Yates (1984, 238) reminds, the concept of visual narration recalls Aristotle, who believed that to think one must inevitably depart from natural, sensory images: coupled with his accurate use of language, the description of Mary Magdalene's conversion epitomizes Aretino's pictorial imagination. To the same extent, Titian's devotional portrayal of the Saint does not break away with such process.

The Mary Magdalene of Palazzo Pitti [fig. 2], Florence shows the Saint to the waist completely naked, only covered by her thick mantle



**Figure 2** Tiziano, *The Penitent Magdalene*. Ca. 1531-35. Oil on wood, 85.8 × 69.5 cm. Firenze, Palazzo Pitti, Galleria Palatina, inv. 1912, nr. 67

of reddish hair, which emphasizes the silhouette of the figure but do not conceal her bare breasts, framed by the position of the hands alike those of a *Venus pudica*.

Shrouded in cogitation, Magdalene, clinging to her hair, looks up to the dark sky, with her eyes watering and her lips slightly parted. An ointment jar, her iconographical attribute, sits right beside her, and a rocky backdrop sets the scene behind. The figure, pushed forward and almost filling the whole space of the panel, is invested by divine light, which highlights her polished skin and contrasts with the gloomy surrounding where she is spending her penance.

While most critics agree on stylistic grounds that the Pitti painting dates between 1531 and 1535, its original commission remains uncertain, although it is known that the work eventually became part of the Della Rovere family collection in Urbino. The earliest recorded mention of a Magdalene by Titian appears on March 5, 1531, when Federico Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, requested such iconography from the artist, intending it as a gift for the Marquis of Vasto. Just six days later, Gonzaga informed Vittoria Colonna, the Marquis's cousin by marriage, that the painting was meant for her.<sup>24</sup>

This painting and its following reiterations are usually tackled with discussions about their iconographical meaning, which often overlook their stylistic persuasiveness.<sup>25</sup>

With her cheeks, ears and fingers flushing, Titian's response to the traditional iconography of Magdalene introduces a new sensuality that departs from earlier depictions of the Saint, animated and eroticized by the movement of hair over motionless flesh. The viewer is brought into direct confrontation with the monumental female figure, whose vitality is powerfully conveyed, not just by the intimate proximity but even more so through the dynamic energy of Titian's brushstrokes. This painterly technique amplifies her presence, emphasizing her lifelike immediacy.

These associative correspondences of the brushstrokes, hair and blush acquire a more specific, metaphorical resonance, in relation to a poetic context, rather than purely visual one (Rosand 1981, 88). Titian's technique communicates a deeper significance, one that transcends the subject matter being depicted. This meaning is embedded in the visible marks of the painter's gesture, which let us participate in the process of becoming of the image.

As in Aretino, in this case too, Magdalene is first and foremost a woman facing the experience of the divine. Whether in prose or oil painting, the authors' intention is to convey her humanity as it is consumed by the fire of God. The meaning carried by Titian's brush and Aretino's narration takes us beyond the sacred theme and its allegorical meaning to make us grasp the tangibility of the subjects they portray. They speak the same language.

**24** "Vorrei che mi faceste una Santa Maddalena lacrimosa più che si può [...] e che vi metteste ogni studio sì in farlo bello" (Puppi 2012, 56: 19; I would like you to paint a Magdalene as tearful as possible...and for you to depict her as beautiful as you can make it; Author's transl.). In a letter dated 14 April 1531, Titian responded to Federico Gonzaga, stating that he had completed the work (Puppi 2012, 58: 20). For a detailed reconstruction of the commission, see Bodart 1998. On the contrary, Augusto Gentili (2012, 163 fn. 94) emphasizes how counterintuitive it would be to refer to the Pitti *Magdalen* as the painting commissioned by Federico Gonzaga for Vittoria Colonna, since it in no way depicts the figure as 'lacrimosa' as requested. The scholar then supposes (155) a direct commission from Guidobaldo Della Rovere to Titian as a good omen for the birth of his daughter Virginia, which took place in 1544.

**25** See especially: Aikema 1994; D'Elia 2005.



## 4 Perpetua

At a time when the foundations of a national language are being established, Aretino stands out against the anachronism that defines them, criticizing its impersonal nature and encouraging writers to engage with the world around them through a language that is vibrant, contemporary, and authentic. Similarly, Titian distances himself from Giorgione's now outdated tonal painting and from the classical pictorial traditions, envisioning the image as something alive and breathing.

To recognize in the fight against slavish adherence to tradition and plagiarism the intersection between painter and poet, the point where their mutual naturalistic poetics are reinforced, means embracing T.S. Eliot's notion that "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone" (1919, 55). If the inspiration for the arts is deeply rooted in the cultural legacy history hand us down, then individual talent is the only path worth following. By doing so, one can draw from tradition with the intent of renewing it, offering a glimpse of the contemporary world, while also leaving an enduring imprint on history.

In this sense, the Viennese broadsheet emblematically reveals this intent: on the one hand it clearly shows the dialectic between image and word between Titian and Aretino, but on the other, since its function was inevitably intended for broadcast, it allowed for a wider public to witness the unity of purpose between poetry and woodcut, while also becoming itself a historical record. Eventually, what once represented a moment of rupture has, over time, transformed into a tradition in its own right.

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