The stones and the crown
Or the triumphant death throes in the *Martyrdom of Saint Stephen* by Rubens

Ralph Dekoninck

If there is a model expression in the early modern period of not the triumph *of* death but the triumph *in* death, then it is undoubtedly that of the representation of martyrdom, which experienced a remarkable flourishing at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Then, in the context of the wars of religion and missionary conquest of the New Worlds, the ideal of martyrdom was reborn within an agonistic Church – that is, a Church struggling with internal dissidence (mainly with Protestants) and with external persecution (in non-European regions being evangelised).[1] This rebirth of martyrdom in the early modern period was in some respects a birth, that of unprecedented mediatisation. For the difference from the early Church, which was conceived at this time as a source of revitalisation, was that henceforth the promotion of martyrdom assumed the form of a visual offensive. The goal of this offensive was to re-establish a certain idea of holiness, as born of suffering and a triumphant death, but also to establish a new idea of the image and of art, which had to be anchored in the truth, or verism, of the display of violence and victorious agony. This took place at a historical moment when these two realities, that of the image and that of holiness, were at the heart of an intense debate.

The figure of martyrdom became the place where these two realities were most closely linked, primarily because martyrdom was still conceived as one of the most perfect *imitatio Christi*. This principle of existential imitation was rethought during the sixteenth century, at a time of profound crisis of the religious image induced by the Reformation but also by the affirmation of other models of mimesis promoted by the Renaissance humanism. It is in this context that Catholic authors but also artists tried to re-found a certain idea of the existential as well as artistic imitation through the figure of the martyr and this idea that the *deiformitas* (i.e., the conformation to God) can be reached in suffering and in death. One could even say that *deiformatas* can only be obtained through *deformitas* – that is, through disfiguration – which affects the body in order to form/reform the soul in the image of Christ, whose sacrifice on the cross constitutes the ultimate horizon of all this sacrificial suffering and death.[2] To the two dimensions of holiness and the image, we must add a third, that of relics, treated jointly with the two preceding dimensions at the last session of the Council of Trent. The decree resulting from this session bears the explicit title *On the invocation, veneration, and relics of saints, and on sacred images*.[3]

Now, the unprecedented promotion of the figure of the martyr contributed to link together these three dimensions. We might say that it was an attempt to re-establish the legitimacy of the image in the spectacle of sacrifice, and to build holiness on the testimony of the living image that is the martyr, an image revealed by suffering and death and which in turn engenders material images and relics.

In the present article our interest lies in the way in which one artist in particular, Peter Paul Rubens, was able to celebrate this post-Tridentine ideal of martyrdom, taking as an example one of his works in particular, the *Martyrdom of Saint Stephen* triptych, in which he closely ties together these three dimensions.[4] The aim is to show how Rubens, through his staging of a violent and holy death – holy because it is violent – seeks to translate the idea of triumph in death, or the paradoxical coincidence of suffering and glory, in line with both religious and moral ideals, specifically neo-Stoic ones. Particular attention will be paid to his treatment of the narrative, historical, liturgical and theological time of martyrdom, as well as to the expression of passions and actions inspired by different models, all of which seek to give an account of a suspended time, that of the *kairos* of Grace, but also of martyrological Christomorphism. We will conclude with the question of the effects that this spectacle of 'sacred horror' was supposed to produce on the spectators of the time. But before examining this triptych, it is important to recall the conceptions of the time on the problematic relationship between beauty and truth or between the aesthetic and pathetic effects in the iconography of martyrdom.

The anti-aesthetic of martyrdom

Faced with what was perceived in clerical spheres as artistic excesses that led to a proliferation of the uncanny and of unbridled fantasy, Catholic authors writing in the wake of the Council of Trent tried to re-legitimise the image by means of history and emotion. The martyrological imagery had for them the distinctive characteristic of combining an archaeological ideal and a dramatic effect, the former distancing in time while the latter brings this past to life in the present. The post-Tridentine writers who took an interest in art and the image remind us of the legitimacy and even the necessity of the display of violence and death in religious matters. Thus, while the Bolognese cardinal Gabriele Paleotti condemns all scenes of horror and all bloody spectacles that are depicted with no virtuous aim (this gratuitous violence and death stimulated in some people an unhealthy fascination and in others disgust), he does recommend, when it is a question of encouraging people to love virtue, the representation of saints with all the instruments of their martyrdom and the cruellest torments inflicted on them.[5] Taking as ultimate reference the horror of Christ's Passion, which artists could not gloss over in wishing to submit themselves to the beauty of art, the Jesuit Antonio Possevino also advocates a certain utilitarian verism. According to him, the truth of the death throes – of which the ancient model cited is the *Laocoon* – must prevail over beauty if one is to arouse a feeling of contrition. This truth works through all the details related to the instruments of torture as well as to the passions, virtuous or vile, that this torture provokes or whose torture was the result:

In reality, since statues of the ancient pagans were able to express the severity of pain, as one can see in the Vatican's *Laocoon*, close to death, tormented by pain, he and his sons cruelly bound by snakes; therefore, who could deny that the same things might be obtained concerning He in whom are gathered all kinds of pain and of cruelties? Thus, no person of sound mind would deny that it is necessary to paint Blaise torn apart by iron combs, Sebastian riddled with many arrows, Lawrence burnt on a griddle, lacerated and his innards cast around, deprived of all beauty. Why offer the counter-argument to me of a Stephen stoned without rocks, a Blaise with his body intact and beautiful, on a torture rack without blood, an apostle James without a staff in his head, a Sebastian without arrows, a Lawrence radiant in the flames? Undoubtedly because (so they say) art and the representation of muscles and veins require that it be so. But for my part, I firmly state that the pinnacle of art is to imitate reality itself, that is to say, to express martyrdom in martyrs, tears in those who weep, pain in those who suffer, glory and joy in those who come back from the dead, and to fix all this in souls. Such surely is the very stuff of art: it is what gives form to art, that is to say, what is worthy of being seen.[6]

This last sentence says it all: the *substantia artis* – that is, what gives to the image its form or beauty (the Latin word *forma* having both meanings) – is to show everything concerning cruelty and holy deaths. For Possevino, the essence of beauty is truth ('what is worthy of being seen'), in particular here, the truth of the suffering of Christ and the martyrs. Rather than excluding the deforming forces of pain, as Gotthold Lessing was later to advocate in his *Laocoon*,[7] they must be displayed as the conforming forces of holiness. In terms of the effect on viewers, the pity evoked in this way must necessarily result in piety, driven by a desire for imitation that takes the form, if not of the search for sacrifice for an elite of Christian heroes, then at least of an inner reform.

The living, dying and dead saint

Rubens's work answers perfectly to this ideal. It was through the representation of martyrdom that his consummate art of dramaturgy and of the staging of the most extreme passions and actions was able to express the idea of a triumph in death.[8] This is exemplified in his triptych dedicated to the protomartyr Stephen – the very first martyr of Christianity after Christ (fig. 1).[9] It was created for one of the altars of the Benedictine abbey church, now disappeared, of Saint-Amand-les-Eaux, on the outskirts of Valenciennes, a church which like many others in this region was hit by the *beeldenstorm* of 1566.[10] Rubens's painting most certainly replaced, as Willibald Sauerländer suggests, an earlier work on the same theme destroyed half a century before. Together with many earlier works employing the same iconography, it shares a scrupulous respect for the text of the Acts of the Apostles. On the left panel we see Stephen preaching

of this period. Indeed, these inventories mention the presence of relics of Saint Stephen's arm, teeth and bones.[13] The connection between the relics, coming from his grave and no doubt located near the altarpiece, and the image of the living, dying and dead saint – we should note that these three bodies overlapped when the panels were closed, the effects of which were obviously invisible to the viewer but whose theological meaning could not have escaped the clergy – appears even more clear, as if it were a matter of reversing the thread of the narrative in order to give to the image of Saint Stephen all its incarnating power. While the Acts of the Apostles says little about the entombment of Stephen's body ('Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him'), the *Golden legend* relates that he was destined to be eaten by birds and wild beasts (*ut a feris et avibus devoraretur*)[14] and that he was 'saved' in extremis by two devout men, Gamaliel and Nicodemus, who are precisely the ones who bear the inert body of Stephen into his tomb. Hence the iconographical importance of this interment of a body, which should have disappeared, making possible the *inventio*, this too related by the *Golden legend*, of its relics four centuries later and the *translatio* of some of them many centuries afterwards to the abbey of Saint-Amand. All this makes sense when we learn that following the iconoclasm

1
Peter Paul Rubens, *Saint Stephen triptych*, **c. 1615-1620,** central panel: *The martyrdom of Saint Stephen*, oil on panel, transferred to canvas, 437 x 280 cm; left wing (inside): *The sermon of Saint Stephen*, oil on panel, 400 x 126 cm; right wing (inside): *The entombment of Saint Stephen*, oil on panel, 400 x 126 cm, Valenciennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts (photo: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Valenciennes)

2
Jan van Scorel, *The martyrdom of Saint Stephen*, **c. 1540,** oil on panel, central panel 218 x 150 cm, left wing 231 x 72 cm, right wing 231 x 82 cm, Douai, Musée de la Chartreuse (photo: Musée de la Chartreuse, Douai)

before the Sanhedrin, an episode that results in his being stoned to death by an enraged crowd, which is painted on the central panel. On the right panel, we see his entombment, also recounted in the Acts of the Apostles. This chronological sequencing had already been adopted by Rubens's forerunner Jan van Scorel for the triptych he painted around 1540 (fig. 2)[11] for another Benedictine abbey, that of Marchiennes, located a few kilometres from the abbey of Saint-Amand in the valley of the Scarpe.[12] This triptych was spared by the iconoclastic fury and could not have failed to serve as an example to Rubens, who however rid himself of some mannerist features present in the work of his predecessor. Beyond these basic stylistic and compositional differences, he retains the sequencing of Scorel's triptych: the living body animated by speech – speech inspired by the Holy Spirit – is answered in the centre by the body in its death throes giving up its soul to the Trinity; the whole is concluded on the right by the dead body. This body is called on to survive, not only in the memory of the faithful but also thanks to the presence of relics in the church, as attested by inventories

of 1566 the abbey sought, mainly under the abbotship of Charles de Par, who was none other than the probable commissioner of Rubens's work,[15] to bring about a revival of the cult of the saints whose images had been destroyed and whose relics had been profaned.

Returning to the scansion of speech, suffering and death, we should further note that it is emphasised by the play of forms and the play of colours responding to each other. For example, the martyr's body laid in his tomb 'echoes' through its pallor, on the central panel, the body of the angel suspended in the air, all the while pursuing in some way the fall that Stephen begins in the stoning scene; or, further, it is expressed through what one might call hinge characters – the two members of the Sanhedrin at the far left of the stoning scene who stare fixedly at the transfigured face of the martyr, as proof of the miracle being performed. We might say the same of the right-hand side, but now with an effect of contrast, about the executioner who undresses himself and of his pendant on the right panel who respectfully bears the body of the saint into his tomb.

The *kairos* of the martyrdom

These visual hinges are thus also temporal hinges which articulate the three syncopated time frames. The central stoning scene in a way compresses these time frames into a moment of suspension. For it is a question of grasping a transitory state: not that of a terrestrial life to a terrestrial death, but of a terrestrial death to a celestial life. In the end, it is a matter of figuring the point of junction, or even fusion, between past, present and future through the temporal concretion of agony, death and divine election. In keeping with a rather conventional iconography, the movement of the executioners is halted at the very moment when they are about to let loose their stones on Stephen. Remaining faithful to the account in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6-7), Rubens has shown Stephen with his face turned towards the heavens, where Christ appears to the right of God. The martyrdom of Stephen in fact has the peculiarity of being the consequence and not the cause of a vision he had while preaching before the Sanhedrin: 'When the members of the Sanhedrin heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened (…)' (Acts 7:54-56) . He thus dies because he has had a vision. This is why the large majority of artists before Rubens chose to compress the vision and the stoning into one scene, showing us the two moments simultaneously although they take place consecutively.[16] In order to respect this sequence, Stephen as a visionary martyr is at one and the same time 'full of the Holy Spirit' thanks to his vision and gives up his spirit to God: 'And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (Acts 7:59). The opening up of space-time is played out here in the coincidence between these two time frames.

A further element reinforces this temporal compression. Stephen's vision before the Sanhedrin literally transfigures him: 'And all that sat in the council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel' (Acts 6:15). We might speak of a metamorphosis of the face which, at the

same time when it is defaced or disfigured by the violence, is reconfigured or reshaped in the likeness of God. In a poem composed in honour of Jesuit martyrs (*Quinque martyres*, 1591), and commenting on the fresco of the stoning of Saint Stephen in the church of Santo Stefano Rotondo in Rome – a major site in the reinvention and promotion of martyrological imagery at the end of the sixteenth century, and a church Rubens certainly visited during his stay in Rome – the Jesuit Francesco Benci speaks of this metamorphosis of Stephen using the metaphor of the snake sloughing off its skin: 'That renowned man standing amid the stones, as a snake sloughs its skin across sharp rocks and glistens anew, takes up a crown gleaming with jewels and gold'.[17]

In the case of the Rubens triptych, we can say that this sloughing off is truly Christological. This is presented notably by another form of analogy made possible by manipulation of the wings, and is revealed through the representation, on the reverse of the wings, of the Annunciation (fig. 3). This figuration of the incarnation contributes to the metamorphosis of the figure of Saint Stephen into an *alter Christus*, which is fully justified since he is the first martyr to have died because of his 'imitation of Christ'. In addition, his entombment on the right-hand panel, with the body wrapped in a white shroud, is clearly, as has already been noted, a reminiscence of the entombment of Christ, like that represented by Caravaggio, on which we know Rubens reflected deeply.[18] We should further note that the highly dynamic arrival of the archangel of the Annunciation, his right arm stretched out in the direction of the dove, creates a fascinating visual rhyme, once the wings are closed, with the equally dynamic gestures of the executioners about to release their stones. The message one may take from this is of the analogy no longer so much with Christ as with the Virgin, who is ready to receive the Holy Spirit, while Stephen is prepared to receive the 'coup de Grace' that opens the heavens to him and consecrates his holiness.

In the reorganisation carried out by the abbot Nicolas Dubois between 1628 and 1673, not long after the installation of the triptych, this latter was taken apart in order to be placed on two different altars added on to the ambulatory of the choir.[19] The altar dedicated to the Virgin was given the wings, and the central panel was placed on the altar dedicated to Saint Stephen. While the hypothesis offered by Sauerländer – who sees in this dismantling the rejection of the triptych formula,[20] which was no doubt deemed to be too archaising – seems to have some basis,[21] we may add to it that the arrangement designed for the altar of the Virgin was distinctive in that it allowed the two panels to be pivoted, as recounted at the end of the eighteenth century by Jacob Nicolas Moreau in his *Souvenirs*:

> At the back of the two crossings, one can see, from the middle
> of the church, and one sees even better from the bays, two
> magnificent paintings by Rubens. The one on the right is on
> wood: it turns on a pivot in its niche; on one side it represents the
> Annunciation of the Virgin, and on the other, the burial of Saint
> Stephen.[22]

The analogy with Christ could only be reinforced by this, in the same way as the analogy between the raised left arm of the saint preaching before

the Sanhedrin (even if this scene strangely enough is not mentioned in Moreau's description) and that of the archangel with his right arm raised.

A Eucharistic analogy is added to this Christic one, the liturgical time of the manipulation of the wings quite clearly corresponding to the time of the mass. The elevation of the host before the altarpiece could not fail to some extent to produce a visual coincidence between the holy sacrament and the face of the martyr, the focal point of the altarpiece, whose radiance seeks to convey the idea of transfiguration as mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. We may go so far as to speak of a *mise en abyme*, the figure of Stephen in his priestly dress entering into a visual resonance with the liturgical vestments of the officiating clergy. For we should remember that the dalmatic worn by the first deacon was at that time charged with a symbolism linked to the Passion of Christ, whose face moreover appears on the orphreys of Stephen's dalmatic. This symbolism primarily concerns the colour red, evoking the blood which should flow from a body yet completely hidden by this other substitute body formed by the ample liturgical garment and which is the most evident sign of Saint Stephen's sacerdotal function. Like the snake evoked by Benci, Stephen is going to lose this second and symbolic skin, which allowed him to officiate *in persona Christi.*[23] This symbolic skin is also that of a body which seems to be emptying itself from within, although the iconography of martyrdom at this time tends rather to display the nudity of martyred bodies, as is the case in Van Scorel's version, in which the saint is half unclothed. The dalmatic was used in a liturgical context only from the fourth century: this perfectly self-aware anachronism contributes to creating a strong connection between evangelical times and the beginning of the seventeenth century when deacons still wore the same type of liturgical vestments.

Alongside these temporal clashes, we must return to the way in which Rubens translates what we might call the *kairos* of martyrdom, which opens up a time which is no longer only historical, theological or liturgical, but is a truly visionary or miraculous time.[24] Let us first dwell on the expression of the passions, beginning with the passion of Stephen, whom we may describe as simultaneously laid low by suffering and liberated by faith. The juvenile or even angelic face (an impression reinforced by the presence of angels in the heavens) is radiant, although deathly pale and bloodied. This double expression of pain and grace emerges with all the more contrast since it is opposed to that of the executioners whose nudity, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles,[25] and brutality contribute to revealing the sanctity of the martyr. Stephen's eyes are rolled upwards, and his head is directed towards the opening in the sky and the descent of the angels bringing him the insignia of martyrdom, beginning with the crown – an essential detail, if only through the identity between this emblem of martyrdom and the very name of Stephen, *Stephanos* in Greek meaning 'crown'.

The *exempla doloris*

The preparatory drawing (fig. 4) for this head clearly shows the inspiration Rubens drew from ancient statuary, in this case from a statue representing the dying Alexander the Great.[26] He too was taken in the prime of his life

(*flos aetatis*, as we read in the *Golden legend* about Stephen), and if his death has nothing of the heroic about it, the restrained expression of his last breath, with his mouth slightly open and his eyes turned towards the sky, seemed to be a good model for the representation of Saint Stephen. As Erkinger Schwarzenberg points out,[27] the visual fortunes of this ancient statue did not fail to inspire the representation of martyrdom from the sixteenth century on, beginning with that of Saint Sebastian.[28] The young hero of antiquity who conquered the world becomes the Christian hero whose faith resists all violence, yet without expressing any extreme suffering. However, the Acts of the Apostles as well as the *Golden legend* relate Stephen's cry, after the fashion of Christ's cry to God on the cross: 'And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice [*clamauit voce magna*], Lord, lay not this sin to their charge' (Acts 7:60). Taking inspiration from the ancient model of the *Alessandro morente* that imposed itself on him and other artists before him as an *exemplum doloris*, Rubens transforms what is a cry of agony into a cry we may qualify as ecstatic, characteristic of this

precise moment when the soul leaves the body. As the Jesuit Maximilian van der Sandt puts it, in his dictionary of mysticism, ecstasy or rapture 'adds a kind of sudden violence, through which the soul is suddenly pulled away from the senses, and raised quickly and powerfully towards divine contemplation and love'.[29]

Among other examples of ancient *exempla doloris*, we can of course depend on the figure of the *Laocoon*. We know that Rubens meditated deeply on this ancient model, with which he entered into a contest of emulation.[30] Despite the difference in age between the two characters, the unsteady position of Saint Stephen and the backwards tilt of his head make the *Laocoon* a likely inspiration. We may say as much of the lithic appearance of his pallid face, as if petrified by death, unless he is in the process of returning to life, an entirely heavenly life. But there is no representation here of any attempt to escape death, no tension of the kind Goethe speaks of regarding the *Laocoon*: 'the efforts and the sufferings are united at the same moment'.[31] Saint Stephen here gives himself up to death with courage and resignation.

In this respect we can connect this ideal of martyrdom to the neo-Stoicism of a Justus Lipsius, whose influence on the Antwerp painter is well known.[32] The pictorial meditation offered by Rubens on the *Death of Seneca*, also inspired by ancient statuary, is underlain by the Christianised ancient value of constancy in the face of death and in the face of tyrants.[33] While the aged philosopher has nothing in common with the young martyr, and while one gives himself to death and the other in a sacrifice which cannot be likened to a suicide, this does not prevent the half-open mouth and eyes turned upwards towards the sky from translating here too resignation before adversity, and even more the serene acceptance of death. From this perspective the example of Saint Stephen is not isolated in Rubens's oeuvre, since it has been possible to connect this neo-Stoic imaginary with certain poses assumed by other martyrs he painted, such as his *Saint Sebastian* in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin.[34]

We must also take into account the association established in this period between Seneca and Saint Paul, who were said to have entered into correspondence, a story now thought to be apocryphal.[35] Paul, to whose preaching a substantial part of the Acts of the Apostles is devoted, is represented in the lower right corner of the stoning panel, for as Acts reports he was a witness to this martyrdom. He thus appears as a crucial link in this question of the affinity of Senecan morality with the precepts he conveyed through his preaching, especially on the question of the expectation of death: 'According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain' (Phil. 1:20-21). This resignation to a desired death appears to be central to the post-Tridentine literature on the representation of martyrdom. For example, in Paleotti's *Discorso*, the display of the violence inflicted on the martyrs is clearly presented as an encouragement to patience and magnanimity:

> (…) every day we observe the atrocious tortures of the saints
> depicted and minutely expressed (…). The Catholic Church has

approved their being represented before the eyes of Christian folk, as heroic insignia of the patience and great-mindedness of the holy martyrs and trophies of their unconquered faith and glory; our zealous mother wishes her sons to take heart from their example, and learn to spurn life – should occasion demand – for the divine service, and to adopt an attitude of constancy in all the accidents of this world. She also intends horrendous images to remind us of how incomparably greater the pains and afflictions of the martyrs were than the ones we are feeling in the infirmities and miseries of this life so that we learn to bear and disdain with virility things that may perturb us, faith in God and desire for his glory swelling within us.[36]
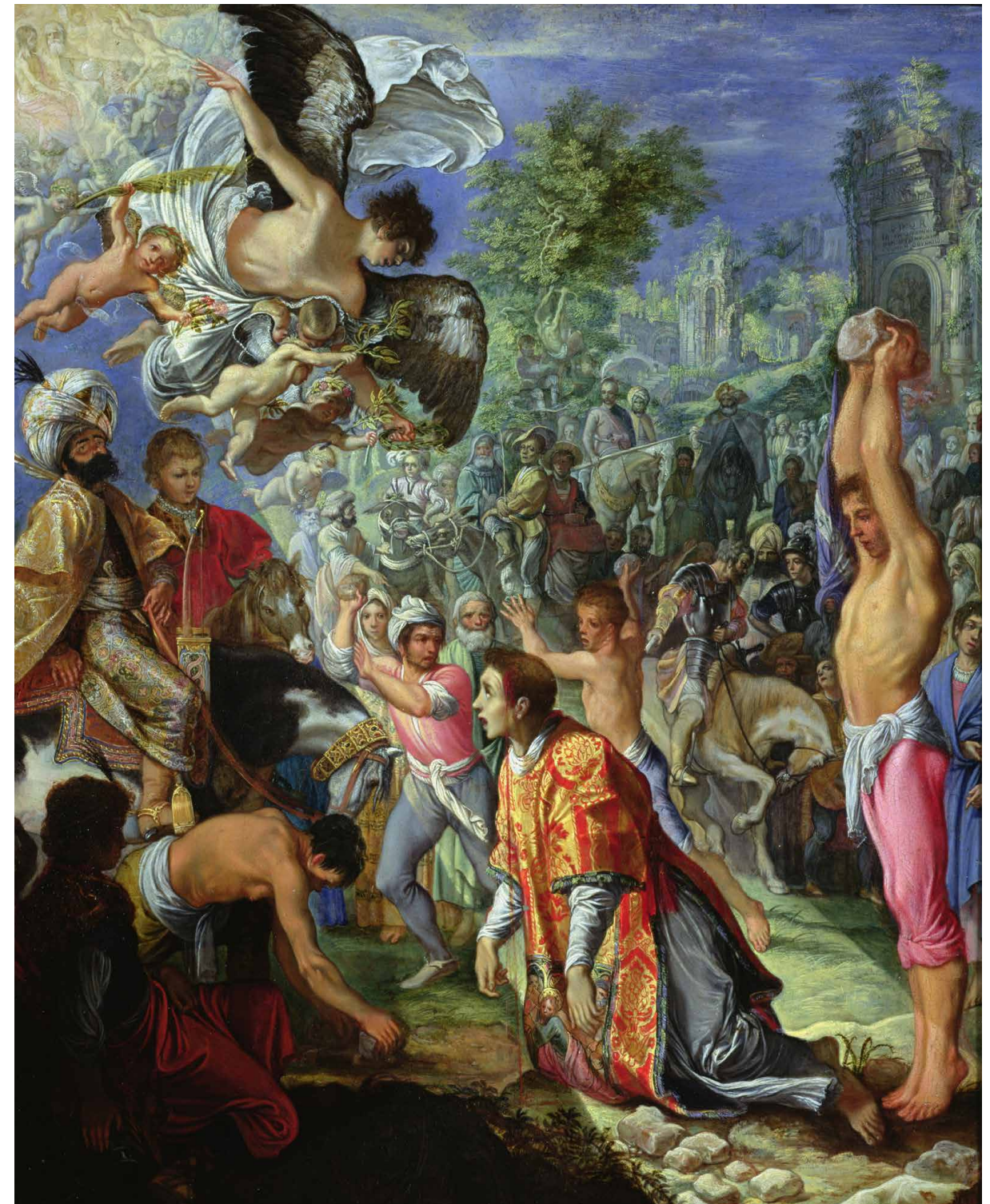
The fall and the rise

In the Valenciennes painting, the absence of resistance in the face of death is reflected by the collapse of the body under the effect of the extremely violent and dynamic forces deployed from the right, which leads to the whole scene as it were being thrown down inexorably to the ground. The artist grasps the most extreme moment of tension, the very gap that precedes the fatal blow. Rubens's treatment contrasts with that of Adam Elsheimer, a forerunner and probably one of his models, painter in around 1604 of the *Stoning of Saint Stephen* (fig. 5),[37] in which the martyr is shown at the precise moment of the fall. It also contrasts with that of another model of the same subject, this one Italian and painted in 1597 by Ludovico Cigoli (Florence, Galleria Palatina).[38] The tour de force of Rubens is to suggest the rising at the same time as the falling, to grasp this moment-gap which is neither the posture of before, nor that of after. This is what Pietro Bellori noticed half a century later when he writes '(…) the saint (…) falls with his eyes uplifted (…)'.[39] The idea of the fall of the body and of the elevation of the gaze conveys very well the coexistence of physical reality with epiphanic truth.

We find this same idea in the *Adnotationes et meditationes* by Hieronimus Nadal which accompany the *Evangelicae historiae imagines*, the series of 153 engraved plates on the Gospels published by the Jesuits in Antwerp in 1593 and from which Rubens drew some of his iconographic models, as has been shown elsewhere.[40] While there is no representation of the stoning of Saint Stephen in the *Imagines*, Nadal's meditations refer to it in these terms:

> See the wounds that Stephen receives, the pain, the effusion of blood. See him thrown to the ground by the violence of the savage stoning; see him rise again by force of spirit and divine strength. Consider at the same time how much ardor he may feel in that stoning; so that each stone gives this most holy man an even more ardent desire for martyrdom.[41]

This incitement to meditative visualisation might have served as *ekphrasis* of Rubens's painting, which attempts to give an account of this divine force at work, coinciding with a double temporality, that of the dramatic *actio* and the divine *electio*, opening up another space-time. In a composition

5
Adam Elsheimer, *The stoning of Saint Stephen,* **c. 1604,** oil on tinned copper, 34 x 28 cm, Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland (photo: National Gallery of Scotland)

constructed in chiasmus, the painting being cut in two diagonally so as to separate clearly the celestial world from the terrestrial where all forces concentrate or converge in a centripetal dynamic towards the saint, this opening up works visually through the sole point of junction between the two worlds that is constituted by the face of the martyr. More precisely, this opening up corresponds to the spatial interval, a real field of forces, between his face and the crown the angel is bringing him – a placed crown that contrasts with the thrown stones and which literally draws him up to the heavens.

One of the main disciples of Rubens, the one who perhaps best understood, from a perspective one might call symbolic, this coincidence between putting to death and triumph, was Anthony van Dyck.[42] In his version of the *Stoning of Saint Stephen* (fig. 6),[43] which is just as dynamic and is clearly inspired by his master's work, he superimposes the crown and the palm on the stone. The stone which gives the coup de grâce and the Grace that consecrates the holiness of the 'crown'-martyr (*Stephanos*) are assimilated visually and theologically.

The emotional power of the image of martyrdom

In his *De picturis et imaginibus sacris*, Johannes Molanus begins his chapter devoted to 'Some ancient images of martyrs to be recommended' with the example of Saint Stephen. One might have expected here an underscoring of the importance of this first martyr in imitation of Christ, but the Louvain theologian straight way gives the example, taken from book II of the *Miracles of Saint Stephen*,[44] of a miraculous image of the saint, 'brought by divine intervention':

> One fair day, a dragon of gigantic size swooped down from the clouds on Uzali, and with all earthly occupation abandoned, the crowd converged on the church, as to the breast of a mother. At the foot of the sacred memorial of the friend of God, persons of both sexes and all ages prostrated themselves with their faces to the ground, until, thanks to Stephen's prayer, through an effect of divine clemency, the dragon disappeared. The next day, an unknown merchant, or in reality an angel, brought to Sennodus, the sub-deacon of the church of Uzali, a veil of different colours, on which was this painting. On the right, one could see Saint Stephen in person standing and bearing on his shoulders a glorious cross. One could see him strike at the gates of the town with the end of the cross. After which, one could see the flight of the hideous dragon at the approach of the friend of God. (…) So this veil with its painting was hung by the sub-deacon before the memorial of so great a patron saint. The faithful of both sexes and all ages began to look and admire, as at a great spectacle, by what liberator this dragon had been put to death and this enemy vanquished. Indeed, there was in this veil a whole discourse of God to men (…).[45]

6
Anthony van Dyck, *The stoning of Saint Stephen*, c. 1622-1624, oil on canvas, 178 x 150 cm, Tatton Park, The Egerton Collection (photo: The Egerton Collection)

This tale offers proof of the power not only of the saint, through his miraculous intercession, but also of his image, whose apotropaic power is thus emphasised. The force of the saint-become-image in effect distances the forces of evil, in the manner of the tutelary saints of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier, painted around the same time by Rubens, the former making the demon flee while the latter makes idols crumble, two saints who are raised up as living statues placed on a kind of pedestal. The cited extract from Molanus testifies moreover to the strong analogy between the protomartyr and Christ, the former also bearing the cross, not only symbolically on his dalmatic, as was the case on the vestment worn by deacons in the seventeenth century, but here literally on his shoulders. The remainder of Molanus's chapter offers other examples testifying to the thaumaturgical power of images of the martyrs. All the healings related are linked at the same time to the intercession of these images and of these martyrs made, as it were, into images – that is to say, appearing as the 'painting showed them'.

In the beliefs of this period this miraculous power was intimately linked not only to relics but also to the striking visual force of these images of martyrs. Many ecclesiastical authors emphasise the tears that flow when one contemplates them. Thus the rector of the German-Hungarian College of Santo Stefano Rotondo, Michele Lauretano, writes of the frescoes representing the martyrs of the first five centuries, among whom Stephen occupies first place: 'The fact of seeing an infinity of kinds of torments and such a great number of martyrs awakens much devotion; (…) many cannot see it without tears and spiritual movements'.[46] A commonplace in the literature of the time, tears shed before the representation of scenes of martyrdom contrasts with the cathartic pleasure that many theorists of art attribute to the sight of paintings of violent scenes. For the specific feature of *catharsis*, as it was then theorised in a way that was fairly faithful to its Aristotelian meaning,[47] is to transform the horrifying into pleasure 'which arises as in tragedy according to a double modality, negative and positive: negative pleasure of horror distanced, positive pleasure of horror transfigured'[48] through art. Such is the paradox of representation, in this case that of the beauty of horror. Hence there are many authors of the time who describe the 'violent pleasure'[49] that takes hold of spectators, as does Marino when he writes about a painting of the *Massacre of the innocents* by Guido Reni (Bologna, Pinacoteca Nazionale): 'horror often goes hand in hand with pleasure'.[50]

We must however recognise that the principles, at the very least theoretical, which guided the iconography of martyrdom in this period sought precisely to evade what appeared to be the snares of delight. In his *Théâtre des cruautés des hérétiques de notre temps*, an illustrated work published in Antwerp in 1588 which offers a selection of the worst atrocities committed by the Protestants against the Catholics, Richard Verstegan too warns his reader-viewers:

(…) if you think that this spectacle has been invented to give you pleasure, we beg you to pardon us; for to the contrary we mean to draw tears from your eyes, cries from your mouths, sighs from your hearts and sobs from your breasts, unless you be without eyes,

without mouth, without heart and without breast, and there dwells within you no humanity.[51]

This remark clearly brings to light this paradox of pleasure linked to the spectacle of violence supposed to make tears flow but of which we suspect the effect of fascination exercised on souls greedy for this kind of horrific display. If the time of contemplation is first and foremost the time of awe, the viewer must not find himself trapped in it. For the pathetic rather than aesthetic power must necessarily lead to empathy, and pity must necessarily lead to piety, and then to conversion, reform or inner imitation.

While we have no testimony of the reception in the seventeenth century of the representations of martyrdom by Rubens, we can easily imagine that a work such as the *Martyrdom of Saint Stephen* could have aroused a certain fascination in front of 'sacred horror' (*sacer horror*), an expression that designates both the nature of the representation and the type of effect it was supposed to produce in the viewer.[52] Of course, in the case of Rubens, this fascination must certainly have been tinged with artistic admiration, an appreciation that was to grow in the second half of the seventeenth century and in the eighteenth century as the taste for this kind of scene of cruelty was fading. When in his *Souvenirs*, cited above, Moreau writes, at the end of the eighteenth century, of Rubens's *Martyrdom of Saint Stephen* that he thought 'to see the heavens open, so struck was I by the beauty of the colours and of the freshness of this admirable painting',[53] we have a fine testimony of a vision we might call more aesthetic than religious, as it seems that the beauty of the painting and no more the horror of unleashed violence or the triumphant death throes of the martyr gives the impression of an opening sky. It is henceforth colour more than the nature of the drama unfolding that creates the visionary experience. The vision of the Trinity with which Stephen was gratified and which opened the heavens to him at the moment of his martyrdom became the experience of the viewer carried up to the artistic heavens produced by this admirable painting.

Notes

1 For a more general approach and a comparison between Protestant and Catholic worlds, see Burschel 2004, Behrmann 2015, Dillon 2003 and Gregory 2001. For more bibliography, Dekoninck 2020.

2 This idea can be found, among other places, in one of the Sermons of Saint Augustine in which he speaks of the sufferings of Christ: *Deformitas Christi te formet* (The deformity of Christ forms you). Augustine, *Sermones*, XXVII, PL 38, col. 181.

3 Alberigo *et al.* 1991, 774-776.

4 I would like to warmly thank Nils Büttner for his comments and bibliographical additions concerning Rubens's work.

5 Paleotti 2012, 257-258.

6 'Sane vero quando in veterum, gentilium statuis acerbitas illa doloris exprimi potuit, quemadmodum in Vaticano Laocoonte cernitur, tantum non

expirante, ac prae dolore se, filiosque serpentibus vinctos dirissime torquente, quis neget id effici posse in eo, in quem omnium dolorum, ac diritatum genera omnia irruperunt? sic ergo Blasium pectinibus ferreis excarnificatum, Sebastianum pluribus sagittis confossum: Laurentium in craticula torridum, lacerum, visceribus diffusis, deformem pingendum esse, nemo sanae mentis non dixerit. Quorsum autem mihi obieceris Stephanum lapidatum sine lapidibus, Blasium integris membris, ac formosum, in equuleo sine sanguine, Iacobum Apostolum sine fuste in capite, Sebastianum sine sagittis, Laurentium in igne candidum? Sane quoniam (aiunt) ars et musculorum atque venarum monstratio, postulant, ut ita fiat. At ego summam esse artem constantissime assero, quae rem ipsam imitetur, martyria in martyribus; fletum in flentibus, dolorem in patientibus, gloriam, et laetitiam in resurgentibus exprimat, et

in animis figat. Haec nimirum substantia artis est: haec, quae arti formam indit, quod videlicet inspectione dignum est'. Possevino 1594, 296-297.

7 Lessing 1962, 19-20.

8 See, in particular, Sauerländer 2014, 175-275.

9 Vlieghe 1973, 150-159, nos. 146-149; Sauerländer 2014, 177-190.

10 See Courmaceul 1866, 213.

11 Guillouet 1964; Baligand *et al.* 2011.

12 Vlieghe 1980, 32-36.

13 'Ampulla continens sanguinem prothomartyris Stephani, de brachio eius, de sepulchro eius, de ossibus eius, de lapidibus quibus lapidatus est. (…) Item sunt duo brachia, unum deauratum, in quo continentur'. Desilve 1894, 326.

14 De Voragine 2012, 48.

15 Desilve 1899, 11.

16 Boespflug 1992.

17 'Ille quidem lapides inter, perque aspera saxa/ Ceu serpens novus emicuit, vestemque reliquit,/ Et tulit insignem gemmis auroque coronam'. Benci 2018, 123.

18 For a recent contribution to the study of Caravaggio's influence on Rubens, see Sammut 2020.

19 See Desilve 1899, 393-395, and Vlieghe 1980, 150-152.

20 It is a remarkable fact that Rubens was commissioned to paint a triptych. For the interpretation of this fact, see Heinen 2016.

21 Sauerländer 2014, 180.

22 Moreau 1899, 405.

23 The sacerdotal garment moreover accompanies the saint into the tomb, as is shown by the female figure at the extreme left of the right panel, a ritual that persisted into the 17th century.

24 See Dekoninck 2021.

25 '(…) and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen (…)' (Ac 7:58-59). The *Golden legend* makes clear the reason for this stripping: 'And the two false witnesses, who by law were to cast the first stone, took off their garments (lest these be made unclean by contact with the blasphemer, or in order to be more at ease while throwing the stones) (…)' (De Voragine 2012, 47). It is interesting to note how Rubens plays on the opposition between naked bodies, taken back in some way to a bestiality stripped of any sign of civilisation.

26 Vlieghe 1980, 153, no. 146b. Van der Meulen 1994, vol. II, 144-146, nos. 124-125. This model is also evoked in his *Daniel in the lions' den* in the National Gallery of Washington. D'Hulst & Vandenven 1989, no. 57, fig. 13. See also Lusheck 2017.

27 Schwarzenberg 1969, 398-405.

28 See, for example, the head of Saint Sebastian by Sodoma in the Uffizi.

29 'Sed reuera *Raptus* addit violentiam quandam repentinam qua mens subito auellitur a sensibus, et Divinam inspectionem, ac amorem contra modum naturae suae, celeriter, ac potenter attollitur'. Van der Sandt 1640, 310.

30 See cat. Frankfurt am Main 2018. He drew inspiration from it in a clearer manner for his martyrdom of Saint Andrew (Madrid, Real Hospital de San Andrés de los Flamencos). See Newman 2018.

31 Goethe 1980, 83.

32 Morford 1991; Heinen 2008.

33 See Noll 2001 and Heinen 2009.

34 Noll 2001, 113.

35 James 1924; Dodson & Briones 2017.

36 Paleotti 2012, 257. '(…) noi veggiamo giornalmente figurarsi i cruciati atrocissimi de' santi e minutamente esprimersi (…). i quali ha approvato la Chiesa catolica che si rappresentino agli occhi del popolo cristiano come insegne eroiche della pazienza, della magnanimità de' santi martiri e trofei della invitta fede e gloria loro, volendo la zelante madre nostra che da questi esempli piglino cuore i suoi figli et imparino a sprezzare la vita, se così accada, per servigio divino, e a stabilirsi nella constanza in tutti gli accidenti di questo mondo, e perché anco, considerandosi quanto incomparabilmente sono stati maggiori i dolori e l'afflizzioni dei martiri, che quegli che noi sentiamo nelle infirmità e miserie di questa vita, impariamo di sopportare e sprezzare virilmente ciò che ci suole perturbare, crescendoci la fiducia in Dio e desiderio della gloria sua'. Paleotti 1582, 216-217.

37 Note that this is a painting of fairly small dimensions: 35 x 29 cm.

38 Mersmann 2016, 138-140.

39 '(…) il Santo (…) cade con gli occhi elevate (…)'. Belleri 1672, 224-225.

40 Freedberg 1978.

41 'Conspice vulnera quae accipit Stephanus, dolorem, sanguinis effusionem. Vide illum violentia saevorum lapidum deiici in terram, vide rursum vi Spiritus et divini roboris assurgentem. Considera simul quantam alacritatem in ipsa lapidatione sentiat; ut singuli lapides adiiciant sanctissimo viro ardentius martyrii desiderium'. Nadal 1595, 27-28.

42 His *Beheading of Saint James* (Valenciennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts) was displayed in the same church of Saint-Amand, and hence nearby the Rubens triptych.

43 Barnes *et al.* 2004, 164-165.

44 *Patrologio Latina* 41, col. 850-851.

45 'Cum enim immensem magnitudinis draco in die nundinarum Vzali e nubibus propenderet, relicta omni terrena negotiatione erat magnus multitudinis concursus ad gremium Eccleisae martris. Ad ipsam amici Dei sacratam memoriam infacie prostrata iacebat diuersa aetas, dispar quoque sexus, donec Stephani prece fusa, clementia Dei draconem illum subtraheret. Sequenti die negotiator nunquam cognitus, aut verius Angelus, Sennodo Vzalensis ecclesiae subdiacono attulit velum, varijs pictum coloribus, in quo inerat pictura haec. In dextra veli parte, ipse sanctus Stephanus videbatur astare, & gloriosam crucem proprijs repositam humeris baiulare; qua crucis cuspide portam ciuitatis videbatur pulsare, ex qua profugiens draco teterrimus, cernebatur exire, amico Dei velut aduantante. Verum ille serpens noxius, nec in fuga ipsa tutissimus, sub triumphali pede Martyris Christi contritus aspiciebatur, & pressus. Talis itaque pictura veli à subdiacono suspensa est ante memoriam tanti patroni; & omnis aetas, omnisque sexus intueri coepit, & mirari tanqum grande spectaculum, quoi scilicet authore, quoue liberatore, draco ille extinctus est, hostisque deuictus. Nam reuera Dei fuit ad homines quaedam allocutio, in velo tacitem dicentis (…)'. Molanus 1570, 27-28.

46 '(…) et e cosa che move molto a divotione vedere infinite sorti di torme[n]ti, et tanto gran numero de Martiri (…), molti no[n] la passono vedere se[n]za lagrime et moti spirituali'. Lauretano 1582, fol. 49.

47 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b21-28.

48 Hénin 2003, 530.

49 Minturno 1559, 23.

50 'E che spesso l'horror và col diletto'. Marino 1632, 19.

51 'Que si vous pensez que ce spectacle ait esté inventé pour vous donner du plaisir, nous vous supplions de nous pardonner; car au contraire nous entendons tirer les larmes de voz yeux, les plaintes de vos bouches, les souspirs de vos cœurs et les sanglots de vos poitrines, si ce n'est que vous soyez sans yeux, sans bouche, sans cœur et sans poitrine, et qu'il ne réside en vous aucune humanité'. Verstegan 1588, 7.

52 Dekoninck & Delfosse 2016.

53 Moreau 1899, 405.

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Detail fig. 6