

*A Discourse on the Dignity, Certainty, Pleasure and Advantage, of the Science of a Connoisseur (1719),
estratto e traduzione*

As the business of Painting is to Raise, and Improve Nature, it answers to Poetry; (tho' upon Occasion it can also be Strictly Historical) And as it serves to the Other, more Noble End, this Hieroglyphic language completes what Words, or Writing began, and Sculpture earned on, and Thus perfects all that Humane Nature is capable of in the Communication of Ideas 'till we arrive to a more Angelical, and Spiritual State in another World. I believe it will not be unacceptable to my Readers if I illustrate what I have been saying by Examples, and the rather because they are very Curious and very little Known.

[...]

The Poet carries this Story farther than the Historian could, by relating what pass'd in the Prison. This is Dante, who was a young man when this happened, and was Ruin'd by the Commotions of these times. He was a Florentine, which City after having been long divided by the Guelf and Ghibelline Faction at last became intirely Guelf: But This Party then split into two others under the Names of the Bianchi, and the Neri, the Latter of which prevailing, Plunder'd, and Banish'd Dante; not because he was of the Contrary Party, but for being Neuter, and a Friend to his Countrey. When Virtue fails, and Party-heats endure The Post of Honour is the Least Secure.

This great Man (in the 33d Canto of the 1st part of his Comedia) in his Passage thro' Hell, introduces Count Ugolino knowing the Head of this Treacherous, and Cruel Enemy the Archbishop, and telling his own sad Story. At the appearance of Dante.

*La bocca solleuò dal fiero pasto
Quel peccator, &c.*

He from the Hon-id Food his Mouth withdrew,
And wiping with the Clotted, Offal hair
His shuddering Lips, raising his Head thus spake.
You will compel me to renew my Grief
Which e're I speak oppresses my sad Heart;
But if I Infamy accumulate
On him whose Head I know, Tie not forbear
To speak tho' Tears flow faster than my Words.
I know not who you ai-e, nor by what power,
Whether of Saints, or Devils you hither came,
But by your Speech you seem a Florentine;
Know then that I Count Ugolino am.
Archbishop Ruggieri this, which known
That I by him Betrayed was put to Death
Is needless to relate, you must have heard;
But what must be unknown to Mortal Men,
The ci'uel Cii'cumstances of my Death
These I will tell, which Dreadful Secret known
You will conceive how Just is my Revenge.
The ancient Tower in which I was confin'd.
And which is now the Tower of Famine call'd,
Had in her Sides some Symptoms of decay,
Through these I saw the first approach of mora,
After a restless night, the first I slept
A Prisoner in its Walls; Unquiet Dreams
Oppress'd my lab'ring Brain. I saw this Man
Hunting a Wolfe, and her four little Whelps
Upon that ridge of Mountains which divides
The Pisan Lands from those which Lucca claims;
With Meagre, Hungry Dogs the Chase was made.

Nor long continued, quick they seiz'd the Prey,
 And tore their Bowels with remorseless Teeth.
 Soon as my broken Slumbers fled, I heard
 My Sons (who also were confin'd with me)
 Cry in their troubled Sleep, and ask for Bread:
 O you are Cruel if you do not weep
 Thinking on that, which now you well perceive
 My Heart divin'd; If this provoke not Tears
 At what are you accustomed to weep?
 The hour was come when Food should have been brought,
 Instead of that, O God! I heard the noise
 Of creaking Locks, and Bolts, with doubled force
 Securing our Destruction. I beheld
 The Faces of my Sons with troubled Eyes;
 I Look'd on them, but utter'd not a Word:
 Nor could I weep; They wept, Anselmo said
 (My little, dear Anselmo) What's the matter
 Father, Why look you so? I wept not yet,
 Nor spake a Word that Day, nor following Night.
 But when the light of the succeeding Morn
 Faintly appear'd, and I beheld my Own
 In the four Faces of my Wretched Sons
 I in my clenched Fists fasten'd my Teeth:
 They judging 'twas for Hunger rose at once,
 You Sir have giv'n us Being, you have cloath'd
 Us with this miserable Flesh, 'tis yours,
 Sustain your Self with it, the Grief to Us
 Is less to Dye, than thus to see your Woes.
 Thus spake my Boyes: I like a Statue then
 Was Silent, Still, and not to add to Theirs
 Doubled the weight of my Own Miseries:
 This, and the following Day in Silence pass'd.
 Why Cruel Earth dist thou not open then!
 The Fourth came on; my Gaddo at my Feet
 Cry'd Father help me; said no more but dy'd:
 Another Day two other Sons expir'd;
 The next left me alone in Woe; Their Griefs
 Were ended. Blindness now had seiz'd my Eyes,
 But no Relief afforded; I saw not
 My Sons, but groped about with Feeble hands
 Longing to touch their Famish'd Carcasses,
 Calling first One, then T'other by their Names,
 Till after two days more what Grief could not
 That Famine did. He said no more, but turn'd
 With baleful Eyes distorted all in haste,
 And seiz'd again, and gnaw'd the mangled Head.

The Historian, and Poet having done Their parts comes Michelangelo Buonarotti, and goes on in a Bas-relief I have seen. [...]

He shews us the Count sitting with his Four Sons, one dead at his Feet, Over their Heads is a Figure representing Famine, and underneath is another to denote the River Arno, on whose Banks this Tragedy was acted. Michelangelo was the fittest Man that ever liv'd to Cut, or Paint this Story, if I had wish'd to see it represented in Sculpture, or Painting I should have fix'd upon this Hand: He was a Dante in his way, and he read him perpetually.

[...]

'Twas formerly a trite saying among the Florentines (and may be so still for ought I know) *Cosa fatta, Capo bù*; a thing done has a Head; that is, 'till then it has no Life, the Main circumstance is wanting, 'tis good for little.

[...]

When the Roman Power was broken and dissipated; and Arts, Empire, and Common Honesty were succeeded by Ignorance, Superstition, and Priest-Craft, the Dishonour of Humane Nature was Completed, for 'twas Begun long before in Greece and Asia. In these Miserable times, and for Ages afterwards, God knows there were no Connoisseurs! to Write, and Read was 'Then an Accomplishment for a Prince to value himself upon. As the Species began to Recover themselves, and to gain more Strength, Literature, and Painting also lifted up their heads; but however not equally; That Degree of Vigour that serv'd to produce a Dante in Writing, could rise no higher than a Giotto in Painting.