

number of people, in whom the divine spark has not been totally extinguished by the condition of earthly existence.”

Pilate's musings were interrupted by Bolcitan's further divagations.

“Hegemon, remember what I just said about adopting a different *forma mentis*. Instead of following the guidelines of one eschatological view that claims to lead to blessedness in this life, you must allow yourself to countenance a whirlpool of ideas which end up dissolving back towards respect for mystery. Your hemispheres owes its aetiology to a fundamental dissymetry, but one which can be overcome. Yes, in your world the pieces do not quite fit, the structures are not quite symmetrical, the superposition of layers comes and goes. One element is always missing, in this realm of deception. But I have come to help you, to fan the spark before it is extinguished forever!”

Pilate, who had been holding his throbbing head in his hands, raised it to speak, only to find that in the interval Bolcitan had vanished like a hallucination.



## 14. The Tuscan Sky Canopied Them from Above the Crusty Ridges

The Tuscan sky canopied them from above the crusty ridges on both sides as they walked along the river Elsa in the valley where the old millraces still carried water as in medieval times. It was like a scene from Giotto.

“This valley puts me in mind of the scholarly crux about colors in *Purgatory* 7,” said Lady Murasaki. “I can recite the lines from memory:

Gold and fine silver, cochineal and white lead,  
 Indigo bright and clear,  
 Fresh emerald at the moment it is sundered,  
 Would all be surpassed in color,

If placed within that valley,  
By the grass and the flowers growing there,  
As the lesser is surpassed by the greater.

“Did you know that Dante’s glittering description of his Valley of the Princes has fascinated readers all the more in that they’ve been unable to come to agreement about just what the brilliant colors are? Dante wrote the mysterious *indico legno* to mean indigo, just as it sounds, but the commentators keep conjuring up implausible solutions that give meanings like Indian wood and lych-nite, each often verging on the fallacy of the single cause. But actually it’s just a shade of blue.”

Prince Towa no Ai was not surprised to hear Lady Murasaki’s penchant for logical rigor had brought her to a definitive solution where others had floundered. “I’m eager to hear your argument for indigo. If I know how commentators deal with these cruces, no doubt lots of quasi-philological straw men have been propped up only to be knocked down. I guess there’s never an obstacle to faulty reasoning with that breed of cat, as if some pedantic posturing or leaning on *auctoritates* like Pliny the Elder or Isidore of Seville can cover it up.”

“Well,” said Lady Murasaki laughing, “it’s pretty obvious that these learned gentlemen never thought of taking a look around Colle di Val d’Elsa the way we are now. It also helps to be conversant with art history. Did you know that Ruskin was a devoted reader of Dante? He pointed out that the precious vegetable and mineral derivation of the colors that appear as analogous to those of the Valley gives us the provenance *inter alia* of the cochineal and white lead, and then makes the useful observation that these are all the colors of pigments, not the substances that make them. In other words, Nature is revealed here as a painter, so it’s to the art of painting we should turn for our solution, bearing in mind, of course, the analogical sense of the completed reading.

“Besides the visual arts, it’s sometimes helpful to take a peek into the nooks and crannies of the history of verbal art. I’m thinking of a precursor of Dante, the Lombard Benvesin da la Riva, who composed a poem of some two thousand lines to narrate the

torments of Inferno and the joys of Paradise. Like his other work, it was largely addressed to the recognition of a varied public, and its history includes the probability of open recitation. It's such accessible poetry that we can only assume that its imagery consists mostly, if not entirely, of material that stood as much within the compass of popular knowledge, surmise, and entertainment as the vernacular in which it's rendered. Bonvesin's characterization of indigo appears in another of his poems in the vernacular. There he compares indigo to the blue of the sky, completing the connotative nexus of clarity and serenity similar to what we find in Dante's line."

Looking up at the sky the Prince saw a bird ascending and immediately recalled Dante's star-seeking eagle. In his mind's eye he could picture anew the scenes evoked by the imaginative confluence of the landscape around them and references to the battle of Colle di Val d'Elsa, from which the great Sienese Provenzano Salvani, taken in combat, reappears in the *Comedy*, contrite about his overweening arrogance. This is one of the places where Dante's own exile is predicted, with its own implicit connection to the same sin. Though far from the Valley of the Princes, the features of its ambience continue: the context of art and precious objects, their connection with *Superbia* or with worldly glory.

"It's intriguing to consider what Dante and Giotto might have talked about," said the Prince. "I wonder whether their conversation ever centered on the comparative prowess of painters and poets, and on the technical means demanded of each in his own chosen art form."

"It must have," responded Lady Murasaki. "In Paradise, the reciprocal relationship of artists and their mutual apprenticeship appears as the analogical opposite of God's power. One master painter, only, never requires guidance. At the same time, those among whom Dante evolved his knowledge of art are also the same men who imparted to him a sense of their craft. It's curious, in view of the intimate bonds Dante establishes between his major concerns and the visual arts, that to date no effort has come to light that attempts the correlation of nature's painting in the Valley of the Princes, as it were, to that of man.

"We know that the mixing of colors did not become a craft separate from the painter's studio until well into the Renaissance.

Since the drawing and painting of an artistic subject frequently took place in the same medieval studio in which paints were made, we may assume that the derivation and preparation of colors is viewed by Dante as part of the artist's own occupation. The wording of the Dantean passage combining the metaphor of nature painting with the enumeration of colors in their primitive state also suggests this. Once again, of course, we have recourse only to literature on the subject of painting in Dante's time for corroboration and new evidence."

"Do you mean Cennino Cennini's manual?" asked Prince Towa no Ai.

"Yes, the one on the art of painting, the only book early enough to be germane even though it postdates Dante's lifetime by a number of years. It summarizes the elements of color choice and the mixing of colors, then the modeling and drawing of a subject, then the finishing and preservation of the work. It's a compendium of ideas on painting extant during Dante's time, whose author appears to be placed directly within a tradition beginning in Giotto. Cennini was the pupil of Agnolo Gaddi, the son of Taddeo Gaddi, who was the godson and probably pupil of Giotto. Repeatedly Cennini remarks that one who follows his methods can paint as well as Giotto, but he also follows the direct advice of his master, Agnolo. The little book enjoyed a wide diffusion. Cennini anchors himself firmly to Tuscany, calling himself Cennino di Colle. That's exactly the place we're in now.

"Cennini's treatise is just that, nearly all of the time, combining the sensible tone of the instructing craftsman with the intimacy of address to potential peers. The sections on color resemble those on line and on surface preparation in their straightforward presentation, and the book is devoid of fanciful figures or digressions. But it's just this character that makes the single passage in which Cennini may be said to deviate from it appear more salient."

"I think I know which one you mean," the Prince exclaimed. "It's where Cennini states that indigo can imitate the blue derived from the prized and more expensive azurite if it is mixed with white lead. And he makes it clear that this blue is in itself a precious and highly desirable color, thus corroborating the evidence of our eyes gazing at frescoed skies."

Lady Murasaki picked up the thread. "In fact there's a division in the book between colors that are natural and colors that are natural through artifice. Although lapis lazuli and azurite were two valuable sources of this blue, still the colors Cennini characterizes as natural through artifice appear to be those that required more mixing and did not appear as essentially ready in the earth. Cennini's editors note that indigo came from the East in the form of pressed cubes or paste, and was indeed extensively used to simulate the kind of blue made from azurite."

"It sounds like chromaticism in music, of the sort my father analyzes in his treatise on the tempering of the scale," interjected Prince Towa no Ai, for whom all thinking about art was subordinated to his absorption in music, a familial inheritance.

"Did you know," continued Lady Murasaki undeterred, "that Cennini actually describes a visit with his father to this very valley? He recalls how upon reaching it he saw a very wild steep place, and scraping the steep with a spade uncovered seams of many kinds of color: ocher, dark and light sinoper, blue, and white. The passage continues with the comparison of those veins of color in the valley to the wrinkles on the face of an old person. Later Cennini recalls that he removed light ochre with his penknife. It's likely, then, that the colors showed in places so clearly and immediately that it wasn't necessary to scrape for some of them at all. In that event, indeed in either case, the spot must have been quite well-known to local inhabitants as well as, quite possibly, artists and others having to do with the detection and preparation of color-substances. It's irresistibly tempting to suggest not only that Cennini was taken to this place to see the colors, but also that the same place was known to Dante. If Cennini's father, not mentioned by him as a master-painter, brought his son here on account of the marvelous veins of color, then the valley was probably of general interest. That the context of his Valley of the Princes so strongly suggests painting to Dante enhances the possibility that this steep and wild place, as Cennini puts it, was transfigured in the *Comedy* into a comely retreat strewn with multicolored flowers and grass painted by nature."

“But that still leaves us with the problem of identifying the colors, doesn't it?” queried the Prince.

“I don't think there's much room for doubt left, do you?” replied Lady Murasaki. “If Cennini's valley helped to generate Dante's conception, we should note the prominence there of the color blue, especially in tandem with white, which if mixed with blue produces the painter's desired sky color. Of course, the copresence of the vein of black must strike us also. There are dark and light sinoper, shades of earth red, and ochre yellow as well as blue, white, and black. Yet unless Dante had a black flower in mind rather than the blue which was both an important component of medieval painting and present among the colors in Cennini's valley, we may discount the probability of something black being bright and clear.”

“A lot seems to hinge on assuming that Dante knew this valley,” offered Prince Towa no Ai. “Are there any further indications that he really did know it?”

“Yes, there are,” said Lady Murasaki. “Although he only alludes to Colle by name once in the *Comedy* and again with reference to the decisive battle of the Sienese and the Florentines, other loci show a highly probable close acquaintance with the region near Florence in which the valley is located. In *Inferno* 31 there's the well-known allusion to the towers of Montereccione which is near Colle. And remember how Beatrice in the terrestrial Paradise rebukes the pilgrim?:

And if your vain thoughts had not been  
As water of Elsa round about your mind,

. . . .

I see you turned to stone in your mind.

“The imagery refers to the petrifying powers of the waters of the river Elsa, which encrust with layers of calcified matter objects that are immersed in it. A traveler in Dante's footsteps noted that this calcifying property is not distributed throughout the waters, but only at a spot directly above Colle di Val d'Elsa where a source flows from a small, laterally situated valley into the river. Dante's allusion to the petrifying waters, then, betokens a knowledge of the

geographical peculiarities of the region which encompasses the valley described by Cennini.

“If Dante knew the valley near Colle, it may well have come to mind when he was writing of the links between earthly glory and accomplishment, on one hand, and divine painting on the other. It would not be the first time viable and important associations were uncovered between some humble place of his acquaintance and a transfigured, elevated new context. The decontextualization of the little valley would entail the forging of a further bond between the ground of art and that of warfare and the art of governing. The latter are the connections in which the site of Colle di Val d’Elsa is chiefly remembered. For the rest, there can be small doubt that although Dante frequently departed from naturalistic detail, he chose the possibility of blue rather than the ebony-colored flowers for the Valley of the Princes, and that he drew from the experience of the plastic arts as he knew them. Here, then, is an instance of a line ultimately to be glossed with an explanation from the life of art, which is the simplest and the most economical as well.”

By a curious coincidence these words were uttered just as their stroll brought Lady Murasaki and Prince Towa no Ai to a brook by an expanse of grass bedecked with spring flowers, where they lay down in a lover’s embrace and peered upwards, delectating in the azure of the Cimabuean firmament.

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### 15. Odious Things

Drip-dry polyester shirts and the ’druffy academicules who wear them; avocado kitchens; SUVs and the interchangeable dirty-blond, pony-tailed, baseball-hatted, cell-phone-clutching women who drive them; foetid Orthodoxim and their fatuous piety; lisping art historians who say provenance with a broad *a*.