

## 8. GIOTTO'S JOY

How can we find our way through what separates words from what is both without a name and more than a name: a painting? What is it that we are trying to go through? The space of the very act of naming? At any rate, it is not the space of "first naming," or of the incipient naming of the *infans*; nor is it the one that arranges into signs what the subject perceives as separate reality. In the present instance, the painting is already there. A particular "sign" has already come into being. It has organized "something" into a painting with no hopelessly *separate* referent; or rather, the painting is its own reality. There is also an "I" speaking, and any number of "I's" speaking differently before the "same" painting. The question, then, is to insert the signs of language into this already-produced reality-sign—the painting; we must open out, release, and set side by side what is compact, condensed, and meshed. We must then find our way through what separates the place where "I" speak, reason, and understand from the one where something functions in addition to my speech: something that is more-than-speech, a meaning to which space and color have been added. We must develop, then, a second-stage naming in order to name an excess of names, a more-than-name become space and color—a painting. We must retrace the speaking thread, put back into words that from which words have withdrawn.

My choice, my desire to speak of Giotto (1267–1336)—if justification be needed—relates to his experiments in architecture and color (his translation of instinctual drives into colored surface) as much as to his place within the history of Western painting. (He lived at a time when the die had not yet been cast, when it was far from sure that all lines would lead toward the unifying, fixed center of perspective.)<sup>1</sup> I shall attempt to

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relate that experience, that translation, that pivotal historic moment without verbal support from any of these—except for a few anecdotal although not insignificant points, drawn mostly from Giorgio Vasari.<sup>2</sup> This kind of endeavor locates my strategy somewhere between an immediate and subjective deciphering and a still incoherent, heteroclitic theoretical apparatus yet to be worked out. Primarily, I should emphasize that such an itinerary implicates its subject more than it repudiates it under the aegis of a scientific code. This is not an apology; rather, I am calling attention to the dialectical necessity and difficulty now facing any theory of painting that attempts to put forward an understanding of its own *practice*.

### NARRATION AND THE NORM

Giotto's pictorial narrative follows biblical and evangelical canon, at Assisi as well as at Padua, deviating from it only to bring in the masses. In those works concerning St. Francis, the Virgin Mary, and Christ, mythical characters resemble the peasants of Giotto's time. This sociological aspect, however important it might be to the history of painting, shall not concern me here. Of course, it goes hand in hand with Giotto's disruption of space and color; it could not have come about without such a disruption and, in this sense, I could say that it followed.

Christian legend, then, provided the pictorial signified: the normative elements of painting, insuring both adherence to social code and fidelity to ideological dogma. The norm has withdrawn into the *signified*, which is a *narrative*. Painting as such would be possible as long as it served the narrative; within the framework of the narrative, it had free rein. A narrative signified cannot constrain the signifier (let us accept these terms for the moment) except through the imposition of *continuous representation*. Contrary to a certain kind of Buddhist or Taoist painting, Christian painting experienced the mass arrival of characters with their itineraries, destinies, and histories: in short, their epic.

The advent of "histories of subjects" or "biographies"—symbolizing both phylo- and ontogenetic mutations—as well as the introduction of the principle of *narrative* into Christian ideology and art are theoretically justified by Saint Francis and his exegete Saint Bonaventura. The latter's

*The Mind's Road to God* is the philosophical enunciation of a subject's itinerary, of a series of trials, of biography, of *narrative*. If the principle of *itinerary* itself is not new (it appears in Greek epics, popular oral tradition, biblical legends, etc.), its formulation by Bonaventura is relatively so, favoring, or simply justifying, its entry into the Christian pictorial art of the time by disrupting twelve-centuries-old, rigid Christian canon. This theoretical and artistic phenomenon fits in with a new European society moving towards the Renaissance and breaks with the Byzantine tradition (portraits and detailed but isolated scenes, lacking sequences of images articulated within a totalizing continuity) that Orthodox Christianity, which had no Renaissance, preserved.

There are pictorial narrative *episodes* in the nave of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (fourth century), but it would seem that the oldest narrative *sequence* pertaining to the old Testament is in the Church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, dating from the time of Theodoric. In illustrated manuscripts of the sixth century, illuminations follow a logic of narrative episodes (cf. *The Book of Genesis* at Vienna). But Byzantine mosaics, including those at St. Mark's Church in Venice, depict detailed scenes and sequences of dramatic and pathetic scenes without any comprehensive narrative to seal the entire fate of a *particular* character.

To the contrary, the narrative signified of the Giotto frescoes at Padua (figure 3), through a simple and stark logic limited to the basic episodes of Mary's and Jesus' lives, suggests that the democratization of the Christian religion was effected by means of biography. On the walls of Padua we find a masterful expression of personal itineraries replacing Byzantine pathos. Within Giotto's pictorial narrative, the notion of individual history is, in fact, more developed in the Padua frescoes than in those at Assisi. The empty chairs suspended in a blue expanse (*The Vision of the Thrones at Assisi*) would be unimaginable in the secular narrative of the Padua frescoes.

Yet, the narrative signified of the Arena Chapel's nave, supporting the symbolism of teleological dogma (guarantee of the mythical Christian community) and unfolding in three superimposed bands from left to right in accordance with the Scriptures, is artificial. Abruptly, the scroll tears, coiling in upon itself from both sides near the top of the back wall facing the altar, revealing the gates of heaven and exposing the narrative as

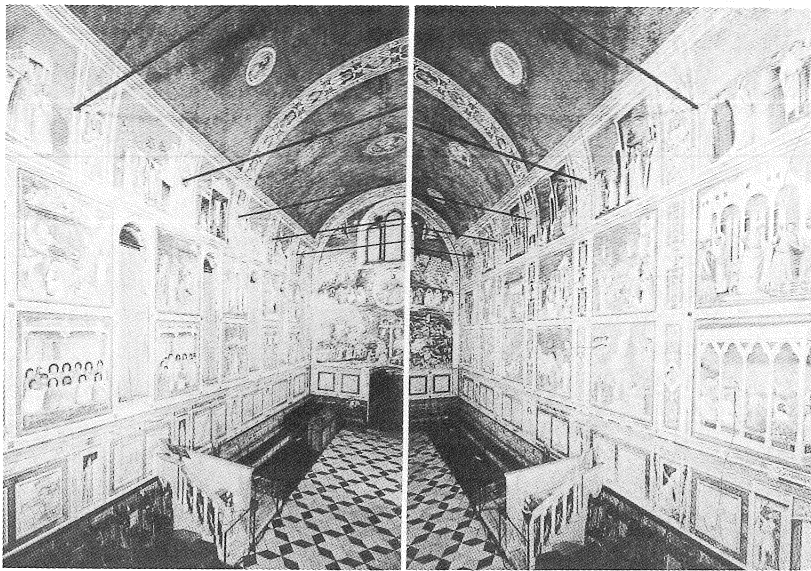


FIGURE 3.  
GIOTTO, INTERIOR OF THE ARENA CHAPEL, PADUA.  
Photo: Dmitri Kessel

nothing but a thin layer of color (figure 4). Here, just under the two scrolls, facing the altar, lies another scene, outside the narrative: *Hell*, within the broader scope of the Last Judgment. This scene is the reverse of the narrative's symbolic sequence; three elements coexist there: historical characters (Scrovegni [who is the donor of the chapel], and the painter himself), the Last Judgment, and the two groups of the blessed and the damned. With the representation of Hell the narrative sequence stops, is cut short, in the face of historical reality, Law, and fantasy (naked bodies, violence, sex, death)—in other words, in the face of the human dimension—the reverse of the divine continuity displayed in the narrative. In the lower right-hand corner, in the depiction of Hell, the contours of the characters are blurred, some colors disappear, others weaken, and still others darken: phosphorescent blue, black, dark red. There is no longer a distinct architecture; obliquely set masonry alongside angular mountains in the narrative scenes give way on the far wall to ovals, discontinuity, curves, and chaos.



FIGURE 4.  
GIOTTO, DETAIL FROM THE LAST JUDGMENT.  
ARENA CHAPEL, PADUA.  
Photo: Scala

It seems as if the narrative signified of Christian painting were upheld by an ability to point to its own dissolution; the unfolding narrative (of transcendence) must be broken in order for what is both extra- and anti-narrative to appear: nonlinear space of historical men, Law, and fantasy.

The representation of Hell would be the representation of narrative dissolution as well as the collapse of architecture and the disappearance of color. Even at this full stop in epic sequence, *representation* still rules

as the only vestige of a transcendental norm, and of a signified in Christian art. Deprived of narrative, representation alone, as signifying device, operates as guarantee for the mythic (and here, Christian) community; it appears as symptomatic of this pictorial work's adherence to an ideology; but it also represents the opposite side of the norm, the antinorm, the forbidden, the anomalous, the excessive, and the repressed: Hell.

Only in this way is the *signifier* of the narrative (i.e., the particular ordering of forms and colors constituting the narrative as *painting*) released here, at the conclusion of the narrative; it finds its sign, and consequently, becomes symbolized as the reverse, negative, and inseparable other of transcendence. The history of individual subjects, the Last Judgment, and Hell capture in a transcendence (which is no longer recited, but rather, pinpointed; no longer situated in time but rather in space) this "force working upon form" that earlier was concatenated as narrative. In Hell, painting reaches its limit and breaks apart. The next move would be to abandon representation, to have nothing but color and form—or nothing at all. In Giotto's work, color and form "in themselves" are never liberated. But beginning with Giotto, with the emergence of the great Christian paintings of the Renaissance, the independence of color and form appears *in relation to* the signified (to theological norm): with respect to *narrative* and *representation*. It appears independent precisely because it constantly *pits itself* against the everpresent norm. It tears itself from the norm, bypasses it, turns away from it, absorbs it, goes beyond it, does something else—always in relation to it.

Certain Buddhist and Far Eastern paintings exclude the signified from representation and become depleted either through the way they are laid out (Tantric squares, for example) or inscribed (ideograms in Chinese painting). Giotto's practice, on the other hand, and the Christian tradition of art in general, show their independence of symbolic Law *by pitting themselves* against the represented narrative (parables of Christian dogma) as well as against the very economy of symbolization (color-form-representation). Thus, pictorial practice fulfills itself as freedom—a process of liberation *through and against the norm*; to be sure, we are speaking of a subject's freedom, emerging through an order (a signified) turned graphic while permitting and integrating its transgressions. For, the subject's freedom, as dialectics sets forth its truth, would consist

precisely in its *relative* escape from the symbolic order. But, since this freedom does not seem to exist outside of what we agree to call an "artist," it comes about by modifying the role played by the systems of referent, signifier, and signified and their repercussions within the organization of signification into real, imaginary, and symbolic (both role and organization are patterned on the function of verbal communication—keystone of the religious arch) so as to organize them *differently*. Two elements, *color* and the organization of pictorial *space*, will help us, within Giotto's painting, to follow this movement towards relative independence from a signifying practice patterned on verbal communication.

### THE TRIPLE REGISTER OF COLOR

In the search for a clue to artistic renewal, attention has often been given to the composition and geometrical organization of Giotto's frescoes. Critics have less frequently stressed the importance of color in the pictorial "language" of Giotto and of painters in general. This is probably because "color" is difficult to *situate* both within the *formal system* of painting and within painting considered as a *practice*—therefore, in relation to the painter. Although semiological approaches consider painting as a language, they do not allow an equivalent for color within the elements of language identified by linguistics. Does it belong among phonemes, morphemes, phrases, or lexemes? If it ever was fruitful, the language/painting analogy, when faced with the problem of color, becomes untenable. Any investigation of this question must therefore start from another hypothesis, no longer structural, but *economic*—in the Freudian sense of the term.

What we have permissibly called the conscious presentation of the object can now be split up into the presentation of the *word* and the presentation of the *thing* [ . . . ] The system *Ucs.* contains the thing-cathexes of the objects, the first and true object-cathexes; the *Pcs.* comes about by this thing-presentation being hypercathexed through being linked with the word-presentations corresponding to it. It is these hypercathexes, we may suppose, that bring about a higher psychological organization and make it possible for the primary process to be succeeded by the secondary process which is dominant in the *Pcs.*<sup>3</sup>

This hypercathexis of thing-presentations by word-presentations permits the former to become conscious, something they could never do without

this hypercathexis, for "thought proceeds in systems so far remote from the original perceptual residues that they have no longer retained anything of the qualities of those residues, and, in order to become conscious, need to be reinforced by new qualities."<sup>4</sup>

Freud sees, then, a split between perception and thought process. Positing a qualitative disappearance of archaic perceptions (an assumption that seems wrong to us when we consider the subject as "artist," but we shall not argue this point here), Freud situates word-presentations in a position of relationship involving two categories: the perceptual and the verbal. Such an economy is particularly clear in the case of schizophrenia where word-presentations undergo a more intense cathexis in order to allow for recovery of "lost objects" separated from the ego (what Freud calls "taking the road of the object by way of its word element").

In interpreting Freud's terminology, it becomes clear that "thing-presentation" principally designates the pressure of the *unconscious* drive linked to (if not provoked by) objects. "Thought" denotes *conscious* processes (including secondary processes), and the various syntactical and logical operations; resulting from the imposition of repression, they hold at bay the "thing-presentations" and their corresponding instinctual pressures. The term "word-presentation" poses more of a problem. It seems to designate a complex state of drive that cathects the symbolic level,<sup>5</sup> where this instinctual drive will later be replaced, due to repression, by the sign representing (erasing) it within the communicative system. Within "word-presentations" the drive's pressure: (1) is directed at an external object; (2) is a sign in a system; and (3) emanates from the biological organ that articulates the psychic basis of such sign (the vocal apparatus, the body in general). Freud in fact writes, "But word-presentations, for their part too, are derived from sense-perceptions, in the same way as thing-presentations are."<sup>6</sup>

Word-presentations would then be doubly linked to the body. First, as representations of an "exterior" object denoted by the word, as well as representations of the pressure itself, which, although intraorganic, nevertheless relates the speaking subject to the object. Second, as representations of an "interior object," an internal perception, an eroticization of the body proper during the act of formulating the word as a symbolic element. This bodily "duel," thus coupling the inside and the outside, as well as the two instinctual pressures linked to both, is the matter upon which repression is set—transforming this complex and



heterogeneous pressure into a *sign* directed at someone else within a communicative system, i.e., transforming it into language.

The triple register is made up of a pressure marking an outside, another linked to the body proper, and a sign (signifier and primary processes). This is then invested in the fragile, ephemeral, and compact phase of the symbolic function's genesis and constitutes the true requirement for this function. It is precisely this triple register that is cathected in an instinctual manner in cases of "narcissistic neuroses" where one has detected the "flight of the ego that manifests itself in the removal of conscious cathexis." That is, it forsakes the distance that kept apart "thought" from "drives" and "thing-presentations" and thus culminated in isolating the ego.

This triad also seems to be hypercathected on the artistic function, whose economy thus appears to be clearly distinct from that of communication. If, indeed, the signifier-signified-referent triangle seems methodologically sufficient to describe the communicative function, artistic practice adds what Freud calls "word-presentation." This implies the triple register of exterior drive, interior drive, and signifier. It in no way corresponds to the sign's triangle, but it affects the architecture of the latter. As a result, the artistic function introduces a pivotal order into the symbolic order (the order of "thought," according to Freud's terminology). This pivotal order—both an "energetic pressure" (instinctual drive) and an "imprint" (signifier)—modifies both the symbolic (because it cathects it with instinctual drive and thing-presentation) and thing-presentations (because it cathects them with signifying relationships that the perceptions themselves could not have insofar as their cathexes "correspond only to relationships between thing-presentations").<sup>7</sup>

This Freudian metapsychological triad frustrates both "representation" (as it rather involves taking in instinctual pressures) and the "word." It suggests an elementary *formal apparatus*, capable of setting in motion the phonemic order, a stock of lexemes, syntactic strategies (these to be determined for each subject through the process of language acquisition), and the presyntactic and prelogical primary processes of displacement, condensation, and repetition. This formal apparatus, subsuming instinctual pressures, is a kind of verbal *code* dominated by the two axes of metaphor and metonymy; but it uses, in a specific way (according to each subject) the general and limited possibilities of a given language.

Color can be defined, considering what I have just said, as being articulated on such a triple register within the domain of visual perceptions: an instinctual pressure linked to external visible objects; the same pressure causing the eroticizing of the body proper *via* visual perception and gesture; and the insertion of this pressure under the impact of censorship as a sign in a system of representation.

Matisse alludes to color having such a basis in instinctual drives when he speaks of a "*retinal sensation* [that] destroys the calm of the surface and the contour"; he even compares it to that of voice and hearing: "Ultimately, there is only a *tactile vitality* comparable to the 'vibrato' of the violin or voice."<sup>8</sup> And yet, although subjective and instinctual, this advent of color (as well as of any other "artistic device") is necessarily and therefore *objectively* occasioned and determined by the historically produced, formal system in which it operates:

Our senses have an age of development which does not come from the immediate surroundings, but from a moment in civilization. We are born with the sensibility of a given period of civilization. And that counts for more than all we can learn about a period. The arts have a development which comes not only from the individual, but also from an accumulated strength, the civilization which precedes us. One can't do just anything. A talented artist cannot do just as he likes. If he used only his talents, he would not exist. We are not the masters of what we produce. It is imposed on us.<sup>9</sup>

One might therefore conceive color as a complex economy effecting the condensation of an excitation moving towards its referent, of a physiologically supported drive, and of "ideological values" germane to a given culture. Such values could be considered as the necessary historical decantation of the first two components. Thence, color, in each instance, must be deciphered according to: (1) the scale of "natural" colors; (2) the psychology of color perception and, especially, the psychology of each perception's instinctual cathexis, depending on the phases the concrete subject goes through with reference to its own history and within the more general process of imposing repression; and (3) the pictorial system either operative or in the process of formation. A preeminently composite element, color condenses "objectivity," "subjectivity," and the intrasystematic organization of pictorial practice. It thus emerges as a grid (of *differences* in light, energetic charge, and systematic value) whose every element is linked with several interlocking registers. Because

it belongs to a painting's system, and therefore, to the extent that it plays a structural role in any subject-elaborated apparatus, color is an index of value (of an objective referent) and an instinctual pressure (an erotic implication of the subject); it hence finds itself endowed with new functions it does not possess outside this system and, therefore, outside pictorial practice. In a painting, color is pulled from the unconscious into a symbolic order; the unity of the "self" clings to this symbolic order, as this is the only way it can hold itself together. The triple register is constantly present, however, and color's diacritical value within each painting's system is, by the same token, withdrawn toward the unconscious. As a result, color (compact within its triple dimension) escapes censorship; and the unconscious irrupts into a culturally coded pictorial distribution.

Consequently, the chromatic experience constitutes a menace to the "self," but also, and to the contrary, it cradles the self's attempted reconstitution. Such an experience follows in the wake of the specular-imaginary self's formation-dissolution. Linked therefore to primary narcissism and to subject-object indeterminacy, it carries traces of the subject's instinctual drive toward unity (*Lust-Ich*) with its exterior surrounding, under the influence of the pleasure principle about to become reality principle under the weight of rejection, the symbolic function, and repression.<sup>10</sup> But chromatic experience casts itself as a turning point between the "self's" conservative and destructive proclivities; it is the place of narcissistic eroticism (autoeroticism) and death drive—never one without the other. If that experience is a revival of the "self" through and beyond the pleasure principle, such a revival never succeeds in the sense that it would constitute a subject *of* (or *under*) symbolic law. This is because the symbolic necessity, or the interdiction laid down by color, are never absolute. Contrary to delineated *form* and *space*, as well as to *drawing* and *composition* subjected to the strict codes of representation and verisimilitude, color enjoys considerable freedom. The color scale, apparently restricted by comparison with the infinite variation of forms and figures, is accepted as the very domain of whim, taste, and serendipity in daily life as much as in painting. If, nevertheless, the interplay of colors follows a particular historical necessity (the chromatic code accepted in Byzantine painting is not the same as that of the Renaissance) as well as the internal rules of a given painting (or any

device whatsoever), still such a necessity is weak and includes its own transgression (the impact of instinctual drive) at the very moment it is imposed and applied.

Color might therefore be the space where the prohibition foresees and gives rise to its own immediate transgression. It achieves the momentary dialectic of law—the laying down of One Meaning so that it might at once be pulverized, multiplied into plural meanings. Color is the shattering of unity. Thus, it is through color—colors—that the subject escapes its alienation within a code (representational, ideological, symbolic, and so forth) that it, as conscious subject, accepts. Similarly, it is through color that Western painting began to escape the constraints of narrative and perspective norm (as with Giotto) as well as representation itself (as with Cézanne, Matisse, Rothko, Mondrian). Matisse spells it in full: it is through color—painting's fundamental "device," in the broad sense of "human language"—that revolutions in the plastic arts come about.

When the means of expression have become so refined, so attenuated that their power of expression wears thin, it is necessary to return to *the essential principles which made human language*. They are, after all, the principles which "go back to the source," which relive, which give us life. Pictures which have become refinements, subtle gradations, dissolutions without energy, call for *beautiful blues, reds, yellows*—matters to stir the *sensual depths in men*.<sup>11</sup>

The chromatic apparatus, like rhythm for language, thus involves a shattering of meaning and its subject into a scale of differences. These, however, are articulated within an area beyond meaning that holds meaning's surplus. Color is not zero meaning; it is excess meaning through instinctual drive, that is, through death. By destroying unique normative meaning, death adds its negative force to that meaning in order to have the subject come through. As asserted and differentiating negativity, pictorial color (which overlays the practice of a subject merely speaking in order to communicate) does not erase meaning; it maintains it through multiplication and shows that it is engendered as the meaning of a singular being. As the dialectical space of a psycho-graphic equilibrium, color therefore translates an oversignifying logic in that it inscribes instinctual "residues" that the understanding subject has not symbolized.<sup>12</sup> It is easy to see how color's logic might have been considered "empty of meaning," a mobile grid (since it is subjective), but outside of semantics, and therefore, as dynamic law,<sup>13</sup> rhythm, interval,<sup>14</sup> gesture.

We would suggest, on the contrary, that this "formal," chromatic grid, far from empty, is empty only of a "unique or ultimate signified"; that it is heavy with "semantic latencies" linked to the economy of the subject's constitution within significance.

Color, therefore, is not the black cast of form, an undefilable, forbidden, or simply deformable figure; nor is it the white of dazzling light, a transparent light of meaning cut off from the body, conceptual, instinctually foreclosed. Color does not suppress light but segments it by breaking its undifferentiated unicity into spectral multiplicity. It provokes surface clashes of varying intensity. Within the distribution of color, when black and white are present, they too are colors; that is to say, instinctual/diacritical/representational condensations.

After having made manifest and analyzed the "mystery" of light and the chemical production of colors, science will no doubt establish the objective basis (biophysical and biochemical) of color perception; just as contemporary linguistics, having discovered the phoneme, is seeking its corporeal, physiological and, perhaps, biological foundation. Psychoanalytic research will then make it possible, proceeding not only from the objective basis of perception and of the phases of the subject's passage through chromatic acquisition parallel to linguistic acquisition, to establish the more or less exact psychoanalytic equivalents of a particular subject's color scale. (These phases would include the perception of such and such a color at a given stage; the state of instinctual drive cathexes during this period; the relationship to the mirror phase, to the formation of the specular "I"; relationship to the mother; et cetera.) Given the present state of research, we can only outline certain general hypotheses on the basis of our observations concerning painting's relationship to the subject's signifying mode. In all likelihood, these hypotheses involve the observer much more than they can lay any claim to objectivity.

## FORMA LUCIS: THE BURLESQUE

Therefore, speak to them, and hear, and believe,  
Since the light of the truth which requites them  
Does not let them turn from itself.

Dante, *Paradiso*, III, 31-33

That specific economy of color can perhaps explain why metaphysical speculations on light and its variations go back to the very oldest of

beliefs. Within Indo-European civilizations, for instance, they are implicit in the fundamentals of Zoroastrianism; later, through Hellenistic civilization,<sup>15</sup> and Plotinism,<sup>16</sup> they reach the center of Christian doctrine (in Saint Augustine, for example), opening up within Christianity an opportunity for the plastic arts, for a flowering of images, never before achieved. The twelfth century occupies a key position in this process because of the humanist reform it brought to Christianity: this affects the metaphysics of color in the work of Saint Bonaventura, when it linked *light* with the *body*. As the other of the body, light gives it its *form* and thus becomes the privileged intermediary between substance and its effect—or the essential element of imagination: "If light names or articulates form, then light cannot possibly be a body; it must be a *something-else-than* body. [ . . . ] Augustine says that humor and the earth's soil are fundamental counterparts, and philosophers say that warmth is a certain subtle kind of substance. [ . . . ] Therefore, it seems clear that light, both strictly and figuratively speaking, is not a body, but a corporeal form":<sup>17</sup> *forma lucis*.

This statement entails a liberating scope difficult for us to appreciate today: it aims at contesting the *luminous unicity* of the idea and opens it up to the *spectrum* of the subject's "artistic" experience, the place of the imagination. Formative light is nothing but light shattered into colors, an opening up of colored surfaces, a flood of representations.

Yet, at the same time, we must insist on the ambiguity of such a statement: if it contests a rigid, unitary theology, arrested in the dazzling whiteness of meaning, then, by the same token, it co-opts the chromatic scale (with its basis of drives crossing through the subject), into theological space, as I suggested earlier.

Within this ambiguity and by playing with this contradiction, Western painting professed to serve Catholic theology while betraying it at the same time; it eventually left behind, first, its themes (at the time of the Renaissance), and later, its norm—representation (with the advent of Impressionism and the ensuing movements). Several theological statements bear witness to high spiritual leaders' distrust of painting, which they perceive as "not elevated enough" spiritually, if not simply "burlesque." Hegel evinces this kind of attitude when, after having recognized Giotto's original use of color, and pursuing his reasoning in the same paragraph, he observes that the painter leaves behind spirituality's higher spheres:

Giotto, along with the changes he effected in respect to modes of conception and composition, brought about a reform in the art of preparing colours. [...] The things of the world receive a stage and a wider opportunity for expression; and this is illustrated by the way Giotto, under the influence of his age, found room for burlesque along with so much that was pathetic [...] in this tendency of Giotto to humanize and towards realism he never really, as a rule, advances beyond a comparatively subordinate stage in the process.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, in changing color style, Giotto might have given a graphic reality to the "natural" and "human" tendencies of the ideology of his time. Giotto's colors would be "formal" equivalents of the burlesque, the visual precursors of the earthy laugh that Rabelais only translated into language a few centuries later. Giotto's joy is the sublimated jouissance of a subject liberating himself from the transcendental dominion of One Meaning (white) through the advent of its instinctual drives, again articulated within a complex and regulated distribution. Giotto's joy burst into the chromatic clashes and harmonies that guided and dominated the architectonics of the Arena Chapel frescoes at Padua. This chromatic joy is the indication of a deep ideological and subjective transformation; it descreetly enters the theological signified, distorting and doing violence to it without relinquishing it. This joy evokes the carnivalesque excesses of the masses but anticipates their verbal and ideological translations, which came to light later, through literary art (the novel, or, in philosophy, the heresies). That this chromatic experience could take place under the aegis of the Order of Merry Knights commemorating the Virgin is, perhaps, more than a coincidence (sublimated jouissance finds its basis in the forbidden mother, next to the Name-of-the-Father).

### PADUA'S BLUE

Blue is the first color to strike the visitor as he enters into the semidarkness of the Arena Chapel. Unusual in Giotto's time because of its brilliance, it contrasts strongly with the somber coloring of Byzantine mosaics as well as with the colors of Cimabue or the Sienese frescoes.<sup>19</sup>

The delicate, chromatic nuances of the Padua frescoes barely stand out against this luminous blue. One's first impression of Giotto's painting is of a colored substance, rather than form or architecture; one is struck by the light that is generated, catching the eye because of the color blue. Such a blue takes hold of the viewer at the extreme limit of visual perception.

In fact, Johannes Purkinje's law states that in dim light, short wavelengths prevail over long ones; thus, before sunrise, blue is the first color to appear. Under these conditions, one perceives the color blue through the rods of the retina's periphery (the serrated margin), while the central element containing the cones (the fovea) fixes the object's image and identifies its form. A possible hypothesis, following André Broca's paradox,<sup>20</sup> would be that the perception of blue entails not identifying the object; that blue is, precisely, on this side of or beyond the object's fixed form; that it is the zone where phenomenal identity vanishes. It has also been shown that the fovea is indeed that part of the eye developed latest in human beings (sixteen months after birth).<sup>21</sup> This most likely indicates that centered vision—the identification of objects, including one's own image (the "self" perceived at the mirror stage between the sixth and eighteenth month)—comes into play after color perceptions. The earliest appear to be those with short wavelengths, and therefore the color blue. Thus all colors, but blue in particular, would have a noncentered or decentering effect, lessening both object identification and phenomenal fixation. They thereby return the subject to the archaic moment of its dialectic, that is, before the fixed, specular "I," but while in the process of becoming this "I" by breaking away from instinctual, biological (and also maternal) dependence. On the other hand, the chromatic experience can then be interpreted as a repetition of the specular subject's emergence in the already constructed space of the understanding (speaking) subject; as a reminder of the subject's conflictual constitution, not yet alienated into the set image facing him, not yet able to distinguish the contours of others or his own other in the mirror. Rather, the subject is caught in the acute contradiction between the instincts of self-preservation and the destructive ones, within a limitless pseudoself, the conflictual scene of primary narcissism and autoerotism<sup>22</sup> whose clashes could follow any concatenation of phonic, visual, or spectral differences.

### OBLIQUE CONSTRUCTIONS AND CHROMATIC HARMONY

The massive irruption of bright color into the Arena Chapel frescoes, arranged in soft but contrasting hues, gives a sculptural *volume* to Giotto's figures, often leading to comparisons with Andrea Pisano. That is, color tears these figures away from the wall's plane, giving them a

depth related to, but also distinct from, a search for perspective. The treatment and juxtaposition of masses of color, transforming surface into volume, is of capital importance to the architectonics of the Padua frescoes; the surface is cut into prisms whose edges clash but, avoiding the axial point of perspective, are articulated as obliquely positioned, suspended blocks.

This conflictual aspect of Giotto's pictorial space has already been noted.<sup>23</sup> In fact, 75 percent of the Padua frescoes display obliquely set blocks: a room viewed from an angle, a building depicted from outside at a given angle, a profile of a mountain, the diagonal arrangement of characters, and so on. These examples attest to Giotto's geometric investigations on the properties of squares and rectangles. Frontal settings are relatively rare, whereas oblique spatial constructions dominate the entire narrative cycle, although to varying degrees, frequently tending to merge with the plane of the wall (as in *The Last Supper*).

In short, Giotto avoids frontal settings as well as vanishing points: conflicting oblique lines indicate that the central viewpoint is not in any fresco, but rather in the space of the building where the painter or viewer is standing. These frescoes, with evanescent or exterior centers, articulated by means of the orthogonals' *aggressive patterns*, reveal a spatial organization very unlike the one adopted by perspective-dominated "realist" art. According to John White, this conflictual organization of pictorial space appears only in Islamic or Chinese art—and there only rarely—in the form of "carpets" or "tables" seen from above, the normal viewpoint being avoided within such "spatial" organizations.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Giotto's oblique compositions are sustained by the subject's axial point outside of the image. The fresco is thus without autonomy, impossible to isolate from the narrative series; but neither can it be separated from the building's volume, or severed from the hand tracing it. Each fresco, therefore, is the transposition of this volume and subject into an act that is not yet alienated to the facing facet, within the image in perspective.

This conflict within pictorial space is even more clear cut at Assisi. In the fresco *Expulsion of the Demons from Arezzo* (figure 5) there are broken spaces, shifted and repeated blocks set side by side at different angles. In *Dream of the Palace and Arms*, the frame, seen from the front, appears as a square; inside, however, there are two blocks seen at a



FIGURE 5.  
GIOTTO, *THE EXPULSION OF THE DEMONS FROM AREZZO*.  
BASILICA OF ST. FRANCIS, ASSISI.  
Photo: Scala

forty-five-degree angle, one next to the other, transparent, with each rectangular surface once again divided in order to generate other blocks and tiered columns. A block is set at an angle to the frame, broken and exploded on the far-side wall, culminating in the triangle at the top (pyramid) or in the green cupola; or, conversely, pyramid and cupola are articulated by means of nested, broken blocks (*The Crucifix of St.*



*Damian Speaks to St. Francis*). *St. Francis Renouncing the World* presents open blocks, pressed onto each other, slightly askew; another diagonal overlapping echoes them within the square fresco. In the *Dream of Pope Innocent III*, a raised and imbalanced block collapses onto another facing it within the square of the frame. In *The Apparition to the Brothers of Arles*, another block, opening from the back towards the viewer, would be almost in perspective except for the friezes and ogives near the top, deepening and multiplying the surfaces and preventing the lines from converging at one point. In *Visions of Friar Augustine and the Bishop of Assisi* there are blocks open on the right, soaring over a large block oriented towards the left, to which is added, similarly oriented, a triptych of blocks with their far sides shot through with blue ovals.

A similar working of square surfaces may be seen in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence. An interesting variation of Giotto's geometrical investigations of the rectangle appears in *St. Francis Preaching before Honorius III* at Assisi. The surface of the square cut out by the frame is translated into two volumes, one set on top of the other (the seat); but this antagonistic treatment of space is softened by the curves of the three ribbed vaults, as if the square, confronted with the circle, produced an oval lining, a depth set off from the frame, a field curving inwards, but avoiding the vanishing point of perspective. This particular treatment of space is worth noting, since it reappears at Padua in two figureless frescoes. Situated over the altar, they inaugurate the narrative series and program it, providing its graphic matrix, in three stages: first there is a solid rectangular base; second, above this an angle appears (slanted to the left in one fresco, to the right in the other)—a confrontation of surfaces cut into squares, a conflictive module for space; third, the conflict is nevertheless harmonized in the upper part of the fresco, where the intersecting arcs of the ogives meet in the ribbed cupola's three focal points. A spiral is clinched before the window as if to emphasize the unstoppable and inexhaustible movement going from square to circle.

How do colors participate in this both antagonistic and harmonized space?

Two workings of color may easily be distinguished at Padua: first, in the scenery (field, landscape, architecture); and second, in the make up of human figures and interiors.

The blue field dominates the scenery. The oblique or frontal planes of the blocks stand out from this background either through the use of colors close to blue (green, grayish-green: for example, in *The Annunciation to Anna*) or contrasting with it (rose and pinkish gray, for example, in *The Meeting at the Golden Gate*; or gold and golden-rose in *The Betrothal of the Virgin*). Interiors that are set frontally are surrounded by square or lateral planes painted rose or yellow (*The Mocking of Christ*). The blue-green relation dominates the upper frescoes, whereas the blue-rose or blue-gold one appears more frequently in the lower registers. Once again, Giotto seemingly wants to facilitate the natural perception of a viewer standing at the center of the somber church. The less visible upper registers are consequently done in blue-green, while the lower ones, more accessible to daylight, accentuate gilded-rose colors, which are, in fact, the first perceived under increased lighting.

In every case, however, the antagonistic space of the overlapping, fragmented blocks is achieved through the confrontation of colored surfaces: either through colors of the same hue with the addition of complementary tones (for example, the pink roof in *The Annunciation to Anna*), or directly through complementary chromatic scales.

What is important is that, except for the basic blues, all other hues are particularly refined and *very light*. It seems as if the distribution of colored masses reflected a search for the *smallest possible difference* capable of shattering a homogeneous background. Such a difference is precisely what causes spatial conflictivity to be perceived without violence—as harmony and transition.

This becomes even more evident in the treatment of human figures.

On the one hand, each mass of color is unfolded into its variants. For example, the colors of clothing are opened out through the realistic effect of drapery folds into variations of pink absorbing gray, white, and green, thus molding a cape. These variants are infinitesimal differentials within the already subtly different light hues of Giotto's palette. In some instances they recall the subdued colorings of Chinese prints, where a text supports the signified, while color seeks out barely perceptible differences, minute retinal sensations charged with the least "semantic latency." These "folds of color" are confrontations between one color and the complete chromatic scale: while each color remains dominant

in its various mixtures, it is also *differently* and *indefinitely attenuated*. The conflict within a color moving toward white—an effect of pure brilliance—provides each color and, therefore, each framed surface, with a sense of volume. This rounded, sculptural aspect of Giotto's figures strikes one immediately. The curves of the drawing (oval shape of the heads, rounded fullness of the bodies) repeat the oval-shaped, colored masses (deformed and drawn out spheres and cylinders). Roundness becomes chromatic and independent of the curved drawing itself. The line seems guided by unfolding color and merely follows it, accentuates it, settles it, identifies it when color defies fixed objects, and in short, distinguishes it from adjoining spheres and colors. These masses of color become spherical through their own self-differentiation; set within an angular space of blocks and squares, they serve as transition between clashing surfaces. In fact, and more effectively than the clashing surfaces, these masses of color generate the volume of the painted surface. The colors of colliding surfaces thus delineate the edges of such cubed space, while the colors of each figure give volume to and round out this conflict between blocks. Color thus succeeds in shaping a space of conflicts, a space of noncentered, unbordered and unfixed transitions, but a space turned inward.

In addition and at the same time, these voluminous colors, as they come into being by intermixing and detaching themselves from the entire spectrum, become articulated with one another either by close contrast (at the same end of the spectrum) or by truly diverging contrast (complementary colors). Thus, in *The Massacre of the Innocents* at Assisi we have the following sequence: brick red—pink—bordeaux—green—white—lavender—white—green—red—pink—lavender—blue (like the field)—red—gold. To simplify, if we designate red by A, blue by B, and yellow by C, the following arrangement may be seen.

Relatively limited differences appear at the beginning (red—pink): A; there is then a jump to the other end of the spectrum (green): B; an echo of the beginning (lavender): A<sub>1</sub>; again, a return to the opposite side (green): B<sub>1</sub>; its opposite (red): A<sub>2</sub> will be varied until it reaches only a slight difference in hue (pink-lavender): A<sub>3</sub> = B<sub>3</sub> before another return to the opposite (blue): B<sub>4</sub> (= field) opposed in turn by red: A<sub>4</sub> before the final C.

Thus, we have: A—B—A<sub>1</sub>—B<sub>1</sub>—A<sub>2</sub>—A<sub>3</sub> = B<sub>3</sub>—B<sub>4</sub>—A<sub>4</sub>—C.

The arrangement, whose "model" could very well be a multi-faceted gem, is both conflictual and serial. In fact, the geometry represented in the same fresco includes two prismatic towers with their facets obliquely set.

The chromatic treatment of characters produces a plastic effect confirming this geometry. It also adds a harmonization of delineated surfaces and an impression of volume within the colored surfaces themselves. This is done solely by virtue of the colors' own resources, without recourse to geometric determination. Volume is produced by juxtaposing unfolding chromatic differences alone without the assistance of rigid contours. The painter uses drawings and lines, but he coats them, suffuses them with colored matter so that they break away from strictly chromatic differentiation.

By overflowing, softening, and dialecticizing lines, color emerges inevitably as the "device" by which painting gets away from identification of objects and therefore from realism. As a consequence, Giotto's chromatic experiments prefigure a pictorial practice that his immediate followers did not pursue. This practice aspires not to figural representation, but rather, to the resources of the chromatic scale, which then extrapolate, as we have suggested, the instinctual and signifying resources of the speaking subject. For this chromatic system—so crowded with figures, landscape, and mythical scenes—appears void of figuration if viewed at length and attentively. It is like a setting side by side of chromatic differences that throb into a third dimension. Such a chromatic working, therefore, erases angles, contours, limits, placements, and figurations, but reproduces the *movement* of their confrontation.

Color, arranged in this manner, is a compact and plurifunctional element, not conforming to the localization-identification-placement of phenomena and/or their (or any) ultimate meaning; it acts upon the subject's station point outside of the painting rather than projecting him into it. This painting, then, reaches completion within the viewer. It steers the subject towards a systematic cutting through its foreclosure, because it has been set in motion starting from "retinal sensation," their instinctual basis, and the superimposed signifying apparatus. Is this not precisely the "mechanism" of *jouissance* whose economy Freud locates in the process

of removing prohibition by making one's way through it (in his studies on another phenomenon of "bewilderment": witticism, in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*)?

Let me emphasize, in summing up, that this working one's way through is rigorously regulated by a juxtaposition of differences in volume that operates along two converging paths. On the one hand, it brings into play the geometric possibilities of squares and blocks (their conflict); on the other, it explores the infinitesimal chromatic difference that produces a three-dimensional effect from a colored surface and the opposing or serial alternation of such volumes due to an "element" already indicating volume: the triple register of color (as suggested above) in relation to the sign.

The signifying economy thus made up partakes of an *ideological function*: Giotto's painting as an element of the early fourteenth century societal "superstructure." This raises a fundamental problem, that is, the inclusion of a signifying economy within a social context. By its very nature, artistic practice is indeed doubly articulated: through the inclusion of a "subjective" signifying economy within an "objective" ideological functioning; and through the production of meaning through its subject, in terms of (and liable to the constraints of) concrete social contradictions. In other words, a (subjective) signifying economy becomes an artistic signifying practice only to the extent that it is articulated through the social struggles of a given age. Along such lines, I might suggest that the sociopolitical and ideological position of the painter within the social contradictions of his time ultimately determines a concrete signifying economy, turning it into an artistic practice that will play a given social and historical role. A signifying economy within an artistic practice, therefore, not only operates through the individual (biographical subject) who carries it out, but it also recasts him as *historical subject*—causing the signifying process that the subject undergoes to match the ideological and political expectations of his age's rising classes.

Thus, Giotto's own work-jouissance in color and space and the specific role incumbent on the subject therein, which merge with the ideology of the time: subjectivist and humanist renewal of Christianity; liberating, "secularizing," modern, even "materialist" morality (in the forms of Averroism and nominalism). This ideology corresponds to what Fred-

erick Antal calls the "securely established Florentine upper middle class,"<sup>25</sup> which happens to be the financial basis but also the ideological patron not only of Giotto, but, more generally, of the ensuing pictorial renewal. Antal's study should be consulted for a detailed analysis of the economic and ideological foundations behind the pictorial experience examined here. I would simply emphasize that one cannot understand such practice without taking its socioeconomic foundations into account; nor can one understand it if one chooses to reduce it solely to these foundations, thereby bypassing the signifying economy of the subject involved.

I began with a discussion of color in terms of light, and therefore, of frequency. Applied to an object, however, the notion of color can only have topological value: it expresses precise structures of atoms and molecules. Therefore, what can be described in terms of frequency (light) can only be analyzed in terms of geometry (coloring matter).

Nevertheless, concerning the painting's signification, these topological or frequential differences are of no import in their own specificities and precisions. They are important only as structural differences allowing a spatial distribution. As diacritical markings inside a system (the system of a painting), these differences provide a structural constraint, a general outline, that captures signifi-ance as well as its specific subject looking at the painting. Beyond the threshold of structural necessity, however, color plays, as I have shown, on a complex register: the instinctual cathexis of chromatic elements and the ideological values that a particular age places on them. What escapes structural constraint is nonetheless sizable, and it is this area that contemporary semiology, aided by psychoanalysis, is investigating.

I have made use of certain elements in Giotto's painting in order to present several problems relevant to painting as signifying practice. Neither the whole of Giotto's work nor the complexity of the questions raised about it are addressed directly by these reflections. Their object has been, rather, to encourage a return to the ("formal" and ideological) history of painting's subject within its contemporary production; to present the avant-garde with a genetic-dialectical reflection on what produced it and/or that from which it sets itself apart. As Walter Benjamin said of literature: "It is not a question of presenting works [ . . . ] in correlation to their own times, but rather, within the framework

of the time of their birth, to present the time that knows them, that is, our own."<sup>26</sup>

## Notes

1. "Giotto's paintings do represent a step towards the artificial perspective of the fifteenth century. At the same time the oblique constructions used in the majority of his designs reveal a movement in a *different direction*"—John White, *Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p. 75; emphasis mine.

2. We should keep in mind that the Padua frescoes are located in the Scrovegni Chapel, generally known as the Arena Chapel. Dante put Scrovegni's father, Reginald, in the seventh circle of Hell. Scrovegni himself was a patron of Giotto and thus figured in the frescoes. He belonged to the Order of Cavalieri Gaudenti or the "Merry Knights," so called because of the wealth and behavior of its members, and upheld the existence and dignity of the Virgin Mary. Giotto himself, who worked under the aegis of the Franciscans, seemed to be at odds with the doctrine of Saint Francis, (unless he be in agreement with its specifically Florentine decadent form), when he wrote a poem against poverty, "Molti son quei che laudan povertade." (Historians, however, do not all agree that he wrote that poem.) In addition, Giotto appears to have been the only Florentine artist at the beginning of the fourteenth century to have amassed a true fortune. Cf. Frederick Antal, *Florentine Painting and Its Social Background* (New York: Harper, 1947). There is also an anecdote concerning Giotto's pictorial practice. In reply to Pope Benedict XI, who was looking for a painter for Saint Peter's Basilica, Giotto is said to have sent a single proof of his expertise—a perfect circle drawn in red paint—whence the expression "a more perfected art than Giotto's O." Cf. John Ruskin, *Giotto and His Work in Padua* (London: Levey, Robson and Franklyn, 1854).

3. Sigmund Freud, *Papers on Metapsychology: The Unconscious in The Standard Edition of the Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press & The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953), 14:201–2.

4. Freud, *Metapsychology*, p. 202.

5. Freud explains this passage from perception to symbolic function by the economy of *unification* and *rejection* engendering the symbolic function, the separation between subject and object, and the imposition of repression; it is confirmed in its role by the creation of the symbol of negation (cf. *Negation in The Standard Edition*, 19:235–39).

6. Freud, *Metapsychology*, p. 202.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

8. Henri Matisse, *Matisse on Art*, Jack Flan, trans. (New York: Phaidon, 1973), Statements to Tériade, 1929–30, p. 58; emphasis mine.

9. Matisse, Statements to Tériade, 1936, p. 74.

10. Marcelin Pleyne has shown, in the case of Matisse, the connection between chromatic experience, relation to the mother, and above all, the oral phase of infantile eroticism that dominates not only the pre-Oedipal experience, but also the phase preceding the "mirror stage" (and therefore, the constitution of the specular "I"), whose role proves to be capital, not only in elucidating the genesis of the symbolic function, but even more so, in structuring the "artistic function." Cf. Marcelin Pleyne, "Le Système de Matisse," in

*L'Enseignement de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), pp. 67–74. Reprinted in Pleyne, *Système de la peinture* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), pp. 66–75.

11. Matisse, Statements to Tériade, 1936, p. 74. My emphasis.

12. By that token, its function is related (in the domain of sight) to rhythm's function and, in general, to the musicality of the literary text, which, precisely in this way, introduces instinctual drive into language.

13. *Physical* theories of color have at times embraced this point of view. According to wave theory, each material atom is made up of a subatom of color or sound whose connections are immaterial: *dharmas* or *laws*. Anaxagoras held that colors represent the interplay of an infinity of seeds corresponding to the infinity of luminous sensations.

14. Plato maintained that "what we say 'is' this or that color will be neither the eye which encounters the motion nor the motion which is encountered, but something which has arisen between the two and is peculiar to each percipient"—*Theaetetus*, F. M. Cornford, trans., in Edith Hamilton & Huntington Cairnes, eds., *Collected Dialogues*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 858–59. Epicurus seems to suggest through his theory of simulacra a connection between color and what we now call the "unconscious." The mind builds a wall against the mass of simulacra that assails it, selecting only those that pique its interest. Cf. M. A. Tonnelat, *Evolution des idées sur la nature des couleurs*, Lecture given at the Palais de la Découverte, 1956.

15. "And knowing that of all things light is best, He made it the indispensable means of sight, the best of the senses; for what the intellect is in the soul, the eye is in the body; for each of them sees, one the things of the mind, the other the things of the senses"—Philo, *On The Creation of the World*, passage 53, in *Philosophia Judaica*, Hans Lewy, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), page 61. See also passage 17. "For the eye of the Absolutely Existent needs no other light to effect perception, but He Himself is the archetypal essence of which myriads of rays are the effluence, none visible to sense, all to the mind. And therefore, they are the instruments of that same God alone, who is apprehended by the mind, not of any who have part and lot in the world of creation. For the created is approached by sense, which can never grasp the nature which is apprehended by mind"—Philo, *On The Cherubim*, passage 97, in *Philo*, F. H. Colson & G. H. Whitaker, trans. (New York: Putnam, 1923), 2:67–69. See also passage 28.

16. "We must imagine a center, and around this center a luminous sphere that radiates from (Intelligence). Then around this sphere, lies a second one that also is luminous, but only as a light lit from another light (the universal Soul). [...] The great light (Intelligence) sheds its light though remaining within itself, and the brilliancy that radiates around it (on to the soul) is 'reason'"—Plotinus, *Enneades*, K. Guthrie, trans. (Philadelphia: Monsalvat Press, 1910), Book iv, 3, 17.

17. "si ergo lux formam dicit, non potest esse lux ipsum corpus, sed aliquid corporis [...] sicut dicit Augustinus quod humor et humus sunt elementa, et philosophi dicunt quod calor est substantia quaedam subtilis [...] sic igitur ex praedictis patet, quod lux, proprie et abstracte loquendo, non est corpus, sed forma corporis"—Sanctus Cardinalis Bonaventurae, *Librum Secundum Sententiarum* [Commentary on the sentences, II] in *Opera Omnia* (Paris: Ludovique Vivès: 1864, 1864), Dist. xiii, Art. 2, Quaest. 2; pp. 552–53.

18. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy Of Fine Art*, F. P. Osmaston, trans. (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1975), 3:322–24.

19. Ruskin notes that before Giotto, "over the whole of northern Europe, the colouring of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries had been pale: in manuscripts, principally com-

posed of pale red, green, and yellow, blue being sparingly introduced (earlier still, in the eighth and ninth centuries, the letters had often been coloured with black and yellow only). Then, in the close of the twelfth and throughout the thirteenth century, the great system of perfect colour was in use; solemn and deep; composed strictly, in all its leading masses, of the colours revealed by God from Sinai as the noblest;—blue, purple, and scarlet, with gold (other hues, chiefly green, with white and black, being used in points or small masses, to relieve the main colours. In the early part of the fourteenth century the colours begin to grow paler; about 1330 the style is already completely modified; and at the close of the fourteenth century, the colour is quite pale and delicate"—Ruskin, *Giotto*, p. 21.

20. "To see a blue light, you must not look directly at it."

21. I. C. Mann, *The Development of the Human Eye* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), p. 68.

22. In this context, it seems that notions of "narcissism" (be it primary) and autoeroticism suggest too strongly an already existing identity for us to apply them rigorously to this conflictual and imprecise stage of subjectivity.

23. White, *Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*, p. 75.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

25. Antal, *Florentine Painting and its Social Background*.

26. Walter Benjamin, "Literaturgeschichte und Literaturwissenschaft" in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt/am/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 3:290.

## 9. MOTHERHOOD ACCORDING TO GIOVANNI BELLINI

### THE MATERNAL BODY

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable, there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. "It happens, but I'm not there." "I cannot realize it, but it goes on." Motherhood's impossible syllogism.

This becoming-a-mother, this gestation, can possibly be accounted for by means of only two discourses. There is *science*; but as an objective discourse, science is not concerned with the subject, the mother as site of her proceedings. There is *Christian theology* (especially canonical theology); but theology defines maternity only as an impossible elsewhere, a sacred beyond, a vessel of divinity, a spiritual tie with the ineffable godhead, and transcendence's ultimate support—necessarily virginal and committed to assumption. Such are the wiles of Christian reason (Christianity's still matchless rationalism, or at least its rationalizing power, finally become clear); through the maternal body (in a state of virginity and "dormition"<sup>1</sup> before Assumption), it thus establishes a sort of subject at the point where the subject and its speech split apart, fragment, and vanish. Lay humanism took over the configuration of that subject through the cult of the mother; tenderness, love, and seat of social conservation.

And yet, if we presume that *someone* exists throughout the process of cells, molecules, and atoms accumulating, dividing, and multiplying