Stating a Mysterious Figure

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In his sermon *De Glorioso Nomine Iesu Christi*, St. Bernardine of Siena punctuated the mystery of the Incarnation with an interminable series of oxymorons: “Eternity comes in time, immensity in measure, the creator in his creature .the unfigurable in figure, the untellable in the tale, the ineffable in words, the uncircumscribable in place, the invisible in vision, the inaudible in sound....”¹ I would simply like to extract from this aporetic series a few propositions that aim to conceive of the articulation-points between word and image and allow painting to speak. “The unfigurable comes in figure, the uncircumscribable in place, the invisible in vision, the inaudible in sound.” To truly tell what the mystery of the Incarnation envelops, would be, if we are to understand St. Bernardine, a double failure of the eye’s vision and language’s words: the unfigurable, the uncircumscribable, the invisible on one side, the untellable, the inexplicable, the inaudible on the other, a double failure that would be mysteriously “taken up,” as one takes up a challenge, but also as a transcendent Aufhebung, on one side a figure, a place, a vision, on the other a tale, words, sound. In brief, what, in Tuscany, around 1425, our preacher is registering, in a long theological, exegetical and mystical tradition, is perhaps the double question of figurability and its enunciability, provided that we understand the former as the ability to render the mystery in figuration and in figures, and the latter as the ability to render the secret of this mystery in statements, statements that are simultaneously hidden and revealed by painting’s figures and figuration: precisely, then, the articulation-points between word and image that allow painting to speak.

St. Bernardine’s sermon evokes and convokes a mystery for its Christian audience, the central mystery of the Incarnation in all the orthodox power of its dogma: the becoming flesh of Uncreated Light and its corporeal figuration; and the initiatory secret of its tale, the Annunciation, tells of language’s, the divine Word’s, becoming word and statement. My own
discourse aims to show, in a reverse — but no less aporetic — circuit, that in certain paintings figuration is always the mystery of an incarnation whose statement always presents itself as the announcement of a secret; or yet again that painting’s figuration is the “mysterious” exposure to sight of the “announced” secret of language’s statement.

Annunciation — enunciation, a play on words, a play of letters insinuates this secret by referring both to the theological and spiritual sense of the Annunciation, and to the pragmatic and semiotic sense of enunciation.

Enunciation: two general propositions can be put forward. The first is that enunciation is always implicit, that it is the condition of possibility of any linguistic statement, that it is language’s “transcendental” in the Kantian sense of the term. This proposition can be developed linguistically in two corollaries: (1) enunciation as the transcendental structure of all statements leaves traces in the empirical statements that it supports and permits — hence the “demonstratives,” and more generally, the entire field of deixis in discourse. (2) These stated enunciations, marks or traces of enunciation, obey the logic of secrecy in the sense that they insinuate an enunciation that remains forever implicit or presupposed. They refer to it indirectly; they “secrete” it in discourse.

The second proposition is that enunciation can be theoretically elaborated through the well-known opposition of the two enunciative modes of story and discourse: the mode of story being defined by the erasure, in statements, of all traces of enunciation, whereas the mode of discourse maintains them as statements of enunciation. A corollary would be that any realized, empirical story remains marked, here and there, by traces of enunciation, “erratic” traces wherein the instances of enunciation and its secret are insinuated, in which its presence in narrative representation is manifested.

Annunciation: this is above all a story of Christianity has over the centuries read into Luke I, 26-38, a written text, a narrative “representation,” but whose central kernel is an exchange of words, a conversation between two actors, the Angel Gabriel sent by God and Mary, a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, actors whose (narrative) function is to say and not to do or to take action; or, more precisely, whose doings, whose action consists in saying, in talking, in conversing.
Nevertheless, in this kernel, we see that the Angel’s salutation (and not the Angel himself) troubles Mary and provokes the question Mary asks herself: a passionate effect, a cognitive effect. Now, during the following narrative sequence, the Angel responds to Mary as though he heard what she asked herself. What the story tells us both in language and in its own way is the Angel’s double position, both inside the Virgin hearing her inner question, and outside of her responding to her with uttered words. Inside and outside, or rather on the limit of inside and outside, through his ambiguous position as narrative actor, the Angel develops in narrative a logic of secrecy whose figure, brought to legibility, he would be: does he not insinuate, through his speech, the secretum of an unasked, unexpressed question directed by the Virgin to herself, a question which is precisely that of “sense”?

Hence, this short passage reveals to us that the Angel is not only God’s messenger, not only the message and the message’s channel, not only one of the actors in the conversation, but also a representing figure, beyond the narrative instance, “Luke,” the instance of transcendental enunciation, God; or to take our terms up again, he is the figuration, the setting in figure, of enunciation as the transcendental structure of any statement: he is the figure of enunciation’s secrecy and of figuration’s mystery; or, to recall St. Bernardine’s terms, he is the figure of the coming – that coming that is at the heart of the oxymoron – of the invisible in the visible and of the unsayable in words; he is the figure of the articulation-point of word and image through which Painting comes to word and inversely the Word comes to show itself.

**Figurability of mystery:** the question that any work of painting representing the Annunciation asks of Luke’s story concerns precisely the central kernel that I have just evoked: that of the space between the two narrative actors, that, especially, of the figurability of this space between. It is indeed in this space – interval, distance, proximity – between the Angel and the Virgin that there is a meeting, in the story, of the statements they make and those that the story relates, statements that are accompanied by gestures and gazes which seem to support the words and phrases. How is one to figure this interval, this “inter-diction” wherein words are exchanged, to the rhythms of breath’s and voice’s resonances? It would seem that this question of the space between is asked by the story of the painter’s work, like a challenge that would cause painting necessarily to err. But let’s reread the
story the Evangelist tells us; nowhere does he speak of this interval, of this
distance in which the words of the two characters who are staged on the
scene are exchanged. Perhaps because the words enunciated hide the
space they cross between mouth and ear; perhaps because spoken words
hide the voice that carries them; perhaps because this space seems to “go”
without saying. Only painting, in showing the Angel, the Virgin and their
meeting, will bring it to life, not only on a panel or on a wall, as space, but
in language because panel or wall will have to make it understood as the
figuration of a dialogue read in the pages of the Holy book, as the figu-
rbility of its “realization” which relates the reality of its event and its story.
Figurability of the voice’s mystery, figuration of the presence of the eva-
nescence breaths and surprising echoes belonging to words in the hollows
of bodies and spirits. No longer is the question, as it was just a while ago, how
is one to figure the interval and the “inter-diction” that puts history’s nar-
rative into story? But how is one to recount the monstrance of infinite dis-
tance and immediate proximity, of transcendent remoteness and the
most intimate penetration, accomplished by paintings that at their surface
represent the Annunciation?

In the early quattrocento schema of representation, at the moment St.
Bernardine was preaching in Tuscany, legitimate perspective would seem
to constitute in painting the underlying structure of the space painting rep-
resents. The frieze-like placement of the storia’s figures in the narrative
setting built into this space theoretically produces a 90-degree rotation of
this schema: lateralization by the painting’s placement of figures in represen-
ted space is, with respect to the centering of representational schema
that perspective rules and articulates, analogous to the disconnection of
the structures of enunciation effected in language by the system of verb
tenses and pronouns. But as in “empirical” stories, this transformation by
lateralization of the centrality of representational schema leaves some
marks of its process and some traces of its operation. And it is no doubt
precisely one of these traces that paintings exhibit in that moment which
St. Bernardine reveals to the crowds listening to him, that moment in the
Annunciation of the coming of the invisible in the visible, the unfigurable
in figure, of the uncircumscribable in place, of the coming of the Word-
made-Light in the womb of the Virgin, the secret the Angel announces.

Figurability of mystery: the space between Angel and Virgin, the space of
dialogue where the holy story of Grace, the origin of the tale of redemp-
tion, is begun.
Mystery of figurability: a simple interval that recedes in depth along the central axis of the gaze, the principal line of sight, from the point of view to the hole of the vanishing-point at which appearances disappear and are condensed in their disappearance.

In place of the chiasmus of the figurability of mystery, the vacuum of a space between, an abstract, “theoretical” space, of intersection between depth and laterality, of the central axis of enunciation (and of the schemas of representational perspective) and the axis of width, along which the actors of narrative statements are placed.

Figurability of mystery: this abstract place of intersection would present the inaudible exchange of voiced statements; it would figure the breaths of their enunciation.

Mystery of figurability: by its very vacuity, as a vacuum emptied of any figure, painting would show the invisible condition of possibility of figures, as a space of painting, a space of light where the uncircumscribable appears within the place of represented bodies.

It is this intimate link of figurability and of mystery, it is this place of reciprocal dependency of places and terms, exchange of words and placement of figures that the quattrocento painter will re-mark with a figure-sign and its symbolic dimensions: a column, a vase of flowers, the foot of a lectern, a chest, a door closed or open onto a garden, a bedroom, or onto three arches ... the iconography of which strives knowingly to show theological weight and spiritual importance, while forgetting too quickly that these figures, before ever signifying the terms of a dictionary of symbols, perhaps possess the primordial pictorial function of re-marking, by the procession of any mark, the figurability of the unsayable, of the untellable and the inexplicable, the enunciability of the invisible, of the uncircumscribable and the unfigurable, the coming of Light and Word to voice and the coming of painting’s presence to flesh.7 Isolated or in combination on the painting’s, the panel’s or the wall’s scene, these signs would then have the mystical or analogical function of re-marking invisible-inaudible literality, of unfigurable-untellable picturality, the secret of painting as much as that of the statements made in this space.

Between the “inter-diction” of narrative actors in represented space, and the chiasmus of figurability and of mystery in the space of representation, one must pose the question of this “in-between space” within the spectator’s space, the space of presentation. This in-between space must
be made to *inter-vene* between the place of the work and the position of him who looks at it from his own place, across their common and indistinguishable borders, to their limit where, beyond the invisible mirror-plane, one of the potential inversions of the real and the imaginary is accomplished.

This intervention would be seen — as in the *Annunciation* of Filippo Lippi in San Lorenzo in Florence (approx. 1440) — in the re-marks that we have just mentioned and in their displacement. The figure of the column, as we said, is often, in quattrocento Tuscany, a very powerful sign-figure (at once theological and spiritual) that signals the in-between space of the invisible and inaudible exchange of words between the actors of the story. In Lippi’s work, the central pilaster of the foreground — which hides the pilaster of the portico that leads to the Virgin’s loggia, even as it corresponds to it architecturally — this pilaster is placed behind the Angel. God’s envoy has crossed the border signaled by the pilaster in order to penetrate into the in-between space. The two Angels standing on the left half of the altar-piece are in a sense there as traces of his displacement.

The column’s sign-figure has thus lost its iconographical function. For it is substituted, but ambiguously, the crystal vase that symbolizes, according to the iconographical lexicon, Mary’s Virginity — it is crossed by light without being broken — and whose neck points vertically *between* Gabriel and the Virgin. But the pilaster is not only central to the altar-piece as a result of the displacement to the right of the narrative scene of the Annunciation, but it is also “pushed” forward, it is part of the inner border of the altar-piece’s frame whose two Corinthian pilasters would constitute the outer lateral borders, left and right. In the same way that the substitute sign-figure, the crystal vase, is placed in a semi-circular indentation of the extreme edge of the pavement, so also is our pilaster supported by a pedestal too wide for it. Differently put, these sign-figures would not only remark the invisible place of the figurability of mystery and the articulation of the untellable mystery of figurability (the exchange between narrative figures like those of the story’s text and the painting’s figures), but also placed *between* the extreme limit of the space represented in the panel and the far edge of the space of presentation from which it is looked at, *in the thickness* of the plane of representation, these sign figures would remark the place of the invisible exchange between the spectator’s gaze and the painting, the untellable “eye’s-share” in painting; or still again, like the left-hand Angel who gestures to him, showing with his right hand the space
beyond the pilaster (a beyond, at once lateral, in depth, and to the right), the sign-figure of the pilaster would signify the place of entry of the spectator into the painting: his incarnation in painting whose annunciator would be an Angel. And we won’t repeat, after D. Arasse, how the red surfaces of the background contribute to the reinforcement of the surface-effect, against the “diluting” effect of linear perspective, painting working on itself and at its edges, in its depths and at its surface “taking figurability into consideration” in order to make it talk.

Six or seven years earlier, Fra Angelico painted an Annunciation altarpiece that can be seen today in the diocesan museum of Cortona: dazzling in its colors and substances, but at the same time, extremely precise theologically and exegetically in the construction of its concept and remarkably rigorous in the construction of its perspectival space. The place of the Annunciation, the Virgin’s loggia, into which the Angel has entered, and which opens at the back onto the Virgin’s bedroom, seems to be placed on the lawn and the flowers of the garden enclosed by a hedge of roses and a wooden barrier beyond which a palm-tree and fruit-trees can be seen, and whose upper edge defines the horizon-line and, at its intersection with the frame’s edge, the vanishing-point. Beyond, the sterility of sin and, in the upper left-hand corner, Adam and Eve, chased from the Garden of Eden by the Angel with the flaming sword, “descend” towards the announcing Angel and the new redeeming Eve. Legitimate perspective legitimizes the exegetical meaning by furnishing what can be called, without undue metaphor, its syntactic construction, just as exegetical meaning authorizes an orthodox theology of perspective by giving it semantic meaning that goes beyond the simple Albertian storia by raising it to the grandiose dimensions of holy history.

We could note, as we did with regard to Fra Filippo’s Annunciation at San Lorenzo, the “push,” at the extreme edge of the altar-piece, of the column’s sign-figure that designates the space between the Angel and the Virgin: a frontal push, but without the displacement that permitted Lippi to place on the left the two “supplementary” Angels whose function we have seen. On the other hand, another displacement simultaneously affects the representational schema and the placement of figures. The Virgin’s loggia, her place, is, according to the evidence shown by its architecture, a perfectly cubical edifice with three arches on both sides, open on
the left and on its “facade,” but probably closed on the right. The back is more complicated: from right to left one can see a blind arcade, another arcade where the door opens onto the Virgin’s bedroom, and a third which opens at the left onto a sort of cubicle. It is as though the painter, in order to allow us to see Mary’s hortus conclusus and above all the exegetical type of the Annunciation which, in the Old Testament, is the expulsion from Paradise, had displaced the loggia towards the right, thus hiding the third frontal arch of the “facade” in favor of a binary “represented” architectural structure framing the scene of the Annunciation. However, the same lateral “metonymic” displacement from left to right permitted him to reveal the loggia’s (left-hand) trinity of arches leading the eye of the devout viewer from the “antitype” of the Annunciation to the “typical” scene of the expulsion from Paradise. (fig. 1)

Let’s perform the contrary movement: let’s slide the loggia’s structure from right to left onto the lawn of the enclosed garden. What will the third arch then reveal? What scene is framed by its arc, by its columns and its marble pavement veined with brown and gold? What scene, what “pendant” to the expulsion from Paradise with which the reign of the Law began, on the left in the deep background, would be found to the right of the Annunciation and the redeeming Incarnation with which the reign of Grace begins? A scene that would be “anticipated” perhaps “mysteriously” by the empty place onto which opens the third arch in the background, beside the Virgin’s bedroom and covered with a blue ribbed vault strewn with gold stars, the space unsayable in discourse, unfigurable with a figure, uncircumscribable in place, that of the reign of Glory in which “we will then no longer see per speculum et in aenigmate, but face to face” (I Corinthians 13:12), a confrontation after death and at the end of Time. It is this space “to come,” which the lateral “metonymic” displacement from left to right points toward, that the empty place designates, without making it visible, however; it is the content of this space that the empty place anticipates “per speculum et in aenigmate,” in depth, at once by the negative type of separation and of original sin and by the empty place in the back of the loggia of the second Eve by whom all graces entered the world.

Two “signs” indicate the figurability of the unfigurable without truly signifying it, but by an excess of pictorial artifice they allow it to accede to discourse. In a little tondo, between the two visible arches of the loggia’s
Fig. 1: Ground Plan of the Annunciation of the Cortona Altarpiece (Fra Angelico)

- Metonymic displacement
- Areas hidden in perspectival representation
- AB: Loggia's façade
- AC: Left side with three open arcades
- 1. Virgin's bedroom
- 2. Virgin's bed
- 3. Virgin's bed-curtain
- 4. Virgin's loggia
- 5. Virgin's armchair
- 6. Angel
- 7. Virgin's garden
- 8. Palm tree
- 9. Orchard outside the Garden
- 10. Empty 'cubicle' closed on two sides
facade, God is painted as though he were sculpted in the round, a God-
the-Father leaning a little beyond the plane of representation, looking at
the Virgin and sending down to her the dove of the Spirit radiant with gold
in its sphere of light. God the Father was absent from the upper left, be-
yond the frame; He was only represented by his delegate, the Angel with
the sword at the threshold of the original Garden, chasing the first parents
who are overwhelmed with grief. Now here He appears on the upper edge
of the painted architecture that frames the scene of the Annunciation, but
as a figure of a figure, a representation of a representation, a painting of a
simulated sculpture that functions as the decoration of a “represented”
structure, the doorway of the Virgin’s domuncula. And yet it is this image
of an image whose “referent” is at least three or four times removed from
its representation who, by his gesture and his attitude, sends the Holy
Spirit, imaged with the dove, to effect the miraculous conception. We per-
ceive, it would seem to me, with this figure of the image of God the Father
and also with all the knowledge of a theologian, all the piety of a Brother
of Observance, all the skill and all the technique of a painter, how far we
have strayed from the iconographic dictionary of images in order to gain
access through them to the figurability of a mysterious presence and to the
enunciability of a secret enunciation. Differently put, never was vision per
speculum et in aenigmate, never were the unfigurable, the uncircumscrib-
able, the ineffable, the inexplicable able more mystically and more con-
fusedly to gain access to the work of painting, and by this tour de force
(painting a decorative architectural sculpture beyond the plane of repre-
sentation of the painting) to point out this absent right-hand part where
the mortal and impossible confrontation with God ought to shine forth.

The second “sign” is not a “sign-figure” but three “chains” of linguistic
signs, of graphemes written in golden letters. Fra Angelico seems to link
up again here with the tradition of phylacteries in which the words pro-
nounced by the persons bearing them were inscribed in golden letters. To
ask again the question of the space between the two actors of the Annun-
ciation in the “space” invented by the quattrocento whose legitimate per-
spective would be the regulating schema, it would seem that Fra Angelico
responds to it with a somewhat archaic brutality: this place of the invisible
and inaudible exchange of secret words is occupied by written signs signifying
these words, given to be read as they are given to be seen. Neverthe-
less, it will be noted, at first glance, that these signs have no other support
than the plane of the painting, no other place than the space of the paint-
ing. They are not written-painted on a painted scroll. They are painted, they are inscribed in/or the painting. Yes, to be sure, "in/on" the painting. Any legible, visible writing that is not inscribed on a support represented as an object immediately has a surface-effect. Compare them to the words written on the little book posed on the Virgin's knee and opened, as it should be, to the prophecy of Isaiah. But at the same time, the three chains of signs go behind the sign-figure of the space between, the white column that separates and links the two actors; it hides some of the words; it cuts them like a figurative punctuation-mark; it scans them with an iconic accent as though they and it were of a single medium; this, however, in their very legibility, they are not, unless they, in turn, pull the column into their field not of images, but of language, something, in its legibility as a loggia-column, the column is not.

Let's approach to see; let's approach to read:11 two of the chains are rectilinear, the third, however, curves tangentially to the Virgin's halo in order to rise ideally towards the image of the Spirit's dove. Let's read according to our code of top to bottom, left to right. First line, the one that curves: "Sp Š Sup (–) Veī – et i te" that is, with abbreviations: "Spiritus Sanctus Sup – veniet in te." The column iconically abbreviates the central verb of the evangelical statement sup(er)veniet just as the painter-scribe graphically abbreviates the words with the customary mark: a double syncope, a graphic one to which the code of writing provides the key, and an iconic one which space (because it is deep) and the objects represented there allow to be seen. Differently put, as early as this first line, when painting speaks with language's signs, with the legible graphemes that the painter writes in/on it, it is painting that finishes by talking, developing a strange discourse "between image and word," possessing "the articulations of image and word." This strangeness explodes in the second line. This line is straight and immediately follows the one we just read; it is well written but illegible and doubly illegible: it is written from right to left (in boustrophedon) and each of its letters is inverted from top to bottom: ECE AL ATV WAB TUV. Boustrophedon is found in a certain number of Annunciations: the right-to-left inversion signifying and making seen, with a certain effectiveness, the process of interlocution. To a left-hand figure who speaks and whose words are written from left to right corresponds a right-hand figure who responds with writing reversing that movement. Now Fra Angelico's Annunciation transgresses this rule twice.
He transgresses it first by reversing the graphemes composing the Virgin’s phrase of acceptance of her fate of Mother of God: “Ecce Ancilla Domini. Fiat verbum tuum.” Fra Angelico, even as he makes Mary’s words visible as though spoken from her mouth by writing them in boustrophedon and directing them toward the Angel, by this very visibility, hides their legibility; he seals it by inversion and reversal; he separates it even as he makes it visible: the Annunciation’s logic of secrecy; the Annunciation’s logic of enunciability. We have already noted that the notion of enunciation in its relation to the statement has some relation to the logic of secrecy: in order for an enunciation to be secret, it must be simultaneously concealed and revealed, it must be hidden and yet insinuated by certain traits – the "secreta" of secrecy. To this extent, any "sacred" language reveals this logic, as the exegetical enterprise was to show over the course of centuries by deploying, starting from the "signals" of literal meaning, the variety of spiritual or mystical meanings.

Nevertheless the enunciative structure of secrecy is more specific than that of enunciation in general, because of the distinction implied between the addressee of a secret and its confidant: the confidant receives the secret. He is the true "enunciator" of the secret in the second-person position, like the "you" of an interlocutor. But the addressee of the secret is excluded from this communication: he’s a "he," the absent third person, removed from the exchange, in a sort of negative communication. There is no secret between the confider and the confidant of a secret but for this, but for the setting-aside of the addressee. It is thus that the painter even as he visibly shows that there is an exchange, withdraws its legibility from the exchange, and at the same time excludes the viewer-reader addressee from it. He undoes the signification of the Virgin’s words for the addressee by painting them in signs, however, in/on his painting. Now, we know, Mary’s word of submission signals – throughout the tradition – the moment of the miraculous Conception, the moment of the divine Incarnation: figurability of the mystery (of the Incarnation) by the enunciability of the secret (of the Annunciation); thus the mystery of figurability in painting comes to tell the secret of painting.

But a second transgression weighs down and overdetermines the first. The Virgin’s response to the divine request transmitted by the Angel is written-inscribed, in the painting, between the two phrases emitted by the Angel, the one rising towards the Spirit’s Dove, the other descending towards Mary’s hands crossed on her breast. In the “text” legibly written
and painted in/on the painting – and this legibility infers visibility – the Virgin, having responded to the Angel, leaves the last word to him: “VIRT’ALTISI – OBUMBRABIT TIBI” (“the Power of the Most High will overshadow you”). Now we, viewers of the altarpiece and readers of Scripture, well know, like the devout faithful, that these words are pronounced by the Virgin at the last verse of “Annunciation,” after the Angel has responded to her question: “How shall this (conception) be, since I have no husband?” with the two phrases we see framing the Virgin’s last “word”: pictorial transgression of the written signifier’s linearity and discourse’s syntagmatic linearity, but in which, perhaps, the meaning is thus figured, at the expense of a de-signification of language in its permanent inscription on the support.

But it could well be that the question painting asks here of language has a higher meaning. In fact, the Angel’s discourse we read in Luke is a discourse announcing the future of the Incarnation; the tense of the Message – related in a story in the aorist – is the future: “you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus ... he will reign.... The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God...” and citing Genesis 18:14 the Angel concludes: “For with God nothing will be impossible.” It is then that Mary accepts: “I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Thus marking with these statements in the present tense the moment of the presence in her of the power of the Most High, the immediate Coming of the Holy Spirit. How can the representation of painting make the present appear, the present of presence in its narrative monument of the story’s past, a story which is that of the Announcement of the future; how can the representation of painting make the present come about as the coming of presence in history? The mystery of figurability is here exposed in the figurability of the divine Incarnation by the paradox of the painting of a writing (of the statements of a secret enunciation) that is also the writing of a painting, which, by distortions and transgressions, displacements and reversals of language’s graphemes, makes painting come now, in the painting viewed, to its language.

To conclude with yet another Annunciation, the one painted by Piero della Francesca, circa 1470, in the pinnacle of the polyptych of Saint
Anthony. The history of art has told and retold of its importance, simultaneously as a synthesis of the evolution of forms and of iconography, and as the archetype of the pictorial and plastic future of its theme. Our contemplation of the work brings us however to ask the question of the space between the announcing Angel at left, kneeling, his two hands crossed on his breast, in absolute profile with his shadow falling, weightless, on the white band that separates two colored tiles, and the Virgin addressee on the right, hands crossed on her breast, eyes lowered, holding in her hand the book where she has kept a finger at the page of Isaiah’s prophecy. Here the Angel adoringly contemplates the Virgin who has just agreed to be the Mother of God. A space between, which is both narrative and temporal: the invisible exchange of inaudible words has just taken place. The inchoative aspect opens the interval between the almost “about to be” and the almost “already”: the present’s aspect of imminence or of evanescence. Between the two actors of the story, the double row of a cloister’s columns, “una prospettiva di colonne che diminuiscono, bella affatto,” as Vasari puts it. Here then, but with what splendor, with what demonstrative power, Piero has taken up again the motif of the central aisle which it is thought that Massaccio invented for the lost Annunciation of San Niccolo sopr’Arno and which opens a beautiful historical series.12

Nevertheless, if one examines things more closely, a remarkable dislocation clears the Angel’s space. Indeed, the cloister’s second row of columns (right-hand side) is prolonged towards the viewer in a portico supported by masses of quadruple twin columns whose centers seem made of black marble, as is the interval between the coupled columns that punctuate the cloister’s architecture: a foreground that places the Angel in an open space towards the left and the Virgin in an open space towards the right, covered and protected, however, by a screen of columns. What then is there between the Angel and Mary? If we “construct” the Angel’s and Mary’s places, the geometric operation reveals that according to the ground plan of the scenic floor and the flat projection of the architectural structures this floor supports, the Angel cannot see the Virgin, hidden behind a mass of columns.13 On the other hand, visually, irresistibly, the viewer’s sensory eye cannot prevent itself from seeing that the Angel sees the Virgin, that she is visible to the Angel who is looking at her. Thus in this cleavage between what is given to be seen and what is made to be understood, between the sensory eye and the intellectual eye, between the fleshly gaze that falls on appearances and the intelligible gaze that falls on
real essences, this space-between empties the very space of presentation, the one from which the viewer is looking; it is by this split that the invisible comes to figurability, and the inaudible to enunciability, perceptible only to the eye and the ear of the soul. (fig. 2)

Fig. 2: Drawing of the inside space of Piero’s Annunciation according to the work’s indications.

(Drawing taken from Thomas Martone, Piero Teorico dell’Arte)

It is necessary, however, to push the analysis forward, to sharpen more finely contemplation’s gaze. Between the Annunciation’s two actors, in the space represented, the cloister’s aisle of columns opens in depth and the portico’s masses of quadruple columns, the Virgin’s monumental baldachino, are closed off laterally; or, to recall our initial semantic model, an opening according to enunciation – discourse’s modality – is conjugated with a closing according to the statement – story’s modality. The double dimension of the enunciation and the statement, of discourse and story, is here designated by their signs and their indexes between the story’s two actors, but its purpose is to reveal the mystery of the Incarnation, the secret of the Annunciation, the “secret” of enunciative logic and the mystery of representational figuration. Let’s put together the perspectival schema
that regulates the entire picture, just as the cloister's double colonnade invites the viewer to do by the effect of a kind of cognitive passion of the intellect, a theoretical passion of the gaze. A vanishing-point appears, an intersection of orthogonals in the picture-plane, not at the infinite distance of a "natural" deep space that the cloister's aisle would hollow out of the picture-plane, but on a great sheet of marble, fake or painted at the end of

Fig 3: Drawing of Piero's *Annunciation* (Peruggia Polyptych) showing the exact position of the Virgin with regard to that of the Angel.

(Drawing by Thomas Martone and Robert Miahara in *Piero Teorico dell'Arte*)
the aisle, not on an open or a closed door, not on a closed window or one
giving onto the world, but on a painted surface with its veins and its diag-
ogonal and oblique spots, a pure piece of painting which, between the deep
green of the garden’s foliage, the columns’ white and the black that sur-
rounds the Virgin, appears translucent, almost diaphanous, where the
vanishing point is inscribed on the right-hand part a little below the lower
bluish vein: in a place that represents nothing, on a surface painted with
spots and trails that resembles nothing, if not a veiling surface or a place
where an invisible and uncircumscribable light is sealed: the “visual” logic
of the enunciator’s secret. But inversely, the lateral closure will open onto
the figure, onto the sign-figure of mystery. Of the Virgin, the Angel sees
only her hand holding the book and the great monumental folds of her
figure on the right. For him, her face and her head are one with the rect-
angular base of the arch. The Angel in profile, the announcing narrative
actor, looks at the Virgin he does not see, he looks at her behind the mass
of columns that he sees, behind and through the two twin columns, a
double symbol, according to Raban Maur, of the divinity of Christ because
of the pillar of fire from Exodus in the night of the desert, and of the
humanity of Christ because of the pillar of smoke from Exodus in the day-
light of the crossing.14 He sees in her, without seeing her herself, the incarn-
ate Word, the mystery of the Incarnation at the same time that the
viewers, the faithful in prayer, see with their sensory eyes the Virgin whom
the Angel does not see (without seeing that the Angel does not see her
because the Angel sees Christ incarnate in her) (fig. 3); at the same time
that the faithful see the figure-image of the holy Spirit, the dove in its nest
of rays of light of which 12, then 7, then 3 finally pass diagonally through
the second arc of the Virgin’s portico in order to invisibly reach her. But, at
the same time, their spiritual gazes in their hearts read the Angel’s words
and the ears of their souls (as Augustine, or Origen or St. Bonaventure
would say) hear their echo: “the power of the Most High will overshadow
you.” The visible light in the sign-image of the dove for the sensory eye
shows the eye of the heart or the mind the shadow of the Transcendent:
figurability of the Incarnation of mystery; mystery of the figurability of
painting.15

Translated by Timothy Raser
Translator's note: The verb énoncer (to state, to enunciate) and its derivatives are of capital importance in this article. While the French verb’s meaning is the first meaning of our “to enunciate,” English does have a second meaning, primarily visible in transitive constructions: “to articulate distinctly.” It is to avoid confusion with this second meaning that I have, occasionally (primarily in transitive constructions), used the verb “to state” and its derivatives to render énoncer and its derivatives.

Notes

1. St. Bernardine of Siena, De glorioso Nomine Iesu Christi, Opera omnia (Paris, 1635), II, Sermo 49, Italian translation in San Bernardino da Siena, Pagine Scelte (Milano, 1954), p. 54. One might note in passing that in fact St. Bernardine takes up, even in the very expressions he uses (in particular the incirconscribibile and the infigurabile), themes that are found in Cistercian writings, St. Bernard, Guerric d’Igny, etc.... and in those of St. Gregory the Great (see in particular Moralia, 6, 59; 10, 13; Patrologie Latine [henceforth cited as PL] vol. 75, col. 763 C and 928 b), not to mention the writings of the Greek Cappadocian Fathers, or of St. Athanasius, or of Origen.

2. It is this play on words that serves as the title of D. Arasse’s fine “Annonciation/Enonciation. Remarques sur un énoncé pictural au Quattrocento,” Versus Quaderni di Studi Semiotici (1984), p. 37.


5. Cf. opposite the table presenting the syntagmatic narrative structure and the complex problems of framing in the story of the Annunciation.

6. We introduced this working hypothesis, stated here too briefly, in our study of a cartoon by Le Brun, “Le Tableau d’histoire ou la dénégation de l’énonciation,” in the Revue des Sciences humaines, 57 (1975-6). See also our Dénuire la peinture (Paris: Galilée, 1977), pp. 58 and following. This hypothesis was taken up with some variants in the article by D. Arasse already cited.

7. The essential importance of the difference that we establish between the figurability of an interval, that is to say, of a relation specific to pictorial vision and the sign-figure, a “specific” iconic sign that re-marks this figurability, will be understood here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1, 1:4</th>
<th>position of the characters: enunciator / enunciatee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1, 5-25: Announcement of the Angel (Messenger) of the conception of the Birth of John the Baptist (Zachary and Elizabeth) | 1) Story defined as “good news”, as “announcement”  
| 1, 26-38: Annunciation | Qualifying trial (Propp’s sense): John the Baptist “qualifier” of Jesus - double: “trial” of the Annunciation  
Principal trial (Propp’s sense) |

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>26-27</th>
<th>Seq. 1: God — (Gabriel) — Mary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Seq. 2: Angel — (enter) — Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>says</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seq. 3: Angel — (Mess.) — Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seq. 4: Message — (trouble) — Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seq. 5: Mary — (Message) — Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>asks herself</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 30-33 | Seq. 6: Angel — (Mes.) — Mary |
| 34    | Seq. 7: Mary — (Mes.) — Angel |
| 35-37 | Seq. 8: Angel — (Mes.) — Mary |
| 38    | Seq. 9: Mary — (Mes.) — Angel |
| 38    | Seq. 10: Gabriel — (leaves) — Mary |

| 39-56: Visitation of Mary to Elisabeth | Glorifying trial (Propp’s sense) |
| 39-46: “inspired” response by Elisabeth to Mary’s salutation |
| 46-55: “song”: Mary’s Magnificat |
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10. Our analysis anticipates the research done by Georges Didi-Huberman on Fra Angelico.


15. Some of the elements of this study are taken from our work (forthcoming) on *The Figurability of Enunciation* and from our paper presented at the colloquium “L’Annonciation en Italie à la Renaissance,” (Florence: I Tatti et Institut Français, 1986).
Piero della Francesca, Polyptych of Saint Anthony, detail of the *Annunciation*, Peruggia, National Gallery