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Dante and Giotto: Thoughts on Perspicuity

In the third ring of the seventh circle of Hell, where those who committed violence against God, Art, and Nature receive eternal punishment, Dante and Virgil come upon a steep cliff and take a break. Below them is the eighth circle, Malebolge, the abyss of the fraudsters, where the poets will spend more time than anywhere else during their journey through the *Inferno*. While they wait for someone, or something, to transport them to their next stop, Dante is called upon by three lost souls who recognize him as a Florentine because of his attire. Like him, they hail from Florence and have been doomed to eternal punishment due to their unrepentantly violent temperaments. The first one is Guido Guerra, a Guelph *condottiero* who fought at the two most decisive battles of the second half of the *Duecento*, Benevento and Montaperti. The second one is Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, one of the Florentine captains at Montaperti who also served as *podestà* of Arezzo. Finally, there is Jacopo Rusticucci, yet another Guelph politician of whom we know close to nothing, except that he married an extremely demanding woman. After exchanging greetings, sharing brief news items, and lamenting the current state of affairs in Florence, a city dominated by greed and the drive toward quick and easy profit, Rusticucci announces that Dante is bound for fame and glory and asks the poet – given that telling the truth is something that comes naturally to the poet – to speak well of them when he returns to the world of the living, when he returns to the world and has the chance to *riveder le belle stelle* (*Inf.* XVI, 83). Rusticucci’s auspice is especially significant because it anticipates in its wording the final line of the *Inferno* (“e quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle”) as well as the word that ends all three parts of *The Divine Comedy*: *stelle*. As is often the case with Dante, however, the suggestive nature of the scene acquires true significance in relation to what happens next. The distant sound of a stream gives way to a beautiful digression on Italian geography after which the pilgrim ceremoniously unties the rope around his waist and hands it to Virgil, who throws it off the cliff – in his words – to summon a creature from the dream world, a *novità*. He refers to Geryon, the monster of fraud, who will dominate the following canto when he ap-

pears and carries them down to Malebolge. Just before the creature flies up to fetch them, Dante warns:

Sempre a quel ver c'ha faccia di menzogna
de' l'uom chiuder le labbra fin ch'el puote
però che senza colpa fa vergogna;

ma qui tacer nol posso, e per le note
di questa comedia, lettor, ti giuro
s'elle non sien di lunga grazia vòte,

ch'i' vidi per quell'aere grosso e scuro [...].¹

Mandelbaum translates:

Faced with that truth which seems a lie, a man
Should always close his lips as long as he can –
To tell it shames him, even though he's blameless;

But here I can't be still; and by the lines
Of this my Comedy, reader, I swear –
And may my verse find favor for long years –

That through the dense and darker air I saw
A figure swimming, rising up [...].²

What Dante sees “swimming, rising up” is actually flying. In the poet's imagination, however, it looks like a sailor rising to the surface after having loosened a ship's anchor from a rock. The metaphor precedes the vision. Poetic imagination takes precedence over perception. The move is common in Dante, but it takes on special importance coming after that incredible warning to the reader. As many critics have already noted, this ‘truth disguised as fiction’ defines first and foremost *The Divine Comedy*, a visionary, eschatological, and prophetic poem presented as poetic fiction – a form of reality (of truth-revelation) at once literal, figurative, and allegorical. Secondly, this truth disguised as fiction is the opposite of the monster Geryon and of what the infernal pilgrims will find in Malebolge: fraud, that is, fiction disguised as truth³. The poet reaffirms his credibility with the reader before descending to the depths of the fiction.

¹ *Inf.* XVI, 124-130. D. Alighieri, *Commedia*, ed. by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, vol. 1, Mondadori, Milan 1991, p. 503.

² *Inf.* XVI, 124-131. Id., *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Allen Mandelbaum, Bantam Classic, New York, 1980, p. 149.

³ Chiavacci Leonardi traces the origin of this idea in a Latin treatise, the *De quattuor*

Dante frequently invokes the reader as a tool to generate verisimilitude through confidence and comradery. In fact, there are twenty invocations to the reader in *The Divine Comedy*⁴. But this one is unique for two reasons. First, it includes an oath. Second, the oath involves the poem itself, which is named for the first and only time with the title that is still used today: “Comedy.” The promise to tell the truth while invoking fiction would be ironic if it were not for the fact that Dante is specifically proposing his poetic vision as the inverse of fraud.

In a 1955 essay, Lanfranco Caretti reflects on this passage – a passage, incidentally, that has been relatively overlooked by Dante scholars. Caretti says that the unfractured continuity between the extreme realism (the three historic Florentine characters, the description of Italian geography), the mysterious symbolism (the rope thrown into the abyss), and the unleashed fantasy (the multifarious flying monster) imprints in these final lines – but also in all of Canto XVI – the “unequivocal evidence that contributes to the unaltered illusion of a constant testimonial truthfulness”⁵. In a poem riddled with improbable situations and fantastical images, Dante chooses this moment, right before descending into Lower Hell where fraud is punished, to anoint himself as the herald of truth disguised as fiction, of revelatory prose; and he does so through an oath that guarantees self-evidence.

But let us return for a moment to the cliff. Dante anticipates the imminent arrival of this novelty announced by Virgil when the canto suddenly ends (it is a literal cliffhanger). The following canto, the seventeenth, opens with the apparition of the monster, a creature with the face of a just man, the body of a serpent, the tail of a scorpion, and hairy extremities that serve as wings. Geryon lands on the ledge and while Virgil negotiates with him for transportation to the eighth circle, Dante, following his guide’s advice, approaches to observe the souls of those condemned for usury (one of the most abject forms of violence) who burn in a sandy pit in flames. This time Dante does not recognize anyone. Each carries a purse around their neck that they stare at, entranced while they wander in pain. One of them,

virtutibus, which the Medievalist attributed to Seneca (see D. Alighieri, *Commedia*, cit., p. 503). This work, cited by Brunetto Latini and Albertano da Brescia, distinguishes four types of sentences, as Dante’s contemporary, Guido da Pisa, notes in his remarks on the *Comedy*: 1) those that are true and seem true, 2) those that are false and seem false, 3) those that are false and seem true, 4) those that are true and seem false. See Guido da Pisa, *Expositiones et glose super Comediam Dantis*, ed. by V. Cioffari, State University of New York Press, New York 1974, p. 306.

⁴ See E. Auerbach, *Dante’s Addresses to the Reader*, in “Romance Philology”, vol. 7, 1953, pp. 268-78.

⁵ L. Caretti, *Storia e poesia (Inferno XVI)*, in L. Caretti (ed.), *Antichi e moderni: Studi di letteratura italiana*, Einaudi, Turin 1976, p. 31. Translations mine unless otherwise noted.

whose purse has the blue emblem of a pregnant sow, scolds the curious poet. He identifies himself as Paduan and sticks his tongue out like an ox. He is Reginaldo degli Scrovegni, a notorious usurer who lived in the second half of the thirteenth century. We know that after his death, at the end of the thirteenth century, the people of Padua, scandalized by his greed and roused by his sins, threatened to ransack his house; they would have done so if it had not been for the promise of his son, Enrico, who agreed to buy the old plot where the Roman theater had once stood and build a monastery for the Augustinian friars and a church dedicated to the Annunciation. The generous donation was intended to purge the sins of the inveterate Reginaldo who, according to accounts, told Enrico on his death bed: "Gold is power, strength, and health"⁶. Along with the church and monastery, Enrico ordered the construction of a small chapel, and to decorate it he commissioned Giotto, who was already famous throughout Italy.

Giotto painted the Scrovegni Chapel (also known as the Arena Chapel) between 1305 and 1306. Not only are these the best-preserved frescoes he painted, but it is also one of the best-preserved frescoed complexes from the Middle Ages. There are three series of stories, each on one level of the walls. The upper row is occupied by scenes of the life of the Virgin's parents. In the middle section is the story of Mary's life, including the birth of her son. The lower strip depicts the life of Jesus. The chapel also includes a dazzling Final Judgement, a series of painted statues that represent vices and virtues (figures in proto perspective that simulate reliefs), and various depictions of angels, saints, plants, and animals.

One barely need enter the Scrovegni to perceive the organic relationship between the frescoes and the space of the chapel. To follow the chronological continuity of the stories, one must move, walk, change position, turn around, look up and down, squint, relax. It is a full-body experience. The sensation is of having left the world and entered an ancient blue microcosm. The ceiling, a starry sky, recalls the stellar endings of the Dantean poems and transports the spectator – a temporary inhabitant of the chapel – to a further away, indefinite antiquity of Byzantine mausoleums (like that of Galla Placidia in Ravenna) or pagan temples, including prehistoric caves decorated with colorful talismanic animal figures. On the wall opposite the altar, a huge last judgement with its enthroned Christ and the obligatory monstrous Satan surrounded by souls condemned to the most atrocious punishments, reminds the visitor of the final chapter of the Christian eschatological epic. But the greatest impact is caused – this one understands later, after the miserable fifteen minutes of visitation allowed are up – by the effect of all-encompassing totality in

⁶ See C. Gizzi, *Giotto e Dante*, Skira, Milan 2001, p. 19.

the chapel. Giotto's thoroughness, the concept of making of the entire space an analogical and emotive work of art, translates into an effect that transcends the sphere of the visual and is perceived in the flesh.

Where did Giotto learn to paint like that? Those sheep with curious gazes and fluffy wool, those restless dogs, those melancholic donkeys, those faces brimming with affections, those meticulously undulating mantles, and those eyes. Especially those eyes. The astonishment before Giotto's genius is shared among the very first people who noted his importance in painting and continued through Vasari. The common denominator of the praise that rains on the Tuscan painter from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries has to do with the exceptional, transformative character of his art. Giovanni Boccaccio, perhaps the first intellectual who saw Giotto as an innovator of painting, says in *The Decameron* (Sixth Day, Novel V) that the artist "[...] having brought back to light that art which for many ages lain buried beneath the blunders of those who painted rather to delight the eyes of the ignorant than to satisfy the intelligence of the wise, he may deservedly be called one of the lights that compose the glory of Florence [...]"⁷. Filippo Villani, one of the first Florentine historians, includes Giotto in the series of biographies of great figures of Florence that his father had started and says the painter "restored the ancient dignity of painting"⁸. In his *Il libro dell'arte*, a manual for young painters written in the beginning of the fifteenth century, Cennino Cennini states that Giotto "translated the art of painting from Greek to Latin"⁹, that is, thanks to him, Italian painting abandoned Byzantine uses and forms and adopted a style much more faithful to nature. Several decades later, in the *Commentari* (ca. 1452-55), Lorenzo Ghiberti claims that the Etrurian artist led painting to the "greatest perfection" and talks about a resurgence of art after more than six hundred years of barbarity¹⁰. Finally, in the sixteenth century, Giorgio Vasari considered him the great restorer of the *disegno*, someone who painted from nature (*di naturale*), who "gave birth to painting," and repeats the story (previously recounted by Ghiberti and almost certainly fictional) of how Cimabue accidentally discovered him when he was a boy, on a mountain, drawing a sheep on the surface of a rock¹¹.

The subsequent tradition – I am skipping over the *Seicento*, *Settecento*, and large part of the *Ottocento*, most of which considered Giotto's style

⁷ G. Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, vol. 2, trans. by J. M. Rigg, Project Gutenberg, epub.

⁸ F. Villani, *Le vite d'uomini illustri fiorentini*, Sansone Coen, Florence 1847, p. 47.

⁹ C. Cennini, *Il libro dell'arte: A new English Translation and Commentary with Italian Transcription*, ed. by L. Broecke, Archetype Publications, London 2015, p. 20.

¹⁰ L. Ghiberti, *I commentarii*, ed. by L. Bartoli, Giunti, Florence 1998, pp. 84-85.

¹¹ G. Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori*, vol. 1, Edizioni per il Club del Libro, Milan 1962, pp. 295-332.

rudimentary – follows the line traced by Vasari and considers Giotto, aside from being the precursor to lineal perspective, to be the pioneer in promoting and developing naturalism. The Tuscan artist is seen as a painter who is sensitive to the particularity of figures and emotions, whose primary aesthetic objective consists in reproducing the world. Giotto is understood in many cases as a functional – fundamental even – part of the aesthetic and devotional reform promoted by the Franciscans¹². The interpretation is convincing not only because of the close ties between the painter and said monastic order, but because of the most notable characteristics of his stroke. On the frescoes of the Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi and in the Bardi Chapel in Santa Croce, Giotto's figures, unusually plastic, tactile, fragile, herald a new way of praying and of imagining sacred history. Critics and admirers repeatedly underscore the effect of presence and reality produced by Giotto's hand. In a letter to Émile Bernard, Van Gogh talks about his impressions before a panel painted by Giotto which he saw with Gauguin: "The expressions in it of pain and ecstasy are human to the point that, 19th century though it may be, you feel you're in it – and believe you were there, present, so much do you share the emotion"¹³. The Museo Horne's Saint Stephen, the Saint Anthony of Padua of the Berenson Collection, the Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata in the Louvre, and the Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa all have a similar effect on the viewer. They immediately play upon their sensibility while also generating an effect of atemporality. They are weighty, dense presences that seem completely unaware of the limits imposed by the two-dimensionality of the panel or wall. Their existence is beyond all doubt. They exist in and of themselves. That is how they prevail and that is how they present themselves to us, as if they do not need us, but above all as if they do not need the artist, as if they were not artifices. Giotto's figures are self-evident in and of themselves, as is self-evident a sheep grazing in the valley or a shepherd who guides it through the valley and who, in a moment of leisure, draws it with the tip of a burnt stick or a pebble on the surface of a rock.

But there is another Giotto. Not a naturalist Giotto, but a realist one. This Giotto is an artist for whom the faithful imitation of the world is not the primary objective but just another mechanism in the creation of an independent universe that is a figurative image of an ontologically supe-

¹² See B. Cole, *Giotto and Florentine Painting (1280-1375)*, Harper & Row, New York 1976, p. 17; H. Tode, *Giotto*, Bielefeld, Velhagen & Klasing, Leipzig, 1910; E. Auerbach, *Il fattore personale nell'ascendente di San Francesco d'Assisi*, in Id., *San Francesco, Dante, Vico e altri saggi di filologia romanza*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1987, pp. 15-26.

¹³ V. Van Gogh, *Letter to Émile Bernard, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence*, Tuesday November 26th, 1889, <https://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let822/letter.html>.

rior reality to the one the artist accesses mystically or intuitively. A brilliant sketch of this Giotto is given by Proust in the sixth volume of the *Recherche, Albertine disparue*. Here is the narrator's impressions after his visit to Scrovegni: "angels were flying with so intense a celestial, or at least an infantile ardour, that they seemed to be birds of a peculiar species that had really existed, that must have figured in the natural history of biblical and Apostolic times [...]"¹⁴. This is a *supernaturalist* Giotto, whose evocative power is capable of showing the tangible existence of intelligible realities. This Proustian intuition finds a more speculative correlation in Roberto Salvini's analysis, which uses a Hegelian lens to examine Giotto as an artist whose work is the expression of the "consciousness of a direct relationship with the artist's spirit and the appearances of the knowable world, in the sense of a fantastic transposition of a nature that the spirit gives as objective and real"¹⁵. For Salvini, Giotto's totalizing vision prevails in the interest in imitating the particularities of the knowable reality.

This idea of the superiority of the totality of a work over the mimetic detail of the individual figure already appeared in Richard Offner's reading for the great Giotto exhibition of 1937, organized in commemoration of the sixcentenary of the artist's death. Offner understands that Giotto subjugates the individual form to the general order and equilibrium, which "implies a non-naturalist treatment of the figure"¹⁶. In agreement with him, Hans Belting emphasizes Giotto's Franciscanism and concludes that Giottoesque images, "contrary to popular belief, are not a mirror of the exterior world so much as they are the dramatic stage on which actors represent a vast spectrum of human feelings and relationships"¹⁷. We can then perhaps talk of a *plotinian* Giotto, whose model for portraying reality is not the world itself but the dimension of ideas, of which things are merely ontologically degraded images.

I am going to propose a third Giotto. Without putting aside (though it would be advisable)¹⁸ the conviction about the absolute exceptional-

¹⁴ M. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: The Sweet Cheat Gone*, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Modern Library, New York 1957, epub.

¹⁵ R. Salvini, *Giotto: La cappella degli Scrovegni*, Arnaud, Florence 1951, p. 21.

¹⁶ R. Offner, *Giotto, Non-Giotto*, in "The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs", vol. 74, n. 435, 1939, p. 260.

¹⁷ H. Belting, *The New Role of Narrative in Public Painting of the Trecento: Historia and Allegory*, in "Studies in the History of Art", vol. 16, 1985, p. 153.

¹⁸ There is no doubt that the irruption of Giotto on the Italian art scene as an event *ex nihilo* is nonsense. Many have marked the direct antecedents of the artist in international gothic sculpture, Nicola Pisano's pulpits, Pietro Cavallini's mosaics, and even in the ancient Roman painting rediscovered during the thirteenth century. That without mentioning the crucifixes painted by Giunta, Cimabue, and, of course, the literature that nourished Giotto, works like *Meditations on the Life of Christ* and the *Legenda Aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine.

ism of Giotto and the fundamental role of his stylistic revolution in the history of art, I will attempt to put in parentheses notions like realism and naturalism to understand the effectiveness of his pictorial style from another position. Giotto's naturalism, which Vasari made the canonical praise bestowed upon the painter, was brutally cast into doubt by the taste of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when some of his frescoes, considered primitive, were painted over (those in the Peruzzi Chapel in Santa Croce, for example). In a guide to the Scrovegni frescoes published in 1854, John Ruskin expresses the taste of the period when he says that Giotto's drawings are extremely defective, but he adds that the painter obviously did not make the least effort to imitate reality and that his art instead appeals to the imagination and is of a symbolic style¹⁹.

It is difficult not to accept, at least in part, Ruskin's assessment. Giotto's figures are anatomically inadequate (see, for example, the fingers on Saint Stephen's left hand or the shepherd's feet in "Joachim's Sacrificial Offering"), his landscapes oscillate between the archetypal and oneiric, and even his paradigmatic power of concentration on dramatic action is effective at the expense of verisimilitude. The rudimentary knowledge of human anatomy in the era immediately before the so-called anatomical revolution of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is in fact an advantage for Giotto. The meticulous imitation of the body, of every muscle in their different states of tension and relaxation, can become a temptation for the artist who desires to demonstrate virtuosity (as will happen in the second half of the *Cinquecento*) and a distraction for the viewer. Regarding Giotto's supposed realism, understood as the construction of a visible universe in the image and likeness of an invisible and immutable one, the doubt resides precisely in Giotto's undeniable interest in accounting for the particularity, the unique and unrepeatable of the emotive moment, gesture, or outburst. In other words, Giotto is too interested in the particular to be a realist, and he portrays it in a way that is too affected to be naturalist. What is it, then, that makes his art so effective? This third Giotto that I propose is an attempt at an answer.

The effectiveness is the product of an illusion. The illusion of all-encompassing space which in turn produces self-evidence. Various critics throughout the twentieth century noted the importance of the concept of self-evidence in Giotto's work²⁰. In his monograph on the Scrovegni

¹⁹ J. Ruskin, *Giotto and His Works in Padua*, Arundel Society, London 1854, pp. 36-38.

²⁰ Brinckmann says Giotto renews painting by conferring "plastic and volumetric self-evidence" to bodies (A. E. Brinckmann, *Dante und die bildende Kunst*, in "Kunstchronik und Kunstmarkt", n. 50/51, 1921, pp. 898-903). Offner notes that Giottesque composition subjugates the individual form to the organic totality producing "prevailing self-evidence" (R. Offner, *op. cit.*, p. 260). Battisti, for his part, identifies Giotto's exceptionalism with this "self-evidence" of his images that neither the Byzantines nor representatives

frescoes, Max Imdahl highlights this concept and argues that the self-evidence (*Evidenz*) effect is made by the independence of each image with respect to the story of which it is a part. Likewise, the composition of each scene is sustained independently of the totality of the chapel. At the same time, it is the complete work that gives meaning to each scene and each individual character. This fluid dynamic given between the parts and the whole confers concision and a “very high and immediate evidence” of the pictorial complex, Imdahl concludes²¹. The notion of self-evidence can be applied to all of Giotto’s work, and perhaps it is more notable in works that have been removed from their original location, such as the “Ognissanti Madonna” (today in the Uffizi Gallery) or the Museo Horne’s “Saint Stephen,” given that in them the sense of an organic totality is purely and exclusively sustained on the aesthetic strength of the singular work removed from its context. Nevertheless, it is in Scrovegni where the effect can best be appreciated. This dialectic between units and totalities of meaning that Imdahl notes is, indubitably and in large part, responsible for the self-evidence effect. But it is also a secondary instance of the aesthetic appreciation, one mediated by a previous moment of reflexive withdrawal that is nourished on the initial perception. In the initial perception there is already self-evidence and the illusion of the atemporal.

While Giotto’s critics have, with good reason, repeatedly underscored the creation of spatiality as one of the most distinctive aspects of the artist’s genius (the *Giotto spazioso*, to use the words of Roberto Longhi), specifically in relation to the Scrovegni frescoes, few have paid attention to the temporal – or more so the atemporal – illusion that this all-encompassing spatiality and those colors somewhere between telluric and oneiric generate for the visitor. The apprehension of self-evidence is an effect of the intersection of two axes: that of totalizing space and that of atemporality. The figures that reside on the walls of Scrovegni are purely spatial presences that do not know time because in Giotto there is no time, there is only the instant. Space unfolds once and for all in an eternal present. And the dramatic action is a suspended moment of tension that has no beginning or end. The key to this radical atemporality, which is the key to the power of Giotto’s style, is in the eyes of the characters and in their gazes that subtly reference a temporality that is never fixed. Giotto’s eyes are windows to something that just happened or that is about to happen, but never to what is happening in the scene itself. The most

of the international gothic had achieved (E. Battisti, *Giotto nel Trecento*, in Id., *Rinascimento e Barocco*, Einaudi, Turin 1960, p. 69).

²¹ M. Imdahl, *Giotto Arenafresken: Ikonographie, Ikonologie, Ikonik*, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Munich 1980, p. 59.

famous example is “The Kiss of Judas”. Giotto focuses on the moment immediately after the kiss, when St. Peter is already cutting off Malchus’s ear. Judas’s face shows a shadow, not of remorse but of an awareness of the magnitude of what he has just done. The vanishing point of the axes of the total space and the fossilized – or better put, canceled – time is in this visual and narrative dissonance.

Let us take an example from the first series of stories in the upper strip of the wall to the left of the altar. These are scenes from the life of Joachim and Anna, the Virgin’s parents. Specifically, let us focus our attention on “The Meeting at the Golden Gate”, an episode taken from the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew (3.5). After forty days of solitude in the desert, during which Joachim does penitence in order to be worthy of receiving the grace of God and be capable of procreating, the Virgin’s father meets his wife at the doors of Jerusalem. Joachim does not know it, but Anna has been visited by an angel who announced she would be a mother. The couple meets and kisses. He embraces her; she takes him by the neck with one hand and with the other caresses his beard. The scene is tender and moving; both have their eyes open, but their gazes do not align. The pupil of Joachim’s right eye is in a direct line with Anna’s ear so that Christ’s grandfather seems to be looking toward the Golden Gate, below which are four women observing the meeting. Anna’s gaze, however, is directed at her husband. Her left eye, open and attentive, is fully devoted to Joachim. There is, nevertheless, an unreal note in her gaze that is too concentrated, too fixed on an indetermined point on her husband’s body. These two eyes harmoniously unaligned evoke a dream-like dimension, both archaic and otherworldly, that gives the scene a powerful sensation of atemporality.

But this crossing of unsynchronized gazes is nothing more than the epicenter of a complicated game of looks. Under the arch of the Golden Gate there are four women looking at the future parents. At least, this is the impression they give at first glance. Their gazes are directed toward the couple, though when drawing a line from each of their pupils, it becomes apparent that none of them is looking at Joachim and Anna. It is not clear what they are looking at, but it is something that is beyond the couple. Is it the shepherd who supports Joachim? Someone or something that is outside the scene? Perhaps the desert, where Joachim is coming from? For his part, the shepherd who follows Joachim looks toward the Golden Gate, but it is impossible to determine whether his gaze falls on someone or something in particular. There are, then, two groups of gazes that go in opposite directions without crossing. On the one side, Anna and the four women looking outward. On the other, Joachim and the shepherd looking inward. But there is an eighth character who disrupts the scene at the same time as she organizes it: the woman in black.

The elderly pair is the focus of the story, yet Giotto does not place them in the middle of the scene but slightly to the left. The center is occupied by the woman in black whose back is to Joachim and Anna and whose gaze is directed at the group of women, or perhaps toward the city's interior. The meaning of this character is not clear and has been the subject of much discussion by critics. Her taciturn, opaque presence creates a pronounced contrast with the general joy of the reunion scene and with the miraculous news of the imminent conception. Her position and the direction of her gaze is a mystery. Why does she ignore the future parents? Is she perhaps a premonitory character, an admonishing figure, a reminder of the suffering that awaits this girl so desired by the couple, an ominous anticipation of bloody episodes like the massacre of the innocents and the calvary? Does she perhaps represent the Synagogue, which will turn its back on the good news?²² Or, perhaps, the object of her gaze is further away.

“The Meeting at the Golden Gate” is the final scene in the upper strip on the left-hand wall when standing at the altar. The scene that follows it chronologically – the birth of the Virgin – is on the opposite wall, also on the upper row and directly opposite. But to move from one to the other, one must pass over the wall across from the altar, where the entrance to the chapel is located and where Giotto placed the Final Judgement. Is that where the woman in black directs us? Toward the enthroned Christ who judges, rewards, and punishes? The woman's gaze is not sinister but cautionary, as if her role were to remind the viewer of the eschatological meaning of the story and to warn them not to get lost in the warm emotion the scene provokes. The birth of the Virgin leads to the incarnation that then leads to the Passion, the resurrection, the Last Judgment, and the end times.

If the woman in black's eyes indeed indicate the end times, then they are nothing more than an explicit representation of the resistance to the temporal dimension that is also expressed by Joachim and Anna's eyes as well as those of the women under the arch of the gate, of the shep-

²² Smart suggests that the mysterious woman in black could represent the Synagogue, which in the medieval imaginary was an old woman dressed in black and wearing a veil or with her eyes blindfolded. Her position, her back to the reunion scene, would anticipate the reticence of the Jews to a Jesus as the Messiah. See A. Smart, *The Assisi Problem and the Art of Giotto*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1971, p. 105. Chiara Frugoni, however, also mentions as a possible source of inspiration a famous figure of Medea sculpted on a Roman sarcophagus that has been lost but of which is conserved a renaissance drawing that shows the famous matricide enveloped in a blanket much like the woman in black. This reference would establish a connection between *The Meeting at the Golden Gate* and *The Massacre of the Innocents*. See C. Frugoni, *L'affare migliore di Enrico: Giotto e la cappella Scrovegni*, Einaudi, Turin 2008, p. 126.

herd, and of the many other characters on the walls of Scrovegni. These almond-shaped eyes, a trademark of Giotto's style, function as windows to an archaic, unreal dimension that leads to the end of history or to the world of dreams, which is also outside of time. The color *verdaccio*, a combination of brown and green, sometimes grayish, sometimes yellowish, was achieved by mixing white, black, and yellow pigments and was commonly used for the faces in fresco painting. This color gives Giotto's eyes a somewhat disquieting, inhuman (reptilian), tone that contributes to the effect of atemporality.

The direct and indirect disciples of Giotto (Taddeo and Agnolo Gaddi, Stefano Fiorentino and his son, Giotto, Andrea Pisano, and others) understood the importance of these almond eyes that were never fully open but always visionary, that the viewer never fully knows where they are looking, and through which the master expresses emotion with that "naturalist" and Franciscan vigor that so impacted his first critics. Giotto's narrative concision, which achieves in each frame compact syntheses of dramatism and self-evidence, boils down to those eyes that oscillate between the inhuman and superhuman and in those out-of-time gazes that direct the attention of the viewer toward uncertain referents. Thus, the viewer, like the reader Dante speaks to, completes the scene with their dose of faith, with their *unwilling* suspension of belief, while they look for the object of the gazes. Their search is in vain because the vanishing point of all the gazes is eternity.

Without meaning to force the connection between Giotto and Dante (yes, they did possibly meet; yes, Giotto is the only contemporary painter mentioned in *The Divine Comedy*; yes, the style of both is characterized by a proverbial narrative economy and by an outstanding ability to generate affective verisimilitude), I return to the end of the sixteenth canto of the *Inferno* and to the image of truth disguised as fiction that synthesizes the nature of the prophetic poetry and that functions as an antidote to fraud. There are two details in the Scrovegni Chapel, two corners painted like little windows that produce the three-dimensional illusion of a contiguous empty space, a *coretto*. They are details that reinforce the image of Giotto as a master illusionist, precursor of the lineal and anti-naturalist perspective²³. These openings trick the eye, they are fiction disguised as truth. But perhaps in the closed, self-contained, atemporal universe of

²³ Longhi, Gombrich, Cole, and others underscored Giotto's illusionist capacity. Cole says the painter "fell heir to an art that was slowly changing from abstraction to illusionism" (B. Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 39). But Vasari (see G. Vasari, *op. cit.*, p. 110) had already praised Giotto's ability with perspective. See E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, Phaidon, London 1995, p. 151; R. Longhi, *Giotto spazioso*, in *Giudizio sul duecento e ricerche sul trecento nell'Italia centrale (1939-1970)*, Sansoni, Florence 1974, p. 62.

Scrovegni, they are truths disguised as fiction. Like Dante's warning to his reader, when the poet vehemently affirms his credibility right before describing as true a chimera of his abysmal imagination, Giotto's *trompe-l'œil*, just like the unaligned and disruptive gazes of his characters, far from being tricks to deceive the viewer, are modes of constructing self-evidence and establishing the necessary conditions for it to produce the ultimate and fundamental effect medieval art aspired to: facilitating the epiphany of transcendence.

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La chiarezza come rivelazione: Dante e Giotto tra verità, visione e atemporalità

Questo saggio esplora i parallelismi estetici tra la *Divina Commedia* di Dante e gli affreschi di Giotto nella Cappella degli Scrovegni, concentrandosi sul concetto di perspicuità – o evidenza intrinseca – come segno distintivo della rivelazione di verità nel Medioevo. A partire dal giuramento al lettore nel canto XVI dell'*Inferno*, l'analisi mostra come Dante costruisca la propria credibilità attraverso una combinazione di realismo, simbolismo e visione immaginativa. Tale dinamica trova un corrispettivo nella lingua visiva di Giotto, che genera un'illusione di presenza senza tempo grazie alla totalità spaziale e agli sguardi non sincronizzati.

Il saggio propone l'idea di un "terzo Giotto", né puramente naturalista né strettamente realistico, ma un artista la cui forza risiede nella capacità di evocare atemporalità e trascendenza mediante l'evidenza visiva. L'intreccio di sguardi, l'azione sospesa e i dettagli *trompe-l'œil* negli affreschi giotteschi si accordano con la "verità come finzione" della poesia dantesca, intesi come antidoti alla frode. In ultima analisi, si sostiene che Dante e Giotto costruiscano esperienze estetiche capaci di condurre lettore e spettatore verso l'epifania e la percezione di verità eterne.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Dante, Giotto, Perspicuità, Temporalità, Estetica medievale.

Dante and Giotto: Thoughts on Perspicuity

This essay explores the aesthetic parallels between Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Giotto's frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel, focusing on the concept of perspicuity – or self-evidence – as a hallmark of medieval truth-revelation. Beginning with Dante's oath to the reader in *Inferno* XVI, the paper examines how the poet asserts credibility through a blend of realism, symbolism, and imaginative vision. This dynamic mirrors Giotto's own visual language, which creates an illusion of timeless presence through spatial totality and unsynchronized gazes. I propose a "third Giotto," neither strictly naturalist nor realist, but an artist whose effectiveness lies in evoking atemporality and transcendence through visual self-evidence. The interplay of gazes, suspended action, and *trompe-l'œil* details in Giotto's work aligns with Dante's poetic truth-as-fiction, both functioning as antidotes to fraud. Ultimately, the paper argues that both artists construct aesthetic experiences that lead the viewer or reader toward epiphany and the apprehension of eternal truths.

KEYWORDS: Dante, Giotto, Perspicuity, Temporality, Medieval Aesthetics.