

A superbly written and tightly argued appraisal of the political and religious ramifications of one of the fundamental topics in the history of art – the artistic encounter with the transcendent

# Heaven on Earth

*Painting and the Life to Come*

T. J. Clark

101 illustrations

23.4 x 15.3cm

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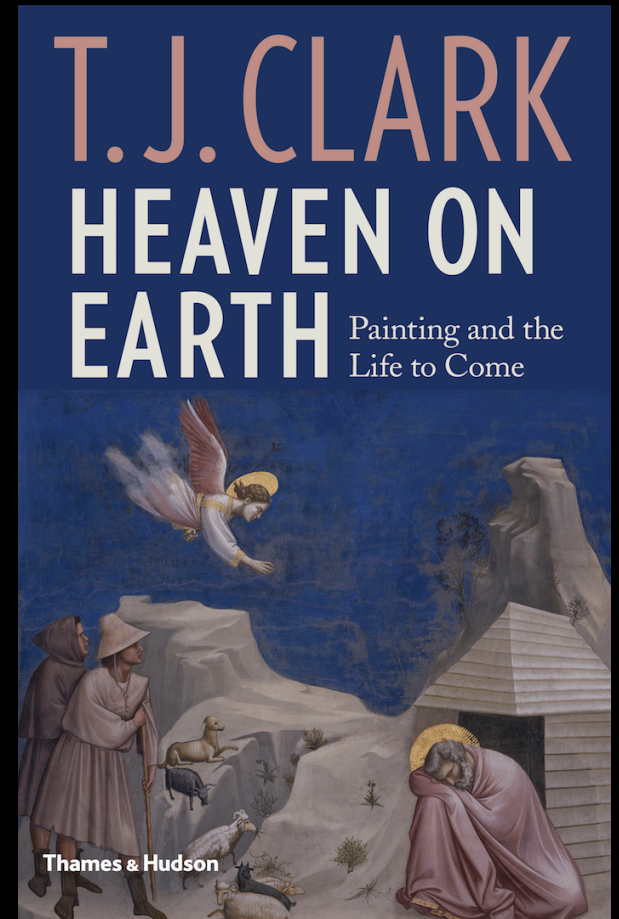
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## Key Sales Points

- T. J. Clark, one of the world's most respected writers on art, interweaves philosophical interrogation with contemporary art theory in a study of the transcendent in art
- Presents a new thesis on a topic of universal interest
- A bold, significant addition to the literature of Western art history

# Giotto and the Angel

VLADIMIR. I've seen you before, haven't I?

BOY. I don't know sir.

VLADIMIR. You don't know me?

BOY. No, sir.

VLADIMIR. It wasn't you came yesterday?

BOY. No, sir.

VLADIMIR. This is your first time?

BOY. Yes, sir.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR. Words, words. [*Pause.*] Speak.

BOY [*In a rush*]. Mr Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow.

[*Silence.*]

VLADIMIR. Is that all?

BOY. Yes, sir.

[*Silence.*]

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*



5. Giotto, *Joachim's Dream*, c.1303-5, fresco.  
Arena Chapel, Padua.

The painting by Giotto called *Joachim's Dream* comes almost at the beginning of the great sequence in the Arena Chapel. It is high on the wall to the left as we look towards the *Last Judgment*: the fifth in a row of six panels telling the story of the birth of the Virgin (fig. 6). Giotto had access to the legend probably in several versions, perhaps including handbooks that have not survived, but the text he appears to have responded to most deeply is one his contemporaries knew as the *Liber de Infantia* or the *Historia de Navitate Mariae*, which I shall call *The Book of*

## Bruegel in Paradise

Likewise the Lord said that a grain of wheat would bear ten thousand ears, and every ear would bear ten thousand grains, and every grain would give ten pounds of flour, clear and pure; and apples and seeds and grass would produce in similar proportions; and all animals, feeding only on what they received from the earth, would become peaceable and friendly to each other, and completely subject to man. Now these things are credible to believers. And Judas, being a disbelieving traitor, asked, 'How shall such growth be brought about by the Lord?' But the Lord answered, 'They shall see who shall arrive at those times.'

Papias, *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*<sup>1</sup>

The closest Bruegel ever came to painting the afterlife seems to have been in a mid-size panel, just over 20 inches high and 30 inches wide, called the *Land of Cockaigne* (fig. 24). The Dutch word for the place was *Luye-leckerlandt*, the hereafter as imagined by lazybones and gluttons. A certain amount is known about the hereafter's close German cousin, *Schlaraffendland*, which became a staple of early sixteenth-century chapbooks, intrigued by the idea's peasant origins and eager to moralize on the theme of eternity without effort.<sup>2</sup> There is a sense in the pamphlets, and perhaps in Bruegel's picture, that the idea is seen as 'medieval' – already looked back on from a leaner modernity.<sup>3</sup> Bruegel's panel is dated 1567: the same year as his *Conversion of Saint Paul*, that very modern subject, and in all likelihood the *Peasant Dance* and *Peasant Wedding*, now in Vienna. The child sucking its sticky fingers in *Peasant Wedding* is dreaming of a *Luye-leckerlandt* to come.

I began thinking about the *Land of Cockaigne* some years ago, mainly because of its treatment of gravity. Bruegel seemed to me a materialist,



23. Pieter Bruegel The Elder, *Peasant Wedding*, c.1567, 114 × 164 cm (44 $\frac{7}{8}$  × 64 $\frac{5}{8}$  in.). Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

perhaps the deepest and most thoroughgoing to have left us a picture of the world; and in this he connected across history with certain other painters – Poussin and Veronese chief among them – who had a similar interest in the human world's overall orientation, in particular the way the upright (or downfallen) body connected with the ground.<sup>4</sup> The fact of bipedalism was central to these artists' vision. This is not the place to explore the nature of such an interest more fully (it crops up later, in the chapter on Poussin) except to say that it strikes me as rare in painting, or rare in the sense that the interest shapes an artist's whole anthropology. One part of me finds the infrequency puzzling, since painting, of all the arts, seems in many ways best fitted to show how much of human nature and culture derives from uprightiness – anatomical high standing – which the ground supports but at the same time qualifies. To be a little ominous about this, it surely mattered profoundly to the cultures from which Bruegel and Poussin emerged that human beings





24. Pieter Bruegel The Elder, *Land of Cockaigne*, 1567,  
52 x 78 cm (20½ x 30¾ in.). Alte Pinakothek, Munich.



48. Nicolas Poussin, *Sacrament of Confirmation*, 1645, 117 × 178 cm (46½ × 70½ in.).  
Bridgewater Collection Loan, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

– not yet – the first Christians. They are Romans and Jews, inhabitants (inheritors) of the world of Joachim.

*Marriage*, that is to say, is less severe and claustrophobic a picture than the other indoor scenes in the series. But at the same time it comes across as the most calmly measured of the seven. It is the painting with the strongest and most all-determining crisscross of verticals and horizontals. Even the *Eucharist*, which is the scene that best rivals *Marriage* for sheer beauty and complexity of architecture, looks empty and frontal and straightforwardly vertical by comparison. Poussin has decided in the *Eucharist* not to give us the strong beam lines of the upper room's ceiling. The ins and outs of the room's massive cornice – truly High Roman these, with their play of attached and freestanding



49. Nicolas Poussin, *Sacrament of Holy Eucharist*, 1647, 117 × 178 cm (46½ × 70½ in.).  
Bridgewater Collection Loan, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

pilasters – break the horizontal into discontinuous segments. And down below, where the disciples take bread – the contrast alerts us to the key compositional choice in *Marriage* – there is no internal reiteration of the room's four walls by freestanding columns, and no answering geometry spelt across the floor. Of all Poussin's paintings *Marriage* seems to me the one in which space is most elaborately compartmentalized. Not just the four columns marking out the room within a room inside the porch, but the three rear doors presenting the space of the city and, above all, the spaces to right and left of the great columns close to us in the foreground.

These last spaces in particular have always fascinated viewers – or, rather, one of them has. No one has ever cared much about what





64. Paolo Veronese, *Marcus Curtius*,  
c.1550, 221.5 cm (87¼ in.) in diameter.  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

they are dimensions of Veronese's thought that exist in tension, not at odds. And this connects to my sense of Veronese's distinctive qualities as a painter, which I see the *Allegories* as summing up.



'A good, stout, self-commanding, magnificent Animality,' writes Ruskin, 'is the make for poets and artists.'<sup>10</sup> Again he has Veronese in view. I would state the case slightly differently. What seems to me the central feature of Veronese's achievement – take the counterpoised bodies in *Respect*, for example, or the bride and naked goddess in *Happy Union* – is a unique completeness of empathy with the figures he paints, so that one feels him almost physically entering into them, male or female, and deploying their weight and balance as if from the inside. Even Titian cannot manage the business in quite the same way. The centre or anchor of Veronese's vision was this: an internal, material, comprehensive inhabiting of bodies, and therefore an ability to depict their glittering outsides as manifestations of their weight, their mechanics: the set of their skeletons, their centres of gravity, their muscle tone. I really do not see any other painter who can do this as well; so that time and again facts of deep structure and self-propulsion appear wholly on the outside of things, in the fall of a drape or the lustre of a fold of fat.

It seems strange that the gift is so rare. But it is rare, perhaps because human beings naturally (biologically) divide experience in two, the inhabiting of the body being something experienced from the inside, and 'appearances' being felt as detached from that lived totality. However we try to explain the norm, what Veronese does is extraordinary: he steps over the dualism as if the division of inside and outside did not occur to him. But of course he knows that outsides, if they are to manifest the whole feel of a complex solid in motion, will have to be somehow supercharged, almost hypertrophied. Hence the famous gaudiness of his surfaces – the shot silk, the rippling silver stripes, the impenetrable brocade, the special acidity of his greens and yellows. His treatment of



78. Henri Matisse, *Icarus (Icare)* from *Jazz*, 1947, pochoir printed in colour [original cut-paper, 1943], 42.2 × 65.3 cm (16½ × 25¼ in.).

exploding lightbulb-incendiary in *Guernica*) and Icarus's white-on-black falling body, and you have the bare elements of Picasso's idea. To these add Bruegel.

I have no doubt that long before Salles produced his *Icarus* title in March these two versions of the legend – Matisse's and Bruegel's – had coalesced in Picasso's mind. Matisse had been the presiding deity of the UNESCO project from the moment (in late January) when the action had shifted from studio to seaside. The tanned figure top right in the mural – pebble, flower, polyp, pin-up, extravagant Saint Tropez sunbather – is a compound and parody of Matisse motifs. The Icarus



79 Pieter Bruegel The Elder, *Fall of Icarus*, c.1555, 73.5 × 112 cm (28½ × 44¼ in.). Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.

idea emerged from the Matisse matrix. And once it had appeared, naturally Bruegel came with it: Picasso burrowed into his library and dreamed over the unavoidable source. What he responded to most deeply, it seems, and set himself the task of repeating, was Bruegel's (entirely characteristic) sense that the tragedy of Icarus had made no difference to the universe it took place in – that in the real world tragedy is an incident, a brief interruption, an agony in a vacuum, to which the idiot onlooker in Picasso's mural, staring out at us from his position top right, will never pay heed. Characteristically, the response to Bruegel's idea seems to have hinged on a single visual incident that Picasso saw he could fasten on: Icarus's splayed limbs in the mural (and in the sketch where the figure first materializes) are direct variations on the famous 'unnoticeable' flailing legs of the Bruegel prototype.



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