

Icarus' Tears: Gaze and Vision

Cesare Battelli

In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid recounts the myth of the labyrinth, the story of Daedalus and Icarus and the overcoming through flight of the labyrinthine structure, a symbol of imprisonment but also of the indissoluble bond between one's body and one's view of the world.

Daedalus, guilty of having helped Theseus and Ariadne in the defeat of the Minotaur; by order of the ruler Minos is locked up with his son Icarus inside the labyrinth that he himself had devised. From the labyrinth, the two protagonists cannot get out except by opposing the horizontality of the structure with the verticality of flight, which represents a sort of initiatory experience in that it 'overcomes' the force of gravity of body weight: that is, through imagination.

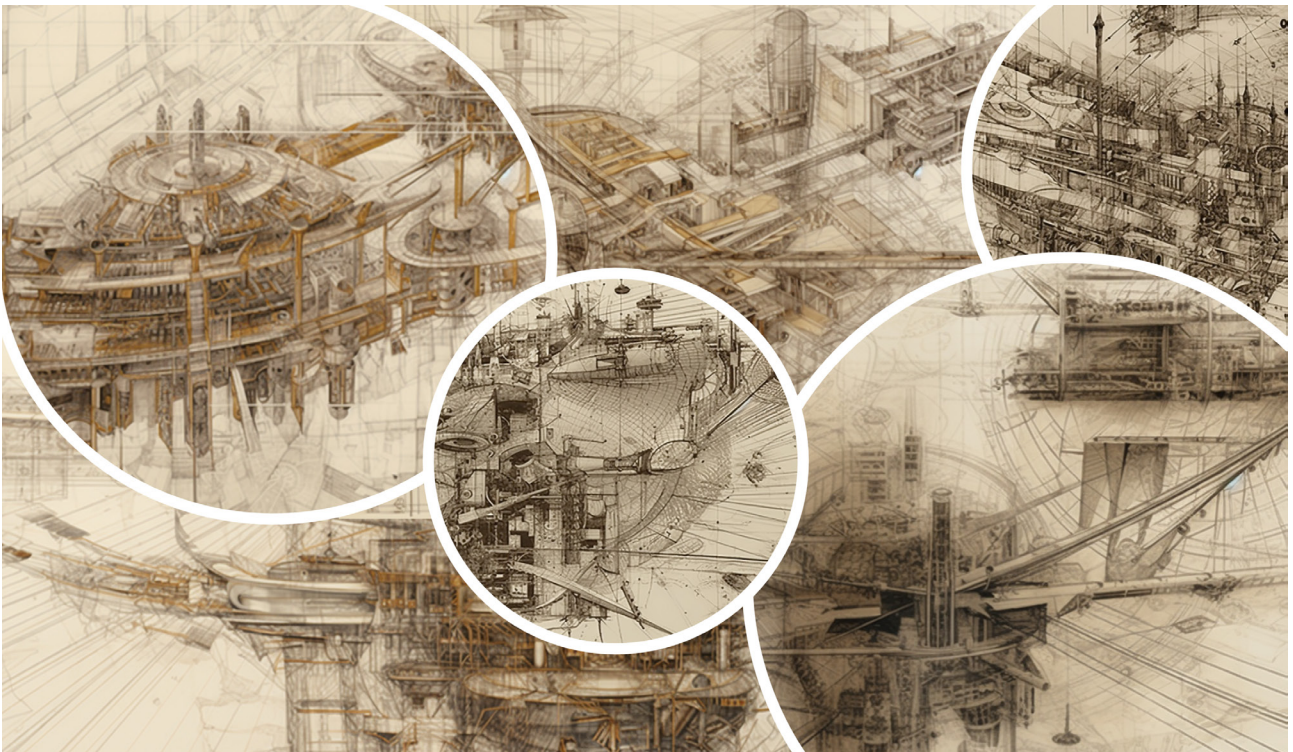
The human being imagined the land seen from above even before the invention of the satellite or the aircraft.

Even before being a topographical transcription, bird's-eye view is in its essence a vision and thus starts from the assumption of an intrinsic blindness, but with an admonition that is implicit in the deepest sense of imagining, as the imagination is affected by the two worlds to which it belongs: imprisonment of the sensible and liberation elsewhere.

The motions of imagination and the idea of flight are united. Ovid's account bears witness to this: it is within the labyrinth, in the condition of imprisonment, that the legendary architect creates wax wings for himself and his son. The unpredictability of flight and thus the fall of Icarus also take us back to the aporetic labyrinths of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) where, through the analysis of free-hand drawing, certain links between looking and vision are anticipated, between the seeing of imprisonment in

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Fig. 1. Cesare Battelli, *Labyrinths*.



the sense of our relationship with the real, and the 'not seeing' of the transcription (drawing) of what is commonly interpreted as real.

With freehand drawing at the centre, the real protagonist in the French philosopher's writings is in fact the relationship between eye and the gaze. Derrida never explicitly refers to vision *stricto sensu*, as in his hermeneutics there is only an internal bounce, an entanglement in one's own labyrinthine contours, but not an elsewhere. However, some passages and notes may be useful in reflecting on the size of the eye and how it, like flight, is more endowed with shadowy areas than it appears at first glance. "But it is known that eyes are not only made to see, they are also made to weep. We can ask why we cry, why a certain dimension of sadness –or laughter, or traumatic shock– causes tears, is quite enigmatic. It is rather enigmatic: why is this symptom pouring water on the eyes?" [Derrida 2016, p. 78, translated by the author].

In a collection of writings related to blindness, Derrida refers to a poem by Andrew Marvell, a 17th century poet (1621-1678), which concludes: "These weeping Eyes, those seeing Tears" [1].

According to the English poet, it is the tears that see and not the eyes. However, this seemingly contradictory veiling hides more articulated meanings. The eyes see veiled by tears, as if by blurring our vision in the dimension of abandonment –like Icarus beyond the labyrinth– we can see better by breaking down the limits of the things that surround us. At the same time, tears are the irruption of an emotion or trauma, an opening or an inner flight.

A second exergue of Derrida's is oriented to Nietzsche, to his "spectral presence in those places" [Derrida 2016, p. 79, translated by the author], and since a spectre is someone or something that is seen without being seen, it is a form vacillating in a completely undecidable way between the visible and the non-visible and is you don't see it coming, a kind of fluctuation of the threshold from which the French philosopher will draw some considerations on the event and its internal contradictions. The spectre, like the hallucination, is someone or something that crosses the space of obsession, mourning, etc.

Similar in some ways to certain texts by Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) and perhaps also to the figure of Homer described in the *Aleph*, or to the various forms of blindness that accompany Dante in his descent into the underworld, Friedrich Nietzsche's blindness is not only progressive, but also affected by a backward blurring.

Figs. 2, 3. Cesare Battelli, *Labyrinths*.

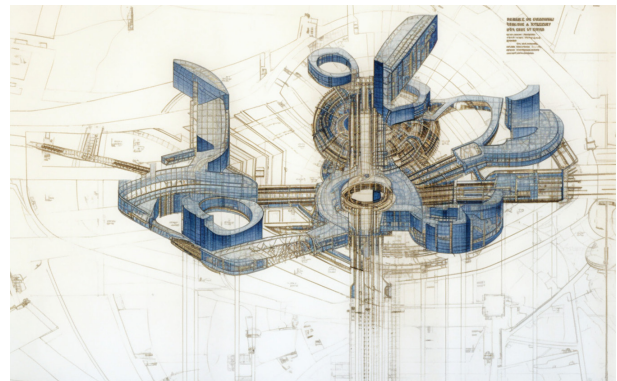
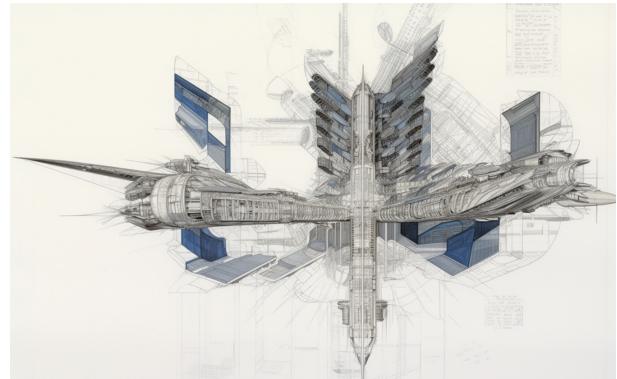
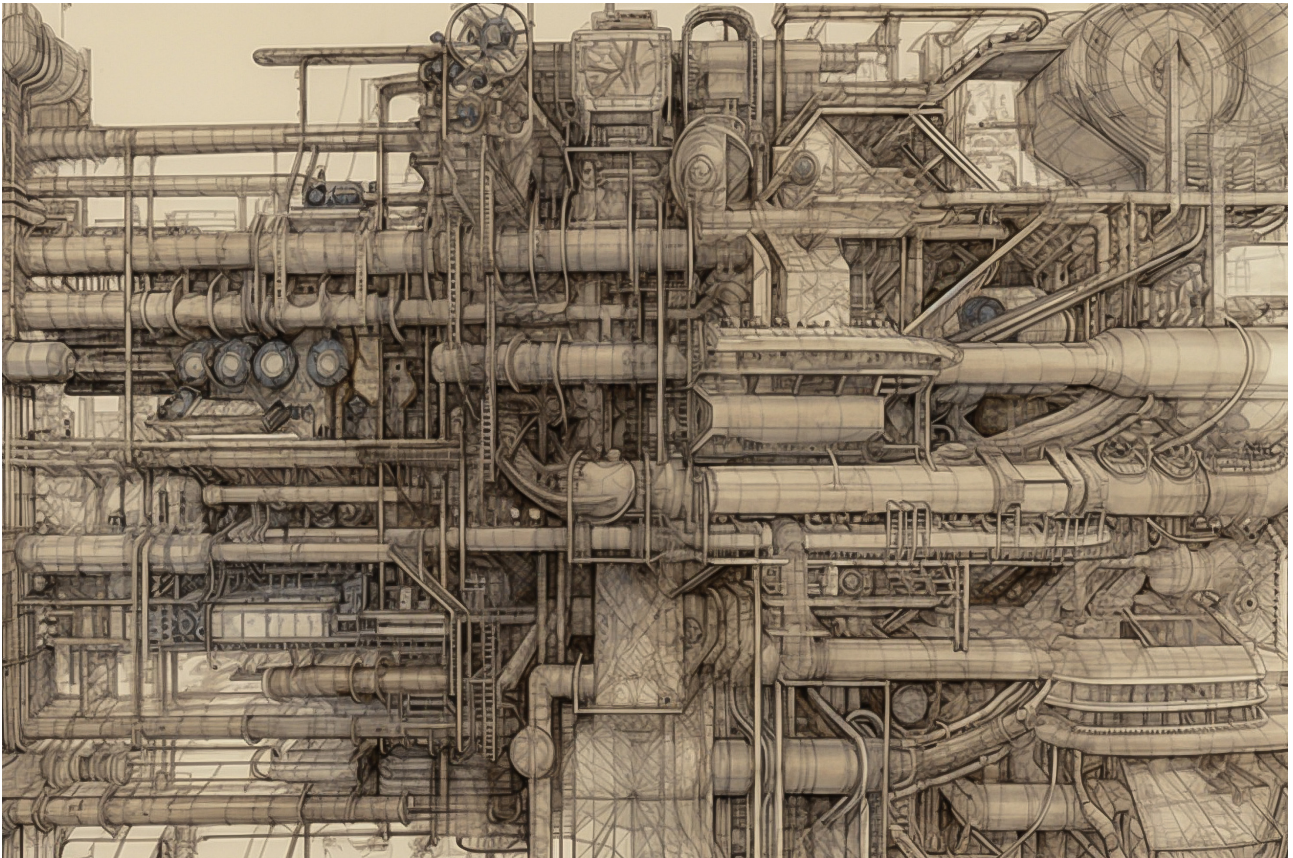


Fig. 4. Cesare Battelli, *Labyrinth*.



“Even the evil of my eyes, which sometimes leads me dangerously towards blindness, is a consequence, not a cause. In fact, every increase in my life force improves my eyesight. I am a double, I have a second sight in addition to the first. And perhaps I also have a third” [Nietzsche 1991, p. 271, translated by the author].

The first difficulty, the first aporia if you will, is that what comes to us, if it is to constitute an event –Derrida argues– must not be seen coming. An event is what comes (arrives); the arrival of the other as an event is an event worthy of the name, that is, an event that is irruptive, inaugural, singular only insofar as it is not seen arriving. An event that you can anticipate, that you see coming, that you foresee, is not an event. The Derridean eye is in fact a hand-eye, in that space where the dimension of contact takes place that arises simultaneously from distance and proximity. In this way, human eye has the capacity to foresee, anticipate and grasp, so that the hands interpose themselves, anticipating eye-contact.

In contrast, the sightless eye, the blind eye *ante litteram*, brings the hands forward to spatialize the encounter with the ‘other’. By bringing the hands forward, the hands themselves structure the visual horizon, anticipating and recreating it. The world offers itself there, in the contact with the hands. At the same time, the blind person, thanks to the use of hands, pre-examines and pre-sees without seeing what is in the condition of coming, what is about to arrive without yet appearing in the horizon of touch and therefore of sight.

The space that is created between the eye and the hand, anticipating and intermediating between ‘us’ and the world, has a double condition: anticipation and recollection. The same space, perhaps, that is annulled in the recollection of prayer, with folded hands, almost as if no distance with the divinity were allowed, to welcome it and be welcomed. A form of intimacy, that of the hand and the eye, similar to the blind hand that is also produced between the eye and the hand of the artist.

In fact, drawing is thought of by Derrida as a form of blind transcription, or almost visionary, in the indicated sense of the event, as the irruption of the unexpected, of what one does not see coming.

The fractures produced in the philosopher’s analytics seem without solution. If you draw, you don’t see the object inspiring your drawing; if you observe the object, it is the drawing that disappears. An intermittence in which the eye, while bending, cannot split.

The natural drawing, the strokes on paper, should exhibit the visible by showing the way the eye rests on the paper. But that instant between eye and hand is once again blind, it is given in an instantaneousness of blindness. The apparent paradox, once again, lies in the fact that alluding to what the drawing lends itself to represent –that is to make present again– is due to a momentary obscurity of vision. However, this is not the only invisibility through which the drawing is structured: there is more, and perhaps that set of signs and lines is nothing but the unfolding of many shadows. First of all, drawing is a section as a mental projection; therefore, it is a portion of a totality that, except in the cubist experience and assuming it was successful, is as such unspeakable. It is projection, fragment. The contours, the *eidós* are drawn, but as such are only visible in the artist’s head. Not to be confused with mimesis, in a portrait everything that finally evokes that person or that face is sustained by an absence, by everything that is not there.

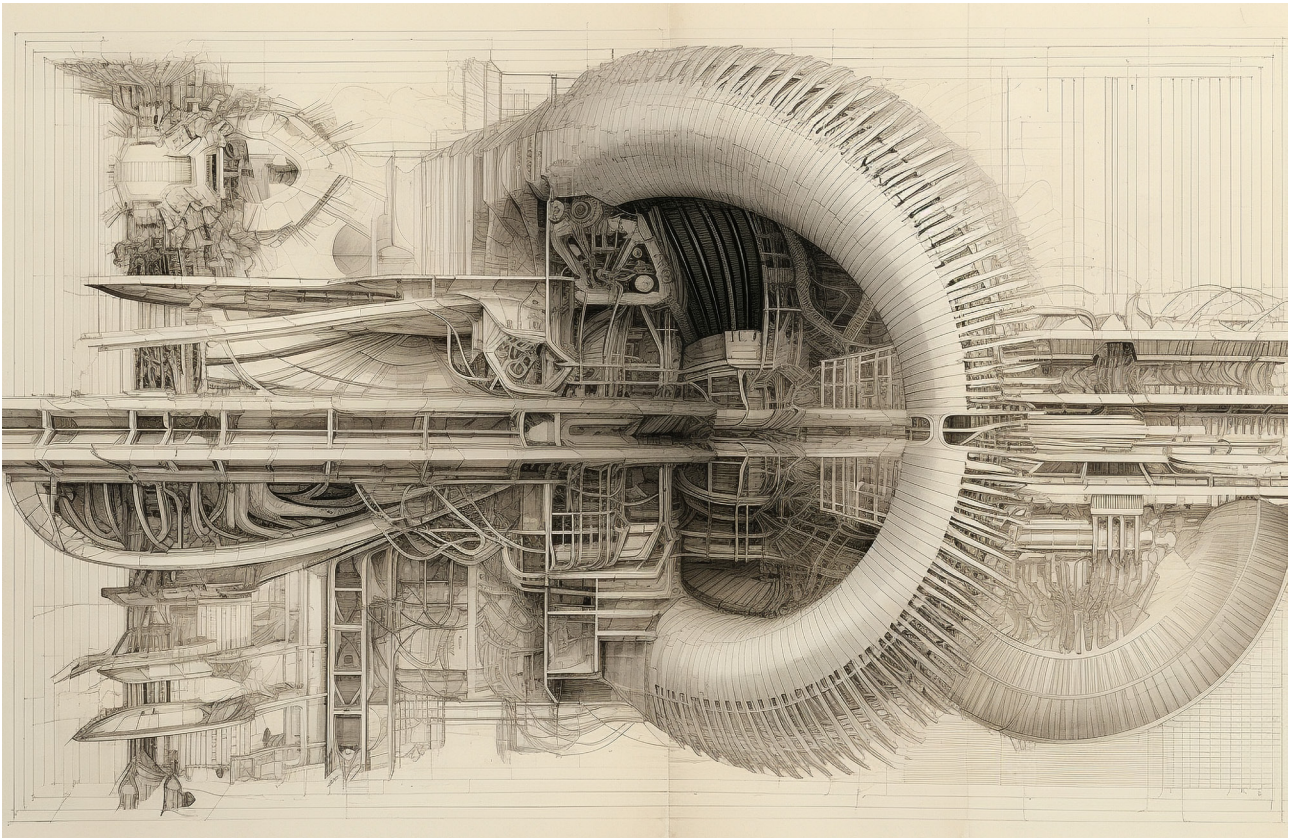
The origins of painting and drawing also take place in an absence. In Pliny the Elder’s narration, the shadow is the protagonist; the drawing takes place in the silhouette of the projected shadow of the character, the lover who is about to leave, at the moment of his early absence.

In a painting by Joseph Benoît Suvée (1743-1807) –there is also a similar one by Bartolomé Esteban Pérez Murillo (1617-1682) from 1660– entitled *The Origin of Painting*, one can clearly see how a young Corinthian woman, daughter of the craftsman Butades, with light projected on a wall, outlines the shadow of her beloved in order to preserve his image and, according to tradition, also his soul. “Regardless of the origin of the drawing, everyone agrees that it had to consist of circumscribing the shadow of a man. Finally, art emerged from monotony [se *ars ipsa distinxit*], discovered light and shadow, and thanks to this difference, colors were separated from each other. Then brightness was added, another value of light” [2].

The intermittence between seeing and blindness, which has the hand-eye as its protagonist, is a mixture of light and shadow, as is the eyelid in its constant flickering that indicates both closure and brightness.

In Derrida’s chiaroscuro ontological fabric, in the labyrinth of his aporias, the eyelid is not mentioned in the sphere of drawing. However, the eye squeezes to put on paper those measurements taken with the pencil placed halfway between eye and field of vision.

Fig. 5. Cesare Battelli, *The flight of Icarus*.



With the distances reduced, if not eliminated, the eyelids and their 'murmurs' in the half-light of the night acquire a dimension of visionary interiority. These images, perhaps visions, produced in the darkness of the eyelid are eloquently described by the poet Nanni Cagnone (1939) and are of two types: hypnagogic and eidetic [Cagnone 1993, pp. 114, 115, translated by the author].

The eyelid with its constellations offers itself as an intermediate world, a prelude to an inner journey that serves Cagnone to introduce the condition of the improbable poet, those discomforts of logic that we call poetry.

"There is a phenomenon of adaptation in describing them: that state of consciousness that is called hypnagogic, the twilight experience of those figures that one perhaps glimpses in the kaleidoscope of sleep on the inner screen of the eyelids. Even those who are polite enough to call them illusions and not hallucinations tend to downplay them, as if they were nothing more than an announcement of sleep, the sign of dreams. Yet sometimes we no longer sleep after these apparitions, and they are not always mere figures: rolling our eyes, we see things that evolve, subject to time, things that undoubtedly mature or come and go, make and unmake" [Cagnone 1993, p. 119, translated by the author].

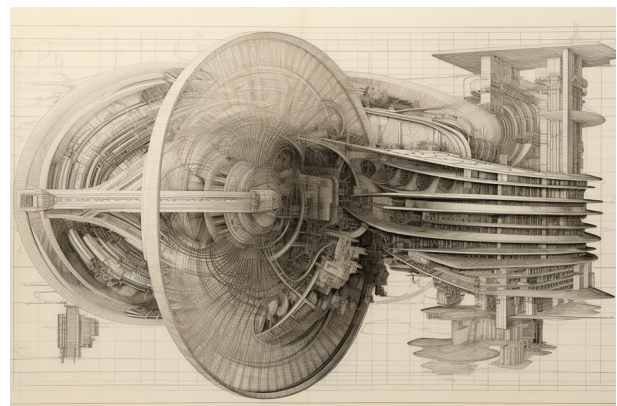
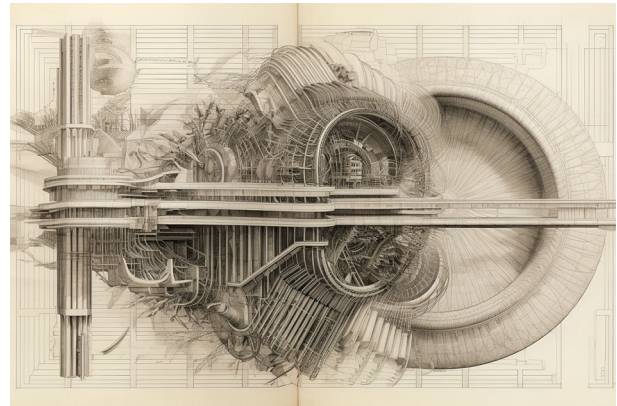
Hypnagogic vision, cut off from all exteriority and distance from the other, creates its own universe of images in a place without space. The eyelid thus becomes a screen, transcending its own dimensions to become an internal luminescence, a kaleidoscope of images without a body, an absence of matter. Sometimes it is a succession of shadows with the density of ink, other times the shadows themselves, like ghostly fragments, slide in on us, on too close a plane, as if coming from the side, to gradually disappear if we do not look at them too closely. Something similar happens with eidetic images.

Cagnone, faced with the scepticism of those who consider them to be hallucinations, perhaps forgets to mention that hallucinations have their root in the Greek '*aluo*, *allusso*', which indicates an outside of oneself, an external vagueness, which transports the 'we' into the abyss of distance with no possibility of encounter.

On the contrary, visions, like dream visions, are the heritage of interiority.

The eidetic images, on the other hand, still carry with them some fragments of exteriority, perhaps of the light that has just gone out, those flashes imprinted on the retina that are transformed alchemically, in the manner

Figs. 6, 7. Cesare Battelli, *The flight of Icarus*.



of trans-figurations, into a changing succession of small constellations. In this case, distance contracts but does not cancel out. The almost-ritual dance of those small luminous spots with imprecise coloring similar to the uncertain colors described by Ludwig Wittgenstein, in their hybrid appearance, acquire a certain autonomy. They may even generate and regenerate themselves over long periods of time, but almost never, as in a glance, do they show themselves frontally. As soon as too much attention is paid to them, the eidetic images tend to disappear as if they do not want to be surprised. Perhaps the darkness, the blindness itself, instead of observing it, has to be traversed, in a kind of welcoming similar to that of the poet, which Cagnone refers to in his text on several occasions. The figures of the eyelid are all the more dazzling and enduring the more carelessly they are observed. The eyelid constitutes itself as an autonomous universe closed in on itself, halfway between sleep and wakefulness, and invites us to reflect on the meaning of the image. Cagnone describes his ocular visions as images that are nothing more than the persistence of what is offered, by repetition, to the biological eye. Persistence or perhaps pre-existence, with-

out debt. But persistence is not so much an insistence that repeatedly furrows the same gesture, which in itself would already be a transfiguring gesture, but a form of fixation that escapes.

“There is therefore no *adæquatio rei et intellectus*. It is not a matter of writing, of rewriting, but of perceiving more and more the relationship with that appearance that, for itself, has words and will particular to those words. It is a matter of allowing oneself to be persuaded by the vision, of not dominating it and of admitting that no words will adequately prove it”, Cagnone argues. Furthermore: “The shadow of you rests on my similitude of bodies” [Cagnone 1993, p. 119, translated by the author]. It is to this that we would like to arrive, and by necessity we will have to feed on the persuasion of the thing seen, being certain that it will become a ‘gap’ in the mind.

Credits of the images

The drawings here presented, dedicated to the construction of suggestive visions on the themes of Icarus and the Labyrinth, are by Cesare Battelli and were created with Artificial Intelligence software in May and June 2023.

Notes

[1] Andrew Marvell. Eyes and Tears. In G. A. Aitken (ed. by). *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*. London: Lawrence & Bullen, 1892, pp. 36-38.

[2] Plinio il Vecchio, *Naturalis historia*, XXXV, 11.

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