A Chapter of Accidents[1]

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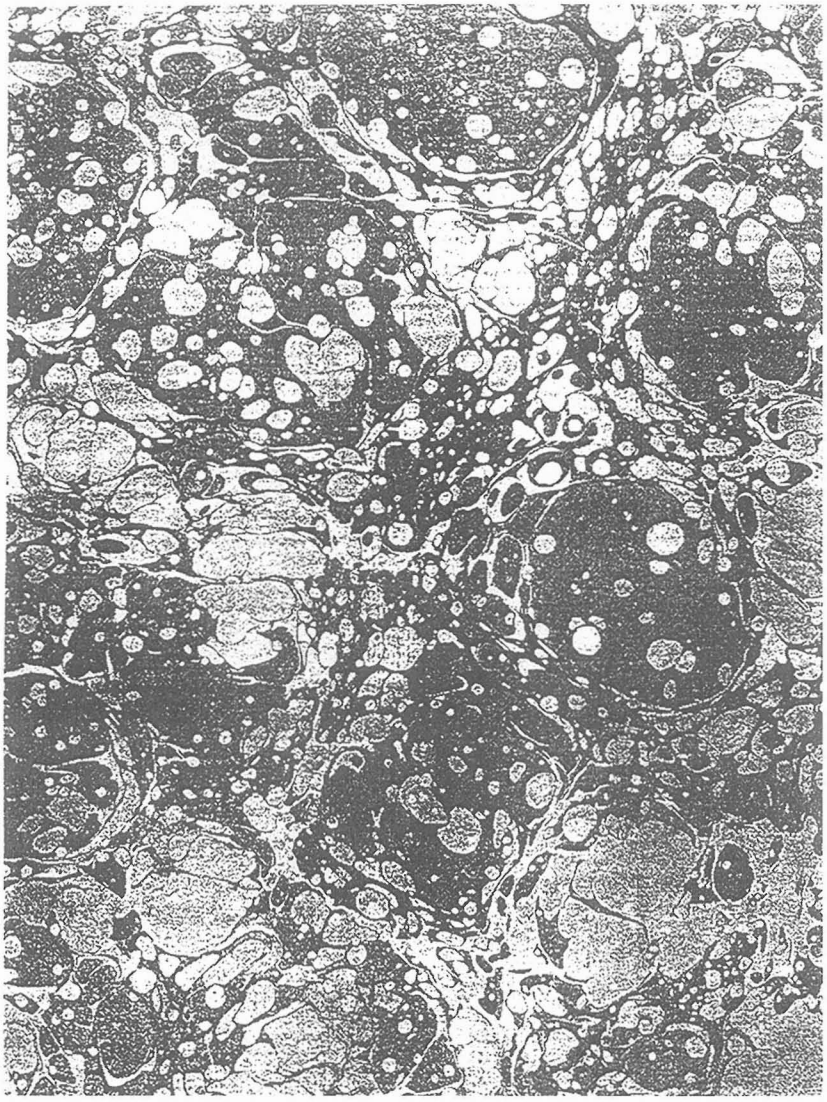

FIGURE 1
Marble endpaper from Joseph Addison, *The Works*. (Birmingham: J. Baskerville for J. and R. Tonson, 1761). From the collection of Steve McCaffery and Karen Mac Cormack. The original is in polychrome.

... others on the contrary, tucked up to their very chins,
with whips across their mouths, scouring and scampering
it away like so many party-colouring devils astride a mortgage.

Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Chapter VII

ut magis legere libeat in marmoribus quam in codicibus

St. Bernard

This paper delineates the odd trajectory of a single, paratextual leaf in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, conducted according to Jarry's 'pataphysical rule of the anomaly, the rule that governs *exceptions*. At the same time it exemplifies the accidental felicities that obtain in that minor species of miscognition Dick Higgins and I named "creative misunderstanding." The broad background for this odd configuration is the textual-scholarly battles as to what constitutes a paratext. Jerome McGann, a scholar adamantly committed to socializing the study of literary texts, stresses the need to focus on those materialities previously disregarded as peripheral or irrelevant. Among these he cites "typefaces, bindings, book prices, page format...."[2] Unlike Genette's paratextual foci in *Seuils*, McGann addresses the non-linguistic elements enclosing or juxtaposing texts-as-such. While acknowledging the usefulness of Genette's itemized set of paratexts (prefaces, dedications, notebooks, advertisements, footnotes, etc.), McGann additionally insists that by restricting itself to the linguistic aspects of a format, Genette's methodology problematically ignores those extra-linguistic phenomena McGann himself considers crucial to textual understanding. "The text/paratext distinction as formulated in *Seuils* will not, by Genette's own admission, explore such matters as ink, typeface, paper, and various other phenomena which are crucial to the understanding of textuality. They fall outside his concerns because such textual features are not linguistic."[3]

Rather than extending the debate between two distinguished textual scholars, let me ask how and when does the non-linguistic periphery become linguistic and by that interrogation turn to *Tristram Shandy*.

In the middle of volume III of the first edition, Sterne abruptly defamiliarizes the reading experience by simultaneously interrupting both the narrative flow and the book's bibliographical normativity with a decorative marbled leaf between two chapters. The leaf is marbled on both recto and verso but with two distinctly different patterns of marbling and is hand-inserted into the normal collation as a sequential leaf containing page 169 on the recto and 170 on the verso. How are we to interpret this? Karen Schiff offers a convincing figurative reading of the leaf's significance. "In the context of the narrative," she observes, "it is obvious that this image represents Walter Shandy's ejaculation, a subject that also starts off the novel in volume I. The colors of the original marbled page can all be found in the

body, and white and yellow pigments are splattered in the top layer. And Sterne would prefer a reading practice that mimics the unpredictability of sexual experience."[4] I will return to Schiff's claim later, suffice to say at this point that in an unprecedented gesture within the history of the novel, Sterne deterritorializes a decorative endpaper, endowing it with both metaphoric significance and mimic power, an instance of McGann's non-linguistic peripherality suddenly becoming a contraventionally repositioned paratextual element essential to the narrative of the most heterological of 18th century novels.

It might be useful to look at the historical rise of marbling (see Figure 1). Marbling's characteristic polychrome random patterns are obtained through a process of floating different coloured inks and dyes on a gelatinous substance which is then scattered into random chromatic patterns. (In more recent developments the ink and dyes are stroked with a comb.) After the liquid is marbled in a container the blank sheet of paper is dipped into it. Imported into Europe from Turkey in the 17th century, the practice became widespread by the middle of the 18th and its mass production affected the style of textiles, furnishings, and wallpapers as well as endpapers. It was soon applied to the leather covers of books to create a marbled effect upon the leather. The fact that marbling, though a process of mass production, produced popular, unique artifacts, with an accidental, aleatoric, one-of-a-kind design is of crucial cultural import. Whereas the history of printing develops through moveable type to the stereotypic reproduction of identical texts, marbling registers as a radical interruption by stochastic singularity.

Yet how do readers engage a marbled page or panel? Long before the age of Sterne, the optical lure of marble and its seductive power to lead readers away from textuality drew significant early comment. In a letter to William of St. Thierry, Saint Bernard notes "it is more diverting to read in the marble than in the texts before you" (*ut magis legere libeat in marmoribus quam in codicibus).*[5] For his part, the Abbé Suger's exulted that "On all sides there appears so rich and so amazing a variety of forms that it is more delightful *to read the marbles* than the manuscripts."[6] In Barbara Stafford's somewhat fanciful interpretation, the phenomena of marbling was symptomatic of a sensual opposition to neoclassical dictates of order and proportion and aided in externalizing the hidden, irrational forces within the Enlightenment.[7] Indeed, in a move that supports Schiff's erotic reading of the page, Stafford boldly links the counter-aesthetics of marbling to the "liquid psyche" of the libertine.[8]

> To stray, rove, ramble was a symbol of revolt because it inevitably led one from the straight road of collective duty, or right line of direction, into secret compartments where mistake, blunder, and sin reigned.[9]

According to this argument, the paratextual impact of marbled endpapers would vary accidentally according to the content and nature of individual texts. A

first edition of de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, for example, with its call to libertine deviance and singularity, would find its content symbolically evoked by marbled endpaper along the criterion of Stafford's interpretation, whereas my own copy of the 1784 edition of Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary*, sporting both its original marbled endpapers and marbled leather boards, offers itself as a fundamentally ironic artifact precisely through its paratextual enfoldings. For in this case, the marbling, in its idiosyncrasy and mutation, undermines Johnson's heroic attempt to counter the analogous "marbling" of lexical change in a living language by the fixity of definition. Johnson supplements his own definition of marbling "To variegate, or vein like marble" with a quotation from Robert Boyle: "Very well sleeked *marble* paper did not cast any of its distinct colours upon the wall with an equal diffusion."[10] This supplementation, with its haunting transposition of that static marble page into the mural fluctuations of *cinema lumière*, certainly undermines Johnson's cautious definition, but imagine the social consequence of depositing a piece of marbled paper in the place of the definition *à la* Sterne.

At this point I wish to return to Schiff to substantiate, and at the same time develop, her sexual interpretation of the marbled page. A long excursus into the quatrocento will help extend the semiosis of marble beyond the parameters established by both Schiff and Stafford. In his remarkable study of dissemblance and figuration in the paintings of Fra Angelico and his contemporaries, Georges Didi-Huberman examines the persistent phenomenon of *marmi finti* or painted marble in quatrocento paintings.[11] His study develops from a surprising observation made in the corridor of the Convent of San Marco in Florence of "blotches" of paint that seemingly defy all subject and figural categorizations. The author describes his book "as a microhistory ... into the way the mystery of the Incarnation has given form and originality to the Christian world of images."[12] The Incarnation is a perplexing mystery at the heart of Christian meditation, a mystery as Aquinas pointed out (*Compendium theologiae,* 201) of the spirit attainable only by a passage through the corporeal. As Didi-Huberman points out, dissemblance, dissimulation, or the visual conversion of a figure, constitutes the basic tenet of a long theological tradition (traceable to Dionysius the Aeropagite) for the figuration of the divine. Marble and its representation then constituted a key element in the dogma and exegesis of that penetration of the sensible by the intelligible known as the Incarnation long before its simulation on paper. As well as the central mystery of Christianity, incarnation is also the basic event precipitating the strange itinerary of Sterne's plot: of a life told (announced) from the moment of conception not birth. Indeed, the entire formula of *Tristram Shandy* is suspended in the ontological paradox of incarnation, in a narrative staging of presence before representation, of a life before birth, announced via an explosive counter-narrative moment in the text that connects to both a medieval semiotics of marbling and a heretical genealogy of semen.[13]

The dominant effect of exegesis is to lay out a series of directions, associations and digressions away from the central narrative—in other words exegesis marbles a text. And while offering something that approximates a parodic reversal of such exegesis Sterne nonetheless preserves its major dynamic as a deterritorialization of intellectual concentration by digressions from the central *historia* of the novel. By incorporating a marbled leaf into the body of the text Sterne adopts a mode of fictive representation heavily saturated with a theological code and, to a medieval reader, the marbled surface would be received as anything but a decorative, paratextual displacement. A veritable poetics of exegesis developed in the Middle Ages devoted to following "the path of the uncanniness of form—figures that are not valued for what they represent, but for what they show visually, beyond their aspect, as indexes of mystery."[14] We are moving closer back this way to Walter Shandy's ejaculation as a dissembled figuration in a marbled page.

Didi-Huberman builds a compelling argument for the centrality of fictive marble in a poetics and dogma of the Incarnation, linking it to the "patch" or "blotch" of paint often found in Fra Angelico's work. The "patch," a term Didi-Huberman takes from Proust, designates the "way of naming those zones, those moments in the painting where the invisible vacillates and spills into the visual. It is a way of naming the 'cursed part' of paintings, the indexical, non-descriptive, and *dissemblant* part."[15] In a similar manner Sterne's marbled "patch" registers as a moment of paratextual implosion, when both the peripheral and external move into the textual field of the narrative, by which the patch becomes "the pictorial place for a contemplation that no longer [needs] visible objects to occur, but only visual and coloured interiority."[16] A further affinity suggests itself. In Fra Angelico's "Holy Conversation," subtitled "Madonna of the Shadows," there is a physical separation of the historial from the patchwork. Beneath a narrative space that occupies the painting's upper compartment are four smaller panels of *marmi finti* that seem to form a decorative yet incongruous paratextual exergue. Like endpapers, indexes, end notes, or afterwards, they are physically outside of the work's figural regimen. Overlooked by most commentators on this painting, Didi-Huberman connects these panels to a tradition of "blotchist" painting that imitates the abstract, variegated, accidental lines in Italian marble, and links the formlessness of that stone to episodes in the life of the Virgin Mary: her marriage, celestial coronation, the massacre of the innocents, and the Annunciation.[17] Examining a corpus of such paintings he remarks upon the singularity of the formal setting of this pictorial marble in terms that describe precisely the movement of the paratextual marbled page to a critical position in Sterne's narrative, inserted into and interrupting the narrative thread. "These multicolored zones, odd in their formless audacity, generally participate in the *locus* or ground—but they have the peculiarity of being in some way *projected* forward in the painting, often in the central part, into the foreground. They thus exist *between the background and the foreground*. They are like a 'ground' set right in front of us as if moving forward."[18]

In effect, painted or fictive marble comprises a meta-materiality deploying one material (paint) to create a representation of a different, formless, material (marble). Going beyond this iconic function, the *marmi finti* are designed to convert the viewer's gaze, introducing through their negation of orthodox figuration the mystery of precisely that which cannot be figured within a figure. It is on this paradoxical basis that Didi-Huberman terms these marble "patches of negative theology."[19] In other words a chromatic apophasis irrupts. It is precisely in this manner that Sterne's marbled leaf both supplements and overturns the common notion of textual representation; it marks a negative narrative moment in narratology itself, and, being neither narrative, decoration, nor illustration proper, registers a perplexity inside its own ontic status. What is remarkable in the Angelican paradox is the coincidence of an accomplished, albeit negative, figuration of the highest of Christian mysteries with "the most humble affirmation of the material means the painter has at his disposal: his coloured vestiges."[20] It is the culminating paradox of the completion of mimesis in its very repudiation that makes this patch practice a triumph in dialectical dissemblance; the double valorization of the mystery beyond meaning and representation, and the pure visuality of material disfiguration.

The identification of stone as the figure of Christ was a persistent theme throughout the Middle Ages. In his *Summa de exemplis et similitudinibus rerum*, and with a fecund demonstration of what Saint Jerome calls *tropologia libera*, Giovanni di San Gimigniano devotes forty chapters to the significance of stones. All stones are figures of Divine love; marble is a figure for Beauty, Goodness, and Prudence; Mary is chalcedony and her virginity asterite, and Christ is chrysolite. Analysing the Prado Annunciation, Didi-Huberman draws attention to the dialectic placement of colour to create an astonishing effect:

> [I]n the entire central zone, the place occupied by the angel, the marble is composed of blue and yellow nuances, two colors we can call *heavenly*, inasmuch as they are the colors also used in the star-studded ceiling and, at left, in the "real" sky Angelico painted, an ultramarine sky traversed by a great ray of yellow light. But strangely—significantly—the "heavenly" marble is nuanced on the right, just below the Virgin, with hematite, incarnate, the same color that forms the Virgin's bosom and robe nearby, and the incarnate of her cheek. It is as if, at thismoment, the marble itself *was being incarnated*, just as the Virgin in the red mantle is being covered with a heavenly, ultramarine cloak. There is something like a double movement, an encounter—the covering of the flesh with heavenly glory: a movement in the image of the very movement of divine Incarnation.[21]

The significance of the relative disfiguration and amorphousness that constitutes the *marmi finti* in paintings of the Annunciation becomes apparent. Marble functions as a seminal figure in its most literal sense: a figure of insemination; its coloured formlessness containing a dynamic of virtual form.[22] Substituting the Greek word

seme here for Logos not only establishes a connection between the divine Incarnation and Tristram's more common, maculate version, but also folds the locutionary into the sexual, folding word into seed. In a magisterial fusion of geology and Genesis, Albertus Magnus offers a theory of the formation of stones that parallels the birth of Adam and further enriches the reading of Sterne's marbled page. He avers that stones originate "in a divine virtue of the place (*loca generant lapides*) such that, beginning with the material mixing of water and earth, the clay comes to dry, to 'agglutinate,' and that is how it becomes a stone."[23] Recalling the actual production process of marbling paper we realize that it too involves agglutination, an insemination of liquids into liquid in a receptacle. Both medieval exegesis and Sterne's radical intervention into the common rules of narrative reach confluence in this complex case of marble. The evidence, of course, is not available to determine whether Sterne's radical *détourné* was intentional, a creative misunderstanding, or an accidental coincidence and because of this I'll decline the *cul de sac* of speculation. The evidence is sufficient, however, to stake the claim that, via this striking parallelism, of conception, annunciation, and marble, Sterne's novel "accidentally" opens up the broad theme of the mystery of Incarnation and folds historical evidence into a contemporary reading of Sterne's novel sufficient to both enrich and complicate the registration.[24] By inserting a polychrome marbled leaf Sterne not only represents the formless figuration of Walter Shandy's *jouissance* but inflects the Pseudo-Dionysian representation of the Incarnation as *marmi finti*, an amorphous annunciation without speech, evoking through both a negative mimesis and an alien semiosis that ontic space in which stochastics collides with abstraction.

This paradoxical space awaits rediscovery in our own *ricorso* to the great tsunamis of modernity: the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock, the shotgun art of Niki de Saint Phalle, and, perhaps most of all, to one of modernity's littler-known works. The marbled route back through Mr. Shandy's bedroom to Fra Angelico's holy space takes us via a faulty landscape to those liquids love is made of. Duchamp's small private piece of 1946, "Paysage fautif" (Faulty Landscape) is an abstract work that bears a remarkable resemblance to *marmi finti*. Indeed, like Sterne's page, it too is directly pertinent to the history of incarnational disfiguration. Measuring eight-and-a-quarter by six-and-a-half inches, the piece comprises Duchamp's own seminal ejaculation onto a patch pg Astralon and backed with satin. In a 1953 interview with the Janis family Duchamp speaks of a parallel rendition in the figuration of "The Large Glass." "'The splashing of liquid,' for example, could be readily compared to 'semen ... etc.,' he confessed, 'liquids, you know, that love is made of.'"[25] Duchamp's seminal piece not only inaugurates the numerous neo-Dadaist sperm works of the 1960s but also completes a medieval tradition of disfiguration—completing by destroying it, returning the figure to the actual thing.

CODA

Karen Schiff cogently argues that Sterne's larger design in *Tristram Shandy* involves nothing less than a new and deliberately unsystematic method of reading. I include here a transcript of one original and erroneous paragraph from an earlier draft of my essay. The error arose from my consulting the tenth edition of *Tristram Shandy* (6 volumes, 1775) and not the first. In the copy checked, the marbled leaf is accidently inserted in the wrong volume. I add here verbatim the original passage before its alteration in the light of reading Schiff's article. "In Chapter VII of the novel, Sterne suddenly defamiliarizes the reading experience by simultaneously interrupting both the narrative flow and the book's bibliographical normativity with a decorative marbled page. The leaf is marbled on both recto and verso but with two distinctly different patterns of marbling and is inserted between the sequential, integral leaves containing pages 22 and 23 respectively; its own pagination, (21 recto-22 verso) repeating the pagination of the earlier leaf. How are we to interpret this? The random patterns of the marbling offer an apt metaphor *sans mots* to describe the irregular and errant mind of Uncle Toby—(the novel's central character here speaking)." Through a 'pataphysical felicity this erroneous reading occasioned by the accidental placement of the marbled leaf this reading is not entirely incorrect, indeed the plausibility of my reading can be supported by ancillary material. Saussure, for instance, forcibly enunciates the formlessness of primary mentation: "Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass.... Without language, thought is a vague, unchartered nebula."[26] Lyotard similarly elaborates upon the protean, atmospheric nature of thinking:

> Thoughts are not the fruits of the earth. They are not registered by areas, except out of human commodity. Thoughts are clouds. The periphery of thoughts is as immeasurable as the fractal lines of Benoit Mandelbrot ... Thoughts never stop changing their location one with the other. When you feel like you have penetrated far into their intimacy in analyzing either their so-called structure of genealogy or even post-structure, it is actually too late or too soon.[27]

Indeed, my accident in plausible though incorrect interpretation stands as a minor example of the type of creative misunderstanding of which the greatest must surely be that brought to my attention by Gregory Ulmer. In August 1610 Galileo sent Kepler a short note containing the cryptogram

SMAISMRMILMEPOETALEUMIBUNENUGTTAURIAS

Ulmer outlines the uncanny misunderstanding by which a false decoding arrives by accident at a staggering truth.

Recognizing it as an anagram Kepler translated it into five Latin words—'*salvue umbistineum germinatum martia proles*' (Greetings, burning twins descendents

of Mars)—which he understood to mean that Galileo had observed that Mars has two moons. Galileo, however, actually meant the message to read, '*altissimum planetam tergiminum observavi*' (I have discovered that the highest of the planets [Saturn] has two moons). The interest in the paragrammatic mistranslation is that the sense intended is referentially wrong (with his primitive telescope Galileo mistook the rings of Saturn for moons), while the interpreted sense is referentially correct. Mars does have two moons, although they were not observed until 1877.[28]

From sperm to paper to stone and unformed thinking back to sperm as art; from Fra Angelico through Sterne to Duchamp. That is a Shandean sprogue to be sure.

NOTES

1 This essay builds on and selects from material first presented under the title "Context as Paratext: the grammatological genealogy of the letter in Finnegans Wake," at the Texte et Paratexte Colloque, Université de Paris X (Nanterre), June 5, 1999.
2 Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 13.
3 *The Textual Condition*, 13.
4 Karen Schiff, "Topics in the History of Artists' Books: Tristram Shandy's Original Marbled Page" in *The Journal of Artists' Books* 14 (Fall 2000); 9. For further reading on Sterne's marbled page, at odds with Schiff, I recommend De Voogd, and Patterson. Bartine provides a concise survey of 18th-century reading practice.
5 Michael Camille, *Gothic Art Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd., 1996), 62.
6 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico Dissemblance and Figuration*, Trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 244.
7 Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism. Imagining the Body in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993), 200.
8 *Body Criticism*, 204.
9 *Body Criticism*, 201.
10 The Dictionary is unpaginated.
11 *Marmor finti* can be found, for example, in "The Annunciation" by Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi, painted in 1333 for the altar of St. Anastasius in Sienna Cathedral and now in the Ufizzi, Florence, but is absent in an earlier annunciation in which forms part of Lorenzetti's 1320 "Arezzo Polyptich." My thanks to Ann Lecercle-Sweet for referring me to Didi-Huberman's work to whose reading of quatrocento relative disfiguration this paper is indebted.
12 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico Dissemblance and Figuration*, Trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.
13 Karen Schiff, "Topics in the History of Artists' Books: Tristram Shandy's Original Marbled Page" in *The Journal of Artists' Books* 14 (Fall 2000); 6-11. This ejaculatory quality, however, would not be evoked by combed marble paper, the technique of which produces a repeated but relatively uniform pattern. I believe Schiff is correct when she indicates that, although 20th century editions preserve the random, spermal effect of contemporary editions, the editions that do not insert the marbling precisely between chapter breaks undermine the semantic complexities of the page. What she does not point out is that while the Rinehart edition of 1950 (edited by Samuel Holt Monk) is placed correctly, the marbling patterning is of random vortices rather than the "blotchist" one-of-a-kind patterns found in the first and subsequent early editions. In a recent—and the first—Portuguese translation the marbled leaf has a stunning magnified effect of human sperm, the mixture of its predominantly white, red and tan colours being highly evocative of blood, flesh and semen; it is moreover correctly placed between chapters. (The Portuguese title reads *A Vida e Opinioes de Tristram Shandy*, translated by Manuel Portela and published by Ediçioes Antigona, Lisbon, 1997. The page can be found between pages 328 and 329.)
14 *Fra Angelico*, 7.
15 *Fra Angelico*, 9.

16 *Fra Angelico*, 9-10.
17 *Fra Angelico*, 33.
18 *Fra Angelico*, 33-34.
19 *Fra Angelico*, 56.
20 *Fra Angelico*, 56.
21 *Fra Angelico*, 69.
22 Liane Lefaivre, *Leon Battista Alberti's Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997). Lefaivre draws attention to a similar link between marble and the sexual in her comments on the *romanzo d'amore*, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Interpreting the work as an Albertian treatise on Epicurean architecture, and claiming to be "the first to have noticed that the hero makes love to architecture," Lefaivre offers this telling description of an altar to Bacchus. "The altar to Bacchus is made of darkly veined marble especially selected to express the virility of that deity, and it is carved with a great phallus 'rigidly rigorous.'" The book was first published in 1499 by Aldus Manutius with subsequent French and British editions. Lefaivre disputes the popular attribution of authorship to Francesco Colonna and presents a solid case for a reattribution to the humanist polymath Leon Battista Alberti. It should also be noted that unveined marble was also imbued with symbolic associations in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Smooth white marble is compared to the flawless skin of a nude nymph at i1v, e6 and contrasted to the virile associations evoked by the richly veined marble altar to Bacchus. Indeed, the association of clear marble to purity and virginity is a familiar medieval trope that is closely linked to the Virgin Mary. "Hugh of Lincoln, for example, sees in the hewn white stone of his own cathedral something of her 'whiteness' and 'well-formedness.' Its whiteness stands for her pudor and its well-formedness for her dogma. The marble, which is 'smooth, gleaming, and snow white' is an embodiment of the 'bride' who is simple, gentle, hard working. The smoothness of the marble 'truly exemplifies' the 'simplicity' of the Virgin; its polish, her mores; its darkness, her labor."
23 *Fra Angelico*, 74.
24 Even the Annunciation and Incarnation fell victim to medieval misogyny, which reaches perhaps its most extreme in Ratherius of Verona's assertion that "even the Virgin Mary was a sinner for having ignited divine love" (quoted in Lefaivre, 202). On the more general medieval deployment of abstract shapes to distinguish different levels of reality in painting see Camille, *Gothic Art*, 16.
25 Francis M Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp: the art of making art in the age of mechanical reproduction* (Ghent and Amsterdam: Ludion Press, 1999).
26 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, Trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana/Collins, 1974), 111-112.
27 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Peregrinations Law, Form, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 5.
28 Gregory Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 151-152.