An Interpretation of Mantegna's 'Parnassus'
Originally published in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* in 1963

In her negotiations with Giovanni Bellini, Isabella d'Este laid down what we might call her 'minimum conditions' for a painting that was to go into her *Studiolo*. It could be any story, an ancient fable or a fresh invention, provided only that it 'represented a classical subject with a beautiful meaning'. It is easy to see in what way Mantegna's so-called 'Parnassus' fulfils the first of these conditions, but what of the second? What *bello significato* can be found in the hilarious comedy of Mars and Venus trapped by Vulcan for the amusement of the gods? Ever since Foerster first stressed the essentially humorous character of the story, discussion has centred on this difficulty. Did Isabella (or her adviser) read the tale in the spirit of Homer’s minstrel in the *Odyssey*, who entertains the Phaeacians with this spicy story or did they prefer to forget it for the sake of a more general significance, such as the glorification of Isabella and her martial husband in the guise of the Goddess of Love and the God of War? Perhaps these alternatives are not mutually exclusive. For there is a classical text which explicitly chides those who cannot see beyond the immoral surface of Homer’s story and fail to grasp its beautiful significance. It occurs in the allegorization of Homer, a defence of the poet against Plato’s strictures, attributed in the Renaissance to the philosopher Heraclides Ponticus but now to an otherwise unknown rhetorician of the first century A.D. called Heraclitus. This text was first printed in Venice in 1505 but a good many manuscripts, which could easily have been accessible to Isabella's advisers, exist in Italian libraries. Moreover, the passage concerned is also quoted in some, at least, of the scholia to the *Odyssey* which would have been eagerly scrutinized by any humanist trying to fulfil Isabella's requirement.

Let us now leave all other things aside and turn to the defence of that crime with which the slanderous informers plague us—for they never stop making a song and dance with their loud accusation that the loves of Mars and Venus are a blasphemous invention. They allege that this carries lust into heaven and that Homer is not ashamed of attributing to the gods a crime such as adultery, which is punished with death among men:

I sing of the love of Ares and Aphrodite of the fair crown
How they first lay together in the house of Hephaistos….

Then the trap, the laughter of the gods and Poseidon's intervention with Hephaistos are censured. For if these vices occur among the gods it would be unworthy to punish them among men.

I think, however, that though this story was sung among the Phaeacians, a people enslaved by pleasure, it still contains a philosophical message. For the passage confirms the doctrine of the Silicians and of Empedocles that Ares is the name of strife, Aphrodite that of love. Homer tells how these two ancient enemies were reconciled. Thus it is fitting that from the two is born Harmony, which reduces everything to concord and tranquillity. Thus the gods laugh and rejoice out of gratitude that the accursed strife is over and transformed into unanimity and peace.

Heraclitus goes on to offer an additional allegory interpreting the myth in a way which foreshadows the alchemists, with Mars standing for iron, Venus for fire and Vulcan for water, and the whole story symbolizing the art of the armourer. We need not follow him there, for the interpretation quoted above appears to provide all that is needed for the understanding of Mantegna's composition. What more 'beautiful meaning' could be found for this classical subject than the birth of Harmony from the union of Mars and Venus and the rejoicing of the gods at the establishment of peace and concord? And how could this meaning have been better symbolized
than by the joyful dance of the nine Muses to the song of Apollo? Incidentally, this meaning may explain the puzzling fact that the first description of the picture, the 1542 inventory of Isabella d'Este's possessions, calls the singer ‘Orpheus’ and the Muses ‘nymphs’. The writer remembered the *bello significato* better than he identified the *cosa antiqua*.

There is no reason, in this reading, to underplay the cheerful character of the subject, typified by the figure of Cupid who seems to aim his blow-pipe at Vulcan in a distinctly naughty way. For the surface of the story is humorous, its deeper meaning joyous.

What, then, of Hermes and Pegasus accompanying the scene? In Homer it is banter between Apollo and Hermes (both agreeing that they would gladly change places with Ares) that provokes the laughter of the gods. Hermes’ presence, moreover, would equally fit the idea of the birth of Harmony if he is linked with oratory and the arts.

This is the role in which Mercury appears in company with Apollo, the Muses and Venus in the beautiful opening lines of Pontanus's *Urania*, which were written in the same years when Mantegna painted his picture. I do not wait to suggest, of course, that there is any direct link between the poem and the painting. Pontanus does not write about Mars and Venus. But the great poet's enchanting vision of the joyous concourse of the gods comes so close in spirit to Mantegna's evocation of divine harmony that word and image illuminate each other even though they were conceived independently.

 Qui coelo radient ignes, quae sidera mundo
 Labantur tacito, stellis quibus emicet ingens
 Signifer, utque suos peragant errantia cursus…
 Dic, dea, quae nomen coelo deducis ab ipso
 Uranie, dic, Musa, lovis clarissima proles,
 Et tecum castae veniant ad vota sorores.
 Dum canitis resonatque cavis in vallibus echo…
 Ipse chori pater ac princeps et carminis auctor,
 Phoebe, adsis, noctisque decus latonia virgo,
 Dique deaeque omnes, quorum sub numine coelum est.
 Tuque adeo, Comes Aonis, dux optima vatum,
 Alma Venus (teneros nati sat lusimus ignes),…
 0 mihi si Charites spirent, si blanda canentis
 Gratia mesopio contingat labra liquore
 Tu vero, nate, ingentes accingere ad orsus
 Et mecum illustres coeli spatiare per oras;
 Namque aderit tibi Mercurius, cui coelifer Atlas
 Est avus et notas puerum puer instruct arils.…

(You who take your name from the heavens themselves, Urania, divine Muse, renowned child of Jupiter, tell of the fires that shine in the sky, of the constellations that move while the world is silent; tell with what stars the great zodiac shines forth, and how the Planets run their wandering courses; and let the chaste sisters join you in your hymn. And while your song echoes in the hollow valleys, lead Phoebus, you who are the father and ruler of the chorus, the leader and originator of song, and Diana the adornment of the night, and all the gods and goddesses who hold sway over the heavens, yes, and you, mother Venus, the companion of the Muses and excellent guide of the poets (we have sung enough of the gentle fires of your son…). Oh, if the Charites inspire me, and if favouring Grace touched the lips of the singer with inspiring liquor, and you, Cupid, begin the great undertaking and traverse with me the shining confines of the heavens, for Mercury, whose ancestor is Atlas who carried the heaven, will be with you, who as a boy should teach the boy the foundations of the art.)
The Subject of Poussin's Orion
Originally published in *The Burlington Magazine* in 1944

This was the vision, or the allegory:
We heard the leaves shudder with no wind upon them
By the ford of the river, by the deep worn stones,
And a tread of thunder in the shadowed wood;
Then the hunter Orion came out through the trees,
A tree-top giant, with a man upon his shoulder,
Half in the clouds….  
Sacheverell Sitwell: ‘Landscape with the Giant Orion.’

Bellori tells us that of two landscapes Poussin painted for M. Passart one represented ‘the story of Orion, the blind giant, whose size can be gauged from that of a little man who stands on his shoulders and guides him, while another one gazes at him’. It is to Professor Tancred Borenius that we owe the identification and publication of this masterpiece, which is now at the Metropolitan Museum at New York. The strange tale of how the gigantic huntsman Orion, who had been blinded for an attempt to violate the princess Merope at Chios, was healed by the rays of the rising sun, would appear to be a tempting subject for illustration. And yet Poussin seems to have been the first—if not the only—artist to paint it.

Perhaps the story did indeed appeal to him—as Sacheverell Sitwell suggested—‘because of its poetical character, and because of the opportunity it afforded him to make a study of a giant figure, half on earth and half in the clouds, at the moment of sunrise’, but the idea of making it the subject of a painting was nevertheless not his own. It was apparently first conceived not by a painter but by a man of letters, by that fertile journalist of late antiquity: Lucian.

In his rhetorical description of a Noble Hall, Lucian enumerates the frescoes which adorn its walls:

On this there follows another prehistoric picture. Orion, who is blind, is carrying Cedalion, and the latter, riding on his back, is showing him the way to the sunlight. The rising sun is healing the blindness of Orion, and Hephaestos views the incident from Lemnos.

There can be little doubt that this passage is the immediate source of Poussin's painting. Like Botticelli's *Calumny of Apelles* or Titian's *Bacchanal* it thus owes its origin to that curious literary fashion of classical antiquity, the *ekphrasis*, which fired the imagination of later centuries by the detailed description of real or imaginary works of classical art.

But, although the passage from Lucian may serve to explain Poussin's choice of the subject matter, it does not appear to have been the only literary source on which he relied when he began to reconstruct the classical fresco described by the Greek author. For in one point, at least, Poussin's picture does not exactly tally with Lucian's description: Hephaestos is not represented as 'watching the incident from Lemnos'—he is seen advising the guide he gave Orion and pointing the way towards the East where the sun is about to rise. The role of the spectator has been filled by another divinity, Diana, who is seen quietly looking down from a cloud. The same cloud on which she leans also forms a veil in front of Orion’s eye and thus suggests some kind of connection between the presence of the goddess and the predicament of the giant. Félibien must have felt this connection when he described the picture as ‘un grand paysage où est Orion, aveuglé par Diane’—quite oblivious of the fact that no classical version of the myth conforms to
this description. It was not Diana who blinded Orion, however often the story of the hunting
goddess may have been interwoven with that of the hunting giant. It was said that he loved her in
his youth, attempted to violate her, was slain by her for his crime (or else for his boasts that he
would kill all the animals in the world), and was finally changed by her into that mighty
constellation on the night sky in which his name lives on. No classical version of the tale,
however, connects Diana with the episode of Orion’s blindness. Indeed it is her intriguing
appearance as ‘a silent stone statue in the open sky’ that inspired Mr. Sacheverell Sitwell in his
highly imaginative poetical interpretations of the painting which centre round the poet’s
impression that ‘she will fade out of the sky as soon as Orion recovers his sight’. However, the
presence of the goddess becomes perhaps less mysterious if we turn from classical authors to the
reference books Poussin may have consulted, when trying to deepen his acquaintance with the
myth to which Lucian alluded.

A few lines in a satirical verse by Marston provide a neat enumeration of some of the most
popular reference books in vogue with the poets and artists:

Reach me some poets’ index, that will show
Imagines Deorum, Book of Epithets,
Natalis Comes, thou I know recites,
And makest anatomy of poesy.

The modern reader who turns to works like Natalis Comitis Mythologiae will find it difficult
to associate this bewildering farrago of pedantic erudition and uncritical compilation with the
serene Olympian world of Poussin. The most apocryphical and outlandish versions of classical
and pseudo-classical tales are here displayed and commented upon as the ultimate esoteric
wisdom. The very subtitle of Comes’ book: ‘Explicationis fabularum libri decem; in quibus
omnia prope Naturalis et Moralis Philosophiae dogmata in veterum fabulis contenta fuisse
perspicue demonstratur’, (Ten books of explanations of fables, clearly demonstrating that all the
doctrines of Natural and Moral Philosophy were contained in the fables of the ancients) shows it
to be part of that broad stream of tradition which kept alive the belief that, to the initiated, the old
fables reveal themselves as symbolical or allegorical representations of the ‘arcana’ of Natural
History or Moral Philosophy.

The principal method of this strange art of hermeneutics is a fanciful etymology which so
stretches the sound and meaning of words and names that they are made to yield their pretended
secrets. Weird and abstruse as these ‘interpretations’ read today, it can hardly be denied that they
satisfy at least one of the principal requirements of any successful interpretation: the most
disparate elements of a myth are, through this method, reduced to one common denominator and
even the most contradictory episodes can be made to appear as different symbols and
manifestations of one ‘hidden truth’. In his interpretation of the Orion myth, Natalis Comes
chose to consider its various episodes in the light of a slightly repulsive apocryphal story which
tells of the giant’s joint procreation by Neptune, Jupiter and Apollo, a story which, to Comes,
clearly signifies that Orion stands for a product of water (Neptune), air (Jupiter) and sun
(Apollo). Armed with this clue and a fanciful ‘scientific’ interpretation of meteorological
phenomena he proceeds boldly to interpret the whole legend as a veiled symbol of the interaction
of these elements in the origin and natural course of the stormcloud:
..through the combined power of these three Gods arises the stuff of wind, rain and thunder that is called Orion. Since the subtler part of the water which is rarefied rests on the surface it is said that Orion had learned from his father how to walk on the water. When this rarefied matter spreads and diffuses into the air this is described as Orion having come to Chios which place derives its name from ‘diffusion’ (for chéein means to diffuse). And that he further attempted to violate Aeorepe (sic) and was expelled from that region and deprived of his lights—this is because this matter must pass right through the air and ascend to the highest spheres and when the matter is diffused throughout that sphere it somehow feels the power of fire languishing. For anything that is moved with a motion not of its own loses its power which diminishes as it proceeds.

Orion is kindly received by Vulcanus, approaches the sun, finds his former health restored and thence returns to Chios—this naturally signifies nothing else but the cyclical and mutual generation and destruction of the elements.

They say that he was killed by Diana’s arrows for having dared to touch her—because as soon as the vapours have ascended to the highest stratum of the air so that they appear to us as touching the moon or the sun, the power of the moon gathers them up and converts them into rains and storms, thus overthrowing them with her arrows and sending them downwards; for the power of the moon works like the ferment that brings about these processes. Finally they say that Orion was killed and transformed into a celestial constellation—because under this sign storms, gales and thunders are frequent….

In this strange ‘interpretation’ Diana—the Moon and her power—does indeed form an integral part of the same process that is also symbolized in the episode of Chios: the drama of the circulation of water in nature.

But reading Natalis Comes’ text in front of Poussin's picture it appears to explain more than the mere presence of Diana on the scene. The long-stretched stormcloud through which the giant is striding, that conspicuously rises from under the trees, expands through the valley, gathers up in the air and touches Diana’s feet, this cloud is no other than Orion himself in his ‘real’ esoteric meaning. We cannot but admire the ingenuity with which Poussin has contrived to represent the exoteric and the esoteric aspect of the myth in one picture. To the uninitiated the stormcloud appears as a happy pictorial solution, a rational trick which helps to illustrate Orion’s blindness as a transitory phase which will be over when he has passed the mist and approached the rising sun. To the circle of scholars who were accustomed to see ‘the teachings of Natural and Moral Philosophy hidden in the fables of Antiquity’, the cloud rising in the grandiose scenery represented the whole myth again on a higher plane: the eternal drama of the ‘mutual generation and destruction of the elements’.

Trained, as we are, in a predominantly visual approach to the arts, we may at first find little to commend in such an intellectual and even sophisticated trick of illustration that embodies a learned commentary into a representation of a classical myth. Indeed—had this trick remained purely on an anecdotal plane the connection with Natalis Comes’ erudite compilation might just as well have remained forgotten. It constitutes the true achievement of Poussin’s genius that he succeeded in turning a literary curiosity into a living vision, that his picture expresses in pictorial terms what it signifies in terms of allegory. Without the aid of any rational ‘key’ to its emblematic language the picture has always imparted its inner meaning to sensitive observers. It was of this ‘Landscape of Poussin’ that Hazlitt wrote, with strange intuition, in his Table Talks: ‘At his touch, words start up into images, thoughts become things’. and Professor Borenius, the rediscoverer of the painting: ‘the use made of the terms of land sea and sky suggests the drama of nature for which the mythological terms are but symbols’.

Reading the passage from Natalis Comes there can be no doubt that this quite literally describes Poussin's approach to mythological landscape painting. An artist like Poussin can only have made use, in his reconstruction of Lucian's ‘ekphrasis’, of the humanist’s allegorical reading of the myth because he accepted this approach as a whole. He too conceived the ancient
tale of violence and magic as a veiled and esoteric ‘hieroglyph’ of nature’s changing course. Thus the landscape became more to him than the scene in which a strange and picturesque story was enacted. Its deeper significance lifted it beyond the sphere of realistic scenery or Arcadian dreams—it became fraught with the meaning of the myth; a vision \textit{and} an allegory of Nature herself.