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# Mediating Meaning in Botticelli's *Primavera*

*Gorčin Dizdār*

## Denotation, Art History, and Language

It is a commonplace to begin a discussion of Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* (fig. 1) by pointing out that it represents one of the foremost interpretative challenges of art history, having produced a large number of often diametrically opposed understandings of its meaning. The plethora of critical assessments is a testimony not only to the complexity inherent in this Renaissance masterpiece but also to the highly problematic status of art history's methodology. The *Primavera* continues to be seen – to name but a few of the more prominent interpretations – as a mythologically veiled illustration of the circumstances surrounding a wedding in the family of the painting's patron, an allegorical illustration of the arrival of spring, and a symbolical depiction of neo-Platonic ideas about the nature of love. A problem of fundamental methodological importance to any interpretation of a work of art – though one which is usually overlooked or taken for granted in discussions of the *Primavera* – concerns the relationship of word and image or, in other words, the precise way in which the linguistically expressed meaning and the painting are related to each other. The aim of this essay is to deconstruct this complex relationship, arguing that the diversity of interpretations of the *Primavera* is to a large extent a consequence of different implicit assumptions about the relationship between linguistic and pictorial representation.

In addition, the article aims to reflect upon the relevance of the concept of 'convergence culture,' coined in reference to very recent developments in media technologies, for much older artistic and cultural works such as the painting *Prima-*



Figure 1: Sandro Botticelli's 'Primavera'

*vera*. In his article “The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence,” Henry Jenkins argues that “convergence is taking place within the same appliances...within the same franchise...within the same company...within the brain of the consumer” (2004, 34; ellipses in the original). It is particularly this final aspect of convergence culture, namely the convergence within the brain of the consumer, that I would like to focus on. Although we do not usually refer to a Renaissance era viewer or patron of a painting as a ‘consumer,’ what I am essentially arguing is that the final ‘meaning’ of the painting is to be found in a convergence of a variety of discourses – visual and linguistic – occurring in the brain of the painting’s audience. Thus, although contemporary cultural products operate in a universe of infinitely wider technological possibilities, the basic mechanism of convergence culture was utilized as far back as in the Renaissance. Sandro Botticelli’s masterwork combines different media of his time – such as painting, philosophy, astrology, and religion – in order to create a complex cultural product consisting of visual and linguistic interpretative clues.

In the case of the *Primavera*, the problematic nature of the relationship between image and word strikes the interpreter at the fundamental level of the painting’s name: its author is not Botticelli himself, but the artist’s biographer Giorgio Vasari who, around 70 years after the completion of the painting, claimed that it denotes spring. The painting’s name is but the tip of an iceberg of ambiguities surrounding the correlation of discourse and depiction within the *Primavera*. The next challenge is the attempt to identify the nine figures portrayed in the painting. A plenitude of intellectual effort has been invested in linking the figural representations to particular Greco-Roman deities, largely through tracing some of their features to the conventions governing the Humanist cultural context to which the *Primavera* belongs. However, even a basic acquaintance with classical mythology reveals that the names of most deities are linked not to one, but often to several figures and sets of attributes with divergent and sometimes contradictory characteristics, related only through their common name. Which particular features of the identified divinity will be taken into account in the course of the interpretation depends on an act of negotiation between several distinct factors, such as possible textual references from Botticelli’s intellectual environment, the mutual relationships of the characters in the composition, and the presumed overall meaning of the painting. Which one of these factors will be weighed more heavily than the others often depends more on the interpreter’s subjective opinion about the nature of the *Primavera* than any objective features of the painting itself. Thus, the aim of this essay is not to offer an interpretation of the *Primavera*, but, as it were, an interpretation of its interpretations.

## The Three Types of Representation

The hypothesis of this essay is that interpretative efforts implicitly employ three basic ways to conceptualize representation, namely the semantic relationships of identity, metaphor, and symbolism. The example on which the nature of the three types of representational relationships will be elaborated is the famous aphorism of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus: You cannot step into the same river twice. The crux of Heraclitus's argument lies in the duality of the word 'river' (or the name of a particular river), which always remains the same, and the actual river, which is in constant change as new quantities of water flow past. Another conceptual framework through which identity, metaphor, and symbolism will be considered is Erwin Panofsky's trinity of meanings of a work of art presented in his essay "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline" (Panofsky 1940/1982). According to Panofsky, every work of art has three levels of meaning which he terms the primary or natural, the conventional, and the intrinsic. The primary level of meaning relates to a mere identification of actual objects that are visible in a work of art, such as a human being, an animal, or a plant. The conventional meaning refers to certain features of a work of art which can be explained by referring to the culturally ascribed significance of certain objects, combinations of objects, or ways in which they are positioned, such as a handshake or the halo above a person's head. Finally, intrinsic meaning refers to deciphering the so-called content of a work of art, defined as "the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – all this unconsciously qualified by one personality, and condensed into one work" (Panofsky 1921/1982, 56). In the following, Panofsky's terminology will be preserved, although its meaning will be modified to fit into the taxonomy of identity, metaphor, and symbolism.

The central characteristic of the relationship of identity is a denial of the duality of sign and meaning. As its name suggests, this relationship assumes that the word and its meaning are identical or form one indivisible whole. It pays no attention to Heraclitus's remark, enabling one to continue using the word 'river' as though there were no fundamental discrepancy between the constancy of the word and the flux of the actual river. Its response to Heraclitus would be: of course you can step into the same river twice. Identity largely incorporates Panofsky's primary or natural meaning. Thus any interpreter is capable of identifying various elements in the *Primavera* without much hesitation: different kinds of trees, human figures, pieces of clothing, etc. Identity is revealed in most instances by the use of the verb 'to be': e.g. this is a laurel tree, that is a rose ... but also: this is Venus, those are the three Graces, the *Primavera* is an allegory. The latter examples show in which way identity is distinguished from Panofsky's primary meaning. It incorporates not only what Panofsky believed can be determined universally, without recourse to convention or context, but every relationship between sign and meaning which is

claimed to be stable and objective. The usage of the words 'sign' and 'meaning' should not mislead us into thinking that this is a purely linguistic or semiological relationship: identity can occur between two images, between an image and a word, between one word and a group of other words, etc. The only necessary condition is that within the discourse in which the relationship of identity is postulated, one of its elements can be replaced by the second one without obscuring the meaning of the entire structure.

The metaphorical relationship occurs once the linguistic function of meaning is introduced as a link between the two elements of the semantic equation. It is distinguished from identity by the acknowledgment that the link is a matter of conditional convention. The metaphorical response to the Heraclitean paradox is that it is resolved once the role of the word in the discourse is adequately accounted for. The link between the word 'river' and the actual river is not a simple one-to-one relationship, but a specific semantic function whose role is to designate a particular entity consisting of relatively stable (the riverbed) and relatively flexible elements (the water). The relationship is named 'metaphorical' because it is based on a partial and never fully defined correspondence between two or more elements. In terms of the *Primavera*, the metaphor is encountered on the level of the links between one of the portrayed deities and the characteristics it represents within the composition. It is on the level of metaphor that the difficult issue of the relevance of the artist's original intention is faced. If it is possible to create several alternative metaphorical meanings of a painting which are all coherent with the established identities within it, it makes sense to question the relevance of the original intention. Thus one can argue that a multiplicity of possible readings only adds to the significance of a particular work of art. In terms of the Panofskyan categorization of meanings, the metaphor is most closely associated with the conventional meaning. The crucial difference is that rather than linking the visual elements of a painting to a presumed original context of the painting, the metaphorical meaning arises whenever the image is assigned a place in a wider discursive context.

The nature of the symbolic relationship is best explained through a well-known symbol, the yin-yang (fig. 2). The relationship between the two elements of the yin-yang, the black and the white colour, is characterized by a fundamental ambiguity: besides the black and the white side blending into each other, both sides appear to contain an element of each other in their midst. The ambiguity that the symbol does not resolve lies in the question whether the black circle lies on top of the white colour, fills out a hole within the white side, or lies underneath the white colour, visible due to a hole within the white colour itself (and vice versa). Each possibility implies a different relationship between the two elements that make up the whole. The defining characteristic of the symbolic relationship is the fact that it links its constituent elements in more than one way at the same time. This relationship cannot be reduced to a simpler one through a linguistic method, but can only

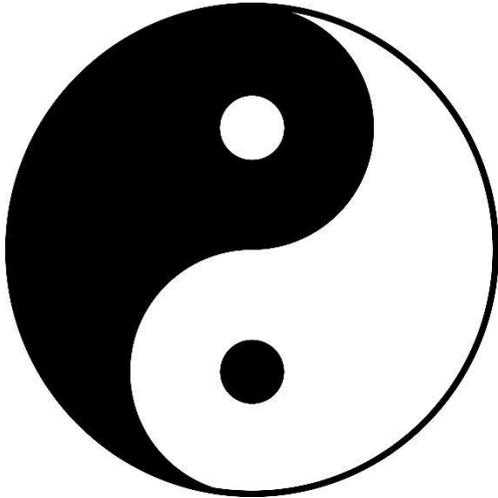


Figure 2: Yin-yang symbol

female. It could indeed be the case that the artist posits this structural relationship unconsciously and that certain analogies can be found with the symbolic structures of other artistic, philosophical, and even political projects of the period or social group to which the artist belongs. But replacing the content with the symbolic relationship enables a much less mysterious and mystical conceptualization of these analogies. There is no need to posit dubious entities such as the collective unconscious: the relative coherence of a period or social group is achieved by the conscious or unconscious emulation of the symbolic relationships of those acts, texts, or works of art which are perceived as great at a certain point in space and time.

## Identity

As previously pointed out, the attempt to establish a relationship of identity between word and image can be made on different levels of the painting's contents and structure. In the following section, three such attempts will be evaluated, leading to a clearer understanding of the appropriateness of identity as a tool for a linguistic evaluation of the *Primavera's* meaning. The first one is a description of the painting's basic constituent elements, corresponding to Panofsky's original primary or natural meaning of a work of art, as well as the fundamental structural relationships between these elements. The second attempt will concern the assignment of identities to the human-like figures in the painting and the determination of the significance of individual plants. Finally, interpretative efforts that aim to establish an identity between discursive and linguistic representation on the level of the painting's overall meaning will be considered.

be shown or pointed to. It can therefore be said that it fully embraces the Heraclitean paradox: in fact, the sentence 'you cannot step into the same river twice' can be seen as a linguistic equivalent of the yin-yang, establishing a paradoxical relationship between the word and the object. The symbolic relationship can be likened to Panofsky's content of a work of art. Its defining feature is not, however, an alleged correspondence with the basic attitude of a nation, but a particular structural relationship of its metaphorical meanings, such as, for example, life and death or male and

The apparently least controversial level at which the relationship of identity can be established is the identification of the objects portrayed in the painting. Thus, first of all, it can be said that the *Primavera* depicts nine human-like figures set against a background of blooming trees and standing on a field covered with flowers. In other words, an identity can be established between certain elements of the *Primavera* and the words 'trees,' 'human figures,' and 'flowers.' It can be safely assumed that for the purposes of an interpretative discussion of the *Primavera*, these identities will not be called into question.

As previously mentioned, it has been possible to identify the majority of the figures appearing in the painting through certain features that were conventionally used to portray Greco-Roman deities. Such markers are the winged shoes of Mercury, the halo of myrtle branches around Venus's head, or the bow and arrow carried by Amor. According to Panofsky's iconological principles, the identification of pictorial elements through reference to conventions constitutes the conventional level of meaning, clearly separated from the basic meaning used to identify a tree or an unnamed human figure. However, from the point of view of the terminology used in this essay, the relationship between the word and the image in the case of a tree on the one hand and Venus on the other is much closer than may appear at first. True, the identification of Venus and the other human figures has required a much greater degree of specialist attention, but the accumulation of sufficient evidence enables the art historian to postulate a link between the word 'Venus' and the central figure of the *Primavera* which is as close as that between the word 'trees' and the background of the painting. In other words, a relationship of identity has been established between the word 'Venus' and the image, which is very unlikely to be questioned.

Despite the establishment of identity between the figures and definite Greco-Roman deities, this relationship is far from simple and transparent and does not immediately provide a definite key to the decipherment of Venus's role in the overall meaning of the painting. That step will already involve the concept of meaning, which is a relationship of metaphor rather than identity. This distinction is exemplified more clearly by the role of the individual plants and flowers shown in the painting. In *Botticelli's Primavera*, Mirella Levi D'Ancona provides an extensive list of every single plant and flower that appears in the painting. Besides giving the English, Latin, and Italian name of each plant, she also provides one or more references to mythological, poetical, symbolical, medical, religious, or other texts in which that plant is assigned a particular meaning. The point that is made in reference to Venus is that her identification is much more akin to the identification of individual plants, rather than the more complex process whereby the precise meaning of the plant in the painting is determined.

However, numerous critics and art historians seem to be convinced that an identity can be established on the level of the overall relationship between the *Primavera* as a whole and its alleged meaning. Jean Seznec, for example, claims that "the artist, unquestionably following a program furnished again by Politian or by

some other humanist in Lorenzo's court, was evidently charged with concealing in this work some momentous secret from the wisdom of the ancients" (1972, 116). Thus it seems as though the painting is merely a concealed version of a 'meaning' which could be expressed more clearly through language. Frank Zöllner sees the *Primavera* as an allegorical illustration of the circumstances surrounding the wedding between Semiramide Appiani and Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, which was mediated by the legal guardian of the groom, Lorenzo the Magnificent, who commissioned this work. According to this view, the true meaning of the painting is thinly veiled behind a rather eclectic mixture of classical references, as for example "Botticelli's depiction of Chloris being taken by force, inspired by Ovid's description, corresponded to the politically-motivated, arranged marriage which took little account of the personal feelings and needs of the bride" (Zöllner 1998, 37). Gombrich adopts a more sophisticated approach, aiming to establish links between the *Primavera* and the neo-Platonic philosophy of Ficino, Lorenzo the Magnificent's mentor, but explicitly acknowledges that his interpretation is based on a fundamental assumption "which may any day be overthrown by a lucky find: the hypothesis that Botticelli's mythologies are not straight illustrations of existing literary passages but that they are based on 'programmes' drawn up ad hoc, by a humanist" (Gombrich 1945, 7). Hence Gombrich sees only two possibilities for the meaning of the *Primavera*: either it is an illustration of a literary passage or the visual expression of a particular philosophical idea.

What all these approaches share is the conviction that an unproblematic relationship of identity can be established not only at the level of the individual word but also between an entire discourse such as poetry or philosophy and a painting with a highly complex content and structure like the *Primavera*. However, such a conviction is undermined by the discrepancy between grammar, poetical modes, and visual artistic conventions and possibilities (as well as other discourses to which the *Primavera* has been linked). The extension of the relationship of identity to the level of the painting as a whole seems to serve a very particular purpose: it is not a conditional replacement of the visual, but its permanent subjection by the linguistic. According to W.J.T. Mitchell

the 'otherness' of visual representation from the standpoint of textuality may be anything from a personal competition (the paragone of poet and painter) to a relation of political, disciplinary, or cultural domination in which the 'self' is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the 'other' is projected as a passive, seen and (usually) silent object. (1994, 157)

There is another conspicuous consequence of the establishment of identity between word and image: once it is achieved, the link cannot be broken apart, it becomes permanent. The *Primavera* is assigned a definite and final place in relation to linguistic discourse, dying like the Theban Sphinx once its riddle has been finally resolved.

## Metaphor

The metaphorical interpretation of a painting is a domain defined by a more self-conscious relationship between language and image. Rather than assuming the primacy of language as a transparent medium enabling an unmediated access to a meaning that lies beyond the image conceived as merely a method of expression, it acknowledges that meaning is a linguistic concept that depends on the relationship of identity in order to incorporate the painting and its individual elements into its field of reference. It can be said that the metaphor supervenes upon identity, for it is impossible to speak of meaning in the metaphorical sense without the prior establishment of stably conceived points of reference. The metaphor does not claim that its linguistically expressed meaning is equivalent to the painting itself, but rather to a kind of mirror image of the painting, whose nature is a combination of the painting itself and the characteristics of the medium in which it is reflected, i.e. the language and grammar of interpretation. The following section will explore approaches by which various art historians have attempted to interpret the *Primavera* in ways which could be brought into correspondence with the relationship of metaphor described here.

The initial step towards the metaphorical relationship is established in Gombrich's commentary on the painting when he states that "for the cultured visitors to the Castello the Graces in the *Primavera* must have been surrounded by an aura of potential application and still-to-be-discovered meaning which may be just as essential for their understanding as the significance they had for the initiated" (1945, 39). However, for Gombrich the significance of the "aura of potential application" is still somewhat marginal in relation to the assumed meaning of the painting for the initiated, which is the true subject of his study. An investigation of this aura may be of interest to the field of inquiry named 'Rezeptionsgeschichte' in German, and, with much less prominence, 'reception history' in English, but remains outside of the interpreter's main focus on the assumed true meaning of the work of art.

There are several arguments in favour of a reversal of this hierarchy of meanings. Most fundamentally, it rests on the assumption that the *Primavera* was originally conceived as a transparent visual illustration of a particular idea, a coded message to the initiated that is perhaps aesthetically more pleasing, but semantically equivalent to its linguistic counterpart. But, even assuming that some such coded meaning did exist, most likely in correspondence with Seznev's claim that it was dictated by Politian or another humanist of the Medici circle, its prioritization devalues any subversive or expansive potential of an acknowledged artistic genius such as Botticelli. Finally, even if it is accepted that Botticelli was a talented, but ultimately passive translator of philosophical or poetic ideas into the language of painting, there is no decisive reason for an exclusive concentration on this particular interpretation, rather than other ones which the painter may have produced unconsciously or even coincidentally.

A critical approach that is more closely aligned with the concept of metaphor discussed here can be found in Barbara Gallati's "An Alchemical Interpretation of the Marriage between Mercury and Venus" (1983). As a methodological foundation for her approach, Gallati explicitly refers to a definition of the allegory as "an extended metaphor in which characters, objects, incidents, and descriptions carry one or more sets of fully-developed meanings in addition to the apparent or literal ones" (1983, 104). The way the metaphor is used in this essay can be likened to this definition of the allegory, with the crucial difference that the characters, objects, etc. do not "carry [...] fully-developed meanings," but these are assigned to them within the framework of the critical discourse. Gallati provides another valuable point that may be used to explain the mechanism of metaphor when she attempts to explain the link between Venus and the Virgin Mary in the *Primavera*: "it is evident that Venus is not the Virgin, but the viewer is meant to think of the two simultaneously. What occurs is what may be called a superimposition of mental images" (111). The relationship between the central human figure of the *Primavera*, the name 'Venus,' and the Virgin Mary described here is an instance of the relationship between image, identity, and metaphor. The problematic idea of the "superimposition of mental images" may be somewhat imprecise, but it offers a poignant clue to the way a multiplicity of words and images may form a complex link that is not reducible to a simple one-to-one relationship of identity, but rather incorporates a series of representational modes.

Comparing only three prominent critical approaches to the *Primavera*, it can be deduced that the role of Venus in the painting has been conceptualized in several different representational modes: as one element of a linear astronomical narrative (Dempsey), as one of the two elements, along with Mercury, of an allegory of ideal marriage (Gallati), and as a symbol of the humanist ideal of love (Gombrich). Each reading implies a different interpretation of the representational role of the other characters, being either astronomical signs equivalent to Venus, allegorical representations of aspects of Venus's or Mercury's characters, or narrative equivalents of the central symbolism of Venus. If the idea that there is only one correct reading of the *Primavera* is rejected (i.e. that it stands in a relationship of identity towards language), it becomes possible to conceive of it as a work of art which combines different representational modes. The different modes or interpretations all stand in a metaphorical relationship towards the image and should be considered as its mirror images modified by the characteristics of the discourse in which it is reflected, rather than identity-type readings that are opposed to each other.

In several interpretations of the *Primavera*, there is a tendency to revert to the relationship of identity even after the multiplicity of metaphorical meanings has been taken into account. Gallati, for example, writes that "the understanding of the system of relationships in the *Primavera* requires a viewer who is educated in their various meanings, for the essential nature of the painting is based upon a loosely-structured series of suggestions" (Gallati 1983, 111). Although a significant step forward has been taken from interpretations which may be described as reductive,

seeing only one link between language and the painting, there is a sense in which they have been replaced by one that is more complex, but ultimately of the same kind as the previous ones. Gallati's view implies that rather than illustrating a particular idea, the *Primavera* expresses a series of suggestions, which are nevertheless limited in nature. Similarly, Dempsey writes that "the painting is the sum total of all amorous thoughts – the eternally vernal garden of paradise with its flowers and orange trees, the never-ending dance of Flora and the Graces, the perpetual loosening of Love's flaming arrows, the unceasing abundance of Venus in her plenitude – that gathered together in their fullness create the perfected and ideal portrait of love that is forever painted in every true lover's heart" (Dempsey 1997, 27). It seems that rather than exploring the possible meanings of the painting, describing the variety of links that can be established between its elements and different discourses, the interpreters have returned to the domain of identity, a transparent and uncritical correspondence between word and image. The difference is not merely rhetorical, but reflects the underlying intention to close the semantic circle once and for all, to dissect the *Primavera* and place it in the herbarium of art historical interpretation.

## Symbol

The previous section did not end on a metaphorical comparison with the natural world for merely stylistic purposes. On the contrary, it serves as an appropriate transition to the exploration of the symbolic relationship between image and discourse, which offers a way to conceptualize the deeply rooted identification of culture with a living organism. An organism can be defined as a living entity consisting of several interdependent and specialized constituent parts. The hypothesis that will be explored in this section is that the specific function of artistic creation within the cultural organism is to act as a reservoir of symbolic forms, which can be pointed to through discourse but also emulated within it. The symbolic relationship explored here will be based on a metaphorical interpretation of the *Primavera* derived from the readings of Edgar Wind and Mirella Levi D'Ancona. It can be described as symbolic because it refers to the irreducible interaction of two polar opposites, the masculine and the feminine, expressed through the figures portrayed in the *Primavera*. The analysis of the symbolic relationship will be followed by an interpretation based on its emulation in the critical discourse, demonstrating the function of the symbol within the cultural organism.

Wind's and D'Ancona's readings of the *Primavera* are based on a metaphorical association of the painting with neo-Platonic ideas about love prominent in the humanist circles surrounding Botticelli. D'Ancona sums up the way one of the most prominent of these humanists, Ficino, understood love:

According to Ficino, there are two kinds of love, the terrestrial and the divine. Love cements the union between mortals as well as between man and God. Love originates from God, and all humans tend to return to God when they are inflamed with love. The lower kind of love, which is common to humans as well as beasts and plants, is responsible for the continuation of the species through the generative act. This lower type of love, in turn, induces man to seek the higher kind of love, which links man with God. (D’Ancona 1983, 54)

The two kinds of love are represented by the left and the right side of the painting respectively. While the terrestrial love is associated with Zephyrus’s lust expressed in his rape of Chloris, Mercury embodies the idea of divine love: “Mercury turns his back on the other figures [...] to demonstrate that he is engaged in the highest form of love, Divine Contemplation. His handsome young face is radiant, transformed by this form of physical love” (D’Ancona 56). This horizontal dialectic is juxtaposed with the vertical dichotomy of Venus and Cupid alluded to by Wind (1968, 120). Thus, what emerges is a symbolic relationship between the word ‘love’ and the concept it represents in the painting, consisting as it does of several contradictory elements paradoxically merged into one.

This reading rests on a rejection of D’Ancona’s conclusion, seeing the relationship between the different aspects of love as hierarchical rather than symbolic: “When we ‘read’ the picture from right to left, we have thus the gradual uplifting of the soul, from the basest form of love embodied in the rape of Chloris, to Mercury’s enraptured contemplation of God” (D’Ancona 1983, 56). The primary reason for a rejection of this unambiguously linear conception of the painting’s structure is its reduction of a metaphorical reading to one of identity, but further support can be gained from a closer analysis of Mercury’s possible meanings. Gallati, for example, writes that “Mercurius was conceived as the ‘prima material,’ the One in which many opposing elements were resolved, e.g. male/female; moist/dry; good/evil; Sol/Luna. Yet, Mercurius could stand for any of its component elements at any given time to fit into the pattern desired at the moment” (Gallati 1983, 119). Wind similarly points out that Zephyrus can be seen as an aspect of Mercury. Thus, structurally speaking, the two sides of masculine love, personified by Mercury and Zephyrus respectively, can be identified and merged into a symbolic unity through Venus in the centre of the painting. But Venus herself is of a contradictory nature: she also incorporates the violent, penetrative Eros as part of her character. What emerges is a symbolic structure: the masculine and the feminine are both paradoxical wholes composed of an irreducible union of opposites.

The equation of the symbolic with an abstract structure of elements is partly based on Lévi-Strauss’s idea of the symbolic function. According to Lévi-Strauss, symbols are the unconscious structures governing conscious thought:

the unconscious ceases to be the ultimate heaven of individual peculiarities – the repository of a unique history which makes each of us an irreplaceable being. It is reducible to a function – the symbolic function, which no doubt is specifically human, and which is carried out according to the same laws among all men, and actually corresponds to the aggregate of these laws. (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 120)

The health of individuals depends on the possibility of incorporating their personal experiences into the symbolic structures governing their worldview. A sick individual can be cured of psychological and even physiological diseases through the expansion of the domain of symbolic structures, so as to be capable of incorporating the particular experience causing the malaise. While Lévi-Strauss discusses shamans and psychoanalysts as agents of the expansion of symbolic structures, there is no reason to deny works of art a similar potential. A meditation upon the *Primavera* and the complex structure of mythological associations that arises from its metaphorical meanings leads to an unconscious incorporation of symbolical relationships within and between the male and the female, enabling the beholder to overcome traumatic experiences by structuring them in accordance with the enriched worldview, in which physical intrusions, sudden bursts of passion, and metaphysical speculation all form a higher harmonious union.

## Towards a Symbolic Interpretation

The notion of love and the relationship between male and female explored here should not be seen as the transparent linguistic expression of the symbolic structure of the *Primavera* but only as one of its possible manifestations. If the symbol is an unconscious structure, it can never be fully expressed but only applied to conscious, linguistic content. Taking a clue from Wind's remarks about the nature of Mercury, I will attempt to structure this entire discussion in accordance with the symbolic relationships expressed in the *Primavera*. Wind notes:

Not only was Mercury the shrewdest and swiftest of the gods, the god of eloquence, the skimmer of clouds, the psychopompos, the leader of the Graces, the mediator between mortals and gods bridging the distance between earth and heaven; to humanists Mercury was above all the 'ingenious' god of the probing intellect, sacred to grammarians and metaphysicians, the patron of lettered inquiry and interpretation to which he had lent his very name, the revealer of secret or 'Hermetic' knowledge, of which his magical staff became a symbol. (1968, 122)

Based on this insight, it becomes possible to establish an analogy between Mercury and the interpreter dispersing the clouds surrounding the true meaning of the *Primavera*. Mercury's symbolic nature moreover leads to a correspondence between

the masculine, active interpreter and the feminine, passive visual message waiting to be deciphered. This idea can be expanded further by incorporating a wider context in the form of the opening lines of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Supposing truth is a woman – what then? Are there not grounds for the suspicion that all philosophers, insofar as they were dogmatists, have been very inexpert about women? That the gruesome seriousness, the clumsy obtrusiveness with which they have usually approached truth so far have been awkward and very improper methods for winning a woman's heart? (Nietzsche 1886/2006, 5)

Supposing the truth of the *Primavera* is a woman – what does the painting itself tell us about this woman, and man's (i.e. the interpreter's) attempt to acquire it? On the one hand, there is Zephyrus, violently penetrating the horrified virginal truth embodied by Chloris – could this not be compared to the rigid relationship of identity, which does not take into account the fragile and nebulous nature of visual truth? On the other hand, does the disinterested, noble stature of Mercury, the disperser of clouds, not resemble the seeker of metaphorical relationships, a stoic figure intent on unveiling the complexities of the semantic knots tying the *Primavera* to a multiplicity of discourses? In contrast to Nietzsche's seducers of truth, both Zephyrus and Mercury can boast success in the form of the bountiful maid Flora and the longing gaze of one of the Graces. However, neither of these approaches reaches the paradoxical totality of Venus's enlightened gesture: that is reserved for the beholder who emulates the symbolic unity of opposites unfolded before her eyes.

It is precisely this unconscious emulation of symbolic structures that defines the organic nature of art and explains Panofsky's mysterious link between individual works of art and entire societies and epochs. Briefly returning to Lévi-Strauss's notion of the unconscious, I wish to point out that it is the active element of the human psyche, governing the domain of the preconscious, defined as "the individual lexicon where each of us accumulates the vocabulary of his personal history" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 203). Thus, on the level of society, it is not events such as significant wars, revolutions, or other political events that define a nation's past and determine its future, but the way they are incorporated into an unconscious structure, a symbolic arrangement of polar opposites such as life and death, freedom and captivity, good and evil. It is the so-called great works of art that express the dominant symbolic structures of a particular epoch most clearly – and it is precisely this conscious or unconscious correspondence with the way a period or a society perceives itself that determines their status as great works of art to a large extent.

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**Images**

Botticelli, Sandro. *La Primavera*. c1477-1482. Tempera on panel. Uffizi, Florence.  
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