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APHRODITE



## Focus and Transfiguration in *Divine*

“Florence is a white rose, whose petals unfold for a moment before the silver pool of Time.” (405)

“We are mounting the hill . . . Little else of the past, however, remains. The passageways are vacant . . . The way too is directionless.” (295)

*Divine* is the D of Aphrodite, whose name of course means “foam-born.” According to Hesiod, Aphrodite (Venus, the goddess of female beauty and erotic love) was born from the sea-foam after Kronos castrated his father Ouranos and threw his severed genitalia into the sea. An alternate myth takes Aphrodite as the daughter of Kronos and Rhea (“flow”), thus as Zeus’ and Hera’s sister. According to a third myth she is the daughter of Zeus and Dione, a tree-goddess also connected to the dove whose father was Oceanus (the encircling ocean) and mother Tethys (a sea goddess). Hence Aphrodite will in any event have close ties to both sky-gods and water-gods or goddesses: Botticelli’s famous Renaissance painting shows Venus emerging (virtually naked) from the sea. Given not just her connection to water and flow/flux but to the sky/sea interface or mixture, one could interpret Aphrodite as a representation of the primordial chaotic flux itself—as well as of the (feminized) force of desire, of Eros, who is in one myth Aphrodite’s son and in another emerged from Chaos just after Mother Earth. One might also see this goddess as the mediation or “horizon” of sea/sky, thus taking on a sense of the beautiful (virtual, watery, shimmering and mirror-like) “surface” or perhaps even “frame.” This is an interpretation that fits the reading of *Divine* that follows.

In *Divine*<sup>2</sup> Madison Morrison has written an extremely complex, indeed intentionally excessive work. Here we have a recurring allegorical theme, that of the Dantean quest “upward” toward God (or some sort of epiphanic vision, moment of enlightenment)—one that we may or may not see as ever “arriving” (Of course, even Dante’s God at the end of the *Paradiso* lies beyond human vision or comprehension, at least insofar as these can be expressed in words;<sup>3</sup> the Dantean God is in this sense, like Morrison’s own text, necessarily “excessive.”) This Dantean quest is ironized and parodied in various ways by the author-narrator’s own “tour” of Rome and northern Italy; for instance, he is accompanied (and in some sense guided) by a young Chinese lady-friend, his Beatrice.<sup>4</sup> The ironic distance or doubleness of the allegory is reinforced by the technique of textual juxtaposition or embedment familiar from earlier stages of the **Sentence**: classical texts (pre-eminently those of Vergil and Dante) are interspersed with the immediate, empirical travelogue-narrative.

But in *Divine* the travelogue-quest intertextual or “dialogic”<sup>5</sup> passages are themselves interspersed with, their irony reinforced by that of, passages of formal “dialogue.” These are most often conversations between the author and Qian-hui and interviews with Italian university students; the latter can be read

as part of the empirical travelogue, the journalist's "report." Yet here Morrison tends to play an ironic Socrates, subtly qualifying or critiquing the point of his interlocutors, ostensibly for the Socratic purpose of elucidation:<sup>6</sup>

**MM:** What of the future? . . . Is the future for you going to be the same as the present is for your parents? . . . Or the past for your ancestors?

**Simona 1:** I think the main difference is our education. My mother had only the primary school. But I am in the university.

**MM:** Does this make you better, or worse, than your mother? . . . Will you, then, be happier than your parents because of all your education?

**Simona 1:** I don't think so. Culture makes people more frenetic. (410)

By foregrounding, in his very framing of the question, the cultural and historical temporality of past (ancestors), present ("us") and future (descendants, heritage)—and more specifically the metaphysical "problem" of time itself—Morrison plays off the central transcendent problem of the Dantean quest: we strive upward, through space and time, toward a God (or perhaps a final meaning and purpose for our lives) who (or which) by definition dwells beyond space and time—and thus, again, beyond the possibility of clear human vision, understanding, expression.

In my feeble attempt at "interpreting" a book whose very overflow, divine excessiveness seems to stifle, stymie, stupefy all such merely human efforts (hermeneutic quests), I want to emphasize just these spatio-temporal dimensions of MM's Dantean "mock-epic," in relation to the technique of visual or spatial "framing," "focusing" and the problem of the "figure," of figuration and transfiguration. But let us first contemplate an intertextual passage that presents in barest form the Dantean quest-theme:

Pigeons strut across the open space of the inner court. We begin our climb. "*What they feel with much greater intensity is their distance from God.*" . . . One floor from the top we pause to look down into the Campo's fountain, onto its tiled rooftops. "*Dante climbs the mountain with them.*" Off in the distance the marble cathedral glistens. "*A pilgrim among pilgrims, he understands and shares their memories of the past and their longing for the future.*" (338 <sup>7</sup>)

*Engendering* and other earlier books in Morrison's **Sentence of the Gods** have led us to expect a certain *Gestalt*-switch ambivalence in his textual juxtapositions: we may see the academic or classical texts as "embedded" in the immediate, quotidian narrative, as a form of running "commentary" upon it, but we may also see this the other way around, with the empirical text as commentary on the classical and scholarly passages. The same is true here, so that once again there are two ways of reading the dynamic: the classical and academic texts, by "transcending" the transient world of the immanent, empirical narrative, reinforce but also ironically comment upon it, emphasizing perhaps its very contingency and fleetingness; the mundane objective realism of the travel-narrative can reinforce, as by example, and also ironically undercut the "pretensions" of more ancient and abstract utterances.<sup>8</sup> However, in *Divine* the

interposed and highlighted classical Italian and academic English texts more directly “accompany” the embedding/embedded narrative: “We begin . . . . *What they feel . . . .*” . . . we pause . . . . “*Dante climbs . . . he understands and shares.*” There is now less “distance” between the two texts—thus a greater ambivalence regarding priority, a greater potential for *Gestalt*-like reversal or “inversion” at any moment—even a “textual longing” echoed by the “much greater intensity” of one’s perceived “distance from God” and the longing to overcome that distance, that is, the longing-for-goal, “longing for the future.”

Morrison has, in addition, introduced (or at least made much more explicit) a new technique in *Divine*, one whose relation to the familiar technique of juxtaposing classical-academic and empirical-narrative texts, and to that greater “proximity” here between the two and thus more ambivalent “order of priority,” will need to be further explored. This is the technique of spatial or visual “framing”: often scenes are framed (or embedded) within spatially wider scenes, as these are empirically viewed from a certain perspective. In the above passage the overtly visual (spatial) scenes are clearly part of the empirical travelogue-narrative: In Siena, “Pigeons strut across the open space of the inner court . . . We begin our climb . . . One floor from the top we pause to look down into the Campo’s fountain, onto its tiled rooftops. . . . Off in the distance the marble cathedral glistens.” In fact this empirical scene is one of climbing and looking back and forward along one’s journey—of physical movement and visual perspective—which of course is “echoed” by (and/or echoes) the Dante scholar’s text. But such movement upward (climbing)—both that of the narrator-author and of Dante’s pilgrims—is actually contrasted with (and parodied by) the pigeons, who simply move horizontally, “strut across the open space of the inner court.” And yet we feel that this particular space, both *open* and *inner*, is somehow very significant in the passage, that in some secret way it might frame the allegorical pilgrims’ quest itself, perhaps even frame the very goal of that quest. Let us then turn to some purely spatial and perspectival passages in *Divine*, in order to see how these might also indirectly suggest, perhaps conceal within themselves (within their frames), the spatio-temporal “divine quest.”

## Frame

**At the Piazza's south end a casement opens inward, its square panes reflecting: the eastern, the West, the western, the East.** An unshaven man scurries by, a document headed "Manifesto" under his arm. **Within the rectangular, glassless opening is framed a rain-dappled, cobblestoned square.** We have arrived today by way of the Corso Rinascimento, white billowy clouds scudding the sunny skies above. IN VERONA A MANIKIN IS DRAPED IN A FULL-LENGTH MINK COAT. Seated facing west, we have just been served our drinks, a *caffelattè* for MM, a *succo d'arancia* for Qian-hui. THROUGH THE SHOP'S WINDOW ARE VISIBLE IN THE CEILING TINY LIGHTS, REFLECTED IN THE GLASS AS AN AUREOLE ABOVE THE MANIKIN'S BLACK-MASKED HEAD. *Rome Antique*, reads the title of a tour guide, white against red, on sale at a kiosk, its cover photo reconstructing a pristine coliseum. **Across the garret's aperture the Piazza reads like a painting or tableau.** (275)

We get this scene in the book's second paragraph.<sup>10</sup> Here we are not quite sure whether the speaker (author) and his Chinese friend (Qian-hui) are sitting in an "indoor" or "outdoor" café, whether they are inside looking out through a "rectangular, glassless opening" or—as we would more likely assume with "THROUGH THE SHOP'S WINDOW," but where *is* this shop?—outside looking in? Again the sense of reversibility, inversion, the *Gestalt*-switch. We do know the couple is "facing west," but the "eastern" pane reflects "the West" and "the western, the East"; the directions got confused; "the way too is directionless" (295). Perhaps this glassless opening (like the "way" itself) mysteriously "frames" the whole narrative. Or is the "MANIKIN/SHOP'S WINDOW" passage the ultimate frame here? Instead of God in the center—from which vantage point a divine perspective might be assumed—we have (ironically) a mere manikin (for selling women's clothes), a virtual doll-God; the "CEILING," whose "TINY LIGHTS" could (if they were stars) create a true halo or "AUREOLE" for the divine manikin-goddess, is a merely *virtual* sky (or heaven); the aureole proves to be a deceptive image, created by artificial lights "REFLECTED IN THE GLASS." The uncertainty as to spatial location, a function of uncertainty of perspective (*whose* perspective?), is a problem for interpretation, for "reading." And in *Divine Morrison* deliberately foregrounds the theme of "reading": "*Rome Antique* reads the title of a tour guide, . . . **Across the garret's aperture the Piazza reads like a painting or tableau.**" But again, is this view of the Piazza "real" or merely "virtual"—a photograph in a tour guide, perhaps? As work of art it becomes more beautiful than reality itself; perhaps it becomes "surreal." And again, who *has* this perspective on the Piazza from "across the garret's aperture"?<sup>11</sup> (The couple, the omniscient author, the reader, God?)

At dusk, lights in the basin below have turned its waters golden, . . . barely so, as we look down from divine perspective on the whole square . . . An elderly man ambles past in a black overcoat, his wine-colored fedora set at a jaunty angle. *Roma Antica*, white against orange. *Domitian used the site as a racetrack, hence the shape observable in the aerial photo. Antica Rom . . .*, in white against brown. *It also served as the site of mock naval battles. Brown and white predominate, rooftop tiles and marble structures.* Two carabinieri clop by . . . **A fourth photo, upside down, turns all inside out, the floor of the piazza transmogrified into the turquoise roof of a surrealistic building.** (276)

Here the framed passages, neither in boldface nor italics, represent events—a man “ambles by,” carabinieri “clop by” on horses—as well as views, but the “abstraction” (as in abstract painting) of framing-views (“**Brown and white predominate**”) is to a degree repeated with variation in the framed-views (“in white against brown”). The opening framing-passage, a view from above “**on the whole square,**” reminds us of the opening of Genesis: “lights in the basin below have turned its waters golden.” There is a kind of subtle spatial inversion (or inversion of perspective) here, as well as an echo of the ceiling’s “tiny lights, reflected in the glass” of the earlier passage. The virtuality of “reflected lights” is also reflected in that of “mock naval battles.” But we are perhaps most struck by the final framing-line of the paragraph that echoes the divine and/or aerial-photograph view of the Piazza in the earlier passage, now explicitly reversing and inverting it, rendering it “surreal” in a *renversement des senses*: “**A fourth photo, upside down, turns all inside out, the floor of the piazza transmogrified into the turquoise roof of a surrealistic building**” (276). This is clearly the author-narrator’s perspective; he has (randomly we assume) looked at an upside-down photograph. But it also “points toward” a more absolute divine perspective, one from which, all reality would be (not ordered into unity but) blurred and mixed in a grand chaos. Or perhaps we have to do with a simply “carnivalized” heaven (Bakhtin), an inversion of Heaven and Earth, of Heaven and Hell).

And the “postcard view” appears again, with variation, in this passage:

Having stopped for coffee at a bar in the Via dell’Aracoeli, just opened at 5:30 a.m., author exits into a little piazza to head upward, mounting what appear to be the steps to the Campidoglio. Totally alone in this even smaller, building-surrounded space, he opens the map to determine its identity. . . . **Here the postcard view represents an imposing grandeur, the square inscribed with a circle, within which a twelve-pointed star, at the center a pedestal for a since removed equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. . . .** The sky, only just beginning to lighten, has a rosy, grayish gloom about it; off in the distance gleams a single red traffic light. **Again the postcard view greatly overgoes in detail and coherence this incomplete account, showing us, if not naming, the Tempio della Concordia . . . along with other monuments . . . to say nothing of a half moon held in place above the Coliseum.** Author continues descent . . . as crows caw . . . (293-294)

As the street narrows, a smart boutique . . . advertises itself. “*The description of Angelica tied to the nudo sasso suggests a veritable inversion of Alcianian ‘unnature.’*” We are

passing a large sign in orange on white: “*In such passages as the following.*” “Gli Ingegneri del Rinascimento:” “*Angelica is linked directly by textual echoes to Alcina.*” “Da Brunelleschi a Leonardo da Vinci.” “*While at the same time replacing the fairy’s mere seeming with real, natural being.*” Above it rises the tightly designed Palazzo Strozzi. “*La bellissima donna, così ignuda / Come Natura prima la compose.*” We continue along the Via de’ Tornabuoni, beside a highly colored, vastly enlarged, transparent photograph of a slinky model . . . “*She seems at this point to be a composition of Nature itself.*” Prosperous Florentine couples, having dined in restaurants, stroll across the avenue . . . “*Her ‘meaning’ is unveiled, present on the gorgeous surface, without the allegorical depths of Alcina.*” A clock erroneously reads fourteen minutes to 11:00. (394)

The seeing/textuality interplay here is already made clear through the omnipresence of *signs*, visual-and-written signs, through the interfusion of, or confusion between, these signs and the “further” texts/signs toward which they point: “. . . a smart boutique . . . advertises itself,” “a large sign in orange on white”; “*In such passages . . .*”; “Gli Ingegneri . . .”; “*Angelica is linked . . .*”) But the central “point” of the passage is also the opposition between “real, natural being” (personified by Angelica, a symbolization or allegorization that may seem to debase its “naturalness”) as that which is “present on the gorgeous surface,” and the “mere seeming” (artificiality) and “allegorical depths” of “unnature.” What is immediately present on the surface is of course what we actually see, as opposed to what is subtle, hidden, “veiled”—the artifice of metaphorical language, the abstraction of “transcendent” metaphysical thought. But we cannot quite correlate the “surface” here—that totality which the painting shows us “all in one moment,” in Lessing’s view—with the vision itself, any more than mere language/textuality can ultimately reach to the allegorical depths. Yet Morrison is reversing the hierarchy: we *want* the clear physical beauty of the mere surface (and/or, analogously, of “physical language”) rather than the concealed vision/abstract understanding. The beautiful surface is nature itself, it is what we get in nature; we do not *need* to transcend upward (as in Plato’s *Symposium*) from this beauty (as presented perhaps in this “immanent textuality”) to an absolute Beauty (or allegorical “truth”).

What we want, after all, is pure immanence, pure *visibility*, which may not be presented by that widest, most encompassing “frame” (or aerial, “postcard view”) but rather in the concrete details *within* the frame. It is in the quotidian experience of this multitude of details that we will seek the divine, even, or perhaps especially when these are most purely contingent, deceptive, false: “*Her ‘meaning’ is unveiled, present on the gorgeous surface . . .*” A clock erroneously reads fourteen minutes to 11:00.” And yet here we end up, again, with the merely *virtual*: the manikin-goddess framed by the shop window, the absent equestrian statue at the center of the abstract geometrical design. This is a key difference from Dante: if the Morrisonian God is not totally absent, then He (or She) possesses the sort of “lack” we associate with the virtual beauty of mere surfaces, of figures, photographs, and perhaps also *maps*. Although if “the



way too is directionless” perhaps even maps would be needless (absent), the map embodies a sort of virtual space pointing to a larger (or in rare instances smaller) “real” space; but its very smallness (“secretness”) as well as virtuality might suggest that this is where the divine, after all, can if anywhere be “located.” It is as if within the smallest imaginable space, from which we would escape, the map opens out—thus in effect inverting the frame, inverting space itself: “Totally alone in this even smaller, building-surrounded space, he opens the map to determine its identity.” (293)

## Focus and Transfiguration

We now need to focus more narrowly on a point that has no doubt already been implicit in our discussion of the framing passages. The more immanent, empirical, quotidian reality framed within the wider spatio-visual “scenes” is the reality of *events*, a dynamic, spatio-temporal reality in contrast to the pure spatiality of the frames. In the “MANIKIN” passage the empirical arrival in Rome of “Dante and Beatrice” is framed as a “detail” within the wider spatial context of the “painting”: **“Within the rectangular, glassless opening is framed a rain-dappled, cobblestoned square. We have arrived today . . . IN VERONA A MANIKIN . . . Across the garret’s aperture the Piazza reads like a painting or tableau.”** (275) But once again there is a central ambivalence in the technique. On the one hand we would assume, as the “general case” (without really “looking at it”), that Morrison is here putting the temporality of the moment within a wider, timeless spatiality; but actually he is (also) putting the empirical event of an *earlier arrival* (“We have arrived today”) within the purely spatio-visual frame *seen at this moment* in a café: the view of a **“glassless opening,”** view **“across the garret’s aperture.”** Now consider again the “divine perspective” passage: **“as we look down from divine perspective on the whole square . . . An elderly man ambles past. . . . Domitian used the site as a racetrack, hence the shape observable in the aerial photo. It also served as the site of mock naval battles. Brown and white predominate . . . Two carabinieri clop by . . . A fourth photo, upside down, turns all inside out. . . .”** (276) In the framing-lines we are “looking down” *now* (even if *via* the distanced simulacrum of an aerial photo displayed on a postcard or in a tour guide); the man *ambles* past and the soldiers *ride* by, but “Domitian *used* the site as a racetrack” [my emphasis]; present-tense empirical events along with a past event are framed within the context/perspective of what is now being (divinely, virtually) observed.

Thus Morrison gives us the *presence* and (sometimes) the *past* of real events framed within the “living present” of “seeing,” of the “field of vision”; the latter, though happening we assume “now,” takes on the sense of a timeless present over against the real time (temporality) of actual events which move

from past to present to future. In the “equestrian statue” passage this absent statue appears at an ambiguous level of textuality between frame and framed: “. . . **at the center a pedestal for a since removed equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius.** . . . The sky, only just beginning to lighten, has a rosy, grayish gloom about it; off in the distance gleams a single red traffic light.<sup>12</sup> **Again the postcard view . . .**” The “emerging present” of this “just beginning to lighten” seems a crucial part of what one might almost call the author’s “divinatory” dynamics; it echoes the “just-having-arrived” of the earlier passage: “We have arrived today . . .” Here we have “just beginning” and “just having ended” as variations on/of the idealized case of a momentary event frozen to eternity (Keats’ Odes), or set beside it: “Florence is a white rose, whose petals unfold for a moment before the silver pool of Time.” (405)

In the “pigeon” passage, whose intertext is Lino Pertile’s commentary on Dante, “arrival” is of course absolutely what is at stake:

*“Like earth, Purgatory is in time, it has dawns and sunsets . . . The penitent are not frozen in their earthly individuality; they move on together . . . listening intently, or gazing. . . .”* Pigeons strut across the open space of the inner court. We begin our climb. *“What they feel with much greater intensity is their distance from God.” . . . Having forgotten to bring her camera, [Qian-hui/Beatrice] is in a bad temper. “Like a reversed nostalgia, this sense of separation and exile characterizes their ascent, transforming it into a pilgrimage toward the heavenly home. . . . Dante climbs the mountain with them . . . A pilgrim among pilgrims, he understands and shares their memories of the past and their longing for the future.”* (338)

The pilgrims’ own longing for a future vision of God (longing for Heaven) is no doubt the counterpart (or even the equivalent) of the pulling force of God’s Love at the end of the *Paradiso*.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the *Paradiso*, God is a force of Love that “moves the sun and the other stars [and] my / desire and will” (Mack 1429); Aquinas takes God as both Aristotelian First Cause (an “efficient cause” that “moves”) and Aristotelian Final Cause that “pulls.” (The Unmoved Mover as the universe’s End, *Telos*). Of course, in both Aristotle and Aquinas God’s “force” of logical necessity (e.g. that of the truth of “A = A”) is closely tied to both the “pushing” (logical deduction) and “pulling” (logical induction) forces. But the force of this longing for a divine vision in/of the future cannot be clearly distinguished from that force of “reversed nostalgia,” our nostalgic longing for an idealized, romanticized past. Is the remote past also, like the remote future, a powerful “magnet” pulling us, accelerating us back toward it—a center-of-gravity like that of the earth (whose “Satanic” center the final canto of the *Inferno* depicts), such that the closer we get to it the faster we “fall”? If so, then what stands in the past as the counterpart to God in the future? Morrison sometimes suggests a model of circular time, so that we have God at “both ends.” But in one of his “interviews” he offers what might be an alternative view, one that focuses on the “detachment” of an absolute past,

which, whatever degree of “divinity” we wish to attribute to it, parallels that of the “ultimate vision”’s absolute (or “apocalyptic”) future:

“It has been a magnificent tour,” says the author. But the tour is not over yet.

“This,” she says, “was all an ancient Roman cemetery. And there is the house of Maecenas, where Vergil worked. They held wild parties.”

“Oh they did?” author responds, inquiring of her views about Vergil.

“About certain people we are not accustomed to have views,” she replies, laughing. “They simply are. They are simply great. We are asked to learn them by heart but not to have views. . . . The American tendency to recapture the past, the idea of Pound, the *Kulturmorphologie*, which he got from the Germans, of making the past alive, this is not an Italian idea. The past in Italy is an object of veneration. That is all. . . . Because Aristotle is a god. You cannot touch.” . . .

“Do you think that Plato, the dialectician, would have agreed?” author inquires. But we have suddenly reached the end of the tour. (291-292)

In this “perspective” then the remote, glorious past of classical history is “an object of veneration,” monumental, virtually divine. The notion of virtuality is perhaps indeed relevant here, inasmuch as the monuments and statues by which we remember great figures of the past (the missing equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius) are mere *simulacra* (signs, representations) of what is gone. In this sense, and in keeping with my reading of the framing passages in terms of a framed “immanent reality” at whose heart is often found virtuality, the virtual (as monument) is still in the present; the (transcendent) “real” toward which it points is absent, located in a distant past. This sort of absolute *power*—“I have only a view of immense power,” the same interlocutor responds when asked about Nero (291)—of past-as-monument might be contrasted with the more “romantic” conception of a Golden Age with which Morrison, in his coda, brings *Divine* to a close. Here he quotes, in the intertext of another dialogue, Vergil’s description in the *Georgics* of a time when mankind lived in pure harmony with nature. This was an age that existed before human society began its decline into greediness, power-hunger and corruption, tied (as also by Lao Tzu) to the increasing rule of rationality and law:

BEFORE THE RISE OF THE CRETAN / LORD . . . BEFORE IMPIOUS  
MEN SLAUGHTERED BULLOCKS FOR THE BANQUET. . . . SUCH AS  
THE LIFE THAT GOLDEN SATURN LIVED UPON EARTH. . . .  
MANKIND HAD NOT YET HEARD THE BUGLE BELLOW FOR  
WAR. . . . HAD NOT YET HEARD THE CLANK OF THE SWORD ON  
THE HARD ANVIL. . . . THE FRUIT ON THE BOUGH. . . . THE CROPS  
THAT THE FIELD IS GLAD TO BEAR . . . ARE HIS FOR THE  
GATHERING. HE SPARES NOT A GLANCE FOR THE IRON / RIGOR  
OF LAW. (407-408)

This “absolute” or “monumental” time of the Vergilian past and Dantean future are clearly nothing like the framed immanent-present and immanent-past/future (“about to emerge,” “just having emerged”) discussed above. Rather, the transcendent past/future suggest something more like a *spatialization*

of time, and thus correlate in a certain way with the living present, or eternal present, of the *visual frame*, the (divine-authorial) “view.” Perhaps we are being pointed here toward a view of our own present as something momentarily framed by an eternal or absolute past and future.

The mythopoetic spatialization of time may also be closely tied to ancient cosmography, the pervasive topocosmic model of mythopoetic thinking:<sup>14</sup> we exist on the earth’s flat surface; above us is the inverted bowl of sky, beneath us (the bowl of?) Hades. Vergil’s version (from the *Georgics* again) of the Orpheus myth, here presented as intertext, locates or identifies the instant of Orpheus’ “forgetting” (not to look back at his wife) as that of his arrival-at-(earth’s)-surface (after the upward climb from Hades)

ORPHEUS, SICK AT HEART, SOUGHT THE COMFORT OF HIS  
HOLLOW LYRE. . . .“YOU, SWEET WIFE,” HE SANG ALONE BY THE  
LONELY SHORE . . . .“YOU AT THE DAWN OF DAY,” HE SANG, “AT  
DAY’S DECLINE YOU.” . . . NOW HE HALTS. . . . EURYDICE, HIS OWN,  
IS AT THE LIP OF DAYLIGHT.<sup>15</sup> . . . ALAS! HE FORGOT. . . . HIS  
PURPOSE FINALLY BROKEN, HE LOOKED BACK . . . HIS LABOR  
UNDONE, THE PACT THAT HE HAD MADE WITH THE MERCILESS  
KING / WAS ANULLED. . . . THREE TIMES DID THUNDER PEAL  
OVER THE POOLS OF AVERNUS. (383)

that draws us back to the traumatic memory of the past is echoed by the real (and/or mythopoetic) gravitational force that pulls/pulled Eurydice back down to Hades.

Whoever sees that Light is soon made such / that it would be impossible for  
him / to set that Light aside for other sight; . . . but through my sight, which as I  
gazed grew stronger, / that sole appearance, even as *I altered*, seemed to be  
changing. In the deep and bright / essence of that exalted Light, three circles /  
appeared to me; they had three different colors, / but they all were of the *same*  
*dimension* . . . / That circle—which, begotten so, appeared in you as light  
reflected—when my eyes had watched it with attention for some time, / within  
itself and colored like itself, / to me it seemed *painted with our effigy*, / so that my  
sight was set on it completely. / . . . so I searched that strange sight: I wished to  
see / the way in which *our human effigy / suited the circle and found place in it—* / . . .  
But then my mind was struck by light that flashed / and, with this light, *received*  
*what it had asked*. (Mack 1428-1429, my emphases)

Morrison’s *Divine* does seem to be playing with the possibility of such inversions or transfigurations. And yet, again, the possibility of a genuinely (or seriously) “divine” transfiguration seems more often to be ironized and subverted by that virtual surface whose mere “blankness” extends extremely far (if not quite to infinity), that surface which in effect “cuts through” or “flattens out” the (possibility of a) dynamics of interchange, of transfiguration. This surface is (in one of its many manifestations) the black-masked figure of the MANIKIN whose AUREOLE is in reality the ceiling’s “TINY LIGHTS, REFLECTED IN THE GLASS . . .” An “aureole” (suggesting ghostly “aura”)

is the halo of a holy figure in a religious painting, and also the “aura” around the sun during a total eclipse. Here we have the absence of the center again, of the sun whose own mere virtuality is represented by its *trace* (its now empty “frame”), of the equestrian statue (in the center of an elaborate geometrical design that should have pointed upward toward God) that has left behind, as aura or trace, its “pedestal.”

The final passage of the main text of *Divine* (before the appended Vergilian coda) leaves us suspended in a state of “expected transfiguration,” one whose *arrival* may need to be put off indefinitely: “Outside a candy store, its vitrine full of multicolored offerings, a dazzling beauty stands on a white marble pedestal to wash its window.” (406) Here Morrison is harmonizing several of his recurring motifs, and he leaves us (once again) with a multiplicity of interpretations. We are left with the puzzle, fundamentally, of three relationships: that between the living woman standing outside the shop window and the statue of a (beautiful) goddess who (as “dazzling beauty”) we would have expected to see standing on this pedestal; that between the woman washing the window—in order to see what stands behind it—and the MANIKIN within the vitrine, now absent because this is a candy (not clothing) store whose “multicolored offerings” nonetheless suggest the sacrificial worship of a deity, perhaps a goddess of pure pleasure; and that between the absent manikin within and the absent statue without. Of course, once the window is clean, the woman may only see her own reflection; in a virtual world, a world of mere surfaces, transfiguration can finally only be self-reflection. Perhaps this standing woman, the pedestal completing her own (dismembered) body, has been somehow placed outside her own frame, leaving the center (once again) empty. Here, in this echo of the opening MANIKIN passage, the absent simulacrum within the “glass opening” mediates between human woman and divine goddess yet is less “real” than either, parodying and debasing both.

## Conclusion

In one of the late passages building up to that “*description of Angelica tied to the nudo sasso*,” an academic text, one that seems to be removed to a safe allegorical distance, is ironically juxtaposed with the subtle violence, and not-so-subtle sexuality, of “two female torsos painted gold from pubis to neck”:

*“The completion of the circle guarantees that the education in and through metaphors at the literary antipodes finally leads back into historical reality . . .”* As we turn into the Via Porta Rossa the pavement has begun to dry. *“Thus the journey allegorizes the translation of historical experience by textual reference.”* “La Gatta Cenerentola,” a fancy clothing shop, shows two female torsos painted gold from pubis to neck. *“And the corresponding motion from textual insight back into readerly experience.”* (393)

The trope of dismemberment fits manikins, dolls and other sorts of (detachable, assembled and disassembled, deconstructed) simulacra, but “real” dismemberment (disfiguration) comes with murder, torture, human and animal sacrifice. The opening passage of *Divine*, coming just before the frame-scene of the “*glassless opening*,” presents

. . . a young woman named Agnes, [who,] propositioned by an official, rejected him. Stripped naked in the stadium . . . as punishment, she survived humiliation when her locks miraculously flourished to cover her shame. A balding man passes, black sunglasses atop his head . . . Condemned to be burnt at the stake, she proved impervious to the flames. A man in a wheelchair glides by, drooling spittle. Dismayed, Diocletian ordered her head cut off. His attendant glances at author . . . Across the Piazza Navona . . . , the Chiesa di Sant’ Agnese in Agone, which houses the *sacra testa*, her severed skull, marks the spot where she was martyred. *Agnes had been tried and found guilty.* (275)

This torture and disfigurement is perhaps a sign of Purgatory, a symptom of perverted, defective and/or excessive love: “*In the Purgatorio the seven capital sins are allegorized.*” . . . “*The first three (Pride, Envy and Wrath) represent the perversion of love.*” . . . “*The fourth (Sloth) is a sign of defective love.*” . . . “*The last three (Avarice, Gluttony and Lust) represent excessive love.*” (303) But in having her head removed from her body Agnes (Agony) is literally “transfigured.” The absence of her *sacra testa*,<sup>16</sup> itself suggesting a work in stone, makes of Agnes a statue ruined (disfigured, decapitated) by time, the armless and headless figure of “The Crouching Aphrodite” (Friedrich 138). Yet it is her skull, we recall, which has been “housed,” that “marks the spot.” Such scenes remind us of the other side of Beatrice’s angelic love that guides Dante up to the Empyrean, a more purgatorial and indeed infernal side: something like raw “desire,” which would (we suppose) need to be contrasted with God’s powerful Love at the end of the *Paradiso*, pulling the universe into Itself/Himself. We are reminded that Morrison’s technique of framing, focusing, inversion and transfiguration in *Divine* may not be purely “virtual” and “two-dimensional” after all, that there is real violence here, real force—just as God’s Love is real force.

And yet it seems, at least on the reading I have suggested here, that the “bare surface” still predominates in this text: the detached, purely aesthetic surface of the woman’s, the goddess’ body, before it has been touched and violated. *Divine* remains in the first place a “work of art”; the guiding angels and goddesses are after all (assembled) manikins behind and within the “glassless openings” of squares, frames, shop windows, where their function is to entice the (male and female) spectator with the beauty of their clothing. We are living after all in the “real world” of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, where the real guiding angel is a superficial beauty created and promoted by a late-capitalist-driven economy. But the irony is not just that, every day in numerous ways, we see the transcendent (or the possibility of any transcendent) subverted and debased (leaving only its “pedestal”) by the immanent; it is that the radical contingency of immanent reality, as it appears to us from all sides, fills our world to bursting

and thus “flattens out” the (possibility of) any meaning whatsoever. Immanence and transcendence are collapsed together. Once we are forced to read graffiti as sacred inscriptions there can be only a single encompassing text (“*il n’y a dehors de texte*”), a single textual surface:

“*To those that do not see entire.*” “Fotti il Systema,” reads a graffito, as we skirt a carabinieri van, a computer and a fax machine visible through its rear window . . . “*The immediate impression is alone taken into account.*” . . . we pause . . . “*For those drunken with this wine.*” Where two Africans, in bright baseball caps, are laughing. “*Filled with the nectar.*” . . . bicycles crowd . . . “*All their souls penetrated by this beauty.*” . . . we linger a moment. “*They cannot remain mere gazers, for no longer does the spectator gaze upon an outer spectacle.*” Above “Biblioteca Universitaria” sits a five-pointed star, within it a five-cogged wheel. “*Instead, clear-eyed, he holds that vision within himself.*” Entering a triangular square, a yellow scooter, its two headlights shining, seeks a parking place. “*Though, for the most part, he knows not that it is within.*” (345)

Apparently he who is “drunken with this wine” is able to see beyond the “immediate impression,” to “see entire” only by seeing “that vision within himself”—and yet “he knows not that it is within.” Perhaps this is because there is no longer a difference between within and without; perhaps “seeing the whole surface” depends on (or is) an underlying ambivalence as to which side of the window we are on—that is, which side of us “it” is on. In the vitrine of *Divine*, the multitudinous, involuted, “in-framed” texts displayed before us, ironically self-reflecting in the glass, cancel one another out, leaving blankness. The divine excessiveness of this multiplicity, and/or of the frame that could possibly contain it, silences the would-be interpreter. He is left staring at the “blank gaze” of the book and/or at his own blank and stupefied gaze. The “virtual” reversal or inversion assumes of course that the textual surface, like the windowpane, has two sides. Or might it, like Borges’ disk, have only one?<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

1. All citations of *Divine* are from *SCENES FROM THE PLANET: In, All, Excelling, Or, Divine*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2001.

2. Organized on the pattern of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, the book also imitates the *person* of Dante, in its first half and the persons, respectively, of Tasso and Aristo in its second half.

3. Dante in the *Paradiso* compares seeing God to seeing, "ingathered / and bound by love into one single volume— / what, in the universe, seems separate, scattered / . . . I think I saw the universal shape / which that knot takes. . . ." (Mack, 1427-1428)

4. Her name is Qian-hui (or "A Thousand Wisdoms"), and the aspect that I feel most differentiates her from the original Beatrice—Dante's young and beautiful, "pure" yet would-be (imagined, desired) lover in real life, the same role Laura played for his younger contemporary Petrarch—is hard to catch in specific quoted passages from the text. It is based on the underlying Greek-Chinese metaphysical difference: the Platonic/Christian radical split or duality of immanent and transcendent worlds (earth/heaven, time/eternity, body/soul) versus the Chinese "pervasive immanence," a worldview that comes down from the ancient (*circa* 1000 B.C.) *I Ching* into both Taoism and Confucianism. To simplify things somewhat we could say that this perspective does not see such a radical split between immanent and transcendent (physical and spiritual) levels of reality; thus for instance gods are not transcendent beings in the way of Zeus (or the Hebraic Elohim, God) but natural and ancestral spirits, part of the extended "human family." The intense focus on social interconnectedness through time, on the memories our descendants will have of us after we die, makes personal immortality (e.g. dwelling in a Christian Heaven) seem less important. Thus Morrison's "Beatrice" here, rather than guiding him "upward" on the vertical path toward God (Supreme Being) as the spatio-temporally disrupted or displaced "metaphor" (see discussion of Lyotard in the previous chapter on HERA), is guiding him into the horizontal-metonymic maze of frames-within-frames, courtyards-within-courtyards. (See the following discussion of framing.) We should also note Qian-hui's seeming naïveté as a Chinese tourist in Italy—a young and passionately curious tourist who is innocent of all things western, and certainly of classical western culture as opposed to the globalizing world-culture of contemporary China. (See the discussion of *Excelling* in Chapter 6.) Qian-hui's "metonymic" Chineseness, the porousness of her "surface," her total openness to the society and culture around her that allows her fully to "absorb" it, gives us quite a different dynamic than we have with Dante's Beatrice—in certain respects perhaps (given this goddess' connection with sea/sky horizon and smooth yet porous sea-surface) a more "Venusian" dynamic.

5. In Bakhtin's sense of dialogism or double-voicedness as "carnival": the peasants' voice mocks and subverts the "official" voice of the upper class (culture, ideology, religion, philosophy, morality). Bakhtin sees dialogism as the essence and foundation of the modern novel (from Rabelais; Cervantes and Shakespeare fit the pattern well); he also thinks epic (i.e. Homer, Vergil and Dante) is inevitably "monologic" (dominated by the official cultural voice). How then to read Morrison's own form of "dialogism" here?

6. Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* sees the ironic dialogism of both Socratic dialogue and (late Greek and Roman) Menippean satire as the two primary grounds or springs of the novel.

7. Compare this sense of an accelerated "longing for the future," a distance-from-goal felt "with much greater intensity," with Simona 1's comment on "progress" in the above-quoted dialogue: "Culture makes people more frenetic." While some travelogue-narrative texts are interpolated with passages from Vergil or Dante, and some with passages from derivative Italian Renaissance romance-epics in the allegorical tradition, Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, here we are placed at a still further "allegorical distance": the italicized "classical" text is in fact a commentary on Dante by contemporary Dante scholar Lino Pertile.



8. This technique was discussed at some length in Chapter 3 (on *Engendering*).
9. See the later discussion regarding the “magnetic pull” of the future (ultimate vision of God) in the Dantean allegorical tradition, but also that of the “absolute past.” (See note 11.)
10. Ideally such passages should perhaps be read step-by-step, gradually filling in the parts. (I considered first leaving out the “MANIKIN” passage in capital letters.) It is almost as if they were “designed” in this way—to be reconstructed. Lessing argues that the painting gives us “everything in one moment,” whereas the poem (narrative) gives us “the succession of scenes through time, but never everything at once.” Morrison is perhaps combining both strategies.
11. “Garret” is from *garite*, “a watchtower” and *garir*, “to watch”; it means “the space, room or rooms just below the roof of a house, especially a sloping roof; attic.”
12. The dark-light ambiguity of “rosy, grayish gloom” catches the in-betweenness of dawn. Friedrich associates the ancient Greek/Near Eastern figure of Aphrodite with Eos, Dawn; note the following comment on the “blossoming” of Florence’s “white rose.” The “single red traffic light” may be the rising sun, its positive connotation (“rebirth”) offset by the negativity of “stoplights.” (The day/night, life/death interface again.) *Divine’s* mundane reality is often permeated by mythopoetic significance.
13. At the end of the *Paradiso* God is a force of Love that “moves the sun and the other stars [and] my / desire and will” (Mack 1429); Aquinas takes God as both Aristotelian First Cause (an “efficient cause” that “moves”) and Aristotelian Final Cause that “pulls.”
14. Kristeva in “Woman’s Time” distinguishes a male Chronos (linear time/history) from two female times: the “cyclic” (“seasonal”) time of mythopoetic thought and “monumental” time, apparently a spatialization or “flattening out” of time that suggests too Deleuze’s *aion* (see note 16) as “mere eternity.” Of course, “spatialization” (or “flattening out”) of time is a staple not only of Einstein’s relativity theory early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (time as fourth dimension of space, curved spacetime) but also of “postmodern” theories late in that century. Jameson in *Postmodernism* emphasizes that the turn to postmodernism in visual (and also narrative) art is a turn toward spatialization of time; this perspective sees e.g. modernist stream-of-consciousness narrative as being more fundamentally temporal, a diachronic moving-through-time as compared to the flattened out, synchronic designs of postmodernist narrative. (See the discussion of Lyotard in Chapter 4, also the discussions of spatial, temporal and textual surfaces in Chapters 2 and 6.)
15. This “lip of daylight” is striking. “Lip,” a feminine and sexually charged image, suggests “mouth”: the mouth of the singer himself (who “sings the earth”) juxtaposed with the earth’s “mouth.” The latter could suggest earth-as-mother (earth-womb) but also “chaos”; Greek *Xaos* (from *xaien*) originally meant “gums” or (the mouth’s) “yawning gap.” Orpheus’ own singing mouth points us back to the earlier image of his “hollow lyre”: hollow like (again) a mouth and like the earth. Perhaps Morrison’s technique in *Divine*, with its absent or “excluded middles,” is that of playing an Orphic (divinatory) “hollow lyre.”
16. Aphrodite’s emergence from the “foam” created when Kronos tossed his father Ouranos’ severed testes into the sea in a certain sense parallels Athena’s emergence “full-blown” from Zeus’ forehead after he had swallowed the pregnant Metis: both daughter-from-father births are “parthenogenic.” (See the discussion of the sonnet on Hesiod’s Zeus-Metis-Athena myth in Chapter 4.)
17. In “The Disk.” (Perhaps we might also think of his Zahir, “coin,” in another sense.) The “Biblioteca Universitaria” of course suggests Borges—many of his texts but most literally “The Library of Babel.” One also wonders, thinking again of the early Wittgenstein (see note 10), whether—and especially if we are thinking here of the “world” as a *one-sided* textual surface—we might indeed say, “*Unser Leben ist ebenso endlos, wie unser Gesichtsfeld grenzenlos ist*” (“Our life is endless in just the way that our visual field is without limit”).

