

A classical painting detail showing a muscular, bearded man (Silenus) with a goat's head, bound with vines. The man is the central figure, depicted with a large, bushy beard and a head that is a goat's head. He is bound with dark, leafy vines around his waist and arms. The background shows other figures, including a woman with a white headscarf and another man with a beard. The overall style is characteristic of the High Renaissance or Baroque period.

MORGAN MEIS

On Gods,
Goats,
and the
Cracks in
Reality

THE DRUNKEN SILENUS

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MORGAN MEIS

SLANT



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For Shuffy and Matthew Power

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Preface

I STARTED WRITING THIS BOOK WHILE living in Antwerp. I was there because my wife, the indefatigable Shuffy, was making a short film ostensibly centering on Abraham Ortelius, the great cartographer and man-about-Antwerp circa the mid to late sixteenth century. We were also rapidly spending a not insignificant chunk of change I'd managed to wheedle from the Andy Warhol Foundation for my writings on art and what-not. Problem was, I had no particular project to be doing in Antwerp, other than cooking for Shuffy and tending to her needs, a not unpleasant commission but, then again, it is said that idle hands are the devil's workshop and there is, indeed, some wisdom in the saying. Suddenly, or so it seems to me now, I remembered that Antwerp was, among other things, Peter Paul Rubens's town. This thought annoyed me, since I had absolutely no interest in Rubens. I didn't even care about him enough to dislike him. My next thought was, "I'll write a book about Rubens."

It pleased me to write about Rubens since my lack of interest allowed me to focus on developing a new way of writing about art, new to me at least. There are others

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who've attempted something similar. But not too many, I'd wager. I was working on a style. The style would be direct, sometimes even downright agitated in nature. I wanted it to be funny and strange. I wanted it to be shamelessly intellectual at times and shamelessly crude at others. I wanted this style to be able to touch on deep things, profound problems of being alive, but also to let those problems hang unresolved, to raise issues of some import and then also to laugh at them. I wanted to create a style that would unfold in spirals rather than in lines.

I hope I've succeeded to some degree. I'll let others be the ultimate judges. That's how it always is anyway. I came, I should mention, to feel quite strongly about Rubens in the end. I came to recognize that he was a real artist, whatever exactly that means. But it must mean, at least, that he wrangled with the hardest things both in terms of his craft, the medium, and in terms of what you can do, what you can show through that medium.

I believe that this little book can be read with some amusement by those who will allow themselves to be so amused, and, I might add, *plus uno maneat perenne saeclo*.

1. Rubens discovers Titian, who had already discovered Silenus . . . but who is Silenus?

EARLY IN HIS ADULT LIFE, PETER PAUL Rubens, the famous painter—though he was not yet famous at the time—took a trip to Italy with his apprentice Deodat del Monte. Rubens had been living in Antwerp with his mother. He wasn't born in Antwerp, he was born in Siegen, in what is now Germany but was, at the time, not the unified country that it is today. Rubens was born in the time before nation-states as we know them existed. Before the French Revolution, before Bismarck, before Napoleon. Rubens was born in Siegen because his father had been in prison there, or thereabouts. That's another part of the story we'll get into later, the arrest and near execution of Rubens's father. Rubens's mother moved back to Antwerp after the death of that man, her husband, Peter Paul Rubens's father, Jan Rubens. They couldn't live in Antwerp while Jan Rubens was alive because he wasn't allowed to go back to Antwerp. Nobody wanted to see him around there. He wasn't welcome. But then Jan died and Rubens and his brother

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Philip and the other children moved back to Antwerp with their mother. And Rubens grew up from the age of ten or so until his early twenties as an Antwerp boy.

Antwerp was an important city then, but past its prime. Antwerp is in Belgium now, but that would have made no sense to the people of Antwerp at the time of Rubens since there was no such place as Belgium then. When Rubens was alive, Antwerp was thought of primarily as a place in Flanders. This is the late sixteenth century into the early seventeenth century. Antwerp was at its greatest during the mid-sixteenth century, when its port brought in goods from all over the world and its printing houses printed the most important books and its prominent citizens built structures and institutions of prominence. That did not last very long, mostly because of the religious wars and the pressures that were pulling the Hapsburg Empire apart. The great prominence of Antwerp didn't last very long at all, a generation or two, and then the city fades back into history as a secondary place.

So, Rubens took a trip to Italy. Then, as now, Italy was beautiful and then, as now, people were attracted to that beauty. Plus, Rubens was a painter and all the great painters were in Italy at that time. If you were a painter, you were interested in Italy.

The Italy sojourn interests us most for the simple reason that Titian was in Italy. Titian was dead, of course, before Rubens ever got to Venice. But the paintings were there. We know that Rubens looked at the paintings and that he was moved by the paintings.

Rubens discovers Titian

I'm reasonably certain that Rubens was amazed and astounded by one Titian in particular. That painting is today called *Bacchus and Ariadne*. The narrative of that painting is focused on those two figures. Bacchus is the name that the Romans gave to the Greek god Dionysus, often referred to as the God of Wine, though that makes him seem like the god of dinner parties which, you can be sure, is very far indeed from the real significance of Bacchus/Dionysus. Ariadne is a mythological figure who you will remember as the daughter of King Minos of Crete. Ariadne helped Theseus defeat the Minotaur and then to find his way out of the labyrinth. Ariadne gave Theseus a thread, which he unwound in order to find his way back out of the labyrinth, and that is why you will still hear, today, the phrase "Ariadne's thread" referred to as a way to get out of difficulties. In the old stories, Ariadne runs off with Theseus after he defeats the Minotaur but is then, in turn, abandoned by Theseus on the island of Naxos. That is where she meets Bacchus/Dionysus. He comes to her on the island of Naxos and takes her for his bride. This is the moment that Titian is treating in his famous painting. Later, in many of the stories, we are told that Ariadne hangs herself from a tree. But that happens later.

In the painting, Ariadne has her back to us and seems in the early stages of flight from Bacchus and his motley crew. They are, indeed, a rough bunch. Leopards lead the way, followed closely by a group of drunken fools and semi-humans. Satyrs dance about on their goat legs. The Dionysian ladies, the Maenads, pound

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on cymbals and tambourines. A severed cow head is dragged along on a rope by a wicked-looking baby satyr. A rough bunch. Ariadne is, wisely, looking for an exit route. But Bacchus leaps from his chariot in a flowing red cape to intercede. The painting catches him in mid-leap. There, suspended in the air, Bacchus is a miracle. He might as well be coming down directly from the heavens. Look at his face. Look at the rapture.

But our real interest is in the background of the painting. There he is in the top right, in the back, just coming on to the scene. It is the fat man. He rides an ass. His head lolls to the left. He's in a stupor again. Silenus. Poor Silenus.

That fat man, Silenus, has been following Bacchus/Dionysus around from the very beginning. Part hostage, part acolyte, we hear from the Homeric hymns of old that Silenus was a tutor to the young god. He was born to a nymph or, depending on who you ask, sprung directly from the earth. Silenus attends to Bacchus—that is his role. He tries to keep up with the party. But he is a wreck. It is too much for him. The other attendants to Bacchus hold him up as the ass tramps from one gathering to another. Silenus takes another drink.

In his own painting career, Rubens was to develop a minor obsession with Silenus. It is almost as if Rubens plucked Silenus right out of Titian's painting and made him a star in his own right. It is as if there, in the background of Titian's painting, Rubens saw something important that he couldn't let go. Rubens wanted to run with some truth of which Titian had gotten a glimpse.

Rubens discovers Titian

* * *

It's possible, of course, that Rubens never saw that painting by Titian at all. Maybe Rubens read about Silenus somewhere else, perusing the Orphic hymns in some leather-bound volume. Rubens liked to think of himself as a classicist. He would have had leather-bound volumes lying around his studio. Note, for instance, that ridiculous little vignette, that puff piece by Otto Sperling, the doctor to the Danish king and, presumably, one of the top sycophants of his time. Otto visited Rubens in his studio and wrote the following, "the master was working on a canvas while listening to a reading of Tacitus and simultaneously dictating a letter. Since we did not dare interrupt him, he himself addressed us, while continuing to paint, listen to the reading, and dictate his letter." Why not mention that Rubens was frying an egg and teaching his dog to speak while he was at it?

Who knows how or when Rubens first came across Silenus? Still, I prefer to think of Rubens being struck dumb while looking at that painting by Titian. Who is that wrecked man riding the ass in the back of the scene, he would have wondered. All the fancy activity in the foreground of Titian's painting was suddenly forgotten in place of the pitiful scene of Silenus on his ass. That's the truth of the whole scene, Rubens must have thought. Silenus rides in silent judgment of the whole affair. Silenus knows that the whole crazy circus

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is just for show. Behind it all is the base fact that life has no meaning.

* * *

I'll tell you one thing about that Silenus Titian painted in his *Bacchus and Ariadne*. He is so very tired and so very fat. A fatter more tired man has never been captured via pigment. He's asleep, or in a stupor at least. He's utterly oblivious to all the action happening at the other side of the painting, with Bacchus's leaping about and Ariadne's forestalled flight from the canvas. Another member of Bacchus's retinue seems to be holding Silenus up as he droops off the ass he is riding. Maybe the man or satyr holding Silenus up is also whispering something into his right ear, it is impossible to say for sure.

If Titian's Silenus is ever having any fun, he isn't doing it here. But this is the Silenus you can imagine uttering his famous words of wisdom. This is the Silenus that jumped up out of that painting and struck Rubens dumbfounded. This Silenus spoke to Rubens. We can presume that Silenus said the same thing to Rubens that he said to King Midas in the old myth. In the Greek myths, King Midas went looking for Silenus. He'd heard that Silenus was hiding a bit of wisdom and he wanted to hear what it was. He captured the drunken fat man. How hard could it be? He offered Silenus some wine. He replaced the water of a spring with delightful hooch and Silenus couldn't leave. What's the secret?

Rubens discovers Titian

King Midas asked. What's this thing you know? What's the best thing for man?

The secret, Silenus said, is that it would have been better not to have been born at all. The next best thing for man, Silenus added, would be to die quickly.

2. The forgotten city of Antwerp and some speculation as to why Rubens felt at home there. Perhaps it all has to do with a lingering melancholy.

RUBENS BUILT HIS HOUSE IN ANTWERP. It is a strange place, that house. That strange man built a Venetian palazzo in Flanders. It is not a Venetian palazzo, exactly. It has the elements of a Venetian palazzo. But it has the outward façade of the comfortable home of a Flemish burgher. Then it breaks out into Venetian exuberance on the inside. Even on the inside the exuberance comes and goes. In some parts of the house, the design calms down and gets Northern European again. Then, out near the gardens it erupts into arches and statuary. Back and forth. It is a rumbly bumbly ride walking through that house. Some of the rooms are dark like tombs, brown to their very soul. Dark brown wombs where a person could huddle away for an entire winter season. These seem like rooms for forgetting. But maybe they are rooms for remembering, rooms for whiling the hours away in contemplation of the past. Either way, they are rooms of the interior. And then the inner façades and courtyards of the house

The forgotten city of Antwerp

present another celebration. So, the outward face of the building is in the mode of a comfortable burgher. These lead the way into the dark and brooding rooms of brown and browner. And these rooms open up to the courtyards that make a Venetian show.

The thing Rubens really wanted, then, was to hide his Venetian joy. You could walk by that house all your life and never know that there is a flower inside. You could walk into the house and drop off some ducks in the kitchen and never know. There are a hundred ways you could experience that house and never know. Rubens liked that idea. He liked the idea that his burgher's house was the hiding place for a palazzo. He wrapped his palazzo up in a dirty bag and then hid it in plain sight, right in the middle of Antwerp, a dead city when he lived there. He wanted to walk around a dead city as its most prominent ghost, his own secret.

Why was Antwerp a dead city, for ghosts? Because the bastards silted up the river, of course. The men from Holland washed their hands of the entire city in exactly 1585. Oh, they closed the river up alright, they dumped the earth into the Scheldt until Antwerp couldn't be a harbor anymore. Then they went back to reading tracts of Calvinist theology and making money. They had stopped the Spanish and the Counter Reformation right there in Antwerp. This is all in the history books. I can't explain it all to you. There was a Reformation and a Counter Reformation. There were Orangemen and Hapsburgs and always the French lurking in the background. There were matters of politics and matters

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of religion. The guys up North, the men from Holland, said to Antwerp, in essence, you can have your sandy river and your Pope too. You can have your bloated, dying church. You can have your Hapsburg potentates. We'll just move all the commerce up to Amsterdam and begin the task of forgetting you. And there were wars and there were killings. The people of Antwerp were roused from slumber more than once and dragged into the streets to be butchered by one group or another.

And that is where Rubens spent the second half of his life. He roamed the ghost city of the Counter Reformation watching it all die, watching the city dry up and flake away into the wind. He built his secret palazzo and settled in for the decline. Maybe he even liked it that way. Maybe he thought it was funny, or just true. He could be the last man in the city of death.