

# Confronting the Beast - From Virgil's Cacus to the dragons of Cornelis van Haarlem\*

*A revised version of a paper given to the Virgil Society on 24 November 2001*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper has its origins in a visit to the National Gallery, that London marvel of state-sponsored munificence. Its mission is to trace the history of European painting from the beginning of the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century, and the collection therefore abounds in suggestive vistas of complement and contrast. In virtually every room, the Gallery illustrates the co-presence and interlocking of Judeo-Christian and classicizing elements in western culture. My argument here will take shape against this backdrop of interactive traditions.

Let me begin with a look at an altarpiece by Raphael on display at Trafalgar Square: *The Crucified Christ with the Virgin Mary, Saints and Angels* (c. 1503). Here is how John Drury, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, and head of its cathedral, imagines a first, deliberately naive, reaction to the painting:

Enjoyment and difficulty meet us straight away and in strength. Here is a loveliness of colour, line, forms, landscape and human bodies to give immediate delight. But - and the 'but' is very big - the mention of bodies... points up the difficulty. Having and being bodies, we can only be distressed, even appalled, by the central body in this picture being hung on a cross: an atrocious form of public death by ignominious torture which any body can see only with feelings of horror. Being caught like this in a collision of pleasure and pain is a ferocious challenge to contemplation. Are we meant to enjoy this? If so, how? ... Time is short, so would it not be better to go and look at something by Monet, who has got himself clear of such rank ambiguity?!

Before reaching Monet, however, one might be stopped dead in one's tracks, as I was, by another painting first, which is, arguably, even more unnerving than Raphael's image of Christ nailed to the cross: Cornelis van Haarlem, *Two Followers of Cadmus devoured by a Dragon* (1588) [figure 1]. *Two Followers* shares Raphael's concern with the human body in pain and its atrocious mutilation, but has little of its elegance of brushwork and loveliness of colour; rather, at first sight, the painting features a relentless spectacle of death within an overall atmosphere of putrefaction. If the Raphael poses 'a ferocious challenge to *contemplation*', the Cornelis, in its stomach-churning glory, seems destined to trigger a more visceral response—quite apart from the fact that the imagery is one of disaster and perdition rather than of prelapsarian forbearance and promised salvation.

Indeed, in the case of the Christian painting it is fairly easy to make at least some sense of the depicted violence. For two millennia, much exegetical ingenuity has been invested in the endeavour to rationalize the extraordinary fact of a crucified saviour. Anyone familiar with the basic catechism of Christianity is able to situate Raphael's vision within the context of an eschatology that holds out a final deliverance from evil. As Nigel Spivey puts it: 'In believers' eyes, Christ died for the world: so Christians translate by faith the extremity of passive suffering into sublime victory.'<sup>2</sup> In fact, as far as Christian representations of pain and suffering go, the Raphael is fairly tame. The aesthetics of edifying shock, *via* the concept of *gloria passionis*, both of Christ and those who followed in his footsteps, was part and parcel of the Christian artistic tradition, from late antiquity onwards.<sup>3</sup> For the Cornelis, in contrast, such an 'ideological recuperation' is rather more difficult to perform. The imagery appals through its irrationality: there seems to be no larger plot behind the painting that could make sense of the depicted violence. It is of course possible to take refuge in the academic. Art historians, for instance, tend to point out the lively interest in the nude and its representation in art, which were well-known hallmarks of the Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> But having a dragon feast on two hapless victims is arguably not the most obvious way to explore the intricacies of human anatomy. While a concern with the body is clearly visible in the painting - from the exaggerated brawn of the musculature to the gaping windpipe of the dislocated head -, Cornelis does not invite us to partake in an anatomy lesson à la Rembrandt.

The authors of the National Gallery volume on *Sixteenth-Century Painting* try to solve the unsavory predicament of having to deal with an apparent *l'art-pour-l'art* atrocity by suggesting that Cornelis wished to illustrate Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The painting thus becomes 'an example of another new development in art, the creation of exciting imagery to illustrate ancient poetry, especially that of Ovid - here the excitement is violent, more often it was erotic.'<sup>5</sup> The slippage from 'exciting imagery' (which I take to mean imagery that may excite the spectator) to 'the excitement' (presumably the one depicted in the painting?) intrigues. For a fleeting moment, the authors put the focus on reception, rather than representation, implicitly acknowledging that the gruesome, in particular in art, is not necessarily a turn-off (as Drury presupposes a *priori*). What he called 'rank ambiguity', the coincidence, that is to say, of violence and artistic beauty, might actually thrill.

This holds very likely true for Cornelis' original audience in sixteenth-century Haarlem, and is most certainly the case in twenty-first-century Britain. After a day of fieldwork in the National Gallery, during which I observed reactions of visitors to the Cornelis-canvas, I can report that even British school-children (aged 6-10) almost invariably respond to the painting with a jolly mixture of



*Figure 1:*

Cornelis van Haarlem, *Two Followers of Cadmus devoured by a Dragon*. National Gallery, London.

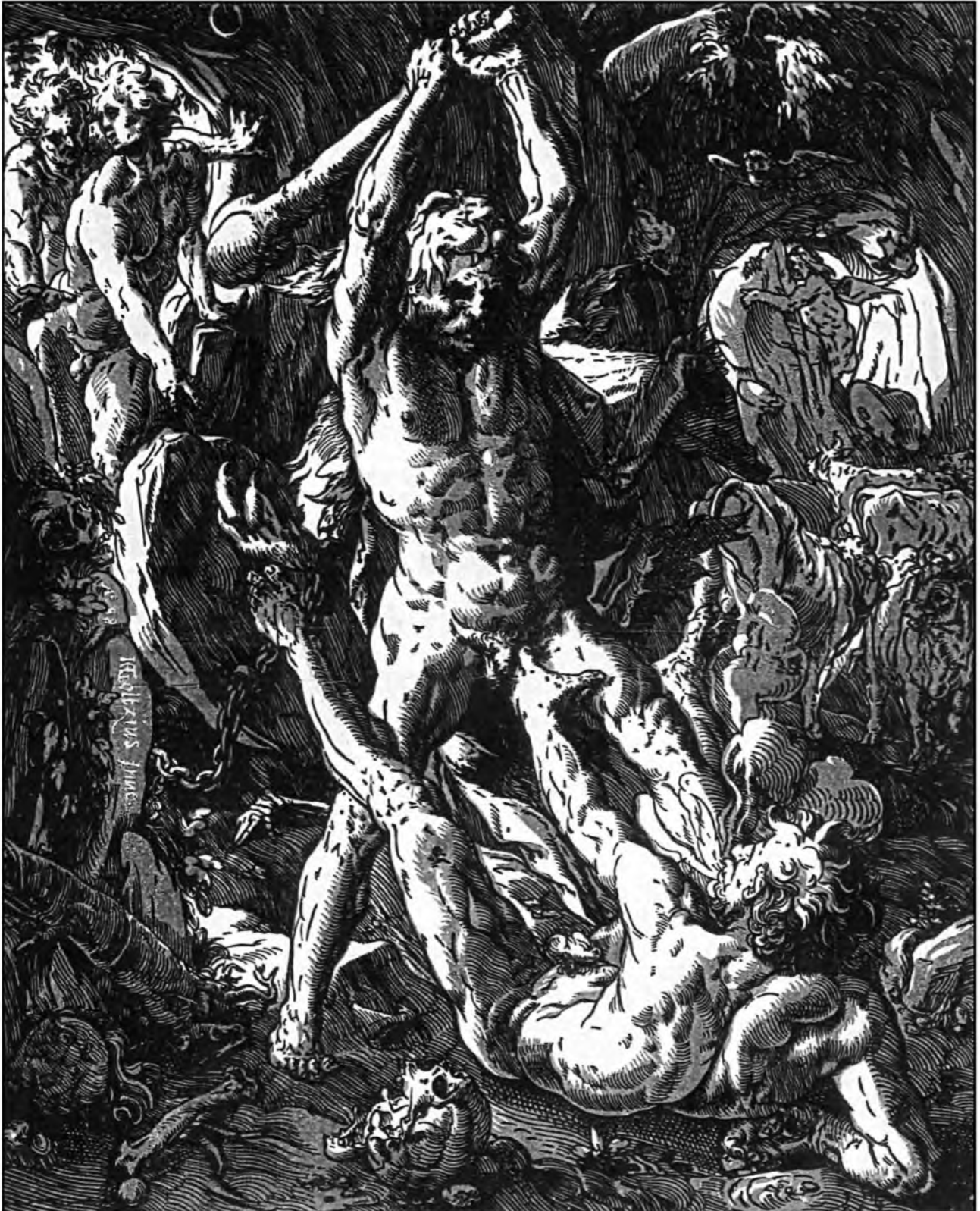
horror and delight, a scopophiliac desire to stop and stare, while anxious chaperones, ruffled and alarmed, quickly try to shuffle them out of the room.

Observations such as these point up the problematics involved in situating ourselves vis-à-vis cultural artifacts and underscore the complex social and psychological processes by which we come to endow visual data with meaning. As is now well known, ‘spectator’-, or, for that matter, ‘reader’-ship, constitutes itself at the interface of the units of information that we take in through our eyes and the sedimented layers of cultural knowledge that shape our outlook on the world. While difficult to parse, this interplay between sense-perception and epistemic matrices conditions our responses on various levels, from the elementary physiological (horror and disgust) to the highly cognitive and intellectual, as when we insert certain images into the metanarrative scripts that circulate within our culture (such as Christian eschatology).<sup>6</sup> What I wish to do in this paper is to work out such a script in the Cornelis-canvas, which has, as far as I can tell, gone unnoticed by art historians. My point of departure is the fact that the posture of Cornelis’s lapsed Phoenician finds conspicuous replication in a woodcut of Hendrik Goltzius, entitled *Hercules and Cacus* [figure 2]. This replication is hardly fortuitous: both artists belonged to the circle of Carel van Mander, a scholar and poet active in late sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century Haarlem.<sup>7</sup> *Two Followers* and *Hercules and Cacus* can with some certainty be dated to the same year as well: 1588.<sup>8</sup> We may thus confidently posit an instance of iconographic allusion.

For the classicist, the allusive dialogue between these two artworks is of special interest since it re-enacts, rather intriguingly, an intertextual dimension of the two texts which the paintings recall, namely Virgil’s *Aeneid* 8 and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 3.<sup>9</sup> As Philip Hardie has shown in a seminal article, Ovid’s account of the founding of Thebes, in particular Cadmus’s encounter with the primordial resident of the site, the dragon of Ares, is replete with allusions to the *Aeneid*, especially to *Aeneid* 8 and the fight between Hercules and Cacus.<sup>10</sup> Ovid’s Cadmus, clothed as he is in the lion-skin of Hercules, emerges as an intertextual transvestite who acts out the role of ‘the great civilizer’ that Virgil pre-scripted for Hercules in the *Aeneid*. The ‘interfigurality’ that links Goltzius’s woodcut to Cornelis’s painting seems to indicate that the Dutch artists, too, perceived some sort of meaningful relation between these two myths. One might even ponder the possibility that they were aware of the Virgilian reminiscences in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. I should stress, though, that the reflections that are to follow do not depend on this being actually the case: in the wake of Julia Kristeva, it has become possible to pursue intertextual dynamics without a (strict) notion of intention.

Whatever Cornelis and Goltzius thought they were doing—their choice of *sujets* (two myths with obvious parallels of plot) and the formal design of their paintings (enacting an allusive interplay of some sort or another) extend a strong invitation to set up, at least provisionally, a series of analogies that involves four artists, two media, four fictional characters and two cultures separated by more than fifteen centuries. The figures of Hercules and Cacus parallel those of Cadmus and the dragon of Ares, and the allusive dialogue between Goltzius’s woodcut and Cornelis’s painting matches that between Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, even though in the case of Goltzius and Cornelis it is impossible to determine who influenced whom.

Cultural history, of course, is never as straightforward, simple and pithy as these formulae suggest. Already a moment’s reflection on the ‘inversion of victimhood’ in the two visual artists points up a serious difficulty. In the Cornelis, we find an unfortunate Phoenician in the same contorted posture



*Figure 2:*

Hendrick Goltzius, *Herkules und Cacus*. Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle. Foto: Christoph Irrgang. Reproduced with the kind permission of bildarchiv preussischer kulturbesitz.

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of subjugation that Cacus is forced to assume in the Goltzius, and this ‘triumph of the beast’ over one of the harbingers of civilization cannot help but complicate our response. For the time being, however, let us note that we are dealing with a prime instance of ‘hypoleptic conversation’, the phenomenon which Jan Assmann has identified as the hallmark of cultural traditions: a special type of coherence and continuity in which texts and artists communicate with each other across profound divides of culture, space and time, as well as media.<sup>11</sup> In the following, I want to tinker a bit (nothing more) with the texture of the traditions that underwrite the quartet of Virgil and Ovid, Goltzius and Cornelis. My guiding interests are: how is spectatorship constituted for us, both in the texts and the paintings? What are the aesthetic experiences the artists have to offer their audiences (ranging from the off-putting to the sublime)? And how do their respective aesthetics interact with issues of ideology, such as larger historical or metaphysical ‘plots’?

## II. VIRGIL: HERCULES AND CACUS<sup>12</sup>

### 1. Sights and observers in the tale of Hercules and Cacus

The story of Cacus and Hercules as related in *Aeneid* 8 by Virgil’s internal narrator Euander contains a complex network of references to eyes, seeing, and sights. Far from being a secondary feature, this multi-layered poetics of visibility helps to establish the peculiar ontological design of Euander’s discourse, as well as its epistemological profile and aesthetic impact.

Euander’s deployment of visual pointers begins with his inaugural gesture to the badly damaged topography of the Aventine Hill. As he begins his tale, he encourages his Trojan guest to take a good look: *hanc aspice rupem*, he says (8. 190), and then follows up his invitation to autopsy, which grounds his narrative in empirical reality (or at least the human reality of Virgil’s narrative), by transporting his audience back in time via a gut-wrenching *mise-en-scène*:

*hic spelunca fuit uasto summota recessu,  
semihominis Caci facies quam dira tenebat  
solis inaccessam radiis; semperque recenti  
caede tepebat humus, foribusque adfixa superbis  
ora uirum tristi pendebant pallida tabo.*

(*Aen.* 8. 193-97)

[‘T was once a robber’s den, inclos’d around  
With living stone, and deep beneath the ground.  
The monster Cacus, more than half a beast,  
This hold, impervious to the sun, possess’d.  
The pavement ever foul with human gore;  
Heads, and their mangled members, hung the door.]<sup>13</sup>

Euander’s horrifying ephrasis of Cacus’s gruesome domicile is bound to trigger revulsion and disgust—much like the bits and pieces of human anatomy that litter the foreground of *Two Followers*. But the depiction also titillates the reader with the evocation of an atmosphere perhaps best captured with Freud’s concept of ‘das Unheimliche’. For Freud, the uncanny is opposed to the homelike and the everyday and fascinates with the perverse allure inherent in the mysterious and the alien. The underworldly trappings (*plutoneia*) that make up Euander’s description—a vast cave, inaccessible to sunlight, damp with slaughter; putrefying human heads—are ghastly stuff, bound to produce the odd frisson of pleasure and horror we experience when we mentally partake from a position of safety in frightful settings and events.

The passage also brings to the fore the primeval connection of ‘the gaze’ and power. We have a stark and disturbing antithesis between disfigured human heads which rot away as the putrefying trophies of a headhunting monster and the countenance of Cacus himself, a semi-human ogre whose visage is terrifying to behold: *semihominis Caci facies .. dira*, 8. 194. I daresay that not many members of Euander’s Arcadian community would have mustered the courage to confront Cacus face to face.<sup>14</sup> While he was in residence, we may reckon with a few downcast eyes at the future site of Rome, a condition of victimhood that Euander picks up and reverses in the monster’s clash with Hercules. Both the moment of peripeteia and the very end of their encounter are marked by references to Cacus’s eyes.

As soon as Hercules has twigged the prank that the monster has played on him and storms up the mountain in a fit of rage, Cacus’s eyes cloud over with fear. Intriguingly, this instance is focalized for us through the eyes of Euander’s fellow-Arcadians, whom he here (and only here) mentions as onlookers to the fight:

*tum primum nostri Cacum uidere timentem  
turbatumque oculis.* (8. 222-3)

The enormous monster who, initially, is said to be moving about with massive bulk (*magna se mole ferebat*, 199) proves to be surprisingly fleet of foot. His flight, however, is in vain. In the end, Hercules gains access to the cave in which the frightened ogre cowers and throttles him until his eyes pop out:

*et angit inhaerens  
elisos oculos et siccum sanguine guttur.* (8. 260-1)

Line 261 brings Hercules’s agency to an end. At this point, there is an abrupt cut in the narrative as Euander switches to impersonal and anonymous passives. The construction is peculiar since it makes Hercules all but disappear from the narrative:

*panditur extemplo foribus domus atra reuulsis  
abstractaeque boues abiurataeque rapinae  
caelo ostenduntur pedibusque informe cadauer  
protrahitur.* (8. 262-5)

[The doors, unbarr’d, receive the rushing day,  
And thoro’ lights disclose the ravish’d prey.  
The bulls, redeem’d, breathe open air again.  
N ext, by the feet, they drag him from his den.]

Then the Arcadians are back. Precluded from observing the events that took place within the cave, they are now able to observe the dead monster at length, especially his eyes:

*nequeunt expleri corda tuendo  
terribilis oculos, uultum uillosaque saetis  
pectora semiferi atque extinctos faucibus ignis.* (8. 264-7)

[The wond’ring neighborhood, with glad surprise,  
Behold his shagged breast, his giant size,  
His mouth that flames no more, and his extinguish’d eyes.]

Euander again places heavy emphasis on the horrible eyes and face of Cacus, as his fellow Arcadians engage in scopophilic gloating over a fear dispelled. They ‘have their visual fill’ of the monster as if to make up for the time when they would not have dared to stare him in the eyes.

In the course of the Hercules and Cacus episode, then, the eyes of the monster gradually lose their demonic powers. It is Cacus who has ‘air supremacy’ at the outset and who is *superbus* (cf. 8. 196), the very word that Virgil uses of the Romans themselves when he first mentions his people in the *Aeneid*: *populum late regem belloque superbum* (1. 21).<sup>15</sup> It takes a god to break the spell of Cacus’s evil eyes, to instill fear in them, and finally to dislocate them from their sockets, clearing the site for Rome’s ascent to global power. With the defeat of Cacus, Hercules removed a primeval obstacle of Rome’s rise to a city co-extensive with the universe.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. The aesthetics of the sublime

Given his persistent emphasis on ‘the eyes’ of Cacus and the Arcadians as spectators, it is remarkable and curious that Euander carefully avoids presenting *himself* as an eye-witness to the events. At 8. 222, he talks of *nostri*, ‘our people’, and at the very end he again scrupulously excludes himself from those who gazed upon the monster’s corpse: *nequeunt expleri corda tuendo ...*, 8. 265. This (surely deliberate) way of situating himself vis-à-vis his narrative material amounts to an implicit disclaimer: without stressing the fact, Euander still insists on making it clear that he is not reporting on events which he saw with his own eyes. *Prima facie*, this is a baffling ploy as it appears to undermine his credibility as well as diminish his *auctoritas* as narrator—or does it?

To make headway with this problem it is important to realize that Euander’s tale features a peculiar ontology. On inspection, his discourse imbricates two different realities—the human reality of the Arcadians; and the ‘divine’ reality in which the clash between Hercules and Cacus takes place.<sup>17</sup> The latter is almost entirely a space of the poetic imagination. We enter it at 8. 193, with the ecphrasis of Cacus’s cave (*hic spelunca fuit...*) and exit it when the doors of the cave suddenly swing open after Hercules vanquished Cacus (8. 262: *panditur extemplo foribus domus atra revulsis...*). As George puts it:

The cave-description is a fit beginning for a story that is to culminate in a katabasis-like exploit. When this tale of the supernatural closes (262ff.), the cave-mouth is again the setting; and it is used as the point of re-entry from the world of the fearfully supernatural to that of Arcadian Pallanteum.<sup>18</sup>

The pocket of ‘gigantomachic art’<sup>19</sup> embedded in Euander’s tale differs in important ways from the narrative surroundings, an ontological split that raises questions of epistemology and aesthetics, which are compounded by the fact that Euander does not keep the two worlds fully apart. There is one telling moment, that carefully contrived instance of peripeteia, in which the Arcadian settlers are configured as onlookers to the metaphysical drama on the Aventine Hill. This moment of ‘imbrication’ roots Euander’s fanciful account in the life of a human community; but by removing himself from the realm of the empirically observable, he clears narrative space for another type of vision: the vision of the *uates*, the seer-prophet, who is able to look beyond appearances. In Euander’s case, his epistemological omnipotence finds articulation in his special powers of *phantasia* (‘visualization’).



*Phantasia* is the faculty that enables a poet to transcend the confines of empirical reality, a precondition for creating a world endowed with sublime magnificence. And Euander's tale, as Richard Heinze realized long ago, offers 'sublime' poetry *par excellence*. Arguably the best commentary on its poetics can be found in Ps.-Longinus' treatise on the subject. Several passages from *On the Sublime* do much to illuminate Virgil's artistic agenda, especially the striking shift in literary registers that his narrator Euander deploys:

Contrast the line about Darkness in Hesiod—if the Shield is by Hesiod:

Mucus dripped from her nostrils.

This gives a repulsive picture, not one to excite awe. But how does Homer magnify the divine power?

As far as a man can peer through the mist,

Sitting on watch, looking over the wine-dark sea,

So long is the stride of the gods' thundering horses.

He uses a cosmic distance to measure their speed. This enormously impressive image would make anybody say, and with reason that, if the horses of the gods took two strides like that, they would find there was not enough room in the world. (6) The imaginative pictures in the Battle of the Gods are also very remarkable:

And the great heavens and Olympus trumpeted around them.

Aidoneus, lord of the dead, was frightened in his depths;

And in fright he jumped from his throne, and shouted,

For the earth-shaker Poseidon might break through the ground,

And gods and men might see

The foul and terrible halls, which even the gods detest.

Do you see how the earth is torn from its foundations, Tartarus laid bare, and the whole universe overthrown and broken up, so that all things—Heaven and Hell, things mortal and immortal—war together and are at risk together in that ancient battle? But, terrifying as all this is, it is blasphemous and indecent unless it is interpreted allegorically... .

(Ps.-Longinus, 9.5-6; trans. Russell)

The passage reads like a commentary on Euander's discourse. The description of Cacus's cave definitely qualifies as 'repulsive'. It is off-putting in the extreme.<sup>20</sup> (Not that it is not also great poetry, of dense allusive texture, recalling similarly repulsive passages in earlier writers, from Homer to Ennius.) But Virgil quickly leaves the 'repulsive' behind and moves into the 'awe-inspiring'. In the encounter of Cacus with Hercules, we get awesome poetry of cosmic grandeur. Nothing captures the operative principle in Virgil's text better than Longinus's phrase *hyperbole tou megethous*, which Russell translates as 'enormously impressive image'. Virgil's imagery is out of the ordinary, larger than life, cosmic in scale, in every respect beyond the boundaries of human experience.

The amplification of reality begins subtly: first, there is the lowing of cows that resounds from the hills as they depart (8. 215-16: *discessu mugire boues atque omne querelis/ impleri nemus et colles clamore relinqui*), which not only triggers the responsive answer from the cattle hidden in the cave that sets up Cacus's downfall, but also, like the rumbling of thunder in the far distance, introduces a majestic soundtrack that will soon build up to a truly sublime crescendo. Then there is the magnificence of Hercules's emotional outburst and the speed with which he scales the Aventine Hill in no time at all, Cacus, in turn, fleeing faster than the wind. We finally reach the climax when Euander describes the effects of Hercules's toppling the cliff on the Aventine Hill to gain access to Cacus's cave:

*impulsu quo maximus intonat aether,  
dissultant ripae refluitque exterritus amnis.  
at specus et Caci detecta apparuit ingens  
regia, et umbrosae penitus patuere cauernae,  
non secus ac si qua penitus ui terra dehiscens  
infernus reseret sedes et regna recludat  
pallida, dis inuisa, superque immane barathrum  
cernatur, trepident immisso lumine Manes.*

(8. 239-46)

[Thus heav'd, the fix'd foundations of the rock  
Gave way; heav'n echo'd at the rattling shock.  
Tumbling, it chok'd the flood: on either side  
The banks leap backward, and the streams divide;  
The sky shrunk upward with unusual dread,  
And trembling Tiber div'd beneath his bed.  
The court of Cacus stands reveal'd to sight;  
The cavern glares with new-admitted light.  
So the pent vapors, with a rumbling sound,  
Heave from below, and rend the hollow ground;  
A sounding flaw succeeds; and, from on high,  
The gods with hate beheld the nether sky:  
The ghosts repine at violated night,  
And curse th' invading sun, and sicken at the sight.]

At this point, the hyperbolic commotion is complete, the soundtrack earsplitting, the entire cosmos in turmoil, the images produced by Euander beyond the capacity of our imagination. Tiber himself cannot help but feel the emotion that, according to Ps-Longinus, great poetry is bound to elicit: *ekplexis* (cf. *exterritus amnis*, 8. 240). Note that Euander resorts to a simile that enacts the worst fears of Homer's Hades:<sup>21</sup> Terra splits open, revealing the realm of the dead. In all, the imagery of the tale does indeed 'measure out the full dimension of the Cosmos' (to paraphrase Ps.-Longinus), as well as delight with an aesthetics of shock and suddenness.<sup>22</sup>

Both the theomachic imagery and the following *katabasis* of Hercules into Cacus's fuming haunts are prime instances of poetic *phantasia*. The author of *On the Sublime* discusses the image-producing powers of 'visualization' and contrasts its use and function in rhetoric and poetry as follows:

15.1 Another thing which is very productive of grandeur, magnificence and urgency, my young friend, is visualization (*phantasia*). I use this word for what some people call image-production. The term *phantasia* is used generally for anything which in any way suggests a thought productive of speech; but the word has also come into fashion for the situation in which enthusiasm and emotion make the speaker see what he is saying and bring it *visually* before his audience. It will not escape you that rhetorical visualization has a different intention from that of the poets: in poetry the aim is astonishment, in oratory it is clarity. Both, however, seek emotion and excitement.<sup>23</sup>  
(trans. Russell)

Ps.-Longinus's distinction between the rhetorical and the poetic use of language and their different functions is ideally suited to identify and assess the shift in registers that occurs in Euander's discourse. As we have seen, he initiates his tale with a rhetorical use of language. Nothing could be clearer than his gesture to the Aventine Hill (*hanc aspice rupem*, 8.190) by which he links his

narration to ‘empirical’ features of the landscape. But his account then veers off into the mythopoetic, where different rules of the imagination apply, as he regales his audience with an astounding tale of supernatural forces, designed, and bound to produce, the desired frisson of sublime poetry, *ekplexis*. The story ends with a marked return to rhetorical clarity. After he has set Hercules’s katabasis before the mind of the audience, an event that played itself out without any eye-witnesses present, Euander abruptly discontinues tracing the adventure of Hercules with his powers of *phantasia*. The doors of the cave swinging open coincides with a change in perspective, as Euander returns his discourse to the reality of his Arcadians.

In the course of his tale, then, to put it in the idiom of the author of *On the Sublime*, Euander moves from *to pragmatikon* to *to muthodes*, from *enargeia* to *ekplexis*, from *mimesis* to *phantasia*, and back again. Euander, a *uates*-figure blessed with privileged knowledge that spans the empirical and the divine, expertly plays on the two registers, successfully integrating the natural and the supernatural aspects of his tale. By offering an aitiological account of the local topography as well as the ritual at the Ara Maxima that Aeneas’ arrival interrupted, he teaches; by entertaining the guests with a grandiose account of legendary events, he knows how to delight.

For Virgil’s readers, Euander’s narration further establishes a teleological link between Rome’s mythic past and her historical evolution. His tale of triumph and its aesthetics of the sublime are similar to a plot of cosmic conquest elaborated by Lucretius in *De rerum natura*. In describing the effects of Epicurus and his philosophy, Lucretius also opted for a ‘drama of vision’ that plays itself out through various stages of ‘ocular posturing’:<sup>24</sup>

*Humana ante oculos foede cum vita iaceret  
in terris oppressa gravi sub religione  
quae caput a caeli regionibus ostendebat  
horribili super aspectu mortalibus instans,  
primum Graius homo mortalis tollere contra  
est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra,  
quem neque fama deum nec fulmina nec minitanti  
murmure compressit caelum, sed eo magis acrem  
irritat animi virtutem, effringere ut arta  
naturae primus portarum claustra cupiret.*

...

*quare religio pedibus subiecta vicissim  
obteritur, nos exaequat victoria caelo.*

(*De rerum natura* 1. 62-79)

[When human life lay foul for all to see  
Upon the earth, crushed by the burden of religion,  
Religion which from heaven’s firmament  
Displayed its face, its ghastly countenance,  
Lowering above mankind, the first who dared  
Raise mortal eyes against it, first to take  
His stand against it, was a man of Greece.  
He was not cowed by fables of the gods  
Or thunderbolts or heaven’s threatening roar,  
But they the more spurred on his ardent soul

Yearning to be the first to break apart  
The bolts of nature's gates and throw them open.

...

Wherefore religion in its turn is cast  
Beneath the feet of men and trampled down,  
And us his victory has made peers of heaven.]  
(trans. Melville)

The passage offers remarkable and illuminating parallels to the narrative setting of *Aeneid* 8: foul living conditions, downcast eyes, a powerless community, supernatural horrors, a Greek saviour who measures out the universe and breaks the spell of fear, a triumphant end with human heads uplifted. In Lucretius, of course, we are dealing with the private drama of philosophical enlightenment. In Virgil, the liberation of the Arcadian community takes place in a religious context and is of world-historical significance. Virgil's equivalent to Lucretius's intellect that lifts itself victoriously into heaven (*nos exaequat victoria caelo*) is the city of Rome that will conquer the world: *tecta uident, quae nunc Romana potentia caelo/aequauit, tum res inopes Euandrus habebat* (8. 99-100).

To sum up: in Virgil, we have aesthetic effects very similar to those of the Cornelis painting, a combination of the noisome and the sublime, of off-putting rot and genuine grandeur. But there is a clear sense of progress and improvement in the tale: the relief at the end is palpable. Moreover, the story has a historical dimension: a promising future beckons for Rome once the evil which haunted the site has been removed. Indeed, Virgil intimates that Rome herself is now poised to unleash gigantomachic energies, as she is ready to launch her march towards world-conquest. Beneath all the undeniable complexities, Virgil's plot is one of salvation and triumph under the aegis of supportive divinities.

### III. OVID: CADMUS AND THE DRAGON OF ARES<sup>25</sup>

Ovid's tale of Cadmus and the dragon of Ares at the opening of *Metamorphoses* 3 features a drama of sight that is as rich in visual registers and as sophisticated in its literary enactment of a psychology of perception as Virgil's tale of Hercules and Cacus. But his poetics of vision in this episode also adumbrates a view of the world that is diametrically opposed to the teleology of the *Aeneid*.

#### 1. In and out of focus

Just before the followers of Cadmus stumble into its lair, Ovid offers his readers a highly vivid account of the beast but omits any reference to its size:

*ubi conditus antro*  
*Martius anguis erat cristis praesignis et auro:*  
*igne micant oculi, corpus tumet omne ueneno,*  
*tresque micant linguae, triplici stant ordine dentes.* (Met. 3.31-4)

[Hidden in the cave  
There dwelt a snake, a snake of Mars. Its crest  
Shone gleaming gold; its eyes flashed fire; its whole  
Body was big with venom, and between  
Its triple rows of teeth its three-forked tongue  
Flickered.]<sup>26</sup>

Size, however, matters when the creature leaves its cave to attack the horror-stricken intruders. The dragon suddenly appears to be of gigantic proportions:

*ille uolubilibus squamosos nexibus orbis  
torquet et inmensos saltu sinuatur in arcus  
ac media plus parte leues erectus in auras  
despicit omne nemus tantoque est corpore, quanto,  
si totum spectes, geminas qui separat Arctos.* (Met. 3.41-5)

[Coil by scaly coil  
The serpent wound its way, and, rearing up,  
Curved in a giant arching bow, erect  
For more than half its length, high in the air.  
It glared down on the whole wide wood, as huge,  
If all its size were seen, as in the sky  
The Snake that separates the two bright Bears.]

Here Ovid wants us to believe that the dragon towers above the entire grove, is, in fact, equal in size to the astral version of the species that dwells between the Bears. Against such a creature any resistance is patently futile, and the Phoenicians quickly succumb to the beast's ferocious onslaught (Met. 3.46-9).

But how could Cadmus vanquish such a foe, even though he comes equipped with the accoutrements of Heracles, mythology's valiant slayer of gigantic ogres? Ovid makes the necessary adjustments. In the course of Cadmus's battle with the dragon, a significant downsizing of the animal takes place. After some initial difficulties, Cadmus pins the beast, who had easily outsized the entire grove only forty lines earlier, against a single oak (3.90-2). To be sure, the sturdy tree bends under the dragon's weight; but the plant would hardly have been able to sustain the burden of the stellar-sized animal that massacred Cadmus's companions.<sup>27</sup> In other words, as the narrative progresses the intimations of gigantomachy quickly fizzle out. The adventure turns into an ordinary dragon-hunt. And we, the audience, come to understand that the first impression we were given of the monster's size must have been mistaken.

What are we to make of such inconsistency? Sportive play with epic penchant for hyperbole is, of course, a hallmark of Ovidian poetics - an ingenious stratagem, repeatedly employed throughout the poem, to undercut the representation of traditional heroism. But one should not regard the - surely present - send-up of conventional epic forms as exhausting the text's meaning. Another interpretation, one more closely aligned to what actually happens in the text, suggests itself. What the hyperbole seems to capture is the distorted perception of the followers of Cadmus when they suddenly come face to face with the lethal monster. Anxiety generates delusions.<sup>28</sup> And the companions of Cadmus are absolutely paralyzed with fear when the dragon appears on the scene.<sup>29</sup> Being surprised by a monstrous foe may well distort one's point of view. From the perspective of the characters in the narrative, the hyperbolic depiction of the animal is therefore psychologically apposite.<sup>30</sup>

So in a sense, Ovid, by his use of hyperbole, assimilates his narrative to the delusory perspective of the dragon's victims. Our first impression of the animal's size is mediated through clouded eyes;

the judgment of the Cadmeans is impaired by terror and panic, as they - wrongly, as it turns out -, attribute gigantic proportions to their attacker. It is Cadmus who affords us a more realistic perspective. When he enters the scene and surveys the gruesome slaughter, he commits himself with unemotional determination to either exact his revenge or die trying. We get no intimation that Cadmus is at all impressed by the serpent's magnitude.<sup>31</sup>

## 2. Tragic visions<sup>32</sup>

Immediately after Cadmus's heroic struggle, as he gazes on the conquered foe, an anonymous voice tragically ruptures the atmosphere of epic achievement:

*dum spatium victor victi considerat hostis,  
vox subito audita est (neque erat cognoscere promptum,  
unde, sed audita est): 'quid, Agenore nate, peremptum  
serpentem spectas? et tu spectabere serpens.'* (Met. 3. 95-8)

[Then as the victor contemplates his foe,  
His vanquished foe so vast, a sudden voice  
Is heard, its source not readily discerned,  
But heard for very sure: 'Why, Cadmus, why  
Stare at the snake you've slain? You too shall be  
A snake and stared at.']

Ovid here recasts the divine epiphany that occurs at the end of Euripides's *Bacchae*, where Dionysus makes a similar announcement to Cadmus and his wife Harmonia. But he perversely inserts the closing statement of the Euripidean Dionysus, which is addressed to a Cadmus who is already well past his prime, at the very beginning of Cadmus's Theban career in the *Metamorphoses*.<sup>33</sup> The magnificent chiasmus *serpentem spectas - spectabere serpens* captures on the stylistic level the truly remarkable transformation that Cadmus will undergo from an active epic protagonist into the tragically passive object of a spectator's gaze.

Any sense of future promise and historical development is thus strikingly foreclosed for him and the city he is about to found. His fate epitomizes the principle that haunts Thebes in the imagination of Attic drama. As Froma Zeitlin has shown, tragic Thebes is forever incapable of differentiating itself from its origins.<sup>34</sup> The city is unable to shake off her heritage, her ultimate roots in the dragon of Ares. Disaster of one sort or another strikes again and again. Judging from the authoritative scripts of Athenian playwrights, daily life in ancient Thebes featured incessant civil strife, repeated autochthonic disaster, flagrant sexual perversion and the occasional human *sparagmos* - the entire spectrum of violent and gruesome catastrophes that confound the normal order of things.

The theme of civilisation rising out of bloodshed and becoming undone is crucial to tragedy; it also frames and permeates Ovid's Theban history.<sup>35</sup> As the fates of Actaeon, Semele, Narcissus, Pentheus, and Ino and Athamas show, his Theban territory has lost none of its sinister and deadly connotations. It finds its proper conclusion in Cadmus and Harmonia assuming the shape of the monster, as they bring Theban 'history' full cycle, back to its origins in the primordial beast. In other words, the view of history in Ovid's Theban narrative is diametrically opposed to the vision of progress that Virgil presents in *Aeneid* 8.

#### IV CORNELIS VAN HAARLEM: TWO FOLLOWERS OF CADMUS DEVoured BY A DRAGON

##### 1. The painting

The first impression is one of graphic, unadulterated violence. We see a dragon in the process of devouring two naked human beings. The brutality of the scene is palpable. The beast, an overwhelming juggernaut, rules the canvas. The man on whom it has settled with its murderous paws seems already dead. Crimson droplets of blood trickle down from his pale body where the atrocious claws of the animal tear deep into the skin. The second victim is still alive; thrown backwards onto the ground and half buried under the torso of his fallen comrade, he awkwardly props himself up on his right elbow and valiantly tries to ward off the animal with his bare left hand. Yet despite his well-developed physique, the effort is futile. We witness the very moment when the monster is sinking its teeth with languid yet irresistible force straight into his face.

The foreground of the painting reinforces the chilling outrage that the dragon is working on its victims. This is apparently not the first time that the beast has had its fill. Human and animal remains litter the scene, including a complete human head that is turned towards us. Its eyes are closed, but the mouth is wide open, still contorted in a scream of pain.<sup>36</sup> Grotesquely, in the badly mauled throat the gaping windpipe is fully visible - a gruesome detail that adds to the atmosphere of gratuitous carnage and lurid gloom that prevails in the painting. The visual impact of the creature as it feasts on two helpless human beings is virtually all-consuming. The ghastly cloud of colours that hovers around the beast fills out almost the entire background. There is a demonic glow to the appearance of the dragon that contrasts with the ghastly paleness of the human bodies. The menacing darkness that ensues almost seems to envelop the spectator as well: the painting seems barely able to contain the animal.

Eventually, however, the window of dim blue sky in the upper left corner redirects our attention. This vista is the only exit from the slaughter, a vanishing point that grants a temporary reprieve from the overpowering images in front. In fact, just below the horizon, barely visible in the gloomy landscape and easily overlooked, the painter has added a scene that hints at a resolution to the pictorial hymn to violence celebrated in the foreground. In the far distance, we can make out a well-dressed figure that engages the dragon in single combat. Both antagonists are much diminished in scale, but the dragon seems to have shrunk disproportionately. The hero deftly employs a long spear to keep the miniature version of the animal at bay. With his weapon poised at the serpent's throat, he is at the point of delivering the *coup de grace*; the monster, so it seems, here suffers the reckoning for the unchecked outrage it is working in the foreground.

##### 2. Ovid into art

This gruesome painting by Cornelis van Haarlem (1562-1638) illustrates the crucial sequence of events at the opening of Book 3 of the *Metamorphoses*. It recasts the unfortunate encounter between the dragon of Ares and the companions of Cadmus at their arrival in pristine Boeotia. It also hints at the sequel: Cadmus's killing of the monster in revenge for its slaughter of his followers.

A host of lovingly elaborated details reminds the viewer of Ovid's text. The scene in the foreground looks very similar to the sight that must have presented itself to Cadmus when he went

in search of his comrades. He encountered the dragon, perched above his human prey, licking the horrible wounds he had inflicted with his blood-drenched tongue.<sup>37</sup> The dragon's deadly bite is just as authentic an Ovidian touch as Cadmus's fatal blow to the animal's throat.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the careful depiction of the dragon's vicious teeth recalls Ovid's own emphasis on the chewing equipment of his tooth-fairy: *triplici stant ordine dentes*, he says at 3.34, its teeth stood three rows deep. Both artists might have had in mind the crucial role these instruments of destruction would play later on in the narrative: they furnish the seeds of the Spartoi with whose help Cadmus founds his city.

But beyond such points of detail, a more general kinship exists between the narrative and the painting. Ovid and Cornelis employ the differing artistic devices at their disposal to create similar thematic effects. Most obviously, in his striking visual representation of the events that led up to the founding of Thebes, the artist captures the essence of what the city stands for, both in the tragic imagination and Ovid's *Thebaid*: disruptive and transgressive violence against human beings. Cornelis could have given prominence to Cadmus's *aristeia*, littering the background of his painting with the limbs of his companions. He chose not to. And his choice is true to the mythological fact that Thebes is synonymous with ferocious catastrophes. As we have seen, the untimely demise of the companions of Cadmus initiates a sequence of tragic tales, recounted in the course of *Metamorphoses* 3 and 4 that will ultimately end with the transformation of Cadmus himself and his wife Harmonia into serpents.<sup>39</sup> Quite clearly, the *anguis* as *uictor*, rather than the laudable feat of the hero, belongs in the limelight of the painting.

A similar homology between text and painting concerns their peculiar merging of linear and circular time. The two scenes in the fore- and the background of Cornelis' canvas suggest development and progress, the chronological evolution of plot in Ovid's narrative. But the odd disproportion and the overpowering images up front arrest any sense of temporal progression. The painting all but compels the viewers to revisit the image that dominates the foreground, suspending, as it were, any sense of future through an overwhelming presence. Thus understood, it becomes emblematic of a universal truth about the city: its origins in violence that can never be fully exorcised. The conquest of the dragon takes place in the background and is, at any rate, only an insignificant and momentary respite from future outrage.<sup>40</sup>

Much like Ovid's narrative, Cornelis' painting illustrates the inability of the city to differentiate itself from its origins. The making of Thebes begins with the undoing of Cadmus's companions by the dragon; its death furnishes the seeds for the city's foundation. But, as we have seen, tragic Thebes can never shake off her heritage, her initial roots in the dragon of Ares. At Thebes, the future cannot begin. The spectre of the primordial monster continues to hold sway, remorselessly returning civilization to its origins in the beast.

### 3. Illustrating Revelation

Viewing the Cornelis as an illustration of Ovid's Theban history yields a rich and coherent interpretation. But something else is going on in the painting. It so happens that *Two Followers* comes with a companion-piece that depicts the 'Fall of Lucifer' as recounted in *Revelations* 12.7-10:



12. 7 And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels;  
 8 And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven.  
 9 And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.  
 10 And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ...<sup>41</sup>

The two paintings were done in the same year and ended up with the same patron (Jacob Rauwert, a friend of Cornelis and Goltzius). They also elicited joint commentary from a contemporary connoisseur, Karel van Mander:<sup>42</sup>

When he [sc. Cornelis] was at the height of his studies he made a *Brazen Serpent* ('Serpent-bijtinghe'), lengthways on a large canvas and another large upright canvas with a *Fall of Lucifer*. Jacob Ravart in Amsterdam had these two pieces of his. .. In relation to these two I cannot sufficiently express what excellent observation is achieved in all the various poses of the nudes, and it is a pity that such works are not to be seen in a public place for during that period he paid very close attention to the art of drawing, good arrangement, proportions and other elements.

Pieter van Thiel, the author of the most recent monograph and catalogue raisonné on Cornelis offers the following comment on van Mander's use of 'Serpent-bijtinghe':<sup>43</sup>

Miedema translates 'Serpent-bijtinghe' as 'Brazen Serpent', as Van Mander usually used that title to refer to the biblical subject, as appears (to name just one example) from his title of the right wing of the triptych by Cornelis Engebrechtsz in Leiden. In this case, however, he must have been referring to the *Cadmus* painting.

The *Fall of Lucifer* was long believed to have been lost; but recently, Pieter van Thiel has made a convincing case, based on iconographic material and formal evidence, that it should be identified with a canvas in Copenhagen, which he had previously thought to depict a titanomachy [figure 3 - *overleaf*]. For a non-expert, the reasons he adduces sound persuasive.<sup>44</sup> Whether or not this canvas is the one that Cornelis intended as complement to *Two Followers* is, at any rate, not essential to my argument. The fact remains that Cornelis carried out two paintings for the same patron in the same year, one depicting an overpowering and victorious dragon from the *Metamorphoses*, the other illustrating the passage from the Bible in which Satan, referred to as a dragon, and his host are being thrown out of Heaven. It is difficult to believe that he did so accidentally, quite apart from the neat philological detail that Van Mander seems to have used the Dutch word for Satan, the Judeo-Christian Serpent, with reference to the *Cadmus*-painting.<sup>45</sup>

Juxtaposed, the two paintings thus neatly epitomize the four main 'forces' that make up the western cultural tradition. Let me be quick and to the point: if one were to impose a genealogical stemma upon the shifting kaleidoscope of discourses and practices that is human history, the western cultural tradition would run back to four primary sources of origin. On the one hand, there is the heritage of Judaism and Christianity; on the other the legacy of ancient Greece and Rome. The former finds its most influential articulation in the Old and New Testament of the Bible. The latter lacks any such central text. Yet if a single work from pagan antiquity had to be placed next to the Holy Scriptures of the Jews and the Christians, it would have to be Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Homer might be the Bible of the Greeks, but the *Metamorphoses* is the Bible of paganism for the art and literature of the western tradition.<sup>46</sup> Much like Christianity, which fashioned something new out of



*Figure 3:*

Cornelis van Haarlem, *The Fall of the Titans*.

Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

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the religious vision of Judaism, the *Metamorphoses* modified and changed, but also codified and preserved the initial Greek way of making sense of the world: myth.

However, or, rather, moreover, the outlook of the Bible and the outlook of the *Metamorphoses* complement each other like ying and yang, tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee: the one offers an ‘official’ narrative, which promises (the re-establishment of) order, justice, and salvation; the other delights in fluid subversion, lapses into chaos, the triumph of the beast. The figure of the dragon is ideally suited to explore these oppositions. Symbol of evil in the Bible and the creature of natural creation in Greek myth, the dragon combines the metaphysical with the metamorphic. Encounters with dragons evoke both primeval creation and later gigantomachies (original creation on a somewhat reduced scale). To engage the dragon in art and literature tends to involve a struggle over the definition of the universe, of good *versus* evil and creation *versus* destruction. As Watkins puts it: ‘The dragon symbolizes finally everywhere the chaos of destruction, the threat to life and property, the ravager of man and beast, which we find formulaically expressed ... in a variety of traditions throughout the Indo-European world.’<sup>47</sup>

The two signature voices that conclude the conquest of the beast in the Bible and the *Metamorphoses* define for us two opposite ways in which these tensions may play themselves out in time, either as a triumphant teleology or a cyclical return to the origins:

And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom  
of our God, and the power of his Christ...  
(*Revelations* 12.10)

Then as the victor contemplates his foe,  
His vanquished foe so vast, a sudden voice  
Is heard, its source not readily discerned,  
But heard for very sure: ‘Why, Cadmus, why  
Stare at the snake you’ve slain? You too shall be  
A snake and stared at.’  
(*Met.* 3. 95-8)

With this announcement, Ovid implodes the neat table of opposites on which an affirmative view of cosmic order and human civilization is based: if we cannot distinguish between Cadmus and the Dragon, between Christ and Satan—or if such distinctions can only be upheld temporarily, through tremendous efforts of prescribed futility—, then the world we live in is a rather inhospitable place. Even worse, we humans turn into rather problematic beings since the violence that primordial acts of creation both presuppose and try to exorcise resides within ourselves, is part of us, constantly poised to raise its ugly head again in apocalyptic destruction and new forms of atrocity. In Ovid’s tale of Cadmus and the dragon we find articulated a view of things that Sigmund Freud encapsulated in the formula of ‘civilization and its discontent’, just as the Fall of Lucifer in *Revelations* enacts the promise of an ultimate salvation that would move us beyond such ‘rank ambiguity’. By illustrating both the *Metamorphoses* and *Revelations*, Cornelis pointedly juxtaposes, and to some degree conflates, the two masterplots of Western civilization.

## V. GOLTZIUS

I want to conclude with a look at Goltzius’s *Hercules and Cacus*, which, in intriguing ways, complements the Cornelis-painting. Goltzius must have engaged with *Two Followers* in detail, given that he produced a mirror-reversed woodcut of it. He must also have been aware of the fact that his

co-artist did not simply set out to illustrate Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. He himself later represented the opening of *Metamorphoses* 3 in art, as part of a new illustrated edition of the poem. The three woodcuts he devoted to the Cadmus-story differ drastically from Cornelis's interpretation of the event. All three woodcuts stick very closely to Ovid's narrative; there is not even a whiff of the transgressive elements that dominate the Cornelis painting, with its adumbration of the metaphysical, and its enactment of the gruesome and the sublime.<sup>48</sup>

Significantly, apart from illustrating a 'classical' source, Goltzius's woodcut contains an intriguing interfigurality with a Christian painting as well: his Cacus not only 'cites' Cornelis's follower of Cadmus, but also 'bears a striking resemblance to the figure in the foreground of a drawing by Dirck Barendsz., "Fall of the Rebel Angels," in Windsor Castle.'<sup>49</sup> The paintings of all three artists, then, feature a figure in the same posture of defeat: a companion of Cadmus in the case of Cornelis; a member of the host of the rebel angels in Barendsz; and Cacus in Goltzius. Yet the identity of the victims strikingly differs: Barendsz and Goltzius illustrate the conquest of evil; Cornelis the triumph of the beast.

If we are indeed dealing with a deliberate allusion by Goltzius to Barendsz's painting, the artist, in his rendition of the pagan myth, seems to have been intent on endowing it with a Christian meaning. As in the two Cornelis paintings, the Judeo-Christian and the Greco-Roman cultural horizons intermingle. But whereas the two canvases of Cornelis offered alternative visions of the world, the interfiguralities of Goltzius operate in unison: the triumph of *Hercules over Cacus* is, from the point of view of plot, exactly analogous to the victory of the archangel Michael over Satan. The 'Christian allusion' in the woodcut reinforces the stark contrast between his Hercules and Cacus and Cornelis's *Two Followers*. Goltzius, in other words, perceptively strengthens the antinomy between the narrative outlook of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, by aligning the former with the grand plot of Christian salvation.

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## NOTES

- \* I am very grateful to the Classics Department of King's College London for a small research grant that facilitated publication of this lecture.
- <sup>1</sup> J. Drury, *Painting the Word. Christian Pictures and their Meaning* (New Haven and London, 1999) ix-x.
- <sup>2</sup> N. Spivey, *Enduring Creation. Art, Pain and Fortitude* (London, 2001) 28.
- <sup>3</sup> See e.g. G. Finaldi et al. *The Image of Christ. The catalogue of the exhibition SEEING SALVATION* (London, 2000). Some of the more extreme documents that merge sadistic violence with the promise of salvation, such as the *Vie de Sainte Marguerite of Wace*, mid 12th-century, which recounts the torture and execution of St. Marguerite, are discussed by H. R. Jauss, 'Die klassische und die christliche Rechtfertigung des Hässlichen in mittelalterlicher Literatur', in: *Die nicht mehr schönen Künste* (Munich, 1968), 143-68. For our purposes, we may note that such texts tend to put a lot of emphasis on sight insofar as they try to visualize the transcendent glory that attaches to the ultimate commitment of Christian martyrdom. Thus, at the most gruesome moment in the *Life of St. Marguerite*, even Olimbrius and the other pagan torturers need to avert their eyes (not realizing that the human body counts for nothing), whereas Christian onlookers, privy to this insight, remain unaffected by even the greatest forms of atrocity. In all, we are dealing with an 'ontological split': whereas pagans partake only in empirical reality, Christians have access to a transcendent world, in which ostensibly pernicious events acquire a sublime quality. Prudentius' *Hymn to St. Lawrence*, the saint famous for having been roasted to death on a gridiron, enacts this ontological split through the sense of smell: whereas the pagans are assaulted by the stench of human flesh being burnt, Christians savour the scent of ambrosia in vicarious anticipation of St Lawrence's ascent to an eternal life in Heaven.
- <sup>4</sup> Cornelis was fond of mythical and biblical *sujets* that enabled him to depict bodies in 'extreme' situations. See e.g. his series of figures caught in a moment of free fall (Phaethon, Icarus), his *Slaughter of the Innocent*, or his *Fall of the Rebel Angels* (for which see below).

- <sup>5</sup> J. Dunkerton, S. Foister, and N. Penny, *Dürer to Veronese. Sixteenth-Century Painting in The National Gallery* (New Haven and London, 1999) 2.
- <sup>6</sup> The two (and other) levels are not distinct: Drury, for instance, brilliantly illustrates how, by familiarizing oneself with the Christian presuppositions of the Raphael, a 'naive' response of bafflement and revulsion may in time give way to a more nuanced (but, perhaps, also less immediate) understanding and appreciation of the artwork.
- <sup>7</sup> See J. L. McGee, *Cornelis Corneliszoon van Haarlem (1562 - 1638). Patrons, Friends and Dutch Mannerism* (Nieuwkoop, 1991) (= *Bibliotheca Humanistica & Reformatorica*, vol. XLVIII): 53 and 77 (on the 'close working relationship among Cornelis van Haarlem, Goltzius and van Mander' as well as 'the frequent exchange of ideas and styles').
- <sup>8</sup> See P. J. J. van Thiel, *Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem, 1562-1638: a monograph and catalogue raisonné*, translated from the Dutch by Diane L. Webb (Ghent, 1999) 340-41; W. L. Strauss (ed.) *Hendrik Goltzius. Complete Engravings, Etchings, Woodcuts* (New York, 1977) 696. In the same year, Goltzius also executed an engraving of Cornelis' painting.
- <sup>9</sup> It is, of course, possible that Goltzius also knew, and alluded to, Ovid's version of the Hercules and Cacus myth in *Fasti* 1.543-86. In fact, in many ways (but not all), Ovid's account of the fight corresponds closer to the painting. In Virgil, Hercules strangles the monster to death. In Ovid, the fight ends with Hercules smashing his triple-knotted club several times into the ogre's face (see *Fasti* 1. 569-78). Obviously, though, there are also artistic considerations to be taken into account: the use of the club allows Goltzius to depict Hercules at just the *kairos* when every muscle in his body would be tensed for maximum effect.
- <sup>10</sup> P. R. Hardie, 'Ovid's Theban History: The First Anti-*Aeneid*?', *CQ* 40 (1990) 224-35.
- <sup>11</sup> J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich, <sup>2</sup>1997) 102 and 280-92.
- <sup>12</sup> The immense body of critical literature on this episode, especially its political implications, is deftly sorted, critiqued, and transcended by L. Morgan, 'Assimilation and civil war: Hercules and Cacus', in: H.-P. Stahl (ed.) *Virgil's Aeneid. Augustan epic and political context* (London, 1998) 175-97.
- <sup>13</sup> Throughout, I give Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*.
- <sup>14</sup> Looking the enemy straight into the eyes is the most elemental articulation of courage. In *Iliad* 17.166-68, for instance, Glaucus specifically reproaches Hektor for not daring to face up to Ajax.
- <sup>15</sup> Hercules, too, is described with this adjective: *spoliisque superbus/ Alcides aderat* (8. 202-3).
- <sup>16</sup> See *Aen.* 8. 99-100: *.. tecta uident, quae nunc Romana potentia caelo/ aequauit, tum res inopes Euandrus habebat* and the description of the shield of Aeneas that concludes the book (8. 626-731).
- <sup>17</sup> The most striking instance of such 'imbrication' I know of occurs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 2, in the wake of Apollo's rather rash execution of his pregnant, yet unfaithful beloved Coronis. After the dying girl has informed the god of his pending fatherhood, the divine patron of healing engages in a vigorous, yet futile attempt to revive her. It is only when Coronis is about to be burned on a pyre that he snatches away her unborn child, the future god Aesculapius. Divine and human actions in this episode run parallel, but are at the same time utterly out of sink. As a result, the corpse of Coronis seems to exist in two different worlds. On the one hand, Apollo closely attends to it, trying to bring it back to life; on the other, it undergoes funeral rites carried out by some anonymous mortals. The divine and the human handling of the body are clearly incompatible, but are nevertheless conflated. The god is forced to react to whatever happens in the human sphere, whereas his own exertions are clearly invisible to whoever puts Coronis on the pyre. To be sure, the passage is an extreme instance of 'ontological imbrication', designed, primarily, to show up the foolishness and ineffectuality of Apollo. But it may help to bring the artistic design of the Virgil-passage into sharper focus.
- <sup>18</sup> E. V. George, *Aeneid VIII and the Aitia of Callimachus* (Leiden, 1974) 51.
- <sup>19</sup> For the gigantomachic associations of the fight between Hercules and Cacus, see P. R. Hardie, *Virgil's Aeneid. Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford, 1986) 110-118.
- <sup>20</sup> While Longinus does not approve of it, (representation of) the gruesome and disgusting can trigger powerful physiological responses in the audience, and hence form effective registers of literary communication. Applied in measure, they may spice a text with that element of the sensationally revolting which plays on the paradoxical curiosity that attracts us to sights we would ordinarily find sickening in the extreme. In epic, of course, generic conventions restricted poetic license in this respect rather drastically, though Virgil here gives us a taste of what was to come: his successors expanded the epic code in this area with evident relish. See M. Fuhrmann, 'Die Funktion grausiger und ekelhafter Motive in der lateinischen Dichtung', in H. R. Jauss (ed.), *Die nicht mehr schönen Künste*, (note 3, above) 23-66.
- <sup>21</sup> Hom. *Iliad* 20.61-65, for which see the Ps.-Longinus passage quoted above.
- <sup>22</sup> The text contains sudden leaps in time, striking omissions, abrupt shifts in focus: cf. *On the Sublime*, chap. 35.
- <sup>23</sup> Cf. Quint. 6. 2. 29: *quas phantasias Graeci vocant, nos sane visiones appellemus, per quas imagines rerum absentium ita repraesentantur animo ut eas cernere oculis ac praesentes habere videamur*.
- <sup>24</sup> See G. B. Conte, 'Instructions for a Sublime Reader: Form of the Text and Form of the Addressee in Lucretius's *De rerum natura*', in: *Genre and Readers. Lucretius, Love Elegy, Pliny's Encyclopedia* (Baltimore and London, 1994) 1-34.

- <sup>25</sup> The material in this section is part of work-in-progress on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which I collaborate with Andrew Zissos.
- <sup>26</sup> Translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are taken from A. D. Melville, *Ovid, Metamorphoses* (Oxford 1986)
- <sup>27</sup> Cf. *Met.* 3.93-4: *pondere serpentis curuata est arbor et imae/ parte flagellari gemuit sua robora caudae.*
- <sup>28</sup> Cf. Lysias 2.39 on the mindset of the Greeks before the battle of Salamis: 'Certainly the fear that was upon them must have made them believe that they saw many things which they saw not, and heard many that they did not hear.'
- <sup>29</sup> Cf. *Met.* 3.39-40: *effluxere urnae manibus, sanguisque relinquit/ corpus et attonitos subitus tremor occupat artus.*
- <sup>30</sup> Interestingly, Ovid implicates his audience in the mental state of the animal's victims. His apostrophe in line 45 (*si totum spectes*) exhorts you and me with pointed immediacy to survey his leviathan. This produces the calculated effect of drawing us into the narrative. And like the companions of Cadmus, we would have difficulties fitting the dragon into our frame of vision. The author here plays with our capacity for visualising the phantastic, a sly ploy to see whether our imaginative abilities are up to his penchant for extravagant exaggerations.
- <sup>31</sup> It bears mention that Ovid explicitly singles out Cadmus's courage as the most useful weapon in his encounter with the dragon (3.54: *teloque animus praestantior omni*); a fearless hero, unlike his companions, is not susceptible to disadvantaging himself by mistakenly exaggerating the size of his antagonist.
- <sup>32</sup> This section draws on I. Gildenhard and A. Zissos, 'Somatic Economies - Tragic Bodies and Poetic Design in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*', in: P. Hardie, A. Barchiesi and S. Hinds (eds.), *Ovidian Transformations. Essays on Ovid's Metamorphoses and its Reception*, (Cambridge, 1999) 162-81.
- <sup>33</sup> It is uncertain who speaks the Ovidian lines. There might be a whiff of Aius Locutius in the air, that peculiar Roman deity that consists of a voice. If that is the case, the lines contain an additional cross-cultural point. Aius Locutius, in Rome, utters prophetic warnings, never iron-clad predictions: there is always a margin of contingency in place that allows the community to make amends, restitute the *pax deorum*, and avoid disaster. This is clearly not an option for Cadmus.
- <sup>34</sup> F. I. Zeitlin, 'Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama', in: J. J. Winkler and F. I. Zeitlin (eds.), *Nothing to do with Dionysos?* (Princeton, 1990) 130-67.
- <sup>35</sup> See P. R. Hardie, *CQ* 40 (1990) 224-35.
- <sup>36</sup> Potentially, this head belongs to the first of the dragon's two victims; it is difficult, however, to come up with a coherent sequence of events that could account for its location.
- <sup>37</sup> Cf. *Met.* 3.55-7: *ut nemus intrauit letataque corpora uidit/ uictoremque supra spatiosi corporis hostem/ tristia sanguinea lambentem uulnera lingua.*
- <sup>38</sup> Cf. 3.48-9: *hos morsu ... necat*; and 3.90-1: *donec Agenorides coniectum in gutture ferrum/ usque sequens pressit... .*
- <sup>39</sup> *Met.* 4.563-603.
- <sup>40</sup> There is another potential allusion to a future event: the head in the foreground is reminiscent of the 'torn-off head' of Pentheus (see *Met.* 3.727: *auulsumque caput*) that his mother Agave is brandishing in noxious triumph at the end of book 3. In Thebes, the future is always a re-enactment of the past, a return to the founding myth, a renewed grounding of Thebes in its violent origins.
- <sup>41</sup> See also 11.7: And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them.
- <sup>42</sup> Van Mander, *Schilder-boeck*, fol. 293r, in the English translation by Hessel Miedema (1994-1999), vol. I, 430.
- <sup>43</sup> Pieter J. J. van Thiel, *Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem 1562 - 1638. A Monograph and Catalogue Raisonné*, translated from the Dutch by Diane L. Webb (Ghent, 1999) 341.
- <sup>44</sup> See van Thiel 326.
- <sup>45</sup> van Thiel 341, n. 3 gives the following linguistic explanation for his choice of words: 'The first meaning of "serpent" was snake. In his elucidation of the Cadmus legend (Wtlegg., fol. 22r), Van Mander consequently talks not of a "serpent" but a "draeck" (dragon). In combination with "bijtinghe" (biting), dragon would have produced "draeck-bijtinghe", which nonexistent word would have sounded strange to Van Mander. "Serpent-bijtinghe", on the other hand, had a familiar ring to it and characterized the depiction perfectly.' This argument seems to rest on the strange premise that Van Mander somehow had to use a combination of words that included 'bijtinghe'. But surely he could have described the painting in several other ways without recourse to the charged phrase 'serpent-bijtinghe'.
- <sup>46</sup> A case forcefully argued by L. Barkan, *The Gods made flesh. Metamorphosis & the pursuit of paganism* (New Haven and London, 1986).
- <sup>47</sup> C. Watkins, *How to kill a dragon. Aspects of Indo-European poetics* (Oxford, 1995) 300.
- <sup>48</sup> Years later, in 1613, Goltzius returned to the tale of Hercules and Cacus. The painting, commissioned by a Haarlem lawyer and now on display in the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, depicts the immediate aftermath of the fight and is perfectly innocuous.
- <sup>49</sup> W. L. Strauss (ed.) *Hendrik Goltzius. Complete Engravings, Etchings Woodcuts* (New York, 1977) 696.