

KATHLEEN FRASER

"NOT BY SYSTEM, BUT BY WRIST":
A CONVERSATION BETWEEN DANTE AND GIOTTO

It is not difficult, gazing on those silent but eloquent walls, to repeople them with the group once[...] assembled with them: Giotto intent upon his work, his wife Ciuta admiring his progress; and Dante, with abstracted eye, alternately conversing with his friend, and watching the gambols of the children playing on the grass before the door.

(Lord Lindsay, *Christian Art*)

Within these walls the greatest painter and the greatest poet of medieval Italy held happy companionship during the time when the frescoes were executed.

(J. Ruskin, *Giotto and His Works in Padua*)

The title of my talk would seem to propose a more judiciously proportioned back-and-forth exchange between Dante and Giotto than I can vouch for. While I've daydreamed various conversations between these two pathfinders and benevolent heretics, nevertheless I am a poet – not a scholar – and so I must speak, *not* from certain evidence, but from the realm of the imagined and speculative **and** from the somewhat post-modern stance of a linguistic sceptic who questions any source of absolute authority, be it church doctrine, received aesthetic standards, stability of historic "fact" and/or hierarchy of correctness – which is to say, any final-version claim to the translation of anything.

At the center of my comments will be a poem I wrote in 1990 called "Giotto: ARENA", and my writing process while working on a poem-of-parts that began nine years earlier with my visit to the Arena Chapel in Padova, following many years of gazing at art books or magazine reproductions of Giotto's frescoes, painted on the Arena walls just after the chapel's construction in 1306.

We all know the stunning impact delivered by a work of art when one is finally standing before it, having fed on its shadow version for years. But it has not always been my experience that such a work continues to take on weight and sufficient demand in the mind's autonomous life, to motivate a further search for the other parts of its story. This happened to me with Giotto in the setting of the Arena chapel, but it was not until some time after I'd finished the poem that I understood just how profoundly my own resistance to codification had been engaged by Giotto's work and by the major decisions both he and Dante took in turning away from the assumed choices of their shared era: in Dante's instance, turning away *from* the official written language of Latin *to* the particular sounds and expressions of the Tuscan vernacular in daily use around him; in Giotto's case, his visual translations, moving *away from* Constantinople's "Great System of Perfect Color" *towards* the odd and compelling human particulars dictated by a shepherd's purple ankle socks or a local merchant's style of marcelled hair. These daily observations revitalized his frescoes and radically refurbished the ancient stories of the Papal kingdom that had circulated in totally predictable fashion throughout Byzantine art for some two-hundred years.

I hadn't really thought about the friendship between Dante and Giotto until I set out, in 1990, to discover more information about Giotto. Somewhere in the middle of reading Vasari's account, I found a very early edition of John Ruskin's little book on the Arena Chapel and then, searching out his sources (among them, Lord Lindsay's *Christian Art*), I began patching together the history of the Arena Chapel's construction – how the wealthy Enrico Scrovegno decided to buy the site and to erect a new chapel in memory of his father, Reginaldo, who had shamed their noble Padovan family by his money-lending practices.

Ruskin tells the story that Enrico, benefitting financially from his father's unseemly and much-resented behaviour, now possessed considerable means with which to buy this already historically marked site, the very same site that had once held the remains of a Roman amphitheatre and where, in 1278, a first chapel was built in which to celebrate, each year, the mystery of the Annunciation in an annual festival called Lady's Day.

In a canny and pious-seeming move, Enrico Scrovegno determined to spend a great deal of money on the decoration of this new chapel – since money spent was money earned, both in the realm of general social prestige but also as an investment in the church fathers' influence and probable willingness to negotiate on behalf of Reginaldo, his father, permanently stuck in hell for his sin of excessive avarice. Enrico, hoping to efface the memory of his father's life through this devout and elaborate gesture dedicated to "Our Lady," hired Italy's foremost fresco painter, Giotto, to entirely paint the walls and ceiling of the new chapel.

Dante, having talked with Giotto and aware of the Padova community's perception of Reginaldo as chief of the users, placed him in the Seventh circle of *l'Inferno*.

While charmed by this story and its various fictional embellishments, my attention was just as vividly captured by a problem that Ruskin was worrying over, in the middle of his history of the Arena Chapel – having been troubled by a certain passage from Dante, translated by Rev. Francis Carey into a smoothed-over, somewhat too proper English prosody. Here is the translated passage from Canto XVII of *l'Inferno* involving the money lender, Reginaldo Scrovegno. I placed this passage as a kind of prologue at the beginning of my poem and direct you to several other translations—or transgressions—so that you may participate in the give-and-take process and follow the migration and repositioning of certain phrases or images that began here, but ended up in playful, recombinant mutations elsewhere in my poem. Here is Carey in 1805:

Another I beheld, than blood more red
A goose display of whiter wing than curd.
And one who bore a fat and azure swine
Pictured on his white scrip, addressed me thus:
What doest thou in this deep? Go now and know,
Since yet thou livest, that my neighbor here,
Vitaliano, on my left shall sit.
(Inf., XVII, 63-66)

And here is Ruskin's complaint regarding this passage (imbedded at top of p. 59, with certain of its references re-entering the poem on p. 69, in my book, *when new time folds up*):

Dante's indignant expression of the effect of avarice in withering away distinctions of character, and the prophecy of Scrovegno, that his neighbor, Vitaliano, when living, should soon be with him, to sit on his left hand, is rendered a little obscure by the transposition of the word 'here'. Cary has also been afraid of the excessive homeliness of Dante's imagery; 'whiter wing than curd' being in the original 'whiter than butter.' The attachment of the purse to the neck, as a badge of shame, in the *Inferno*, is found before Dante's time; as, for instance, in the windows of Bourges cathedral (see Plate iii of MM. Martin and Cahier's beautiful work).

Upon reading Carey's translation of this passage, a number of things occurred to me, almost simultaneously: first, that my ear loved the oddness of diction in "whiter wing than curd", despite any objections by Ruskin; more-over, that "whiter than butter" was also pleasing enough for its t sounds and was, in fact,

probably more immediately available as a telegraphed image in the vernacular (*vulgare*) Dante had consciously chosen; and, finally, that the visual information itself, as well as the purse's history as a "badge of shame"—even before Dante's time (as seen in stained glass windows in the Bourges cathedral)—was a fascinating piece of ethical iconography. For an example of a later recombinant passage, I refer you to p. 51.

I was clearly being drawn to fragments of information, for their own sake, and wanted to find some way to bring their intriguing complexity into my slowly emerging poem. I decided to lift the Carey-translated passage *whole*, to import it as an element of the poem's material base and to see what magnetic force it might exert on the other fragments I was unearthing. As can be seen in several of the poem's collaged and invented prose-like references, I irreverently echo the solemn voices of the all-too-human Ruskin or the error-prone Vasari, and through their example, comment on a language of authority that would seem to shut the door on all but its own interpretation. I chose to lightly mock this stance by inserting intentional typos which would serve to undermine the illusion of enduring stability in human enterprise. I would immediately add, however, that while resisting a certain stern and masterly tone in these art historian/critics, I was at the same time being enriched by immense amounts of fascinating history and the fruits of thoughtful minds.

The story Vasari tells about Giotto, which Ruskin later repeats—this story having entered the Tuscan vernacular as the proverb "Round as the O of Giotto"—goes like this: Pope Boniface VIII (whom Vasari mistakenly designates as Benedict IX) sends a courier out to the great cultural centers of Italy to collect samples from various known artists, in a kind of contest to determine who might be awarded the contract for decorating certain rooms of the Vatican. The courier, having arrived at Giotto's workshop and having made his request, watches as Giotto dips a brush into red paint—holding his arm stiffly to his side (as in the arm of a compass)—and with his right hand swiftly executes a perfect circle on a piece of vellum and hands it to the courier as his example. Fearing he is being made fun of, the courier nevertheless passes Giotto's sketch forward with the other more elaborate entries he's gathered. Much to his surprise, the Pope and his brilliant circle of advisors understand immediately the skill and the daring required to make such a drawing, and award the contract to Giotto.

I decided to retell this story as a collaged lyric narrative, in one section of the poem, but also to cross-reference it with the problem of error, or *mis*-translation (as Ruskin noted in Lord Lindsay's careless mistranslation of the phrase "*pen-nello tinto di Rosso*" (brush dipped in red)—the kind of error in which a wrong choice of word, in this case "crayon" instead of "brush," completely obfuscates

the point of Giotto's more painterly gesture.

While writing this section, "the opponent work of Giotto," I began to understand why Ruskin was making such an issue of a single word – that the hand-drawn circle represented the touch of the individual artist and the confident manner of he who knew the difference between a rigid crayon and the spontaneously asserted red Zero made with a fine and supple brush.

Giotto's touch would distinguish itself, in its deft articulation, from the more familiar and elaborated illustrations merely replicating the gestures and color codes of traditional Byzantine church art. Fortunately for Giotto, he enjoyed the privilege of a sophisticated reception.

Led on by Giotto's playful confidence – his elegant solution sent to the Pope – I began to see my own poem in very graphic terms and to invent visual occasions for presenting bits of deconstructed historic "fact"...or visualization of error... or banners waving across the page with Ruskin's and my own invented pronouncements of odd fact and fictional detail (see pages 54 through 66). I also noted in my text some of the wonderfully observed human features I'd noticed in looking at Giotto's depictions – particularly of men and sheep. As one may see (p. 59), I also visualized and integrated his circle graphic by drawing it into the poem with a hand-held compass, using a pencil of very soft lead to produce the thicker, less refined line Giotto preferred to a more perfect or mechanical version: "Not by system, but by wrist"(p. 54). At this point, I incorporated Dante's original line in Italian – "*mostrando un'oca bianca più che burro*" – as part of the circle *and* the page's intended multi-level intake of information.

The other level on which this poem began to operate, was the foregrounding of *unintentional* error, usually the result of faulty copying, or modification/mutation of language use through time...that slow wearing down of "fact", the very human moment in which a grammatical misperception or a simple misspelling or an unremarked change in usage – be it intentional or not – refuses the reigning *status quo* or current operating code. In my reading about Giotto and Dante, I kept coming upon these slippages, always within the context of a mostly highly touted source of authority, whether it be one of the above cited texts or the "green book" on Italy, published yearly by Guide Michelin. One example of error I visually inserted appears at the end of the lyrical section, "the opponent work of Giotto" (p. 57). It is Vasari's clearly *unintended* mistake, pointed out by Ruskin – that of naming Benedict IX as the reigning Pope when it was, in fact, Boniface VIII who sent his talent scout from Rome.

Vasari's known propensity for error was enough to get me going on a most pleasurable insertion of typographical error into my own poem's text, as a kind

of visual prompt, meant to playfully announce the poet's full awareness of that continuous falling away of fact and the folly of Perfection as an ultimate goal when lorded over the less powerful by a ruling culture, such as Byzantium. Its "Great System of Perfect Color" dictum, proposing only certain color combinations as aesthetically correct and spiritually appropriate, had governed all major religious art – and its practitioners – for well over two hundred years. On pages 66-67, I draw on information from Ruskin but translate it into my own poetic diction, imagining Giotto's re-thinking of how to paint the world as *he* saw it.

The questioning of "the official version" shared so profoundly by Dante and Giotto, had reinforced my own sceptical propensity in this regard, thus I found great comradeship with them in pulling apart the official scripture of Ruskin and recombining it, here and there, with words from the originating Dante passage and with the numerous salient details painted into Giotto's frescoes.

To the truly engaged artist – as both men so brilliantly demonstrated – ALL was sacred and therefore one could choose to begin, again, from a new ground of reference. This shared perception preceded Luther by two centuries in its radical understanding of the value and validity of asserting one's own unique conversation with one's chosen spiritual guides. Not by system, but by wrist.

It became clear, by the end of my poem's research and construction, that in order to free oneself as an artist – as both Giotto and Dante did – one must find a way of slipping out of the too tight garment handed down by one's brilliant predecessors.

I like to think of the two of them sitting outside on the grass, under some old trees just behind the new Arena chapel where Giotto has been working all day to finish applying his colors to a particularly difficult rendering of the Virgin Annunciata before the *intonaco* inlay of plaster undercoating dries on the walls. Giotto is twenty-eight (or thirty-eight), Dante just a year older (or ten years older), depending on which history you've consulted. It is several years since Dante was banished from Florence on a trumped-up charge of corruption; he is struggling with his first draft of the *Inferno* and they are probably drinking white wine from the Veneto, for it is hot in Padova and they are in the mood to talk about everything, from the abuse of power in high places to the transparent behaviour of Giotto's temporary "patron," Enrico Scrovegno, local reformed citizen trying to rewrite his father's standing in the firmament.

Kathleen Fraser,
da *When New Time Folds up*,
Minneapolis, Chax Press, 1993

GIOTTO : ARENA

:

*Another I beheld, than blood more red
A goose display of whiter wing than curd.
And one who bore a fat and azure swine
Pictured on his white scrip, addressed me thus:
What doest thou in this deep? Go now and know,
Since yet thou livest, that my neighbor here,
Vitaliano, on my left shall sit.*

Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XVII
(trans. Rev. Henry Francis Cary, 1805)

Fat blood
addressed me,
thus this deep
curd.
Now know
thou live more
red than good.
"I did,"
Scrovegno said.

living to sit obscured by word "here"

GIOTTO

:

ARENA

:

Enrico, son of Reginaldo

SCROVEGNO

(money-lender of
peak avaricious habits
confirmed by cameo spot
in Dante's seventh circle),

offers his earnest version of atonement
for paternal embarrassment
and hopes for better treatment, too,
in Padova, bringing all glory
to the Virgin Annunciate

continuing Lady's Day
but doing it right, with Giotto's
brush to introduce him

of
avarice
effect

ARENA

new name, old site, chapel built
above more than one original,
the first an amphitheatre cast
along Roman lines

ARENA

Enrico on his knees proffers
a tiny version of it
to the Annunciate, its weight
supported on another's shoulders,
salmon length of brick the same
as Virgin's gown, angel feathers'

salmon flesh and roe
lifting one swift arc

Enrico Scrovegno of Padova
on this spot defamed

remains of Romans

motion (less leaves) blue sky

lightness inlaid their branching
 pale rose breadth

of shade
through intervals

Dante watched Giotto paint Enrico
(they talked at Arena)

"Not by sistem, but by
wrist,"

G. said,
substituting body parts.

pale rose
bread

"Odd arch
of nose,

did you notice?"

—massed—

He masses pale clothed bodies — relieved with beloved and
random Venetian stripes; blue is sparingly ppressedd . . .

A certain Flemish meanness

Graven image temporarily misplaced . . . the possible enlargement of a click(ed) moment's pictorial efforts, Giotto keeps looking at grasses' breadth, a band of green repeated not in stone but in lines' lucid firmness, *the murmurs of heretic* in flower and leafing Vespignano's rose-lit sky above Appenine road to Bologna.

Cypress hedges, masses of oleander, magnolia inlaid with flutter.

"A grey extent of mountain ground tufted irregularly with ilex and olive."

Refusal of minute and sharp folds: French and German illuminated dawns (gowns) and a certain meanness in the Flemish disposition of drapery.

the opponent work of Giotto

rubied flower far-away bends
at intervals
through framework of each leaf
sublime form's
restrained palliate

low, not desolate/full of sewn
fields and tended
pastures Cimabue found him
drawing sheep
upon a smooth stone

"My little drawing to give
to his Holiness," G.
took a leaf of vellum with
brush dipped
in red and fixing

arm to side made the limb of
a pair of compasses
and turning his hand drew
a circle so
perfect it was more

than enough & thus "Rounder
than the O of Giotto"
entered the vernacular Would a
circle so produced
have borne strict witness

to anything other than a draughts-
man's mechanical genius?
"Pennello tinto di rosso"
(brush dipped
in red) misleading in

careless English translation
of *crayon* (lesser made
and rigid) instead of *brush*
hand's appetite
Giotto turned to knowing

Papal courtier en route scouting Vatican art
among masters asks Giotto for proofs. Benedict
IX (error) Boniface VIII (correction)

opponent rubied flower bend

intervals frame subdued

full found him stone

vellum-red arm

side of turning circle

enough way have witness

to other brush misled

in rigid and lesser drawing

my little vellum red harm

"Dante's indignant expression of the effect of avarice in withering away distinctions of character, and the prophecy of Scrovegno, that his neighbor-Vitaliano, when living, should soon be with him, to sit on his left hand, is rendered a little obscure by the transposition of the word 'here'. Cary (the translator, ed. note) has also been afraid of the excessive homeliness of Dante's imagery; 'whiter wing than curd' being in the original 'whiter than butter'. The attachment of the purse to the neck, as a badge of shame, in the Inferno, is found before Dante's time; as, for instance, in the windows of Bourges cathedral (see Plate iii of MM. Martin and Cahier's beautiful work)." John Ruskin

mostrare un'oca più bianca che burro

Translator afraid of Dante's butter badge of shame found, for instance, in cathedral (see Plate iii).

Nothing is required for the job but firmness of hand. Nothing more is said and nothing further appears to be thought of expression or invention of devotional sentiment.

Giotto's handmade truth. That a difference might of wrong or right lie in line's thick power shone by accuracy which disdains error.

•

Nothing's sad
nor appears

to be thought
of devotional

sediment. No
thing

required but
firmness

to draw
difference of

wrong or right
in line's thic power

shone by accuracy's
disdaining errorr

fFretwork

in
fretwork's
stone
error
even
smallest
incident
suggesting
departure

error
even

"the languid and degraded condition of becoming merely formal," one said

unexpected starts of effort or flashes of knowledge in
accidental directions gradually forming

apprentice to Cimabue, Firenze; footholds, no Byzantine
zero

Sublime monotony in Constantinople,
magnificent redundance of red and blue

take me
back

prolonged formality of degraded systems
reminding us of who we were (and we were)

in original noble design. Once sword
and still. Now sword flung head,
flung head. Now still

red hands in white air knit. Slipped parts of
speech retain and invest their knots. evenness.
evidence.

we were
red hands

we were
white

we
flung us

were
parts

THE GREAT SYSTEM OF PERFECT COLOR

Blue. Purple. Scarlet deep
with gold [revealed] on [Sinai]
by [GOD] as [noblest]
Others chiefly green
with white & black
used in points of small mass
to relieve blank color

Byzantine flung repetitions

Could we trade length of dress?
Paint unpredicted folds where thigh
opens outward, joints resist
(large blank surfaces)

— four horizontally (lambs,
too) in doorway — noting
nature's tendency
to circle where heat lifts

Gesture of damp gnawing grief

Forgotten twice,
twice refusal of
of ludicrous, cumbrous sheep
sheep leaned as men
flocking terminal lines
Lines, no draperies, broad masses
arm held stiff to pale colors
leaked in vertical bands
Bands continuing,

continuing to

grief
gnawing
vertical

Real faces needed in *the great system of perfect color*,
and different sorts of hair, G. thought

Joachim,

in spite of gold-bordered cape

and halo backdrop returns

empty-handed, marcelled grey hair

(curled rows). Also shepherds' mauve socks

rolled at ankles like us.

White dog jumps up.

No response from Joachim,

eYeSe sidelong.

rounder than

()

His own palpate softens theory's sharp folds

seeing lLarge blank surfaces' close-up seeing

... highest strength marked by unconsciousness of its own means of making no small scorn of best result's exertion, intent on other than itself caring little for fruits of each toil (meanwhile "inferior minds intently watching self's process and valuing product's evidence"), there cannot remain the smallest doubt that his mind ...

	love of beauty	love of truth
entirely free		untinged by
of weakness		severity

industry constant	workmanship
without	accurate
impatience	without formalism

— John Ruskin's Giotto

large blank surfaces

The widows of whiter than butter,
I knew none of them
nor curd's buttery purse nor
shame effect.
Sit away, for instance, to the neck.
In 'here' cathedral's obscure badge.

Texts referred to in this work: *Sulla Cappellina degli Scrovegni nell'Arena di Padova*, Sevatico. Padova. 1836. *The Lives of the Artists*, Giorgio Vasari. 1568. (Trans. George Bull. Penguin. New York. 1965.) *Giotto and his Works in Padua*, John Ruskin. London: George Allen. 1905.