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NIETZSCHE IN ITALY

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Louis Marin

TRANSFIGURATION IN RAPHAEL, STENDHAL, AND NIETZSCHE

I have no other reason to speak on the topic of *Nietzsche in Italy* than that I had the occasion—or the fate, as Nietzsche would have put it—to encounter an Italian painting after him. It happened that I read the name of this Italian painting and recognized its image first in a text—a text which, in spite of its several editions, always remains a text, a text of another writer who, to take up again Nietzsche's own words written in Turin, "was one of the most beautiful accidents of my life,"¹ that is to say, Stendhal. It is an Italian painting which I encountered first as a name, not an image, in a text of Stendhal's which, unlike Stendhal's other books, was never read by Nietzsche, for it was published in 1980, a text which was for Stendhal in Rome what *Ecce Homo* was for Nietzsche in Turin: *The Life of Henry Brulard* (Stendhal's autobiography). It is an Italian painting, more exactly a Roman painting, whose presence and return Nietzsche nevertheless could have acknowledged in Stendhal's work from his first book on, a painting that Nietzsche, for his part, also mentions from his first book on, in the fourth chapter of *The Birth of Tragedy*, when that painting suddenly emerges as a dazzling name in a passage where it was not expected to appear. This Italian painting is Raphael's *Transfiguration*: a name before an image, but what a name!

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, tr. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968) 700.



*Raphael: The Transfiguration.
Vatican Museums.*

And it is perhaps the new transfiguration of a resurrected Raphael in *Daybreak* that is accomplished by the answer Nietzsche provided, in Turin in 1888, to the question provoked by the old *Transfiguration* in the reverie of the Consul of Civitavecchia: "Who was I? Who am I? In reality, I would be embarrassed to say."

Nietzsche, as you well know, reformulates this question without end of the origin, or without origin of the end, as "How one becomes what one is." He answers it by giving it the name of Raphael's *Transfiguration*, the name it undoubtedly had in the eyes of Nietzsche since 1872 and *The Birth of Tragedy*, a name that is an answer found in the last sentence of a text that has finally become a transfigured body and dissected once and for all: Dionysus, a name which is also an ultimate contradiction, Dionysus versus the Crucified. It is precisely this contradiction that Raphael had represented in his last painting, the *Transfiguration*, the last painting by which everything begins for both Stendhal and Nietzsche. And it is by the *Transfiguration* of Raphael that I would like to begin.

"Having confessed his sins and made penance, Raphael ended his career on his very birthday, Holy Friday, at thirty-seven years old. We can believe that his soul adorns Heaven the same way this painting embellished earth: above his corpse, in his studio, they hung the *Transfiguration* that he had made for the Cardinal de' Medici. The vision of this dead artist and his living work filled all those present with a terrible grief. This painting was placed by the Cardinal at San Pietro in Montorio above the grand altar and was always admired for the quality of its execution.... With the death of this admirable artist it is quite possible that painting itself died because when he closed his eyes, she became blind." Thus Vasari concludes his life of Raphael, that is to say, with a double transfiguration: the transfiguration of the dead painter in his final painting, where painting itself reaches its end by dying, where it culminates in blindness and vision, and also the transfiguration of a life in its death, which repeats the origin as its end in order to situate it in the tomb of a painting in expectation of a resurrection. The painting itself and its subject would be the representation, or to speak like Nietzsche, the *analoges Gleichnis*, the analogical symbol and substitute, of this resurrection. Echoing Vasari and Raphael, here are a few sentences from *Ecce Homo* that might be put in the mouth of the painter, or better, in the mouth of the appearance of appearance above the painter's dead body: "On



*After Raphael: Modello for the Transfiguration.
Vienna, Albertina Museum.*

this perfect day when everything is ripening and not only the grape turns brown, the eye of the sun just fell upon my life: I looked back, I looked forward, and never saw so many and such good things at once. It was not for nothing that I buried my forty-fourth year today; I had the *right* to bury it; whatever was life in it has been saved, is immortal" (*Ecce Homo* 677). And Nietzsche added that Stendhalian sentence, "and so I tell life to myself." It is precisely here that we must begin: to look at Raphael's painting in this way.

The *Transfiguration*, a painting interrupted by Raphael's death and perhaps taken up by Giulio Romano, is a painting also interrupted and taken up again by Raphael himself. It is a painting of syncopation: an interrupted body in the suspension of gestures, movements, and self-consciousness. Spatial syntax is interrupted by spacings which representation, being representation, takes up again and erases. It is the syncopation of a plastic song, of a visual music where an end is heard at the same time that a beginning takes place, in order to produce for the eye an effect of rhythm, an intensification of presence and absence. The painting preserves the trace or accent of this syncopation, like the obscure bar that cuts it horizontally into two halves and the diagonal gap separating the figures on the left from those on the right. Nocturnal zigzagging marks the canvas twice.

But the *Transfiguration* is not only the painting of a formal, plastic, or compositional syncopation; it is also the painting of a narrative or, rather, an iconographical syncopation that is dissimulated and taken up by the title of the painting, which designates it obliquely, like every syncopation. The *Transfiguration*, in turn, designates a well-known episode in Jesus's life. As you can see, only the upper part of the painting is named by the title *Transfiguration*. This is the part which Raphael decided to syncopate (we shall see at what price), which he decided to link, in the musical sense of the term, through the local and temporal unity of action, to the scene of the possessed son who, when Jesus was on Mount Tabor, was brought to the Apostles, who in their lack of faith refused to cure him miraculously. It is this surprising syncopation of those two unrelated scenes in the Gospel that Stendhal points to with a kind of surprise: "The big disadvantage of the painting, the difficulty that the followers of Raphael would not be caught admitting, is that the lower part of the painting is too far away from the upper part." It is precisely this difficulty, which we have named iconographical syncopation, that Raphael chose to confront, into which he threw himself for his last painting.

Let us take a look at the admirable preparatory drawing in order to read the syncopation. In the middle of a crowd of angelic figures, the Celestial Father is just above his beloved Son under the vault of his mantle. Firmly footed on earth, the Son stands at the summit of the mountain. The Apostles are kneeling and Moses and Elijah are barely discernible in the grisaille. Here again there are two orders, that of the Father and that of the Son. The text of the transfiguration ends: "A cloud came over which covered them with its shadow and from it came forth a voice: 'This is my beloved Son. Listen and obey him.'" Raphael's drawing reveals the image of the celestial voice as the voice identifying the Son.

The syncopation chosen by Raphael is now put into relief by the drawing as the trace of an absence. God the Father is no longer visible. Only the gaze of the Son, a gaze with no object in the painting, designates Him outside the frame. It is as if, thanks to this sublime flight to the very vanishing of all possible presentation, another father would be able to enter the scene from below, the terrestrial father holding another son, the possessed one: another father, another son surrounded by figures, the Apostles, the family separated by a terrifying night, the diagonal gap of the syncopation.

If the whole lower part of the painting depicting the possessed son seems to be substituted for the upper part of the drawing, a part excluded from the painting, if an Apollonian gesture measures the unity of the space represented and closed within exact limits, and if by this gesture Raphael displays for the eye the strange inconsistency of the mountain where the miracle took place, then—in order to reduce the scandalousness of the invention, composition, and construction—it becomes necessary that Jesus's transfiguration be an ecstatic vision. This vision is not one that would be had by the figures of the lower part; it is *our* vision as spectators of the painting, the vision of dream, the appearance of appearance.

We can now grasp what fascinates Nietzsche, the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*. It goes by the name of transfiguration, the well-established subject of Christian painting, the representation of a miracle without an object, a miracle that remains separated once and for all from human pain and suffering—pain and suffering that it nevertheless had to make disappear—but whose syncopation is forever redeemed in and by the painting that presents it to the spectator, in and by the work of art that dared to display it by discovering its double scene.

"In his *Transfiguration*, the lower half of the picture ... shows us the reflection of suffering, primal and eternal, the sole ground of the world: the 'mere appearance' here is the reflection of eternal contradiction, the father of things. From this mere appearance arises, like ambrosial vapor, a new visionary world of mere appearances, invisible to those wrapped in the first appearance—a radiant floating in purest bliss, a serene contemplation beaming from wide-open eyes."³

In brief, Raphael, in his painting of the *Transfiguration* of Jesus on Tabor, operated the transfiguration of the Christian subject into the tragic myth.

"Art is not only an imitation of natural reality but a metaphysical supplement of this reality which is placed next to it in order to surpass it. Inasmuch as it partakes in art, the tragic myth fully partakes in this metaphysical transfiguration that constitutes pure art in general."

With the *Transfiguration* of Raphael, with his final painting and its scandalous audacity, it is again Apollo who appears to Nietzsche, Apollo in whom alone is accomplished deliverance through appearance. The possessed son remains once more the mirror image of the eternal originary pain.... Perhaps we have to wait for *Daybreak*, or simply for the satyric chorus in *The Birth of Tragedy*, in order to read that figure as the drunken and mad young companion of Dionysus, the messenger of a wisdom springing from the depths of Nature. Yes, we have to wait for *Daybreak* and perhaps even later, if not too late, perhaps always too late, in order to understand ("Have I been understood? Have I been understood well?") that God the Celestial Father, whom Raphael had excluded from the representation because of His luminous sublimity, returns from below, through the shadow and the obscurity of the water, in the figure of the disfigured son. Perhaps too late for us, we would perceive the new transfiguration promised by *Daybreak* to the new Raphael and accomplished in Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*.

You will recall the admirable opening description of Rome in *The Life of Henry Brulard*: "This morning, on the sixteenth of October, 1832, I was in San Pietro in Montorio on Mount Janicolo in Rome. It was a magnificent sunny day. A light, barely noticeable sirocco breeze made a few white clouds float.... I was happy to live." Between the

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, tr. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968) 45.

Memoirs of a Tourist and the history of the City, appears the phantom of the Eternal City, between the quest for the past in present ruin or the return of the present through the writing of history from the origin, a fantastic City in this locus of the Stendhalian text: here things coexist in the space of the Memory-City instead of succeeding each other. Everything is reserved, and to make them appear, one only has to shift perspective. It is possible to grasp that fantasy in a fiction, a fantasy which consists in writing one's life by beginning with this unimaginable time, which is itself a space which is not a place of successions but rather a time of metamorphoses and metaphors, where everything is preserved in its annihilation, where everything returns eternally if one accepts to write while dreaming. Inimaginable time, a time of happiness where time-order disappears in becoming what one is. Transparent, luminous space, morning space and not noon space, the space of autumn, October, 1832. "Thus it is here," writes Stendhal, "that the *Transfiguration* of Raphael was admired for two and a half centuries." Raphael's painting is at once an emblem of Rome and a figure of the subject, an emblem of that which the subject looks at, and a figure of the eye that looks. But this emblematic and figural image is invisible and absent in San Pietro. There is only its name. The painting was here but is now there, "buried in the depths of the Vatican, in the sad gallery of gray marble." Instead of and in place of the subject is an invisible and absent painting, which is the syn-copation of this place and that one, of this time and that one, the syn-copation of happiness and despair, of life and death.

Raphael's painting does not provide an answer to the double question of the self-identification, "Who was I? Who am I?" Yet it is, in itself, the place where the enunciation of this double question can occur. Because it has this name, because it treats this subject and displaces it by the supplement of a second son, Raphael's painting would be the fiction typically and singularly modelling Stendhal's life. By the same token, the contemplation of the painting gives rise to the place of the "auto-bio-thanato-graphical" enunciation. But it also offers the troubling image, the trembling image of the essential enunciation, that of a life in its singular death. The same goes for Nietzsche, but inversely. We read in Aubenque's *Le Probleme de l'être chez Aristote* this definition of essence: "The essence of a man is the transfiguration of a history into a legend, of a tragic because unforeseeable existence into a fulfilled destiny, a transfiguration which can only be accomplished at death."