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MARIA MORGANTI: "THE COLOURS OF LIFE"

.... While working the painter constantly elaborates upon his dreams lying somewhere between matter and light, the dreams of an alchemist in which he contrives substances, enhances light, softens over-powering colours and causes contrasts in which we can always discover the battle between the elements".

G. Bachelard, *Il pittore sollecitato dagli elementi*, in *Il diritto di sognare*. Dedalo, Bari, 1974. Pag 35.

Books of memoirs, already widely available in the Middle Ages, consist of a series of recollections ("memoirs", to be precise) recorded for one's own benefit or for family members or immediate descendants, generally written in fragments which all begin with "I remember that...". Mainly found in those areas where literacy was most widespread (such as Florence), they are midway between chronicle writing and autobiography. These books are often valuable documents on the lifestyle and customs of the day. Maria Morganti has tackled her father's diaries, recognising in them and their distinctive style some of the constituent elements of her own artistic method. Morganti tends to note down those chromatic impressions which seem to her to best describe the qualities of a given day, normally one colour for each day, one after the other, layered without any single colour suffocating the memory of any other.

The colour is always transparent, at least by vocation, so the various brushstrokes settling on the canvas interact with each other so the result embodied in the final layer is bound to be closely

interconnected with those that preceded it. The experimentation carried out by Maria Morganti can also be studied in relation to traditional literary diary writing, reworked synaesthetically in a pictorial sense. The question of colours, their nature and causes, has always been the focus of philosophical and scientific thinking. This is particularly true in those periods in history when, unlike the present day, philosophers trying to analyse the world were very often the same people striving to develop cognitive theories about it. I am mainly referring to thinkers in antiquity. In their thoughts chromatic phenomena were more or less explicitly present whenever they were trying to understand how human beings could engage visually with surrounding reality. The reason is obvious: in the past, just like the present, the most striking thing about everyday visual experience is the fact that it is intuitively sensed as a predominantly chromatic experience. In our interactions with reality (which might be described as "naive") the act of seeing most certainly involves form, motion and distance, but especially colours.

Seeing is, first and foremost, seeing colours. The question of relations between colours and names also falls within the framework of this subject: linguistic knowledge plays a key role in the decision to assign a coloured object to a given class, since the "finiteness" of language does not allow us to adequately describe the range of different shades of colour emerging as light conditions change. Finally, the highly pragmatic role of colour in human life tends to push this aspect into the background, even though in actual fact it is of fundamental importance in the field of colorimetric technology. Just consider how certain notions of colour have changed down the centuries. The

Ancient Greeks' notion of green was not strictly associated with the colour of vegetation, but also encompassed all those entities in some way associated with vitality, such as tears, blood, sap and honey. The names of colours have more than just chromatic connotations. After all, nowadays the names of colours are put to powerful metaphorical usage. In relation to the issue of nominalism, according to which the idea of colour has been supported for centuries on the twin crutches of ontologism and metaphor, we have always known that there are an infinite number of colours.

So it still remains to be decided, as the scholastics and nominalists debated, whether or not names derive from things, particularly in the case of colours which are apparently objective cerebral formations only existing in our minds, as Goethe had sensed even before it was technically proven. This explains why colours are infinite while the nouns used to identify them are not. So there are not enough names for all the colours and we need to resort to metaphor and metonymy to talk about them, as Dante often did in ways which have moved us for centuries: "gold and fine silver, carmine and leaded white, indigo, lignite bright and clear, an emerald after it has just been split, placed in that dell would see their brightness fade against the colours of the grass and flowers, as less is overcome by more" (Purg., 7, 73). He often goes even further, discovering a colour for words: "dark-coloured words". So the only definite nouns defining colours unambiguously are those borrowed from objects whose distinctive traits never change: soils, living organisms, minerals such as ochres, crimson, cobalt, cinnabar etc.

Other than these possibilities, communicating aesthetic experiences or other generic impressions deriving from the sight of colours results in a major linguistic muddle and perhaps an impossible endeavour, as Wittgenstein demonstrated so brilliantly, somebody who really understood the problems of language. So let's just allow ourselves to be dazzled by the poetic visions which great geniuses have translated into their own aesthetic formalism, primarily to the benefit of our spiritual health. This will also enable us to better understand the extraordinary and fascinating capacity for poetic imagination lying in every human brain. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton gives a passionate description of the eyes of the snake which seduced Eve, described by Milton as being carbuncle with a burnished neck of verdant gold. Any large ruby is a carbuncle, so Milton's creative imagination saw the kind of penetrating and hypnotic light we are now familiar with through the laser effect. And let's not forget that the great poet had been blind for many years when he wrote *Paradise Lost*.

Moreover, how could we exemplify the animal's verdant gold shades, materially yellow and green, so provocative and, at the same time, abstract and totally cerebral? This impression has not been lost, nowadays we experience it again in so-called metallic paints for cars or the personification of snakes in certain Walt Disney films for example, worthy examples of artificially produced synergies of sounds and colours. Nevertheless, there is still a lot to be understood about colours and their relationship with "logos". Considering these matters, Carlo Carrà claimed that: "we are still at the very infancy of knowledge".

(translation by Martyn John Anderson)