
The being and movement of the angel in the Burial of the Count of Orgaz by El Greco

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Fig 1. El Greco, *Burial of the Count of Orgaz Toledo*, at present exhibited in an exterior venue attached to the church of Santo Tome. Oil on Canvas 5 x 3,5 metres (Copyright: By permission of the late Prof HE Wethey)

Abstract

The focus of this study is the angel in El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*. Art historians who have studied the *Burial* previously have not extracted the full meaning of this angel in their interpretations of it because they have neglected

its stylistic qualities. It is the purpose of this study to indicate how the angel is presented as a visual realization of the Tridentine dogma of salvation.

Abstrak

Die fokus van hierdie artikel is die engel in El Greco se *Begrafnis van die Hertog van Orgaz*. Kunshistorici wat die *Begrafnis* voorheen bestudeer het, het nie die volle betekenis van hierdie engel geïnterpreteer nie omdat hulle die stilistiese kwaliteite daarvan verwaarloos het. Dit is die doel van hierdie studie om aan te toon dat die engel 'n visuele verwesenliking is van die verlossingsleer, soos deur die Konsilie van Trente geformuleer.

In Him we move and have our being

(Acts 17: 28)

This study will focus on the meaning of the action of the angel in El Greco's *Burial of the Count of Orgaz*, a masterwork of the artist's middle period in Toledo (fig 1). To my best

knowledge this angel who is, more than any other figure, the key to the composition, has never been satisfactorily interpreted. Even though art historians, quoted below, have noted the importance of the angel as the "bearer" of the Count's soul, the actual action that it performs has not been scrutinized sufficiently. If analysed stylistically, the movement of this angel who is depicted between the earthly and heavenly zones, not only integrates what is below with what is above but also becomes a visual realization of the Tridentine dogma of salvation, provided its actual role is recognized.

In El Greco's oeuvre angels have various roles, such as messenger or musician. Most often they serve as intermediaries between the human and divine worlds, for example in the Martyrdom of St Maurice (1580-82, Il Escorial, Monastery). In this painting the angels who bear laurel wreaths can be identified as intermediaries, acting in the zone between heaven and earth on behalf of the slain martyrs. In El Greco's compositions in which verticality and elongation is emphasized, angels ascend or descend as intermediaries. Usually the movement of their descent is vividly portrayed in their outstretched wings and silken garments, swirling and spiralling around their lower limbs. If the movement were upwards, as

they are in his Assumption of the Virgin (Toledo, Santa Cruz Museum), then the garments cling to the bodily form. Descent indicates that the angels, who are bearers of symbols of victory or redemption, welcome the souls of the martyred, for example in The Martyrdom of St Maurice. In the Burial of the Count of Orgaz the theme of the angel as an intermediary to whom the ascent of a deceased person's soul is entrusted is expanded.

In well-researched articles on the Burial, both Franz Philipp (1981) and S Schroth (1982) neglect an aspect of the work which is contained in the intermediate zone of the painting, namely that zone between the earth into which the body of the deceased Count is lowered, and the celestial *gloria* around the throne of grace (Gnadestuhl) on which Christ is seated with the Virgin to his right and St John the Baptist to his left. An analysis of the style of the central zone suggests that the respective descriptions of the action of the central angel by both Philipp and Schroth, are inadequate in the context of the total meaning of the work. Philipp (1981: 81) says that the soul of the Count is "borne aloft" by the angel. Schroth (1982: 7 & 14) avers that it is 'being carried into heaven' and that the angel is shown 'conveying the soul upward'. Also



Fig 2. *Diagram of the movement of the angel in the Burial of the Count of Orgaz*

Francisco Calvo Serraller (1995: 15) commits this inaccuracy by referring to "the angel bearing the soul of the dead man".

A closer look reveals that the central area is shaped like an inverted funnel formed by cloud-like formations above the horizontal line of the heads of the mourners into which the form of the angel and the soul of the Count is fitted. The shape of the angel suggests a vortex of powerful movement around a diagonal axis which runs through the line of the right leg to the head, and which is balanced by the outstretched wing, an image of divine power according to Plato (1914: 473): "The function

of the wing is to take what is heavy and raise it up into the region above, where the gods dwell; of all things connected with the body, it has the greatest affinity with the divine."¹

The wing shape is emphasized as it fills the shape of the "funnel" to the left side, forming a triangular shape, with the angel's bent arm below the apex which opens into the top and through which the soul of the Count is being pushed. That the angel initiates a powerfully energetic action may be deduced from the muscular action of his right arm with its conspicuously flexed biceps. The hand holding the nascent soul is rotated in anticipation of the exertion required for a dynamic push. This contracts the muscles of the forearm in a spiral fashion (fig 2). In the action that will follow a second later, the hand will be opened and the elbow will be straightened so as to focus the impetus which will deliver the soul of the Count through the thin cylinder of the funnel into the celestial zone.

The greatest oddity in the painting is the cloud-like shape which is the Count's soul. By representing it in this way, El Greco may have followed a technique which was applied, for example, by Correggio (1489-1534) in his *Jupiter and Io* (1530-1534, Vienna, *Kunsthistorisches*

Museum); Raphael in the *Sistine Madonna* (c. 1515, Dresden Gallery), and by Tintoretto in his *Last Supper* (1594, Venice, San Giorgio Maggiore), in which the figures of the mythological god and those of the angels are represented in the form of clouds. In the phrase of WH Janson (1973: 66), this became a "pictorial device for representing incorporeal beings" during the Renaissance. In the *Burial* this is particularly apt since the soul of the Count is indeed at that stage an incorporeal being, midway between death, to which the human body is subject, and an everlasting existence in a spiritual body in the spiritual realm represented in the *gloria*. Because the soul of the Count is represented as being so insubstantial in the moment before his spiritual birth, the strenuous action of the facilitating angel who helps his insubstantial soul to mount upwards is therefore strikingly anomalous. Also, the cloud-like nascent soul seems to be attempting to push himself upwards by displaying a climbing motion. Every effort is made by the angel and the soul itself to obtain its salvation, and perhaps salvation is understood in the Byzantine tradition as divinization, which is a kind of celestial apotheosis.

It is worth noting that there exists a complementarity between the action of the angel and the postures of St John and the Virgin. The lat-

ter holds out her hand to receive the Count's soul which still has to pass through the womb-shape below her hand. The metaphorical allusion to the womb intensifies the Christian idea that one will experience a second (spiritual) birth only after one has risen from the dead. Thus resurrection is a symbol of rebirth. In El Greco's representation, the Virgin awaits the unborn soul and the spiral curves of her sleeve echo the lines of contraction in the angel's fore-arm muscles - a contraction which suggests the sheer force with which the angel pushes. St John, on the contrary, kneels before Christ in accordance with the intercessory function of the Virgin and the Baptist in Gnadestuhl iconography, in order to plead that the soul, which is in the throes of birth, might be received into heaven.

The significance of the central zone is not confined to the mere ascent of the Count's soul. The central zone is also revelatory of the soul's birth, at which the midwife is an angel, and in which the new soul is compassionately awaited by the Virgin and pleaded for by St John the Baptist while a white-robed Christ rests at the summit of her ascent.

Thus, the *Burial* achieves a unity of form and content. The content is a medieval legend, transformed as Schroth (1982: 3) puts it, "into a real-

istic re-enactment of a funeral to convey a message. To emphasize the didactic intention, the artist included a young boy in the left foreground of the painting, pointing at the burial group."

The didactic lesson was immediately obvious to those viewers of the painting who were familiar with the doctrines of the Counter-Reformation. What was believed by the "nonemblem who contemplate the event [and] view it with utmost studious detachment"? (Schroth 1982: 7) Schroth (1982: 8) explains: "Ruiz' devotion to the saints brought him the reward on earth of a miraculous burial by the hands of saints; now the saints will reward him in heaven by interceding for his soul."

Indeed, the soul does receive help. This is vividly illustrated by the action of the angel, as it drives the soul upwards with the tremendous force. When one recalls that there was no specific reference to the soul of the Count in the contract for the painting, one realizes how revealing is the prominence accorded it by El Greco.

David Davies (1984: 69) says that, in accordance with the Tridentine decree on Justification, the Count clearly "has merited the grace of salvation". Even so, the count's salvation is not auto-

matically assured and he has to face a "Particular Judgement, where it [i.e. the soul] is assisted by the Virgin and the saints who intercede effectively on its behalf" (Davies 1984: 69). Although, theologically speaking, there may still be some doubt about the Count's salvation, the imminent physical action of the angel negates the possibility of such doubt. It "ascends with his soul to heaven", according to Davies (1984: 69). In a later statement, Davies (1990: 31) refers to the movement of the angel as "spiralling". He does not, however, elucidate the formal, expressive qualities of the angel's movement: "The most important link in the chain between earth and heaven is the angel, who, at the hub of the composition, spirals heavenwards bearing the soul of the Count in the unsubstantial form of a child."

Looking at the picture, however, it is clear that the angel cannot ascend any further, as his way is blocked by the narrow diameter of the funnel-like cloud. It is not the angel, but rather the soul, which is stepping with its right foot on the tensed hand, and which will, in the very next moment, be forcibly pushed up into heaven. Nevertheless, Davies had sensed that the movement of the angel is related to that of a spiral. His analysis is, however, incomplete, The angel is indeed transformed into a vortex and its power-

ful movement contributes to the depth of meaning inherent in its presence in the painting.

In this complex painting, meaning is clearly reinforced by El Greco's personal manner of expression. The conventions applied to the *gloria* are mannerist in detail, while the earthly zone is predominantly realistic. Stylistically, the most interesting zone is the central one. While the angel is elegantly foreshortened but twisted into a most awkward posture, the posture itself is suggestive of dramatic force, an image which mediates between the realms of death and life. Indeed, it is one of the most forceful figures in which El Greco emphasizes a *Zielhandlung*, creating, in G Paulsson's (1967: 133) terminology, "einen historischen Raum", in which space is differentiated so as to allow for the expression of time, in which one state of being is transformed into the other. By means of salvation, death is transformed into life, and the angel is the vital sign of the transforming force.

This force was most probably experienced by the viewers who attended a mass said for the Count's soul. About the reception of the painting, originally above the Count's grave, to the right of the entrance door of Santo Tome, one may speculate that El Greco could have intended to draw attention to the fact that the angel is also interceding on behalf of the Count's soul.

The exertion of the angel could have been intended to draw attention to the fact that the angel could have been intended as a visual metaphor sustaining the continued masses said at his grave to redeem the Count's soul from Purgatory.

Note

1 For a discussion of winged beings and the symbolism of the wing, see Maré (1998).

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