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Masterpieces of Western Art

6 March 2008

How Long?: Opposition and Motion in *The Vision of Saint John*

> *And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How Long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?*
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> Revelations 6:9-10

In many ways, Christianity is a religion of contradictions. God is a trinity, yet He is one; Christ is mortal, yet divine; the Lord is merciful, yet His ever-present gaze knows and judges our every sin. For this reason, depicting the Christian theological canon in art almost inevitably involves teetering on the edge between dichotomies, and El Greco's *The Vision of Saint John* is no exception to this trend. Its world resides in the threshold between worlds, the fitful and precarious fringe that bridges contrary forces. Heaven and Earth, sleep and wakefulness, mercy and vengeance, grace and contortion, death and life—in this painting, opposites converge in a dizzying dance whose shock value is only matched by its theatrical narrative appeal. Ultimately, the effect of this opposition is to create a sense of restless movement that not only relays the Biblical story at hand, but also draws the viewer into the first-personal experience of Saint John.

Formally speaking, *The Vision of Saint John* is painted with oil on canvas that is applied with wide, sweeping brushstrokes. The composition consists of one proportionally massive figure (the figure, we may safely assume, of Saint John the Evangelist), who is dressed in a loosely-draped blue robe and occupies most of the

painting's left side. Beside him, arranged in a formation that expands in magnitude as it progresses to the right, are seven smaller nudes. They stand in front of a pair of colored draperies, on which two cherubs tug upwards as they hang suspended in the air. A third cherub floats down and passes a piece of white cloth into the outstretched arms of one of the nudes. The entire scene, which is framed by a tumultuous blue-black night sky and nondescript brown earth, utilizes a palette composed mainly of ghostly pale shades contrasted against nightmarish midnight blues and blacks; however, these are offset by the bright blue of John's robe and the large, amorphous swathes of colored cloth that appear behind the nudes and on the ground. Due mainly to the effect of being enacted in front of these cloths, which are reminiscent of a theatrical backdrop, the scene appears to take place in a very shallow, flat stage. With little in the way of perspective, El Greco chooses instead to emphasize the very lack of dimensionality that lends this work its otherworldly, dreamlike tone.

Even from this purely formal perspective, we begin to get a sense of the contradictions inherent in El Greco's painting. The brushstrokes are fluid and sweeping, yet they are periodically flecked with stark strokes, particularly in the jagged storm-clouds and streaks of vivid color in the draperies. From a broader perspective, also, we see that the bottom of the scene is painted with a blunt, matte brown, while the top is intricately whirled. Even more fascinatingly, the movements of the male nudes are contradictory in their own way: their bodies are contorted, yet their writhing is so theatrical, so sensual and dance-like, that it seems to carry with it a choreographed sense of pained beauty. On another level, though, despite this seeming synchronization, almost

none of them seem to interact with each other—in fact, they are each surrounded by a thick black line that makes them appear eerily isolated and alone.

These strange oppositions find their roots in the narrative being depicted, for *The Vision of Saint John* is intended to portray a particular moment from the sixth book of Revelations. As the story goes, Saint John the Evangelist receives a vision in which he is shown, among other apocalyptic sights, the souls of Christian martyrs begging God to wreak vengeance upon their tormenters. In an odd mix of reverence and anguished impatience they address God, crying, "How Long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"[1] And God, counseling them to have patience for the second coming, distributes to each a symbolic white robe, perhaps as a sign of their piety or as a form of consolation until the Judgment Day arrives.

If, with this in mind, we view the seven nudes as martyrs who await the impending judgment, their strange contradictory dance takes on new meaning. Some are half-tangled in draperies—whose bright tones perhaps symbolize the sensuousness and instability of earthly life—while others seem to emerge from the darkness. Especially in conjunction with the figures' grasping hands and upward-turned gazes, this partial entanglement gives the viewer the sense that these individuals long for one world but remain helplessly entrenched in another. Their wretched movements and distinct solitude are reminders that they have not yet attained the salvation for which they long. Perhaps the most vivid instantiation of this painful contrast comes from the three figures in front of the green drapery; grasping desperately toward the white robes above them (whose color represents the grace of God and the purity that comes of shedding mortal life), their

[1] Revelations 6:10

progression toward divinity is depicted in the very shading and positions of their bodies, for they become brighter and more upright as they near the floating cherub. This painting, we see, is a snapshot of the brief meeting of two worlds. Thus, we can understand the stylistic differences between the top and bottom of the work as manifestations of the more fundamental difference between Heaven and Earth. The swirling brushstrokes that create the sky evoke the circularity that often represents the perfection of Heaven in art, while the angrier flecks hint at the torment borne of finding this perfection to be just out of reach. Moreover, while the sky is stormy and turbulent, the clouds part and become tinged with gold around the descending cherubs; in El Greco's heavenly sky, then, we see embodied the very dichotomy that defines the merciful yet vengeful Lord, whose judgment is fittingly referred to in this passage of Revelations as "the wrath of the Lamb"[2].

In more physical terms, the intermingling of antipodal elements that occurs in this work of art creates a sentiment of unease and instability that is translated into a sensation of whirling movement. In John, for example, we can see a certain kineticism apparent in his draperies, which are so heavily rumpled that it is impossible to distinguish where his legs begin or even whether they are touching the ground at all. Together with the general upward thrust of his stance and his gaze, this gives him a feeling of levitation, and the way the light catches on the fabric, creating bright highlights against deep recesses, contributes to the sense of frenetic movement and upward struggle. Even more distinctly, though, we see the motion of this painting in the nude figures. Their contorted, dance-like postures give them a striking resemblance to a flickering flame, seething with an inner energy that is released only in momentary bursts. They are certainly anguished, but

[2] Revelations 6:16

more so than that, their wild nude dance carries an air of primal sensuality. Perhaps this is an intentional narrative tool on the part of the artist, for in vivid contrast to the heavenly redemption for which these figures long, we are forced to realize that they are very much still bound by their mortal, sinful flesh.

An interesting aspect of the motion in *The Vision of Saint John* is that it has a strong sense of directionality. First of all, it has a tense up-and-down thrust. The cherubs seem suspended from above, yet they pull themselves downward so strongly that two of them are entirely inverted; simultaneously, the human figures seem weighted down, almost chained to the Earth, yet they struggle upward, setting the painting in a precarious state of tug-of-war that gives a very visual instantiation of the contradictory themes. In addition, there is a vast swirling motion that encircles the entire painting. If we follow the earth along the bottom, then we are pulled by the reaching figures up the right side of the painting, where the earth extends very far before finally merging with the sky. Following the eddies of the clouds, we are drawn back to John's outstretched hands and down his body to where we began. This entire sense of whirling motion creates a frantic atmosphere that echoes the desperation of the martyrs and John's experience of being swept along through a wave of prophesy.

Yet despite the extraordinary kineticism of this work, we have noted that the action all occurs in a very shallow, two-dimensional arena, against a backdrop of curtains. In this way, we are given a feeling of unreality, of watching events being performed on a stage, which fits perfectly with the idea that this painting depicts a vision being enacted in the mind of Saint John. This explains why he is so disproportional in comparison to the rest of the painting, and why the nude figures seem to flow out of him,

emanating from his chest and sweeping rightward in a widening fan. It also makes sense of the striking formal differences between the depictions of John and of the nudes; they are hazy and indistinct, while he has a marked nearness about him, in terms of his spatial relation to the viewer, the level of detail in his features, and the realism of his emotions. He is this-worldly, real, and alive at the narrative moment being portrayed. The nudes, on the other hand, are merely characters in a vision, tools to convey a scene which in actuality has not yet occurred, and thus it is quite fitting that they are depicted in a way that makes them appear choreographed and theatrical as well as frustratingly indistinct.

The theatricality of the vision narrative makes sense of a number of stylistic choices on the part of the artist, but it leaves us with at least one lingering question. While John is having this vision, he also seems somehow to be taking part in it. He, too, reaches upward in the same anguished gesture of "how long?", and he, too, exudes the emotional and physical aura of one struggling toward Heaven. Upon closer inspection, we even begin to notice a bizarre resemblance between John and the male nude on the far right, whose posture almost exactly mirrors his. Perhaps this is a coincidence—or perhaps it is a subtle hint that John, borne along by the terrifying force of the apocalyptic vision that has been delivered by God into his mind, has begun to fear the time when he, too, will join the ranks of the Christian martyrs.

There remains one detail of this work that we have left largely unexplored, and that is the group of two women and a man who stand in front of the yellow drapery on the left. Unlike their counterparts, these characters appear calm, graceful, almost unaware of their surroundings. Are these, too, the figures of Christian martyrs awaiting anxiously the word of God? If so, why do they appear so peaceful, so elegant and unperturbed? They

seem to partake in an eerie display of aristocratic chivalry, the man lifting the drapery from the shoulders of one of the women. She delicately covers her breasts, turning away in a balletic pose. These are the only female figures in the painting, and moreover, they are much brighter than any of the other nudes, seeming to attract or perhaps even emit a glowing light. Perhaps these are representatives of the living, who, ignorant of the looming apocalypse, continue to engage in mindless acts of simple, cheerful frivolity. The discomfort we feel as we attempt to make sense of them is entirely appropriate, for it sweeps us away into the mindset of a prophet who is being shown murky visions of a looming future he only half-understands. What, truly, are these events? Are we nothing but the frivolous mortals, unaware that our judgment awaits? If so, *how long*—how long until it arrives?

Struggle as we might to seek answers in the mysterious shrouded faces of the figures in *The Vision of Saint John*, to resolve the contradictions and to quiet the restlessness it provokes, we are left ultimately with nothing but a hazy understanding and a lingering sense of emotional unease, even a subtle fear. Yet it is no accident that we are suspended this way. For as we turn back to the face of Saint John, the one face in the painting that is recognizable and clearly-defined, we find ourselves partaking in the muddled comprehension of the prophet, and echoing the same question that burns in his mind: “how long?”