

Narrative, Memory and the Crisis of Mimesis: The Case of Adam Elsheimer and Giordano Bruno

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Introduction: Narrative and the Fundamentals of the Art of Memory

Intimations of family ties between memory and narrative go way back, to the ancient Greek myth of Mnemosine, the mother of nine creative daughters known as the Muses. Of those patrons of the arts, some reign over overtly narrative media – epic poetry, tragedy, comedy and of course history, whose very name means “story” in most European languages; others rule over arts which, though not solely narrative-based, give pride of place to narrative structures and elements – such as lyrical poetry and music.

Memory is, then, the precondition of narrative, and when it is disturbed or malfunctioning, narratological coherence and efficiency suffer as well. In fact, narration not only depends on memory. It is inherently constructed by it as well, as seen in the ubiquity of memory-based techniques like retroversion – also known as flashback – in any narrative (see Bal 1997, esp. 80–98).

However, the memory-narrative relation is far from unidirectional: just as memory engenders narrative, so is narrative, at times, indispensable for the agility of the faculty of memory. The classical art of memory, or “architectural mnemonics”, is a case in point, as it is based on the use of narrative structures for the improvement of the ability to memorise, particularly for the use of orators.¹ In its original version,

¹ The classic study of this art remains Yates 1992 (1966). Yates begins with the three classical Latin sources for the Art of Memory – Cicero’s *De oratore*, Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* and the anonymous *Ad C. Herennium libri IV* – and then continues, through the Middle Ages, up until the late Renaissance (a period that will be discussed in detail below).

created in antiquity and thriving all through the Middle Ages and up to the sixteenth century, the art of memory consisted of the creation of an imaginary place, say a house. Within it several more specific locations were defined, and the items to be memorised, incarnated in visual images, were then allocated to these locations. To retrieve those items, one had to imagine a tour of the house, visiting each place in turn, finding in it just the right image placed there, so to speak, in advance. Thus, the time-based narrative was superimposed on a spatial ordering to ensure the fulfilment of Mnemosine's task.

The art of memory, thus described, rests on two principles, often naturalised and overlooked in spite of their fundamental importance and their dependence on cultural norms. The first is the perfect, transparent translatability of verbal concepts into visual images. To be sure, as Mary Carruthers explains in her *Book of Memory*, this does not necessarily mean that there is a resemblance between what has to be memorised and its mental image, but the unambiguous relation of signification between the two is nonetheless taken for granted, as is the need of the image and its location to be clear and perfectly visible (Carruthers 1990, 39 and *passim*).

The second principle is the absolute necessity of a "place" in order for something to happen. In this case, a place is indispensable for the images to function according to the role allotted to them in the "art of memory" system. It is quite remarkable that many European languages have retained this "locational prejudice" in their vocabulary: English, for instance, uses "to take place" as an equivalent to "to happen", whereas French prefers the less active "avoir lieu", to *have* a place, to denote the same meaning. Things that happen should occupy a place – a single, clear *locus* or site, on which, like a theatre stage, the narrative can run its course.

Both these principles – translatability and localisation – are also an inherent part of the theoretical framework accompanying one of the mightiest artistic movements in the history of western culture – Italian, more specifically Florentine, Renaissance painting. This self-proclaimed apotheosis of European art was solidly grounded on the iconographical rendering of verbal concepts and on the creation of perspective-guided places where the resulting depiction was to take place. Or so, at least, claims *the* Renaissance painting manual *cum* theory, Alberti's *On Painting*. Not surprisingly, this opus also makes the somewhat dubious statement that the starting point for any painting should be a *historia*, a story or a narrative – although, as the new French edition of *On Painting* reminds us, this fundamental notion cannot be simply translated into its modern derivatives (Alberti 2004, 331–340).² In any case, the alliance between painting and the art of memory has its roots already in medieval painting for, as was shown by Daniel Arasse, memory-images were the

2 In their glossary, the translators explain that *historia* cannot be translated simply into the French *histoire* or *récit* (the English *story* or *tale*, approximately), if only because it can, and should, be *seen*. This ambivalent term designates, then, something in between "narrative discourse" and "representation", the latter including even the painted surface itself. It is a mediation between an image and a story. In any case, a *historia* should always include several bodies in movement.

basis of painting's organisation and structure for quite a long period (Arasse 2004, 109–115).³

The Memorable Revolution of Giordano Bruno

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, with the demise of humanistic culture well under way, all of the above-mentioned assumptions were desanctified and re-evaluated.⁴ In an era of epistemological saturation coupled with the patent insufficiency of existing frameworks to contain new knowledge, questions of memory, history and inter-medial translation of information came to the fore again.⁵ One of the main historical figures reconsidering questions of memory and knowledge was the Italian thinker Giordano Bruno (1548–1600).

Bruno is widely considered to be one of the forefathers of modern science, a man who dared to contradict the Church's doctrines and who paid for his beliefs with his life – he was burnt at the stake on the highly symbolical date of 1600. What is less often mentioned – although well known at least since Frances Yates' groundbreaking work in the second half of the twentieth century – is that Bruno was far from being a real modern scientist or a “rational thinker”, whatever this last term could mean (Yates 1991). In fact, Bruno's famous thirst for knowledge was in itself no simple matter, because his very cosmology, based on an infinite universe, precluded any systematic, fully accessible knowledge about the world-as-cosmos. Bruno's Italian dialogues, dealing with cosmology and metaphysics, sufficiently show this. Interestingly enough, so do his Latin works, most of which revolve around a seemingly technical, utilitarian theme – the art of memory.

As Yates has shown, the mimetic bias prevalent in those arts from antiquity onwards – and to which I alluded earlier – was practically given up by Bruno (Yates 1992). One of the key terms of Bruno's memory writings is the “Shadows of Ideas”, *umbris idearum*.⁶ Although I cannot do justice to this complex concept in this article, its relevance can hardly be dismissed. For Bruno, the images of memory, far from being simple, transparent imitations of elements of reality, or

3 According to Arasse, the artistic revolution of Renaissance Humanism consisted precisely in the substitution of rhetoric for memory as the basis of painting. I would say instead that this transformation happened only towards the end of the Renaissance. Alberti's model retains, at least from this point of view, many characteristics of medieval art, if the latter can indeed be seen as consisting of memory-images.

4 Alberti's text was, of course, elaborated and challenged many times during the more than 150 years separating its publication from the period I discuss, and new viewpoints about *historia* and perspective emerged all along that period. I would claim, though, that Alberti's fundamental assumptions remained virtually unchallenged, and were not even discussed; it was the painters' role to be the first to challenge them, and as I hope to show, they first did it in subtle, almost imperceptible ways. Some of Alberti's views, becoming Renaissance axioms, survived in mainstream painting well into the nineteenth century.

5 Of the abundant literature on this period's epistemological crisis, see in particular Foucault 1966; Bouwsma 2000; Reiss 1982.

6 Bruno's Latin text discussing this concept is called simply *De umbris idearum*.

even just signs rich and representative enough to evoke them, are merely shadows, partial, impoverished traces of the essential dimension of reality. And the latter dimension, in itself, is not visual at all. The external, visible reality is actually opaque and distant from the so-called “real reality”. In Bruno’s system, the basic units of the art of memory are, to quote Yates, “magicised, complicated... blown up into inscrutable mysteries” (Yates 1992, 242). In anticipation of the Baroque, the images are charged with affects, but their representational value is contested. The images show us something, but do not depict; they are not directly translatable from and to verbal entities.

Bruno’s memory images, then, subverted the mimetic tendencies of Renaissance mainstream art theory, as well as the latter’s conviction that images can simply, clearly, tell a story. More or less at the same time and place – Rome around 1600 – the art of painting itself, in its concrete, material way, disputed the same Albertian precepts. If painting in the Renaissance was seen as a tool for the transmission of information, and thus adopted the “universal” principles that guide, according to Carruthers, the functioning of memory at all times, this very target was now questioned (Carruthers 1990).

The Immemorial Painting of Adam Elsheimer

The artist I chose to discuss in this article is the German, Frankfurt-born Adam Elsheimer, who spent the first decade of the seventeenth century in Rome and died there in 1610. The connection between Bruno and Elsheimer is neither causal nor anecdotal: I do not suggest that Elsheimer knew Bruno or read his works. At the same time, appealing to some vague *Zeitgeist* will not be necessary either. As I will explain later, the mere facts that the parallel innovations of the two men were *possible*, became *conceivable*, at that specific time, is historically significant enough to consider them together. And then again, Rome in the beginning of the seventeenth century was not a big place, and some vulgarised idea of even the most advanced philosophical and astronomical ideas may have been circulating in the relatively educated circles. After all, Elsheimer is said to have been aware of Galileo’s discoveries, so can we exclude the possibility of him being conscious at least of the idea of an infinite universe?

From a more purely artistic point of view, Elsheimer was close to some of the future masters of the emerging European Baroque painting, notably Rubens, and, more importantly for us, was considered a master of nocturnal scenes. In this sense, his daring use of darkness and the colour black resembles his contemporary Caravaggio. Much can be said about the epistemological aspect of paintings whose surface is almost entirely dark. Here, however, I shall limit myself to two more specific cases. In the first example, Elsheimer’s imagined space seems to challenge Humanistic notions of figuration and mimesis in a way quite similar to Giordano Bruno’s. This picture – a very small one in reality, a fact that is in itself not

unimportant, because it precludes, to some extent, illusionism – is *The Flight into Egypt*, now in the Alte Pinakotek in Munich (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Adam Elsheimer, *The Flight into Egypt*, 1609, oil on copper, 31x41 cm. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

This oil-on-copper painting represents, of course, a Biblical story, well known to us today just as it was to its spectators 400 years ago. The narrative aspect – the feeling of a time-based event – is enhanced by the profile view of the Holy Family in movement.⁷ Elsheimer's painting seems at first to generally follow Alberti's instructions. Its starting point is definitely a story, a *historia*, of which it represents a sequence of events or views. On the right we see a nocturnal landscape, presumably representing (though highly unconvincing from a geographical point of view) a moonlit Middle-Eastern scenery; on the left some shepherds are enjoying a camp-fire with their livestock; and in the middle, the Holy Family seems to be making its way from the desolate, menacing forest to the friendly human gathering. Apparently, we have here, in a nutshell, the whole story of the saving of the Saviour from Herod's barbarity.

⁷ It is quite peculiar, though not unprecedented, that the Holy Family seems to ride from the right towards the left, whereas the traditional "reading pattern" of Western painting is sometimes said to have been left-to-right. Although there are no strict rules in this matter, it is quite logical that, in the case of paintings imitating narrative sequences, and thus requiring a reception similar to "reading", the direction of the sequence will follow the direction of reading in European languages.

But a more detailed examination reveals that things are much more complex. For what I have just described as the painting's content left out half of the work's surface: the beautifully rendered, starry night sky. Elsheimer's depiction here triggered a heated discussion about the artist's awareness of the quasi-contemporaneous astronomical discoveries of Galileo Galilei.⁸ But for my topic here, the important thing to notice about the sky is very simple: its unity. That is, the fact that above the three separate scenes or views taking place below, one, continuous spread of sky is shown.

I have just mentioned "three separate scenes or views taking place", but in fact, precisely because these scenes are separate, the term "take place" is quite misleading. Each one of the three takes its own place, so that as a whole "taking places" would be more adequate. This is not semantic fussiness; the very meaning of this painting depends on this distinction.

Why do I say that the three spaces are separate? This is easy to show through "pure" formal elements. The three "stripes" into which the surface of the inferior triangle is divided not only show different scenes; they don't even share the same source of light. On the left, the campfire is making the shepherds visible; on the right it is the surprisingly bright moonlight; and in the middle, a torch.⁹ Strangely, none of the light sources has any effect on the "neighbouring" spaces: even the moonlight remains restricted to the right-hand third of the painting, a fact that defies the "normal" laws of optics. Moreover, the relative sizes of the human figures, given the apparent distance between them, are totally incompatible, and the space left for the Holy Family to walk into is utterly absurd. The three scenes can hardly be thought of as taking place in a single, coherent space, that is as "taking place" in the literal sense. And yet, the superior triangle, the depiction of the night sky, implies just that.

And it is here that the mimetic absurdity of the depicted space emerges. For in a triptych, for example, or in modern comic strips, the cohabitation of three incompatible spaces on a contiguous space would not present a problem. In such a case, the spaces would be really separate and the points of view distinct, each a world in itself, narrative links notwithstanding. In our painting, such a hypothesis should be immediately rejected because the three scenes do seem to happen under a continuous, coherent representation of the sky.

To be sure, the putting-together of different episodes on the same painted surface was not new or revolutionary in itself. It was very common in the Middle Ages and through the Early Renaissance, though much less so in the century just

8 The controversy began with Anna Ottani Cavina's claim that Elsheimer's rendering of the sky necessarily means that he knew of Galileo's discoveries and possibly even had a glimpse of the sky through a telescope. Keith Andrews refuted the claim, mainly by showing that chronologically Galileo's discoveries came too late for Elsheimer, who died in 1610. Deborah Howard supported Cavina's claims in general, while suggesting new nuances in their presentation (see Cavina 1976; Andrews 1976; Howard 1992). In my opinion, independently of any "proofs" suggested for the chronological aspect, Elsheimer, whose art shows a subtle scepticism towards knowledge in general and its visual representation in particular, was unlikely to adopt scientific discoveries as the basis for his art.

9 Gottfried Sello speaks of "Lichtinseln" (Sello 1988, 70).

preceding Elsheimer, especially in easel painting.¹⁰ The revolutionary stance of Elsheimer's space is nonetheless unmistakable, for several reasons: First, in the *Flight into Egypt* what we have is not the cohabitation of several stories revolving around the same protagonist; it is *one* story developing through several spaces. No figure is represented twice. The three portions of the space are all there *at the same time* and for the same figures to, hypothetically, go through them at some point – which we do not see. Second, it is precisely the seemingly conventional structure of the space, the veiling of the afore-mentioned spatial incompatibilities, that make Elsheimer's achievement so subtle. In earlier paintings representing several adjacent spaces, the multiplicity of *stories*, or the repetition of the same figure in different positions and places, made it clear from the start that the spectators were seeing this artificially created cohabitation. But here, nothing of sorts: we are led first to believe that we do, indeed, see one unified, "rational" space, only to discover its fragmentary nature and its inherent incompatibilities after a more detailed scrutiny.

Epistemological Blur

How is the passage between those incompatible but cohabitating spaces represented in the painting? The simple answer is that it is not: the "in-between" space, the moment in which one scene is fading and another is appearing, consists here of the pictorial equivalent of nothingness, at least in a Renaissance context – a black surface. From a narrative point of view, black here stands for the darkness of the night, but the latter is not part of the original fabula: Elsheimer chose to represent a nocturnal episode of a long event – the flight into Egypt – spanning days *and* nights.¹¹ What this impenetrable darkness enables him to do is precisely to veil the liminal space between the three vertical thirds of the painting, thus leaving us "in the dark" in our attempt to reconstruct a coherent spatial framework to this series of episodes. Literary theory could say that there are *blanks* or *gaps* in the story, to be filled in by the spectator.¹² In this case, the gaps are literal and spatial rather than just temporal and reconstructed in the mind of the viewer.

This epistemological confusion is reminiscent of the description of Giordano Bruno's memory images. Elsheimer's painting, attentively observed, also turns out to be "complicated and blown up into inscrutable mysteries", even "magicised".

¹⁰ Frescos present different – and more complex – spatial issues altogether, and should therefore be excluded from discussion at this stage.

¹¹ Wiezsaecker (1936, 252) claims that this painting was conceived as part of a cycle of works representing the different parts of the day. In this case, the main theme of the picture was the night, and its aim the observation of nature. The fact that Elsheimer does not faithfully follow the Biblical story is explained by Wiezsaecker as stemming from pure "Erzählerlust".

¹² I am referring here, principally, to Wolfgang Iser's work on literature; an attempt to implement it for painting was suggested in Kemp 1985.

Thinking of memory images in a way closer to our own contemporary universe, *The Flight into Egypt* can be compared to a fragmented, “incoherent” series of memories, episodic pieces of events that cannot be put together and made into a continuous narrative. They are nevertheless known to originate in the same experience of one and the same person. Traumatic memory is an extreme example of such a fragmented memory (cf. LaCapra 2004, 106–143).

The narrative theme of the painting, its starting point (though not its exclusive “content”) – the flight of the Holy Family from Palestine to Egypt for fear of Herod’s violence – can be linked to this epistemological complexity. After all, the work is telling us a story of *displacement*, of a flight, a state in which the spatial landmarks are blurred or lost. It is a non-natural event, a fact that also explains, perhaps, the possibly deviant right-to-left direction of movement.

I began by claiming that when memory is fragmented, narrative cannot remain intact. Elsheimer’s *Flight into Egypt* proves just that: its ambivalent status as a memory image entails a series of narratological ambiguities. The first of these is the above-mentioned spatial vagueness. Space and time are considered to be the basic coordinates of any story, from the rigidity of Greek tragedy to any daily experience we are telling someone about. In a visual representation the former has the upper hand; whereas time in painting is implied and disputable, space is concrete and immediate. However, this does not necessarily mean that space is clear and coherent. In this painting, the stage on which, so to speak, the events will happen was not “well prepared”. The narrative is supposed to be taking *place*, but as I showed above, we cannot be quite sure what this place actually is. This situation is strikingly opposed to the spatial coherence of the more “classical” Renaissance paintings. In Raphael’s well-known *School of Athens*, for instance, it seems that the stage-like decor was prepared before the actors went there and took their well-defined places. In fact, this is precisely the order of work recommended by Alberti.

The ambiguities of space create similar ambiguities of implied “time of action”, about which I cannot elaborate here. More interesting is the fact that the spectator’s point of view, the painting’s focalisation, is blurred as well. The use of the visually oriented concept of focalisation in discussing the visual arts is, paradoxically, not without its problems – as Mieke Bal has shown (Bal 2002, 35–46). However, in our case, I contend that it can contribute to our understanding of this painting’s revolutionary stance.

As is widely agreed today, Renaissance perspective, with its single vanishing point and unified structure, implies a single, centrally-located viewer, and one who is supposed, thanks to his position, to enjoy an uncontested mastery of the represented scene (you will forgive me here for using “his”, as this implied spectator is also, of course, assumed to be male). Elsheimer’s work deconstructs this by making it impossible for the viewer to assume any clear and unifying position. A position constructed to make sense of one scene, one vertical stripe, would not function for the others. The spectator is forced to reconsider his position whenever his gaze moves from the Holy Family to the moonlit landscape or to the left-hand campfire,

and vice-versa. And of course, the sky is also an element to consider in this sense, because its dominant presence works against any stabilising perspective – by definition, the sky looks quite similar from points of view that are close to each other.

There is no explicit “internal focalisation” in this small painting, partly because the figures are too tiny for us to determine where their own gazes are directed. What could be suggested is that the two side-scenes are focalised by the main actors of the fabula, Joseph and Maria. To be sure, changing focalisers, and particularly the use of internal and external focalisers in the same work, are very common in literature (cf. Bal 1997, 144–149). In the context of Renaissance visual art it is not, especially not in the way it is done here, and this is one of the exciting novelties of Elsheimer’s art.

In narratological terms, one could say that the unorthodox handling occurs both in the passage from fabula to story – in the sequential ordering resulting from the movement from right to left, in the ambiguous spatial vectors and in the unstable focalisation – as well as in the further step leading from story to text. It is the latter aspect, the narratological and semiotic qualities of lighting, colour-relations, brushwork and formal details, that has to be further explored.

Symptoms in Writing, Ambiguities of Painting

If we go back now to the texts of Giordano Bruno, we can see similar examples – verbal, this time – of narratological ambiguities, incoherencies and oddities. They, too, are often overlooked in the attempt to reformulate or paraphrase Bruno’s ideas or “doctrines”. But the detour via paintings showing a pictorial version of Bruno’s concepts of memory and narrative proves that these very attempts are vain: Bruno’s texts do not *transparently* tell a story or give an account of a doctrine. Quite the contrary, they keep drawing the reader’s attention to the presence of the text itself, to its irreducible opacity and complexity. Just like Elsheimer’s works and their emphasis on the medium of painting.

Take, for instance, one of Bruno’s Italian dialogues, *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, a typical *mélange* of narrative, dialogue, philosophy and cosmology. Bruno performs here a subversion of the (textual) representation, robbing it of any claims to transparency. Thus, the narration is strikingly indirect, similar in this sense to recurrent platonic devices: the route leading to the supper – an obvious metaphor to the route toward knowledge – is being told by a marginal figure, whereas, in a complex play of mirrors, the main protagonist of his story is no other than the actual author of the piece. Sometimes the characters themselves, in the diegetic space of the supper, lengthily quote someone else, making the layering of narration more complicated still.

There are other obstacles to the reader’s knowledge of the text, *symptoms* of writing, fissures that uncover the aporias and inevitable opacities of representation. Needless to say, all these narratological irregularities are also *mnemonic* aberrations, because the tale consists basically of that which Teofilo *remembers* of the

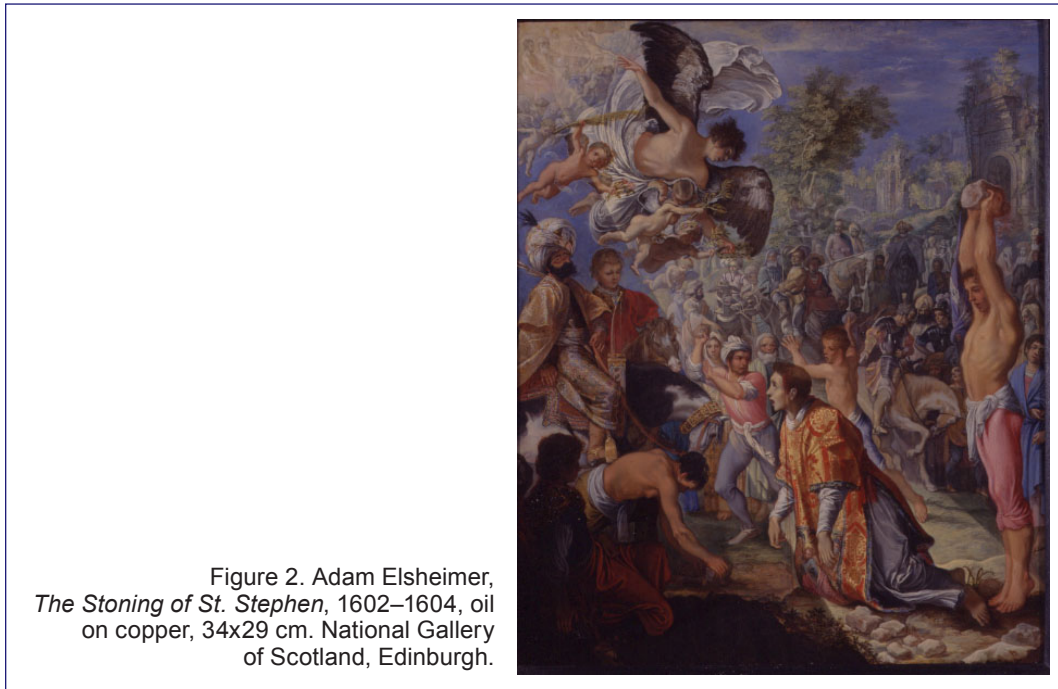
events themselves. Thus, for instance, the “real” theme of the dialogue, the supper and the philosophical discussion of Bruno with his English hosts, is constantly postponed all through the two first, long parts of the work. Teofilo announces at times that there is no time to elaborate on a theme, and then discusses it in detail and in surprising length, using his trademark rhetorical spirals. The bilingual nature of the text adds to the confusion: Prudenziio speaks Latin because he is a “pedant”, but the others do not hesitate to use this language as well, and quotations of Latin poetry abound. The dialogue thus becomes partly opaque for those who speak only one of its two languages. This partial accessibility reminds us of the inevitably mediate character of the text – of any text – and of representation in general. Just like the symptoms of painting, described, for instance, by Georges Didi-Huberman as irruptions of materiality within the structure of representation, Bruno’s textual devices are the irruptions of an irrepressible textuality, of writing itself, emerging on the surface of the seemingly smooth representation.¹³

Another painting by Elsheimer in which a similar irruption occurs is *The Stoning of St. Stephen* (figure 2), now in the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh and, in a version whose autograph status is contested, in the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne. Here, the principle destabilising device is related to the distribution of light, and in literary terms one might want to consider it as pertaining to the level of the *text*, rather than to that of the story or the fabula. The different layers are, however, closely related, and the strangeness of the painting’s text/texture has important repercussions both for the structure of the story being “told” and for our understanding of the fabula being “illustrated”.

The *Stoning* contains, then, two zones of very different lighting: the natural daylight reigns everywhere, apart from the diagonal stripe in the centre where supernatural rays of light are emanating, or so it seems, from the divine realm of heaven. If we consider the painting’s implied three-dimensional structure, the zone of natural light surrounds the central circle of divine glow, though on the flat surface of the painting the latter circle takes the form of a triangle. We should imagine, then, that the figures behind the Saint are located out of this circle, even though we see them as if *through* it. The ambiguous nature of light – its oscillation between abstraction and materiality – is already present here.

The zone of natural light occupies the larger part of the painting’s surface – and of the implicitly represented space. This zone is well-illuminated by the (invisible) sun, and as such retains all the elements of classical mimetic representation, all the natural “accidents” visible through the transparent window of painting. It is subject to the natural, inevitable influence of time – the ruins, the different ages of people – and of space – cast shadows, changing density of objects. Nature and humanity are thus represented in a seemingly natural, direct way; all traces of mediation and artificiality, of the objecthood of painting as such, are artfully concealed.

13 See, in this context, Didi-Huberman’s discussion of the *detail* and the *patch* (1989), as well as, for the question of symptoms, his work on Warburg and Freud (2002).



Having said that, the real focus of the scene is of course the central zone, the supernaturally illuminated triangle of St. Stephen. And this zone is so bright, the details in it so crystal-clear, the visibility so overwhelming, that the rest of the painting seems, in comparison, rather dim and misty. Worse still, the “transparent” and “clear” representation of the surrounding scene, the window-like immediacy and naturalness, turn out to be arbitrary and relatively opaque. The humanist principles of mimesis are again contested by Elsheimer’s construction of represented space. Moreover, the painting’s perspectival scheme is equally ambiguous: in a chiasmic structure, we can see, from bottom left to top right, the natural depth of the visible, natural world, and from top left to bottom right, the supernatural profundity of heaven, based on an independent system of lines and vanishing points. The laws dominating the natural world are not valid in the holy sphere of divine Grace.

If this dual structure inspires distrust toward the visible world, these doubts are reinforced by the afore-mentioned ambiguity between the three-dimensional space and the flat surface. Some of the worst perpetrators of the Saint’s martyrdom, obviously excluded from the divine grace, are nonetheless seen to us through the miraculous light with which God floods the faithful. A mental construction of the “real” space would prove right away that those incarnations of evil are actually located *behind* the supernaturally illuminated zone, but at first sight they seem to be included in it. Of course, this would be morally untenable. The only possible way to avoid this scandal would be to recognise the necessarily false nature of visual representation.

The Edinburgh version of the *Stoning* contains two supplementary elements further enhancing the unrealistic stance of the painting and its narrative complexity. It may be quite easy to explain the fact that the angel floating between heaven and earth seems to enjoy total independence vis-à-vis the rules of perspective, and that its clothes seem to mock the natural laws of gravity; explaining the position of the

man on the right, who is going to throw the mortal stone at the Saint's head, seems a more arduous task. This man is far too big in relation to his position and to the figures standing right behind him; moreover, his contours are somewhat blurred compared to the clear outlines characteristic of this version of the work. From an optical point of view, the latter element is quite easy to account for: when the eye focuses on a distant point, closer objects seem vague. And yet, considered with the humanistic norms of painting in mind, Elsheimer's choice to paint such a figure in such an important position seems surprising. In a way reminiscent of Holbein's famous *Ambassadors*, a vague object, though positioned in the extreme foreground of the painting, remains less clear than the principle, "official" subject of the work. It is a curious combination: this man, central for the plot, imposing and vigorously active, seems in fact rather eerie, almost ghostly. The shadow of an idea...

Elsheimer's paintings thus destabilise the credibility of vision; a doubt is then cast on the coherence of visual narration; and memory, in turn, seems now to be more complex than the impression given by earlier theories and practices of art. Narratologically, *The Stoning* is just as ambiguous as *The Flight*. The focalisation is unclear (which point of view would make the contradicting perspectives cohere?), the space ambiguous (who belongs to the circle of God's grace?), the texture – comparable, perhaps, to levels of narration distinguished by their directness – highly heterogeneous (the man on the right salient but blurred, small details crystal-clear). An attempt to turn this complex "text" into a comprehensible "story" – and, furthermore, to turn this story into a coherent "fabula" – will inexorably end in partial failure. *The Stoning* is supposed to evoke the memory of a sacred story, but it lacks everything that makes a good memory image. We have here neither a clear, well-defined *locus* nor unambiguous, easily verbalised visual components. Just like Giordano Bruno's memory images, the paintings of Elsheimer emerge from an environment whose fundamental beliefs about representation, transparency and clarity were shaken to the core.

Conclusion: Conditions of Possibility for Art and Thought

Defining the exact nature of the links between Bruno's epistemology and art of memory and Elsheimer's innovative use of narrativity, would require, of course, further elaboration, and a solid theoretical framework about possible relations between paintings and ideas, paintings and knowledge, and paintings and memory. To conclude, I will only say very briefly that I conceive of these links in terms of conditions of possibility. The same historical conditions made possible new epistemological insights with their correlated art of memory, on the one hand, and puzzling elements in an otherwise traditional style of painting on the other. All those were now possible to imagine and, to some extent, acceptable: Elsheimer's art was appraised by his contemporaries whereas Bruno's ideas were comprehen-

sible enough for the Church to see the danger they represented. The same period, moreover, gave birth to some other narratological novelties, this time in the most traditionally narrative-based medium. When Bruno and Elsheimer were active in Rome, Shakespeare was writing his great tragedies and Cervantes published *Don Quixote*, whose contribution to narrativity need not be shown and whose relation to epistemology and indirectly to painting was amply demonstrated by Michel Foucault (1966, 60–64).

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