

# Uncertain Signifiers: 'An Affective Fantasy' in Jacopo Pontormo's *Joseph in Egypt*

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In spite of its renown, Jacopo Pontormo's (1494–1556/57) painting *Joseph in Egypt* (ca. 1518) still calls for deeper art historical consideration. The painting does not open its reservoirs of meaning very easily, and art historians have left many interesting questions untouched in the old and in more recent research literature. In a way, it is surprising that this picture, with its *bellezza dell'invenzione* ('the beauty of inventions', as defined by Giorgio Vasari),<sup>1</sup> has not received much attention for decades, especially when we take into account the development of methods and tools in art history over the last thirty years. As such, many questions are open for discussion, even when we think about normal art historical research and leave semiotic analysis untouched. I am going to apply some methods of semiotics in order to illuminate this old but still vital object of study.

Belonging to the early phase of Italian mannerism, the Jacopo Pontormo's (1494–1556/57) painting *Joseph in Egypt* (ca. 1518) was thought by Pontormo's contemporary Giorgio Vasari to be the most challenging of all his paintings: *storia assai grande pur di figure piccole* ('quite a large story for the small-scale figures').<sup>2</sup> The painting is relatively small, only 93 x 110 cm on panels, and yet as a little oil painting it contains numerous micro-episodes and narrative oddities. Vasari also stated that it is *la più bella pittura che Puntormo facesse mai*.<sup>3</sup> Translated in the mannerist language, the word *bella* here does not mean simply beauty, but rather complex splendour. *Joseph in Egypt* is a 'little big' painting, full of narrative and symbolic enigmas. The most surprising of these might be the 'living statues', which await new interpretative efforts. I have not encountered semiotic interpretations of the painting, but it

1 G. Vasari, *Le vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*. Vol. VI. Ed. G. Milanesi. Firenze: Sansoni, 1881, p. 261.

2 G. Vasari, *Le vite...* VI, p. 261.

3 G. Vasari, *Le vite...* VI, p. 262.

seems clear that semiotic analysis could be the most fitting approach for this complex picture (fig. 1).

The panel painting, now in the National Gallery, London, was painted for the wedding chamber of Pierfrancesco Borgherini and Margherita Acciaiuoli in their townhouse in Borgo Santi Apostoli, having been commissioned by Pierfrancesco's father Salvi Borgherini in 1515. The work was the most significant in the series of *spalliere* and *cassoni* paintings made by Pontormo and other artists (Andrea del Sarto, Bacchiacca and Francesco Granacci) for this famous wedding chamber. The subject was the story of Joseph as narrated in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> Vasari mentions that Pontormo's *Joseph in Egypt* was located apart from the others, left of the doorway<sup>5</sup>, and it was 'apparently a separate item in the scheme of decoration'<sup>6</sup>, yet the theme or subject matter was the same: the life of Joseph. Pontormo also made three other panels, which are smaller and for the *spalliere* and *cassoni* (and for the *lettuccio*?) of the chamber: *Joseph Sold to Potiphar*, *Pharaoh with his Butler and Baker*, and *Joseph's Brothers Beg for Help*, all in the year 1515. The common theme which underlies all of these paintings is the story of Joseph as a precursor of Christ.<sup>7</sup> The biblical story depicted in *Joseph in Egypt* consists of five episodes: (1) Joseph presents his parents to Pharaoh, bottom left of the picture, (2) Joseph receives the message of his father's illness, bottom right, (3) dying Jacob (top right) with his family and grandsons, and the depiction of the transfer of the grandsons' privileges to the younger boy Ephraim, (4) above the Egyptians begging for food (bottom centre) is a crowd of men gathered behind a stone, considered to be Joseph's brothers (which is an old presumption) (Genesis 47 and 48),<sup>8</sup> and finally (5) a group of children below the stairs in the foreground; one of these kids is in contemporary dress. In this way the small picture plane is packed with episodes. Besides these main events, the rare and peculiarly notable elements of the whole scene are the three semi-living statues standing over the activities on the ground.

Before considering the statues, the first of various peculiarities is the long narrative time span between the episodes in the biblical text represented. The long time span has been condensed into five episodes, so spatially close to each other that the beholder cannot easily discern one episode from the next. It has been said that within the scene the story proceeds jerkily (*a scatti*, as the art historian Antonio Pinelli has stated),<sup>9</sup> and yet there is a double movement of signifiers within the visual narrative: one is disjointed (fragmented) and the other is condensed. Thus, discontinuities of meaning on one level of the narrative can signify continuities on the other. There has been much discussion of the incorrectness, or the lack of unity of the perspective of the work.<sup>10</sup> Arguably, this particular 'dimension' of the

4 G. Vasari, *Le vite...* VI, p. 261; C. Gould, *Joseph in Egypt*. - *The Sixteenth-Century Italian Schools*. Ed. C. Gould. London: National Gallery, 1975, p. 200.

5 G. Vasari, *Le vite...* VI, p. 261.

6 A. Braham, *The Bed of Pierfrancesco Borgherini*. - *The Burlington Magazine* 1979, vol. 121 (921), p. 761.

7 A. Braham, *The Bed of Pierfrancesco Borgherini*, pp. 757, 761, 765.

8 Cf. C. Gould, *Joseph in Egypt*, p. 199; K. W. Forster, *Pontormo. Monographie mit kritischem Katalog*. München: Bruckmann, 1966, pp. 30-31.

9 A. Pinelli, *La bella maniera. Artisti del Cinquecento tra regola e licenza*. Torino: Einaudi, 1993, p. 73.

10 Cf. K. W. Forster, *Pontormo*, p. 28; A. Pinelli, *La bella maniera*, p. 73.

picture was exaggerated in earlier research, especially in the 1960s, when perspective discontinuities were seen as the dominant feature of early mannerism, with its assumed medieval references. However, the scene can be viewed as more coherent than discontinuous, and its depth cues as consistent rather than inconsistent.<sup>11</sup>

While the biblical story has a 'profane' visual structure which does not follow dominant visual conventions of the age, the hypothesis that I propose here is that 'the deep structure' of the scene represented contains certain important polarities of meaning: euphoria/dysphoria, nuclear family / tribal family, *unheimlich/heimlich*, solitude (melancholy) / crowd, and solitary affects / familiar affects. The scene thus introduces a field of meaning full of essential tensions. Of pivotal concern here are the living statues (*statue viventi*), replete with different affective and totemic (i.e. family-oriented) implications. According to my hypothesis, the enigmatic meaning of the living statues can be interpreted through an analysis of the various tensions or polarities built into the scene. For example, we can try to search for a contextual identity of the colourful putto on top of the short column, and yet a more important question might be to ask what kind of catalytic function this figure has in the middle of the overall multi-focalised scene. The roles of these animated but seemingly melancholy statues placed in the midst of the lively episodes are my main concern. In my view, the problem of living statues has not been correctly resolved in the extant art historical literature. Indeed, the meaning of these statues has continued to be an art historical enigma, especially in terms of their roles or functions in the scene.

The main problem concerning the meaning of the statues has usually been seen as referential, and thus iconographic in the narrow sense. A semiotic approach, however, does not so much focus on what the statues mean as how their presumed referential meaning is bound up within, or 'woven' into, the symbolic structure of the picture. In this sense we can assume that the 'hidden meaning' does not in fact refer very far 'outside' of the scene; on the contrary, it elucidates the disposition of certain visual segments of the story: the sections loaded with certain kinds of evidence which can be discerned within the tensions of meaning.

11 According to recent views, perspective is tricky: without architecture it often offers irregular depth cues, which the beholder may perceive as regular (cf. E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. London: Phaidon, 1960, p. 201). In the first draft, the whole scene of the painting was different. According to Carol Plazzotta and Rachel Billinge there are many underdrawings in Pontormo's work, cf. C. Plazzotta, R. Billinge, *The Underdrawing of Pontormo's 'Joseph with Jacob in Egypt'*. - *The Burlington Magazine* 2002, vol. 144 (1196), pp. 662-665. The master changed the round staircase into its mirror image and situated the bed scene in the middle of the upper zone of the scene.

## The seductive symbolism of living statues

In terms of surveying the literature, it is interesting to look at the different referential meanings art historians have given to the living statues.

(1) In his early monograph of Pontormo, Frederick Mortimer Clapp states: 'There are three statues on high pedestals in the picture. They represent Mars, Venus and Cupid.'<sup>12</sup> He does not, however, tell us why they are included in the scene.

(2) Rachel Wischnitzer published a more profound analysis in 1953: 'There is a statue surmounting a column at the entrance of Pharaoh's palace, another one at the top of the circular stair, and a third at the foot of the stair. The three figures were interpreted as some unspecified Egyptian deities, intended to give local colour to the scene.'<sup>13</sup> She also refers to Clapp: 'According to another suggestion, they are Mars, Venus and Cupid',<sup>14</sup> and continues: 'The three statues, an old man, a young woman and a child, seem to personify the *Three Ages* and thus sum up the content of the picture, with Jacob, Joseph and Joseph's children representing three generations.'<sup>15</sup> The problematic, colourful 'dancing putto' does not disturb Wischnitzer.<sup>16</sup> She sees the statue of the dancing putto as nothing more than 'the image of a care-free childhood'.<sup>17</sup> Whereas for Venus or Caritas – although the attribute is not clear – she finds a clear function which refers to Genesis 41: 45, and finally the family situation of Borgherini: 'Pontormo in his Biblical picture may have wished to glorify paternal love and filial affection, thus alluding to the tender relationship of his patron Salvi Borgherini to his son Pierfrancesco.'<sup>18</sup> Because we do not know much about the circumstances of the Borgherini family situation in the early years of the sixteenth century, the reference might be too hazy.<sup>19</sup>

(3) In his monograph of Pontormo (1966), Kurt W. Forster follows the lines of Wischnitzer as far as he can, and mentions the same allegorical meanings – 'Lebenslater and Venus as Caritas' – and in that way does not say much about the statues. However he also refers to an illusory Caritas sculpture of Pontormo in another painting dealing with the theme of Joseph, *Joseph Sold to Potiphar* (fig. 2), which is also in the National Gallery, London.<sup>20</sup> Forster's idea that these statues are like 'allegorical comments' seems accurate,<sup>21</sup> and yet their commenting role here could be seen as even more important and explanatory than the 'exact' referent. In this sense, there is a possibility that the statues may more importantly be an inside referent within the picture.

(4) Kaoru Adachi, in his article 'La statua vivente' ('A living statue') from 1997, refers mainly to the representatives of the corpus of hermetic knowledge as a key for interpretation: Marsilio Ficino, Francesco Zorzi Veneto, Tiberio Russiliano Sesto

12 F. M. Clapp, *Jacopo Carucci da Pontormo, His Life and Work*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916, p. 157.

13 R. Wischnitzer, *Jacopo Pontormo's Joseph Scenes*. – *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 1953, (March), p. 155.

14 R. Wischnitzer, *Jacopo Pontormo's Joseph Scenes*, p. 157.

15 R. Wischnitzer, *Jacopo Pontormo's Joseph Scenes*, pp. 155–156.

16 R. Wischnitzer, *Jacopo Pontormo's Joseph Scenes*, p. 161.

17 R. Wischnitzer, *Jacopo Pontormo's Joseph Scenes*, p. 156.

18 R. Wischnitzer, *Jacopo Pontormo's Joseph Scenes*, p. 156.

19 Cf. A. Braham, *The Bed of Pierfrancesco Borgherini*, p. 761.

20 K. W. Forster, *Pontormo*, p. 132.

21 K. W. Forster, *Pontormo*, p. 132.

Calabrese, Giulio Camillo Delminio, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa di Nettesheim and Giordano Bruno. According to Adachi 'the painter has wanted to 'animate' in a divine manner the statue the same way as a hermetic magician'.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, the mystical-hermetic knowledge does not explain or validate its relationship to the narrative whole. It is far too syncretistic. In fact, Adachi's interpretation is typical of the time period (1980s-1990s): the overall cosmological account rolls over the visual narrative and does not fit the demands of the pictorial narrative.

(5) In his late monograph (1994), Philippe Costamagna states: 'The three emblematic and enigmatic ritual figures underline, in all probability, the moralizing intent of the story.'<sup>23</sup> What this means exactly remains somewhat unclear. Costamagna's explanation is a loosely psychological one: it suggests a lack of motivation to 'return' the meaning back to the machinery of other representations in the scene.

(6) Maurizia Tazartes (2008) sees clearly the double role of the statues. According to her the statues are '...not only living persons but also sculptural works, the art which the painter seems to know quite well, and which we can infer from the explanations in Pontormo's letter to Benedetto Varchi on 18 February 1548.'<sup>24</sup> Tazartes also refers to the terracotta models Pontormo later used when making figures *a fresco* in San Lorenzo.<sup>25</sup> They are works of art inside the scene. This explanation is interesting and leads us to the revealing testimonial of Pontormo himself - to which we will return. It does not, however, explain the function of the statues in this particular scene.

It is hardly ever mentioned that the pagan statues in the scene can be seen to represent paganism or otherness, 'Egypt' in a wide sense, in the same way that Pontormo borrows elements of the art of Flanders and Germany, especially if we think about the topos of 'The Flight to Egypt', and the function of the pagan statues in this topos in Flemish painting. It has often been mentioned (from Vasari to Cecil Gould) that Pontormo admired Northern art, especially Albrecht Dürer and Lucas van Leyden. As for the statue on the left, Cecil Gould refers to the Laocoön Group<sup>26</sup>, and as for otherness, Pontormo painted a gabled gate in the background of the scene, which he took from an engraving by Lucas van Leyden, *Ecce Homo* (1510)<sup>27</sup>. Antonio Pinelli has rightly observed that Hans Memling's painting *Scenes from the Passion of Christ* (1470-1471), with its microcosms of labyrinthine events in the same architectural setting, was the most influential work for Pontormo's image. The painting was at that time in Florence, and is now in the Galleria Sabauda, Torino.<sup>28</sup>

Although Pontormo's use of living statues seems to be a rarity in the pictorial world of the Renaissance, they certainly do not come from out of the blue. Not long before Pontormo, Piero di Cosimo had painted two pictures representing the deeds of Prometheus, notably depicting Prometheus shaping a human being from clay and

22 K. Adachi, *La statua vivente. Una precisazione iconografica della Giuseppe in Egitto del Pontormo.* - *Bijutsushigaku* 1997, no. 19, p. 110.

23 P. Costamagna, *Pontormo.* Milano: Electra, 1994, p. 130.

24 M. Tazartes, *Il "ghiribizzoso" Pontormo.* Firenze: Pagliai, 2008, p. 59.

25 M. Tazartes, *Il "ghiribizzoso" Pontormo.* p. 59.

26 C. Gould, *Joseph in Egypt.* p. 201.

27 K. W. Forster, *Pontormo.* p. 29; C. Gould, *Joseph in Egypt.* p. 200.

28 A. Pinelli, *La bella maniera.* p. 59.

putting him on a pedestal in the mode of a living statue.<sup>29</sup> Susanne Peters-Schildgen has also referred to Filippino Lippi's role as the initiator of the living statue topos, with his frescos in the Strozzi Chapel in Santa Maria Novella, Florence.<sup>30</sup> Some have also referred to the myth of Pygmalion.<sup>31</sup> This reference is worth noting, but it does not help much when seeking the function of these *statue viventi* within the whole narrative, which mostly involves the isolation of figures. Indeed, their liveliness is a challenge for critics. Paul Barolsky even speaks of the 'putto in the flesh', posing 'Pippo-fashion'<sup>32</sup>, whereas Salvatore Silvano Nigro speaks of *marmocarne*, marble-flesh<sup>33</sup>. In addition, the concept *simia natura* has also been mentioned.<sup>34</sup>

The other term often used is *figura viva* (or *quadri viventi*), especially in light of how the decorations of triumphal carts in the carnival processions of the late *quattrocento* have been described.<sup>35</sup> Probably the most famous description of this kind of image is in Vasari's 'Life of Pontormo': how in a carnival triumph of the year 1513 they used a real gilded boy, who later died from the gilding.<sup>36</sup> In many ways, the problem of *statua vivente* or *figura viva* is a serious one, not only semiotically but also historically.<sup>37</sup> It has, therefore, both synchronic and diachronic meaning structures. The diachronic ingredients come from Filippino Lippi and Piero di Cosimo, while synchronic items illuminate the whole scene and give a new meaning to this *mixtura*, many times seen as a strange compendium of different motifs and themes.

The semiotic context of the *statua vivente* topos is bound up with the following narrative codifications, which concern the whole representation:

- (1) Details have been depicted realistically, and yet the whole scene is represented as a fantasy, which is full of disjointed elements or narrative gaps. It seems that some narrative details live a life of their own, detached from the narrative context.
- (2) Discontinuities of meaning on one level of narrative can signify continuities on another level.
- (3) This leads to a search for oppositions, discrepancies and polarities of meaning in the disposition of the story, as well as the search for semic dimensions and polarities of the visual story. The painting/narrative gives several interpretative hints, some of which are seemingly contrary and some clandestinely consistent.

29 E.g. U. Bischoff, Die "Cassonebilder" des Piero di Cosimo. Fragen der Ikonographie. Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1995, pp. 68-69; E. Capretti, Sezione I - 55 a-b: Piero di Cosimo: Prometeo plasma l'uomo & Prometeo sottrae il fuoco celeste agli dei. - Piero di Cosimo, 1462-1522. Pittore eccentrico fra Rinascimento e Maniera. Eds. E. Capretti, A. Forlani Tempesti, S. Padovani. Firenze: Giunti, 2015, p. 326.

30 S. Peters-Schildgen, Die Bedeutung Filippino Lippis für den Manierismus. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Strozzi-Fresken in Santa Maria Novella zu Florenz. Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 1989, pp. 73-75, 115.

31 P. Barolsky, As in Ovid, So in Renaissance Art. - Renaissance Quarterly 1998, vol. 51 (2), p. 456; V. Stoichita, L'effetto Pigmalione. Breve storia dei simulacri da Ovidio a Hitchcock. Trans. B. Sforza. Milano: Il sagggiatore, 2006, pp. 88-89.

32 P. Barolsky, As in Ovid, So in Renaissance Art, p. 470.

33 S. S. Nigro, L'orologio di Pontormo. Invenzione di un pittore manierista. Milano: Rizzoli, 1998.

34 U. Bischoff, Die "Cassonebilder" des Piero di Cosimo, p. 68.

35 E.g. P. Helas, Lebende Bilder in der italienischen Festkultur des 15. Jahrhunderts. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1999, pp. 3-8.

36 G. Vasari, Le vite... VI, p. 254.

37 Cf. V. Stoichita, L'effetto Pigmalione. Breve storia dei simulacri da Ovidio a Hitchcock, pp. 89, 262.

Cf. P. Helas, Lebende Bilder in der italienischen Festkultur des 15. Jahrhunderts, pp. 3-7, 182-189.

It has to be stressed that the main discrepancy within the visual narrative is structured as follows: naturalistic/realistic details > < the fantastic whole. The most realistic detail in the whole scene is the portrait of Agnolo Bronzino as a young boy sitting on the lower level of the staircase; he was the beloved pupil of the lonely Pontormo, who later became a famous painter. Vasari mentions him and his 'realistic' shopping basket.<sup>38</sup> Before we put Bronzino in his place in the logic of the narrative, we have to refer to the melancholy of Pontormo himself.

## Lonely melancholy and familial euphoria

It is essential to note that the living statues standing over the events are dissociated from the main narrative stream in a way which provides insight into Pontormo's eccentric motivations. Besides being monochromatic and working on another level of representation, their separateness seems to be awesome, even melancholy. Indeed, the postulation of melancholy here may be motivated by the biography of Pontormo. He lost almost all his close relatives during his childhood.<sup>39</sup> According to Vasari he 'was a melancholic and solitary young man', a *uomo fantastico e solitario* ('eccentric and solitary man') who made pictures *con tanta malinconia*.<sup>40</sup> Vasari also mentions that Pontormo was a learned man.<sup>41</sup> According to the Renaissance theory of genius, learned men usually suffered from intellectual melancholy; this was linked to 'heightened self-awareness'.<sup>42</sup> In that sense '[m]elancholy was the price one had to be pay for aspiring to reach the level beyond ordinary men'.<sup>43</sup> Also, when Vasari characterises Pontormo's eccentric ideas with the word *ghiribizzi* ('whims' or 'fancies'), he emphasises his bizarre way of making inventions in solitude.

Especially the light brown used, a somewhat drained colour, and the sense of the surface of the two monochromatic statues on the top engender certain depressive associations. Also, the poses and gestures of these two figures seem to be more or less gloomy: the female one has bent her head down and the male is in shadow stretching his arms in a way which brings to mind the grief expressed in the

38 G. Vasari, *Le vite...* VI, p. 261. Rudolf and Margot Wittkower state: 'Pontormo's devoted pupil Bronzino was a friend of Vasari's and very likely told him many details about his master's life'. M. Wittkower, R. Wittkower, *Born Under Saturn. The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963, p. 69; cf. A. Braham, *The Bed of Pierfrancesco Borgherini*, p. 762.

39 Timothy Verdon has rightly stressed that Pontormo was bound to experience heavy losses in his childhood: *Povera Pontormo: gli era morto il padre quando Jacopo aveva cinque anni, e la mamma quando ne ebbe dieci; morì poi Mona Brigida, la parente presso la quale il ragazzo era finite*. That was not all: his sister Maddalena died very young, see T. G. Verdon, 'Pensando a nuove cose'. Spunti per un'analisi formale del linguaggio pontormesco. - Pontormo e Rosso. Atti del convegno di Empoli e Volterra, progetto Appiani di Piombino. Eds. R. P. Ciardi, A. Natali. Venezia: Marsilio, 1996, p. 49.

40 G. Vasari, *Le vite...* VI, pp. 247, 279, 287.

41 G. Vasari, *Le vite...* VI, pp. 285-286; cf. C. Beuzelin, *Jacopo Pontormo: A Scholarly Craftsman. - The Artist as Reader: On Education and Non-Education of Early Modern Artists*. Eds. H. Damm, M. Thimann, C. Zittel. Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp. 85-92.

42 R. Klibansky, E. Panofsky, F. Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*. London: Nelson, 1964, p. 228.

43 N. L. Brann, *The Debate over the Origin of Genius during the Italian Renaissance: The Theories of Supernatural Frenzy and Natural Melancholy in Accord and in Conflict on the Threshold of Scientific Revolution*. Leiden: Brill, 2002, p. 337.

Laocoön Group. In addition, we also have to remember what Leon Battista Alberti has said in his *Della pittura (libro seconda)* about melancholy movements of the body:

...melancholy (*uno atristito*), preoccupied with cares and beset by grief (*il pensiero l'assedida*) lack all vitality of feeling and action, and remain sluggish, their limbs unsteady and drained of colour. In those who mourn, ... the neck bent, and every part of their body droops as though weary and past care.<sup>44</sup>

When looking at the statues the way Alberti describes visual signs of *pensiero l'assedida*, it seems quite obvious that Pontormo had read his *Della pittura*. It is, therefore, not very important to ponder the exact mythological referent of these two statues above the scene, if indeed there is any. What is more significant is the consideration of their psycho-semiotic roles and functions, especially when taking into account the melancholy and solitary nature of Pontormo's main oeuvre.

So, it seems that there is a melancholy sphere in the illusory upper zone of the representation. What about the lower zone, to the right of the happy episode of Jacob and the Pharaoh, on the ground, at the chthonic level? It certainly appears that there exists a lonely representative of Pontormo's own 'family' in the scene: little Bronzino sitting on the lower level of the staircase. Both the statues and Bronzino represent the opposite pole of the happy reunion of Joseph's big family depicted on the top of the stairs' left side. Indeed, the statues together seem to constitute a kind of nuclear family, and one of them – the colourful dancing putto at the top of the column – seems to be in a mediating role between the adult world and the world of children. The putto is looking at Joseph, whereas the little child (Manasseh?) in the lap of Joseph is looking at Bronzino sitting on the steps. There is a chain of glances: the putto looking at Joseph, and a naked child in the hands of Joseph looking at Bronzino instead.

In fact this episode forms an intertextual connection with the side episode of Andrea del Sarto's *Joseph in Egypt* (Galleria Palatina, Florence): among many incidents in this picture there are two children playing on the steps of Pharaoh's palace at the right hand side of the picture (fig. 3).<sup>45</sup> We can say that Pontormo simply makes one of the children recognisable in his own painting. Compared to Andrea's picture, Pontormo's strategy was twofold: he not only made the 'waif-like figure' of Andrea a child who has his own personal history (Bronzino), but he also changed the odd, shadowy and lifelike river god in the left corner of Andrea's picture into living statues in his own versions of the story of Joseph.

In this sense the third statue, the clothed putto, has a totally different function: it can be understood as a catalyst of the family situation. It seems to comment on the narrative around it. The children depicted in this part of the picture are located at different levels of the representation: (1) naked putti which draw the wagon of

44 L. B. Alberti, *On Painting*. Trans. C. Grayson. London: Penguin, 1991 [1972], pp. 76–77. Cf. L. B. Alberti, *De pictura (Della pittura)*. Ed. C. Grayson. Bari: Editori Laterza, 1980, pp. 70–72.

45 Cf. A. Braham, *The Bed of Pierfrancesco Borgherini*, p. 762; J. Shearman, *Andrea del Sarto*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1965, p. 420.



Joseph, (2) sitting Bronzino, (3) a standing boy talking with Bronzino (and looking at him), (4) a boy in the lap of Joseph also looking straight at Bronzino, and finally (5) the lively and colourful putto statue. Levels of representation have thus been transgressed in this particular part of the story.

First, the putto in colourful clothes at the top of the little column clearly differs from the other two monochromatic statues. It is clear that the eye contact between the children crossing the two representative levels is meaningful. Second, almost all of the children around Bronzino except the dancing putto are looking at him. This visual fact is clearly significant. Art historians have paid some attention to this relationship, which also shines a light on the enigmatic role of Bronzino. Maurizia Tazartes mentions him and says that, seated there in contemporary clothes, he is 'surreal and metaphysical'.<sup>46</sup> Thinking through Pontormo's own family situation, Bronzino's role here is understandable: he is looking for contact with the others, and yet he is an onlooker of the event in this part of the scene. Indeed, he is the only 'outsider' onlooker in the representation. In this sense there is a double transgressive focalisation process taking place in this part of the painting. Furthermore, the animated putto on top of the little column transgresses two representative zones and has a double role: it is both looking at Joseph and at the same time pointing with its right hand to Joseph's family, especially to the children climbing the stairs, while the little child in the lap of Joseph is poking the thigh of Joseph. In this way the putto takes part in the events, in almost the same way as the prophet statue in the scene of Pontormo's panel *Pharaoh with his Butler and Baker*.<sup>47</sup> All in all, there is a complicated complex of different kinds of indications.

In the following scheme the main dichotomies or polarities lead us to search for a key or a hidden code which can hopefully clarify the basic tensions (or polarities) of meaning in Pontormo's painting. In this scheme I have found it useful to apply two concepts of Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés. First, we have to take into account basic semic categories (semes, dimensions of meaning), such as 'vertical' and 'horizontal' (which have metalinguistic character).<sup>48</sup> Additionally, one semic dimension can contain lexemes (object categories, 'semic nuclei'), which are manifestations of one semic dimension.<sup>49</sup> Secondly, we can think of these basic dimensions, 'cardinal points' via thymic categories (which has to do with temperaments in general), such as *dysphoria* and *euphoria*.<sup>50</sup> These two pairs of categories can give us a certain insight into the role and signification of *statue viventi* in the whole scenic playground of the accents of meaning: they can reveal how Pontormo's pre- or unconscious scene-structure of the narrative field is determined by his basic melancholy accents.

46 M. Tazartes, Il "ghiribizzoso" Pontormo, p. 59.

47 Cf. A. Braham, *The Bed of Pierfrancesco Borgherini*, p. 765. Allan Braham does not compare these two panels, neither does Philippe Costamagna, who states that 'the prophet dominates the scene', see P. Costamagna, *Pontormo*, p. 128.

48 A. J. Greimas, J. Courtés, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*. Paris: Classiques Hachette, 1979, pp. 332-333.

49 A. J. Greimas, *Sémantique structurale. Recherche de méthode*. Paris: Larousse, 1966, pp. 45-47.

50 A. J. Greimas, J. Courtés, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 21.

**FIGURE 1.****The basic semic dimensions:****The division between euphoria and dysphoria****The semantic/semic axis of *dysphoria*:***(Lonely, melancholy statues and Bronzino)*

The cephalic lexeme of melancholy.

**The semic axis of *euphoria*:***The continuity of the family line.**The happy reunion of the family**Staircases**The meeting of Joseph's family**from grandfather to sons.**The chthonic lexemes: Joseph's brothers behind the stone**and Bronzino, who has turned his back on the family reunion.**Chthonic melancholy: The lonely family of Pontormo.*

In this way we have two semantic axes: vertical (dysphoric) and horizontal (euphoric). Both of the axes have two poles with two kinds of lexemes as object-references. In the vertical axis there are two kinds of melancholy accents, cephalic and chthonic, and in the horizontal dimension alliance (after many years of separation) and continuity (future generation), both euphoric. Staircases in both ends mean emotional *crescendo*, euphoria. According to Otto Rank and Sigmund Freud, climbing up the staircase in the dream can be compared to the sexual act; in that sense, the German word *steigen* has a double meaning.<sup>51</sup>

Additionally, we have to assume that the *living statues* exist on another representative level than the main narrative. Their role, therefore, is a commenting or a symbolic one. Secondly, we have to presume that the child with colourful clothes on top of the little column differs from the other two (monochromatic) statues, and in this way has a *catalyst function* in relation to the episode around it. Thirdly, we have to suppose that the eye contact between children crossing the two representative levels produces focalisations, which might open the way to the meaning structure of the picture. The fact that the two children are looking at young Bronzino is significant. No art historian has paid attention to this relationship, which certainly opens up the enigmatic role of Bronzino. He is both an onlooker of the events on the right, and the only (outsider) onlooker in the representation. Such factors result in the basic meaningful tensions/oppositions of meaning:

51 S. Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*. Leipzig: Franz Deuticke, 1911.



1.

Jacopo Pontormo. Joseph in Egypt (1515–1518). Oil on wood. 96.5 x 109.5 cm. National Gallery, London / Photo Scala, Florence.

Jacopo Pontormo. Joosep Egiptuses (1515–1518). Õli, puit. 96,5 x 109,5 cm. National Gallery, London / Photo Scala, Firenze.



2.

Jacopo Pontormo. Joseph Sold to Potiphar (ca 1515). Oil on wood. 61 x 51.6 cm. National Gallery, London / Photo Scala, Florence.  
Jacopo Pontormo. Joosepi müümine Potivarile (u 1515). Õli, puit. 61 x 51,6 cm. National Gallery, London / Photo Scala, Firenze.



3.

Andrea del Sarto. Joseph in Egypt (1515). Oil on wood. 98 x 135 cm. Galleria Palatina, Florence / Photo Scala, Florence.

Andrea del Sarto. Joosep Egíptuses (1515). Õli, puit. 98 x 135 cm. Galleria Palatina, Firenze / Photo Scala, Firenze.

## **Euphoria/dysphoria:**

Two solitary and isolated dysphoric statues vs. the euphoria of the family finally reunited.

### **Tribal family / Nuclear family (the yearning for it):**

The image of Agnolo Bronzino (the famous painter as a young student of lonely Pontormo) vs. the big family of Jacob. The hilarious tribal family vs. a nuclear family, which is symbolically represented in separated statues.

### Or, **Abundant family / missing family:**

Perhaps this is the biggest common divider or the basic tension between the totemic (familiar bound) and solitary affects. Pontormo's own family situation is represented by the figure of Bronzino alone. It is also telling that Bronzino has a shopping basket with him.<sup>52</sup> Normal everyday routines have a clear alienation effect within a mythical event.

### **Unheimlich (uncanny) / heimlich (homely):**

All three living statues expressing their strange 'emotions' vs. the family in euphoria ascending the stairs (meaning: emotional *crescendo*).

### **Solitary affects / familiar affects (statues vs. Joseph's family):**

This discrepancy may show that Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's definition of an 'affect' as a kind of ambiguity zone of meaning in the work could be applied here, especially when thinking of the fuzzy role of statues.<sup>53</sup> They are also affective in the sense that they are melancholy but undefined.

All in all there are two kinds of structural key points, which can also be understood as sutures or seams, which close the structure of the picture. One is Bronzino's role in the scene, which opens the personal dimension of meaning and gives us the clue for the central polarities of meaning of the scene: Bronzino as a representative of the 'lonely' nuclear family of Pontormo. The other category of sutures, of course, is lonely statues: especially the coloured and clothed one, the dancing putto. The putto inevitably serves as the mediating point, or rather the 'nodal point' (or *point de caption* of Slavoj Žižek) of these two sutures (Bronzino and the statues).<sup>54</sup> However, ambiguous sutures limit the meaning of the picture: the melancholy statues being hints and the dancing putto being an active catalyst. They function as a kind of zip fastener. These sutures try to limit meaning and at the same time leave it incurably open, even if only certain affects could come to light.<sup>55</sup> We might also suggest that these two sutures explain the vague and indefinite meaning zones of the picture: while limiting the structure, they seem to leave the meaning in an ambiguous state. When transgressing the two representative levels (real child and statue), the animated putto also connects them. At the first level, it has a double role: it is

52. G. Vasari, *Le vite...* VI, p. 261; cf. P. Costamagna, Pontormo, p. 130; cf. M. Tazartes, *Il "ghiribizzoso" Pontormo*, p. 59.

53. G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* Paris: Minuit, 1991, p. 164.

54. S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1999, pp. 87–88, 95.

55. K. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 10–13, 30. Cf. M. C. Taylor, *The Picture in Question: Mark Tansey and the Ends of Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp. 60–61.

both looking at Joseph and pointing with its right hand to Joseph's family climbing the stairs. Considered thus, the animated statue can be seen taking part in the action and in this way mixing representational levels.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the question is of the fusion of two boundary zones of 'reality'. The function of this effect was to irritate and challenge the self-evident norms of the pictorial imitation, which is now known as the High Renaissance, and make them affective in an alienated, cool way.

In this sense, the portrait of Bronzino acts as an indiscernible narrative hint for the lonely statues. The dancing putto statue also has a double role in another sense: it is alone in its own *cephalic zone* and still takes part in what's happening around it through its gestures. In fact, it has the same role as Bronzino: transgressing the two representative levels, and still being isolated from the representation of Joseph's familial events! The putto is lonely and still trying vigorously to take part in events. Bronzino, instead, has turned his back on the happy reunion of the large family. To be sure, this is the most significant opposition in the whole scene! Syntagmatic closeness creates a huge paradigmatic opposition (euphoria/dysphoria). The tonal contrast light (Jacob) / dark (Bronzino) even emphasises this obstruction. We can see two opposite *scènes de rappel* and two types of focalisation:

Euphoric Jacob >< Dysphoric Bronzino	
light	dark
(light) blue	(dark) brown
mythic	'real'
reunion	separation
joy	uncertain seriousness

Discrepancies found at the level of subject matter, however, do not open up all the segments of this complicated work. We also have to take into account the problem of style, especially the question of beauty and the beautiful. What is this *bellezza d'invenzione* or *bella maniera* of which Vasari is speaking? Indisputably, we meet beauty in a complicated form.

Both Kaoru Adachi and Maurizia Tazartes refer to the letter Pontormo wrote in answer to Benedetto Varchi's famous question in his book *Due lezioni* (1549) about the relationship of sculpture and painting. The question is about the *paragone* discussion. Pontormo's explanation is not only challenging but also arrogant: the painter's duty is to animate a figure in such a way as to 'surpass nature' (*superare la natura*), and to 'have a desire to give a spirit to the figure and make it seem to be alive (*parere viva*) in a plane'. This especially requires the skill of a painter: to make a subject in an artificial, miraculous and divine way (*uno soggetto si artificioso, e più tosto miracoloso e divino*).<sup>57</sup>

Of course, this discussion connects with the fertile basis of the picture in question, even if it was started more than thirty years earlier than his answer to

56 Earlier they spoke of 'reality levels'; cf. Verwischung der Grenzen zwischen Schein und Realität (S. Peters-Schildgen, Die Bedeutung Filippino Lippis für den Manierismus, p. 115; cf. 75).

57 B. Varchi, *Due lezioni di M. Benedetto Varchi, nella prima delle quali si dichiara un Sonetto di M. Michelangelo Buonarroti. Nella seconda si disputa quale sia piu nobile arte...* Firenze: Torrentino, 1549, p. 134.

Varchi. From another angle, we also have to take into account Michelangelo's praise of Pontormo's abilities as a painter, expressed when Pontormo was very young.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, we also have to remember the famous characterisation of Francesco Bocchi, which leads us to the problem of the *vago* and *vaghezza* of the mannerist oeuvre. When Bocchi (in the 1580s) referred to the colouristic effects of Pontormo's frescos in San Lorenzo, Florence, the key word was *vago* ('vague beauty').<sup>59</sup> With *vago*, the mind becomes a vagabond.<sup>60</sup> Therefore the basic affect which 'colours' the scene of *Joseph in Egypt* and stupefies the beholder with a certain array of different greens might be the effect of *vaghezza*, which, at that time, also contained the sense of ambivalent and feminine beauty.<sup>61</sup> In addition, there is the question of the invention of a theme, which included a new kind of vagabond or melancholic beauty, at least for Vasari and other mannerists. Indeed, *statue viventi*, living statues, can be characterised as both *vaghi* – in its most literal meaning – and as affective, eccentric and 'real', in a melancholic sense.

Affects are depicted at two levels in the picture: at the level of the expressions of the lonely statues and at the level of overall composition. They can be seen or sensed also at the level of undefined or unstable beauty (*vaghezza*), because the relationships between the events are obscure. There is something undefined in how different levels of representation accord with one other. According to Deleuze and Guattari, affect can be defined as *une zone d'indétermination, d'indiscernabilité*.<sup>62</sup> In spite of the fact that affects (*affetti*) were seen at that time as more or less the same as passions, we can discern the purport level, which opens at the level of unconscious or preconscious affects (affects as primitive unconscious representations).<sup>63</sup> Pontormo's affects are too sweet or 'weak' compared to those of Michelangelo, who in his poem to Giorgio Vasari emphasised the deceptive nature of *arte*, which can bring together two opposite expressions: *l'affettuosa fantasia*.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Pontormo's painting is also mainly about *affective fantasy*, but only in a weak and sweet sense. Besides this, we can sense *belle* and undetermined affects taking the place 'between' the events, so that the whole scene is about vagabond affects.

Because there are numerous tensions of meaning in Pontormo's painting, we can say that the picture is characterised by *the disparate sensibility*, which is also peculiar to melancholy: melancholy brings to the fore peculiarly contradictory qualities of mind: the diabolic nature of the character, as Marsilio Ficino so often stressed.<sup>65</sup>

When interpreting all this in terms of the painting of Pontormo, we have to emphasise the role of concepts used as a kind of 'objective correlative', and state:

58 G. Vasari, *Le vite...* VI, pp. 250, 277.

59 F. Bocchi, *Eccellenza del San Giorgio di Donatello*. – *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento fra manierismo e controriforma*. Vol. 3. C. Borromeo, Ammannati, Bocchi, R. Alberti, Comanini. Ed. P. Barocchi. Bari: Laterza, 1962, p. 185.

60 Cf. D. Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 169.

61 Cf. P. L. Sohm, *Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia*. – *Renaissance Quarterly* 1995, vol. 48 (4), pp. 767–768.

62 G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?*, p. 164.

63 S. Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 97.

64 G. Vasari, *Le vite...* VI, p. 246.

65 M. Ficino, *De vita libri tres*. Hildesheim: Olms, 1978 [1489], pp. 114, 166.



*we do not know the intentions of Pontormo; we only know that the (affective) structure of the work knows it!*

This is not all, however, as we have to refer to yet another concept by problematising the solitary statues as *accessory* elements of the scene. The role of these solitary figures as *bystanders* is to ornament the scene, but also give a solitary, dysphoric or even repressive tone to the episodes depicted. Two of these statues have a liminal character: they do not have access to events. There is no seemingly visual dialogue between the monochromatic statues and the main discourse. These two statue figures above the scene are in a monologue state, and this is also true of the catalyst putto statue, even when it tries to establish contact with the events around it from its separate position. Thus, these statues are more than *bewegtes Beiwerk*, 'accessories in motion' in Aby Warburg's sense.<sup>66</sup> We can also speak of *Belebung-Beiwerk*, the animation of accessory figures, the animation of melancholy bystanders in a liminal state.

66 A. Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Ed. G. Bing. Nendeln: Kraus, 1969, pp. 54–58, 161.

# Ebamäärased tähistajad.

## „Afektiivne fantaasiamäng” Jacopo Pontormo teoses „Joosep Egiptuses”

ALTTI KUUSAMO

Vaatamata tuntusele kutsub Jacopo Pontormo maal „Joosep Egiptuses” (u 1518) jätkuvalt sügavamale kunstiajaloolisele analüüsile. See Itaalia varamaneristlik teos ei ava oma tähendusesalvesid just kuigi kergelt – õigupoolest näib, et nii varasemates kui ka hiljuti avaldatud uurimustes on kunstiajaloolased mitmed huvitavad küsimused käsitlemata jätnud. Väike õlimaal kätkeb endas siiski rohkelt põnevaid pisistseene ning narratiivseid eripärasid. Neist kõige kummastavamad on *elavad kujud*, millest teen juttu artikli viimases osas, pakkudes välja uue tõlgendusvõimaluse, ent kahtlemata ka noore Agnolo Bronzino roll maalil.

Jacopo Pontormo (1494–1556/57) kaasaegne, Giorgio Vasari, pidas Jacopo Pontormo maali „Joosep Egiptuses” (u 1518) tema töödest kõige kaunimaks, kirjeldades seda sõnadega „*storia assai grande pur di figure piccole*” (‘suur lugu väikestest tegelastest’). See on „väike suur maal” täis narratiivseid ja sümboolseid keerdkäike. Esimeseks neist on pikk narratiivne ajalõtk kujutatud piiblistseenide vahel. Ühte stseeni on köidetud vähemalt neli erinevat lugu. On leitud, et maali narratiiv kulgeb hüplikult (*a scatti* – Antonio Pinelli). Selles mõttes on tähistajate liikumine visuaalses jutustuses kahesugune: üks on liigendatud ning teine kokkusurutud. Seega võivad jutustuse ühel tasandil esinevad tähenduskatkestused märkida sidusust teisel. Piiblitlo visuaalne struktuur on „profaanne”, see on sulam, mis ei järgi oma aja valitsevaid tavasid.

Pakun välja hüpoteesi, et teosel kujutatud stseeni „süvastruktuur” sisaldab endas teatud olulisi ja semiootiliselt laetud tähenduste polaarsusi, nagu näiteks eufooria/düsfooria, tuumpere/ sugukond, *unheimlich/heimlich*, üksindus (melanhoolia) / rahvahulk, meeste maailm / mõlema soo päralt olev maailm, isiklikud tundmused / ühised tundmused.

Juhtub kummalist: tantsiv puto on küll üksildane, kuid püüab siiski innukalt sündmustes osaleda. Eufooria/düsfooria suhe tuleb kõige reljeefsemalt esile noore ja üksildase Bronzino puhul: ta on pööranud selja suure perekonna õnnelikule taasühinemisele (eufooria). See on kogu stseeni kõige tähelepanuväärsem vastasseis! Süntagmaatiline lähedus loob tohutu paradigmaatilise vastasseisu (eufooria/düsfooria).

Elavate kujude (*statue viventi*) enigmaatiline tähendus nende tundmuslikes ning tootemlikes vihjetes on jäänud mõistatuseks. Selle asemel et otsida nende üksildaste kujude tähendust, on olulisem küsida: kuhu paigutuvad nad teose melanhooliaskaalal ning milliste protsesside ajendajaks võivad nad olla? See puudutab põhiliselt elavat ning värviküllast puto kuju lastehulga keskel.

Üksildaste ja melanhoolsete kujude rolli ning tähendust erinevate episoodide lõikes pole võimalik avada, analüüsimate teatud semiootilisi mõisteid ning vastandusi, mille olen eelnevalt välja toonud. Oma analüüsis võtan arvesse ka warburglikku *Belebung-Beiwerk* ('elustav lisand') mõistet. Kokkuvõttes ei saa imeks panna Giorgio Vasari väidet, et selles teoses peitub *bellezza dell'invenzione* ('leiutise ilu').

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