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The social lives of paintings in Sixteenth-Century Venice

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A Martyr of Painting

*Irene di Spilimbergo, Titian, and Venetian Portraiture
between Life and Death*

Pygmalion's love for the figure of ivory, which was made by his own hands, gives us an example of those people who try to circumvent the forces of nature, never willing to enjoy that sweet and soft love that regularly occurs between man and woman. While we are naturally always inclined to love, those people give themselves over to love things that are hardly fruitful, only for their own pleasure, such as Paintings, Sculptures, medals, or similar things. And they love them so dearly that those same things manage to satisfy their desires, as if their desire had been satisfied by real Love that has to be between man and woman.¹

Giuseppe Orologi, comment on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1578)

As Giuseppe Orologi, a writer with connections to Titian, makes clear in his commentary on Ovid's story of the sculptor Pygmalion, some people of his

¹ 'L'amore di Pigmaleone, alla figura di Avorio fatta da le sue mani, ci da esempio che quelli che tentano far riparo alle forze della natura, non volendo giamai gustare il dolcissimo, e suavisimo Amore posto regolatamente fra l'huomo, e la donna, essendo la volontà nostra naturalmente spinta per sempre ad amare, si danno ad amare alcune cose di poco frutto, solamente per proprio loro piacere, come Pitture, Sculture, medaglie, ò simil cose, e le amano così caldamente, che vengono le medesime cose, a soddisfare al desiderio loro, come se rimanessero satisfatti del desiderio del vero Amore, che deve esser fra l'huomo, e la donna.' Giuseppe Orologi, 'Annotationi del decimo libro', in: *Le metamorfosi di Ovidio. Ridotte da Gio. Andrea dell'Anguillara in ottava rime* (Venice, 1610) [1578], p. 166.

time fell in love with beautiful things rather than human beings.² Some of Orologi's contemporaries had their desires satisfied not by a man or a woman but by works of art. The author laments what he considers to be an unfruitful type of love.

This chapter may be read as an illustration of Orologi's complaint, for we will focus on the loving celebration of the portrait of a young Venetian noblewoman. When she was hardly twenty-one years old, Irene di Spilimbergo, as she was called, died; and her family and admirers turned to her painted portrait and loved it in her stead. Whether this was unfruitful (*di poco frutto*), as Orologi has it, remains to be seen.

The case of Irene di Spilimbergo is a complex one. While we in the first two chapters have focused on paintings with a devotional function in a religious context, this third chapter is primarily about portraits in the secular sphere – although it will become clear that in early modern Venice, the sacred was never far away. Chapter One discussed a painting of Christ which was venerated as if it was Christ himself. In Chapter Two we treated the case of the attack on a donor portrait that was aimed towards the donor himself. In this chapter, the situation is less easy to grasp. Firstly, there is a very interesting *Portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo* which will be thoroughly examined (fig. 53, colour plate 3).³ Being usually considered as the product of one of Titian's many followers, it will here be presented as bearing the marks of the master. Evidence of the portrait's reception, on the other hand, is relatively scarce. That it was treated as a surrogate of the real Irene is something that needs to be deduced; it is not immediately evident. Secondly, the case is complemented with a lot of literary material. When Irene di Spilimbergo died (1561), friends of hers composed a volume of poems in her memory (fig. 54).⁴ This is a unique collection of lyrical poetry which discusses, among other topics, the power of painting to keep the dead alive. Thirdly, the rela-

² For Orologi, see Una Roman D'Elia, 'A Preliminary Catalogue of Writers with Connections to Titian' in: idem, *The Poetics of Titian's Religious Paintings*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 157-188, here p. 179.

³ The portrait is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. For basic information, see the Gallery's website, http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/tinfo_?object=1222 (last consulted on 13 June 2011).

⁴ Dionigi Atanagi (ed.), *Rime di diversi nobilissimi, et eccellentissimi autori in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo. Alle quali si sono aggiunti versi latini di diversi egregij poeti, in morte della medesima signora* (Venice, 1561).

tions between Irene, her family, and their acquaintances in Venice are very well documented, which makes it possible to analyze the agendas of the people involved: who were interested in keeping Irene alive by means of this painted portrait, why were they interested, and with what results?

So far, the poetry collection in memory of Irene di Spilimbergo has mostly been studied from the perspective of Italian literary history.⁵ This is no surprise, given that the volume contains no less than 279 Italian and 102 Latin poems lamenting the lady's untimely end, and thereby gives an almost complete overview of tendencies in Italian lyrical poetry of the time.⁶ The poetry collection also includes a biography of Irene, and this, in turn, has been studied from the perspective of gender studies.⁷ In the field of art history, however, the importance of the volume has largely been overlooked.⁸ The present text is, therefore, also a first attempt to fill in this gap.

The poetic celebration of the liveliness of a painted portrait was certainly not new when applied in the memorial collection of Irene di Spilimbergo. At the time the poem collection was published, in 1561, praising the liveliness of paintings had become conventional, a topos. We have seen something of that

⁵ Studies by literary historians include Giancarlo Sturba, 'Dionigi Atanagi redattore della "Vita d'Irene da Spilimbergo"', in: Bonita Cleri (ed.), *I Della Rovere nell'Italia delle corti*, Vol. III, Urbino 2002, pp. 37-50; Antonio Corsaro, 'Dionigi Atanagi e la silloge per Irene di Spilimbergo (Intorno alla formazione del giovane Tasso)', *Italica* 75 (1998), pp. 41-61; Giovanni Comelli, 'Irene di Spilimbergo in una prestigiosa edizione del Cinquecento con un carne latino di Tiziano', in: *Spilimbèrc*, eds. Novella Cantarutti and Giuseppe Bergamini, Udine 1984, pp. 223-236; Elvira Favretti, 'Una raccolta di rime del cinquecento', *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 158 (1981), pp. 543-572; and Benedetto Croce, 'Irene di Spilimbergo', in: *Poeti e scrittori del pieno e tardo Rinascimento*, vol. I, Bari 1945, pp. 365-375.

⁶ See Favretti, 'Una raccolta di rime del cinquecento', pp. 548 and 550.

⁷ Anne Jacobson Schutte, 'Irene di Spilimbergo: The Image of a Creative Woman', *Renaissance Quarterly* (1991), pp. 42-61; also idem, 'Commemorators of Irene di Spilimbergo', *Renaissance Quarterly* 45 (1992), pp. 524-536. I consider Schutte's 1991 article the most important contribution on Irene di Spilimbergo so far, although I do not always agree with it.

⁸ Fredrika Jacobs mentions the volume in her book on Renaissance women artists, which includes six sonnets in Italian as well as in English translation (see Fredrika H. Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance "Virtuosa": Women Artists and the Language of Art History and Criticism*, Cambridge 1997, esp. pp. 178-182). Most recently, Irene di Spilimbergo has been discussed in Grosso, *Per la fama di Tiziano nella cultura artistica dell'Italia spagnola*, pp. 115-119, and Tagliafferro and Aikema, *Le botteghe di Tiziano*, pp. 62-63 and pp. 167-172. In the first half of the twentieth century, art historians concentrated on the paintings related to Irene di Spilimbergo; see Hans Tietze and Erika Tietze-Conrat, 'I ritratti di Spilimbergo a Washington', *Emporium* 117 (1953), pp. 99-107; Corrado Ricci, 'Ritratti tizianeschi di G. Paolo Pace', *Rivista del R. Istituto d'Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte* 1 (1929), pp. 249-264; and Adolfo Venturi, 'Cronaca', *L'Arte* 14 (1911), p. 394.

in the Introduction, and, again, in the *Excursus* to Chapter Two.⁹ Its conventionality, however, does not make a topos meaningless; what it shows us is that qualities like liveliness and lifelikeness were the most important requirements when paintings were concerned. In this context, an analysis of Irene di Spilimbergo and the poetry collection in her memory gives us a fine impression of ideas on this matter current around 1560. Such an analysis will show, to touch on one of the outcomes, that paintings were not only said to keep the dead alive, but also, rather terrifyingly, that they were capable of killing.

A key concept in the present chapter will be ‘Petrarchism’. Petrarchism is the imitation of the works of the fourteenth-century Italian poet laureate Francesco Petrarca; most importantly of his *Canzoniere*, the sonnet sequence to his beloved but inaccessible lady Laura.¹⁰ Petrarchism has always had a relation with the visual arts, because painting and drawing together provide the lover-poet with a surrogate of his beloved lady.¹¹ What is more, Francesco Petrarca counts as an adopted son of the Venetian republic. He spent the last years of his life in Venice and nearby Arquà, and the Venetians liked to consider his private library the foundation of their Biblioteca Marciana.¹² Petrarchism was the principal style in sixteenth-century Venetian poetry – so important, in fact, that it was impossible to think of any literary work beyond it. For the Venetian elites, it seems to have been much more than merely a

⁹ See further, among others, Von Rosen, ‘Die Enargeia des Gemaldes’; Rupert Shepherd, ‘Art and life in Renaissance Italy: a blurring of identities?’, in: Mary Rogers (ed.), *Fashioning Identities in Renaissance Art*, Aldershot 2000, pp. 63–78; Land, *The viewer as poet*; Mary E. Hazard, ‘The Anatomy of “Liveliness” as a Concept in Renaissance Aesthetics’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33 (1975), pp. 407–418.

¹⁰ See Karlheinz Stierle, *Francesco Petrarca: Ein Intellektueller im Europa des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Munich and Vienna 2003.

¹¹ A selection of literature: Lina Bolzoni, *Poesia e ritratto nel rinascimento*, Bari 2008; Marianne Koos, *Bildnisse des Begehrens: Das lyrische Männerporträt in der venezianischen Malerei des frühen 16. Jahrhunderts – Giorgione, Tizian und ihr Umkreis*, Emsdetten and Berlin 2006, which, interestingly, studies male instead of female portraits; Joseph B. Trapp, ‘Petrarch’s Laura: The Portraiture of an Imaginary Beloved’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 64 (2001/2002), pp. 55–192; Patricia Simons, ‘Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization: Ambiguous Individualism in Representations of Renaissance Women’, in: Alison Brown (ed.), *Language and Images of Renaissance Italy*, Oxford 1995, pp. 263–311; Mary Rogers, ‘Sonnets on Female Portraits from Renaissance North Italy’, *Word and Image* 2 (1986), pp. 291–305; Alessandro Bevilacqua, ‘Simone Martini, Petrarca, i ritratti di Laura e del poeta’, *Bolletino del Museo Civico di Padova* 68 (1979), pp. 107–150; Elizabeth Cropper, ‘On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, “Petrarchismo” and the Vernacular Style’, *The Art Bulletin* 58 (1976), pp. 374–394.

¹² Even though Petrarch’s collection did not stay in Venice and is now dispersed all over Europe; see Stierle, *Francesco Petrarca*, p. 454 and further.

literary style; in a society in which literature and art were not yet autonomous fields, Petrarchism was part of social life; Petrarch's last years spent in a villa in 'Petrarcadia' were an example to be followed.¹³ One of the questions posed in this chapter is, therefore: to what extent was the Petrarchan topos of the beloved, inaccessible lady who comes alive in her painted image – here exemplified by Irene di Spilimbergo – grounded in social reality?

These are a lot of questions for a single chapter, to be sure. Our investigation of portrayed women and Petrarchan poetry will therefore be continued in the next and last chapter. For now, however, we will first further introduce Irene di Spilimbergo, her biography, and her untimely death. We will then proceed to her painted portrait and that of her sister Emilia, with which it forms a pair. An analysis of the remarkable authorship of these paintings and the roles they fulfilled in family life will gain further relief when juxtaposed to the second part of this chapter, which concentrates on the poem collection. We will see that poets from all over Italy helped to create a verbal picture of an ideal woman, that even now, in the twenty-first century, continues to stir the imagination.

Irene di Spilimbergo, Her Life and Death

The image one gets of Irene di Spilimbergo from her sixteenth-century biography is that of an extraordinary woman. Born and raised in the small mountain town of Spilimbergo, in the Friuli region, she seems to have been no less than a star when she died in Venice hardly twenty years later. The poem collection in her honour came into being not even a decade after she had first made her entry into the big city, and it was of heretofore unprecedented dimensions: never before had a mortal person, in Italy or abroad, been poetically celebrated on such a scale.¹⁴ So who was this woman, and why this honour?

¹³ For Petrarch's villa life in Arquà and the term 'Petrarcadia', see Stierle, *Francesco Petrarca*, pp. 471–472. For Petrarchism as a lifestyle, see also Gordon Braden, 'Applied Petrarchism: The Loves of Pietro Bembo', *Modern Language Quarterly* 57 (1996), pp. 397–423, and below, Chapter Four.

¹⁴ The volume is preserved in more than twenty Italian libraries as well as in some major European and North-American collections: see Schutte, 'Commemorators of Irene di Spilimbergo', p. 524. This suggests it must have circulated widely. Another sixteenth-century example of the poetic celebration of an individual is the so-called *Coryciana*, a collection of 399 poems pub-

As a daughter of Adriano di Spilimbergo, one of the noble lords that ruled the town and region, and Giulia da Ponte, the only child of the wealthy Venetian Zuan Paolo da Ponte, Irene was born in the Friulan castle town on 17 October 1538.¹⁵ It was also in this town that she was baptised and spent the whole of her childhood, the first three years with her parents, then, after her father's death on 12 September 1541, with her maternal grandparents.¹⁶ She seems to have been the third of four children; the only one of whom, besides Irene, who made it into adulthood was Irene's elder sister and companion Emilia.¹⁷

The girls profited from a broad education. Their father had been a cultured man involved as he was in the foundation of an academy in his hometown Spilimbergo in which Latin, Greek, and Hebrew were taught. He also commissioned paintings from Antonio da Pordenone and Giovanni da

lished in Rome in 1524 in honour of the wealthy Luxembourger Johannes Goritz. The poems in this volume, however, focus more on Goritz's 'column' in the Roman church of S. Agostino than on the man himself, and were written during his lifetime. Goritz had an altar on one of the piers in the nave of the church. Above it was a fresco of the prophet Isaiah by Raphael; below it was Goritz's tomb; on the altar itself was Andrea Sansovino's sculpture of Saint Anne, the Virgin and the Christ child. Every year on Saint Anne's day Goritz had his humanist friends write poems on the ensemble, on Goritz's piety, and on the event itself; almost four hundred of these poems ended up in the volume edited by Blosio Palladio (see Blosio Palladio (ed.), *Coryciana* (Rome, 1524); see also Julia Haig Gaisser, 'The Rise and Fall of Goritz's Feasts', *Renaissance Quarterly* 48 (1995), pp. 41-57, with further bibliography).

¹⁵ Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 43. The nineteenth-century sources, as well as Thieme-Becker, vol. XXXI, p. 378, state that Irene was born in Venice in 1540. Her sixteenth-century biographer mentions 1541 as her year of birth: Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo* (here, as in other cases, I do not refer to specific page numbers, for the biographic section of the poem collection has none). The correct data seem to be provided by Zuan Paolo da Ponte, Irene's grandfather, in his *Memoriali*, his unpublished diary and account book. For a discussion of the *Memoriali*, see Michelangelo Muraro, 'Il memoriale di Zuan Paolo da Ponte', *Archivio veneto* 44-45 (1949), pp. 77-88. See further Cesare Scalton, *La biblioteca di Adriano di Spilimbergo (1542)*, Spilimbergo and Udine 1988, p. 20, and Ruggero Zotti, *Irene di Spilimbergo*, Udine 1914, pp. 7-8 and 41.

¹⁶ Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', pp. 43-44; Scalton, *La biblioteca di Adriano di Spilimbergo*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁷ Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 44. Maria Teresa Acquaro Graziosi, however, mentions another grown-up sister, Isabella di Spilimbergo, but her identity is uncertain: see Maria Teresa Acquaro Graziosi (ed.), *Giordio Gradenigo: Rime e lettere*, Rome 1990, sonnet 19 and comments; also Zotti, *Irene di Spilimbergo*, pp. 30-31, who argues that one of the later children of Giulia da Ponte, a half-sister of Emilia and Irene, was called Isabella. For the family tree of this line of the Spilimbergo family, see Ferruccio Carlo Carreri, 'Tables généalogiques des Seigneurs de Spilimberg, Zuccula, Trus, Solimberg, etc., comtes palatins et chevaliers', *Giornale araldico-genealogico-diplomatico* 19-20 (1892), pp. 231-246, table V.

Udine.¹⁸ Giulia da Ponte, the girls' mother, an equally educated person, maintained learned correspondences with men such as Giorgio Gradenigo, a Venetian patrician of whom later more. Giorgio Vasari called Giulia Titian's *comare* or family friend.¹⁹ When Zuan Paolo da Ponte took over the care of his granddaughters after their father's death, he took their parents' education as an example and made sure that they were not only trained in such typical female activities as sewing and embroidery, but also in letters and in music.²⁰ This was rather uncommon for Italian noblewomen at the time and gave their education a slightly masculine touch.²¹ When Irene reached the age of fifteen or sixteen, they all moved to Venice, where Zuan Paolo had their portraits painted by his namesake Zuan Paolo Pace.²²

Regarding Irene di Spilimbergo's course of life, there are only very few verifiable facts. The available sources provide us with narratives. One such narrative is the biography which is part of Irene's memorial volume. This biography singles out Irene's precocity and her virtuousness. It tells us, for example, that already at a very young age, Irene did not consider needlework as something that could engage her all day. When her grandfather learned about this, he hired musicians to teach her how to play the lute, other

¹⁸ Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 43; Acquaro Graziosi, *Giorgio Gradenigo*, p. 170; Fabio di Maniago, *Storia delle belle arti friulani, edizione seconda ricorretta e accresciuta*, Udine 1823, p. 125. In the castle of Spilimbergo are some fresco's by Pordenone: see Joseph Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle, *Titian: his Life and Times with some Account of his Family*, vol. II, London 1877, p. 301. An important study of Adriano di Spilimbergo and his academy is Scalon, *La biblioteca di Adriano di Spilimbergo*.

¹⁹ Acquaro Graziosi, *Giorgio Gradenigo*, p. 170; Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. VI, p. 168: 'Si veggiono anco ritratti di naturale da Tiziano un cittadino viniziano suo amicissimo, chiamato il Sinistri, et un altro nominato messer Paulo da Ponte, del quale ritrasse anco una figliuola che allora aveva, bellissima giovane, chiamata la signora Giulia da Ponte, comare di esso Tiziano...' Sansovino mentions Da Ponte in his section of Venetian writers: 'Giulia da Ponte, delle Signore di Spilimbergo, madre dela famosa et celebre Irene, fece diuere lettere lodate, et poste in libri di diuersi scrittori.' Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima*, p. 281v.

²⁰ Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', pp. 44, 50-51; Luigi Suttina, *Appunti per servire alla biografia d'Irene di Spilimbergo. Estratto dagli Atti dell'Accademia di Udine*, Udine 1914, p. 7.

²¹ From Da Ponte's *Memoriale*, on the way the sisters practiced music (as quoted by Suttina, *Appunti per servire alla biografia d'Irene di Spilimbergo*, pp. 7-8): '... in questa ne hanno fatto tal profitto et passato tanto inanzi, che si poteva dire che le sapeva molto più de quello che, come done, se gli conveniva...'

²² On Pace, known either as 'Zuan Paolo' (= Venetian dialect) or 'Gian Paolo', see Tagliaferro and Aikema, *Le botteghe di Tiziano*, pp. 121-122 (about his position in Titian's workshop), p. 143 (Pace as an independent master), pp. 159-160 (Pace as an occasional collaborator of Titian's), and pp. 345-346 (Pace in Augsburg).

stringed instruments and how to sing, which soon made her very successful.²³ No less was Irene gifted in literature, according to her biographer. She read, albeit in vernacular translation, both contemporary and classical literature – Plutarch, Piccolomini, Castiglione, Bembo and Petrarch – and was widely known for her eloquence.²⁴ She loved to converse with honourable women and men, and to discuss literature and the arts, so that she might improve her knowledge no less than her manners. Although none of it has survived, her biographer claims she also was writing herself.²⁵ And as if all of this was still not enough, she became fascinated by the art of painting. Guided at first by one of her friends – the author of the biography calls her Campaspe – she

²³ Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*. A sign of her success may be found in her invitation to sing, together with her sister Emilia, for queen Bona Sforza of Poland, who passed through the Friuli region in March 1556, and was so pleased with the performance that she awarded both of them a golden chain. See Atanagi, *ibidem*, and Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', pp. 50–51; also Lina Bolzoni, *Il cuore di cristallo. Ragionamenti d'amore, poesia e ritratto nel Rinascimento*, Turin 2010, p. 12.

During the same visit, Queen Bona also had the pleasure to meet another Venetian woman of letters, Cassandra Fedele (1465–1558), by then ninety-one years old, who recited a Latin oration (Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 51). It is an attractive idea that the two women may have met; Irene, young and full of promises; the other one, Cassandra, old, wise, at the end of a long life, in many ways precursor and example to Irene. When Fedele had her age, Giovanni Bellini painted a portrait of her, about which she wrote the following lines: 'Calcavi quae omnes optant meliora secuta/ Iam celebris, passim docta, per ora vagor./ Bellinusque minor me priscis aemulus arte/ Et vivis studio rettulit effigie.' Published in Giacomo Filippo Tomasini, 'Cassandrae Fidelis vita', in: Cassandra Fedele, *Epistolae et Orationes*, ed. Giacomo Filippo Tomasini (Padua, 1626), p. 21. According to Jennifer Fletcher, Fedele recited this poem in front of the Doge and of Angelo Poliziano (Jennifer Fletcher, 'Bellini's Social World', in: Peter Humfrey (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini*, Cambridge 2004, pp. 13–47, here p. 36). See further Cassandra Fedele, *Letters and Orationes*, ed. and translated by Diane Robin, Chicago and London 2000; Cesira Cavazzana, 'Cassandra Fedele erudita veneziana del Rinascimento', *Ateneo Veneto* 29 (1906), pp. 73–91; and Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima*, p. 6r, for more general information on Cassandra Fedele.

²⁴ *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*.

²⁵ 'Ella leggeva, non come il più delle donne, et anco de gli huomini fanno, per semplice passatempo, o come a caso; ma con giuditioso, e particolare avvertimento delle materie, che trattano, de concetti, e delle elocutioni: osservando tuttavia, e facendo estratti delle cose più belle: con fissa application d'animo al servirsi di loro, così nella creanza, e ne costumi, come ne ragionamenti, e ne gli scritti.' See also Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 51, and Zotti, *Irene di Spilimbergo*, pp. 16–17. Irene's writing activities are also recalled in several poems: see Ferrante Carrafa's contributions: 'Cantò la bella Irene, io piango e moro:/ Pinse, et io pingo in me l'horror di morte:/ Scrisse, et io scrivo, ah lasso, hor l'empia sorte./ Con cui vivendo ognihor via più m'accoro.// Oprò la voce, io grido, e mi scoloro:/ Ella il pannel, un dardo io crudo e forte:/ Ella la penna, et io lo stral, che'n forte/ Mi diede Amor, per farmi un del suo choro.' And: 'Col pannel, con lo stil, co i dolci accenti/ Pinse, scrisse, contò la bella Irene'. *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, pp. 36–37.

started training herself in drawing and after a while mastered the art to such an extent that she managed to impress Daniele Barbaro, a well-known connoisseur, and even the great Titian himself.²⁶ Not much later, she was his student.

Our story actually begins when another comes to an end. In the autumn of the year 1559 fate struck for Irene. Her biographer relates that she managed to master proportion, light and shadow, foreshortening, anatomy, the softness and sweetness of flesh, and the handling of draperies; in short, all that a painter needs to know, within a period of only six weeks.²⁷ All this impressed the people around her, of course – she had more than lived up to the expectations aroused by her accomplishments in drawing. But perceiving her great physical effort, this ‘excessive force of nature’, her environment was also concerned and even feared for her health.²⁸ Unfortunately, these fears were not unjustified. Working from morning until evening in a chilly room, often opening the window to look at the break of day – and this in the last week of November, when cold and watery Venice is at its rainiest –, keeping eyes and mind fixed on her work without a moment of pause, Irene caught a fever accompanied by severe headaches.

While today we may not be much impressed by what may well have been a simple cold, in Irene’s world doctors did not know what to do. Many physicians were called to her bed; some of them thought she had typhus, others held the opinion that she suffered from an abscess in the head; again others thought it was a fever. All these ideas notwithstanding, the medical profession

²⁶ For the identity of the first tutor, Campaspe, see Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance “Virtuosa”*, p. 166, and Schutte, ‘The Image of a Creative Woman’, p. 53, n. 42. What seems to have been her father, Gigio Artemio Giancarli, was a poet and painter from Rovigo. Interestingly, ‘Campaspe’ was also the name of Alexander the Great’s favourite concubine: when Alexander asked the painter Apelles to portrait Campaspe unclothed, the master fell in love with the beautiful girl, and when Alexander noticed this, he gave his mistress to the painter, and kept the portrait for himself. See Pliny, *Natural History* 35.36.86–7.

²⁷ ‘Percioche in ispatio d’un mese, e mezzo, trasse copia d’alcune pitture del detto S. Titiano, con tanti particolari avvertimenti alle misure, a lumi, alle ombre, a cosi a gli scorci, a nervi, alle ossature, alla tenerezza, e dolcezza della carni, e non meno alle pieghe de panni [...]’

²⁸ ‘... che non solamente fece stupir coloro, che questa soprannatural forza videro; ma vi furon molti consideratori delle cose naturali maggior de gli altri, iquali vedendo in lei questo cosi grande, et eccessivo sforzo di natura, con un pungentissimo timore le agurorono la morte vicina.’

could not come to an agreement, let alone cure her, and twenty-two days after the onset of her illness, on 19 December 1559, Irene passed away.²⁹

It was a devastating loss. Her family had to part with a granddaughter, daughter, and sister. 'I, Zuan Paolo da Ponte, son of messer Lodovico, have to make a record of the cruel, painful, and premature death of our dearest and sweetest Irene,' wrote her grandfather on the night she passed.³⁰

We were having good hopes for her health when a most extreme lethargy came over her and, as she was already fatigued and exhausted by her first illness, in less than four days she was robbed of it. And it bereaved us of the most glorious fruit that Nature produced in a long time, and has left us in such grief and sorrowful anxiety that we do not know where to go to find peace.³¹

Irene's untimely end also meant that her family was deprived of Irene's social, political, and biological potential. To put it less academically: never again would she bring intellectuals and artists together; there would never come a moment when she would marry; never would she be a mother. Irene di Spilimbergo's life came to an end at that moment when early modern women usually got married, and marriage offered an important opportunity for families to forge alliances.³² Her grandfather Da Ponte, a wealthy merchant from Venice's *cittadino* class, would probably not have been particularly interested

²⁹ 'Or fosse, qual si volesse, la pestifera qualità del suo male; ella nello spatio di ventidue giorni, come virtuosamente era vivuta, così religiosamente, si morì, con pianto universale di ciascuno, che la vide, o sentì ricordare.' For the day of death, see also Maniago, *Storia delle belle arti friulani*, doc. CXVII. For the medical treatment Zuan Paolo da Ponte ordered for his granddaughter, see Suttina, *Appunti per servire alla biografia d'Irene di Spilimbergo*, pp. 11–12. His account makes clear his desperation.

³⁰ 'Dovendo jo Zuan Paolo da Ponte, fo de messer Lodovico, far una memoria della crudel, acerba et immatura morte dela nostra carissima et dolcissima Irene...' Suttina, *Appunti per servire alla biografia d'Irene di Spilimbergo*, p. 5.

³¹ '... erevamo in grandissima speranza de la sua salute, gli sopragionse una sonolentia così esstrema [sic] et trovatala stracca et sbatuta dal primo male, in men de giorni 4 ce la robò, et lassateci privi del più glorioso fruto, che già molti anni facesse la Natura et in tanto cordoglio et dogliosi affanni, che non sapemo in qual lato vogliersi per trovare pace...' Suttina, *Appunti per servire alla biografia d'Irene di Spilimbergo*, p. 5.

³² On marriage practices in sixteenth-century Venice, see Alexander Cowan, *Marriage, Manners and Mobility in Early Modern Venice*, Aldershot 2007; Daniela Hacke, *Women, Sex and Marriage in Early Modern Venice*, Aldershot 2004; Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice*, New York 1985.

in more money – of that he had enough; it is more likely that he was after a patrician party for his granddaughters, as was not only befitting to their noble Spilimbergo blood, but would also have added lustre to his own name.³³ Next to that, Irene had already shown her power to attract cultured people, a quality that Da Ponte was particularly fond of, given the effort he had spent on providing his daughter and granddaughters with a decent literary and musical education.³⁴ Irene thus embodied the promise of being at the centre of attention in a flowering cultural milieu, of becoming a matron of the arts, and, certainly not less important, a mother. But when she passed, these expectations were in the crudest manner cut off. Or were they?

I will argue that, while Irene had died and with her life, her power to act came to an end, the story of her portrait shows how, after her death, the painting became her substitute, and thus was a means to continue her agency in this world. For as Leon Battista Alberti had already said, portraits were capable of keeping the faces of the dead alive.³⁵ As Irene di Spilimbergo can, I believe, be considered a mediator between her own and other families, and between all those cultural agents, writers, musicians, painters that she surrounded herself with, her painted portrait was a tool to continue functioning in this role even after she had passed away. The poem collection *cum* biography worked in more or less the same manner. In other words, after Irene di Spilimbergo's death both painting and poetry worked together to preserve, or perhaps even strengthen her agency, her power to act as mediator. Her painted portrait as well as the poem collection – a portrait, I will argue, in its own right – thereby served as indices of a prototype that, by then, was long gone to take her place at God's side.

³³ Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 44; Scalon, *La biblioteca di Adriano di Spilimbergo*, pp. 19-20.

³⁴ Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 44. Da Ponte himself participated in the Spilimbergo Academy, co-founded by his son-in-law, and was a lover of contemporary vernacular literature and of music.

³⁵ 'A questo modo i volti de i morti per mezzo de la pittura in un certo modo vivono una vita molto lunga.' Leon Battista Alberti, *La pittura ... tradotta per Lodovico Domenichi* (Venice, 1547), p. 18r. Here, as elsewhere, I refer to Lodovico Domenichi's Italian translation of Alberti's text, which was immediately followed by the publication of a number of newly written texts on painting: Paolo Pino's *Dialogo di pittura* (1548), Michelangelo Biondo's *Della nobilissima pittura* (1549) and Lodovico Dolce's *Dialogo della pittura* (1557). The latter even mentions Domenichi's translation of Alberti (Dolce, *Dialogo della pittura*, p. 159).

The Washington Portraits of Emilia and Irene

We will now turn to the one and only undisputed portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo, which is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C (fig. 53, colour plate 3).³⁶ We will study it alongside the portrait of Irene's sister Emilia in the same collection, for reasons that will soon become clear (fig. 55). What do the portraits look like? What were their functions? And who was responsible for them? That the portraits known as *Irene* and *Emilia di Spilimbergo* are indeed depictions of these two persons and not of some other young women, whose identities are unknown to us, is confirmed by the complete provenance of the two paintings, which remained in the family until the beginning of the twentieth century.³⁷

The *Portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo* shows us the three-quarter figure of a young woman, depicted almost life-size, her left arm loosely leaning against an architectural backdrop of which the large, plain column standing on a pedestal on the far right is the most conspicuous item. The other half of the background is taken up by a deep view on a hilly landscape, with in the foreground green meadows where a unicorn is resting, a sign of the sitter's virginity, behind it a dog chasing a hare, and the figure of a man near a tree watching while the animals go by (fig. 58). Behind this is an area with bushes and trees, and in the far background, in front of a screen of rocky mountains, there is the suggestion of a village or castle, perhaps that of Spilimbergo even,

³⁶ There is also a possible portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo in a private collection in New York. See Harold E. Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian: Complete Edition*, vol. II, *The portraits*, London 1971, cat. no. 99, p. 141.

³⁷ The portraits ended up by inheritance in the collection of Niccolò d'Attimis, Count of Maniago, who sold them in 1909. After they quickly changed owners a number of times, they were inherited in 1915 by Joseph E. Widener who donated his estate to the National Gallery in 1942. See http://www.nga.gov/fcgi-bin/tinfo_f?object=1221&detail=prov for Emilia and http://www.nga.gov/fcgi-bin/tinfo_f?object=1222&detail=prov for Irene (last consulted on 13 June 2011). In the past, there has been some confusion regarding the identity of the sitter in the painting nowadays called *Emilia di Spilimbergo*: it has been suggested that the painting actually depicts Isabella, sister of Irene and Emilia (see n. 17). This is suggested by the sonnet titled 'Mentre che Tizian la mano e l'arte' in Dionigi Atanagi (ed.), *De le rime di diversi nobili poeti ... , libro secondo* (Venice, 1565). Emmanuele Cicogna also argued that the portrait was Isabella's (Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni veneziane*, vol. II, pp. 37-38); Maniago, however, published a document that states that Isabella died on 12 October 1543, that is, at a young age and long before the two Washington portraits were painted (Maniago, *Storia delle belle arti friulani*, doc. CXVII: '1543. 12. Octobris. Moritur Isabella.'). The current identification of the sitter with Emilia therefore seems correct.

glimmering in the light of the late afternoon. The greyish sky, filled with dramatic clouds hanging over the mountain tops form a beautiful contrast with the sharp outline of the face and collar of the young woman, who, however, does not really seem to be aware of what is happening behind her in the landscape, nor seems to be a part of it in any other way – it rather gives the impression of a portrait picture taken in a studio, the decor of the landscape a later artificial addition. The light in the picture's foreground, the area where the woman is standing, comes from the front, from where we, the spectators, are, and leaves only the smallest shadows on the figure's right side, to which she is slightly turned.

Irene does not make any eye contact with the viewer. Her facial features make the impression of a characteristic, hardly idealized portrait. Compared to Titian's *Flora* (Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi; fig. 56), his *Judith* (Rome, Galleria Doria Pamphilj), or, contemporary to the portrait of Irene, the *Portrait of a Girl with a Fan* (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie; fig. 57), to name just a few examples, all images of highly idealized women, to be sure, Irene as depicted in the Washington portrait has a weak, receding chin, thin, somewhat compressed lips, a tip-tilted nose and a square, perhaps too large forehead (fig. 59). Her clear, white skin, long elegant neck, the light blushes on her cheeks, and her blond to reddish hair, on the other hand, are typical of the ideal of female beauty of the time.³⁸ In her clothing and jewellery she is showing the wealth of her family. She is wearing pearls in her hair and round her neck, another costly jewel in her ear, and a shimmering girdle round her waist. Over a red dress, on the borders of which appear white and black piping, is a reddish, glossy mantle, decorated with embroidering, the waistbelt kept in her right hand. In her left hand Irene is holding a laurel crown, next to which, on the stone pedestal, are inscribed the words 'SI FATA TVLISSENT' ('if the fates had allowed'); an obvious reference to her untimely death and the many talents that had so little time to flower (fig. 60). Perhaps Irene's most conspicuous attribute in this painting is standing against the column behind her left shoulder: a palm branch (fig. 61).

³⁸ Important studies on the contemporary ideal of feminine beauty have been written by Elizabeth Cropper; see 'The Beauty of Women: Problems in the Rhetoric of Renaissance Portraiture', in: Margaret W. Ferguson (ed.), *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 1986, pp. 175–190, and 'On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, "Petrarchismo" and the Vernacular Style'.

In its overall composition, the portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo is not unlike other Venetian portraiture produced at the time. In fact, already during the 1520s Titian had developed a portrait type, consolidated in the following decades, that, because of its tremendous success, would be followed by many other Venetian painters, of which Irene's portrait seems to be a case in point. This portrait type contains a half length or three-quarter length standing figure, the body turned off-front and the sitter often making eye contact with the viewer – in this sense Irene's portrait is atypical (for example, fig. 62).³⁹ Other characteristics are a relatively subdued use of colour, nearly life-size depiction of the sitter, and a dignified, flattering representation. More than two dozen portraits of this type painted by Titian have survived, including some of female sitters.

Although the portrait of Irene clearly fits into the category just described, it also contains some anomalies. The landscape, for example: Titian often used views on landscapes in his portraits, but this was never a view from top to bottom; the landscape is rather seen through a window, a wall closing off the view down the sitter's waist. Also the fact that the landscape takes up half the background breadthwise is unusual.⁴⁰ The column is not often used either, and certainly adds to the woman's dignity and regal outlook.⁴¹ I will not even go into the palm here, an attribute normally associated with saints and their martyrdoms. A final irregularity – or perhaps merely a flaw – is the rigidity of Irene's attitude, who refrains from making contact with the viewer, and whose stiff body is far removed from the lively dynamics of the best of Titian's vibrating figures.

Let us now take a look at the *Portrait of Emilia di Spilimbergo*. The painting is very similar to *Irene* in its general composition. The portrayed woman is standing in a room, in front of a segmented wall, her left hand leaning on what is most likely the windowsill. Behind her there is an opening overlooking a seascape with a turbulent sea, raging wildly against the shore, and a ship

³⁹ Frederick Ilchman recently characterized this type as the 'Titian formula': idem (ed.), *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice*, Farnham 2009, pp. 206-209.

⁴⁰ Among other Titian portraits containing a view on a landscape are *Eleonora Gonzaga, duchess of Urbino* (Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi), *Count Antonio Porcia* (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera), and *Pietro Bembo* (Naples, Museo di Capodimonte).

⁴¹ The column is hardly ever used with non-noble sitters. See *Giacomo Doria* (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum), *Emperor Charles V, seated* (Munich, Alte Pinakothek), but, on the other hand, *Benedetto Varchi* (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum).

that has a hard job to keep its masts up. The sky is dark with clouds, although a little sunbeam peeps through. Emilia does not watch the scene behind her, but looks in our direction. Her face is very characteristic with its small chin, thin upper lip and long, pronounced nose (fig. 64). Other similarities between the two portraits can be found in the clothes, which are the same, and the way both sitters clutch the waistbelts of their mantles with their right hands. With Emilia standing slightly turned to her left, the viewer's right, and Irene just in the opposite direction, the two portraits are, indeed, perfect pendants.

What were these pendants meant for? Both of the portraits may have been destined for when the girls would be betrothed and married. Both young women had reached the marriageable age at the moment of portrayal (c. 1555); the portraits could have been used to present them to possible partners, as gifts to their intended husbands or families-in-law. It was quite normal that portraits of rich young ladies were produced to this end.⁴² Another possibility is that the portraits were intended for those whom the girls left behind when they married: their Spilimbergo relatives. Indeed, Emilia's portrait, just like that of Irene, always remained in the family estate.

Still, it is interesting that the two sisters are depicted in such a similar way. A few scholars even believed that both paintings represent Irene; however, this view remains an exception.⁴³ Literary sources contemporary to the paintings reflect the way in which the sisters have been represented: as if they were one and the same person. Their grandfather wrote in his diary:

... because everyone knew of this unity of theirs, they never let themselves be seen – at home or outside – if not dressed in the same fabric, in the same colour and form, to confirm in the minds of everyone their conformable unity.

⁴² See also Alison Wright, 'The Memory of Faces: Representational Choices in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Portraiture', in: Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Rubin (eds.), *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence*, Cambridge 2000, pp. 86–113, here pp. 91–92; see also Ilchman, *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese*, p. 216.

⁴³ See the file on the *Portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo* (accession no. 1942.9.83) in the Department of Curatorial Records at the National Gallery of Art: a memorandum written by S. Grossman (dated 11 June, 1976) conveys that Philip Sohm, fellow of the Gallery at the time, held the view that both paintings were posthumous portraits of Irene.

And how they, *pari passu*, walked through the same street, of one will and mind and hope...⁴⁴

And in the poem collection for Irene, we find the following lines, composed by one Vincenzo Giusto:

And in the face of Emilia, and in the serene
eyes, both of them containing equal grace,
you can still admire your Irene.⁴⁵

A Curious Genesis

With the sad event of Irene's death, something for the portraits must have changed, too. Not only became Emilia, as the poet Giusto has it, a living memory of her sister; both their painted images also underwent a change. When Irene died, her portrait could no longer be used in the context of betrothal and marriage. Irene's relatives were well aware that portraits not only served to present the sitter's features to a future partner, but that they were also capable of keeping the faces of the dead alive. In other words, Irene's painted portrait could change its function: from now on it would commemorate her.⁴⁶ As I will show, it seems that the painting was even adapted for this change of function, and that of Emilia, too.

Firstly, something needs to be said at this point about the portraits' curious genesis. As has been mentioned above, they were painted shortly after the family arrived in Venice. That this is not the whole story, however, is likely

⁴⁴ '... perchè così anche da tutti fusse cognossuta questa lor unione, mai se lasarno veder nè in casa nè for a, se non vestite d'un medesimo pano, d'un medesimo color et forma per confermar negli animi a tuti la conforme union loro et como pari passo camminavano per una instessa strada d'un medesimo voler et animo et una istessa speranza...' Suttina, *Appunti per servire alla biografia d'Irene di Spilimbergo*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ 'E d'Emilia nel volto, e nel sereno/ Lume di gratie eguali in ambe sparte/ Mirar potete anchor la vostra IRENE.' *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 165.

⁴⁶ Giorgio Vasari recalled in the second edition of his *Vite* how the portrait as a memorial had been introduced in Venice: 'Rimaso Giovanni [Bellini] vedovo di Gentile, il quale aveva sempre amato tenerissimamente, andò, ancorchè fusse vecchio, lavorando qualche cosa, e passandosi tempo: e perchè si era dato a far ritratti di naturale, introdusse usanza in quella città, che chi era in qualche grado si faceva o da lui o da altri ritrarre; onde in tutte le case di Vinezia sono molti ritratti, e in molte de' gentiluomini si veggiono gli avi e padri loro insino in quarta generazione, ed in alcune più nobili molto più oltre: usanza, certo, che è stata sempre lodevolissima, eziandio appresso gli antichi.' Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. III, pp. 438-439.

for several reasons. In the first place, there is a fragment from the *Memoriali* written by Zuan Paolo da Ponte which suggests so much.⁴⁷ On 28 June 1560, about half a year after his granddaughter had passed, he added the following passage to his diary:

28 June, 1560... I sent for *messer* Titian for the work he has done on the portrait of the already blessed memory of Irene, which was sketched rather badly by *messer* Zuan Paolo Pace and left imperfect for two years, so that it still remained so when the poor girl passed to the better life. But *messer* Titian, out of friendship for me, undertook the task to finish it and conjoined it so that one can certainly say that if she had been present, one could not have wished for something better. I sent him six Venetian ducats and he was so kind to be satisfied with it, though he deserves much more.⁴⁸

This diary fragment suggests that Da Ponte asked Titian after his granddaughter's death to finish, or retouch the portrait, in order to make it better. That in contrast with Pace, Titian's achievement was all that Da Ponte had hoped for, is not only evident from the passage just quoted but also from a later remark: 'Titian, having her effigy in his mind, has finished and forged her so

⁴⁷ These *Memoriali* are a combination of diary and account book. Nowadays they are still in the possession of descendants of the family living in Venice, and consist of at least six manuscript volumes, of about four hundred pages each, and are largely unpublished. See *Tiziano ritrovato: il ritratto di messer Zuan Paulo da Ponte*, Venice: Antichità Pietro Scarpa 1998; Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 43; and Muraro, 'Il memoriale di Zuan Paolo da Ponte'.

⁴⁸ 'Giugno 28, 1560... mandai a messer Tutian per l'opera per lui fata nel retrato della nostra già benedetta memoria d'Irene abozata assai malamente da Ser Zuan Paulo de Pase et lassata imperfetta per dui anni si che rimase ben che la poverina andò a miglior vita. Ma Messer Tutian per me gratia si tolse il cargo di volerlo finir et conzata talmente che si può dir per certo che se fusse sta presente meglio si non poteva desiderare. Gli mandai ducati 6 viniziani et per sua cortesia se à contenta che merita assai più...' Quoted after Tietze and Tietze-Conrat, 'I ritratti di Spilembergo a Washington', p. 100. See also Ricci, 'Ritratti tizianeschi di G. Paolo Pace', and Venturi, 'Cronaca'. The authenticity of the fragment is somewhat disputed, though. First published by Ferruccio Carlo Carreri, it could not be traced by Hans Tietze and Erika Tietze-Conrat, who noticed that the pages in question had been torn out from the *Memoriali*, and that the table of contents only mentions Pace, not Titian. On the basis of the pictorial evidence, however, they still argue that the contents of the diary fragment are essentially true, and that Titian has indeed retouched the portrait of Irene, but not that of Emilia. They refer to Lodovico Dolce's sonnet 'Pon Titian ogni maggior tua cura', which I discuss below, as additional evidence for their thesis: written sometime between December 1559 and the publication of the memorial volume in 1561, the poem would suggest that Titian had not yet worked on Irene's portrait.

that would he have had her present he could not have done it better.⁴⁹ So, while Pace in the eyes of Da Ponte had left a rather rough draft, Titian finished the portrait so convincingly as if Irene had been present in front of him.

Now this is an extraordinary story. One of two portraits commissioned from Pace, a minor artists working in Titian's manner, would have been improved by Titian himself, at the time already an absolute star. This runs counter to the usual procedure in painters' workshops: the master would start a portrait and his assistants would finish it. Nevertheless, as Tagliaferro and Aikema argue, from the 1540s onwards Titian seems to have re-organized his workshop in a way aiming towards the 'Spilimbergo-model'.⁵⁰

There is another reason for believing Irene's portrait really was finished by another painter after the sitter's death. This is the inclusion of two elements that would have made no sense while the woman was still alive: the palm and the inscription. To the meaning of these two attributes I will pay attention later on in this chapter, when we have learned more about their literary context; for now it suffices to say that the palm, generally connected to martyrdom, signifying the victory over death, and the inscription 'if the fates had allowed', another reference to the sitter's premature end, would be meaningless, or perhaps rather morbid, for a woman in the prime of her life. What is more, close examination of the painting as well as the X-ray photograph indicates that at least the palm is a later addition; it is painted over the column and seems, therefore, not to have been conceived from the start (fig. 63).⁵¹

Although Da Ponte's diary remains silent about the portrait of Emilia, that painting seems to have undergone changes as well. Long ago, Joseph Crowe and Giovanni Battista Cavalcaselle already proposed that the ship on the stormy sea in the background of Emilia's portrait alluded to her sister's death; technical examination now confirms their idea (fig. 65). For it is clear that the ship has been changed: it used to be more upright and its sails used to be hoisted (fig. 66). The clouds, too, give evidence of *pentimenti*. All of this points in one direction: that originally, there was no storm.

⁴⁹ Tietze and Tietze-Conrat, 'I ritratti di Spilembergo a Washington', p. 100.

⁵⁰ Tagliaferro and Aikema, *Le botteghe di Tiziano*, pp. 62-63.

⁵¹ For this and what follows, I refer to the curatorial records of the portrait of Irene and Emilia, as kept in the National Gallery of Art.

To be sure, both portraits are in a seriously bad condition, which makes conclusive statements about their genesis and attribution almost impossible. The paint surfaces have been heavily abraded; a large part of what currently meets the eye is the result of not so sensitive overpaintings. The technical evidence does confirm, however, that both paintings originated in the same workshop, and that both of them were made in a clumsy wet-in-wet technique (which resulted in the bad condition of which we are speaking). An accomplished painter like Titian would certainly not have started the portraits in such a way; but if he would have been confronted with them at a later stage, he could not have done a thing about it.⁵²

All in all, the pictorial and technical evidence allows for a situation in which two painters, or workshops, were involved, first a minor, and later a major; these may be identified with Zuan Paolo Pace and Tiziano Vecellio. Most importantly, their respective involvement thereby not only would have marked two separate phases in the production of the paintings, but also two different functions of the portraits, and, finally, the life and death of one of the sitters.

Titian's Authorship

'Take the most possible care, Titian,' writes Lodovico Dolce in a contribution to Irene's poem collection, 'to lively portray her in a living, life-giving design'.⁵³ His sonnet is an appeal to Titian, arguably the best Venetian portraitist of the sixteenth century, to paint the deceased's image in a manner heretofore never seen. Dolce continues:

As nature never let
a more beautiful thing in this low kingdom,
so is the subject, which overshadows the most famous ones,
only worthy of your hand.

⁵² I here paraphrase Joanna Dunn, assistant painting conservator at the National Gallery of Art, with whom I discussed and studied the Spilimbergo portraits on 14 January, 2010.

⁵³ These are the first and third line of the first stanza. The whole first stanza reads: 'Pon Titian ogni maggior tua cura/ Et unisci i color, l'arte, e l'ingegno/ Per ritrar viva in vivo almo disegno/ Lei, che ne tolse morte acerba e dura'. *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 121.

Represent her divine and celestial face,
the gold, the roses, and the bright white ivory,
and may her eyes really, not fictively, shine.

So that you will not only surpass those that you have surpassed here,
but that, of all the work that you will ever make,
this will be the most rare and most perfect.⁵⁴

Only Titian is up to the task of portraying the most beautiful person nature has ever created, as Dolce argues. In my view, this sonnet should best be read independently from the Washington portraits, with which Titian would most likely have been finished around the time Dolce was writing.⁵⁵ I am discussing the latter's poem for the way it constructs an image of Titian as supreme *auctor*. The poet expresses his hope that the artist will not only emulate works of other painters – which Titian, of course, has already done – but also his own, so that he may show Irene's golden locks, her rosy cheeks and her fair skin and let her real eyes shine.

Dolce's sonnet can be understood within the discourse on the art of painting in Venice around mid-century; indeed, as we have seen, Lodovico Dolce himself was one of the principal participants in this debate. Dolce's poem first asks Titian to invest the painting with life, to compensate, as is the suggestion, for the life that is lost. Secondly, the enumeration of Irene's physical qualities in terms of Petrarchan metaphors like 'gold' and 'roses' makes clear that the portrait should be the depiction of an ideal of female beauty. Titian thus should portray Irene in a painting that is at the same time alive and ideal. As we will see, these two demands turn up again and again in discussions around Irene.

But why, the reader may wonder, all this fuss over the paintings' attribution? Have we not seen in the two preceding chapters that most people using paintings in Venice at the time did not bother at all about their makers? On the other hand, I have also shown how, later in the century, a successful mi-

⁵⁴ 'Che come non fermò giamai natura/ Cosa piu bella in questo basso regno/ Così'l soggetto è solamente degno/ De la tua man, ch'i piu famosi oscura.// Rappresenta il divin celeste aspetto/ L'oro, le rose, e'l terso avorio bianco/ E splendan gli occhi suoi veri, e non finti.// Che non pur vincerei quei, c'hai qui vinti/ Ma di quanti lavor facesti unquanto/ Questo sarà'l piu raro, e piu perfetto.'

⁵⁵ See also above, n. 48.

raculous painting became seen as the product of Titian's brush, although up to then it had been regarded as authorless; this, I think, signals an important change in the way the artist's agency was perceived. The portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo came into being around 1560, at the same moment when Titian came to be regarded as the author of the *Christ Carrying the Cross*. I would like to argue that very similar mechanisms have been at work in the case of Irene's portrait, and will even go further this time, by showing that the artist as the author of a painting, as one of the essential agents connected to the work of art, became one of the very themes around which the discourse on Irene di Spilimbergo after her death developed.

This is not to say that we should not proceed with caution when ascribing the portrait (partially) to Titian. For what do we actually mean to say by claiming it has been finished or retouched by Titian? Or rather: what would sixteenth-century authors have meant when they wrote that a painting was finished by Titian? For one, we have to take into consideration the possibility that it was actually one of his assistants who took care of the painting, and not the master himself.⁵⁶ Although we nowadays attach great value to the autograph, to the idea that the leader and genius of the workshop has produced a work with his own hands, we should not close our eyes to the possibility that this may have been less relevant to sixteenth-century viewers, and that for them other characteristics may have been of importance in deciding whether a painting was by Titian or not.⁵⁷ Writings on painting of the time are of help here. Authors such as Lodovico Dolce, one of Venice's most prominent art

⁵⁶ The activities and nature of Titian's *bottega* have long been in the dark, also as a result of purposeful attempts of the artist himself and his mythographers to present the products of the shop as the achievement of a single mind: see above, Chapter One. For the make-up and character of Titian's workshop, see Giorgio Tagliaferro, 'In Tizians Werkstatt, 1548-1576', in: Sylvia Ferino-Pagden (ed.), *Der späte Tizian und die Sinnlichkeit der Malerei*, Vienna 2007, pp. 68-75, and other recent publications by the same author; most important, however, is Tagliaferro and Aikema, *Le botteghe di Tiziano*. Tagliaferro explicitly connects the growth of the workshop after the artist's journey to Augsburg in the late 1540s to the rising demand for high quality replicas of successful prototypes, which he considers a characteristic development for a court culture (see 'In Tizians Werkstatt').

⁵⁷ For ideas on the autograph, authenticity, and sixteenth-century connoisseurship in general, see Jeffrey M. Muller, 'Measures of Authenticity, the Detection of Copies in Early Literature on Connoisseurship', in: Kathleen Preciado (ed.), *Retaining the Original: Multiple Originals, Copies, and Reproductions: Proceedings of the Symposium, Baltimore, 8-9 March 1985*, Washington 1989, pp. 141-145; Carol Gibson-Wood, *Studies in the Theory of Connoisseurship from Vasari to Morelli*, New York 1988, pp. 11-13 (on Marcantonio Michiel) and pp.14-32 (on Vasari).

critics of his time, consider the depiction of flesh as one of the major achievements of Titian's brush.⁵⁸ Dolce praises the master's altarpiece for S. Niccolò dei Tolentini, Venice, with the following words: 'When Pordenone went to see the afore-mentioned Saint Sebastian, he said, I think that Titian has used flesh in that nude, not colours.'⁵⁹ And more generally he writes about Titian's art: 'he is on a par with Nature, for every one of his figures is alive, moves, and its flesh vibrates.'⁶⁰ And in one of Pietro Aretino's well-known letters, we may read how Aretino lauds the representation of the naked skin in Titian's Young Saint John the Baptist: 'behold the flesh so well coloured, that in its freshness it looks like snow mixed with vermilion, moved by a pulse and warmed by the spirits of life.'⁶¹ Titian's marvellous depiction of landscape is a favourite topic of Aretino as well; we need only think of the letter in which he compares his actual view on the Canal Grande to his friend's colours on canvas.⁶² The more a painting in Titian's vicinity possesses qualities that were so overtly praised by his contemporaries, the more it becomes likely that it was actually regarded as by him. It is even better, of course, when writers actually and explicitly say so. We are therefore lucky to have a passage in Vasari's description of Titian's works that reads as follows:

Also portrayed from life by Titian were a Venetian *cittadino*, a great friend of his, named Sinistri, and another one, named *messer* Paolo da Ponte, of whom he also portrayed a daughter that he had, a most beautiful young woman,

⁵⁸ For Titian's representation of flesh see Daniela Bohde, *Haut, Fleisch und Farbe. Körperlichkeit und Materialität in den Gemälden Tizians*, Emsdetten and Berlin 2002; David Rosand, 'Titian's Saint Sebastians', *Artibus et historiae* 15 (1994), pp. 23-39; Norman E. Land, "'Ekphrasis" and Imagination: Some Observations on Pietro Aretino's Art Criticism', *The Art Bulletin* 68 (1986), pp. 207-217; and also Sophie Couëtoux, 'Les charmes de la chair peinte: Florence, XVIIIe siècle', *Studiolo* 5 (2007), pp. 173-192, here p. 174.

⁵⁹ 'Ilqual San Sebastiano essendo il Pordenone andato a vedere, hebbe a dire, io stimo, che Titiano in quel nudo habbia posto carne, e non colori.' Dolce, *Dialogo della pittura*, pp. 188-190.

⁶⁰ 'Egli [Titian] camina di pari con la Nattura: onde ogni sua figura è viva, si muove, è [sic] le carni tremano.' Dolce, *Dialogo della pittura*, pp. 184-185.

⁶¹ 'Guardate le carni sí ben colorite che, ne la freschezza loro, somigliano neve sparsa di vermiglio, mossa da i polsi e riscaldata da gli spiriti de la vita.' Letter from Pietro Aretino to Massimiano Stampa from Venice, 8 October 1531, Aretino, *Lettere*, vol. I, no. 28, p. 82.

⁶² Letter from Pietro Aretino to Tiziano Vecellio from Venice, May 1544, published in *Lettere*, vol. III, no. 55, pp. 78-80; for a critical reading see Werner Busch, 'Aretinos Evokation von Tizians Kunst', *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 62 (1999), pp. 91-105.

called *signora* Giulia da Ponte, *comare* of this Titian, and similarly *signora* Irene, a most beautiful virgin, woman of letters, music, and well-informed about *disegno*, who, dying about seven years ago, was celebrated by almost all the pens of the writers of Italy.⁶³

Vasari, who wrote this passage probably after his visit to Venice in 1566, presents the portrait of Irene as a work of the master from Cadore. Zuan Paolo Pace has disappeared from the stage.⁶⁴

In the years after Irene's death, her image underwent a thorough metamorphosis. I am using the ambiguous word 'image' on purpose here, for I believe the change not only concerns her physical portrait as painted by Pace and Titian, but also the myth developing around her. This myth tells that, while Zuan Paolo Pace had made a rather dead portrait of a living woman, Titian managed to portray a dead woman as if she had never been more alive.⁶⁵

Such ideas came not out of thin air. No other painter in sixteenth-century Venice, perhaps even in the whole of the Italian peninsula, was praised so widely for the life-giving powers of his brush. Andrea Calmo, perhaps better known as a comrade of Tintoretto's, recalls 'the hands of *ser* Titian, painter, such a profound, magisterial intellect that, with feigned colours, he makes creatures appear on canvas that lack nothing except that they speak and ask for food in order to live'.⁶⁶ While Calmo is certainly one of the more

⁶³ 'Si veggiono anco ritratti di naturale da Tiziano un cittadino viniziano suo amicissimo, chiamato il Sinistri, et un altro nominato messer Paulo da Ponte, del quale ritrasse anco una figliuola che allora aveva, bellissima giovane, chiamata la signora Giulia da Ponte, comare di esso Tiziano, e similmente la signora Irene, vergine bellissima, letterata, musica et incaminata nel disegno, la quale, morendo circa sette anni sono, fu celebrata quasi da tutte le penne degli scrittori d'Italia.' Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. VI, p. 168.

⁶⁴ It is interesting in this context that Pace's *Portrait of Giovanni delle Bande Nere* was ascribed to Titian as well, as early as 1585 (see 'Pace, Gian Paolo' in Thieme-Becker, vol. XXVI, p. 117). The portrait was a gift to Giovanni's son, the later grand duke Cosimo I de' Medici, and is now in the Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. See Karla Langedijk, *The Portraits of the Medici: 15th - 18th Centuries*, Florence 1981, cat. no. 56,6, p. 1028.

⁶⁵ It was not uncommon in the Cinquecento to dismiss dull, stiff or old-fashioned paintings as 'dead': see Locovico Dolce on the works of an earlier generation of Venetian painters, as quoted above, Chapter Two: 'le cose morte e fredde di Giovanni Bellino, di Gentile, e del Vivarino [...] lequali erano senza movimento, e senza rilievo...' Dolce, *Dialogo della pittura*, pp. 186-188.

⁶⁶ '... le man de ser Titian depentor, tanto profundao intel magisterio del far parer suso una tela con colori fenti le creature, che no ghe manca si no che le parla e domanda da manzar per

original critics, remarks of similar import in Venetian literature attesting of the liveliness of Titian's figures are countless.

There are also more specific passages, however, that go into the powers of the brush as an instrument of life, which produces paintings as the male genitals produce children. In his burlesque poem 'Del pennello', which not only means 'On the paintbrush', but also has a sexual connotation, Agnolo Bronzino describes an image of a couple making love, while smartly confounding his account of the creation of the image with its erotic contents. Arguing for variety, he claims that 'it is enough that in order to make it from behind, in front, across, foreshortened, or in perspective one uses the paintbrush for them all.'⁶⁷ And in Pietro Aretino's satiric dialogues on the sex lives of nuns, married women and courtesans, the *Sei Giornate* ('Six Days'), one finds, among many other witty metaphors for the male and female genitals, a paintbrush that is being dipped in the colour cup.⁶⁸ Brushes and colour together make for beautiful paintings, so much is certain.

The metaphor is taken to another level by the poet Luigi Groto (1541-1585), also known as the 'Blind one from Adria' ('il Cieco d'Adria'), a great admirer of Tintoretto, who addressed to the painter the following poem:

So true are the images you paint
that they seem to be formed by nature,
and not feigned by way of art.
So beautiful, and complete are your daughters
that they seem not naturally conceived
but painted by a learned brush.

viver...' Letter from Andrea Calmo to *M. Moscardina d'I Gazanti*, Andrea Calmo, *Le lettere di messer Andrea Calmo*, ed. Vittorio Rossi, Turin 1888, pp. 126-127.

⁶⁷ Quoted after Fredrika H. Jacobs, 'Aretino and Michelangelo, Dolce and Titian: Femmina, Masculo, Grazia', *The Art Bulletin* 82 (2000), pp. 51-67, here p. 53. The translation is hers.

⁶⁸ Jacobs, 'Aretino and Michelangelo, Dolce and Titian', p. 54; see Pietro Aretino, *Sei giornate: ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia (1534): dialogo nel quale la Nanna insegna a la Pippa (1536)*, ed. Giovanni Aquilecchia, Bari 1969, p. 20. For more examples of the brush as penis and on gendered art criticism in general, see Philip L. Sohm, 'Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia', *Renaissance Quarterly* 48 (1995), pp. 759-808.

In order that you produce and feign this well,
without resting you conceive, and paint.⁶⁹

Although the poem starts with a very familiar topos, namely that the painter's works seems to be a product of nature, it takes an interesting turn in the second sentence (verse four) when the topos is reversed and what in reality is the work of nature, now seems a product of art. The last lines can be read as a pun on Tintoretto's characteristic *prestezza*, or quick production.⁷⁰ There is more going on, however: juxtaposing the creation of paintings with the conception of daughters, Groto makes clear these two activities share a common ground. By a most suggestive chiasmus, he makes the reader feel that the daughters are paintings – in the sense of ideal women – and the paintings are the actual living beings: they are the ones invested with the painter's powers of life. In the end, they are more alive than life itself.

But what was it, then, that gave the painter's brush these unexpected powers? As Bernardino Tomitano (1517–1576), who shared a great many friends with Titian, and probably also knew the painter himself, argued, it is the finishing touch that matters most:

... that virtue that gives that same prettiness to beautiful compositions, like the ultimate touches of Michelangelo's chisel give to figures formed by other sculptors, not yet alive and breathing; or, likewise, the ultimate brush strokes of Titian, which in the figures of other painters bring about breath and pulse.⁷¹

⁶⁹ 'Si proprie son le imagini, che fai/ Che da natura sembrano formate/ Non per via d'arte finte./ Si belle, e intere son le figlie, c'hai/ Che non naturalmente generate/ Ma da un dotto pannel paion dipinte./ Pero poi che si ben produci, e fingi/ Senza mai riposar genera, e pingi.' Luigi Groto, *Delle rime ... Nuovamente ristampate, et ricorrette ...* (Venice, 1587), p. 171. The poem is accompanied by the following comment: 'L'Autor mandò questi versi al Tintoretto singolar pittore in Vinegia, e padre di figlie bellissime, e dotate insieme d'ogni nobil virtù.'

⁷⁰ On Tintoretto's *prestezza*, see Una Roman D'Elia, 'Tintoretto, Aretino, and the Speed of Creation', *Word & Image* 20 (2004), pp. 206–218, and Tomas Nichols, 'Tintoretto, Prestezza and the Poligrafi: A Study in Literary and Visual Culture of Cinquecento Venice', *Renaissance Studies* 10 (1996), pp. 72–100.

⁷¹ 'Sopra tutto sia di bella e pura e leggiadra elocutione, laquale è quella virtù, che rende quella istessa vaghezza a i belli componimenti, quale rendono l'ultime impressioni dello scarpello di Michel'agnolo alle figure non be vive e spiranti formate da gli altri scultori: ò gli ultimi tratti di Titiano, che alle figure de gli altri pittori recano la lena e'l polso.' Bernardino Tomitano,

If Tomitano had specifically wanted to refer to the portrait of Irene, made by another painter but enlivened by the touch of Titian's brush, he could not have said it better.

Agency in the Art of Painting

In his *Della historia dieci dialoghi (Ten Dialogues on History)* Francesco Patrizi (1529–1597), a leading philosopher and member of the Accademia della Fama, made a distinction between human action and superterrestrial action. Here as well as below, I will mainly let men connected to this Academy speak, for, as will become clear, the memorial volume for Irene di Spilimbergo is strongly connected to that institution, too. While, in Patrizi's view, human action is bound by time and space, superterrestrial action is free from such conditions. And while human actors need *instruments* to do things – the philosopher comes up with the example of the hammer – the gods can do without.⁷² Applied to the art of painting, in particular to the portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo, it is clear that, in the eyes of sixteenth-century Venetians, this is derived from the former category: it is the product of human action, the action of the great Titian.⁷³ No longer are the origins of the image wrapped in mystery, or traced back to the interference of a divine being: this portrait is generally considered to be the product of the agency of a human being,

Ragionamenti della lingua ... I precetti della rhetorica secondo l'artificio d'Aristotele e Cicerone nel fine del secondo libro nuovamente aggiunti (Venice, 1546), pp. 298–299.

⁷² 'Ogni attione, o publica, o privata ch'ella sia, o di pace, o di guerra, o di popolar sollevamento, è necessario che ella sia fatta da qualche persona: laquale sia l'attore di quell'attione: e senza ilquale non possa ella farsi à patto niuno. Et l'attore sempre si muove ad operar la sua attione, per qualche cagione. Et l'attione humana essendo movimento, e ogni movimento fece[n]dosi in tempo, conviene sempre che l'attore, faccia l'attion sua in tempo; e sia ella dal tempo sempre misurata. Et anchora percioche l'attore è corpo, e si muove per far l'attione, egli è necessario, che ella sia faccia in luogo. [...] Et avegnadio, che gli attori sopracelesti operin le loro operationi, si come fuor di luogo, et sopra al tempo, così senza stromento alcuno.' Francesco Patrizi, *Della historia dieci dialoghi ... ne' quali si ragiona di tutte le cose appartenenti all'istoria, et allo scriverla, et all'osservarla* (Venice, 1561), p. 38r. Patrizi's treatise has been reprinted in Eckhard Kessler (ed.), *Theoretiker humanistischer Geschichtsschreibung: Nachdruck exemplarischer Texte aus dem 16. Jahrhundert*, Munich 1971.

⁷³ As an historian, Patrizi himself was interested in the art of painting, both as source material and as a medium in which to present one's findings: 'Non solamente adunque, [...] l'istoria si scrive, ma et si scolpisce ella, et si dipinge...' Patrizi, *Della historia dieci dialoghi*, p. 14r. On Patrizi's antiquarian interests, see Anthony Grafton, *What was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 130–134.

Tiziano Vecellio, working at a particular place, Venice, in the years around 1560, a particular moment in human, historical time.

The figure of the artist as the principal agent behind a painting was receiving a lot of attention in mid-century Venice. There is a wealth of written sources discussing the phenomenon and related questions, such as: 'Should the subject depicted or the way in which the painter has chosen to depict it be the decisive factor in our judgment of the work?' and 'What aspect of a painting, e.g. its material or maker, should we mention first when we praise a work?'⁷⁴ Let us look at a few fragments. In his *Ragionamento della poesia* (1562), Bernardo Tasso (1493-1569), father of the better known Torquato Tasso, in an apology for the art of poetry rhetorically asks whether the whole of poetry should be held responsible if a few poets write lascivious and inappropriate verses.⁷⁵ He illustrates his point of view with the following, hypothetical, example:

Tell us, please, most benevolent listeners: if Titian, the famous painter, ... had painted [*pingesse*] a lascivious satyr who, from under a shadow or lying on a green meadow, violated a humble maiden, or, in a leafy forest in the falling shadow of the highest trees the obscene intercourse of Venus and Adonis, would you reprimand the beautiful and astonishing art of painting or the lascivious invention of the painter?⁷⁶

In fact, we do not know of works by Titian that conform to Tasso's descriptions; nor is it very likely that the theorist would really have wanted to criticize the painter. For Tasso, member of the Accademia della Fama and

⁷⁴ Other relevant remarks on the topic, which I will not discuss here, have been written by Giulio Camillo Delminio: see his 'Scoltura o pittura lodata' in Giulio Camillo Delminio, *Le idee, ovvero forme della oratione da Hermogene considerate, et ridotte in questa lingua* (Udine, 1594), p. 72v.

⁷⁵ 'Né questo è difetto della poesia ma del poeta, il quale a guisa di malvagio medico dà il veleno in vece della medecina, e dove la vergina mente de' garzonetti d'ottimi costumi adornar dovrebbe, coi vizii la corrompe.' Bernardo Tasso, *Ragionamento della poesia*, ed. Bernard Weinberg, *Trattati di poetica e retorica del Cinquecento*, vol. II, Bari 1970, p. 577.

⁷⁶ 'Diteci per grazia, benignissimi auditori, se Tiziano famosissimo pittore, l'opere del cui pennello in alcuna parte non cedono et in molte avanzano quelle degli antichi, pingesse un lascivo satiro sotto qualche ombra o nel letto di qualche verdeggiante prato una umile verginella violare, o in qualche frondosa selva al rezzo degli altissimi arbori cadente, l'osceno congiugnimento di Venere e d'Adone, riprendereste voi la vaga e meravigliosa pittura o la lasciva invenzione del pittore?' Tasso, *Ragionamento della poesia*, p. 577.

contributor to Irene's memorial volume, Titian was simply the point of reference when painting was concerned.⁷⁷ What he conveys here is that it is an individual artist rather than the whole art that is responsible for a given work.

Claudio Tolomei, a man of letters who seems to have been acquainted with the Accademia della Fama's founder, Federico Badoer, is perhaps more articulate.⁷⁸ In a letter to Sebastiano del Piombo (c. 1485–1547), a painter who started his career in Venice, Tolomei wrote about a portrait of him that Sebastiano was planning to paint:

Me, seeing in your art vividly expressed my image, which will be a continuous stimulus for me to purge my soul from its many faults, not only in that respect that led Socrates to ask of young people that they look into the mirror, but also, more to the point, for seeing you in the midst of many luminous rays of your virtues, which will inflame my soul with a beautiful desire for honour and glory.⁷⁹

What Tolomei is saying with these words, filled with praise, is that his portrait painted by Sebastiano will not only make him know himself – as a mirror does – but that it will also show the character of the one who has painted it, the artist. That is, the portrait will lead the viewer to the topic depicted, its prototype, but it also demonstrates the painter's artistry, and moves the spectator's soul to the imitation of the virtues inherent in that artistry.

That Titian himself was aware of the ongoing debate on authorship seems likely (as has also been suggested in Chapter One), not only because he was personally acquainted with many Venetian *letterati* of his time, among whom Bernardo Tasso, but also because he seems to have expressed his view on the matter. A paraphrase of his words has been recorded by a visitor to his work-

⁷⁷ See Giancarlo Alfano, *Dioniso e Tiziano: La rappresentazione dei "simili" nel Cinquecento tra decorum e sistema dei generi*, Rome 2001, pp. 221–222.

⁷⁸ Tolomei wrote a eulogy of Badoer: Lina Bolzoni, 'Il "Badoaro" di Francesco Patrizi e l'Accademia veneziana della Fama', *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 158 (1981), pp. 71–101, here p. 73.

⁷⁹ 'Me, vedendo ne l'arte vostra espressa vivamente la mia imagine, la quale mi sarà continuo stimolo a purgare l'anima di molti suoi mancamenti; non solo per quel rispetto, per lo qual Socrate voleva che i gioveni si guardasseno ne lo specchio; ma molto più, perche vedendovi dentro molti luminosi raggi de le vostre virtù, mi s'accenderà l'anima a bel desiderio d'honore, e di gloria.' Letter from Claudio Tolomei to Sebastiano Luciani from Rome, 20 August 1543, published in Claudio Tolomei, *De le lettere ... lib. sette. Con una breve dichiarazione in fine di tutto l'ordin de l'ortografia di questa opera* (Venice, 1547), p. 75.

shop.⁸⁰ When Francisco de Vargas, ambassador to Charles V, asked the painter why he painted these large stains with these heavy brushes (referring to the master's *pittura di macchia*, characteristic of his late style), Titian answered that he did not want to imitate other celebrated painters and that he rather developed his own manner in order to acquire fame with innovation.⁸¹ Whether Titian really said something like this or not, the anecdote makes sufficiently clear that his circle believed it was not only the prototype that was present in a painting painted by Titian: the painter himself also left his mark, put something of himself in his work, 'proclaimed his presence'.⁸²

Paintings as Relics?

In a commentary to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lodovico Dolce wrote that 'in old times the images of the great Gods (like in our days venerably those of the Saints) were honoured not for the sake of their artists, but for the resemblance of those whom they represented,' thereby suggesting that the importance of the painting's prototype was something of the past.⁸³ And indeed, so far we have seen much praise for the artist responsible for the portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo, for the mastery of Titian's brush, and hardly any for its prototype, Irene. Nonetheless, a pressing question remains as yet unanswered. If Titian's brush really was the only thing that mattered, why then would Da Ponte not have asked the master to make a new painting altogether, and let him have a free rein? Why then would he instead have insisted on the adaptation of an already existing, minor work?

⁸⁰ See especially D'Elia, *The poetics of Titian's religious paintings*, pp. 184–185.

⁸¹ Letter from Antonio Pérez, secretary of state under Philip II: '... respondió el Ticiano: Señor, yo desconfié de llegar á la delicadeza y primor del pincel de Micael Angelo, Urbino, Corregio y Parmesano, y que cuando bien llegase, sería estimado tras ellos, ó tenido por imitador dellos; y la ambicion, natural no ménos á mi arte que á las otras, me hizo echar por caminio nuevo que me hiciese célebre en algo, como los otros lo fuéron por el que siguieron.' Quoted from David Rosand, 'Tintoretto e gli spiriti nel pennello', in: *Jacopo Tintoretto nel quarto centenario della morte: atti del convegno internazionale di studi*, eds. Paola Rossi and Lionello Puppi, Venice 1996, p. 134, n. 15; with additional bibliography.

⁸² A formulation of David Rosand (see Rosand, 'Tintoretto e gli spiriti nel pennello', p. 134).

⁸³ '... le imagini de i gran Dij (come a giorni nostri dignissimamente quelle de' Santi) venivano honorate ne gli antichi tempi non per cagion de gli Artefici loro, ma per la sembianza di coloro, che esse appresentavano.' Lodovico Dolce, *Le trasformazioni ... di nuovo ristampate e ... ricorrette et in diversi luoghi ampliate ...* (Venice, 1553), p. iijr.

Above, I already noted that the portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo changed its function with her death. It therefore had to be adjusted to a more ideal image, I would like to argue, that came into being as soon as she passed away. Such a procedure is not uncommon. With Christian saints, for example, comparable things happened. As Hans Belting shows, when the holy Francis of Assisi had died, his 'image' constantly had to undergo changes. New biographies of Francis corrected earlier ones to the extent that the older texts had to be destroyed in order to hide the differences. The same was true for ceremonial images of the saint. Both texts and images had to be convincing, they had to be believed in, and therefore had to be adapted to the desirable perception people were supposed to have of the saint.⁸⁴ This same mechanism may have urged Zuan Paolo da Ponte to commission Titian to work on Irene's portrait; for, when time passed and the memory of her real, and only too human person faded, another perhaps more divine, more beautiful image of Irene came into being with which her painted portrait had to keep up. The best way to hide discrepancies was to ask Titian simply to overpaint the earlier image. Although we should not neglect the fact that this was the better solution from an economic point of view, too, we may wonder whether money was Da Ponte's only motive.⁸⁵

For was Pace's portrait, despite all its weaknesses, not already too much cherished to throw it away? In spite of its low quality, there was something about the portrait that would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a substitute for: the portrait was painted from life and, at least partially, in Irene's presence.⁸⁶ This added to the painting's truthfulness, and also had the effect

⁸⁴ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 13.

⁸⁵ As he noted in his diary, Da Ponte paid Titian six ducats for his retouches; while for two completely new portraits, commissioned from the same artist in 1534, he was charged 10 and 20 ducats respectively (in which were not included the costs for the *lapis lazuli* necessary for the already most expensive of the two). See *Tiziano ritrovato: il ritratto di messer Zuan Paolo da Ponte*, Venice 1998.

⁸⁶ Again, Da Ponte's *Memoriali* are an important source: the reason Titian charged varying amounts for the two 1534 portraits was that he could stay in his workshop for the first, of Da Ponte himself; for the second on the contrary, a depiction of Da Ponte's daughter Giulia, he had to come visit the young lady at home, as befitted women of her class. See Book C, entry of 8 March 1534, cited after *Tiziano ritrovato*. It is likely that the portrait of Irene was produced according to the same painterly practice; that is, that Pace in order to make an outline for the portrait visited the young woman at home.

that something of her presence was literally left in the picture. The painting had a relic-like quality.

In the period itself, images were sometimes defined as relics, too. But not necessarily as relics of the depicted persons. The following words, which Pietro Aretino addressed to Michelangelo, are an eloquent example: ‘But why, oh lord, do you not remunerate my enormous devotion, I who bow to your heavenly quality, with a relic of those drawings that to you do not mean that much?’⁸⁷ While, according to Aretino, Michelangelo did not value his drawings much, to Aretino they were a relic of Michelangelo’s genius. This again brings us to the figure of the artist. Regarding the portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo, it seems safe to conclude that Titian’s life-giving touch had invested Irene’s portrait with relic-like power. A relic of whom or of what, however, has, for a little while longer, to remain open.

The Poem Collection

We will now leave the paintings behind and move over to poetry; for we have hardly paid any attention yet to the *Rime di diversi nobilissimi, et eccellentissimi autori*, or, in other words, Irene’s memorial collection.

Who were responsible for the collection? Let us start with the man known as the principal initiator. One of the most significant people in Irene’s circle of noblemen, *letterati* and artists was Giorgio Gradenigo (1522-1600). As the inheritor of some estates in the vicinity of Cividale, just like Spilimbergo located near Udine in the Friuli region, he may have known Irene’s family from an early date.⁸⁸ We know for certain that he was a close friend of Irene’s mother Giulia, as is shown by their correspondence.⁸⁹ He was a powerful

⁸⁷ ‘Ma perché, o signore, non remunerate voi la cotanta divozion di me, che inchino la celeste qualità di voi, con una reliquia di quelle carte che vi son meno care?’ Aretino, *Lettere*, vol. III, no. 52, pp. 74-75, here p. 75. See also Julius Held, ‘The Early Appreciation of Drawing’ in: *Acts of the Twentieth International Congress of the History of Art: New York, September 7 - 12, 1961*, ed. Ida E. Rubin, vol. III, *Latin American Art, and the Baroque Period in Europe*, Princeton 1963, pp. 72-95, here p. 81.

⁸⁸ Schutte, ‘The Image of a Creative Woman’, p. 46; for an extensive bibliography see D.B.I., s.v. ‘Gradenigo, Giorgio’. On Giorgio Gradenigo and his literary production see also Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni veneziane*, vol. II, pp. 35-40.

⁸⁹ Four letters from Gradenigo to Da Ponte are published in Acquaro Graziosi, *Giorgio Gradenigo* (numbers XIII-XVI). Two from Da Ponte to Gradenigo are in Bartolomeo Zucchi (ed.), *L’Idea del segretario ... rappresentata in un trattato dell’imitatione e nelle lettere di principi e d’altri*

man, starting his career as *podestà* of Portogruaro, on the *terraferma* north-east of Venice (1552-1553), and later on became a senator. A lover of poetry both ancient and modern and of music and painting, he was a member of Venice's only official sixteenth-century academy, the *Accademia Veneziana* or *della Fama* (1557-1561).⁹⁰ Gradenigo wrote and published poetry, which he exchanged with fellow poets and, according to the modern editor of his work, in his spare time he liked to paint.⁹¹

The nature of Gradenigo's relationship with Irene di Spilimbergo, sixteen years his junior, is not particularly clear. That he, as a friend of Irene's mother, was quite fond of the young woman seems beyond doubt, but if this was just friendship or whether something more was going on is difficult to say. One of his friends called Irene Gradenigo's 'beloved, and most beloved Milady, or lady, or woman, whatever she is,' and several modern commentators have indeed assumed a romantic relationship between the two.⁹² Benedetto Croce, on the other hand, characterized Gradenigo as a man 'who was possibly in that delicate and sweet state of mind between friend and lover'.⁹³ A number of poems in the memorial collection, specifically addressed to its initiator, and those poems under the heading of '*incerto*', generally ascribed to Gradenigo, also attest of his affection for Irene.⁹⁴ Be this all as it may, loving

signori (Venice, 1606); another part of their correspondence is in Bernardino Pino (ed.), *Della nuova scelta di lettere di diversi nobilissimi huomini et eccellentissimi ingegni, scritte in diverse materie, fatta da tutti i libri fin' hora stampati, libro secondo* (Venice, 1582).

⁹⁰ On the Accademia della Fama, see Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, pp. 114-122, with further bibliography. Gradenigo was one of the regents of the Academy's *Stanze degli humanisti* (see Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni veneziane*, vol. II, p. 36, who quotes from the *Istromento di Deputazione* (1560), and also attests of Gradenigo's friendship with Federico Badoer (1519-1593), founder of the Academy).

⁹¹ Acquaro Graziosi, *Giorgio Gradenigo*, pp. 20-21.

⁹² '... amata, e amatissima Madonna, o donna, o femina, che ella si sia...' Letter from Lodovico Novello to Francesco degli Oratori, undated, published in Francesco Turchi (ed.), *Delle lettere facete et piacevoli di diversi grandi huomini et chiari ingegni, scritte sopra diverse materie, libro secondo* (Venice, 1575), pp. 349-353, quoted from Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 46.

⁹³ Croce, 'Irene di Spilimbergo', pp. 365-366. That the two were engaged to be married is concluded by Zotti, *Irene di Spilimbergo*, p. 30.

⁹⁴ Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni veneziane*, vol. II, p. 37; Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', pp. 46-47. Interesting in this regard is also the following passage from Lodovico Dolce's 1568 edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: 'V'è Giorgio Gradinico, a cui le rime/ vegg'ir seconde l'altrui lodi prime./ Questi il vago, leggiadro e puro canto,/ che fermar l'onde a l'armonia poteo,/ vòlto soavemente al nuovo pianto/ dolce non men che quel del tracio Orfeo,/ chiamando Irene che nel suo bel manto/ stupir già l'arte e la natura feo,/ e per suoi tanti pregi in

Irene did not refrain him from loving her mother with equal passion, as is suggested for example by a letter to her in which he begs her to move from Spilimbergo to Venice, that city in which ‘live so many of your kin, so many of your friends, who wait for you, who call for you, who breathe the desire to see you and be with you’.⁹⁵ Although Gradenigo is not officially connected to the memorial volume, his name is mentioned in the Latin dedication, which shows that he is the real motor behind the volume.⁹⁶ The several poems of condolence addressed to Gradenigo in the volume further underline this.⁹⁷ Based on our knowledge of his friendship with Giulia da Ponte, we may hypothesize that he closely cooperated with her and her father and the rest of the Spilimbergo clan, with which Giulia stayed connected through her second marriage.⁹⁸

As far as the practical execution of the volume is concerned, it was published with Domenico and Giovanni Battista Guerra, two brothers originally from the Friuli – not coincidentally the same region as Gradenigo’s and Irene’s – who established themselves in Venice probably only one year before the volume was published.⁹⁹ The editor of the volume was Dionigi Atanagi, who was a poet and joined several literary academies in Rome before editing his first collection *De le lettere di tredici huomini illustri* (‘Letters of thirteen illustrious men’; 1554). When he moved to Venice in 1559, he soon found a

ciel felice,/ splende più assai, che la gran Laura e Bice...’ Lodovico Dolce, *Le transformationi ... tratte da Ouidio* (Venice, 1568), p. 20v.

⁹⁵ ‘... nella quale vivono tanti vostri parenti, tanti vostri amici, che v’aspettano, che vi chiamano, che sospirano nel desiderio di vedervi e d’esser con voi’. Acquaro Graziosi, *Giorgio Gradenigo*, letter XVI.

⁹⁶ ‘Ea fuit IRENES Spilimbergiae virtus; ea est Georgii Gradonici gratia, et auctoritas apud omnes, qui aliquo ingenii lumine hodie in Italia clarent...’ *Diversonum praestantium poetarum carmina in obitu Irenes Spilimbergiae*. See Schutte, ‘The Image of a Creative Woman’, p. 46 and further; D.B.I., vol. 58, pp. 304–306, s.v. ‘Gradenigo, Giorgio’.

⁹⁷ Schutte, ‘The Image of a Creative Woman’, p. 47; Francesco Turchi (ed.), *Delle lettere facete et piacevoli di diversi grandi huomini et chiari ingegni, scritte sopra diverse materie, libro secondo* (Venice, 1575), pp. 349–353.

⁹⁸ For the second marriage, see Schutte, ‘The Image of a Creative Woman’, p. 44. For the family’s connection to the poem collection, see also Corsaro, ‘Dionigi Atanagi e la silloge per Irene di Spilimbergo’, p. 47.

⁹⁹ Fernanda Ascarelli and Marco Menato, *La tipografia del ‘500 in Italia*, Florence 1989, s.v. ‘Guerra Domenico e Giovanni Battista’. The Guerra brothers were active from 1560 to 1600, so Irene’s volume, published in 1561, must have been one of their first Venetian commissions. For their bibliography, see Ester Pastorello, *Tipografi, editori, librai a Venezia nel secolo XVI*, Florence 1924, no. 235.

job as secretary to the Accademia della Fama, which is most likely where he met Gradenigo. That it was not Atanagi's own initiative is clear: not a nobleman, he was a mere executive, and, belonging to a lower social class than Irene, he will hardly have known her.

Finally, there are of course the poets that contributed; no less than 143 have attached their names to the project.¹⁰⁰ Among them are such well-known figures as Benedetto Varchi, Francesco Patrizi, and the young Torquato Tasso, but also many lesser known *letterati*. Part of them can be connected directly to Gradenigo, but others will have been contacted indirectly; I also suspect that Atanagi's network in Rome has been of much help. What is more, it has been argued that Gradenigo and Atanagi were not the only ones to invite poets to contribute; a number of poems literally contains requests from one poet to another to participate, or a response to such a request. These poems thus suggest an expanding movement engaging ever more poets, in the end encompassing the whole Italian peninsula.¹⁰¹

Although it is related to several literary genres of the time, the volume for Irene was unique at the moment of its publication. To be sure, it would not have come into being in this form without the huge popularity of (exemplary) women in sixteenth-century literature; and also in terms of funerary poetry the volume has a number of important precedents.¹⁰² Yet, never had a recently deceased woman been honoured on such a scale; and never had the genre of the poem collection been combined with biography. So why this

¹⁰⁰ For a list of all contributors, see Schutte, 'Commemorators of Irene di Spilimbergo'.

¹⁰¹ Favretti, 'Una raccolta di rime del cinquecento', p. 553.

¹⁰² For the volume's literary context, see Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', pp. 47-49. As to precursors in the funerary genre, one may think of the rather obscure collection for Livia Colonna (see Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 48) or the volume for the poet Serafino Aquilano (d. 1500). However, most important perhaps, certainly in the Venetian context, was the collection of poems written in memory of Valerio Marcello, son of the patrician Jacopo Antonio Marcello, who died, still a child, in 1460. See Margaret L. King, 'The Death of the Child Valerio Marcello: Paternal Mourning in Renaissance Venice', in: Maryanne Cline Horowitz, Anne J. Cruz, and Wendy A. Furman (eds.), *Renaissance Rereadings: Intertext and Context*, Urbana and Chicago 1988, pp. 205-224. See also Corsaro, 'Dionigi Atanagi e la silloge per Irene di Spilimbergo', p. 43, and Armando Petrucci, *Writing the Dead: Death and Writing Strategies in the Western Tradition*, translated by Michael Sullivan, Stanford 1998, pp. 81-84. Carlo Dionisotti considered the Aquilano-collection as an important moment in the unification of Italian poetry (Carlo Dionisotti, 'Niccolò Liburnio e la letteratura cortigiana', *Lettere Italiane* 14 (1962), pp. 33-58, here p. 49); in that sense it makes an interesting comparison with Irene's volume, too.

remarkable initiative? Clearly, not all participants had heard of Irene di Spilimbergo before they were approached. Perhaps surprisingly, this is not only true for some of the more reputed poets in the volume, but also for a number of less talented figures. In fact, it seems that literary quality was not the initiators' main objective. This is at least suggested by Dionigi Atanagi in a letter to Bernardino Pino, in which he expresses his disappointment about the result:

They are rhymes and Latin verses; if you happen to find among them less perfect things, you should not be surprised, for one could not have it done otherwise; the gentlemen who had it printed wanted it this way, partly to expand the book, partly not to offend those authors from whom they had asked compositions.¹⁰³

Antonio Corsaro, pointing to the illustrious rank of some other people celebrated in poem collections vis-à-vis the, what he calls, 'peripheral' character of Irene, proposes that the volume is an attempt of members of the in 1561 suppressed Accademia della Fama to continue their activities, albeit in a less risky, conspicuous way.¹⁰⁴ Although more evidence would be necessary to fully prove this point – at what moment were the first initiatives taken, for example, and how does this relate to the fall of the academy? – it is certain that many of the academy's former members were involved in the volume. Whether it was consciously intended or not, the project resulted in a poem collection by 'Accademia della Fama & Friends', and is still known today mainly because it provides such a fine and complete overview of tendencies in Italian lyric of the time.¹⁰⁵ Another intended or unintended effect was that Irene's name was dispersed all over the peninsula, and not only hers – it is significant that the volume's title not only mentions Irene but also the other women of her family: 'In morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilim-

¹⁰³ 'Sono rime et versi latini; se tra loro troverete de le cose per avventura meno perfette, non ve ne maraviglierete, perciocchè non s'è potuto fare altrimenti, havendo così voluto i gentilhuomini che gli hanno fatto stampare, parte per crescere il libro, parte per non fare ingiuria agli autori, che richiesti l'hanno composto.' Letter from Dionigi Atanagi to Bernardino Pino, 13 September 1561, quoted after Corsaro, 'Dionigi Atanagi e la silloge per Irene di Spilimbergo', p. 45.

¹⁰⁴ Corsaro, 'Dionigi Atanagi e la silloge per Irene di Spilimbergo', p. 46.

¹⁰⁵ See Favretti, 'Una raccolta di rime del cinquecento', pp. 548 and 550.

bergo', '... Lady Irene of the Ladies of Spilimbergo'.¹⁰⁶ The memorial collection has therefore not only extended and enhanced the Italian republic of letters, but also connected the Spilimbergo family name with it.

In what follows, I will discuss parts of the volume in more detail, focusing particularly on the ways in which the volume constructs an image of Irene.

The Volume as Portrait

Before I come to the portrait-like character of the memorial volume in its totality, I would like to pay some attention to Irene's biography, which contains an actual description of her features.¹⁰⁷ In fact, the biography ends with it, after the record of her death which has already been discussed above. The complete passage reads as follows:

Besides these many excellent beauties of the spirit, referred to above, also her body was beautiful. And she was so amiable and gracious in her face, and in all the movements of her person, that it was almost impossible that a man would meet her in the street and not stop to look at her, praising to himself the beauty and the graces that appeared in her in every part. She was of mediocre stature, but, as far as the parts are concerned that show themselves to the eye, very well formed all over her body. She had a well measured face, full of a certain loveliness, and of blood so sweet and benign that she was most pleasant to look at. Her eyes, furthermore, the most noble part, and the most beautiful of her body – their magnitude, their colour, their liveliness, their sweetness of spirits, the way they were placed in their sockets, and also the shadows proceeding from the length of their lids, formed and placed so well – from them came a wonderful feeling of joy. As if they were burning she would send a couple of loving beams right into the heart of onlookers, moved their blood, and made them willing to receive and keep the image of her face for a long time. Often it was said that she had wizard's eyes [*occhi*

¹⁰⁶ Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, titlepage. The extra 'Delle Signore di Spilimbergo' was also added to Giulia da Ponte's name, Irene's mother, in Francesco Sansovino's *Venetia Città Nobilissima* (see above, n. 19). This addition to the name was probably meant to lay emphasis on the inheritance of the title.

¹⁰⁷ Although the collection as a whole was published only once, the biography has been republished in an anthology of orations in the vernacular, compiled by Francesco Sansovino: *Delle orationi volgarmente scritte da diuersi huomini illustri de tempi nostri* (Venice: Altobello Salicato, 1584), pp. 107r-110v. See Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 45.

maghi]. That force of her eyes was very well-known to herself; for almost always she kept them wide open and accompanied them with a certain sweet smile, coming from a most beautiful mouth. She controlled them with a majesty both honest and pleasant, and taking the liberty to bend them towards anyone, with the behaviour of a grave person, and with an honest disposition, so that in one and the same moment [people] would get to know her as a most beautiful, graceful, and at the same time honest girl, and, because of her singular qualities, worthy of being the wife of a prince.¹⁰⁸

At first, the biographer uses quite general terms to describe Irene and praise her beauties: men could not but look round at her in the streets, she had a shapely body and a well-proportioned face. But then he turns to one specific part of her body, her eyes; their praise takes up the lion's share. We do not learn how long her neck was, how her candid skin alternated with the rose blushes on her cheeks, how her hair shimmered like gold and her teeth were like pearls – in short, all those highly appreciated female qualities that we would not only expect on the basis of our knowledge of the ideals of female beauty current at the time, but also because of her painted portrait discussed above.¹⁰⁹ No, all we hear about are her eyes.¹¹⁰ According to the biographer,

¹⁰⁸ 'Oltre a tante, e così egregie bellezze d'animo di sopra accennate; era anco bella di corpo: e tanto amabile, e gratiosa nel volto, e in tutti i movimenti della persona, che era quasi impossibile, c'huomo l'incontrasse per istrada, e non si fermasse a contemplarla, lodando tra se la beltà e le gratie, che da ogni parte apparivano in lei. Era di statura mediocre, ma per quello, che mostravano le parti soggette all'occhio, formatissima di tutto il corpo. Haveva il volto ben misurato, pieno d'una certa venustà, e d'un sangue così dolce, e benigno, che era soavissimo a contemplare. Gli occhi poi, parte più nobile, e più bella del corpo suo, erano per grandezza, per colore, per vivacità, per dolcezza di spiriti, per incassamento, e così per ombra procedente dalla lunghezza della palpebre, tanto ben elementari, e posti, che da loro scendeva maraviglioso diletto. Da quali mandando quasi da accesa face alcuni raggi amorosi ne' cuori de riguardanti, moveva loro il sangue, e gli rendeva disposti a ricevere, e conservar per lungo tempo l'immagine del volto suo. Onde spesso l'era detto, che ella havea gli occhi maghi. Questa forza de gli occhi suoi era molto ben conosciuta da lei, perché quasi sempre li teneva ben aperti, e accompagnandoli con certo suo dolce riso, procedente da bellissima bocca, li reggeva con maestà insieme honesta, e soave, usando la libertà del volgerli verso ciascuno. Con portamento della persona grave e con l'habito honesto, che ad un tempo istesso la facevano conoscere per donzella bellissima, gratiosissima, honestissima. E per le sue singolari qualità degna d'esser moglie di Principe.'

¹⁰⁹ See the studies by Cropper as in n. 38.

¹¹⁰ Some commentators have already pointed to the neoplatonic character of the eyes' description, and especially of their designation as *maghi*, 'wizard-like' or 'magical'. Corsaro, 'Dionigi Atanagi e la silloge per Irene di Spilimbergo', p. 47; Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 55.

these eyes are the most noble and beautiful element of Irene's body. It is the way they look, but also the way Irene looks with them – that is, she perfectly knows how to use them to maximum effect; she pierces the hearts of the people around her. Such observations should be understood in connection with sixteenth-century ideas of vision and the working of the eyes.¹¹¹ For early modern Italians the eye arguably was the most important of the five senses. As Stuart Clark explains, a particularly rich source of thought regarding the eyes was poetry, especially Petrarchan and Neo-Platonic love poetry. The idea that love caught the lover through the eyes was an old theme. The eye was both the cause and the curse of love; besides being a 'gate to the soul and a choice object of worship' it was also dangerous, possessing the lover and never letting go.¹¹²

But besides the relation with love, the eye also has an unmistakable connection with agency in general. The opened, shining eye was the organ reserved exclusively to those capable of acting. Already in antiquity the eyes had this special function. In ancient literature and mythology, gods were recognized by their shining, sparkling eyes, and there often was an intimate connection between their visual faculty and their powers – when a god was (temporarily) blinded, he was unable to exercise his might.¹¹³ The same was true of the gods' images, whose eyes were believed to follow people within their field of vision, or even damage them, blind or paralyze them in case of eye contact. Irene's friends will certainly have been familiar with stories like these, for they appear in many classical writings, among others with popular authors like Homer and Pliny.¹¹⁴ And in case these stories of the antique eye had not managed to reach them, they were certainly aware of the importance of the eyes in their own Christian cult images – as we have seen in Chapter One – in which the painting in of the eyes is, as David Freedberg puts it, 'the

¹¹¹ For early modern theories of vision, see Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture*, Oxford and New York 2007.

¹¹² Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, pp. 22-23.

¹¹³ Deborah Steiner, *Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought*, Princeton 2001, p. 167 and further.

¹¹⁴ See, for example, accounts of recognitions in Homer's *Iliad*, I.200 and III.397; or a passage in Pliny's *Natural History* 36.16 for an image of Artemis that looked severe when a person entered her domain and glad when she was left alone again; see also the story of several cult statues that blind the viewers less they turn their gaze away (Pliny, *Natural History* 36.32). For these and many other examples see Steiner, *Images in Mind*, p. 172 and further.

last stage of making an image, and the first stage of making it operative'.¹¹⁵ The relation between eyes and animation, both in images and actual human beings, was a very widespread idea.¹¹⁶

The description of Irene's appearance which concludes her biography can thus be read on several levels. First, as the biographer himself signals, it complements our picture of her, heretofore largely consisting of her character or interior, with information about her outward features. Secondly, it tries to explain one of the reasons of her power over people, and thus, one of the *raisons d'être* of the memorial volume itself. But thirdly, we would wrong this passage if we would interpret it as a mere description; on the contrary, it should be regarded as a portrait in its own right. Giving this much attention to Irene's eyes, the readers almost see them in front of them, and thereby Irene becomes present in her own book. With these lines on the eyes the poem collection is given a face.

*'La mia vera effigie'*¹¹⁷

That not only the description discussed above, but also a collection of poems can be considered as a sort of portrait, is an idea that was not at all uncommon in Irene's environment. Contributors to the volume allude to it, like Lodovico Dolce: 'So make with pen and ink a living portrait on such worthy paper...'¹¹⁸ And in the seventeenth century Giovanni Baglione would write about Irene that '[Huomini] Virtuosi sang of her death on paper with a speaking art of painting.'¹¹⁹ On the following pages I will give an overview of ideas about the literary portrait; ideas that were circulating among Irene's friends.

¹¹⁵ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, p. 51.

¹¹⁶ Freedberg provides examples throughout his book. See also Gell, *Art and Agency*, chapter 7.7.

¹¹⁷ See verse 7 of Celio Magno's sonnet 'Non de la spoglia mia terrena, e frate', as written down in the autograph manuscript B.N.M. It. IX. 171 (= 6092), *Rime di Celio Magno*, c. 4.

¹¹⁸ 'Fate adunque con penna, e con inchiostro/ Vivo ritratto in cosi degne carte...' Lodovico Dolce in a sonnet responding to Giovan Maria Verdizotti, from Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 84. For Verdizotti, see below, n. 134.

¹¹⁹ 'E sin nell'ultimo nostro secolo leggiamo d'Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo di questi artificii sì studiosa, che nella sua maniera giunse ad imitare l'eccellenza del Titiano, e la sua morte da' Virtuosi in carte con loquace pittura fu cantata.' Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori scultori et architetti dal pontificato di Gregorio 13. del 1572 in fino a' tempi di papa Urbano Ottavo nel 1642* (Rome, 1642), p. 92.

The idea that words, just like real images, should appeal to the senses was old and widespread.¹²⁰ This is what Giulio Camillo points to when he claims that no poem that does not bring forth colours like in flowers, or agreeable sounds, sweet odours, pleasant flavours or tangible softness, will be listened to with attention.¹²¹ Poetry should appeal to the senses; it is paramount that it produces images, and brings the people and things it is about, vividly before the eyes. This is an important step towards the idea that words can portray just like images.

As to portraiture, some writers claim that poetry, or text in general, is in fact much better suited to it than painting, or sculpture, for that matter. Thus, Paolo Manuzio (1512-1574), humanist and son of the famous Aldo Manuzio, and, what is more, typographer of the Accademia della Fama, writes in a letter to Pietro Aretino:

Do not boast about Titian, having portrayed you in a divine, heretofore unknown manner with colours from life; or about Sansovino, or Danese, who know how to sculpt you with their artistic hand in a living form: for of the two images of yours, the less beautiful is that of your body. For many years, the art of painting may preserve it, and sculpture even for ages, but, in the end, conquered by the force of time like all other things, it will have spoilt, and be consumed. Your real image, the most perfect one, and with even more resplendent beauty, is that of your soul; and that will last forever. For you yourself paint it, and you yourself sculpt it, and every day it gets better with new works, all portraits of the own invention of your mind, all wonderful; you represent, thus liberating yourself from the cruel tyranny of voracious time.¹²²

¹²⁰ The rhetorical concept of 'enargeia' is important here. See above, Introduction.

¹²¹ '... nessuna compositione poetica serà mai con attentione ascoltata, se non porgerà piacere ad alcuno de' sensi, mettendoli davanti ò colori, come ne' fiori, nell'herbe, ò il altri vaghi corpi, ò odori soavi, ò gusti dilettevoli, ò uditi piacevoli, ò tangibili molli, sì che paia leggendo, ò vedendo, vedere odorare, gustare, udire, ò toccare...' Giulio Camillo Delminio, *Le idee, ovvero forme della oratione da Hermogene considerate, et ridotte in questa lingua* (Udine, 1594), p. 87r.

¹²² 'Non si vanti ne Titiano di havervi con divina, ne mai conosciuta maniera di colori dal vero ritratto; ne il Sansovino, o il Danese di sapervi con artificiosa mano scolpire in viva forma: [...] percioche delle due vostre imagini la men bella è quella del corpo: e potrala per molti anni la pittura, potrala per molti secoli la scoltura mantenere: ma finalmente, vinta dalla forza del tempo, come tutte l'altre cose, fie guasta, e consumata. La vostra vera imagine, la più perfetta, e di assai maggior bellezza risplendente, è quella dell'animo, e questa durerà sempre. Percioche

Painted and sculpted images are but perishable copies of an image in itself imperfect, says Manuzio. The real image is that of the soul, and that can only be captured in the poet's works, fruit of his mind's inventions, lasting for eternity. A writer does not need artists to portray him; the real portrait he already has, immaterial and thus impervious to the ravages of time. Whether Aretino, only too well aware of the efficacy of real images, both in the present and in the future, agreed with such an interpretation, is of secondary importance.¹²³ What matters is that propositions on the comparative merits of words and images can be found anywhere in Venetian writings of the time; the debate was obviously on learned people's minds.

This is also shown by a poem of Celio Magno (1536-1602), a fairly well-known poet and member of the Accademia della Fama, too. This composition was to open his own collection of poems and expresses an idea strikingly similar to that of Manuzio:

Of my earthly and fragile remains
I do not care to leave behind an image, painted or sculpted
that promises me help after my death
against his second most cruel arrow.

This humble Muse of mine, that points towards
the immortal part with my sweetest thoughts,
let that be my true image, and let it ardently
spread its wings to follow its fortune.¹²⁴

Again, we encounter the idea that the works of the poet, and not the painted image of his perishable body, really contain his portrait. This is not to say that Magno did not value painted portraits per se – we know, in fact, that he did,

voi medesimo la dipignete, voi medesimo la scolpите, ed ogni di meglio con opere nuove, tutte ritratte da propria inventione della mente vostra, e tutte maravigliose, la rappresentate, liberandovi per questa via dalla crudel tirannide del vorace tempo.' Letter from Paolo Manuzio to Pietro Aretino from Venice, 3 February 1555, from Paolo Manuzio, *Lettere volgari ... divise in quattro libri* (Venice, 1560), pp. 112v-114r, here pp. 113r-v.

¹²³ On Pietro Aretino and his many portraits in paint, print and sculpture, see above, Chapter Two, *Excursus*.

¹²⁴ 'Non de la spoglia mia terrena, e frale/ Curo effigie lasciar pinta, ò scolpita/ Ch'a me prometta dopo morte aita/ Contra il secondo suo più crudo strale.// Questa humil Musa mia, che l'immortale/ Parte co miei pensier più dolci addita/ Sia di me vera imago: e spieghi ardita/ Sua fortuna seguendo intorno l'ale.' B.N.M., It. IX. 158 (= 7333), *Rime di Celio Magno*, c. 1. This is a later version of the sonnet referred to above, n. 117.

having his portrait painted by Domenico Tintoretto.¹²⁵ A poem like this should be read as a move in a larger debate in which participation and continuation were more important than winning and concluding.¹²⁶ It was a debate that not only questioned the relative merits of poetry and painting, but also of the poet and the painter. With an opening statement like this, Celio Magno is making a claim about his art and his own identity as practitioner of that art. Yet at the same time it is the expression of a Platonic ideal, of the ultimate victory of the spiritual over the physical.¹²⁷

In his *Dialogue on love*, the Paduan philosopher and probable friend of Titian Sperone Speroni (1500-1588; fig. 67) at first seems to express an idea very similar to that found in Manuzio's letter or in Magno's sonnet: the whole world is a portrait of God, one of the interlocutors says, but the painter's portrait is less good than all other portraits, for it shows nothing but a person's colour of skin and fails to go beyond that.¹²⁸ One of the other participants in the debate, however, objects, and it is admitted: the portraits of Titian surpass nature and contain a 'non sò che of divinity'.¹²⁹ The dialogue continues:

Aretino does not portray things less well in words than Titian does in colours. I have seen sonnets of his to some of Titian's portraits, and it is not easy to determine whether these sonnets are born from the portraits or the portraits from the sonnets; certainly, together, that is the sonnet and the portrait, they are a perfect thing. The one gives a voice to the portrait; the other, in turn,

¹²⁵ This portrait seems no longer extant.

¹²⁶ For more information on openness and plurality in renaissance discourse in general, see Valeska von Rosen, 'Multiperspektivität und Pluralität der Meinungen im Dialog: zu einer vernachlässigten kunsttheoretischen Gattung', in: Valeska von Rosen and Klaus Krüger (eds.), *Der stumme Diskurs der Bilder: Reflexionsformen des Ästhetischen in der Kunst der Frühen Neuzeit*, Munich 2003, pp. 317-336.

¹²⁷ On the role of platonism in the Accademia della Fama, see especially Lina Bolzoni, 'L'Accademia Veneziana: splendore e decadenza di una utopia enciclopedica', in: Laetitia Boehm and Ezio Raimondi (eds.), *Università, accademie e società scientifiche in Italia e in Germania dal Cinquecento al Settecento*, Bologna 1981, pp. 117-167, here p. 130 and further.

¹²⁸ On Speroni's relation with Titian and with Aretino see D'Elia, *The Poetics of Titian's Religious Paintings*, p. 183.

¹²⁹ Sperone Speroni, *Dialoghi ... nuovamente ristampati et con molto diligenza riveduti, et corretti* (Venice, 1544), p. 24v.

dresses the sonnet with flesh and bones. I believe that being painted by Titian and praised by Aretino is a new regeneration of men.¹³⁰

In this panegyric to his two friends, Speroni repeats the classical topos that painting is mute poetry and poetry is speaking painting.¹³¹ The conclusion of the passage seems to go further, though. Claiming that having one's portrait painted by Titian and being praised in a sonnet by Aretino leads to as much as a 'nuova regenerazione', Speroni refers to the capacity of the portrait-sonnet combination to stand in for a person in all his or her facets. When painting and poetry on the highest level work together, people are reborn.¹³²

In the end, it is not important whether Speroni was right, and Manuzio was wrong – or the other way around. In this playful debate, individual statements are dependent on their contexts; it is the discourse as such that should interest us. What the case of Irene di Spilimbergo makes clear is that we may take this discourse more literally than has been done before.

A Fragmented Image

Be this as it may, the idea that poetry can portray a person also raises a pressing question. For whose portrait is it that Irene's memorial collection really paints? Is it only Irene's, or is it perhaps also a very fragmented portrait of

¹³⁰ 'Lo Aretino non ritragge le cose men bene in parole, che Titiano in colori: et ho veduto de suoi sonetti fatti da lui d'alcuni ritratti di Titiano: e non è facile il giudicare, se li sonetti son nati dalli ritratti, ò li ritratti da loro: certo ambidui insieme, cioè il sonetto, et il ritratto, sono cosa perfetta: questo da voce al ritratto, quello all'incontro di carne, e d'ossa veste il sonetto. Et credo, che l'essere dipinto da Titiano, e lodato dall'Aretino, sia una nuova regenerazione de gli huomini.' Speroni, *Dialoghi*, pp. 24v-25r.

¹³¹ From the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos (c. 556-468 BC) allegedly are the words 'poetry is vocal painting, as painting is silent poetry'; his is one of the first formulations of what would later become the ut-pictura-poesis doctrine. See Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting*, New York 1967, p. 1.

¹³² Speroni once had himself painted by Titian, probably around the same time that the reprint of his *Dialogue on love* was published, as he suggests in his testament of 1569: a portrait 'fatto da Tiziano ora sono 25 anni'. This seems to be the portrait now in the Museo Civico in Treviso; see Mario Pozzi, *Trattatisti del Cinquecento*, vol. I, Milan and Naples 1978, pp. 838-40. He refers to this portrait in a letter to a Florentine courtier of 15 September 1579: 'ragionando con Sua Altezza de' fatti miei, voi ascondeste li miei difetti o se per vero mi ritraggeste dal naturale, come fe' già Tiziano. Il qual ritratto in parole sarebbe questo, che, cominciando dalla età mia, io sono un vecchio di ottanta anni, mezo cieco, mezo sordo, onde io sia noia alli amici nel ragionare e nel salutarli...' Speroni here explicitly completes his portrait from life by Titian with a 'portrait in words'. See also Freedman, *Titian's Portraits through Aretino's Lens*, pp. 103-104, and D'Elia, *The Poetics of Titian's Religious Paintings*, p. 183.

almost 150 poets? For this is what Manuzio and Magno argue: that the poet's works 'depict' the poet; that, in a sense, the poet's verses are his self-portrait. To the question of the self-portrait I will return soon; first let me illustrate my point with what is perhaps one of the most remarkable contributions to the volume, at least as far as its author is concerned. This is a poem from the collection's Latin section, titled *Diversorum praestantium poetarum carmina in obitu Irenes Spilimbergiae* (*Songs of various excellent poets at the death of Irene di Spilimbergo*), allegedly written by no-one less than 'Titianus Vecellius':

"Excellent Irene, you would have fashioned breathing faces
in your pictures, and you on your own would have added the beauty that is
lacking.
If the Fates spinning out your slender vital thread
had not loosened it before its time," a weeping Titian said,
"then you with your artist's hand would have expressed faces in a more
learned way than the ancient Apelles."
Then Death said, "That heaven be decorated with your painting,
is right. You, Titian, are enough for the world."¹³³

Although it is questionable whether Titian actually wrote this poem – most scholars agree that he had not mastered Latin – we need not doubt that he was somehow involved in its conception.¹³⁴ While Jacopo Morelli argued in

¹³³ 'Egregia poteris spirantes fingere vultus/ Pictura, et quod deest addere sola decus,/ Ante diem tibi ni Irene vitalia nentes/ Stamina solvissent tenuia fila Deae./ Dixerat illacrymans prisco Titianus Apelle/ Exprimere artificii doctior ora manu:/ Cum mors caelum, inquit, pictura ornariet huius/ Dignum est: orbi unus tu Titiane sat es.' Atanagi, *Diversorum praestantium poetarum carmina in obitu Irenes Spilimbergiae*, p. 56. The English translation is adapted from Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance "Virtuosa"*, p. 181.

¹³⁴ The question of Titian's degree of education has a long history. It goes at least back to Erwin Panofsky, whose iconological reading of Titian's paintings presupposed the artist's mastering of Latin. In the context of an article on sixteenth-century erotic imagery, Carlo Ginzburg argued against Panofsky and others stating that Titian did not know Latin. See Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian, Mostly Iconographic*, New York 1969, and Ginzburg, 'Tiziano, Ovidio e i codici della figurazione erotica nel Cinquecento'. Recent contributions to this still lively debate are Thomas Puttfarcken, *Titian and Tragic Painting: Aristotle's Poetics and the Rise of the Modern Artist*, New Haven 2005 (see esp. pp. 69-73); D'Elia, *The Poetics of Titian's Religious Paintings*. An exception among current writers is Lionello Puppi, who recently argued that the master did have knowledge of Latin and possessed many (Latin) books: see his 'La biblioteca di Tiziano', in: idem (ed.), *Tiziano: l'ultimo atto*, Milan 2007, pp. 255-266, here pp. 255-256. A possible ghostwriter is Giovan Maria Verdizotti (1525-1600), a writer and painter/printmaker who worked in Titian's workshop, helped the master in writing letters, and

1800 that it was a grandson of the famous painter who is meant here, what I am interested in is that this particular poem carries the artist's name and that his name is thus connected to all those other names of Italian *letterati* of his time.¹³⁵ Titian, the painter whom poets all over Italy tried to emulate in their verses, here, as it is suggested, himself takes up the poet's quill and reflects on his art. While he normally needed others to praise his work, he now does it himself, and that makes this poem into his ultimate hegemony. Strikingly, it is thereby not at all about whom it claims to be: the deceased Irene di Spilimbergo. No, Titian's poem is clearly about Titian: '*orbi unus tu Titiane sat es*'.

Titian's contribution certainly does not stand alone in its self-reflectivity. But while the memorial collection thus certainly gives us portraits of as many poets as have contributed, this is not the only reason why we may consider it as *fragmented*. For also in the image it gives us of Irene, the fragment stands out. We have seen already how Lodovico Dolce praises her 'divine and celestial aspect, the gold, the roses, and the bright white ivory'; other poets, too, acclaim her eyes which sparkled like stars, her beautiful face, her beautiful or learned hand, her locks of gold.¹³⁶ Some also praise her beautiful character, her chastity and innocence, or her poetical and painterly talent, with which she surpassed Apelles, Parrhasius, and Apollo himself; but never do they integrate these aspects into one consistent whole. We can easily see that the praise Irene di Spilimbergo receives is, firstly, very conventional and, secondly, it is always focused on a part of her; never does the reader get a complete image.

also contributed to Irene's memorial collection under his own name (*Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 80 and further). On Verdzotti and his relation with Titian, see Massimo Favilla and Ruggero Rugolo, '“Da un medesimo autore la poesia e la pittura”: Giovanni Mario Verdizzotti, tra Tiziano e Tasso', in: Puppi, *Tiziano: l'ultimo atto*, pp. 55-68; Giorgio Padoan, 'Titian's Letters', in: Susanna Biadene, Antonio Paolucci and Sharon Hecker (eds.), *Titian: Prince of Painters*, Munich 1990, pp. 43-52, here p. 48; Giuseppe Venturini, *Cinquecento minore: O. Ariosti, G.M. Verdzotti e il loro influsso nella vita e nell'opera del Tasso*, Ravenna 1970.

¹³⁵ Marcantonio Michiel, *Notizia d'opere di disegno nella prima metà del secolo 16. esistenti in Padova Cremona Milano Pavia Bergamo Crema e Venezia scritta da un anonimo di quel tempo ...*, ed. Jacopo Morelli, Bassano 1800, pp. 234-235. For the poem in connection with Titian's circle of literate friends, see also Grosso, *Per la fama di Tiziano nella cultura artistica dell'Italia spagnola*, pp. 115-119; Tagliaferro and Aikema, *Le botteghe di Tiziano*, p. 171.

¹³⁶ For Dolce's sonnet, see above, p. 157.

These findings are hardly surprising given the poetical tradition in which the memorial collection stands. One of the first women to be honoured with a collection of poems, Irene reminds us of that other Italian woman who was the subject of a large sonnet sequence: Laura, protagonist of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*.¹³⁷ While Laura was the distant object of Petrarch's painful love, Irene can well be considered as the distant object of desire of all those 143 poets.

Just as Irene's collection, the *Canzoniere* praises parts of a woman's body, yet never does one get a complete image of her – not to mention the fragmentary character of the work itself (in the English-speaking world also known as *Scattered Rhymes*). The separate parts of the beloved woman, her golden tresses, rose cheeks, slender neck, and teeth like pearls, are lauded as if they were precious stones, or, in other words, as if they were just things. Later lyricists writing in the Petrarchan style have imitated this on a large scale. John Freccero, writing on Petrarch's poetics, argues that each part of Laura's body signifies her entire person; because no such complete image of her body exists, however, all those parts remain separate and reveal that there is nothing behind it. Thus, the poet venerates the object, not the beloved herself: 'Her virtues and her beauties are scattered like the objects of fetish worship: her eyes and hair are like the gold and topaz on the snow, while the outline of her face is lost [...] Like the poetry that celebrates her, she gains immortality at the price of vitality and historicity.'¹³⁸ While Freccero concludes that the reader himself has to combine these 'gemlike qualities' into an idealized unity, other scholars, more oriented towards feminism, argue that what they see as the disintegration of the female beloved is a *sine qua non* for the unity of the male.¹³⁹

Interestingly, in Venice this stress on the fragmentary was not confined to lyrical poetry only. Attention for the fragment is also apparent in a religious context. As Ronda Kasl argues in an essay on Giovanni Bellini's devotional

¹³⁷ For a thorough analysis of the *Canzoniere*, see Stierle, *Francesco Petrarca*, part VI; for its fragmentary character see also John Freccero, 'The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch's Poetics', *Diacritics* 5 (1975), pp. 34–40.

¹³⁸ Freccero, 'The Fig Tree and the Laurel', p. 39.

¹³⁹ Nancy J. Vickers, 'Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme', in: Elizabeth Abel (ed.), *Writing and Sexual Difference*, Chicago 1982, pp. 95–109; Freccero, 'The Fig Tree and the Laurel'; see also Danijela Kambascovic-Sawers, 'Carved in Living Laurel: The Sonnet Sequence and Transformations of Idolatry', *Renaissance Studies* 21 (2007), pp. 377–394, here especially p. 380.

paintings, devotional exercises were often very fragmentary in character.¹⁴⁰ Kasl gives an example of such an exercise, published in a booklet called *Decor puellarum* (Venice, 1471), a handbook for maidens, a copy of which happens to have been in the library of Irene's grandfather.¹⁴¹ The exercise is meant to stimulate meditation on eleven separate body parts of the Holy Virgin: the feet that carried Christ, the womb in which he was conceived, the heart that believed Gabriel's message, the breasts, the hands, the mouth and tongue, the lips, the nose, the ears and eyes; all these parts together are meant to summon up a complete mental image of the Virgin, one detail at a time. Kasl argues, furthermore, that devotees found assistance in physical images, such as the many *Madonnas* produced in Giovanni Bellini's workshop. If we look at an example, a *Madonna and Child* by Bellini also known as the *Greek Madonna* (Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera), we see that the various body parts of mother and child are very important (fig. 68). Mary's large and expressive hands, which tenderly touch the body of her son, leap to the eye. The baby Jesus' feet mark the picture's lower edge; his right thumb only just touches the hand of his mother. Her large and meditative eyes and brow are framed by a carefully arranged veil, which, with its dark blue colour, makes the clear skin of her face stand out. In this way, I agree with Kasl, the painting's design facilitates meditation and guides the viewer's attention. To be sure, this preference for the fragmentary, which we have found in the *Decor puellarum*, is present in much other devotional literature, too, for example in the widely read *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola.

All this brings us to another ideal embodied by Irene di Spilimbergo: that of the female Counter-Reformation saint. For not only does her poem collection model Irene on Petrarch's Laura: her biography also clearly bears similarities to contemporary hagiography.¹⁴² This is apparent in the enumeration

¹⁴⁰ Ronda Kasl, 'Holy Households: Art and Devotion in Renaissance Venice', in: Ronda Kasl (ed.), *Giovanni Bellini and the Art of Devotion*, Indianapolis 2004, pp. 59-89, here pp. 79-80.

¹⁴¹ Giovanni di Dio, *Decor puellarum* (Venice: Nicolas Jenson, 1471). For Da Ponte's collection, see Scalon, *La biblioteca di Adriano di Spilimbergo*, p. 96-97: 'Inventario fatto per mes. Zuan Paolo fo de mes. Ludovico [...] Item no. 4, Decor puellarum in quarto de ffoglio ligado ut supra'.

¹⁴² See also Romeo De Maio, *Donna e Rinascimento*, Milan 1987, p. 155. Regarding the role of hagiography in the construction of Irene's image my point of view differs from Anne Jacobson Schutte's, who chose to emphasize the secular character of the biography in order to present

of her many virtues such as humility and prudence, in her interior and exterior beauty, her reluctance to marry, and in her hunger for books and learning. Most conspicuously it comes to the fore in the section about her death: Irene does not value her body, 'which is nothing but vile mud and a little dust', and tries to die a good Christian death, as much as she can 'in the grace of the Lord God'.¹⁴³ Once dead, she becomes a mediator, and, again very much like a Christian saint, she turns out to be much more powerful dead than alive.¹⁴⁴

To conclude, Irene, called 'martyr', 'saint', and 'divine' throughout the volume, becomes disintegrated in the cooperative devotional exercise that is her memorial volume, only to be re-united again in a very much idealized way in the reader's imagination.¹⁴⁵ When Cassandra Giovia promises to follow Irene in her saintly footsteps, she is pointing to the latter's exemplary character, her power to act as *mediatrix*, and to always refer beyond herself to God and the good, much like Dante's Beatrice.¹⁴⁶ Yet in other poems Irene seems to play a different role. There she is compared to her other archetype, Laura, of whom commentators have often noted how she is nothing but a 'brilliant surface, a pure signifier whose momentary exteriority to the poet serves as an Archimedean point from which he can create himself.'¹⁴⁷ If

Irene di Spilimbergo as an 'example... of women's creative possibilities' (Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', pp. 48 and further; for the quote see p. 57).

¹⁴³ *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*: '... quando l'era ricordato, che ella dovesse havere alcun rispetto alla vita sua; rispondeva. A che haver tanto riguardo a questo corpicciuolo, che altro non è che vil fango, e poca polvere?' And: '... risolve l'animo a due cose, degne di somma lode: l'una di morir christianamento, et quanto piu poteva in gratia del Signor Dio...' See for comparison the lives of saints written by Pietro Aretino; his Catherine of Alexandria and Thomas Aquinas are both extremely inquistive, and just like Irene, his young Virgin Mary is very beautiful but not willing to get married. See *La vita di Maria Vergine* (Venice, 1539); *La vita di Catherina Vergine* (s. l., 1540); and *La vita di San Tomaso Signor d'Aquino* (Venice, 1543).

¹⁴⁴ See Peter Burke, 'How to be a Counter-Reformation saint', in: Kaspar von Greyerz (ed.), *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*, London / Boston 1984, pp. 45-55, here p. 49.

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, '1 martir nostro' (Bernardo Tasso, p. 12) and 'vengo seguendo sue vestigia sante' (Cassandra Giovia, p. 16).

¹⁴⁶ Freccero, 'The Fig Tree and the Laurel', p. 39. For Cassandra Giovia's words, see above. The full stanza reads: 'Et io, che fra le tue devote tante/ Illustri Donne (et o non sia gia invano)/ Vengo seguendo sue vestigia sante'. In the first line of her sonnet, Giovia calls Irene 'esempio'.

¹⁴⁷ Freccero, 'The Fig Tree and the Laurel', p. 39. For Petrarch's concept of the fragment, see also Stierle, *Francesco Petrarca*, p. 525 and further. The comparison with Beatrice and Laura was

'Laura' is the poet's self, then 'Irene' is the inevitably fragmented self-celebration of Italian poetic society. The 'true', historical person Irene on the other hand hardly played a role in this.

A Debate of Vital Importance: Irene di Spilimbergo Paints Her Self-Portrait

So far, we have studied the painted and written portraits of Irene di Spilimbergo and examined how these were intended to function. In the last part of this chapter we will continue our work on the poem collection; but while heretofore we have approached it as an object being on a par with the painted portrait, we will now study what the texts have to say *about* the art of painting. The memorial volume gives a unique impression of a debate on the art of painting in relation to life and death. For as we will see, paintings were not only believed to give sitters an afterlife; they were also believed to kill.

In this debate, the figure of the artist stands out. As we go along, we will therefore learn about Irene as a paintress – 'gentle Irene, true example of that ancient Irene', as one contributor to the volume called her.¹⁴⁸ What kind of paintings did Irene di Spilimbergo really make? Unfortunately, her oeuvre can hardly be reconstructed, as almost only anecdotal evidence is available. According to her sixteenth-century biography, she copied a number of pictures by Titian; later sources generally mention a Noah and the Ark, a Flood, and a Flight into Egypt, as well as a Saint Sebastian.¹⁴⁹ As a number of poems in the collection suggest, Irene also made at least one self-portrait (tentatively,

also made by Irene's contemporaries: see Dolce's lines, as quoted in n. 94; see also one of Bernardo Tasso's contributions to the volume, p. 12: 'La tua salita in cielo alma felice/ Cantano i cigni d'Adria; e nel lor canto/ Il nome, e i pregi tuoi inalzan tanto,/ Che di pari ten vai con Laura, e Bice'.

¹⁴⁸ '... Irene gentil, esempio vero/ Di quella Irene antica...' Federico Frangipane, p. 36. Frangipane refers to the ancient Greek paintress Irene, daughter and pupil of Cratinus, as we learn from Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.40.147. Boccaccio also devoted a biography to this Irene in his *De claris mulieribus*, widely read in the early modern period.

¹⁴⁹ *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*: 'Percioche in ispatio d'un mese, e mezzo, trasse copia d'alcune pitture del detto S. Titiano...' Strikingly, these are the only works mentioned in the biography; any invention of her own is lacking. As Fredrika Jacobs argues, this is in line with the way in which female artists were usually represented in the sixteenth century: as able copyists of a man's creations: see Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance "Virtuosa"*, p. 58. It is only in later periods that other works have been attributed to Irene: according to Ruggero, all references to actual paintings allegedly made by Irene di Spilimbergo only date back as far as the eighteenth century (Zotti, *Irene di Spilimbergo*, p. 34). See further Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 53.

fig. 70).¹⁵⁰ This need not surprise us: as far as this genre is concerned, Irene had in her teacher Titian an excellent example.¹⁵¹ What is more, Irene's biographer states that it was precisely a self-portrait, actually one by Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1532-1625), and the praise this work received that urged Irene to start painting (for example, fig. 69):

Having been shown a portrait of Sofonisba Anguissola, made by her own hand and presented to king Philip, and hearing her marvellously praised for her mastering of the art of painting, [Irene] was moved by generous emulation and completely burned with a warm desire to equal that noble and valorous girl.¹⁵²

It is unclear whether such a self-portrait is still extant; nonetheless the notion of self-portraiture is particularly interesting in the context of this chapter. In a self-portrait everything comes together: artist, prototype and often even viewer are one and the same person. Apart from that, it was not unusual, as I will argue, to consider self-portraiture as the paradigm of the art of painting. That the memorial collection presents Irene as a maker of self-portraits makes her into an archetypal painter; which makes the contents of the collection all the more relevant.

¹⁵⁰ Schutte mentions an alleged self-portrait in the deposits of the Museo Civico in Padua; see Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 45, n. 15. As Franca Pellegrini, one of the museum's curators, communicated to me, however, the portrait referred to should be identified with a *Portrait of a Lady* in the collection of the museum's picture gallery, which is attributed to the workshop of Alessandro Varotari, called Il Padovanino (1588-1649). According to Oliviero Ronchi, *Guida storico-artistica di Padova e dintorni*, Padua 1922, p. 149, this would be a copy that Padovanino made of a portrait of Irene di Spilimbergo by Titian. The portrait has recently been published, with further bibliography, in Davide Banzato and Franca Pellegrini (eds.), *Lo spirito e il corpo: 1550 – 1650: cento anni di ritratti a Padova nell'età di Galileo*, Milan 2009, cat. no. 34, pp. 63 and 99.

¹⁵¹ On Titian's self-portraits, see, among others, Jodi Cranston, *The Poetics of Portraiture in the Italian Renaissance*, Cambridge 2000, chapter three; Joanna Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture: The Visual Construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist*, New Haven 1998, pp. 159-167.

¹⁵² 'Essendole fatto vedere un ritratto di Sofonisba Anguisciola, fatto di sua mano, et appresentato al Re Filippo; e sentendo maravigliose lodi di lei nell'arte della pittura, mossa da generosa emulazione, s'accese tutta d'un caldo desiderio di pareggiar quella nobile, e valorosa donzella.' Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*. Much has recently been written about women artists and their self-portraits; for the early modern period here I refer to Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.), *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism*, Berkeley 2005, which contains several useful contributions; Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture*, part four; and Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance "Virtuosa"*.

Regarding Irene as a painter of self-portraits, the most pregnant contribution to the volume comes from the Neapolitan poetess Laura Terracina (1519-c. 1577), who added the following sonnet:

In glory Jupiter shines, surrounded with honour,
for having made such a beautiful idol on earth,
when he, too, finds himself with the others
in the amorous and sweet labyrinth.

But then he gets afraid, that, when she has painted
her own beautiful face, and watching her own portrait
in that moment, in that act
her beauty would not die with her body.

In its greenest and freshest age
at the loveliest and most flourishing moment
he wanted to remove her graceful face

So that such virtue with such beauty
would not have the cruel and unheard-of end
that had the handsome Narcissus in the clear water.¹⁵³

The poem gives us an alternative, mythical explanation for the end of Irene's life. Jupiter, afraid that Irene might lose herself in the self-portrait she painted, takes her away, so that she will not end up the way Narcissus did. Let us look at the sonnet into more detail. The first stanza talks about Jupiter, who has created an 'Idol' – it actually does not call Irene by name. In line with Petrarchan lyric, we may interpret this idol as the object of the poet's longing; an

¹⁵³ 'Giva di gloria Giove, e d'honor cinto/ D'haver in terra un si bel Idol fatto/ Quando trovossi anch'ei con gialtri a fatto/ Ne l'amoroso et dolce laberinto// Ma timido dapoi, che se dipinto/ Havesse ella il bel volto; nel ritratto/ Proprio mirando, in quel punto, e'n quell'atto/ Con la beltà non fusse il corpo estinto// Volsse ne la piu verde et fresca etade/ Et nel piu vago tempo, et piu fiorito/ Ritorre al mondo il suo leggiadro viso// Accioche tal virtù con tal beltade/ Non facessero il fin crudo, e'naudito/ Che fè ne l'acque chiare il bel Narciso.' *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 118. Terracina was one of the most published poets in sixteenth-century Italy, and certainly the most prolific female poet. She was a member of the Neapolitan Academia degli Incogniti and published eight volumes of poetry, most of them in Venice. For a short biography as well as bibliographical information, see Nancy Dersoff, 'Laura Terracina', in: Diana Maury Robin, Anne R. Larsen, and Carole Levin (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance: Italy, France, and England*, Santa Barbara 2007, pp. 356-359; also Giorgio Masi, 'La lirica e i trattati d'amore', in: *Storia della letteratura italiana*, vol. IV, *Il primo cinquecento*, Rome 1996, pp. 595-680, here p. 635.

image that ultimately reflects the poet's self.¹⁵⁴ Jupiter gets entangled in that 'sweet labyrinth': he falls in love with his own creation. The second stanza in a certain sense echoes the first. The idol creates another idol, for Irene paints herself. Yet, Jupiter wants to save her from the same terrible fate as was Narcissus', and thus, she dies, remaining forever innocent and young. Would she normally have grown old and the distance between her real and her painted face have become unbridgeable, she now for ever remains in the climax of her youth, with her self-portrait as a relic of her incredible beauty.

It is the comparison with Narcissus that makes Terracina's sonnet particularly interesting. The paintress Irene is compared with the handsome youth from classical mythology, who fell in love with his own reflection. There is even a source which attributes the invention of painting to Narcissus – and a pretty authoritative source at that, Leon Battista Alberti's *Della pittura*:

... I am used to telling my friends that the inventor of painting was Narcissus, who, according to the poets, was turned into a flower; for, as painting is the flower of all the arts, so the tale of Narcissus fits our purpose perfectly. For what else is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?¹⁵⁵

Alberti's suggestion, allegedly familiar in his humanist environment, but certainly less known to us, was later taken up by the Venetian painter and theorist Paolo Pino (1534–1565), who wrote in his *Dialogo di pittura* (1548; *Dialogue on painting*) about the advantages of painting over sculpture:

... [painting] partakes less of that mechanical and laborious side of art, which the intellect shuns as antipathetic to itself; but it welcomes painting with such a sweet disposition that painters melt and are transformed, as Narcissus was at the image of his own beauty.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Kambascovic-Sawers, 'Carved in Living Laurel', p. 380, who quotes Freccero, 'The Fig Tree and the Laurel', pp. 34 and 38.

¹⁵⁵ '... io sono usato dire fra gli amici, che l'inventor de la pittura sia stato quel Narcisso, ilquale secondo l'opinion de i Poeti fu mutato in un fiore. Percioche essendo la pittura fiore di tutte l'arti, tutta la favola di Narcisso alhora si confarà molto a questa materia. Perche che altro è dipingere, che abbracciare con arte quella superficie de la fonte?' Alberti, *La pittura*, p. 19r.

¹⁵⁶ '... [la pittura] partecipa meno del mecanico e laborioso, la qual parte è fuggita dall'intelletto, come suo contrario; ma la pittura è accettata da lui con tal dolcezza, ch'i pittori si liquefanno e si risolvono, come Narciso, nell'immagine della sua beltade.' Paolo Pino, *Dialogo di*

Although we cannot be sure that Laura Terracina was aware of Alberti's construction, it certainly seems likely. As Caroline van Eck and Robert Zwijnenberg have argued, Narcissus realizes that nature can make images; that representation is a procedure of nature.¹⁵⁷ The crux of Alberti's idea is, then, that while Narcissus tries to embrace his reflection in the pool, the painter tries to do so, too, metaphorically: not only is painting a representation of the creations of nature; painting also imitates the natural phenomenon of the creation of images. Images, moreover, that are dangerously lifelike.¹⁵⁸

The ancient philosopher Aristotle had already assumed that the paradigm of painting was the portrait; as we have seen, Alberti and Pino take this line of reasoning one step further by suggesting that the origin of painting was the reflection of Narcissus in the pool, the first self-portrait.¹⁵⁹ It is this same idea, I believe, that is expressed by Irene's biographer when he chose a self-portrait as the occasion for Irene to go paint, and that also informed Terracina's poem.

In the early modern period, the art of self-portraiture had a place both in the developing notion of the self and in the changing social position of the artist.¹⁶⁰ However, the self-portraits of Irene di Spilimbergo were far from being mainstream: as portraits *of* and *by* a female artist, they were double marvels. Irene's biographer is only too aware of this as he claims Sofonisba Anguissola, Italy's most famous *woman* artist of the time, to be Irene's example. As Joanna Woods-Marsden explains, the female self-portrait, even more so than its male counterpart, was, in all its strangeness, a paradigm of painting; for images of female beauty had a special relationship with art. Art was often symbolized by the image of a beautiful woman, and while beautiful females were held to be miracles of nature, images of female beauty were a miracle of

pittura, ed. Paola Barocchi, *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, vol. I, Bari: Laterza 1960, pp. 93-140, here pp. 130-131; the translation is from John Peacock, *The Look of Van Dyck: The Self-Portrait with a Sunflower and the Vision of the Painter*, Aldershot 2006, p. 16.

¹⁵⁷ Leon Battista Alberti, *Over de schilderkunst*, ed. Caroline van Eck and Robert Zwijnenberg, translated by Lex Hermans, Amsterdam 1996, pp. 44-47. See also Oskar Bätschmann, 'Albertis Narziss: Entdecker des Bildes', in: Joachim Poeschke and Candida Syndikus (eds.), *Leon Battista Alberti: Humanist – Architekt – Kunsttheoretiker*, Münster 2008, pp. 39-52, here in particular pp. 49-51.

¹⁵⁸ For the figure of Narcissus in Petrarchan poetry, see Peacock, *The Look of Van Dyck*, p. 30 and further; for Narcissus in Petrarch proper see also Stierle, *Francesco Petrarca*, p. 590.

¹⁵⁹ Peacock, *The Look of Van Dyck*, p. 17.

¹⁶⁰ Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture*, especially chapters one and two.

art.¹⁶¹ This was potentially problematic for female artists who wanted to portray themselves as creative individuals, even more so as creativity was considered a purely male quality. At the same time (self-)portraiture was one of the rare genres that were actually thought suitable for women to work in.¹⁶² As far as Anguissola's self-portraits are concerned, their importance even went so far that they 'played a crucial role in enabling Anguissola to have a career at all'.¹⁶³

While Alberti, as we have seen, locates the origins of painting in a pagan myth, similar ideas about the centrality of the self-portrait can be found in a Christian context. There, the procedure of painting on canvas was not so much invented as given to mankind, not just by one of the saints but by Christ himself, who impressed his features on St Veronica's *Sudarium*. The paradox here is that this most archetypal painting in Christianity was in fact believed to be un-painted.¹⁶⁴ As the first and most authentic, since unmediated, image of Christ and visual record of his appearance in the flesh, it served as a justification for the use of Christian images.¹⁶⁵ The perhaps clearest exploration of the relation between self-portraiture and the *Vera Icon* is of course Albrecht Dürer's *Self-Portrait* in Munich (fig. 71); without wanting to go into the specificities of Dürer's invention, let me here quote the closing passage of Nicolas of Cusa's *De Visione Dei*, brought in connection with Dürer's painting by Joseph Koerner, in which Cusanus describes how all of our individual destinies together form a self-portrait of God:

You, O Lord, who works all things for Your own sake, created this whole world on account of the intellectual nature. You created as if You were a Painter who mixes different colours in order, at length, to be able to paint Himself – to the end that He may have an image of Himself wherein He Himself may take delight and His artistry may rest. Although the Divine

¹⁶¹ Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture*, p. 192.

¹⁶² For self-portraiture as the emblem of (female) virtue, see also Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture*, p. 124.

¹⁶³ Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture*, p. 193.

¹⁶⁴ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 65. Indeed, neither did Alberti's Narcissus literally paint.

¹⁶⁵ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, p. 149 and further; Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture*, p. 84 and further.

Painter is one and is not multipliable, He can nevertheless be multiplied in the way in which this is possible: viz., in a very close likeness.¹⁶⁶

Sixteenth-century Venetians were certainly familiar with the more general idea that God created man in his own likeness, and that man is thus, in a certain sense, a self-portrait of God. This is also what we may infer from the following words of Giorgio Gradenigo in a letter addressed to Giulia da Ponte, Irene's mother:

I felt myself taking away my thoughts from these earthly beauties and bring them to the contemplation of our Lord God and how infinitely I am obliged to Him. Having done this for a good amount of time, addressing the benefits that I have received and still receive from His immense gentleness, to begin with thinking that he created me a man in an image and figure similar to Himself.¹⁶⁷

It is precisely in the process of self-reflection, as Gradenigo describes, that man comes most closely to his Creator, to God, the ultimate artist. The self-portrait, as an artistic performance of self-reflection, becomes the ultimate expression of art.

Nature Jealous of Art

Let us here return to Irene – who, for that matter, is herself called a mirror who teaches other people about virtuousness.¹⁶⁸ Above, we have already seen several times that painting was sometimes considered a dangerous activity. The same fear is visible in a sonnet written by the Neo-Platonic philosopher Francesco Patrizi:

¹⁶⁶ Quoted from Koerner, *The Moment of Self-Portraiture*, p. 132. For Albrecht Dürer and Venetian painting, see Aikema and Brown, *Renaissance Venice and the North*.

¹⁶⁷ '... io mi sentii levare il pensiero da queste vaghezze terrene e portarlo alla contemplazione del Signor Dio e egli infiniti oblighi ch'io le tengo. Nella quale fermatomi per buon ispazio di tempo, e rivolgendo tra me i benefici che ho ricevuti e ricevo ognora dalla Sua immensa benignità, incominciando dallo avermi fatto uomo d'immagine e figura simile a sé...' Letter from Giorgio Gradenigo to Giulia da Ponte, undated, published in several sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century letter collections; for a modern publication see Acquaro Graziosi, *Giordio Gradenigo*, pp. 121-123 (quoted passage on p. 122).

¹⁶⁸ 'Che i fati Irene bella han tolto a noi,/ Ch'era del sommo ben specchio a di nostri [...]
Che'l mondo ancor da lei virtute impara.' Daniel Priuli in Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 27.

While divine Irene with her hands
applies to mortal canvas the eternal Idea
of beauty that she has in her mind and face,
to let her earthly works rival with God,

And with shadows and colours and full lights
she makes it all, this living Goddess
breathed her own breath into them, so that real life
started to breathe in painted veins.

But the fragile work, that had real similarity
to eternal beauty, was not viable,
and her loose spirit rose towards God.

What a marvellous and painful memory:
to give others life while letting it part from oneself.
If only there was at least one to relief our grief!¹⁶⁹

Patrizi's sonnet puts forward the idea that Irene gave life to her paintings, but herself had to die. Read in a Christian way, she is a pelican, who feeds others with her own blood; Irene's self-sacrifice is that of Christ. Indeed, as Patrizi has it, she wants to emulate God (*pareggiar con Dio*).

Other poems in the volume seem to echo this idea. Terracina's poem, discussed above, plays upon a rivalry between Irene and the classical god Juppiter. However, in classically oriented poems such as this, self-sacrifice is not a theme; these poems talk about overconfidence, jealousy, and punishment. Several times Irene is compared with Arachne, the mythical girl who boasted that her weaving skills were greater than those of the goddess Athena, and as a punishment for her *hubris* was turned into a spider: 'The beautiful hand,' Domenico Venier writes, 'that, operating the needle, more than one time beat Arachne, and with an audacious paintbrush almost gave a soul to

¹⁶⁹ 'Mentre con le sue man la diva Irene,/ Pon in tela mortal l'eterna Idea/ De la beltà, che'n mente, e'n volto havea/ Per pareggiar con Dio l'opre terrene;// E con ombre, e colori, e lumi piene/ Fa tutte parti; quella viva Dea/ Suo spirto lor spirò, che vita ardea/ Vera spirar in adombrate vene:// Ma l'opra fral, che vera havea sembianza/ De l'eterna beltà, non prese vita:/ E'l spirto sciolto a Dio levossi a volo.// O mirabil, e acerba rimembranza:/ Vita altrui dar, e far da se partita:/ Fosse almen l'una, a consolarne il duolo.' *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 40.

whom she painted...'¹⁷⁰ Part of Arachne's punishment stemmed from her failure to acknowledge the goddess as the one who had conferred her skills upon her in the first place. Patrizi suggests a similar defect on Irene's part, thinking herself an earthly goddess and trying to emulate God's creation. 'With much artifice and mastery she made many real forms breathe on living paper, so that nature became jealous with art.'¹⁷¹ No doubt Terracina's Jupiter was envious of her self-portrait too. Or, as one anonymous contributor, usually identified with Gradenigo, described: 'She was a true miracle of your sex, ladies, this one, and it suffices to say that she reached where man is not allowed to go'.¹⁷²

But where exactly is man not allowed to go? What did Irene do that was so overconfident? Patrizi already provided us with an answer: she tried to breathe life into her paintings. The poetess Girolama Corsi, active in the latter half of the fifteenth century, was already well aware of the danger inherent in that act: regarding her portrait painted by Vittore Carpaccio, she wrote: 'But heaven did not like his behaviour, saying that a mortal man appropriates and steals the power belonging to nature when he makes a piece of wood seem a living body.'¹⁷³ Verdizotti in his contribution to Irene's volume mentioned 'the living images, with beautiful colours extracted from her idea';

¹⁷⁰ 'La bella man, che l'ago oprando vinse/ Più volte Arachne; e col pennello audace/ Diè quasi spiro a quel, che'n carte pinse' Domenico Venier in Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 33; see also Celio Magno: 'La bella man, che mille cor gentili/ Si dolcemente in nobil laccio avinse;/ E di si bei lavor tela distinse,/ Ch'a suoi fur già d'Aracne i pregi humili', *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁷¹ 'Fè con tanto artificio, e magistero/ Spirar piu forme vere in vive carte;/ Che portò invidia la natura a l'arte'. Federico Frangipane in Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 36.

¹⁷² 'Vero miracol fù del vostro sesso/ Donne costei: e questo a dirne basti,/ Che giunse ov'ir ad huom non è concesso.' Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 178.

¹⁷³ 'Ma i' ciel non volse questo comportare/ dicendo un uom mortal usurpa e fura/ quanto di potestate ebbe natura,/ che fa che un legno un corpo vivo pare.' Quoted from Vittorio Rossi, 'Di una rimatrice e di un rimatore del secolo XV: Girolama Corsi Ramos e Jacopo Corsi', *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 15 (1890), pp. 183-211, here p. 194; the article is also useful for more information on Corsi. See also Marianne Albrecht-Bott, *Die bildende Kunst in der italienischen Lyrik der Renaissance und des Barock: Studie zur Beschreibung von Portraits und anderen Bildwerken unterbesonderer Berücksichtigung von G.B. Marinos Galleria*, Wiesbaden 1976, p. 144.

Giacomo Zane wrote that ‘she gave shadows and lights to embroidery, and breath and life to dead colours.’¹⁷⁴

In their book on artists’ legends, Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz devoted some pages to the notion of the artist breathing life into his works.¹⁷⁵ As they argue, in artists’ stories the admiration for this almost supernatural skill is intimately connected with fear; for where will this skill lead to and with what power will it endow these artists? And so these stories have usually not such good endings, that is, as far as the artist is concerned. In his 1568 biography of Giulio Romano, for example, Vasari adds an epitaph about Jupiter’s revenge on the painter-architect: ‘When Juppiter saw that the bodies, sculpted and painted by the virtue of Giulio Romano, were breathing, and that the buildings of the mortals equalled those in heaven, inflamed with anger he convened the council of all the gods and took him away from the earth.’¹⁷⁶ Legends like these have a circulation far beyond early modern Italy. The ever returning element: mortals are punished for creating things that only the gods should create. It may not come as a surprise, then, that Irene did not succeed in her life-giving enterprise. God is almighty, and the soul she blew into her paintings went right away to Him. ‘She could not express her mortal figure,’ we read in Antonio Tritonio’s contribution, ‘with her Divine spirit enclosed, so that, despising the art of this world, she wanted to go upwards, where every gentle spirit portrays itself in God.’¹⁷⁷ And Giacomo Zane exclaims: ‘Cry, painting, if you are not deprived of sense, like you have shown us already: she, who made you like this, is dead.’¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Verdizotti: ‘l’imagin vive/ Tratte con bei color dal suo concetto’. Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 81; Zane: ‘Ch’ombre, e lumi a riccami, e spirito, e vita/ Diede a morti colori’, *ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁷⁵ Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Die Legende vom Künstler: ein geschichtlicher Versuch*, Vienna 1934, pp. 87-92.

¹⁷⁶ ‘VIDEBAT IUPPITER CORPORA SCULPTA PICTAQUE/ SPIRARE ET AEDES MORTALIUM AEQUARIER COELO/ IULII VIRTUTE ROMANI TUNC IRATUS/ CONCILIO DIVORUM OMNIUM VOCATO/ ILLUM E TERRIS SUSTULIT.’ Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. V, p. 82. On the dialectics between the life of art and the death of the artist, especially in Vasari’s *Vite*, see also Fehrenbach, ‘Kohäsion und Transgression’, p. 18 and further.

¹⁷⁷ ‘... non potè esprimer la figura/ Mortal col suo Divin spirito rinchiuso, // Onde sdegnando l’arte di qua giuso/ Volle sciolta salir là, dove in Dio/ Ogni spirito gentil si raffigura.’ Antonio Tritonio in Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 5.

¹⁷⁸ ‘Piagni pittura, se di senso priva/ Non sei, che già nol mostri: è spenta quella,/ Che tal ti fece. Ah cruda, ah fera stella,’ Atanagi, *Rime ... in morte della Signora Irene delle Signore di Spilimbergo*, p. 55.

Had Irene lived in pagan antiquity, her story would have ended here; but as she lived her Christian life in sixteenth-century Venice, piously, 'as much as she could in the grace of the Lord God', her story continues. We may illustrate this with a last passage from her biography, which explains her death in a truly Christian manner:

With these noble and excellent ways of living and with this continuous development of those singular virtues, *Sig. Irene* reached the age of eighteen. At that time the Lord God, having given her so much excellence, and then calling her with him in the flower of her years, perhaps wanted to let us know in a single moment and through a single person his love and his power, as well as the capacity of this short mortal life. And he planted in her mind and in that of her sister the idea to work together on the art of painting; and to labour in the acquisition of that noble art.¹⁷⁹

Here, Irene's death as a result of her painterly activities is presented as the outcome of God's plan. He makes her an *exemplum*; she is a tool in his hands. To fully comprehend this, it suffices to take a final look at Titian's portrait of the woman in Washington and think a while about that most remarkable attribute behind her back, the palm.¹⁸⁰ By now, we may get a sense of what this attribute points at. Speroni Speroni argued that Titian glorified the people whom he portrayed: 'Titian is not a painter, and his virtue is not art, but a miracle. [...] His portraits truly have a *non sò che* of divinity in them: just like heaven is the paradise of souls, so God has invested [Titian's] colours with the paradise of our bodies, not painted but sanctified and glorified by his

¹⁷⁹ 'Con queste nobili, et eccellenti maniere di vivere, et con questo continuo accrescimento di tante, e così singolari virtù la *Sig. Irene* pervenne alla età d'anni diciotto: nel qual tempo volendo forse il Signor Dio, con haverle fatto dono di tante eccellentie; e poi col chiamarla a se in su'l fiore de gli anni suoi; darci a conoscere in un tempo, et in un soggetto l'amore, e la potenza sua; et insieme la capacità di questa breve vita mortale; lasciò cader nell'animo di lei, e della sorella, di dar opera unitamente alla dipintura: e di faticar nell'acquisto di quell'arte nobilissima.'

¹⁸⁰ There is another portrait by Titian which contains a palm: the *Portrait of an Unknown Man* in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden, signed and dated 1561, so almost contemporary to *Irene*. Frank Fehrenbach, 'Kohäsion und Transgression', pp. 4-6, argued that in this particular portrait Titian thematized the art of portrait painting itself. Nevertheless, the identity of the sitter remains elusive, as does the meaning of the palm branch: see also *Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister Dresden*, ed. Harald Marx, vol. I, *Die ausgestellten Werke*, Cologne 2005, pp. 224-225.

hands.¹⁸¹ Titian's portrait of Irene can be considered a particularly clear illustration of this passage. But something more is going on. As we have seen, Irene died when God decided she would become a painter; her paintings extracted life from her; in short, *she died of painting*. As one would expect from a true and virtuous person, however, she did not pine away from grief as poor Narcissus did over the pool: keeping her mind on the beauty of eternity, she safely arrived in heaven. Irene is therefore, as also her commemorators affirm, a true martyr of painting. And Titian, who, as opposed to Irene herself, did manage to portray her as if she were alive, made her portrait into her martyr's shrine.

At the same time, though, Irene is also a classical heroine, whose portrait by Titian is a witness to her never-ending fame. For do we not also see a laurel crown depicted? In his *Dialogue on colours*, Lodovico Dolce explains the significance of both palm and laurel:

Cor. [Cornelio] [The Palm] denotes victory: that is what the Palm signifies. That is why Petrarca said: 'The palm is victory: and I, still young, vanquished the world and myself.'

Mar. [Mario] And the Laurel, does that not denote something else than what you've just said?

Cor. Also the Laurel signifies triumph, for when antique Captains triumphed, they adorned their heads with a laurel wreath: for this plant does not burn, and keeps its leaves perpetually green.¹⁸²

¹⁸¹ 'Titiano non è dipintore, et non è arte la virtù sua, ma miracolo. [...] Et veramente li suoi ritratti hanno in loro un non sò che di divinita: che come il cielo è il paradiso dell'anime, così pare che ne suoi colori Dio habbia riposto il paradiso de nostri corpi, non dipinti, ma fatti santi, et glorificati dalle sue mani.' Speroni, *Dialoghi*, p. 24v.

¹⁸² 'Mar. Chi mandasse a donare un ramo di Palma? Cor. Costui dinoterebbe vittoria: che così significa la Palma. Onde disse il Petrarca:

Palma è vittoria: et io giovane ancora
Vinsi il mondo e me stessa.

Mar. E il Lauro non dinota egli altro, fuor che quello che tu hai detto?

Cor. Significa ancora trionfo, perche i Capitani antichi, quanto trionfavano di una ghirlanda di Lauro si adornavano la testa: perche questa pianta non è mai fulminata, e serba perpetuamente verdi le sue fronde.' Lodovico Dolce, *Dialogo ... nel quale si ragiona delle qualità, diversità, e proprietà de i colori* (Venice, 1565), p. 44v.

Conclusion: A Fruitful Afterlife?

Let us recount what this chapter has taught us about Irene di Spilimbergo. She was an extremely gifted young woman from a north-Italian noble house, who after her premature death was celebrated with a painted portrait, thought of as the product of Titian's brush, and with a volume of hundreds of poems composed in her memory. Both the painting, the poems, and her biography – also a part of the volume – help to construct an image of an ideal woman. What is this ideal to which painters and poets refer? Indeed, 'Irene' embodies several ideals at once: she is Laura, the inaccessible beloved of the poet Petrarch, at the same time a real woman and a metaphor for the poet's self; she is Beatrice, the beloved of Dante, who directs the poet towards God; she is a Christian saint, a *mediatrix*, more powerful dead than alive. She is Irene, the paintress from Greek antiquity; she is Arachne, who in weaving rivals with the gods; and she is Emilia, almost identical with her sister. When we try to look beyond those ideals, however, there is hardly anything there. The image we have of Irene is fragmentary; and although all those fragments ultimately point to a whole, this whole is but a shimmering surface. What do we know of the historical person Irene di Spilimbergo (1538-1559)? I am afraid that the answer must be: next to nothing.

As this thesis deals with agency, something also needs to be said about the agency of Irene. This, then, can only have been very limited. Irene's was an indirect agency: as a prototype she informed the images made of her by family, painters, and poets, but in the end, she was mostly a tool in the hands of others. An impotent position she undoubtedly shared with many women of her time. To be sure, for a woman she was extraordinarily educated, and as an alleged paintress and poetess, masculine roles were attributed to her. Yet all of this cannot conceal that agency, just like creativity and *virtù*, was largely considered a male thing. Her painted portrait, on the other hand, did have a strong agency. It literally came to replace her and became Irene's most physical substitute in the earthly realm. Lucky we are, therefore, that the portrait is still with us – albeit in a dark subterranean storage room in Washington, D.C.

It need not surprise us that, when we look at this painted portrait, or read the poems praising her beauty, it is not only Irene di Spilimbergo whom we meet: we also continually encounter the makers of these images. In Venice, the memorial project for Irene di Spilimbergo coincides with an acceleration

in the rise of the *auctor*, the human agent living in historical time who is the maker of the work of art. Both in painting and in poetry, the *auctor's* role becomes more important, and self-referentiality develops into an important artistic strategy. What makes the memorial project for Irene so relevant in this context is not that it is a prominent example of this development; the main reason we should study the paintings and the poems is that artists use Irene's image to *reflect on* this development. Both the portraits in Washington and the contributions to the poem book voice excitement and fear over the increasing achievements of art; in fact, they praise art itself, and art's increasing possibilities to mirror nature in a lifelike and illusionistic way. Artists discover their own power; but, as this chapter has made clear, they are also afraid of where those powers might lead to.

The last word, however, has to go to Irene's family. If Irene di Spilimbergo's premature death and subsequent celebration in painting and poetry have led to one thing, it is the survival of the Spilimbergo family name – and its continuous association with refinement and art. Having presented its female offspring, Emilia and Irene, as two 'versions' of essentially the same 'thing' – for example in the Washington portraits, where the two sisters have the same posture, the same clothes, and very similar faces – the family was not really harmed by Irene's death. This is perhaps a very cynical conclusion. While Emilia lived on and got married, Irene became famous because she was living no longer; and she thus spread the family's fame. As to the specificities of this fame, we can only speculate. Heretofore, 'Spilimbergo' had mostly stood for vendetta, violence and war: throughout the sixteenth century, the various lords of Spilimbergo fought each other, usurping possessions and murdering each other when they got the chance. The construction of 'Irene di Spilimbergo', then, can well have entailed a message of peace.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ About the wars in the Friuli, see Edward Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring: Vendetta & Factions in Friuli during the Renaissance*, Baltimore and London 1993; for Spilimbergo in particular, pp. 179–181. In the eyes of the men involved, the Friuli women did not join in this strife; Friulan men defined their relationships with women, as Edward Muir says, 'an island of repose' (p. 281). For the call for peace inherent in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, which also in this context may have provided an example for the construction of Irene, see Stierle, *Francesco Petrarca*, p. 530 and further.

And what about Emilia, then? She married a Paduan nobleman named Giulio de gli Agugi, and eventually died in 1585, forty-nine years old, making her husband a widower.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Schutte, 'The Image of a Creative Woman', p. 44; Zotti, *Irene di Spilimbergo*, p. 8.

