‘The son that does not shine in Raphael’s Transfiguration’

JAMES D. HERBERT

Christ appears! That would seem to be the astounding gift that Raphael’s Transfiguration, a work nearing completion at the time of the artist’s premature death in 1520, delivered to its viewers (figure 1). The highly accomplished artist appears to have applied all the tricks of the trade, all the sophisticated representational techniques perfected during the Italian Renaissance, to the task of rendering Christ present, in radiant glory. Backed by a cloud of bluish white and robed in bleached garments, the highlighted figure of Jesus rises. He rises three times, in fact. First, thematically: the artist elevishes the event described midway through each of the synoptic gospels, where Jesus only glows, by having Christ physically float above the mountain top to which he has led his three favored apostles and where for the first time he makes visually manifest his transcendent nature. Second, compositionally: by placing the portrayal of the Transfiguration above a depiction of the episode in which the apostles left behind fail to cure a demonically possessed boy — the telling of which immediately follows the Transfiguration in each gospel account — Raphael has Christ ascend above the earthbound crowd below. And third, in relation to the viewers: because the painting itself stands at over four meters, this Jesus at life scale soars far over the heads of anyone who approaches the base of the picture.

Christ appears, and yet he should not. About the impossible nature of this sight, and regarding Jesus’ prohibition against having too much revealed about the event, the gospels are quite clear, especially Mark’s. Those gathered at the base of the hill in Raphael’s rendition, a number of whom gesture upward even as their eyes do not rise, should have no awareness of the miraculous event taking place on higher ground. By the biblical accounts, the messianic secret had to be kept, at least until after the Resurrection. Even if the chosen three covering on the mount — from left to right, James, Peter, and John — were to dare face the divine spectacle directly, that which they saw then in lived miracle we should not be able to see now in paint. We should not see it, that is, if Mark is to be taken at his word — as Raphael’s ecclesiastical patron, Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici (soon to become Pope Clement VII), surely would have expected. By the hard standard of the text, Raphael would appear on the brink of blasphemy.

How to reconcile the potential contradiction between the prowess of painting, reaching an acme in these High Renaissance years, and the limits imposed by the written word? How could Raphael perform his miracle of painterly verisimilitude — if that is what the Transfiguration is — without troubling the keepers of the faith as revealed in the canonical texts? The rising status of artists in Renaissance Italy, in terms both of their social
standing and of the capacities for religious exegesis attributed to them, undoubtedly granted broad license to Raphael and his like to aspire to show ever more. Vasari could extol Raphael as a ‘mortal god,’ although the praise was directed as much toward the artist’s line manners as his artistic ability, and the oxymoronic formulation recognized Raphael’s mundane aspect as much as his seemingly celestial one.3 Indeed, Vasari’s description of Raphael’s final flourish — “The artist seems to have gathered all his force to worshiply present the face of Christ, which was the last thing he did, as death overtook him before he again took up the brush” (p. 243) — intimates divine retribution, or perhaps elevation, for an artist who was pushing the limits of representation proper to this world.

With the Transfiguration, nonetheless, the contradiction between pictorial proferring and textual prohibition may prove less intractable than it first appears. The painting does indeed grant a glimpse of Jesus, but it also represents the impossibility of any sighting of his divine aspect. It presents both likeness and its ineluctable limitation. Paradoxically, with that refusal of representation, the Transfiguration stands the greatest chance of opening itself to the arrival of divine presence, not through visual resemblance but rather by means of inexplicable grace. As an exemplar of High Renaissance painting at its point of greatest achievement, the Transfiguration demonstrates how even this mode of picture making, seemingly capable of showing all, depends on the failure of appearances if it is to allow for the presence of God.

When catching sight of the Transfiguration from afar — as many viewers would first have viewed it down the nave of San Pietro in Montorio in Rome, where the painting presided over the high altar from 1525 to 1577, and as we encounter it now across the largest gallery in the Pinacoteca of the Vatican Museums — all eyes must surely be drawn upward, both by the forceful flow of depicted gestures and gazes and by the bright zone around the transfigured Christ dominating the upper half of the panel. Mark’s account of the event reads:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller [whitener of cloth] on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice: This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly where they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead. (Mark 9:2-9)

Master and apostles may have withheld the event from others following their descent (at least for a time), but when we view the Transfiguration at nave-length distance, we seem to be allowed a vision of that which the chosen three had been given to behold.

When we approach the painting to within comfortable viewing distance — two meters, say — our attention is diverted away from the miracle and toward the mundane crowd that fills the lower half of the panel. Since the depicted figures are life size, we seemingly join this group, completing the circle formed by the seated fellow to the left, the crouching woman at center right, and the cluster of gestulating men between and beyond them. What we our witness was happening below while Jesus and the three were still on the mountain, and in the Bible it emerges only retrospectively, as a tale told within the tales of the three synoptic gospels: Luke 9:37 even places the


4: How and for all other biblical texts, I rely on the New Revised Standard Version. In the second sentence of this passage, the NRSV actually reads “such as no one on earth could bleach them,” but at “no one” a former translator’s “as no one”.

The occupational term also appears in the Vulgate, the authoritative Latin Bible for Raphael and his contemporaries.
standing and of the capacities for religious exegesis attributed to them, undoubtedly granted broad license to Raphael and his like to aspire to show ever more. Vasari could extol Raphael as a ‘mortal god’, although the praise was directed as much toward the artist’s line manners as his artistic ability, and the oxymoronic formulation recognized Raphael’s mundane aspect as much as his seemingly celestial one.3 Indeed, Vasari’s description of Raphael’s final flourishing — ‘The artist seems to have gathered all his force to worthyly present the face of Christ, which was the last thing he did, as death overtook him before he again took up the brush’ (p. 243) — intimates divine retribution, or perhaps elevation, for an artist who was pushing the limits of representation proper to this world.

With the Transfiguration, nonetheless, the contradiction between pictorial proffering and textual prohibition may prove less intractable than it first appears. The painting does indeed grant a glimpse of Jesus, but it also represents the impossibility of any sighting of his divine aspect. It presents both likeness and its ineluctable limitation. Paradoxically, with that refusal of representation, the Transfiguration stands the greatest chance of opening itself to the arrival of divine presence, not through visual resemblance but rather by means of inexplicable grace. As an exemplar of High Renaissance paining at its point of greatest achievement, the Transfiguration demonstrates how even this mode of picture making, seemingly capable of showing all, depends on the failure of appearances if it is to allow for the presence of God.

When catching sight of the Transfiguration from afar — as many viewers would first have viewed it down the nave of San Pietro in Montorio in Rome, where the painting presided over the high altar from 1525 to 1597, and as we encounter it now across the largest gallery in the Pinacoteca of the Vatican Museums — all eyes must surely be drawn upward, both by the forceful flow of depicted gestures and gazes and by the bright zone around the transfigured Christ dominating the upper half of the panel. Mark’s account of the event reads:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller [whitener of cloth] on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’ He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice: This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

(Mark 9:2-9)

Masters and apologists may have withheld the event from others following their descent (at least for a time), but when we view the Transfiguration at nave-length distance, we seem to be allowed a vision of that which the chosen three had been given to behold.

When we approach the painting to within comfortable viewing distance — two meters, say — our attention is diverted away from the miracle and toward the mundane crowd that fills the lower half of the panel. Since the depicted figures are life size, we seemingly join this group, completing the circle formed by the seated fellow to the left, the crouching woman at center right, and the cluster of gesticulating men between and beyond them. What we see as witness is happening below while Jesus and the three are still on the mountain, and in the Bible it emerges only retrospectively, as a tale told within the tales of the three synoptic gospels: Luke 9:37 even places the


4. How and for all other biblical texts, I rely on the New Revised Standard Version. In the second sentence of this passage, the NRSV actually reads: ‘such as no one on earth could bleach them’, but ‘no one’ a for sinister elucidates ‘Geschädigt’ in Völker’s translation. The occupational term also appears in the Vulgate, the authoritator Latin Bible for Raphael and his contemporaries.
return of Jesus and the three ‘on the next day’. Mark’s version is the earliest and longest of the three gospel accounts:

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, ‘What are you arguing about with them?’ Someone from the crowd answered him, ‘Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.’ He answered them, ‘You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me!’ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able — all things can be done — who is it that believes?’ Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You spirit that keep this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!’ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’ (Mark 9:14–29)

The lower half of the Transfiguration transports us back in time, to the episode of the apostles’ failure preceding Jesus’ healing intervention. With guidance from the biblical text, we can segregate out almost all the players in this drama — though a satisfactory explanation of the prominent alabaster woman draped in red and blue will need to wait. To the right, the epileptic boy supported by grey-clad parents is joined by six other figures to form the ‘crowd’ arriving from the distant town behind them to appeal for assistance. That city, with its great wall and gate, also evokes Jerusalem, where Jesus’ fate awaits. To the left, the nine abandoned apostles gather to receive the nine supplicants, and mirror their helplessness across an unbridgeable black chasm. Mark’s ‘scribes’, who are not mentioned in Matthew and Luke, make no appearance among either group, though the open book propped up on a log by the foremost apostle (which will acquire further, more compelling meanings later in my argument) hints faintly at their chronicling activity. With the retrospective knowledge provided by a reading of gospels, we comprehend the reason for the apostles’ therapeutic failure. Like that of the boy’s father, their ‘belief’ is weak; they are part of a ‘faithless generation’ (Matthew 17:19–20) has Jesus reply to the apostles’ query ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ with the indictment ‘Because of your little faith’; their ‘prayer’ is ineffectual (other ancient authorities elaborate Mark’s final phrase to make it ‘praying and fasting’).

We, as proximate viewers of the painting, are caught up in the anguish, which passes like an infection from the suffering family, to the spiritually challenged apostles, to us. To the extent that we become part of this crowd that is gripped by its epileptic emergency and detached by the narrative from the events on the hill, we too lose sight of Jesus and the salvation he promises. At this range and in this scene, ‘belief’ in and ‘awe’ at something higher, which in the gospels only arrive later with Jesus’ descent from the mount, are curtailed by the exigent demands of mundane suffering and the need to alleviate it — which confronted humankind on that day and have continued to do so every day since. The lower half of the painting, viewed in isolation from the top half, in effect draws us into the eternally expanding ‘faithless generation’.

A stylistic difference in the treatment of figures reinforces the yawning divide between the two depicted events, which compositionally can be demarcated by a horizontal line laid across the picture a bit more than halfway up that cuts off nary a lifted finger or dipping toe. Above, the symmetrical, nearly circular arrangement of Christ, elevated prophets, and three chosen apostles exudes a calm mood, all bathed in cool blue light. Meanwhile below, the erratically positioned writhing bodies convey hectic and scattered movement, while the motley colors of their robes sharply differentiate each from the others across the more somber background browns and blacks of hill and earth. Konrad Oberhuber elaborates on the sentiments of many previous commentators when he describes in the Transfiguration the pinning of a ‘world … of order, symmetry, hierarchy … planarity … [and] roundness’ where ‘light makes all colors delicate and transparent’, against an ‘angular’ lower section where ‘spatial forces are received from all directions and flow back out into the periphery, but the center is void, a dark gap’. The mismatch can throw those with expectations of pictorial unity into rhetorical fits of their own; as early as 1835, Jacob Burchardt declared that the work with ‘two entirely different scenes’ presents ‘a dramatic contrast which one may call monstrous’ (though the Swiss historian ultimately decided that Raphael was up to this ‘piece of audacity not to be recommended to everyone’).

You even as the low-erratically positioned writhing bodies convey hectic and scattered movement, while the motley colors of their robes sharply differentiate each from the others across the more somber background browns and blacks of hill and earth. Konrad Oberhuber elaborates on the sentiments of many previous commentators when he describes in the Transfiguration the pinning of a ‘world … of order, symmetry, hierarchy … planarity … [and] roundness’ where ‘light makes all colors delicate and transparent’, against an ‘angular’ lower section where ‘spatial forces are received from all directions and flow back out into the periphery, but the center is void, a dark gap’. The mismatch can throw those with expectations of pictorial unity into rhetorical fits of their own; as early as 1835, Jacob Burchardt declared that the work with ‘two entirely different scenes’ presents ‘a dramatic contrast which one may call monstrous’ (though the Swiss historian ultimately decided that Raphael was up to this ‘piece of audacity not to be recommended to everyone’).

Oberhuber, Raphael, p. 244.

Burchardt, Der Caravaggio, p. 135, spelling slightly altered.

5. See Sekery-Friedenburg and others identify this apostle as Matthias in the group thanks to the match between his clothes and those of his father, Andrew. Ibid., 43, p. 327.

6. Oberhuber, Raphael, p. 244.


80. James D. Herbert
return of Jesus and the three ‘on the next day’. Mark’s version is the earliest and longest of the three gospel accounts:

When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you a boy; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” He answered them, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me!’ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it threw the boy into convulsions, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the father, ‘How long has this been happening to him?’ And he said, ‘From childhood. It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able — all things can be done for the one who believes.’ Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelieving heart!’ When Jesus saw that a crowd had come together running to him, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, ‘You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!’ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, ‘He is dead.’ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ He said to them, ‘This kind can come out only through prayer.’ (Mark 9:14–29)

The lower half of the Transfiguration transports us back in time, to the episode of the apostles’ failure preceding Jesus’ healing intervention. With guidance from the biblical text, we can segregate out almost all the players in this drama — though a satisfactory explanation of the prominent alabaster woman draped in red and blue will need to wait. To the right, the epileptic boy supported by the grief-stricken parents is joined by six other figures to form the ‘crowd’ arriving from the distant town behind them to appeal for assistance. That city, with its great wall and gate, also evokes Jerusalem, where Jesus’ fate awaits. To the left, the nine abandoned apostles gather to receive the nine scribes, and mirror their helplessness across an unbridgeable black chasm. Mark’s ‘scribes’, who are not mentioned in Matthew and Luke, make no appearance among either group, though the open book propped up on a log by the foremost apostle (which will acquire further, more compelling meanings later in my argument) hints faintly at their chronicling activity. With the retrospective knowledge provided by a reading of gospels, we comprehend the reason for the apostles’ therapeutic failure. Like that of the boy’s father, their ‘belief’ is weak; they are part of a ‘faithless generation’ (Matthew 17:19–20). Has Jesus reply to the apostles’ query ‘Why could we not cast it out?’ with the indictment ‘Because of your little faith!’? their ‘prayer’ is ineffectual (other ancient authorities elaborate Mark’s final phrase to make it ‘praying and fainting’).

We, as proximate viewers of the painting, are caught up in the anguish, which passes like an infection from the suffering family, to the spiritually challenged apostles, to us. To the extent that we become part of this crowd that is gripped by its epileptic emergency and detached by the narrative from the events on the hill, we too lose sight of Jesus and the salvation he promises. At this range and in this scene, ‘belief’ in and ‘awe’ at something higher, which in the gospels only arrive later with Jesus’ descent from the mount, are curtailed by the exigent demands of mundane suffering and the need to alleviate it — which confronted humans on that day and have continued to do so every day since. The lower half of the painting, viewed in isolation from the top half, in effect draws us into the externally expanding ‘faithless generation’.

A stylistic difference in the treatment of figures reinforces the yawning divide between the two depicted events, which compositionally can be demarcated by a horizontal line laid across the picture a bit more than halfway up that cuts off nary a lifted finger or dipping toe. Above, the symmetrical, nearly circular arrangement of Christ, elevated prophets, and three chosen apostles exudes a calm mood, all bathed in cool blue light. Meanwhile below, the erratically positioned writhing bodies convey hectic and scattered movement, while the motley colors of their robes sharply differentiate each from the others across the more somber background browns and blacks of hill and earth. Konrad Oberhuber elaborates on the sentiments of many previous commentators when he describes in the Transfiguration the pinning of a ‘world … of order, symmetry, hierarchy … planarity … [and] roundness’ where ‘light makes all colors delicate and transparent’, against an ‘angular’ lower section where ‘spatial forces are received from all directions and flow back out into the periphery, but the center is void, a dark gap’. The mismatch can throw those with expectations of pictorial unity into rhetorical fits of their own; as early as 1835, Jacob Burckhardt declared that the work with ‘two entirely different scenes’ presents ‘a dramatic contrast which one may call monstrous’ (though the Swiss historian ultimately decided that Raphael was up to this ‘piece of audacity not to be recommended to everyone’).

You even as the lowerrightest described almost of Raphael himself are impressed by the head of the painted surface, as if to the right itself without the depicted ledge, cannot occlude a vision of Christ. Till your head back, and there he is — only the degree of anaesthetic dissonance varies with your vantage point below (see figure 4).

In a broader sense, knowledge of Christ’s divinity and his saving powers, whether accepted as truth or regarded as a myth, infuses every viewing of this painting. Raphael created the work under the presumption that the three chosen apostles did indeed follow Jesus’ directive to reveal the secret of the Transfiguration following the Resurrection, a report incorporated into the Good News imparted with catholic abandon by the evangelists and by generations of their followers. Indeed, those three apostles form a horizontal
layer between our low viewing position and the elevated Christ: we know of him through them. While the Transfiguration may grant brilliantly immediate perception of that miracle to the saints, such as the two martyred deacons appearing preternaturally high along the left edge of the picture, it leaves us below caught between the post-Easter gift of revelation and the pre-Easter ignorance of the crowd. 9 The cry of the boy’s father in Mark 9:24 may well characterize the ambivalent predicament of the sinful but repentant visitor presumed by this painting as standing at its base: ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’

8. These two figures have been identified variously, with proposals naming James and Peter, or Philip and Simon, or Peter and Luke. Constantin vonCASPARI formulate a compelling case that they are both St. Stephen (first century) and Lawrence (third century), and convincingly identify their vestments as appropriate for deacons, in ‘The Symbolical and commemorative Allusions in Raphael’s Transfiguration and St John in the Desert’, in Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 35 (1972), pp. 155–6.

If the anguish of the depicted crowd has had the effect of drawing the picture’s low-positioned viewers partially away from divine insight toward seemingly more urgent mundane concerns, the permanent access bestowed on all post-Easter viewers to the vision of Christ — permanent albeit oblique, both literally and figuratively — may equally well draw the depicted crowd away from their terrestrial hopelessness and toward the promise of divine salvation. We can witness their proleptic stirrings. Among the boy’s clan: one hand, then two, then three, four, five, emerge from the shadows to point toward Jesus. Their intent is surely directed elsewhere, in supplication for the lessor apostles’ useless assistance, but the accidental orientation of their arms denies a truth they cannot yet know. More important, at least one of the lesser apostles appears touched by the vision. The prominent red-cloaked figure — let us dub him ‘not-Thomas’, since at least with his hand he seems not to doubt — points directly toward the Transfiguration, even as his eyes remain fixed on the epileptic boy. Behind him (and thus closer to us, to our left), a second apostle extends the line with a pointing arm of his own. With our view of only the back of his head we cannot know whether he is looking at not-Thomas’s expansive gesture or beyond him toward Christ. Nonetheless, these two figures appear on the verge of realizing the source of a healing power that they themselves do not possess.

The demands placed on these figures are excessive and contradictory. As humans participating in an event that precedes (by hours or a day) the arrival of the healing Christ, the months (or years) the disclosure of the messianic secret following the Resurrection, they cannot know. Not-Thomas’s gesture, in fact, directly counters the requirements of the biblical narrative, where the lesser apostles are called on to embody a lack of faith in Christ, not its awakening. As figures within a painting produced in Rome for an ecclesiastical audience, they need instead to hint at the impending completion of the lesson, when the not-yet-arrived Jesus (arriving here in not-Thomas’s gesture) will resolve the dramatic tension of the depicted moment, and at the coming of the Christian era in which the suffering and confusion of the crowd and the lesser apostles will take on the function of, precisely, a lesson. Over the years, commentators on the painting have similarly torn concerning the thematic connection between lower and upper halve. Goethe assures us that ‘after this vision, some persons quickly point to Him as the only source of cure’. 9 [But which vision? Given to whom?] Goethe conflates pre-Easter event and post-Easter rendition. / Burchard, in contrast, insists that ‘not one of them sees what happens on the mountain’, and seals the point with appeal to an authority other than what his eyes see in the painting: ‘and the Bible text did not allow it’ [p. 145].

The Transfiguration hardly resolves these stylistic and thematic tensions and contradictions, all of which stem in one form or another from the juxtaposition of upper and lower halves. Rather it derives its power and interest from holding them open. The painting is not a problem solution, a question not an answer. I believe; help my unbelief! Commentators have been able to work that opening to a variety of purposes — and we need to remain skeptical of any such accounts that bring the painting to easy closure. One group of writers uses the picture to pose theological conundrums and derive their morals. Goethe pioneers the practice: ‘How, then, are those upper and lower parts to be separated? The two are one: below, the suffering part, in need of help; above, the effective, helpful part, both of them linked’ [p. 164]. But then there is Ernst Gombrich, who dispenses with the painting in a handful of pages: ‘It does not seem too hard to suggest an interpretation. . . . If we assume that the discomfiture of the nine Apostles is due to the absence, not only of Christ but also of St Peter, the elements of the puzzle fall into place. For in that case the painting can be seen as one in a long tradition serving the assertion of the Primatus Petri and by implication Primatus Papa.‘ 10 We should attend to the structure more than the content ascribed to the Transfiguration: these descriptions, not much less than Jesus’ pitiable parables, are truer to the painting in their brief setting out of its tensions than in their hasty provision of an explanatory key. Accounts seeking stylistic answers tend to maintain a greater sense of irresolution. Sydney Freedberg best exemplifies the practice: It is as if Raphael had willfully attempted to remake one whole new construct in this picture from the two possibilities of dramatic style open to him since the Tapestry Cartoons: the one, the exalted and supremely disciplined style of the Cartoons themselves, the other, the more movement and irregular expression of the frescoes of the Farnesina. But these modes are too disparate to permit their synthesis, and in this picture Raphael has, if anything made the distinct character of each yet more apparent by their confrontation. What he has achieved in the Transfiguration is no longer a genuinely synthetic image but one in which disparities have been forced to coexist, effectively, in unity. . . .

No work demonstrates more clearly than the Transfiguration not only the retention but the still effective assertion, in Raphael’s late style, of basic classical principle, and, at the same time, the strain and alteration of such principle by new and not quite classical intentions. . . .

The Transfiguration is pregnant with post-classical style, but it remains itself the last and most extensive statement of Raphael’s classical ambition. 11

Freedberg’s tortured, nearly oxymoronic formulations — to paraphrase: ‘Pictorial unity; help my pictorial disunity!’ — suspend us for a while in irresolution before mapping out the stylistic difference across time as a devolution from the zenith of Renaissance classicism toward its mannerist phase, the back side of a Sprenglerian cycle describing a great civilization’s inevitable decay.

Unlike many others, Friedrich Nietzsche leaves the gap in the Transfiguration yawning wide. Ultimately I will be arguing the philosopher gets the painting egregiously wrong, but his error reveals more about the


102. JAMES D. HEBERT
layer between our low viewing position and the elevated Christ: we know of him through them. While the Transfiguration may grant brilliantly immediate perception of that miracle to the saints, such as the two martyred deacons appearing preternaturally high along the left edge of the picture, it leaves us below caught between the post-Easter gift of revelation and the pre-Easter ignorance of the crowd. 8 The cry of the boy’s father in Mark 9:24 may well characterize the ambivalent predication of the sinful but repentant visitor presumed by this painting as standing at its base: ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’

If the anguish of the depicted crowd has had the effect of drawing the picture’s low-positioned viewers partially away from divine insight toward seemingly more urgent mundane concerns, the permanent access bestowed on all post-Easter viewers to the vision of Christ — permanent albeit oblique, both literally and figuratively — may equally well draw the depicted crowd away from their terrestrial hopelessness and toward the promise of divine salvation. We can witness their proleptic stirrings. Among the boy’s clan: one hand, then two, then three, four, five, emerge from the shadows to point toward Jesus. Their intent is surely directed elsewhere, in supplication for the lesser apostles’ useless assistance, but the accidental orientation of their arms divests a truth they cannot yet know. More important, at least one of the lesser apostles appears touched by the vision. The prominent red-crested figure — let us dub him ‘not-Thomas’, since at least with his hand he seems not to doubt — points directly toward the Transfiguration, even as his eyes remain fixed on the epileptic boy. Behind him (and thus closer to us, to our left), a second apostle extends the line with a pointing arm of his own. With our view of only the back of his head we cannot know how he is looking at not-Thomas’s expansive gesture or beyond him toward Christ. Nevertheless, these two figures appear on the verge of realizing the source of a healing power that they themselves do not possess.

The demands placed on these figures are excessive and contradictory. As humans participating in an event that precedes (by hours or a day) the arrival of the healing Christ, they are moved by a mystery they cannot yet comprehend: his resurrection. Yet because their act of seeing is no longer a genuinely synthetic image but one in which disparates have been forced, effectively, in unity... No work demonstrates more clearly than the Transfiguration not only the retention but the still effective assertion, in Raphael’s late style, of basic classical principle, and, at the same time, the strain and alteration of such principle by new and not quite classical intentions....

The Transfiguration is pregnant with post-classical style, but it remains itself the last and extreme statement of Raphael’s classical ambition. 9

Frederick’s tortured, nearly oratory formulations — to paraphrase: ‘Pictorial unity; help my pictorial disunity!’ — suspend us for a while in irresolution before mapping out the stylistic difference across time as a devolution from the zenith of Renaissance classicism toward its mannerist phase, the back side of a Sprechgesang cycle describing a great civilization’s inevitable decay.

Unlike many others, Friedrich Nietzsche leaves the gap in the Transfiguration yawning wide. Ultimately I will be arguing the philosopher gets the painting egregiously wrong, but his error reveals more about the
work than do many accounts that, as far as they go, get it right. Early in The birth of tragedy of 1872 during his exposition of the tension between the Dionysian and Apollonian aspects of ancient Greek civilization, Nietzsche turns to Raphael's panel to illustrate the interrelation of the two forces.24

In his Transfiguration, the lower half with the possesses boy, his despairing bearers, and the helplessly fearful disciples, shows us the reflection [Wide-angle] of eternal original suffering, of the sole ground of the world's 'appearance' [Solon] here is the reflection [Wideangle] of the eternal contradiction, of the father of things. Now out of this appearance rises like the worst of ambrosia a new vision-like world of appearance [see timewool] near Schopenhau, which remains invisible to those who are caught in the first world of appearance — a brilliant hovering in purest blue and painless contemplation through beaming wide-open eyes. Here we have before our eyes, rendered in the highest symbolism of art, that Apollonian world of beauty and its substratum, the horrific wisdom of Socrates [intoxicated human follower of the god Dionysus], and we understand intuitively their reciprocal necessity. But Apollo appears to us again as the apostrophe of the principle individualization, in which the eternally achieved goal of the original Unity [Soma], its redemption through appearance, is alone completed: he shows us with sublime gesture how the whole world of torment is necessary in order to force the individual to produce the redeeming vision.25

Working from a philosophical foundation provided by Schopenhauer's The World as Will and Representation of 1819, Nietzsche fully exploits the double meaning of Schopenhauer’s term ‘appearance’ and ‘shining’ Because Transfiguration, as a painting, has as its purpose the rendering of things visible, it can only give a derivative ‘appearance’ or ‘reflection’ (akin to Schopenhauer’s Vorstellung, or ‘representation’) to the unindividuated vital forces of life and death (close to Schopenhauer’s Will, or ‘will’) that constitute the blindly panoptic events of the epiphany fit itself. The Apollonian spirit, in contrast, is all about bringing things into the light of individual consciousness — a manifestation that is not so much accomplished by the Apollonian individual itself as driven forth by the Dionysian force, the original Unity, with its ‘fervent yearning for appearance’ (p. 30).

And yet Apollo does not inhabit the world of workaday mental constructs, which, like the representations presented by painting, are but means to make possible an illusionary understanding of more basic forces lying beyond sense. Apollo is instead a dreamer who aspires to ‘the higher truth ... in contrast to the only partial comprehensibility of everyday reality’ (p. 21). Immediately preceding his analysis of a knows state of the Transfiguration, Nietzsche would look away from our own ‘reality’ for a moment, if we grasp our empirical existence, like that of the world as a whole, as a concept produced at each moment by the original Unity, then the dream must seem to us now as the appearance of appearance [Schenck of Schopenhau] (p. 30). On the one hand, this ‘appearance of appearance’ would seem a third-order phenomenon, doubly removed from the original Unity by the iteration of representation. On the other hand, the dream world, while never re-establishing identity with the original Unity in the complete and certain manner of a mathematical double

24 — Gary Shapiro provides a perceptive analysis of Nietzsche’s argument in “This is not a Christ”. Art in The Birth of Tragedy, in Adorment of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche on Seeing and Seeing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), ch. 5.

Negotiation, nonetheless seems to reconcept more fully with that primal Unity owing both to its purer form and its broader scope. Purer form: ‘I would ... assert precisely the opposite evaluation of the dream [placing it above waking] on behalf of the secret ground of our essence, whose phenomenal appearance we are ... That which truly exists and the original Unity, with its external suffering and contradiction, needs at the same time the delightful vision, the pleasurable appearance, for its continual redemption ... the appearance of appearance ... [is] an even higher satisfaction of the original desire for appearance’ (p. 30). And broader scope: Dreams, more than collections of fragmented functional concepts, allow the ‘artistically sensitive man’ to ‘interpret life for himself’ (p. 20). This is where the second meaning of Siles beams through in Nietzsche’s argument: like a bright light, the beauty and calming order of the Apollonian vision radiates a redeeming clarity that makes human existence both possible and meaningful against the darkness of Dionysian horrors and ecstasies.26

Nietzsche recasts Raphael’s Christ into the role of Apollo, radiating the ‘higher truth’ of appearance of appearance on the confused world of suffering and our waking attempts to cope. Indeed, the philosopher — virulently hostile to Christianity, which he declines ‘exiles art, each and every art, to the realm of art’ — cannot bring himself ever once to name Jesus as the principal figure in Raphael’s painting.27 And therein lies his error: Nietzsche, in treating the Transfiguration as a pure exposal of Greek thought, misses his Christian character entirely. In having Christ concern himself with Apollo, in radiating Christ thus reveal himself in radiance to enlighten the world, Nietzsche has Jesus show more of himself than Christianity — with its structures against theophany, the showing of God to humanity — can condone.

Let us extend Alan Badiou’s astute observations about the Epistles of Saint Paul to recognize the need of Christianity (a religion founded more by Paul than by Jesus himself) to distinguish itself from the legacies of both Greek and Jewish thought: The Jesus raise the question of the Law, the Greeks, that of Wisdom, of philosophy. Such are the two historical referents for Paul’s enterprise. One must find the path [a diagonal trajectory] for a thought that avoids both these referents,...28

What is Greek discourse? The subjective figure constituted by it is that of the wine man. But wisdom consists in appropriating the ideal order of the world, in the matching of the logos to being. Greek discourse is cosmic, deploying the subject within the realm of a natural reason. Greek discourse is essentially the discourse of totality, insofar as it upholds the spirit (wisdom as instrument) with the knowledge of physique (nature as ordered and accomplished deployment of being).29

Greek thought as a ‘matching of the logos to being’: Badiou’s description runs quite congruent to Nietzsche’s account of the Apollonian shining of a dreamlike totality that structures understanding of an otherwise dark and senseless world. Both involve the creation of a cosmic order, expressed in the realm of the visible. Internal spirits encounters external photos in much the same manner and in the same general vicinity as the Apollonian borders on the Dionysian when the original Unity satisfies its desire for appearance.
work than do many accounts that, as far as they go, get it right. Early in
The birth of tragedy of 1872 during his exposition of the tension between
the Dionysian and Apollonian aspects of ancient Greek civilization,
Nietzsche turns to Raphael's panel to illustrate the interrelation of the two
forces.12

In his Transfiguration, the lower half with the poised boy, his despairing
bearers, and the helplessly fearful disciplines, shows us the reflection
(Widerbildung) of eternal original suffering, of the sole ground of the world:
‘appearance’ [Schein] here is the reflection [Widerschein] of the eternal
contradiction, of the father of things. Now out of this appearance rises like
the scorn of ambrosia a new vision-like world of appearance [neue visionelle
neue Scheinwerk], which remains invisible to those who are caught in the first
world of appearance — a brilliant hovering in purest bliss and painless
contemplation through beaming wide-open eyes. Here we have before our
eyes, rendered in the highest symbolism of art, that Apollonian world of beauty
and its substratum, the horrific wisdom of Silenus [intensified human follower
of the god Dionysus], and we understand intuitively their reciprocal necessity.
But Apollo appears to us again as the apostrophe of the principium individuationis,
in which the eternally achieved goal of the original Unity [Urmen], its
recreation through appearance, is alone completed: he shows us with sublime
gestures how the whole world of torment is necessary in order to force the
individual to produce the redeeming vision.13

Working from a philosophical foundation provided by Schopenhauer’s
The World as Will and Representation of 1819, Nietzsche fully exploits the double
meaning of Schopenhauer’s both ‘appearance’ and ‘shining’. Because
Transfiguration, as a painting, has as its purpose the rendering of things
visible, it can only give a derivative ‘appearance’ or ‘reflection’ (akin to
Schopenhauer’s Vorstellung, or ‘representation’) to the undivided vital
forces of life and death (close to Schopenhauer’s Will, or ‘will’) that
constitute the blindfolded parasitic event of the epileptic fit itself. The
Apollonian spirit, in contrast, is all about bringing things into the light of
individual consciousness — a manifestation that is not so much accomplished by the Apollonian individual itself as driven forth by the
Dionysian force, the original Unity, with its ‘fervent yearning for appearance’ (p. 39).

And yet Apollo does not inhabit the world of workaday mental constructs,
which, like the representations presented by painting, are but means to make
possible an illusory understanding of more basic forces lying beyond sense.
Apollo is instead a dreamer who aspires to ‘the higher truth … in contrast to
the only partial comprehensibility of everyday reality’ (p. 21). Immediately
preceding his analysis of a knowable state of a knowledge of the
Transfiguration, Nietzsche said look away from our own “reality” for a moment, if we grasp our empirical existence, like that of the world as a whole, as a concept produced at each
moment by the original Unity, then the dream must seem to us now as the
appearance of appearance [Schön der Schönes] (p. 30). On the one hand, this
appearance of appearance would seem a third-order phenomenon, doubly
removed from the original Unity by the iteration of representation. On the
other hand, the dream world, while never re-establishing identity with the
original Unity in the complete and certain manner of a mathematical double

negation, nonetheless seems to reconnect more fully with that primal Unity
owing both to its purer form and its broader scope. Purer form: I would …
assert precisely the opposite evaluation of the dream [placing it above
walking] on behalf of the secret ground of our essence, whose phenomenal
appearance we are…. That which truly exists and the original Unity, with its
external suffering and contradiction, needs at the same time the delightful
vision, the pleasurable appearance, for its continual redemption … the
appearance of appearance … in an even higher satisfaction of the original desire
for appearance (p. 30). And broader scope: Dreams, more than collections of
fragmented functional concepts, allow the ‘artistically sensitive man’ to
‘interpret life for himself’ (p. 30). This is where the second meaning of Silenus
beams through in Nietzsche’s argument: like a bright light, the beauty
and calming order of the Apollonian vision radiates a redeeming clarity that
makes human existence both possible and meaningful against the darkness of
Dionysian horrors and ecstasies.14

Nietzsche recasts Raphael’s Christ into the role of Apollo, radiating the
‘higher truth’ of appearance of appearance on the confused world of suffering
and our waking attempts to cope. Indeed, the philosopher — virtuously
hostile to Christianity, which he declares ‘exiles art, each and every art, to
the realm of lost’ — cannot bring himself even once to name Jesus as the
principal figure in Raphael’s painting.15 And therein lies his error: Nietzsche,
in treating the Transfiguration as a pure exposition of Greek thought, misses its
Christian character entirely. In having Christ comport himself like Apollo,
in having Christ reveal himself in radiance to enlighten the world, Nietzsche
has Jesus show more of himself than Christianity — with its structures against theeophany, the showing of God to humanity — can
condone.

Let us extend Alain Badiou’s astute observations about the Epistles of
Saint Paul to recognize the need of Christianity (a religion founded more by
Paul than by Jesus himself) to distinguish itself from the legacies of both
Greek and Jewish thought:
The Jesus raise the question of the Law, the Greeks, of that of Wisdom, of
philosophy. Such are the two historical referents for Paul’s enterprise. One
must find the path ["diagonal trajectory"] for a thought that avoids both these referents, …

What … is Greek discourse? The subjective figure constituted by it is that of
the wine man. But wisdom consists in appropriating the card order of the
world, in the matching of the logos to being. Greek discourse is cosmic,
deploying the subject within the reason of a natural world. Greek discourse
is essentially the discourse of totality, insofar as it upholds the spirit (wisdom as intrinsically the same and proper to all things) as panpsychism,
accompanied and accomplished by employment of the world.16

Greek thought as a ‘matching of the logos to being’: Badiou’s description
runs quite congruent to Nietzsche’s account of the Apollonian shining
force of a dreamlike totality that structures understanding of an otherwise
dark and senseless world. Both involve the creation of a cosmic order, expressed
in the realm of the visible. Internal spirits encounters external phos in much
the same manner and in the same general vicinity as the Apollonian borders
on the Dionysian when the original Unity satisfies its desire for appearance.

12 — Gary Shapiro provides a perceptive
analysis of Nietzsche’s argument in “This
is not a Crime”: Art in The Birth of Tragedy,
in Archetypes of Vision: Foucault and Nietzsche
at Seeing and Seeing (Chicago: University
of Chicago Press, 2005), ch. 5.

13 — Friedrich Nietzsche. The Birth of Tragedy,

14 — In “epileptic” sense, Shapiro writes
"..something appears … and it is stated as
Silenus who is sometimes emphasized, it is
not to suggest any cognitive deficiency but the
brilliant way in which it offers itself” (p. 9). I
agree with Shapiro that Nietzsche breaks with
Schopenhauer on this point. Just as
Nietzsche’s visionary Apollo radiates
Schopenhauer’s pessimism, so the
correspondence of Indian thought, also
adapted from Schopenhauer, is deployed for
ethical contrary to the context from which it is
borrowed. If Schopenhauer and the Indians
speak of our being immersed in the realm of
enlightenment, the Indians will point out the
constructive and healing dimension of the
apology in “The Birth of Tragedy”, p. 19.

15 — The condensation of Christian
theology appearing in Nietzsche’s "Attempt at
a self-criticism", which he added as a preface
to his 1888, Nietzsche, The Birth of
Tragedy, p. 19.

16 — Shapiro points out that Nietzsche
describes the phenomenon — which
Shapiro has just equated to the self-shower
of Shekinah — as "diaphonic", Schipper,
Archetypes of Vision, p. 58. Louis Marin
follows Nietzsche in saying Christ-epilepsy
Apollo exhibits himself fully to our limited
human sight: “It becomes necessary that
Jesus’s transfiguration be an ecstatic vision.
This vision is one not would be that by the
fugitive gaze, but also as an excess
vision, the vision of the divine, the
appearance of appearance ["Louis
Marin: "Transfiguration in Raphael,
Strindberg, and Nietzsche": 19 Nietzsche 168,
by Thomas Harrison (Saratoga, CA:

17 — Alain Badiou, Saint Paul: The Foundation
of Christianity, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford,
Greek thought of this sort had no need for anything on the order of the messianic secret, for wisdom is nothing if it cannot manifest itself. It needs to shine.

As it happens, Raphael's Transfiguration contains a nearly perfect personification of such Greek thought. She dominates the lower half of the picture, directing its action (figure 2). Let us give her a name: Sophia. With her alabaster skin and Attic coiffure, she resembles a Greek statue (faintly, Nietzsche considers sculpture the archetypal Apollonian medium, just as music was for the Dionysian). She has arrogated the red and blue robes usually associated with the Madonna to assert herself as the prima dona of the biblical world into which she finds herself displaced.\(^{29}\) Despite the tinned cloth covering most of her body, reflected light glitters as powerfully off her hip as it does off her shoulder. She might hold our attention more fully, as well as the notice of all those present, were she not redirecting that concentration onto the epileptic boy. Her own focus, however, is on the apostles. 'Attend to this', her sharp gaze as well as her emphatic gestures command; 'Don't look elsewhere!' For the most part, the timid followers comply. Not Thomas ventures a gesture upward, but his eyes cannot risk following his hand. Rather than looking beyond this world for a remedy, rather than looking toward Jesus, he follows Sophia's exhortation to deal with this pressing earthbound crisis here and now, using mundane means. The apostle in the left foreground, under her stare, would even seem to have adopted the Greek identity of Hippocrates, paging through his Corpus in search of a terrestrial cure. Goethe notes: 'Someone has even opened a book to explore whether a traditional formula might possibly be found effective against this evil' (p. 394). Sophia disciplines the gathering to apply their human wisdom to the task of mastering the epileptic fit, and she will counteract no mystical diversions.

In painting this section of the panel, Raphael joins the depicted others in complying with the Greek injunction to render everything coherent and visible. With his use of chiaroscuro to model Sophia's pronounced musculature and the folds of her robes, with the physiognomic precision he devotes to her profile, with the perfect foreshortening of her right arm, Raphael aligns his artistic sophia to her corporeal physis; or, rather, presents her physis so it can be grasped by his sophia. This woman will be known in the light of this world.\(^{30}\) Whatever physical existence she may possess presents itself in the painting's realm of the visible, where empirical Schicks meets idealized Schicks der Schmids.

Once Sophia comes to embody Apollonian order in the Transfiguration, the figure of Jesus rising above no longer can do so (figure 3). As I will argue in a moment, he lacks the coherence. To be sure: there are ways in which Raphael's rendition of Christ likewise serves to draw him into visibility, treating him largely as a terrestrial creature. With the woman's skin and highlighted clothing already quite blanched, Raphael has nothing left to indicate the supernatural whitening that Mark 9:32 ascribes to the transfigured Christ's vestments: 'His clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.' The painter has but his own earthly oils and solvents — lined and lead, in place of the fuller's urine and mustard oil — to whiten Jesus' robes, and the resulting hue remains very much of this world. Matthew 17:2 says more of whiteness from Jesus — 'his face shone like the sun' — and again Raphael cannot deliver a divine excess. Although the depicted illumination bathing Moses and Elijah would indicate a glowing light as their source of light, a painted surface can only reflect ambient light off its own pigments and cannot radiate. In the end, the portrayal of Christ depends on the same play of lighter and darker

\(^{29}\) — Obelkevich writes of the 'marvelous woman, dressed in blue and red like the Virgin, and yet wearing the classical garments and hatred of a Greek statue.' Obelkevich, Raphael, p. 226.

\(^{30}\) — On this point my argument diverges markedly from Conant's conclusion that she figures on earth the divine manifestation of the radiant Christ' (p. 114); and her conclusion that 'the female figure ... represents the visionary, the ineffable — those qualities, conditions, and states of being which do not escape and defy the natural, visible world' (p. 22).
Greek thought of this sort had no need for anything on the order of the messianic secret, for wisdom is nothing if it cannot manifest itself. It needs to shine.

As it happens, Raphael’s Transfiguration contains a nearly perfect personification of such Greek thought. She dominates the lower half of the picture, directing its action (figure 2). Let us give her a name: Sophia.

With her alabaster skin and Attic coiffure, she resembles a Greek statue (Figg. 1, 2, after Nietzsche considers sculpture the archetypal Apollonian medium, just as music was for the Dionysian). She has arrogated the red and blue robes usually associated with the Madonna to assert herself as the prima dona of the biblical world into which she finds herself displaced.20 Despite the tined cloth covering most of her body, reflected light glitters as powerfully off her hip as it does off her shoulder. She might hold our attention more fully, as well as the notice of all those present, were she not redirecting that concentration onto the epileptic boy. Her own focus, however, is on the apostles. ‘Attend to this’, her sharp gaze as well as her emphatic gestures command. ‘Don’t dare look elsewhere!’ For the most part, the timid followers comply. Not Thomas ventures a gesture upward, but his eyes cannot risk following his hand. Rather than looking beyond this world for a remedy, rather than looking toward Jesus, he follows Sophia’s exhortation to deal with this pressing earthbound crisis here and now, using mundane means. The apostle in the left foreground, under her stare, would even seem to have adopted the Greek identity of Hippocrates, paging through his Corpus in search of a terrestrial cure. Goethe notes: ‘Someone has even opened a book to explore whether a traditional formula might possibly be found effective against this evil’ (p. 394). Sophia disciplines the gathering to apply their human wisdom to the task of mastering the epileptic fit, and she will countenance no mystical diversions.

In painting this section of the panel, Raphael joins the depicted others in complying with the Greek injunction to render everything coherent and visible. With his use of chiaroscuro to model Sophia’s pronounced musculature and the folds of her robes, with the physiognomic precision he devotes to her profile, with the perfect foreshortening of her right arm, Raphael aligns his artistic sophia to her corporeal physis; or, rather, presents her physis so it can be grasped by his sophia. This woman will be known in the light of this world. 20 Whatever physical existence she may possess presents itself in the painting’s realm of the visible, where empirical Schicks meets idealized Schicks der Schicks.

Once Sophia comes to embody Apollonian order in the Transfiguration, the figure of Jesus rising above no longer can do so (figure 3). As I will argue in a moment, he lacks the coherence. To be sure: there are ways in which Raphael’s rendition of Christ likewise serves to draw him into visibility, treating him largely as a terrestrial creature. With the woman’s skin and highlighted clothing already quite blanched, Raphael has nothing left to indicate the supernatural whitening that Mark 9:3 ascribes to the transfigured Christ’s vestments: ‘His clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.’ The painter has but his own earthly oils and wools — lined and lead, in place of the fuller’s urine and montmorillonite — to whiten Jesus’ robes, and the resulting hue remains very much of this world. 20 Matthew 17:2 calls for more than whiteness from Jesus — his face shine like the sun’ — and again Raphael cannot deliver a divine excess. Although the depicted illumination bathing Moses and Elijah would indicate a glowsurface as their source of light, a painted surface can only reflect ambient light off its own pigments and cannot radiate. In the end, the portrayal of Christ depends on the same play of lighter and darker

20 - On this point my argument differs markedly from Conover’s contention that the figure on earth the divine manifestation of the radiant Christ’ (p. 11); and her conclusion that ‘the female figure ... represents the visionary, the ineffable — those qualities, conditions, and states of being which do not escape and defy the natural, visible world’ (p. 24).

the event with earthly means to earthly eyes. In all these regards, the figure of Christ serves as well as Sophia for Nietzsche’s Greek notion of Apollonian visibility.

No, the distinction between Raphael’s Jesus and his Sophia below lies instead in the incoherence of Jesus’ corporeal form. For a figure crafted by an artist capable of remarkable exactitude in the depiction of human bodies—Sophia and the other characters in the lower half of the picture may serve no purpose more pressing than allowing this comparison—this Christ, seen straight on, makes no sense at all. His head is too small, and oddly compressed into an overly squat sphere. Even accounting for some warping of the drapery, the midriff balloons. What sort of bend are we to attribute to his hips? To his knees? At what angle should we imagine his feet? For that matter, does the head tilt forward or back? How much depth to this body, in all? Looking straight at the image raises all these questions, and provides answers to none of them.

But, of course, human viewers of the Transfiguration, whether earlier in the church or now in the museum, never do see Christ close up from straight on. If we are near enough to be able to consider such details as the disposition of limbs and shadows, we necessarily are looking upward at a figure located far above our head, which we view at a radically raking angle (figure 4). From this prospect, certain parts of the body do indeed become more explicable. The head seems appropriately small given its height above us; indeed its diminutive size and vertical foreshortening amplify the impression of lowness by exaggerating the ostensible distance and angle of our sighting of Jesus’ countenance. The shadow across the belly, indicating an overhanging expanse of billowing cloth blocked from illumination from above, helps explain the seeming hypertrophy of the torso. The shadow darkens further to the right, as we look up into the underside of the cape. From below, also, we can make better sense of the dark tone (if not the short length) of Jesus’

22. The elevation of Christ in Raphael’s painting, which is undeniably hazed as in the gospels, may inadvertently lead false credence to the now largely discredited suggestion that the Transfiguration is a displaced Resurrection account. Candido R. More effectually refutes that notion in ‘The Transfiguration: an exercise in Markan accommodation’, Biblical Interpretation, 12 (2005), pp. 71–7. In a manner somewhat akin to what I am attempting here with the painting and what Baxos does with Paré, Moser stresses Mark’s gospel in relation to Greek and Jewish legacies of thought.

tones used to depict any mortal creature, with a posited light source above and to the left. Burckhardt proposed that Raphael had devised a thematic compensation to this artistic limitation: The conception of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, formed by the imagination of the believer, is absolutely incapable of representation, for it presupposes a brilliant self-contained illumination of the form, and therefore the absence of all shadow, as well as of all modeling; Raphael substituted the floating’ (p. 145). That elevation may denote the miraculous, but in no manner does it render the miraculous otherworldly. Rather, it only lifts the terrestrial depiction of the Transfiguration a bit higher within the painting, while on its own never casting doubt on the basic presumption that painting can show
the event with earthly means to earthly eyes. In all these regards, the figure of Christ serves as well as Sophia for Nietzsche’s Greek notion of Apollonian visibility.

No, the distinction between Raphael’s Jesus and his Sophia below lies instead in the incoherence of Jesus’ corporeal form. For a figure crafted by an artist capable of remarkable exactitude in the depiction of human bodies—Sophia and the other characters in the lower half of the picture may serve no purpose more pressing than allowing this comparison—this Christ, seen straight on, makes no sense at all. His head is too small, and oddly compressed into an overly squat sphere. Even accounting for some waffling of the drapery, the midriff balloons. What sort of bend are we to attribute to his hips? To his knees? At what angle should we imagine his feet? For that matter, does the head tilt forward or back? How much depth to this body, in all? Looking straight at the image raises all these questions, and provides answers to none of them.

But, of course, human viewers of the Transfiguration, whether earlier in the church or now in the museum, never do see Christ close up from straight on.

If we are near enough to be able to consider such details as the disposition of limbs and shadows, we necessarily are looking upward at a figure located far above our heads, which we view at a radically raking angle (figure 4). From this prospect, certain parts of the body do indeed become more explicable. The head seems appropriately small given its height above us; indeed its diminutive size and vertical foreshortening amplify the impression of lowness by exaggerating the ostensible distance and angle of our sighting of Jesus’ countenance. The shadow across the belly, indicating an overarching expanse of billowing cloth blocked from illumination from above, helps explain the seeming hypertrophy of the torso. The shadow darkens further to the right, as we look up into the underside of the cape. From below, also, we can make better sense of the dark tone (if not the short length) of Jesus’

Figure 3. Raphael, Transfiguration, detail of figure 1. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York.

tones used to depict any mortal creature, with a posited light source above and to the left. Burckhardt proposed that Raphael had devised a thematic compensation to this artistic limitation: The conception of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, formed by the imagination of the believer, is absolutely incapable of representation, for it presupposes a brilliant self-contained illumination of the form, and therefore the absence of all shadow, as well as of all modeling; Raphael substituted the floating’ (p. 143). That elevation may denote the miraculous, but in no manner does it render the miraculous otherworldly. Rather, it only lifts the terrestrial depiction of the Transfiguration a bit higher within the painting, while on its own never casting doubt on the basic presumption that painting can show

Figure 4. Raphael, Transfiguration, detail of figure 1. altered to replicate view from 2 meters away at human height. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York.
lefi shin, visible to us even though bent away from the light. Likewise, the shadowed area on Jesus’ neck below his chin, as well as the spot of shade beneath his lower lip, would be parts of his anatomy only visible from below.

That Raphael in the Transfiguration was capable of depicting a floating figure in a consistent manner from below is amply demonstrated by his treatment of Moses and Elijah, to the left and right of Christ (figure 5). Thematically these two figures do not carry much weight in the composition. Their presence is prescribed by the gospel, unlike the crowd and Sophia below, who only appear owing to the choice of the artist (or perhaps the patron), presumably for the sake of making a point. While priests and theologians have always been able to speculate about the significance of these particular inclusions in the Bible — the two prophets, like Christ, had gone to a mountain to encounter God, and so forth — Raphael presents them in a thematically cursory manner, as simple ‘typologies’ (Old Testament prefigurations of the New Testament event). They are, in any case, presented coherently to an anamorphic view from below. Moses tips his head toward us to let us view his profile, just as both bodies lean solicitously forward toward a centered viewpoint. We look up consistently at the underside of capes, and arms, and hands, and even Moses’ left foot. The shadow below Elijah’s unibrow head appears, while his forehead does not; with neither prophet are we given the tops of shoulders. The book that Raphael places in Elijah’s hands both signals ‘the Prophets’ in correspondence to the ‘the Law’ signified by Moses’ tablets, and visually balances the pair. Because there is no such tome in the biblical account of Elijah from the two books of Kings, I suspect that Elijah has picked up a copy of Alberti’s De pianture when it comes to the rendition of these two figures from the Old Testament, the rules of perspective will be obeyed.

The anamorphic prospect from a human viewpoint near the base of the painting may make sense of the prophets and certain aspects of Jesus, but it fails to account for all of Christ. The figure’s own gaze upward points us toward a more promising view. We might imagine ourselves looking down at Christ from the same distance out as we stood below, and from a similarly raising angle from a point approximately eight meters above the floor (figure 6). This view renders even more of the figure intelligible than did the prospect from below. Now the visible hairline presents itself to an eye positioned properly to see it; now the brightly lit expanse on the top sides of the arms and chest fall into place. Now we make sense of the highlighted lap (from below, the bend of the hips could not have been sufficient to call it that), and the radical foreshortening of the left shin, and the diminutive feet that stretch away from us just as the head had from below. Now that troublesome bag of cloth at the midriff deflates, and the face and upwardly directed gestures claim their appropriate prominence.

Raphael’s Christ is not a figure seen from any one angle, but rather an amalgam inexplicably pieced together from at least two dissimilar prospects. The two outlooks, however, are not for viewers of the same station. From below, we as humans assume a perspective of human scale and placement. And from above? Only a deity could thus soar. And not just any deity; a workshop copy for a lost working sketch of the artist’s first conception of the project includes God the Father floating above an earthbound transfigured Jesus (figure 7). It was perhaps wise for Raphael to have eliminated this divine figure; not only does God manifest himself in the gospel accounts of the Transfiguration only as a voice (just as in the Old Testament he never actually appeared as such to Moses or to Elijah), but also his inclusion here would only raise the distracting and unanswerable question of from whose perspective God should be viewed, a mise-en-abyme. God is literally and figuratively beyond the frame of Raphael’s final version, and his viewpoint (eight meters above us, and more; ultimately from everywhere) is not something we occupy but rather accept as being there, represented to us by Raphael as beyond our reach.

Raphael’s Transfiguration posits Jesus as human from a human prospect, and presumably (when the Father of the Trinity looks at the Son) divine from a divine prospect. And here is where Christianity would have the amalgam be miraculous, because by its doctrines Jesus is not part human.

Figure 5. Raphael, Transfiguration, detail of figure 5, aimed to replicate view from 3 meters away at human height. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York.

Figure 6. Raphael, Transfiguration, detail of figure 6, aimed to replicate view from 8 meters away at the height of the artists. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York.
leth[in], visible to us even though bent away from the light. Likewise, the shadowed area on Jesus’ neck below his chin, as well as the spot of shade beneath his lower lip, would be parts of his anatomy only visible from below. That Raphael in the Transfiguration was capable of depicting a floating figure in a consistent manner from below is amply demonstrated by his treatment of Moses and Elijah, to the left and right of Christ (figure 5). Thematically these two figures do not carry much weight in the composition. Their presence is prescribed by the gospels, unlike the crowd and Sophia below, who only appear owing to the choice of the artist (or perhaps the patron), presumably for the sake of making a point. While priests and theologians have always been able to speculate about the significance of these particular inclusions in the Bible — the two prophets, like Christ, had gone to a mountain to encounter God, and so forth — Raphael presents them in a thematically cursory manner, as simple ‘typologies’ (Old Testament prefigurations of the New Testament event). They are, in any case, presented coherently to an anamorphic view from below. Moses tips his head toward us to let us view his profile, just as both bodies lean solicitously toward a centered viewpoint. We look up consistently at the undersides of capes, and arms, and hands, and even Moses’ left foot. The shadow below Elijah’s umbrage head appears, while his forehead does not; with neither prophet are we given the tops of shoulders. The book that Raphael places in Elijah’s hands both signals the ‘Prophecy’ in correspondence to the ‘the Law’ signified by Moses’ tablets, and visually balances the pair. Because there is no such tome in the biblical account of Elijah from the two books of Kings, I suspect that Elijah has picked up a copy of Alberti’s De pictura when it comes to the rendition of these two figures from the Old Testament, the rules of perspective will be obeyed.5

The anamorphic prospect from a human viewpoint near the base of the painting may make sense of the prophets and certain aspects of Jesus, but it fails to account for all of Christ. The figure’s own gaze upward points us toward a more promising view. We might imagine ourselves looking down at Christ from the same distance out as we had stood below, and from a similarly raking angle from a point approximately eight meters above the floor (figure 6). This view renders even more of the figure intelligible than did the prospect from below. Now the visible hairline presents itself to an eye positioned properly to see it; now the brightly lit expanse on the top sides of the arms and chest fall into place. Now we make sense of the highlighted lap (from below, the bend of the hips could not have been sufficient to call it that), and the radical foreshortening of the left shin, and the diminutive feet that stretch away from us just as the head had from below. Now that troublesome bag of cloth at the midriff deflate, and the face and upwardly directed gestures claim their appropriate prominence.

Raphael’s Christ is not a figure seen from any one angle, but rather an amalgame inexplicably pieced together from at least two dissimilar prospects. The two outlooks, however, are not for viewers of the same station. From below, we as humans assume a perspective of human scale and placement. And from above? Only a deity could thus soar. And not just any deity: a workshop copy for a lost working sketch of the artist’s first conception of the project includes God the Father floating above an earthbound transfigured Jesus (figure 7). It was perhaps wise for Raphael to have eliminated this divine figure: not only does God manifest himself in the gospel accounts of the Transfiguration only as a voice (just as in the Old Testament he never actually appeared as such to Moses or to Elijah), but also his inclusion here would only raise the distracting and unanswerable question of from whose perspective God should be viewed, a mise-en-abyme. God is literally and figuratively beyond the frame of Raphael’s final version, and his viewpoint (eight meters above us, and more; ultimately from everywhere) is not something we occupy but rather accept as being there, represented to us by Raphael as beyond our reach.

Raphael’s Transfiguration places Jesus as human from a human prospect, and presumably (when the Father of the Trinity looks at the Son) divine from a divine prospect. And here is where Christanity would have the amalgame be miraculous, because by its doctrines Jesus is not part human

[Figure 5. Raphael, Transfiguration, detail of figure 3, aimed to replicate view from 2 meters away at human height. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York.]

[Figure 6. Raphael, Transfiguration, detail of figure 6, aimed to replicate view from 2 meters away at a height of 8 meters. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York.]
on the surface of the panel. Rather, it evokes the mystery of his double character — and does so without ever pretending to resemble that which cannot be represented, the Incarnation. Raphael even provides a representation of the manner in which we must perceive Christ, although he cannot provide a representation of Christ himself. The epileptic boy becomes the personification of our necessarily finitistic manner of viewing, as he, with his strabismic eyes, looks up and looks down simultaneously, and also indicates the direction of the two viewpoints with his outstretched arms (figure 8). A deranged child shows the way; it could hardly be otherwise in the Kingdom of God, where the 'first will be last, and the last will be first' (Mark 10:31; Matthew 20:16).

It could reasonably be argued that, with clear vision of the transfigured Christ precluded by both biblical injunction and Raphael's presentation of the impossible figure, words take over as the means by which the miraculous becomes manifest. The Father appears in neither Bible nor panel; instead his voice resonates, commanding further attentiveness to the voice of the Son: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' The three chosen apostles seem barely able to witness the blindingly brilliant event, but presumably they hear the pronouncement, just as before and after the Transfiguration they gather Jesus' sayings. Appropriately, their role as mediators, the apostles (at least Peter and John at center and right) appear portrayed from two angles, their lower bodies shown from the perspective of Jesus above, while their arms and faces are viewed from mortals from below. The rest of the world — the crowd depicted beneath, the generations to follow, eventually us — depend on the delayed verbal report from the chosen three to convey the miracle that occurred on the mountain. The spoken words that sound from the unseen Transfiguration and emanate from it eventually make their way into the written gospels. Raphael gives us just such a book, proleptically bound into the canonical tome, near to us in the lower reaches of the panel, held by the most proximate apostle to the left. Several commentators have proposed that figure should be called Matthew — a name shared by one of the apostles and by the later evangelist, allowing their erroneous conflation across the centuries — but I believe Mark would be the better designation, considering that his actions would seem those of the most zealous protector of the messianic secret among the evangelists. His left hand holds us back in caution (echoed by a flat-palmed signal to 'Halt!' from a fellow apostle further back, near the center of the picture), while his right foot practically kicks us out of the picture. 'Don't look now,' he seems to warn us, in direct contradiction to not-Thomas's point: 'Read later!' Which is precisely what generations of deacons have done in San Pietro in Montorio, standing at each Mass to the left of the main altar directly below the depicted book, reciting from their own large Bibles the lessons prescribed by the lectionary (including the passages from the gospels that recount the depicted events).

Outright hostility toward the image that would so favor the word, however, does not really belong in this time and place. Raphael was not a closet iconoclast and his patron, the future Clement VII, was no Calvin. And indeed, Catholic doctrine provides an account of representation — or rather, presentation, the making of the divine present — that differs as much

and part divine, but rather fully human and fully divine at one and the same moment. As the canonical Athanasian Creed from the fifth century would have it: 'Although he is God and man, he is not divided, but one Christ.... He is completely one in the unity of his person, without confusing his natures. For as the rational soul and body are one person, so the one Christ is God and man.' How the two come together without diminishing either is fundamentally a mystery, a conjunction about which humanity can marvel but which it cannot grasp. In giving views of Jesus from both (credibly) below and (incredibly) above, the Transfiguration does not present Christ as manifest

24. Oberhuber claims: 'The apostles and the top of Mount Tabor are foreshortened for a viewer's eye at the height of Christ's center of gravity. Our minds' eyes have to be lifted up to view his majestically rapt countenance.' But such a viewpoint from above cannot explain the visible underside of Jesus' raised right arm. Konrad Oberhuber, 'Style and meaning', in A Masterpiece of the Transfiguration by Raphael/Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, [n.y.], p. 56.

25. Oberhuber calls him 'Matthew', while Macchiariello refers to him as 'Andrew'/ 'Matthew'. Oberhuber, Raphael, p. 229; Macchiariello, A Masterpiece of Christ, pp. 46, 11.

26. In addition to accentuating the spaces in the religious calendar when the relevant events appear within the lectionary, King documents the position of the lector, who would have been a deacon, below the left side of the picture during Mass — although her point of comparison is with the two-manned deacons depicted higher in the picture. King, The liturgical and commemorative allusions in Raphael's Transfiguration and failure to bond, pp. 359-67, 159.
on the surface of the panel. Rather, it evokes the mystery of his double character — and does so without ever pretending to resemble that which cannot be represented, the Incarnation. Raphael even provides a representation of the manner in which we must perceive Christ, although he cannot provide a representation of Christ himself. The epileptic boy becomes the personification of our necessarily finial manner of viewing, as he, with his strabismic eyes, looks up and looks down simultaneously, and also indicates the direction of the two viewpoints with his outstretched arms (figure 8). A deranged child shows the way; it could hardly be otherwise in the Kingdom of God, where the 'first will be last, and the last will be first' (Mark 10:31; Matthew 20:35).

It could reasonably be argued that, with clear vision of the transfigured Christ precluded by both biblical injunction and Raphael's presentation of the impossible figure, words take over as the means by which the miraculous becomes manifest. The Father appears in neither Bible nor panel; instead his voice sounds, commanding further attentiveness to the voice of the Son: 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' The three chosen apostles seem barely able to witness the blindingly brilliant event, but presumably they hear the pronouncement, just as before and after the Transfiguration they gather Jesus' sayings. Appropriate to their role as mediators, the apostles (at least Peter and John at center and right) appear portrayed from two angles, their lower bodies shown from the perspective of Jesus above, while their arms and faces are viewed from mortals from below.24 The rest of the world — the crowd depicted beneath, the generations to follow, eventually us — depend on the delayed verbal report from the chosen three to convey the miracle that occurred on the mount. The spoken words that sound from the unseen Transfiguration and emanate from it eventually make their way into the written gospels. Raphael gives us just such a book, prophetically bound into the canonical tome, near to us in the lower reaches of the panel, held by the most proximate apostle to the left. Several commentators have proposed that figure should be called Matthew — a name shared by one of the apostles and by the later evangelist, allowing their erroneous conflation across the centuries — but I believe Mark would be the better designation, considering that his actions would seem those of the most zealous protector of the messianic secret among the evangelists.25 His left hand holds us back in caution (echoed by a flat-palmed signal to 'Halt!' from a fellow apostle further back, near the center of the picture), while his right foot practically kicks us out of the picture. 'Don't look now,' he seems to warn us, in direct contradiction to not-Thomas's pointing: 'Read later!' Which is precisely what generations of deacons would have done in San Pietro in Montorio, standing at each Mass to the left of the main altar directly below the depicted book, reciting from their own large Bibles the lessons prescribed by the lectionary (including the passages from the gospels that recount the depicted events).26

Outright hostility toward the image that would so favor the word, however, does not really belong in this time and place. Raphael was not a closet iconoclast and his patron, the future Clement VII, was no Calvin. And indeed, Catholic doctrine provides an account of representation — or rather, presentation, the making of the divine present — that differs as much as

24. Oberhuber claims 'The apostles and the top of Mount Tabor are foreshortened for a viewer's eye at the height of Christ's center of gravity. Our minds' eye have to be lifted up to view the majestic sight correctly.' But such a viewpoint from above cannot explain the visible underside of John's raised right arm. Kenneth Oberhuber, 'Style and meaning', in A Masterpiece of Art: The Transfiguration by Raphael (Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, 1983), p. 36.

25. Oberhuber calls him 'Matthew', while Maciarieli refers to him as 'Andrew/Matthew'. Oberhuber, Raphael, p. 526; Maciarieli, A Masterpiece of Art, pp. 56, 12.

26. In addition to accentuating the places in the religious calendar when the relevant acts appear within the lectionary, King documents the position of the lector, who would have been a deacon, below the left side of the picture during Mass — although her point of comparison is with the two-robed deacons depicted higher in the picture. King, The liturgical and commemorative allusions in Raphael's Transfiguration and nature of holiness, pp. 124–5.
about doctrine that had been established for centuries. The decrees of the thirteenth session of 1552 proclaimed:

After the consecration of the bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and man, is truly, really, and substantially contained in the propitiatory sacrifice of the holy eucharist under the appearance of those things which are perceptible to the senses.... He is... sacramentally present to us by his own substance... in a mode of existing which, though we can hardly express it in words, we can grasp with minds enlightened by faith as possible to God.... The most holy eucharist... is... the visible form of invisible grace. 27

The accidental characteristics of bread and wine, here called 'appearances' (and in other translations 'species') may remain the same, but their 'substance' becomes Jesus Christ. Bread and wine do not represent body and blood, they are they. To posit any qualitative resemblance between mundane 'appearances' and divine 'substance' would be to commit a categorical error by falsely believing that that which is present through 'invisible grace' could somehow be rendered sensible in order to allow comparison with the 'visible form' of daily comestibles. The Council of Trent belabors the point by maintaining that body and blood are equally, not respectively, present in both bread and wine (p. 695). Resemblance of solid to solid or liquid to liquid—were we humans even competent to assess the properties of the divine essences, or presumptuous enough to attribute earthly properties such as liquidity or solidity to them—would be mere happenstance, irrelevant to the real presence of Jesus.

Writing in our own time, the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion elaborates on this Catholic logic by juxtaposing the idol and icon. The idol, according to Marion, shrouds our encounter with the divine by reducing it to something mundane in order that we can apprehend it and assess its resemblance to things of this world. "What the idol works to realabsorb is, precisely, the distance and the withdrawal of the divine: but by establishing such an availability of the divine within the fixed, if not frozen, face of the god, does one not deceitfully but radically eliminate the lofty irruption and the undeniable alterity that properly attest the divine? Compensating for the absence of the divine, the idol makes the divine available, secures it, and in the end distorts it. Its culminating mortally finishes the divine. The icon, in contrast, refuses to impose on the divine the mundane limitations that are entailed when the divine is made visible. Marion writes:

[The icon] is the figure not of a God who in that figure would lose its invisibility in order to become known to us to the point of familiarity, but of a Father who radiates with a definitive and irreducible transcendence all the more inviolate as he unreservedly gives that transcendence to be seen in his Son. The depth of the visible face of the Son delivers to the gaze the invisibility of the Father as such. The icon manifests neither the human face nor the divine nature that no one could envisage but, as the theologians of the icon said, the relation of the one to the other in the hypostasis, the person. The icon conceals and reveals that upon which it rests: the separation in it between the divine and its face.... The icon offers a sort of negative theophany: the figure... opens in its depth upon an invisibility whose distance it does not abolish but reveals. (pp. 8-9)


from such early modern Protestant iconophobia as it does from that version of modern and secular iconophobia that so privileges visual resemblance as a means to deliver an image in place of the thing. Raphael’s fifteenth rendition of Christ in the upper half of the Transfiguration well exemplifies the practice.

Consider, as an archetype for such Catholic presentation, the Eucharist. The Protestant challenge forced the Council of Trent to be quite explicit

194 JAMES D. HERBERT
about doctrine that had been established for centuries. The decrees of the thirteenth session of 1551 proclaimed:

After the consecration of the bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and man, is truly, really, and substantially contained in the propitious sacrament of the holy eucharist under the appearance of those things which are perceptible to the senses. ... He is ... sacramentally present to us by his own substance ... in a mode of existing which, though we can hardly express it in words, we can grasp with minds enlightened by faith as possible to God. ... The most holy eucharist is ... the visible form of invisible grace. 27

The accidental characteristics of bread and wine, here called 'appearances' (and in other translations 'species') may remain the same, but their 'substance' becomes Jesus Christ. Bread and wine do not represent body and blood, they are they. To posit any qualitative resemblance between mundane 'appearances' and divine 'substance' would be to commit a categorical error by falsely believing that that which is present through 'invisible grace' could somehow be rendered sensible in order to allow comparison with the 'visible form' of daily comestibles. The Council of Trent labors the point by maintaining that body and blood are equally, not respectively, present in both bread and wine (p. 695). Resemblance of solid to solid or liquid to liquid — were we humans even competent to assess the properties of the divine essences, or presumptuous enough to attribute earthly properties such as liquidity or solidity to them — would be mere happenstance, irrelevant to the real presence of Jesus.

Writing in our own time, the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion elaborates on this Catholic logic by juxtaposing the idol and icon. The idol, according to Marion, skewers our encounter with the divine by reducing it to something mundane in order that we can apprehend it and assess its resemblance to things of this world. 'What the idol works to reallocate is, precisely, the distance and the withdrawal of the divine: but by establishing such an availability of the divine within the fixed, if not frozen, face of the god, does one not deceitfully but radically eliminate the lofty irritation and the undeniable alterity that properly attest the divine? Compensating for the absence of the divine, the idol makes the divine available, secures it, and in the end distorts it. Its culmination mortally finishes the divine. The icon, in contrast, proposes to impose on the divine the mundane limitations that are entailed when the divine is made visible. Marion writes:

[The icon] is the figure not of a God who in that figure would lose its invisibility in order to become known to us to the point of familiarity, but of a Father who radiates with a definitive and irreducible transcendence all the more so as he unreservedly gives that transcendence to be seen in his Son. The depth of the visible face of the Son delivers to the gaze the invisibility of the Father as such. The icon manifests neither the human face nor the divine nature that no one could envisage but, as the theologians of the icon said, the relation of the one to the other in the hypostasis, the person. The icon conceals and reveals that upon which it rests: the separation in it between the divine and its face ... The icon [offers] a sort of negative theophany: the figure ... opens in its depth upon an invisibility whose distance it does not abolish but reveals. (pp. 8–9)

from such early modern Protestant iconophobia as it does from that version of modern and secular iconophobia that so privileges visual resemblance as a means to deliver an image in place of the thing. Raphael’s fifteenth rendition of Christ in the upper half of the Transfiguration well exemplifies the practice.

Consider, as an archetype for such Catholic presentation, the Eucharist. The Protestant challenge forced the Council of Trent to be quite explicit


The icon cannot show the divine, and thus cannot resemble it. All it can do is manifest the distance — divined in faith rather than apprehended by the senses — that ineluctably separates earth from heaven. It represents not a thing, but an invisible relation. Paradoxically, the divine, which is ‘mortally finish[ed]’ by the idol, can assume a presence in the icon owing precisely to the enabling lack of resemblance between the two.

In many respects, Raphael’s depiction of Jesus does indeed resemble the living and breathing Galilean: head and hands and body and such. A mundane object (a painting) replicates the visible characteristics of a mundane object (a human body). But to the extent that this particular collection of pigments arranged across a panel resembles the physical form of a man, they cannot represent either his divinity or the hypostatic union of man and God. The picture cannot represent the Transfiguration, any more than bread and wine provide empirical evidence of a change following the consecration. Raphael cannot show Jesus showing his transfiguration. If, in Marion’s words, the Father ‘gives that transfiguration to be seen in his Son’, that transfiguration will never be seen as a positive quality in this figure. Rather, transfiguration (dis)appears here as that which the figure cannot show, ‘the invisibility of the Father as such’. The Catholic logic would precede the Renaissance painting, and characterize the biblical event itself. Where Matthew 17:2 states that ‘Jesus’ face shone like the sun’, the evangelist would necessarily be speaking metaphorically (just as Marion does when he writes about ‘a Father who radiates’): whatever the divinity does, it would do it not naturally like the sun but supernaturally in a manner that exceeds both our senses and our minds. The human conception of emanating light could only be a guess, and an utterly groundless one at that.30 Perhaps that is why the chosen apostles in Raphael’s Transfiguration avert their gazes; they cannot look at that which they cannot see. Even had Raphael possessed the technical means to make his panel radiate like a photographic transparency on a light box, the result would have been no closer to rendering the transfiguration as a visible event. Indeed, to have the image thus shine would have increased the risk of idolatry, presenting the figure as if it resembled something that it cannot legitimately even begin to imitate.

Mark 9:3, more cautious than Matthew 17:2, relies instead on an apophatic formulation, hinting at the divine manifestation only by saying that which it is not: ‘His clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.’ Over and again, this is the route that Raphael chooses for his depiction of Christ in the Transfiguration. This Christ, in being less than white, intimates a ‘white’ (which is no such thing) whiter than white. This Christ, by not radiating, suggests a supernatural ‘radiance’ (which is not mere radiance). This Christ, by not cohering in his physical form, hints at full hypostatic union (about whose unity, or disagggregation, we could never know). In each case, it is not as if the painting represents the actual attributes of transcendent entities by showing the opposed characteristics; that would be but a rhetorical feint, substituting irony for simile but still allowing a human capacity to grasp the attribute. Rather, this patch of painting, with its self-evident shortcomings, refuses to tell us anything at all about Christ’s divinity. Let us make the mistake of regarding this smear of pigments as a telling depiction of Christ, Moses and Elijah, both guardians against false gods (respectively, the golden calf and Baal) stand ready to enforce the law against the worship of idols.

Raphael’s Jesus may resemble the man, as his Sophia resembles a woman; but the figure of Jesus also fails to resemble the God or the hypostatic union, whereas Sophia, in her pictorial perfection, manifests no such failure. In her Greek way, by making visible the invisible (in Nietzsche’s terms, by satisfying the ‘desire for appearance’ of the ‘original Unity’), she serves as Christ’s foil by failing to fail. In contrast, Raphael’s Jesus fails in making visible the invisible — which is also to say that, in failing to draw that which is invisible into the realm of the visible, he succeeds in rendering visible invisibility as such. The failure to represent divine attributes, or more precisely the representation of that failure by the painting, serves to mark out that place where the divine might manifest itself without being ‘mortally finish[ed]’ by its capture in resemblance (or resemblance’s ironic opposite). Raphael’s Christ makes it possible for the divine to occupy this section of panel by way of grace, whereby the painting remains alive to the miraculous chance that the divine may be present in its non-appearance.

(At least until Burchhardt tacked-on the short independent clause about the compensatory device of foiling, his description of Raphael’s failure to represent ‘brilliant self-contained illumination’ comes closer to discerning the operation of this picture than many subsequent accounts, which tend to undercut the theological effectiveness of the Transfiguration, either by treating Raphael as an idolater who tries to pass off an image as God, or by giving him more than his human due as a genius who really does express the divine.)

In doing little more to facilitate divine presence than failing to represent Christ, it might seem that Raphael has not really accomplished much in the Transfiguration; some other agent would now appear responsible for the miraculous arrival of grace. With the icon, however, agency has an additional twist. Once again, discussions of the Eucharist make the matter explicit. Who, or what, effects the transubstantiation of bread and wine into body and blood? In the first instance, Christian texts clearly name God as the actor; the Fourth Lateran Council had declared in 1215 that ‘the bread and wine [are] changed in substance, by God’s power, into his body and blood.’ 31 Yet in the second instance, the presiding priest at each Mass would appear the agent, as the decrees from the thirteenth session of the Council of Trent seem to indicate: ‘By the consecration of the bread and wine, there takes place the change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood’ (III.05c). These two descriptions might be seen in conflict — divine intervention or human ritual? or some wily improbable alignment of the two through sheer happenstance? — were it not for the special status of the priest during the Mass. ‘Nobody can effect this sacrament’, the Fourth Lateran Council continued, ‘except a priest who has been properly ordained according to the church’s laws, which Jesus Christ himself gave to the apostles and their successors’ (E09). The thirteenth session of the Council of Trent likewise presumes a direct link between Christ’s institution of the sacrament at the Last Supper and
The icon cannot show the divine, and thus cannot resemble it. All it can do is manifest the distance — denied in faith rather than apprehended by the senses — that ineluctably separates earth from heaven. It represents not a thing, but an invisible relation. Paradoxically, the divine, which is 'mortally finishe[d]' by the idol, can assume a presence in the icon owing precisely to the enabling lack of resemblance between the two.

In many respects, Raphael's depicted Jesus does indeed resemble the living and breathing Galilean: head and hands and body and such. A mundane object (a painting) replicates the visible characteristics of a mundane object (a human body). But to the extent that this particular collection of pigments arranged across a panel resembles the physical form of a man, they cannot represent either his divinity or the hypostatic union of man and God. The picture cannot represent the Transfiguration, any more than bread and wine provide empirical evidence of a change following the consecration. Raphael cannot show Jesus showing his transfiguration. If, in Marioni's words, the Father 'gives that transfiguration to be seen in his Son', that transfiguration will never be seen as a positive quality in this figure. Rather, transfiguration (dis)appears here as that which the figure cannot show, 'the invisibility of the Father as such'. The Catholic logic would precede the Renaissance painting, and characterize the biblical event itself. Where Matthew 17:2 states that Jesus 'face shone like the sun', the evangelist would necessarily be speaking metaphorically just as Marioni does when he writes about 'a Father who radiates'; whatever the divinity does, it would do it not naturally like the sun but supernaturally in a manner that exceeds both our senses and our minds. The human conception of emanating light could only be a guess, and an utterly groundless one at that. Perhaps that is why the chosen apostles in Raphael's Transfiguration avert their gazes; they cannot look at that which they cannot see. Even had Raphael possessed the technical means to make his panel radiate like a photographic transparency on a light box, the result would have been no closer to rendering the transfiguration as a visible event. Indeed, to have the image thus shine would have increased the risk of idolatry, presenting the figure as if it resembled something that it cannot legitimately even begin to imitate.

Mark 9:3, more cautious than Matthew 17:2, relies instead on an apophatic formulation, hinting at the divine manifestation only by saying that which it is not: 'His clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.' Over and again, this is the route that Raphael chooses for his depiction of Christ in the Transfiguration. This Christ, in being less than white, intimates a 'white' (which is no such thing) whiter than white. This Christ, by not radiating, suggests a supernatural 'radiance' (which is not mere radiance). This Christ, by not cohering in his physical form, hints at full hypostatic union (about whose unity, or disaggregation, we could never know). In each case, it is not as if the painting represents the actual attributes of transcendent entities by showing the opposed characteristics; that would be but a rhetorical feat, substituting irony for simile but still allowing a human capacity to grasp the attribute. Rather, this patch of painting, with its self-evident shortcomings, refuses to tell us anything at all about Christ's divinity. Let us make the mistake of regarding this smear of pigments as a telling depiction of Christ, Moses and Elijah, both guardians against false gods (respectively, the golden calf and Baal) stand ready to enforce the law against the worship of idols.

Raphael's Jesus may resemble the man, as his Sophia resembles a woman; but the figure of Jesus also fails to resemble the God or the hypostatic union, whereas Sophia, in her pictorial perfection, manifest no such failure. In her Greek way, by making visible the visible (in Nietzsche's terms, by satisfying the 'desire for appearance' of the 'original Unity'), she serves as Christ's foil by failing to fail. In contrast, Raphael's Jesus fails in making visible the invisible — which is also to say that, in failing to draw that which is invisible into the realm of the visible, he succeeds in rendering visible invisibility as such. The failure to represent divine attributes, or more precisely the representation of that failure by the painting, serves to mark out that place where the divine might manifest itself without being 'mortally finishe[d]' by its capture in resemblance (or resemblance's ironic opposite). Raphael's Christ makes it possible for the divine to occupy this section of panel by way of grace, whereby the painting remains alive to the miraculous chance that the divine may be present in its non-appearance.

(At least until Burckhardt tackled-on the short independent clause about the compensatory device of floating, his description of Raphael's failure to represent 'brilliant self-contained illumination' comes closer to discerning the operation of this picture than many subsequent accounts, which tend to under-cut the theological effectiveness of the Transfiguration, either by treating Raphael as an idolator who tries to pass off an image as God, or by giving him more than his human due as a genius who really does express the divine.)

In doing little more to facilitate divine presence than failing to represent Christ, it might seem that Raphael has not really accomplished much in the Transfiguration; some other agent would now appear responsible for the miraculous arrival of grace. With the icon, however, agency has an additional twist. Once again, discussions of the Eucharist make the matter explicit. Who, or what, effects the transubstantiation of bread and wine into body and blood? In the first instance, Christian texts clearly name God as the actor; the Fourth Lateran Council had declared in 1215 that 'the bread and wine [are] changed in substance, by God's power, into his body and blood.' Yet in the second instance, the presiding priest at each Mass would appear the agent, as the decrees from the thirteenth session of the Council of Trent would seem to indicate: 'By the consecration of the bread and wine, there takes place the change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood.' These two descriptions might be seen in conflict — divine intervention of human ritual? or some wildly improbable alignment of the two through sheer happenstance? — were it not for the special status of the priest during the Mass. 'Nobody can effect this sacrament', the Fourth Lateran Council continued, 'except a priest who has been properly ordained according to the church's keys, which Jesus Christ himself gave to the apostles and their successors.' The thirteenth session of the Council of Trent likewise presumes a direct link between Christ's institution of the sacrament at the Last Supper and
contemporary sanctifications of bread and wine (Eli.859). Not a human deed performed by the celebrant, consecration is rather the divine feat of Christ himself acting through a sacred delegation from Son (one with the Father in the Godhead) to apostles (including Peter) to popes (beginning with Peter) to cardinals to bishops to parish priests. As the Fourth Lateran Council would have it: 'There is ... one universal church ... in which Jesus Christ is both priest and sacrifice' (Ep.39). Ultimately, it is Christ who makes Christ present in the Eucharist.

Raphael was not ordained a priest, but in ecclesiastical high society of Renaissance Italy where civil behavior and ambitious accomplishment could well be taken as signs of divine blessing, it would have been simple enough to confound his standing as the most elevated of artists with the status of privileged officers of the church. Vasari’s praise of Raphael as a 'mortal god' might make most sense on these terms: not the blasphemy of some pagan deification of a human but the recognition of the artist’s extraordinary success as a courtier in venerated circles. Yet to effect divine presence in the Transfiguration, we hardly need cast Raphael as consecrating priest, because such an officiant was already present, standing directly in front of the painting for every Mass celebrated at the main altar of San Pietro in Montorio from 1523 to 1797. Let us step back from our earlier prospect at the base of the picture, which during Holy Offices was occupied mostly by the priest and perhaps briefly by the kneeling faithful when they came forward for communion, to the regular vantage of most lay participants during the Mass, the view from the nave.

The preparation of the Holy Communion begins. The priest faces away from us as he incants the consecration. With the elevation of the Host (a practice dating back at least to the twelfth century), we in the nave would finally see the object of his attention: most likely, a circular wafer of unleavened bread.30 We perceive the priest and the Host against the backdrop of the lower half of the painting. And thus the visual rhyme: above, Christ bracketed by Moses and Elijah, each visually attached to landscape by trees behind them; below, the disk held aloft by robed figures on each side. Imagine the mutually reinforcing flows and eddies of association between the two players, present or implied: Raphael, Christ, priest, Host. Christ acts miraculously through the priest below to transubstantiate the Host into Christ, a conversion that models how the picture above might also come to embody the Son, which in turn recasts the artist into something akin to the priest, while also (cycling back) providing a divine presence for Jesus above to sanction the delegation of consecrating powers to the priest below. Authored by the priest, the Host becomes the author of him; authored by the Host, the real presence of divine substance now in Raphael’s Christ becomes author of the body and blood now in bread and wine.31

As the picture of Jesus above assumes the substance of Christ (in spite of, not because of, any resemblance between accidental image and accidental man), the priest below becomes an actor in the scene of the healing of the epileptic boy. He closes the open circle of figures to the left, and he does more. He gestures with inspired vision where not Thomas can only blindly point. He supplants the remedies of Hippocrates with the Eucharist in his hands; he realizes the writings of Mark with the words on his lips. Perhaps even block out our view of Sophia with his body, he answers the Greek demand for a remedy with the Christian reply of salvation. With the introduction of the presence of Jesus in the form of the elevated Host, the temporality of the scene in the lower half of the panel shifts from the healing episode’s backstory to the moment actually described in the synoptic gospels. Christ arrives, Christ saves. ‘All things can be done for the one who believes.’ Without the Host, the story and the picture are no more complete, no more resolved, than a plagal cadence without its tonic chord, the ‘A’ without the ‘-men’.

And now the priest turns toward us. And now he holds out the Eucharist. And now we move forward to receive the presence of Christ, passing from Jesus (invisible but substantial in his rendition by Raphael) through the hands of the priest, into the Eucharist, into our bodies. Raphael’s programatically incoherent picture only makes sense — or rather, escapes sense to invoke faith — in this setting for Communion. What need have we (Raphael’s Transfiguration) might prompt us to ask of less theologically ambitious works) for one more painting — however beautiful, however anatomically or perspectively or atmospherically accurate — that depicts the accidental characteristics of a person and story we already know? What need for such an image to idolize? Are we not better served by a failure to resemble, which grants us an iconic means for the invisible presence of God? That, according to Catholic doctrine, would be the true remedy to our own idolatry, straining existence. Just as the priest completes the painting as he stands before it facing it with the Host, so the painting allows grace to pass from the Host to complete the assembled faithful once the priest turns round. We can all but hear the collective yet subdued exclamation as the parish receives that act of fulfillment: Amen.

Rather than regard the incoherence of this painting as some aberration strangely lodged at the very heart of the High Renaissance, we should consider the failings of the Transfiguration exemplary of the liturgical needs of the Catholic Church at its peak, just before the Sack of Rome. This mode of picture making was not in the business of delivering resemblance at the cost of presence; rather, it deployed resemblance precisely for the sake of exalting the limits of depiction, thereby allowing the divine in all its ineffability to flood into the void. If the presence of Christ completed the painting, so too the lack of resemblance extended an invitation for Christ to arrive. And just as the proffered Eucharist constituted the social collectivity of the parish gathered round, the imperceptible yet present divinity situated amid all painting — in its center, and everywhere — enabled the work of that medium’s busy activity of rendering visible the things of this world.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my valued colleagues at the University of California, Irvine, who assisted me in a variety of indispensable ways: Linda Bauer, George Bauer, Julia Lupoton, and Margie Miles. As always, my greatest debt is to Cécile Whiting.
contemporary sanctifications of bread and wine (Lk 5:9). Not a human deed performed by the celebrant, consecration is rather the divine act of Christ himself acting through a sacred delegation from Son (one with the Father in the Godhead) to apostles (including Peter) to popes (beginning with Peter) to cardinals to bishops to parish priests. As the Fourth Lateran Council would have it: ‘There is ... one universal church ... in which Jesus Christ is both priest and sacrifice’ (Eph 2:19). Ultimately, it is Jesus who makes Christ present in the Eucharist.

Raphael was not ordained a priest, but in ecclesiastical high society of Renaissance Italy where civil behavior and ambitious accomplishment could well be taken as signs of divine blessing, it would have been simple enough to confound his standing as the most elevated artist with the status of privileged officers of the church. Vasari’s praise of Raphael as a ‘mortal god’ might make most sense on these terms: not the blasphemy of some pagan delusion of a human but the recognition of the artist’s extraordinary success as a courtier in venerated circles. Yet to effect divine presence in the Transfiguration, we hardly need cast Raphael as consecrating priest, because such an officiant was already present, standing directly in front of the painting for every Mass celebrated at the main altar of San Pietro in Montorio from 1525 to 1592. Let us step back from our earlier prospect at the base of the picture, which during Holy Week was occupied mostly by the priest and perhaps briefly by the kneeling faithful when they came forward for communion, to the regular vantage of most lay participants during the Mass, the view from the nave.

The preparation of the Holy Communion begins. The priest faces away from us as he incants the consecration. With the elevation of the Host (a practice dating back at least to the twelfth century), we in the nave would finally see the object of his attentions most likely, a circular wafer of unleavened bread. We perceive the priest and the Host against the backdrop of the lower half of the painting. And thus the visual rhyme: above, Christ bracketed by Moses and Elijah, each visually attached to landscape by trees behind them; below, the disk held aloft by robed figures on each side. Imagine the mutually reinforcing flows and eddies of association between the four players, present or implied: Raphael, Christ, priest, Host. Christ acts miraculously through the priest below to transubstantiate the Host into Christ, a conversion that models how the picture above might also come to embody the Son, which in turn recasts the artist into something akin to the priest, while also (cycling back) providing a divine presence for Jesus above to sanction the delegation of consecrating powers to the priest below. Authored by the priest, the Host becomes the author of him; authored by the Host, the real presence of divine substance now in Raphael’s Christ becomes author of the body and blood now in bread and wine.

As the picture of Jesus above assumes the substance of Christ (in spite of, not because of, any resemblance between accidental image and accidental man), the priest below becomes an actor in the scene of the healing of the epileptic boy. He closes the open circle of figures to the center left, and he does more. He gestures with inspired vision where not Thomas can only blindly point. He supplants the remedies of Hippocrates with the Eucharist in his hands; he realizes the writings of Mark with the words on his lips. Perhaps even blocking out our view of Sophia with his body, he answers the Greek demand for a remedy with the Christian reply of salvation. With the introduction of the presence of Jesus in the form of the elevated Host, the temporality of the scene in the lower half of the panel shifts from the healing episode’s backstory to the moment actually described in the synoptic gospels. Christ arrives, Christ saves. ‘All things can be done for the one who believes.’ Without the Host, the story and the picture are no more complete, no more resolved, than a plagal cadence without its tonic chord, the ‘A’ without the ‘men’.

And now the priest turns toward us. And now he holds out the Eucharist. And now we move forward to receive the presence of Christ, passing from Jesus (invisible but substantial in his rendition by Raphael) through the hands of the priest, into the Eucharist, into our bodies. Raphael’s programatically incoherent picture only makes sense — or rather, escapes sense to invoke faith — in this setting for Communion. What need have we (Raphael’s Transfiguration) might prompt us to ask of less theologically ambitious works for one more painting — however beautiful, however anatomically or perspectively or atmospherically accurate — that depicts the accidental characteristics of a person and story we already know? What need for such an image to idolize? Are we not better served by a failure to resemble, which grants us an iconic means for the invisible presence of God? That, according to Catholic doctrine, would be this true remedy to our own idolatrous exuberance. Just as the priest completes the painting as he stands before it facing it with the Host, so the painting allows grace to pass from the Host to complete the assemblage faithful once the priest turns round. We can all but hear the collective yet subdued exclamation as the parish receives that act of fulfillment: Amen.

Rather than regard the incoherence of this painting as some aberration strangely lodged at the very heart of the High Renaissance, we should consider the failings of the Transfiguration exemplary of the liturgical needs of the Catholic Church at its peak, just before the Sack of Rome. This mode of picture making was not in the business of delivering resemblance at the cost of presence, rather, it deployed resemblance precisely for the sake of exalting the limits of depiction, thereby allowing the divine in all its ineffability to flood into the void. If the presence of Christ completed the painting, so too the lack of resemblance extended an invitation for Christ to arrive. And just as the proffered Eucharist constituted the social collectivity of the parish gathered round, the imperceptible yet present divinity situated amid all painting — at its center, and everywhere — enabled the swerve of that medium’s busy activity of rendering visible the things of this world.

Acknowledgments
I wish to thank my valued colleagues at the University of California, Irvine, who assisted me in a variety of indispensable ways: Linda Bauer, George Bauer, Julia Lupston, and Margie Miles. As always, my greatest debt is to Cécelle Whiting.