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► **To cite this version:**

Patrick Boucheron. What Giorgione Saw : Variations on Three Philosophers. Chare, Nicholas and Mitchell B., Frank. History and Art History : Looking Past Disciplines, Taylor & Francis Group, pp.106-116, 2020, 978-0-367-25601-2. hal-03262800

HAL Id: hal-03262800

<https://college-de-france.hal.science/hal-03262800>

Submitted on 17 Jun 2021

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7 What Giorgione Saw

Variations on *The Three Philosophers*

Patrick Boucheron

Translated by Nicholas Chare and Isabelle Milan Cail

A young boy, an adult male, an old man: three ages, that we can agree on.¹ But what of the rest? Who are they and what are they doing? We think we recognize them, that we're on the point of working it out: that aspect, the half-gesture, the thing they hold, the colour of that piece of clothing, isn't that ...? But no, it's not him, not that, or rather not exactly. They themselves seem set apart, lost and puzzled – they don't speak to each other, don't touch each other, hardly look at each other. They have climbed the terrace-shaped rocks and are beneath the foliage, facing the cavern. They expect, they appraise, they contemplate – but what? We understand nothing. Time presses nonetheless: we who look upon them are facing the West. The setting sun shines its last between two hills. Its diffuse light still makes the colours shout. But soon darkness will encroach on everything and make the earth gloomy. The tree at the centre of the picture is already dead, a petrified skeleton, like those that children in war torn countries draw.

Seized by the image, by these clippings of time, a history shorn, we are orphaned of certainties.² Here's where we are at. In Venice, between 1504 and 1506, Giorgione unquestionably painted this disquiet, this artwork which we today call *The Three Philosophers* (Figure 7.1).³ Because that's clearly what it's about: if at first sight the painting resists any deciphering it's because it figures none other than the enigma of knowledge. A single question gapes like the shadow mouth that draws the gaze leftwards: what on earth is understanding? Of course, as soon as we feel lost, we have no choice: we do what we've always done, like the old man we take pages scribbled with ancient writings from our pocket, we cling to our books like a survivor does to the disintegrating planks of a shipwreck, we say – there must be an answer, and where else can it be found except by reading past authors?

Let us continue then. A cave and a dense forest, the rays in the distance that trace a path between two folds in night's curtain: the work immediately invites being read as a Dantesque allegory the truth of which must be extracted from its gangue of *obscuritas*.⁴ At the beginning of the sixteenth century, this was doubtless the case for an educated spectator in Italy anyway: just as the cave can only be that of Plato's *Republic* and the tension between the *selva oscura* of sinners and the soft-coloured mountains of the virtuous unmistakably evokes the *faticoso viaggio* of the poet of the *Comedy*.⁵

Yes, but what more? All of this tells us nothing about the three figures and what they are contemplating from atop their three-tiered podium. You would have to go to Vienna, to the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* where the painting is today, to grasp what no reproduction is able to capture: that the light bathing the painting does not come from the setting sun which tinges the distant hillside blue and the last rays of which disappear

beneath the blanket of clouds. It comes, rather, from another source of luminousness from the opposite direction, which is to say from the place from where we view the painting. Feebler, without a doubt, yet intense, it subtly illuminates the back of the cave and it's this puzzle that the young man who stands at its threshold seeks to fathom.

Today, this mystery endures. Writing a 'Life' of Giorgione in 1568 that is as short and perplexed as it is admiring, Giorgio Vasari set the tone. 'I, for my part, have never been able to understand what [the figures] mean, nor, with all the inquiries that I have made, could I ever find any one who did understand what [the figures] mean', he wrote of a (now ruined) painting which decorated the façade of the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi*.⁶ This, because the Venetian painter had a crazy aspiration: to paint the exterior walls of his city in fresco. To showcase his talent and, so they say, to encourage imitators, he started with his own house. He picked up the idea of painting murals and the technique from alpine towns, where the sharp frosts froze the brightness of the colours. Here in the lagoon, however, the respiration of the salty waters caused the pigment to peel uncontrollably, like the polluting air that engulfs the Roman villas gutted by the reamers of the tunnellers in Fellini's *Roma*. It was so successful in this that all that was soon left of the fresco of the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi* that Vasari could not understand was a solitary figure reddened by the salt. This is the naked woman whose reflection entranced Ruskin when he saw it floating in the Grand Canal like a 'scarlet cloud'.⁷

See how we 'Giorgionize': it's unavoidable. Ever Since Vasari wreathed him with a halo of impenetrability, Giorgione has imposed his potent mystery on historians. With him, André Chastel felt 'overpowered, and as if overshadowed by an immense poetic injunction'.⁸ His vague, resounding words only serve to reveal our lack of knowledge. This because, surprisingly, although Giorgione worked at a time when so many artists of the Italian Renaissance were caught up in bureaucratic red tape – the paperwork of the chancelleries and the notaries – and are documented through thousands of letters, contracts and records of payment, we know nothing, or next to nothing, about him.

But judge for yourself. The first day of June 1506 offers the earliest evidence of activity by the painter we will dub Giorgione: on the reverse of a portrait of a woman, in brown ink on the wooden backing on which the painting is mounted, it can be read that this *Laura* 'was made by the hand of the master *Zorzi* of Castelfranco'. He dies in the autumn of 1510, without doubt of the plague. The Marchioness of Mantua, Isabelle d'Este, a stubborn pursuer of beautiful paintings, chivvied one of her contacts in Venice because she has heard that the already celebrated artist had left 'a very beautiful and unique painting representing Night' in his workshop – she had to have this Night; she didn't acquire it. Between these two moments, 1506 and 1510, a few brief snippets, some vague traces, and soon legends, but no more than four clearly documented pictures. Giorgione is a painter without a life or a corpus.

Barely four years of work, during which time Giorgione blazed like a comet, leaving nothing untouched. How did he fail posterity by not assuming the pretentious habits of artistic genius? Of course, he needs his share of shadow, his dose of mystery, his posthumous accolades. And if nothing has consumed the colours of his paintings, if we can still appreciate the brutal candour of his brilliant palette, destructive impulses still assail him in another, more underhand, way: that of the twilight of meaning. In *The Three Philosophers*, the forms remain but their significance grows steadily more remote, risking abstraction. Even the title of the work is just a guess. It first came into being when Marcantonio Michiel viewed the work twenty years after it was painted. An amateur painter and a poet and friend of humanists and artists, Michiel set out to visit the

residences of the major Venetian collectors and, in a little book preserved today in the Biblioteca Marciana, to describe the paintings he was shown. In 1525 at Taddeo Contarini's, he saw ten including this one:

The oil on canvas of three philosophers in the countryside (*nel paese*), two of them standing and one seated, contemplating the sun's rays, with its admirably rendered rock, which was started by Zorzo de Castelfranco and finished by Sebastiano Venetiano.⁹

A rural landscape, a rock, three philosophers – today we don't see them as contemplating the sun's rays, but let's move on – it's certainly this one, the one we're looking for, the painting by Giorgione. Let's also skip the mention of Sebastiano del Piombo picking up the work, which bewilders art historians, and stick to the basics: Giorgione painted the canvas for a rich patron called Taddeo Contarini; fifteen years after the death of the artist, the man who commissioned the painting was still alive and allowed an amateur to view his collection; because he knew it, because he was told it or because it's what he sees, the amateur describes the work in this way: 'three philosophers in the countryside'.

From Venice where it was painted and admired to Vienna where it is today preserved, however, the work passed from hand to hand and during those wanderings, was named in different ways in inventories, memoirs or descriptions. Dario, the son of Taddeo Contarini, sold it to the merchant Bartolomeo della Nave, and when the English ambassador to Venice, Basil Fielding, bought his whole collection in 1638, the inventory described it as '3 Astronomers and Geometricians in a landskip contemplate[ing] and measur[ing]'.¹⁰ Twenty years later, they become 'three mathematicians [who] take the measure of the dimensions of the sky's height' (1659).¹¹ The archduke Léopold-Guillaume had by then added the picture to his collection in Brussels. From there to Vienna in 1783 where they saw: 'the three wise men of the East in a pleasant landscape'.¹² Writing the large catalogue of the Imperial and Royal Gallery of Vienna in 1886, Carl von Lützow recognized the 'three ages of human wisdom'; the old man representing Classical philosophy embodied by Aristotle, the middle-aged man, mediaeval philosophy represented by Arab thinking (Averroes or Avicenna), the young man dressed in the Greek style, the Neoplatonic philosophy of the Renaissance.¹³

Henceforth the die was cast. For over a century, this game of identification was relentlessly renewed, like a game of roulette where the ball never settles on a winning number. Each art historian invites themselves to the table of this casino of attributions and stakes their authority, their eloquence, their ingenuity, their intuitions, above fresh evidence.¹⁴ The three Magi studying the heavens for signs that announce the impending Messiah? Too easy: the game would stop by itself. Better to improve the game and see there the three stages of hermeneutic initiation, the three monotheisms, meaning Moses, Mohammed and the Antichrist. And why not the sorcerer Merlin being inducted by his teachers, or Marcus Aurelius being educated by the philosophers? If it's about recognizing three stages of knowledge, then the figures might well be allegories for astronomy, philosophy and painting, this last represented by the young Giorgione. Some are even so bold as to suggest names for them: Giorgione, Giovanni Bellini, Carpaccio. That said, the astronomical trail is much too tempting, and the young Greek man could thus be Ptolemy, preceded by the cosmographer Regiomontanus and by Aristotle. Unless Ptolemy is the old man with the venerable beard and then we would have, from right to left, Ptolemy, Al-Battani, Copernicus. But others think they recognize him in the middle, and

argue for the order Pythagoras, Ptolemy and Archimedes. It equally needs to be acknowledged that Pythagoras could be depicted as a beardless mathematician, with a set-square and a pair of compasses in hand. In that case he would take the lead over a number of others in third-place: Thales, Pherecydes of Syros, Pythagoras; Moses, Zoroaster, Pythagoras; Abraham, Zoroaster, Pythagoras – this trail of biblical prophetism, in turn, provides the basis for other possible combinations where Solomon, for example, is flanked by the two builders of the Temple, Hiram the King of Tyr and Hiram the architect.

Rest assured; I will not take much longer. Because if I were to, I would be here forever. Just listing the names of the historians who, for over a century, have proposed these identifications – you think I'm exaggerating, but all the aforementioned have actually been championed, and many others that I haven't even mentioned – would require entire pages and many volumes would not be sufficient to engage with their arguments. How then to carve a path through this jungle of documents? Where to find Ockham's razor? It would know how to trim this thicket [*buissonnement*] of useless hypotheses, because, as the fourteenth century English Franciscan used to say, a plurality should not be posited without necessity (*pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*).

I thought I had found it in a scathing, lapidary little book by Yves Bonnefoy, *La Stratégie de l'enigme*, where another mysterious painting is the issue, Piero della Francesca's *The Flagellation of Christ* (1455). This also inspired feverish interpretation to such a degree that it gave Carlo Ginzburg the opportunity to put the very nature of historical investigation to the test.¹⁵ There, the subject of the painting or at least the one indicated by the title, is pushed into the background, behind the figures who stand at the very edge, close to us, but who we have difficulty identifying. It's three again, of different ages, and the youngest, so blond and pallid, looking lost, has absented himself to somewhere unseen, among the angels, perhaps. It starts all over again: theories are initiated, some are appealing but none are entirely convincing – a slow waltz of bungled arguments and elusive evidence. And while these interpreters obstinately stumble over the same impediments, groping their way forward, they maintain their belief that one day the fog will lift enabling them to find the path leading to the truth. It's then that the poet calmly tells them: you're wearing yourself out over enigmas, but you don't even understand their enigmatic nature.

And what if the subject of the painting was there, simply there? The painter has left a few clues – enough to make you think that there's something there to be found – but not in sufficient number for us to find it. That's what Bonnefoy calls 'the character of the enigma': it keeps provoking the wish to understand while always preventing its fulfilment. What happens then? We persevere, get frustrated, and look some more. We are not content to see and recognize, to identify and then move on to something else. The eye tarries. And what it perceives henceforth – the forms, the colours, what separates them – is nothing other than the virtual musicality of the painting: 'where the music that gives life to what's there lets itself be heard'.¹⁶ Don't believe, at any cost, in being entertained for free by the disappearance of the subject in painting. The subject is there – in Piero, as it happens, it's very likely a call to the crusades to save a Church scourged by the fall of Constantinople – but faded and distant, muffled, to be more precise. It's as if the painting had lowered its voice, requiring us to approach it the better and more strongly to hear it. The harmony of things themselves, of their arrangement in the here and now and in us, then becomes clear. In this case, because he was asked to proclaim the need to liberate the city of God, for Piero this harmony suggests *mezza voce* that it would, in fact, be

enough to build it now, together, on earth, where we are. Architecture as a display of pure reason thus appears, which we begin to look at like familiar faces, because the faces of the people positioned in the foreground of the scene disdainfully refuse us – yes, do not look elsewhere, stop straying into esoteric reveries, our future is there, ‘in this city without shadows or, alternatively, light’.¹⁷

I really like this idea. And I also like that it’s articulated by a poet, who gives historians a lesson in precision. It will only seem paradoxical to those who confuse true poetry with Ruskin’s red cloud or the vague injunction of Chastel, which is to say with a way of diminishing what we are sure of by way of hazy words. It is, of course, the opposite. Yves Bonnefoy reminds us that there is logical requirement – and, I’d readily add, a political one – to set apart those historical questions that will probably remain unsolved. By unsolved, that is to say: not themselves holding clues or evidence that will resolve them without the fortuitous discovery of further documents. By solving them, that is, moreover, to say: convincing a sufficient number of researchers that a hypothesis advanced by one of their number is sufficiently supported to compel the rest. In the opposite instance, it’s the inadequacy of the arguments put forward which excites and incites discussion. Without limits, it then spreads uncontrollably. And happily: we mustn’t neglect the fact that it’s great fun to add your voice to the offkey choir singing their interpretations of an unsolved mystery. It’s an academic game that holds little risk, where inventiveness is appreciated and a lack of caution is seldom harshly castigated. The reader, however, must then be forewarned – and, in that sense, the caution of *La Stratégie de l’énigme* finds its political significance: we can give ourselves up to the pleasure of letting ourselves be convinced by this or that identification, and we can say: I want to recognize so and so in this young man with such fine features. But we try not to forget that what convinced us is nothing more than a rhetorical sleight, a personal reminiscence, a singular preference.

So let’s now return to *The Three Philosophers* safe in the knowledge that we will never fully understand what the painter, Giorgione, and the patron, Taddeo Contarini, wanted it to say – if, in fact, they wanted it to say anything. And let’s go back to the root of the bewildered admiration which Giorgio Vasari expressed before a painting that would no longer tell its story. Less to understand what it was that he could not understand than why he could not understand it. ‘[T]here is [no] arrangement of events in consecutive order’, writes Vasari in his *Vita* of Giorgione: the order of *storia*, the story that arrays and orders, is clearly the one Leon Battista Alberti wanted to force upon figurative thinking.¹⁸ The foundational treatise of classicism in painting, *De Pictura* of 1436, was well known. The humanist addresses painters, claiming to reveal the practical purpose of their art. ‘Therefore, all other things about it left aside, I will say what I myself do when I paint.’¹⁹ In other words: what do we do when we do what we have to? ‘First I trace as large a quadrangle as I wish, with right angles, on the surface to be painted; in this place it [the rectangular quadrangle] certainly functions for me as an open window through which the [*storia*] is observed.’²⁰

This famous passage is often misunderstood. The Albertian *finestra* is not a window that opens on the world, to bound it and to protect you, but rather the frame of a story. What then is the *storia*? For Alberti, precisely, a way to convince the spectator by an orderly story. Bound by the laws of perspective, the painted surface is therefore regulated, legislated by those ‘ministers of seeing’ which are the vanishing lines, but also by the harmony created by the balance of pigments: ‘There is a kind of sympathy among colours, whereby their grace and beauty is increased when they are placed side by side’.²¹

It's not for nothing that Ciceronian *amicitia* features here.²² It's because, for Alberti, perspective not only governs Western painting but also the rules of rhetoric. Henceforth, the painters cannot simply content themselves with applying the arts of memory in pursuit of the invisible.²³ They must arouse emotion to convince. But convince us of what? There's the mystery. Because what a slack idea of the Renaissance has hidden as it has unfurled indiscriminately throughout the centuries is that this conception of the *pittura chiara*, that of Alberti in Medici Florence, quickly fell out of fashion.²⁴ Already in Piero's time and certainly by Leonardo's and Giorgione's, painting had taken responsibility for the uncertainty of the world, the confusion of time. Remember: between 1504 and 1506, the former painted *The Battle of Anghiari* and the latter, *The Three Philosophers*, as we'll call it, in both cases rumpling the timeline to express the savage indeterminacy which now disrupts its course.²⁵ How strangely distant must now appear the time of youthful triumphs and of fresh hopes that Benezolo Gozzoli painted in the acidulous colours and clear lines of his *Procession of the Magi* which rendered the chapel of the Medici palace the ideal framework for an Albertian *storia*.

The Three Kings, precisely. Salvatore Settis, who undoubtedly offers the most compelling analysis of Giorgione's mysteries in *Giorgione's Tempest*, refuses to brusquely characterize him as a painter of the disappearance of the subject. He writes: '[t]he subject has not been erased but attenuated or hidden'.²⁶ The pictorial matter of the painting preserves the trace of just this, setting down the memory of its possible futures in its wavering pigments. *The Three Philosophers* was x-rayed for the first time in 1932. This revealed overpainting and repentances [*pentimento*]: the young man was first depicted facing the rock, mouth agape, wearing a more forceful expression of surprise; the skin of the middle-aged man in eastern dress was originally much darker; as for the venerable old man in the yellow toga, rays shone from his head that sketched a strange diadem. Twenty years later, a restoration and a remounting of the painting led figurative aspects that had hitherto been neglected to appear with greater clarity: an ivy vine and a fig tree were climbing the rim of the cavern, in the depths of which a spring gushed water. Lastly, the cavern clearly once dominated the original picture, of which 20 centimetres of the left side was chopped off in the eighteenth century – which explains why the first accounts of the work place such emphasis on the scenery.

What can we conclude from this? Let's start with the features in the landscape: the fig tree is a reference to the tree of knowledge [*l'arbre du péché*], the spring water to grace [*la Grâce*] renewed by baptism, the vine to the strength of the Redemption. The rock therefore assumes a much more Christian character. Next, the attributes of the figures: the diadem of the noble old man and the dark skin of the man from the East strengthens readings of the scene as of the Magi, at least in the first version that was revealed by the x-ray. This is because the Magi who came from the East, guided by a star to recognize and honour the birth of Jesus, are represented as kings in the iconographic tradition of the Western Middle Ages. And because one of them, who stood out because of his youthfulness, his more striking robes or his positioning at a remove from the other two, became a Black king in the second half of the fifteenth century, carrying the hopes of Ethiopian Christianity, the origin of humanity, which fantasies about the imaginary kingdom of Preacher John conveyed to the frontline of the war against Islam.²⁷

The outlines of a *storia* begin to emerge, if not on the surface of the painting then in the restored memories of what it could have become. Not the traditional one of the Adoration of the Magi. Just about everything that would make it immediately recognizable is absent: the incense, the gold and the myrrh, the pyxides. The general feel of the

scene conforms to nothing we know. If they've followed the star, why are they so indifferent and what are they doing on this rock? Ernst Gombrich read in Aristotle that it was possible in daytime to gaze at the stars in the gloom of a cave – that would at least explain the attitude of the young man as Giorgione first painted him, slack-jawed before this apparition.²⁸ But that's just it: through his overpaints, the painter brought him back from this initial state of stupefaction. He has become calm, composed, calculating. The Three Kings, really? If that's the case, we must imagine them not as witnesses stunned by a heavenly apparition but as these learned interpreters. In 1503 in Venice the unfinished exegesis of Matthew the Evangelist was published, known as *Opus imperfectum in Mattheum*. It describes the magi (twelve, not three) stopped on Mount Victoralis to interpret divine signs announcing the birth of Christ, and discovering the cave of Adam where the first man hid his treasure before the Fall.²⁹ So many themes brought up to date by the debates about the *Stella Magorum* which opposed Marcile Ficini to Pico della Mirandola at the end of the fifteenth century and in which the status of astrology was decided. And, by the way, look closely at the manuscript the old man is holding. In the top left, we can see the numbers 5.4 (1504?) and at the bottom a drawing with a rotating disc bearing the numbers 1 to 7, certainly an astronomical instrument. More difficult to read yet corroborated by the diagram of a lunar eclipse is the word *eclisi*. That's it, the eclipse of heavenly lights, the majesty of the person who deciphers the mystery, the knowledge of time and the time of knowledge.

So, let's start over one more time. The vine, the fig-tree, the spring; the deep forest, the hills, the magi; rest after a tiring journey, 'because the right path had been lost', the script and the pair of compasses to find the way; the brightness of the star that illuminates the darkness of the cave; the eclipse, the sun that sets in the West and the new light that comes from where we are; the accumulated riches of heavenly knowledge, the wisdom transported from the East, the great tipping-point where the other comes from far away to learn who we are becoming; the promises of the vastness of the world: see how the *storia* is scaffolded, see how we make up stories [*comme l'on se raconte des histoires*]. Stories, consoling and cajoling, that entice our gaze today, as soon as they are laid out on Giorgione's painting, stories that are told to comfort a cosy, domestic *we*, protected from the confusion of a change of scene [*dépaysement*], stories which reserve modernity solely for Westerners and baptise this *we* with the eternally available name of the Renaissance.

Perhaps this was the subject, an attempt at one, an original regret. We can, however, only discern it hidden beneath the overpainting and the discrepancies. Because, as always, all the appurtenances are not there at the same time. The magi who was originally Black is not the youngest, and wears the garb of the Turkish foe; the radiant diadem of the eldest is one often worn by Moses, especially in specific works by Bellini; the beardless reckoner is in Greek dress, and the Latin scholiasts often remind us that 'the Greeks call philosophers' those wise persons who come from the East. Experts in the iconography of the magi have identified at least twelve examples where painters in the second half of the fifteenth century have retouched their paintings to darken the skin of one of the three figures in order to conform to the developing symbolic codes. Giorgione has done precisely the opposite: by lightening the pigment of the central figure, he's obscured the meaning of the scene, making any identifications more difficult and uncertain. A hidden subject, Salvatore Settis said: it was there in our grasp, we almost got a handle on it. It was the moment the painter dangled the prospect so close to us, but, no, *voilà*, it draws away, grows muffled, sinking into the very substance of the painting, behind the picture plane. Mystery is henceforth in place as the aim; laying imperfect clues upon the painted

surface in an expertly asymmetrical ordering which only offers a solitary insight, albeit forcefully: the incompleteness of meaning.

At first when he saw Bruegel's *Adoration of the Magi* at the National Gallery in London, he recognized what he was familiar with. As always. In the end it had become tiresome. He couldn't manage to be surprised by anything anymore. He had looked so much and learned so well how to identify, classify, situate, that he did it all very quickly, without pleasure, simply as a narcissistic confirmation of his knowledge.³⁰

Daniel Arras observes this in *We see nothing* [*On n'y voit rien*], striving, by the very force of his writing, to forswear the 'caretaker's knowledge of the graveyard' which inevitably sustains all practiced historians.³¹ With Giorgione we can abjure, light hearted, and therefore avoid becoming disoriented by the turnstile of deficient theories. In the case, for example, of the fresco called 'The Allegory of Good Government' which Ambrogio Lorenzetti painted in 1338 in the municipal palace of Siena, I'm not wholly discouraged as I know that it's not impossible to reveal at least part of the political motivations of the painter and his patrons and, from there, the contemporary power [*la puissance d'actualisation*] of the work.³² Here, by contrast, it's a waste of time: better then to rein in the learnedness and focus on the one thing that remains visible on the surface of the picture, which is to say the shadow cast by the look that rests upon it.

But doesn't the old sociology of art basically teach us that already? Giorgione is perhaps the first Western painter to have solely worked for a very small circle of wealthy individuals. It was their palaces that Marcantonio Michiel visited, only needing to ford the canal of Santa Fosca that lay between the palace of Taddeo Contarini, who boasted of owning *The Three Philosophers* and that of Gabriela Vendramin, his brother-in-law, where *The Tempest* could be admired. In his will of 1548, Vendramin wrote that his art collection had brought: 'a little peace and tranquility to [his] soul during the many labours of mind and body that [he] endured in conducting the family business'; he liked the artworks 'for their excellence and rarity [*eccellentia et rarità*].'³³ Rarity is the watchword for all impulses to collect, which conveniently reminds of this intractable reality: what we call art in Western history is, essentially, a feature of social domination. Although this artwork has the spirit of a motto, revelling in those elegantly elaborated little puzzles which rile the intelligence, where the hidden meaning does not proclaim itself from every rooftop but is whispered to oneself without spelling things out.

You'll have to get used to it, we're not there yet. But we do at least know what Marcantonio Michiel heard in front of the painting, perhaps even from the mouth of the person who commissioned it: 'three philosophers in the countryside'. And if we now know better why the identification of the three wise men as the three Magi never entirely goes away – returning regularly in the scholarship like repercussion or remorse – we also know that overall since the end of the nineteenth century the allegory of the three ages of philosophy has come to dominate. It's what we can no longer avoid seeing yet without ever being able to agree on the proper names, which still float, fragile and uncertain, above ideas which are too big for them. So let's look one last time at what we want to see there – three islands of time, three instances solemnly frozen in the sun's path, fleeing from east to west, tracing the history of the world, whetting the arrow of knowledge.

At the right of the painting is a venerable old man with a slightly irate expression. His golden toga is the colour of the setting sun, his long white beard affirms the authority of

the piece of writing which he is ready to brandish. It's Aristotle, and it's not. In the Middle Ages, his name covered a heterogeneous grouping of doctrines and writings, part-translations and unbalanced commentaries. Since Antiquity, for better or worse, these had been compiled and descanted by Arab thinkers. From the twelfth century, they transmitted, transformed and reinvented Aristotle. In scholastic thinking, Aristotle's name means nothing more than that: 'the master of those who know' as Dante wrote in *Inferno* (4.131). Let's just call him the Philosopher as most mediaeval authors did. And understand this, out of the depths of the dark forest of paganism, the Philosopher prophesied the light. His head turned in the right direction, albeit scowling. This because he still lived in the dark night of the soul, where the shadows had not yet been lifted by heavenly grace.

The turbaned figure with the beard is clearly in the in-between. His luxurious garb evokes the oriental silks which flow towards the Serenissima yet his long Greek coat gestures more to the Byzantine world. As to his thumb slid into his belt, it indicates those paper Turks that the Venetian painter has transformed into harmless and familiar figures, to reassure himself, of course. This middle-aged Moor is Averroes and is not Averroes. Because the Andalusian philosopher Ibn-Rushd, who died in Marrakesh in 1198, was only known as The Commentator by Latin authors and endlessly mixed up with others, even with the person he professed to translate and explain – the gift from God to all humanity – Aristotle. See how he heads towards the Philosopher, his right foot still raised. The Commentator from the Middle Ages looks at and reflects on the Antique Philosopher, but turns away from the true light, of which he can only perceive a dull reflection by way of a gloss.

Only the youth draped in classical dress remains. He bears no other name than that of collective hope, of Renaissance humanism. It's this youth, this hope of the world, still immature, who discerns in the depths of a shadowy, necessarily Platonic cave the paradoxical reflection of fresh rays in front of a sky at twilight. He has in his hand a set square and a pair of compasses, and in his heart the burning desire to measure the immensity of it all. Such is the philosopher of the new age, who looks in the same direction as Antiquity and disdains the Middle Ages with its scholiasts. It's like in those family photos where, touched and disbelieving, you find yourself the youngest child: that sulky kid, set apart, a little self-conscious in clothes that are too big for him, above all handsome. We are the sons and daughters of this young man, of this European ratiocinator [*raisonneuse*], this engineer, who professes to assert himself in the world solely through his ability to measure.³⁴ A Europe that would soon say, through Galileo in *Il Saggiatore* [*The Assayer*, 1623], that the universe 'is written in a mathematical language' and all that is required is to trace its lettering and symbols with a firm hand: 'its characters are triangles, circles and other geometrical figures, without which means it is humanly impossible to understand a word of it; without these we wander in vain around a dark labyrinth'.³⁵

Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance: slices of time – we've arrived then. And we've arrived from the perspective of the young butcher who quarters the flesh of the ages [*ce jeune équarisseur qui tranche dans la chair des âges*].³⁶ Can we overlook this? We must. Because there is what Giorgione saw and gives us to see, but there is also what he repossesses and transforms, by the very evidence of that gaze. We pretend to believe that Antiquity was a period of universal development when, really, it is just a division of space, a grouping of places that excludes all the others. Here what the painting says most clearly is, yet again, the significant confusion of its identifications. Passionate about

Greek culture, Taddeo Contarini owned a manuscript, *De vita mosis* [The Life of Moses] by Philon of Alexandria, which portrayed Moses as the archetypal Greek philosopher. By making his biblical diadem appear and disappear, Giorgione knowingly plays with this uncertainty: the venerable old man who sticks up for philosophy is Aristotle and Moses, is Jerusalem and Athens, is, above all, the very movement which returns each directly to the other by cutting through the tangled ball of commentaries.

Here begins the forgetting of the Middle Ages. What we call the Renaissance also comes to designate the time of disdain for Arab thinking.³⁷ This through disparaging the ‘multitude of commentators’ who stifle the energy of the ancient text beneath a suffocating gloss.³⁸ Petrarch called the Averroesians a ‘crazy and loud crowd of scholastics’.³⁹ Thus, political attacks against universities doubled as a ruthless enterprise of cultural exclusion, targeting the Arabs, who were collectively responsible for having ‘made Aristotle ugly’. How then not to see Giorgione’s Moor – who turns his gaze away from the sun setting in the West and is, perhaps, not even able to catch the eye the Philosopher – as akin to the Averroesians at a time when the ideological battle between the supporters of Averroes at the University of Padua and the humanists of Venice was raging. The Averroesians were denounced by Petrarch in his treatise ‘On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others’ (1367), printed in Venice in 1501: ‘they seek the truth by rejecting truth, and light by turning their back on the sun’.⁴⁰ At the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, the Renaissance, glorious and forgetful, does not succeed the Middle Ages. The intellectual struggle continues, assigning to each historical moment its places, peoples and languages. Has it really come to this?

Notes

- 1 The opportunity to publish this only very slightly reworked version of the first chapter of my book *L'Entretiens: Conversations sur l'histoire* (Paris: Verdier, 2012) arose thanks to the friendship and trust of Nicholas Chare. Here, by way of a wilfully wandering structure, I offer a critique of the Western European ordering of time with its orientation towards periodization. In *The Three Philosophers*, Giorgione has painted philosophy at a standstill – and it’s this visual event, where thought hastens to stop flowing, which I examine here. Progressively, over the course of the book, the interpretation offered here is relaunched, grows denser, more complex. As it is initially formulated here in the first chapter it may, perhaps, also have merit as a proposed method aimed precisely at defining the limits of interpretation. Between sociology and hermeneutics, it suggests a way to undertake history through art which is not entirely a history of art. Originally published without notes, the text is here reproduced with some minimal references (which are contemporaneous with its writing in 2012). [Translator’s note] Some further references have been provided for specific quotations or texts. We are grateful to Mitchell B. Frank for his helpful comments regarding the translation.
- 2 [Translator’s note] The Fates are being referenced here including, most prominently, Atropos who cut the thread of life with her shears.
- 3 The literature on Giorgione is immense. I principally rely on Augusto Gentili and Claudia Cieri Via (eds.), *Giorgione e la cultura veneta tra '400 a '500. Mito, allegoria, analisi iconologica* (Rome: De Luca, 1981); Sylvia Ferino-Pagden and Giovanna Nepi Scirè (eds.), *Giorgione: Myth and Enigma* (Milan: Skira, 2004); David Alan Brown and Sylvia Ferino-Pagden (eds.), *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2006).
- 4 [Translator’s note] The term gangue is used in mining to denote worthless material around a desirable mineral. The Latin *obscuritas* can refer to gloom but also obscurity of meaning. See the discussion of *obscuritas* in Dante in Katelijne Schiltz, *Music and Riddle Culture in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 57.
- 5 [Translator’s note] On each ledge of the mountain of Purgatory in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, a representation of the sin being purged and the virtue that opposes it is present.

- 6 Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects; Volume II*, trans. Mrs. Jonathan Foster (London: George Bell & Sons, 1892), 399.
- 7 John Ruskin, 'The Hesperid Æglé' in *Modern Painters: Volume V* (New York: John Wiley, 1885), 314–338, 337.
- 8 André Chastel, *Giorgione, l'insaisissable* (Paris: Liana Levi, 2008), 9.
- 9 Cited in Allesandro Luzio, 'Isabella d'Este e due quadri di Giorgione' in Domenico Gnoli (ed.), *Archivio storico dell'arte: Anno I, 1888* (Rome: Loreto Pasqualucci, 1889), 47–48; 48.
- 10 Cited in Settis, *Giorgione's Tempest*, 15.
- 11 Cited in Michael Barry, 'Renaissance Venice and her "Moors"' in Stefano Carboni (ed.), *Venice and the Islamic World, 828–1797* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 146–173; 159.
- 12 Cited in Barry, 'Renaissance Venice and her "Moors"', 159.
- 13 Cited in Settis, *Giorgione's Tempest*, 17.
- 14 A useful overview of the main theories concerning the interpretation of the 'three philosophers' can be found in Enrico Maria Dal Pozzolo, *Giorgione* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2009), 251–265. See also Willi Hirdt, *Bildwelt und Welthild: 'Die drei Philosophen' Giorgiones* (Tübingen: A. Franke Verlag, 2002), translated into Italian by Paolo Scotini as *I tre filosofi di Giorgione* (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2004). More broadly, I'm indebted to the reading developed by Michael Barry, 'Giorgione et les Maures de Venise' in *Venise et l'Orient, 828–1797* (Paris: IMA-Gallimard, 2006), 147–173.
- 15 Carlo Ginzburg, *The Enigma of Piero: Piero della Francesca*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (London: Verso, 2000 [1994]).
- 16 Yves Bonnefoy, *La Stratégie de l'énigme* (Paris: Galilée, 2006), 33.
- 17 Bonnefoy, *La Stratégie de l'énigme*, 46.
- 18 Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, 399. [Translator's note] Alberti refers to *storia* as *historia* in Latin. Some of his understandings of the term are discussed by Anthony Grafton in 'Historia and Istoria: Alberti's Terminology in Context' *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 8 (1999): 37–68.
- 19 [Translator's note] As is the case here, where possible English translations of French texts referenced by Patrick Boucheron have been cited. Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 39.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Rudolph Agricola, *De inventione dialectica* cited in and translated by Michael Baxandall, *Words for Pictures: Seven Papers on Renaissance Art Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 76.
- 22 [Translator's note] Cicero's *De Amicitia* is a treatise on friendship. Cicero is a key interlocutor in Agricola's *De inventione dialectica*, which is cited in the preceding sentence.
- 23 [Translator's note] For a discussion of memory as an invisible art and of the Renaissance humanist turn away from the art memory, see Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1992 [1966]).
- 24 [Translator's note] The Renaissance humanist Lorenzo Valla aligns the idea of a '*pittura chiara*', of a 'clear painting' with *definitio* (the defining characteristics of a thing, the essential) and contrasts it with *descriptio* (a description of the qualities that make something different from something else) which leads to opaque and obscure images. See Cesare Vasoli, *La Dialectica e la retorica dell'Umanesimo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1968), 142. For a broader discussion of Valla, see Lodi Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009).
- 25 This, at least, is the theory developed by Patrick Boucheron, see *Léonard et Machiavel* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2009).
- 26 Salvatore Settis, *Giorgione's Tempest: Interpreting the Hidden Subject*, trans. Ellen Bianchini (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 41. [Translator's note] Settis has Creighton Gilbert's essay 'On Subject and Not-Subject in Italian Renaissance Pictures', in mind here. Gilbert, 'On Subject and Not-Subject in Italian Renaissance Pictures', *The Art Bulletin* 34:3 (1952): 202–216.
- 27 On the Black Magi, see Paul H Kaplan, *The Rise of the Black Magus in Western Art* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985). See also Richard C. Trexler, *Le voyage des mages à travers l'histoire*, trans. Marianne Groulez (Paris: Armand Colin, 2009 [1997]).
- 28 Ernst Gombrich, 'A Note on Giorgione's *Three Philosophers*', *The Burlington Magazine* 128:1000 (1986): 488.

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- 29 [Translator's note] For a summary of the *Opus imperfectum in Matthaeum* see Michael A. Screech, 'The Magi and the Star' in Olivier Fatio and Pierre Fraenkel (eds.), *Histoire de l'exégèse au XVI^e siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 1978), 215–225; 222–223.
- 30 Translation slightly amended. Daniel Arras, *Take a Closer Look*, trans. Alyson Waters (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 41.
- 31 Translation slightly amended. Arras, *Take a Closer Look*, 41.
- 32 [Translator's note] See Patrick Boucheron, *Conjurer la peur: Essai sur la force politique des images* (Paris: Éditions Points, 2013), 15. In *The Power of Images*, this phrase is translated as 'the power with which it is actualized' (4). Patrick Boucheron, *The Power of Images: Siena 1338*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).
- 33 [Translator's note] Translation amended. Cited in Monika Schmitter, "'Virtuous Riches': The Bricolage of Cittadini Identities in Early Sixteenth-Century Venice' *Renaissance Quarterly* 57:3 (2004): 908–969; 917.
- 34 [Translator's note] The French *raisonneuse* can also mean someone who quibbles.
- 35 Galileo Galilei, *Il sagittatore* (Florence: Giunti Barbèra, 1864 [1623]), 60.
- 36 [Translator's note] There is no equivalent word in English for *équarisseur* which literally means a 'squarer', (someone who makes things square) and also refers to the quartering of carcasses in an abattoir. Boucheron is exploiting both senses of the word. The English word quadrator, a synonym for stonemason, carries something of the sense of a person who 'squares' things.
- 37 Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Age* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1991).
- 38 Pétrarque, *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1906), 73.
- 39 Pétrarque, *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia*, 72.
- 40 [Translator's note] Cited in French translation in Ernest Renan, *Averroès et l'averroïsme* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1882), 335.