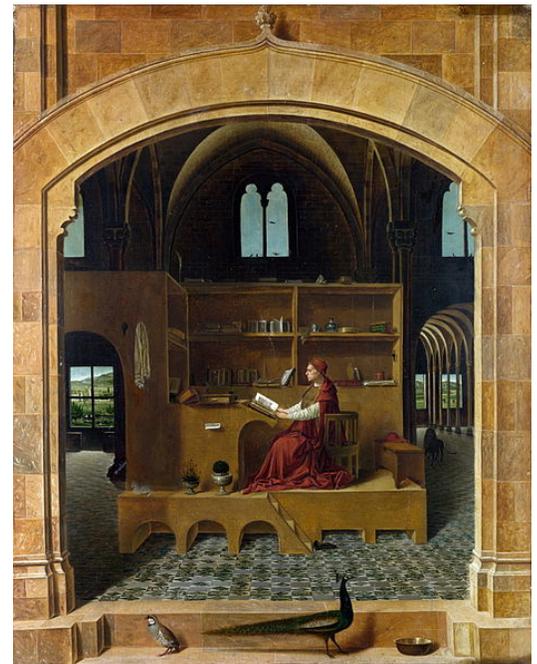# the case of the pink carnation

Aficionados of the Borgesian-style mystery story (in which there are for "why's," a pun that only Nabokov would appreciate) will appreciate the somewhat perennial error of misidentifying the flower of the carnation as a rose. Roses have the best press among art and other historians, evident in the War of the Roses and Umberto Eco's popular thriller, *The Name of the Rose*. The carnation is a second-class botanical cousin, on account of its comparative lack of aroma, its simple forms and varieties, and its lesser ability to convey the irony of beauty and pain, as does the rose with its fairy-tale thorns. This is a case of getting credit where credit is due. The carnation — whose color was traditionally pinkish red (or reddish pink) — was named in relation to *carne*, flesh. This qualified it for cases of incarnation, for things coming out of a spirit world into material being, and in particular the instance of Christ's incarnation. The flower and sometimes the whole plant has been employed by artists in on this symbolism. In Leonardo's Virgin and Child (1469, Alte Pinakothek, Munich), also called "The Madonna of the Carnation," the infant Jesus is shown reaching out to a reddish carnation offered by his mother. In Piero della Francesca's *Virgin with Child Giving His Blessing and Two Angels* (The Senigallia Madonna, c. 1470, Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino, Italy), Jesus is holding a near-white carnation. Slightly earlier, Piero had painted *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels* (1460–1470, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts). When this painting was loaned to the Frick Museum, the curators inexplicably mis-identified the carnation as a rose and elaborated on its symbolism, just as they made an impossible attempt to consider this painting as a candidate for the blank space in the alterpiece painted for the church of Sant'Agostino in Borgo San Sepolchro, Piero's home town. Walter Kaiser faults the curators on this but does not notice the misidentification of the carnation. The painting's date is uncertain, but it appears at a time when the symbolic painterly use of the carnation was in vogue. Antonello da Messina had painted St. Jerome in his study around 1460–1475. Along the shadow line cast by the gaze of God through the "Porta Cœli," Antonello placed a carnation plant. Half in dark, half in light, this placement indicates full recognition of the relation of the flower to flesh; and Antonello further deepens the mystery by adding a partridge (*perdix*), a bird made famous by Dædalus, at the internal frame of the painting. The rebus-style puzzle has been unravelled by Penny Howell Jolly in her article published in *The Art Bulletin*. We are able to connect the carnation mystery (and its permanent resistance to art historians and curators) to the four "why's" of Borges — the "detached" forms of virtuality developed through the devices of the double, the story in the story, travel through time, and the contamination of reality by the dream — if we are able to see the carnation as representative of reversed predication, a function clearly understood by Antonello, who placed it between shadow and light. Predication (framing) reverses when a context becomes a content, when spirit enters a form, when word becomes flesh. The reversal, however, creates a small remainder, and it is this remainder Antonello "interrogated" with his fable about the partridge. Medieval fable had it that the partridge could be impregnated by the wind. This capability made it the perfect bird for St. Jerome, whose translations that led to the Latin Vulgate Bible required an impregnation and birth rather than a correspondence theory of meaning. "Reversed predication," we may conclude, is a virtuality of a different sort; something whose embodiment must rely on a momentary suspension of the laws of physics, a gap between the now and the moments that precede and follow it.

Piero's and Leonardo's paintings of the Virgin handing a carnation to Jesus appear at nearly the same time and are roughly contemporary with Antonello's St. Jerome (right). It is only fair to think that the articulation of this gesture — where Jesus is just about to possess the "flesh" of incarnation — was thinkable as a boundary condition related to the conversion of reversed predication.

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Walter Kaiser, "The Noble Dreams of Piero," *New York Review of Books* 60, 6 (March 21, 2013).

Penny Howell Jolly, *Saint Jerome, Scholar and Ascetic* (Saratoga Springs, NY: Skidmore College, 1983).

Antonello da Messina's St. Jerome in His Study creates a cosmic hole in space with its "porta cœli," an aperture through which God is gazing at Jerome. The objects on the threshold of this gate function as rebuses revealing answers to the puzzle of translation. The partidge can be impregnated by the wind, but Jerome's wind is not just any wind, it is the divine *afflatus* of the word of God, a word that will be come flesh.

Why the fuss? This is a detective story whose object is a case of the "false false" — a double "negation" that involves, among other things, the form of metaphor known as metalepsis — a metonymy of a metonymy. The central issue of Christianity is the divinity of Christ, which put into its logical consequence, becomes the mortality of God. This issue has a fractal quality in theology. It can enter into every detail, every gesture, every symbol. It is scale-independent. Taken singly, each "side" of this contention sounds like a proposition that can be argued in a normal way: "Is Jesus God?" "Is God mortal?" If we avoid seeing these two claims as competing alternatives we have what is called "reversed predication," a way of turning a frame into what is framed, of allowing the mirror image to act for itself. The variations on reversed predication are played out in popular culture via four key "virtualities": the dream contaminates reality, the shadow or reflection breaks free of its "master," the story told inside the story becomes the dominant or real one, the line of time is violated. It is possible to show that these virtualites are not only common in the fiction genre of the fantastic but also in everyday life. Predication is reversed whenever memory short-circuits its records, whenever the weaker dominates the stronger — in short whenever things do not work out according to the transitive rules established by boundaries, frames, scales, identity rules, and travel plans.

The false-false takes the world as it is supposed to be and sees the obvious cracks. The cases of Piero, Leonardo, and Antonello may be seen as minimally conclusive, but they at least offer solid evidence that, in the fifteenth century, people — smart people — were thinking about this, and in terms sophisticated enough to avoid open debate. The carnation's pinkness, its flesh-like quality, offers a means of separating mortality from itself. A flower can be offered; Jesus can reach for it but not yet have it. It is a time before that is simultaneously a time after. Jesus cannot do this with a rose. Were he to achieve his goal, he would be pained with thorns. Mary would not offer a rose to Jesus in the same way she offers a carnation — no mother would. Mary, as an incarnated human mother, would not perpetrate the absurd situation of offering a "symbol" to take the place of the real thing, particularly in consideration that the real thing happens to be in-carnation! What Jesus possesses in the painting that transcends visual symbolism is the gap, the small space between his open hands, reaching out, and the painted flower. This is the same gap that the viewer experiences in confronting the space between hands and flower. It is *identity itself*, i.e. not a symbol, not a predication or argument about something.
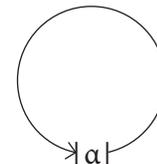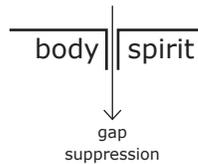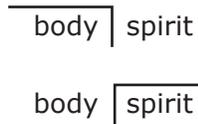

Reversed predication depicts how the use of one term to frame another changes the sense of the relationship. The body can be one manifestation of spirit (incarnation); or the spirit can be seen to be an emergent property of the body (materialism).

gap
suppression

If the action of reversed predication is "caught in the middle of its transaction" so that both framing conditions are held in balance — a state that recognizes the reciprocity and equality of both "outcomes" — then the gap is evident. It is the gap that most be "interrogated."


The gapped circle is, in "normal reality" perceived as a straight line determined by lack and desire. The gap, designated by alpha, α, is the moment of recognition, the short circuit of the predication system itself. This transcends the choices "forced" by predication in either of its modalities

In Antonello's painting of St. Jerome, the partridge plays the role of the Deleuzian "demark," a natural organism that is "out of place" in the natural order. The partridge (L. *perdix*) was believed to be so "sexually active" that it could be impregnated by the wind. This spins Jerome's accomplishment as a translator of the Vulgate Bible: he was not using a correspondence theory of translating a word in one language by a word in another language; he was being "impregnated" by the divine word within the word, and his translation was an "incarnation," a "word made flesh." The perdix was also known through its relation to the nephew Dædalus murdered because he had discovered key secrets of the building trade. Dædalus threw Perdix off a cliff; the gods took pity and transformed Perdix into a bird, whose flights were a series of short hops, never far from earth. Icarus's fall was thought to be the gods' revenge for Perdix's murder.

perdix
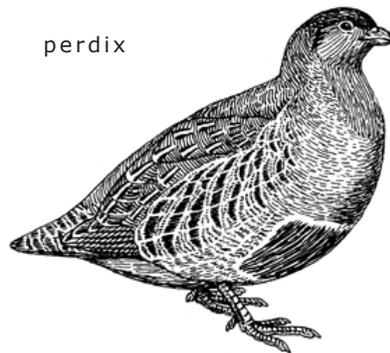
Was the partridge predicat-ED or predicat-ING? The victim is predicated (framed) by the action of a dominant Other. Ovid's Metamorphosis however recounts numerous instances of reversed predication: the victim is converted into a magical being, a plant or animal, that re-engineers victimhood. In the case of Actæon, the hunter's inadvertent theft of a glimpse of the naked goddess Diana led to a reversed predication: the hunter becomes the hunted, thanks to Diana's transformation of him into a stag. The gap between predicated and predicating is realized by Ovid, who "interrogates" it by naming each of the thirty-three of Actæon's dogs who chased him down and killed him. Even before the Christian age, which gave 33 a magical power on account of its relation to power itself (reflected in *tres* = "very"; *nuef* = "new") and to the inherent "recursion" (self-reference) of three and nine. 3/9 both exhaust reality (by being both predicated and predicating) and escape it (by being "perpetually new").

lower | higher

lower | higher
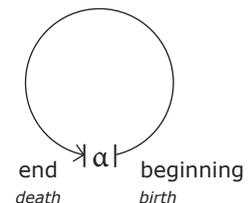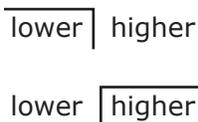
The logic of the victim, and of sacrifice in general, reveals the trope by which traditional cultures secure temporal and spatial stability. Foundation rites typically involve twins, differentiated by a "silly dispute" that results in cosmic protection by the victim. The twins still exist as twins, but one plays the part of the "lower" who has become "higher" by virtue of his/her transformation into spirit. The forced choice (Romulus *or* Remus) becomes the gap, celebrated as a boundary, and on days that are "prohibited" from membership in the secular calendar.

end | beginning
death | *birth*

The gap, commonly celebrated as "holiday" or a perilous gap to be observed through superstitious precautions (fireworks, supplications of evil spirits, etc.), translates the complex situation of double predication into popular culture, assimilated within the practices of the uncanny. During the *Apophrades*, ἀποφράδες, the spirits of the dead were thought to return, in the form of "voice" (cf. the acousmatic voice), a Lacanian "partial object" — an organ without a body. In ancient Athens, this day was reserved for the trials of murderers and other "unclean" transactions. Other famous gaps include Carnival, Lupercalia, Saturnalia, All Soul's, New Year's, April Fool's, and of course Christmas.