



**HAL**  
open science

# HERRI MET DE BLES'S WAY TO CALVARY: A SILENIC LANDSCAPE

Michel Weemans

► **To cite this version:**

Michel Weemans. HERRI MET DE BLES'S WAY TO CALVARY: A SILENIC LANDSCAPE. *Art History*, 2009, 32 (2), pp.307-331. 10.1111/j.1467-8365.2009.00664.x . hal-04084612

**HAL Id: hal-04084612**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04084612v1>**

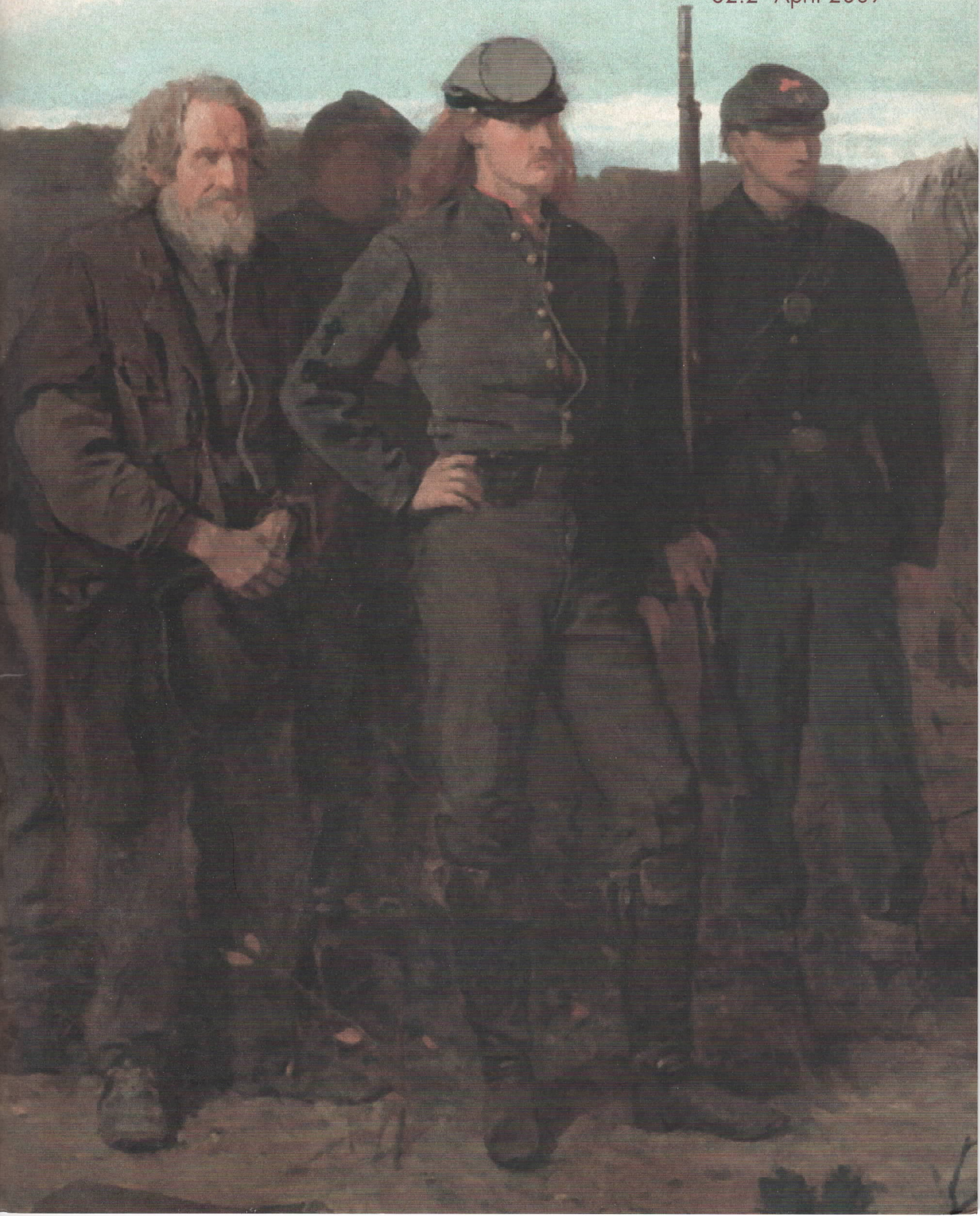
Submitted on 28 Apr 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# ART HISTORY

32:2 April 2009



---

# HERRI MET DE BLES'S WAY TO CALVARY: A SILENIC LANDSCAPE

---

MICHEL WEEMANS

And what of Christ? Was not He too a marvellous Silenus?<sup>1</sup>

(Erasmus, 1508)

Evidence of the ocularcentrism of Christian culture in the Low Countries in the sixteenth century is provided by the existence of a term unique to Dutch: *siendenblind* (a seeing blind person), alluding to the Gospel text 'because seeing they see not; and hearing they hear not' (Matthew 13:13). The contradictory expression reflects the paradoxical Christian concepts of those who can see physically but behave in a spiritually blind manner and the compensation of physical blindness by higher spiritual vision. The term *siendenblind* appears in Dutch dictionaries of the time and in some morality plays by the *rederijkers* that recount the story of a pilgrimage whose aim is the recovery of true sight.<sup>2</sup> In one of these plays, *De Ghepredestineerde Blinde* (*The Predestined Blind Man*) (1552) by Adriaen Jacobsz., the *siendenblind* is identified with the allegorical figure of *Voorgaende menichte*, the *Hurrying Crowd*, led on by its blindness. Herri met de Bles's *Way to Calvary* (Gemäldegalerie, Vienna) elicits a similar identification (plate 1). As is the case in Adriaen Jacobsz.'s play, Bles's painting depicts a blind crowd, a procession of *siendenblinden* incapable of discerning the divine majesty of Jesus beneath the humble appearance, a crowd hurrying to sacrifice a grotesque king with his battered body and crown of thorns.

First, I must ask the reader to accept a premise that I have developed elsewhere and cannot comment on here, the consideration of Bles's landscapes as 'visual exegesis'.<sup>3</sup> This expression should be understood here to have a double meaning. The first relates to Bles's painting itself, its specifically visual themes, and the strictly pictorial procedures by means of which the painter develops his interpretation of the Biblical story. The second meaning refers to the contemporary conception of exegesis and, in particular, to the allegorical and ocularcentric Erasmian model. I rely here on the studies of Jacques Chomara, André Godin and more recently Manfred Hoffman who have shown how, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Erasmus modified the traditional fourfold exegesis in order to adapt it to humanistic and rhetorical interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Erasmus stresses the dichotomy between two extremes: the literal and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible; and at the same time, he inserts a mediating link between these two poles, allegory. He asserts that the mediating stage of the exegetical process, the allegorical sense, is the point where understanding passes from the

literal to the spiritual.<sup>5</sup> First and foremost, allegory means Christ, but, for the rhetorical exegete, allegory also denotes Christ's privileged means of expression. 'Allegory deserves special care since almost all of Holy Scripture is composed of [it].'<sup>6</sup> Christ used allegorical tropes above all to conceal the truth, 'sometimes to the point of having the obscurity of an enigma'. There are several reasons for this, he says. It is in order 'to conceal and cover his mysteries from profane and godless people, but in such a way that pious searchers would not be shut off from the hope of understanding', but also 'to arouse human beings from their sluggishness or sleep and prompt them to make an effort to learn'.<sup>7</sup> So Erasmus adds, after the effort of interpretation, 'the fruit of our labour would be more pleasing'. In fact, things 'are more pleasing if they are shining through a crystal or a piece of amber than if seen with the naked eye. ... Sacred things display more majesty if they are brought to view under a veil than if they are laid bare just like that. ... We discover the truth more agreeably if it first has baffled us by the cover of an enigma.'<sup>8</sup>

In his *Ratio*, Erasmus extends his justification of enigmatic allegory, and approves Christ's rhetorical strategy of dissimulation. Christ 'deceived his disciples by riddles of allegories so that what he wished them to understand would later stick deeper in their mind'.<sup>9</sup> Dissimulation for pedagogical ends is not wrong so long as it respects the truth of the Scriptures and allows us to follow their path. 'Rhetorical theorists' writes Erasmus, 'allow the orator on occasion to misrepresent the truth, to magnify the unimportant and to make the splendid look small, which is a kind of conjuror's trick. To infiltrate the hearer's mind by deception ... is putting a kind of spell on him.'<sup>10</sup> 'Without betraying the treasure of the gospel truth ... we need a sort of holy cunning.'<sup>11</sup> The defining characteristics of Erasmian exegesis – the dialectical tension between the literal and the spiritual and the central and mediating function of allegory, the rhetorical and at the same time Christocentric value of allegory, the taste for paradoxical and enigma, the abundance of visual metaphors, and the fundamental principle of movement from the visible to the invisible – these characteristics, then, are also those which define the 'visual exegeses' of Herri met de Bles. This is what I would like to show with the example of the *Way to Calvary* from Vienna's Gemäldegalerie (plate 1). But, before describing the painting it seems appropriate to begin by defining more precisely the second meaning of the expression 'visual exegesis', which will help illuminate the first meaning. I will do this by following the Erasmian exegesis of this Biblical episode, an exegesis which is allegorical and 'visual' in the way, in its twisting and paradoxical procedures, it elaborates on the Christian concept of vision.

#### ERASMUS' 'VISUAL EXEGESIS'

Erasmus wrote commentaries on the episode of the Way to Calvary in his four *Paraphrases on the Gospels*, published by Froben between 1521 and 1523.<sup>12</sup> In each one of them he uses and develops several figures of visual paradox. He begins by stating that the victory of the priests and the Pharisees consisted in blinding a whole crowd with fury in order to push it towards the destruction of Christ; a relative blindness mingled with treacherous lucidity: 'the world is not so blind', he makes clear, 'that it does not see that great strength is required to crush the truth'.<sup>13</sup> He then emphasizes the stark contrast between the mob enjoying the spectacle and a group of women he derives from Mark, whose distant gazes are characterized by faith, compassion and tears.<sup>14</sup>

Erasmus continues his *amplificatio* of the theme of vision by a series of metaphors: the blindness of the mocking crowd demanding a spectacular miracle; the



1 Herri met de Bles, *The Way to Calvary*, c. 1540. Oil on wood, 52 × 72 cm. Vienna: Gemäldegalerie. Photo: Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künsten, Vienna.

sun, witness to the scene, feeling the torments of Jesus and covering its face with a black cloud, which Erasmus compares to the blindness of those who are demanding the sacrifice.<sup>15</sup> A particularly striking example of visual paradox appears in the *Paraphrase on St Luke*. The crowd, Erasmus explains, was not only blind to the divinity of Jesus but also to His humanity, as confirmed by typological comparison with a passage from the Old Testament where Isaiah compares himself to a worm, the most insignificant, the most invisible of creatures:

Now when you read a prediction of the same prophet in another place, do you not seem to see Christ himself, scourged, spat upon, crowned with thorns, dressed in a cloak, displayed to the Jewish people as an object of mockery? For so Isaiah writes: 'he has no form or comeliness. And we saw him and he had no beauty, and we desired him but he was despised and least of men' [. . .] Then he speaks of himself in a mystic psalm: 'But I am a worm and no man, scorned by men and despised by the people.'<sup>16</sup>

The typology here is allegorical and Christocentric: the Old Testament passage quoted is the shadow, the *figure of the accomplishment* in the New Testament of the *truth of Christ*.<sup>17</sup> So we should not be surprised if the most elaborate Erasmian exegesis of Christ's Calvary is found not in the *Paraphrases on the Gospels* but in a commentary on the Old Testament, the *Commentary on Psalm 2* that he published in the same period.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, if Erasmus chose to comment on Psalm 2, then it is because he considered it to

be above all a prophecy of Christ's Passion and triumph. In the commentary he takes up the visual themes developed in *Paraphrases on the Gospels* – blind mockery, the image of Christ reduced to an insignificant and invisible 'worm', the cosmic antithesis of the blindness of the Jews and the light of Christ – but the emphasis on blindness leads him to interpret the spiritual meaning of the story in an unexpected way.<sup>19</sup> To the crowd's blind and mocking gaze, he writes, replies a gaze that reverses the shameful effect of the former, the all-seeing and mocking gaze of God contemplating the spectacle.<sup>20</sup> Such anthropomorphism can be surprising, the exegete acknowledges: to describe God, who is pure spirit, as mocking and laughing may seem inappropriate.<sup>21</sup> But, he reminds us, the Bible readily uses the explicit language of human emotion to evoke divinity, and several times describes the laughter of God. Glossing this assertion, Erasmus, in an echo of his *Adages*, goes on to say that we can distinguish between several types of laughter. There is the laughter that comes from joy, which is distinct from that which is provoked by bitterness, and which the ancients called 'sardonic laughter', and which is different again from the laughter which makes us wrinkle our nose like Silenus, '*Naso suspendere*' as the proverb says, when someone 'laughs to scorn, and wrinkles his nose in mockery'.<sup>22</sup> It is with this mocking laughter that God laughs. Each Biblical example of God's laughter, he adds, is the reply to a mocking laughter, that of conspirators and the impious that trap innocents but end up by falling into their own trap.<sup>23</sup> And all these Old Testament examples of God's laughter prefigure the great divine laughter at the Way to Calvary. It is the sight of the trapper trapped that provokes God's laughter. For, the exegete concludes:

what of the scarlet mantle, the crown of thorns, the reed given him as a sceptre, the beating, the blows to the head, the spittle, the flogging, the insults, the jeering, the mockery? ... Through all these machinations, did not 'he who dwells in heaven laugh' at the impious and their earthbound ragings, and did not the Lord 'laugh them to scorn'?<sup>24</sup>

The conspiracy that led to the blind condemnation of Christ achieved the opposite effect,<sup>25</sup> the blindness of historical witnesses is ultimately converted into spiritual and universal illumination:

They brought him lower than any man, made him a worm, and an object of derision among the people, and yet he is worshipped and adored throughout the world as God and man. The cross, once a sign of infamy, is the glory of princes and of all the faithful ... What do you say now unhappy Jews? Do you see that you have fallen into the pit which you dug? ... Who could have done more to strengthen belief in the resurrection than the Jews?<sup>26</sup>

These characteristics of Erasmus' exegesis of this episode – the ocularcentrism, the tension between literal and spiritual, the taste for paradox and enigma intended to challenge the reader and provoke the conversion of literal or historical meaning to the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures – constitute the evidence on the basis of which we may now consider the '*visual exegesis*' put into practice by Bles. By this phrase I mean the strictly pictorial procedures by means of which the painter interprets the Biblical story. I do not intend to suggest that Erasmus' textual model had a direct influence on Bles; rather, it is a matter of considering Bles's landscape, in a cultural context strongly marked by a reforming evangelism of the Erasmian type, as a work that is exemplary of this humanist conception of exegesis. In what ways,

then, does Bles's landscape demonstrate tension and mocking paradox, visual extravagance and reorientation of the point of view?

#### WAYS TO CALVARY AND INVERTED COMPOSITIONS IN ANTWERP PAINTING

The Way to Calvary was a favourite Biblical episode for Antwerp painters of Bles's time: Jan van Amstel, Lucas Gassel, Pieter Aertsen each painted the subject. The carnival atmosphere, the colourful crowd, the trees full of onlookers, all show that these painters knew how to exploit the *spectacular* content of this story. But none of these painters shows the obsessive interest of Bles, who painted the story no less than eighteen times. Among Bles's extensive output of Ways to Calvary, the example from Vienna's Gemäldegalerie is probably the prototype of a sub-group characterized by a common compositional schema and the recycling of many figures in an almost identical format.<sup>27</sup> In this sub-group, the procession winds its way around a rocky central axis from Jerusalem at the lower left towards Golgotha at the top right, where part of the crowd already waits around the cross. The painting is an outstanding example of *nettischeydt*, the pictorial attention to detail praised by van Mander as one of the most important qualities of a landscape painter, whose art demands meticulous attention to a wide range of motifs, from vertiginous flocks of birds to the botanical detail of foreground flowers, from the shameful scenes of the *ecce homo* on the walls of the town to the scene of the crucifixion, all of which frame the central procession in these paintings. In the Vienna example the procession includes more than three hundred figures: tiny silhouettes leaving the gates of the town, characters of middle height, such as those escorting the two thieves, and the imposing and central figures, those of the soldiers and horsemen whose oriental-inspired clothing and turbans mark them out as the religious authorities who have stirred up the crowd (plate 2). In



2 Detail of Herri met de Bles, *The Way to Calvary*, showing the Procession. Photo: Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künsten, Vienna.



3 Detail of Herri met de Bles, *The Way to Calvary*, showing Christ. Photo: Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künsten, Vienna.

other words, *nettischeydt* (meticulousness) and *verscheydenheyt* (variety) together contribute to a mobile effect of contrast between the splendour of the representatives of terrestrial power and the humble, almost invisible, detail of Christ, whose progress carrying the cross hides divine power and constitutes the central subject of the painting (plate 3). Although swamped in a torrent of colour, Christ is distinguished by His dark robe and His place at the centre of a complex circular configuration. Behind Him, and linked to Him by his robes, is Simon of Cyrenia, of whom, writes Erasmus, 'they placed the Lord's cross, . . . by God's purpose a figure was thereby provided of gathering the church from the gentiles, for the church embraced the cross of Jesus and walked in his footsteps.'<sup>28</sup>

Bles's painting offers a visual equivalent to this interpretation of Simon of Cyrenia as an allegorical figure of the Church. In stark contrast to Bruegel's tragicomic interpretation, where the reluctance of Simon as he is pulled away by his wife and the soldiers has the effect of turning attention away from the crowd and the figure of Christ, Bles depicts Simon as a sober and positive figure who is clearly the representative of Christian humanity carrying the cross with Christ. Simon takes part, then, in the general dialectic of blindness and judgement implicating the spectator: it is in this sense that we must understand the direct look Simon addresses to the viewer, and his proximity to the figures of compassion, the women positioned at the side of the road. This detail, in which the only women present in the procession are placed near Christ, may also be thought of as an expression of the Biblical antithesis which opposes the blindness of those bent on the sacrifice to the mourning women, blinded by tears, who stand for spiritual vision.<sup>29</sup> At the centre of an antithetical configuration which opposes the flagellant soldier to the beseeching women, the painter strategically locates the figure of exhortation and of identification, the figure of humanity's representative carrying the cross. This schema is completed by several figures whose pointing forefingers are ambiguous signs: we do not know if they are helping to point out the unassuming presence of Christ in order to invite us to feel compassion, or whether they are incarnations of the mocking gestures of which Erasmus speaks.<sup>30</sup> In this way a complex network of figures is developed around Christ, a network that in an ambivalent fashion implies the contrasting



status of visual witnesses to the historical event. But the visual exegesis also involves yet another and no less significant group of spectators, clearly differentiated by their position and by their dress.

A new aspect of Ways to Calvary painted in Antwerp during the years 1530–60 is the encounter between the sacrificial procession and a group of Flemish peasants on their way to market. J.A. Emmens has suggested that we might recognize in these scenes an evocation of the popular spectacles of the Passion involving a crowd of participants. Emmens adds that contemporary viewers would have noticed the coincidence between Good Friday, the last day of the Passion, and the *Vrijdagmarkt*,<sup>31</sup> the market day which drew peasants to the Flemish towns.<sup>32</sup> Bles treated this trope in his own way by making a clear distinction between the procession and this



4 Detail of Herri met de Bles, *The Way to Calvary*, showing peasants on left hand side of the panel. Photo: Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künsten, Vienna.

group of distant spectators, distinctly arranged on the rocky ledge that occupies the whole width of the foreground (plate 4). This pictorial procedure produces a light–dark contrast and a concomitant distancing effect, which we must here interpret historically as well as spatially. Bles's first viewers would have noticed more readily than we do the difference between the orientalizing costume of the figures in the procession and the more familiar, contemporary dress of the Flemish peasants. Bles emphasizes the peasants' status as spectators by means of their raised position, by the baskets placed on the ground, and by their frozen posture in contrast to the movement of the procession. Finally, their turned backs duplicate inside the painting our own position in relation to the image. This device, whereby the painting assumes the presence of a viewer in front of it, or includes a stand-in for the viewer, further accentuates the painting's thematization of the visual and constitutes a key element in its meaning. The pointing gesture of the peasant in red clothes who terminates the scene at the left, emphasized by his depiction in profile and against the turned back of the mounted woman next to him (plate 4), has an exhortatory function. His gaze, linked to the converging gazes of the peasant group, directs the spectator's view towards Christ. In comparison with the procession, then, this foreground scene has a clearly parergonal and *profane* character: exterior and distinct from the sacred scene.<sup>33</sup> In this way, Bles chooses to stress the impression of contrast between the two levels of the image, which correspond to two gazes. This is what differentiates him from Jan van Amstel, Pieter Aertsen and Bruegel, who mingle their contemporary peasants with the members of the historical procession accompanying Christ to the cross.<sup>34</sup> All the peasants' defining traits – their spatial distance and temporal displacement, their turned backs, their exhortatory gestures and contemplative attitudes, the rocky support which at the limit of the frame forms a springboard to the space of the external world – contribute to the establishment of a direct relationship between these interior spectators and

the external viewer.<sup>35</sup> Another connection might be proposed between the female figures of *compassio* at the edge of the all-male procession and the female figures of the rocky foreground. By means of this direct connection and the series of oppositions and connections developed around diverse visual witnesses at the centre of the composition, the painting's viewer is invited to position himself in relation to the visual hierarchy presented and to reflect on the tropological sense provoked by the narrative; that is, on his own situation as *follower* or *witness of Christ*.

We need to connect this pictorial trait with the other characteristic feature of Ways to Calvary painted at this time, namely the lack of emphasis on the holy figure. The difficulty in making out the figure of Christ in the confusion of a crowd leads the viewer to become aware of his own confused vision and to see this as comparable to the difficulty which historical witnesses experienced in discerning the significance of the event and the true nature of Christ. The painting thus performs what it represents. This pictorial principle of the dimming of vision is the corollary to the spatial and temporal distance of the peasants, the two effects jointly contribute to accentuating the relationship with the spectator and the hermeneutic invitation.

Hence several characteristics distinguish Bles's *Way to Calvary* from comparable paintings by his contemporaries: the Flemish peasants, as we have seen, do not mingle with the procession as in Jan van Amstel or Pieter Aertsen, and their poses have no negative connotations, as in Bruegel. But the most important point is undoubtedly the clear distinction between two categories of visual witness: the members of the procession in their oriental costumes, and the distant spectators dressed in a fashion contemporary with the painter, who play the role of intermediary in relation to the external spectator of the painting. The encounter in the same pictorial space of the different categories of historical witnesses and contemporary spectators assumes the function of tropological commentary. The performance of the drama in a Flemish context signifies the reality of phariseism.

Painting of this type effects the transition from images that solicited devotion and identification from the devout viewer to images that manifested a new dimension, tropological and hermeneutic at one and the same time, worked out in the context of humanist spirituality of the Erasmian type. Bles's generation saw the establishment of the new genres of still life, landscape, genre painting. Compared to the model of the *Andachtsbild* from which they are derived, the Ways to Calvary of this period are characterized by a new emphasis given to the unstable and historical existence of the contemporary world and a reduced interest in devotion, and a novel use of icons to imply the presence of sacred and eternal truths. This pictorial development is both reflection and agent of a cultural and spiritual evolution towards an 'applied theology', where stress is placed on the existential and moral dimension, on scepticism about the authority of the Church, and on the need for a corresponding change in the attitudes of individual Christians.<sup>36</sup>

The parallel I have drawn with Erasmus' commentary has focused our attention on the visual characteristics of Bles's exegesis, such as the partially obscured figure of Christ, the various categories of visual witnesses, the device of converging gazes, the importance of threshold figures who seem to be exhorting the external spectator to interpret the image. However, I would like to complete

the parallel between Erasmus' and Bles's exegeses with a last example which proves to be, as we shall see, particularly illuminating for our analysis of the painting. Erasmus' preoccupation with the theological paradox of Christ as both visible and invisible to the eyes of his witnesses, linked to themes of the deceptiveness of surface appearance and blind phariseeism, developed in his exegesis of the Way to Calvary, culminates in an analogy, which was to have a great success, between Christ and the mythological figure whose appearance aroused mocking laughter but hid an interior divinity: the Silenus.

#### THE SILENI OF ALCIBIADES

Among the pearls of ancient treasure that Erasmus exhumed and adapted to Christian thought is the Silenus, the mythological figure whose coarse appearance conceals a divine wisdom. In an important passage, Erasmus tells us in the *Sileni of Alcibiades* (1508),<sup>37</sup> that plural Sileni referred in antiquity not only to the mythological beings, but also to small grotesque statues of these figures, sculpted in such a way that they revealed inside, to whoever could open them, precious drugs or a divine figure.<sup>38</sup> The initial impulse of the *Sileni* repeats this image of something of value concealed within a deceptive outer shell. Erasmus refers to a passage in Plato's *Symposium* in which Alcibiades compares his beloved master to a Silenus.<sup>39</sup> In the same way as the Sileni statues conceal objects of value, Socrates' grotesque external appearance, far from reflecting a mediocre soul, conceals a treasure. The main thread of the book is the idea that appearances hide true reality from us, so that the sensory world is a veil we must break through in order to reach the intelligible world, the one of true reality. Silenus' dualism, both man and beast and both outwardly grotesque and inwardly wise, allows Erasmus to develop at length the theme of vision, and to present us with one of the clearest examples of his 'Christian Platonism'.<sup>40</sup> Socrates, and with him Antisthenes, Diogenes and Epictetus (all of them mendicant sages who argue with kings), are merely pagan prefigurations of the prophets and apostles of the Bible who placed invisible spiritual values above visible riches. This line of reasoning culminates in a central analogy between Christ and Silenus: 'And what of Christ? Was not He too a marvellous Silenus?'<sup>41</sup> After a brief reminder of the historic meaning of the proverbial expression, Erasmus reveals its allegorical meaning: relating the paradoxical figure of 'a Silenus' to Christ and the Church.<sup>42</sup> The enunciation of the Silenic principle of reversibility – that a sordid exterior may conceal a sublime interior, implies, inversely, that a seductive exterior may equally enclose a pernicious interior – is the turning point from which Erasmus unfolds the long tropological or moral development that forms the essence of his text. One need only reverse the gaze to realize that bad Sileni may follow good Sileni:

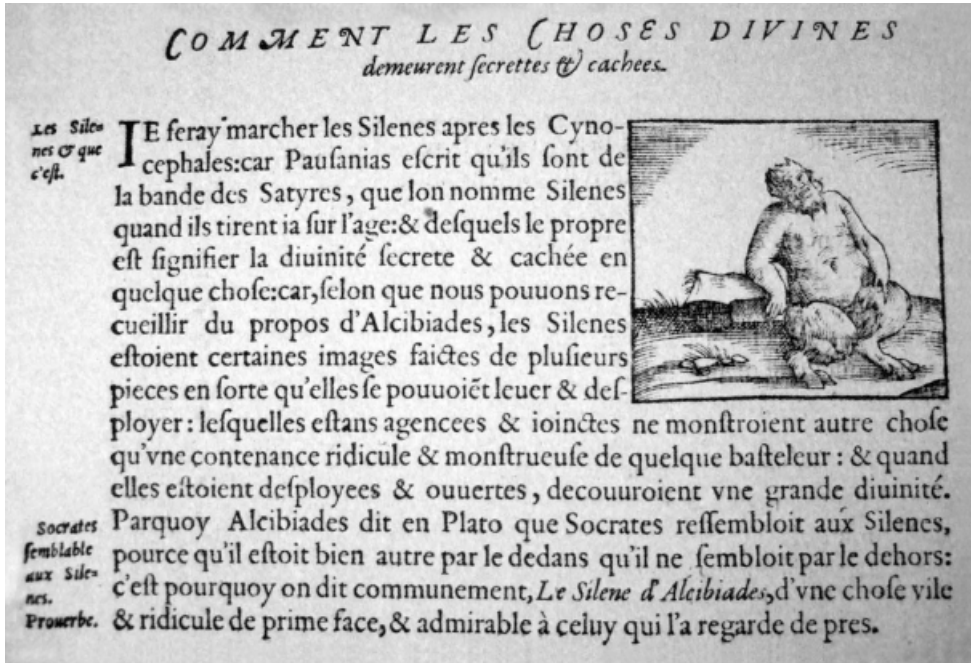
Even today there are some good men who are hidden Sileni; but alas, too few! . . . It may be that you will find even some bishops in whom, if you observe their solemn consecration and run your eyes over their new attributes of honour, the mitre glittering with jewels and gold and the crozier equally studded with gems – in a word, from head to foot, all that mystic panoply – you would no doubt expect to find some heavenly character, some man more than human. Turn your Silenus inside out, and you will sometimes find . . . mere buffoons, squanderers, impostors . . . more pestilentials inasmuch as it is more concealed, and your treasure, as the saying goes, will be simply coals.<sup>43</sup>

As we can see, Erasmus' concept of exegesis informs his text. But he extends the analogy between Christ and the Silenic principle to Scripture: 'Scripture too has its own Sileni. Pause at the surface, and what you see is sometimes ridiculous. . . . Crack the nutshell and you will find that hidden wisdom which is truly divine.'<sup>44</sup> Erasmus affords a particular importance to this meta-discursive analogy, already formulated in his *Enchiridion* and in his *Commentaries on the Psalms*.<sup>45</sup> Both a hermeneutical reflection and a polemic, the *Sileni of Alcibiades* confirms the general principle of the *Adages*, according to which a fragment of ancient treasure can serve as an effective instrument for a critical understanding of the present.<sup>46</sup> The figure of Silenus thus offers the Christian reader a model of prudent scepticism when faced with deceiving appearances, and an invitation to embrace the hermeneutic exercise of inversion as a means of grasping the real meaning of faith.

#### INVERSUS SILENUS OMNIA

'Bad Sileni are everywhere in the world' – *Inversus Silenus omnia* – proclaims one of the paradoxes of Sebastien Franck.<sup>47</sup> The *topos* of the Silenus was certainly widely used in the humanist culture of Europe. The *Sileni of Alcibiades* was an enormous success – numerous translations and editions appeared throughout the sixteenth century.<sup>48</sup> But Erasmus' version was neither the first nor the only text to have rediscovered the figure of Silenus. From Pico della Mirandola to Guillaume Budé, from Lomazzo to Ronsard, from Charles de Bovelles to Jacob Cats, many authors interpreted the world under the law of Silenus.<sup>49</sup> The resurgence of this figure in the humanist culture of the sixteenth century is of such richness and complexity that to analyse it here would be impossible. But it is important to recall briefly those fundamental characteristics of the Silenus which will prove to be illuminating in the remainder of the article.<sup>50</sup>

As Françoise Lavocat's recent analysis has shown,<sup>51</sup> through the figure of Silenus, together with his epigones (satyrs, Pan, Marsyas), the humanists constructed an allegory of interpretation that was variously embedded in collections of proverbs (Erasmus), of emblems (Arnigio, Jacob Cats), of paradoxes (Sebastien Franck), and of comic prologues (Rabelais, Giordano Bruno).<sup>52</sup> The choice of Silenus to stand as an allegory of interpretation is based on two fundamental assumptions, both associated with Silenus, the idea of encoding and the analogy with the divine. These rest on the association, in the culture of antiquity, of the family of Pan, which includes satyrs and the Sileni, with ambiguity and with the power of the oracle.<sup>53</sup> The mythological characteristics of the Silenus – his gifts of wisdom and of prophecy, his misadventures marked by his capture by Midas, his procession and its mockeries, his fall and redemption – encouraged the humanists to reinterpretate him as a Christ figure.<sup>54</sup> The analogy of Silenus with the divinity who appears only under the cloak of mystery is one that is central to the work of many authors. In his *De Studio litterarum* (1532), Guillaume Budé recalls the association of Silenus and the satyrs, because they share the characteristics of mystery and ambivalence.<sup>55</sup> Valeriano evokes him in his famous book *Hieroglyphica*,<sup>56</sup> in the chapter entitled 'How divine things remain secret and hidden' (plate 5). In the context of Italian neo-Platonism and hermeticism the example of Bartolomeo Arnigio has a special significance.



5 Jan Pierus Valerianus, 'Comment les choses divines demeurent secrètes et cachées', from Barthélémy Honorat, *Commentaires hiéroglyphiques ou images des choses . . .*, Lyon, 1576. Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Arnigio does not limit himself to linking Silenus to a series of Biblical examples of the divine enveloped in cloud and darkness, but goes so far as to choose him as the emblem of emblems (following Arnigio, Jacob Cats was to call the most famous Dutch emblematic work *Sileni Alcibiadi*).<sup>57</sup> Thus, unlike the simple goat-footed figure of Valerian's *Hieroglyphica*, the Silenus who decorates the frontispiece of Arnigio's *Discorso interno al Sileno, Impresa de gli academici Occulti* (1568) (plate 6) is an exceptional representation, as Françoise Lavocat has very clearly seen, of the famous Silenus-box described by Erasmus.<sup>58</sup>

Silenus is not presented simply as an image of the veiling of divine truth or the tension between the visible and the invisible, he also appears as the agent of the ironic reversal of meaning such beliefs provoke. In other words, it is as if Silenus causes the destabilizing of meaning in the texts referring to him. This effect, which was already present in Platonic texts,<sup>59</sup> is at work in the *Sileni Alcibiadi* and in most of the Silenic texts of the sixteenth century.<sup>60</sup> The hermeneutic value of the Silenus, then, shows itself to have been extremely rich and complex: it implied not only the idea of an encrypted meaning but also effects of the destabilization of meaning and of ironic reversal, as well as the connection to the reader/interpreter. This latter characteristic is at the heart of the most famous Silenus text. In Rabelais' prologue to *Gargantua*, the mention of Socrates' Silenus – likened to Plato's dog chewing a marrow bone – is the pretext for recommending the humanist virtues of judgement and patience to the reader and exhorting him to ask what meaning, allegorical or otherwise, he should find in the book.<sup>61</sup>



6 Detail of frontispiece from Bartolomeo Arnigio, *Rime de gli academici Occulti con le loro imprese e discorsi*, Brescia, 1568, showing Silenus. Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

In the case of images, then, what relevance does this power of the figure of Silenus to endow the work with ambivalence possess? In order to understand this it is helpful to consider an optical phenomenon that shares in the qualities of illusion and metamorphosis associated with Silenus. Parallel to the abundant Silenus literature, an uninterrupted procession of Sileni marches through the visual arts of the sixteenth century. In Bles's time the Flemish artists known as the *fiamminghi*, who brought back Italian artistic models to Flanders, the intense interest in grotesques and the development of engraving, were decisive factors in the rediscovery of this figure. The engravings of René Boyvin (plate 7), Cornelis Floris, Domenico del Barbieri and Virgil Solis (plate 8) all contributed to popularizing the characteristic physiognomy of the Silenus, a rotund old man with prominent ears, and a snub and mocking nose. At Antwerp, Heemskerck was one of those who contributed most to making Silenus familiar. His monumental *Triumph of Silenus* (1536–37) and his engravings and drawings of Sileni emphasize the antithesis of beauty and ugliness (see plate 9),<sup>62</sup> or recall Silenus' membership of the family of hybrid and metamorphic creatures. It was this last characteristic which attracted the attention of several artists. Having something of both the human and the animal, as well as both masculine and feminine characteristics, all reshaped by drunkenness, Silenus identifies himself with those whose love and death he sings. He also has the power to transform them: in Virgil

it is Silenus who encloses the sisters of Phaeton in bark, changing them into trees. It is to this metamorphic aspect of Silenus that we must link the anecdote, which was related by Pliny and known to the humanists, of the discovery of a petrified image of Silenus in a block of Parian marble; as well as the indistinct figures of Sileni which appear in mannerist grottos such as Bagnaia or Boboli, prisoners of their limestone covering.<sup>63</sup> These reflect the mannerist taste for figures in stones, clouds, or rocks and irregular natural forms, and to debates on the hieroglyphic meaning of nature and the origin of these 'natural images'.<sup>64</sup> The crypto-portico engraved by Antonio Fantuzzi (1545) (see plate 10)<sup>65</sup> illustrates this metamorphic register: capitals featuring Silenus' profile support a surface entirely covered with emergent figures. A similar phenomenon of metamorphic contagion marks Piero di Cosimo's *The Discovery of Honey*, which relates the misadventures of Silenus reported by Ovid.<sup>66</sup> By means of an effect of 'expanded anthropomorphism', to use Michael Fried's expression, Silenus' grotesque snub-nosed face finds its anthropomorphic echo both in the central tree trunk and in the mountain on the right (see plate 11). The full history of Silenus from the pre-Renaissance to the classical age, one which would highlight the ever-present play on deceiving appearances and illusion, remains to be written. From Nicola Pisano's Sileni as the incarnation of diabolical trickery, to Rubens, who associated the Silenus with the allegorical figure of sight, such instances are widely



7 (Left) Detail of René Boyvin (after Rosso Fiorentino), *Nef*, showing a Silenus, 1550. Engraving, 12.4 × 17.4 cm. Paris: Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

8 (Right) Detail of Virgil Solis, *Silenus 'asellitans'*, showing Silenus, from *Ovidii Metamorphosis XI*, Frankfurt, 1581, fol. 141 r. Woodcut, 6 × 8 cm. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



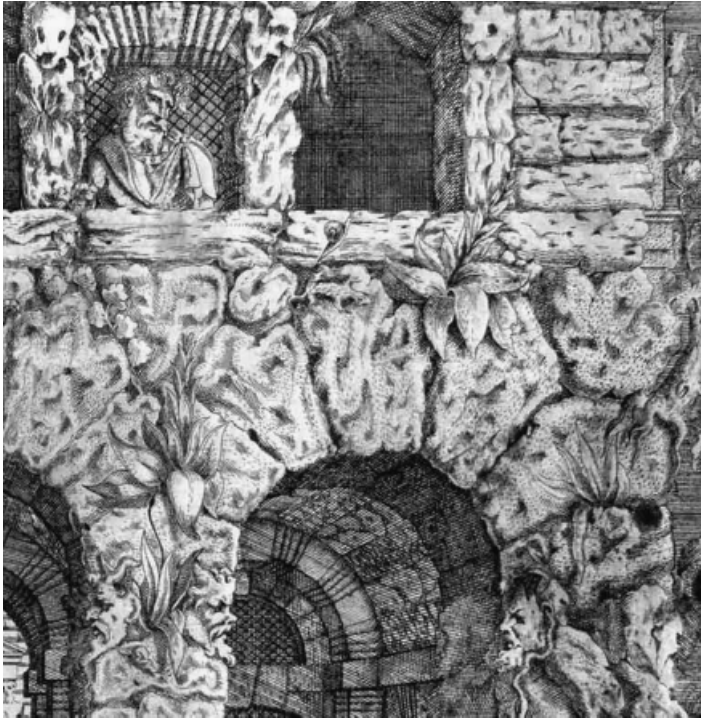
9 Detail of Maerteen van Heemskerck, *Garden with Antiquities Showing Bacchus and the Head of a Silenus as a Fountain*, 1534. Ink on paper, 13.5 × 29 cm. Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Photo: Kupfertichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

distributed through literary and visual culture. We can take from these examples some notion of the strategic position the Silenus occupies at the crossroads of humanist investigation into the cryptic nature of the divine and of allegorical interpretation, that is, into illusion and deceiving appearances. It is now time to justify this diversion and return to Bles's painting, bearing in mind the suggestive and shifting meanings of the figure of Silenus.<sup>67</sup>

#### BLES'S SILENIC LANDSCAPE

What reasons do we have for situating Bles's painting within this tradition? In the very first place, we can do so because, by opposing the ostentatious splendour of the representatives of authority, the bad Sileni, to the good Silenus that is Christ, whom we can scarcely make out, *The Way to Calvary* gives a visual form to meanings that the Silenic paradox also expresses. But there is more. In the version of the painting in the Galleria Doria Pamphili,<sup>68</sup> the precision of the drawing remains constant both in the foreground scenes of the procession and in the more distant scenes, while the uniform brown tonalities help to draw together the whole of the painting.<sup>69</sup> It is a completely different story with the Vienna painting (plate 1). Here there is a clearly marked opposition between the procession scene, which is linked to the central rocky eminence by warm tones and fine detail, and the whole of the background landscape, which is loosely painted in blueish tones with visible brushwork. Chromatic and stylistic differences work together to create an effect of contrast and to detach the central rock from the *sfumato* distance. This is further underlined by strange patches of white clearly visible on either side of the rock and emphasizing that these are proble-





10 Detail of Antonio Fantuzzi, *Cryptoportico*, 1545. Etching, 29.5 × 43.5 cm. Paris: Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



11 Detail of Piero di Cosimo, *The Discovery of Honey*, c. 1515. Oil on panel, 80 × 128 cm. Massachusetts: Worcester Art Museum. Photo: Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts.



12 Detail of Herri met de Bles, *The Way to Calvary*, showing soldier. Photo: Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künsten, Vienna.

matic, rather than neutral, areas. They produce an effect of estrangement, separating out the precise delineation of the rocky mass from its surroundings, and as a result dominating our view of the painting. In effect it is an invitation to the spectator to give concentrated attention to this fantastical and floating rocky form, the compositional centre point of the painting.

I have stressed the role of the varied figures whose glances and pointing fingers direct our attention to Christ. But one figure seems to destroy the effect of convergence this seems to create: the soldier on horseback who occupies a privileged position just below Christ (plate 12). He seems to be included in the procession without being a part of it, while his most remarkable characteristic is the incongruity of his pose, leaning backwards and averting his gaze

sharply. Instead of looking towards Christ, he is clearly fixated on the distance, so that, in complete contrast to the many gazes converging on the symbolic centre of the image – Christ – he alone focuses his attention on the perceptual centre of the image, the rock. This pictorial strategy of double movement implies a connection between what the soldier should be looking at (Christ, whom he is turning away from) and what he is looking at. It is a link between two figures of invisibility in the painting – the tiny Christ and His gigantic double. The invitation which the soldier's reversed gaze offers us is an invitation to reverse our own gaze, or rather to recognize that we were not seeing what we were looking at. In contrast to the blindness of most members of the procession, he invites us to recognize in the enormous rock he is staring at a Silenus (see plate 13): the arch at the right corresponds to an ear, the one at the left to the eye of a giant Silenus seen in profile. A curved rock perfectly delineates the snub nose in keeping with the grotesque models diffused by the *fiamminghi*; another describes a fleshy, grimaicing, mouth. At the very top a group of shrubs evokes a lock of hair falling onto the forehead, while three rocky peaks are surrounded by a crown of vegetation that has something of Silenus' traditional headdress about it. In the middle of the rocky opening representing the eye, the distant detail of a crossroads produces a subtle effect of the pupil enlivening the gaze. The mocking nose accentuates the surprise effect of the appearance of this monumental Silenus. The landscape with the story of Christ-Silenus mocked, is at the same time the portrait of a mocking Silenus, wrapped in the sinuous procession as in a frivolous ruff.

#### CONCEALED ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND EXEGETICAL CONVERSION

The Vienna *Way to Calvary* is only one example of concealed anthropomorphism among many in Bles's art.<sup>70</sup> This phenomenon occupies an important place in Bles's practice and is best defined by reference to its two main characteristics. The



13 Detail of Herri met de Bles, *The Way to Calvary*, showing Silenic Rock. Photo: Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künsten, Vienna.

first is its abundance, there are many examples, varied and regularly recurring throughout the painter's career. The second is their cryptic nature. These two points are related and we will better understand the meaning of Bles's anthropomorphic landscapes if we compare them with the well-known examples of head-landscapes that Joos de Momper, Mattheus Merian, and Athanasius Kircher (see plate 14) created from the last third of the sixteenth century onwards and many anonymous artists reworked and repeated. In complete contrast to Bles, these landscape heads are not defining, recurrent motifs in a career, but are typically almost unique cases in their artists' oeuvres, often restricted to a single painted or engraved image.<sup>71</sup> But above all, in each of these examples the recognition of the double image is immediate, the clear signalling of the presence of optical artifice reduces the space for interpretation. My argument is that the highly elaborate obscurity of the anthropomorphic motifs in Bles's landscapes is connected to the fundamental Christian thematic of vision, condemning deficient sight and belief in the illusion of appearance, and exhorting us to discernment and spiritual judgement. The surprise elicited by Bles's concealed anthropomorphism, the awareness of ambiguity that it evokes, corresponds to a precise exegetical strategy.

In the case of the Vienna *Way to Calvary* the effect of finding the Silenus in the scene is to lead the spectator, himself observing a procession of spectators, to a sudden indecision in which he discovers himself already viewed by the painting, observed without his knowing it by its mocking gaze. At the same time this reversal with its provocation to self-awareness obliges him to question his own situation and his place in a scopic hierarchy. The visual parallel of the Rock-Silenus and the Christ-Silenus invites the beholder to focus his attention and directs his interpretation towards the matter of the deceptive appearances and



14 Athanasius Kircher, 'Campus Anthropomorphus', from *Ars Magna lucis et umbrae*, Roma, 1643. Engraving, 30 × 23 cm. Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Photo: Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

the hidden nature of the divine. The meaning of the Rock-Silenus reveals itself to be inseparable from the exegesis of the Way to Calvary and from Erasmus' paradox, according to which Christians separated from Christ by historical distance but deprived of the truth transmitted by the Gospels have an advantage over those who saw Jesus at close quarters but remained blind to the spiritual meaning of what they witnessed.

'How could a concept be part of what we see?' Hubert Damisch's question – based on Wittgenstein's thinking about the connection between seeing and interpreting, between seeing and imagination, about the fact that any perception is borrowing a concept – has a paradigmatic value here.<sup>72</sup> We can say that the change of aspect in Bles – the possibility of seeing both a rocky eminence and a portrait of Silenus – functions in two ways: on the one hand, the concealed anthropomorphoses are part of the visual exegesis and contribute to the hermeneutic dynamic; while, on the other hand, the interpretation of the image as exegesis is also what makes possible the appearance of the concealed image. That the change of aspect is linked to a concept in this way further suggests that the paradoxical figure of Silenus and his analogical relationship with Christ formed a sufficiently well-known humanist *topos* to appear more spontaneously to the eyes of Bles's contemporaries than to our own. It is also the case that, compared to Erasmus' allegorical exegesis, the visual exegesis of Bles reveals an enigmatic extravagance, a visual challenge it has for centuries offered its spectators. The visual challenge of grasping the image in both its optical and exegetical dimensions, both in the flesh and in the spirit, balances the concealed anthropomorphism that functions in Bles's exegetical landscapes, as operator of conversion, as enigmatic allegory, designed to overwhelm the spectator and to provoke him to convert the literal into the spiritual. As 'holy cunning' or pictorial *Jocoserium*, the Silenic gaze is the counterpoint to the distant gaze of viewers called to meditate before this landscape on the Silenic nature of the world and on the laughter of God which, across the centuries, descends from the heavens.

The notion of visual exegesis aims to define the modalities of meaning at work in Bles's religious landscapes. Seeing and understanding such images, like interpreting a passage in the Scriptures, does not consist of recognizing explicit and univocal statements. The exegetical conception of meaning which is non-univocal or definitive, but veiled, and hence equally open to interpretation, has favoured the pictorial devices of ambivalence and ambiguity; the double or crypto-image is one of these devices.<sup>73</sup> They operate with the fundamental principle of exegesis, the transition from literal to spiritual meaning and its diffraction into several levels. The narrative and historical dimension is surely present in Bles's painting, with its precise depiction of the crowd and the episodes of the Ecce Homo and crucifixion. But for the exegete painter, representing the Scriptures does not simply mean, as for an illustrator, translating narratives into an image. It aims to invest the image with a dynamics of conversion so that it provokes the movement from literal to spiritual as a consequence of its pictorial constitution.

As Georges Didi-Huberman's book on Fra Angelico and Paolo Berdini's on Jacopo Bassano have stressed, the idea of visual exegesis requires a particular attention to the pictorial devices that elaborate the image as a dynamic process,

to the gaze, and to the active participation of the beholder.<sup>74</sup> Relating Fra Angelico's frescoes to the scholastic conception of exegesis and to the central notions of *dissimilitudo* (referring to the illusory nature of appearance) and *figura* (designating the endless displacement of meaning), Didi-Huberman has revealed the importance of zones of non-figurative polychromy in these works, and has argued that, in concert with the figurative portions of the painting, they aim at stimulating the spiritual imagination of the beholder and his speculations on the mystery of the incarnation. Likewise, Paolo Berdini shows that, although in the context of post-Tridentine Venice, Bassano's genre paintings depicting ordinary existence in a realistic way, are not openly religious, they become religious under an exegetical gaze attentive to the forms of indeterminacy and incongruities they contain. Berdini argues that such pictorial incongruities must motivate hermeneutical activity and make the spectator progressively conscious of being in the presence of an ordinary that must be resolved into an extraordinary, of an image whose realism 'does not constitute a straightforward illustration of everyday life but carries a metaphorized reality that emerges as an index of the parable'.<sup>75</sup> Analysis conducted less in terms of explicitness, clarity and iconographical readability than in terms of incongruity and opacity, displacements and rupture in the visual field, thus reveals relations between things normally distinct but significantly connected in the realm of exegetical thought.

Applied to the study of the *Weltlandschaft*, the Flemish emergent landscape tradition of which Bles was one of the main proponents, the notion of visual exegesis implies several things. It helps us reconsider the complex relationship between landscape and religious subjects, and question the idea of landscape as a neutral background where only figures carry meaning.<sup>76</sup> It also suggests that we should re-evaluate the metaphor of the book of nature and its appropriation and its articulation to the book of scripture. In that context, the notion of contemplation should be understood as a means of stimulating the imagination. Finally, considering Bles's landscapes in terms of visual exegesis allows us to identify a specifically Erasmian oclarcentrism. Bles's ambiguous or concealed anthropomorphic shapes, as well as the protagonists of his paintings who exemplify certain states of vision, spiritual insights, blindness or deception, are structural components of the pictorial rhetoric of the conversion and discernment to which these paintings are devoted.

The circle of Scriptures, says Erasmus, is similar to an unending game of correspondences between every particle of the Scriptures; this circle signifies not only the perfection of Christ but also the ceaseless whirling of meaning around the mystery of the incarnation.<sup>77</sup> This web of references and displacements, of correspondences and analogies, evokes the indeterminacy of the image, in the whole of its composition as well as in its details. It is in that sense that the clear polarity between the terrestrial Jerusalem at the lower left of Bles's painting and his characteristic motif of the Heavenly Jerusalem at the upper right corner, juxtaposed with the scene of crucifixion, points emphatically towards an anagogical sense. Far from being fortuitous, the presence of a tiny pelican perched at the top of the rock Silenus is a Christian *topos* that reinforces the sacrificial meaning of the episode. But its distant position, dominating the bird's eye view of the landscape, also suggests a potential link with the tropical

figures of the foreground beholders supposedly distinct from the *siendeblinden* of the crowd. Indeed at the periphery of the image Bles – also known as *Uyl* in the Netherlands or *Civetta* in Italy – put his famous figurative signature, the owl (plate 15). Its camouflage abilities and nocturnal keenness lead, in a humanist Christian context, to make of this bird the ambivalent emblem of the hidden and the allseeing, of the passage from darkness into the Christian light, of the exigency of discernment or the incapacity of the soul to grasp the sense of the Scriptures. If the owl is emblematic, it is not so much of the painter but of the painting. At the threshold of the image, in contrast to the converging gazes, the incongruity of this hidden and insistent gaze compels us to acknowledge that uncertainty and mobility remain the rule of any exegesis, that the humble and patient exercise of interpretation requires us to discern that to which we once were blind.



15 Detail of Herri met de Bles, *The Way to Calvary*, showing the owl. Photo: Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künsten, Vienna.

## Notes

I am grateful to Giovanni Careri, Michèle Clément, Thomas Sipp, Xavier Vert, Will Coleman and Claudia Koch, for their insightful remarks and comments.

- 1 'An non mirificus quidam Silenus fuit Christus?', Erasmus, *Sileni Alcibiadi, Chiliades Adagiorum*, Venice, 1508, LB II, 771.
- 2 See also Adriaen Jacobsz., *De Ghepredestineerde Blinde*, c. 1552, Brussels, Bibliothèque royale Albert 1er, inv. 21653. On the *rederijkers*, see Bart A. Ramaker, *Spelen en figuren. Toneelkunst en processiecultuur in Oudenaarde tussen Middeleeuwen en Moderne Tijd*, Amsterdam, 1996; W. H. M. Hummelen, *Repertorium van het Rederijkersdrama 1500 - ca. 1620*, Assen, 1968; Garry K. Waite, *Reformers on Stage: Popular Drama and Religious Propaganda in the Low Countries of Charles V, 1515–1556*, Toronto, 2000.
- 3 On the notion of visual exegesis, see, in particular, Anna C. Esmeijer, *Divina Quaternitas: A Preliminary Study in the Method and Application of Visual Exegesis*, Amsterdam, 1978; Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance et figuration*, Paris, 1990; Patrice Sicard, *Diagrammes médiévaux et exégèse visuelle: Le Libellus de formatione arche de Hugues de Saint-Victor*, Paris, 1993; Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis*, Cambridge, 1997.
- 4 For Erasmus' exegesis see Manfred Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology: The Hermeneutics of Erasmus*, Toronto, 1994; see also John William Aldridge, *The Hermeneutics of Erasmus*, Richmond, 1966; John

- B. Payne, 'Towards the hermeneutics of Erasmus', *Scrinium Erasmianum*, 2, 1969, 13–49; Marjorie O'Rourke, *Erasmus on Language and Method in Theology*, Toronto, 1977; Jacques Chomarat, *Grammaire et rhétorique chez Érasme*, 2 vols, Paris, 1981; Erika Rummel, *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament: From Philologist to Theologian*, Toronto, 1986; Hilmar M. Pabel, ed., *Holy Scripture Speaks: The Production and Reception of Erasmus' Paraphrases on the New Testament*, Toronto, 2002.
- 5 On Erasmus' conception of allegory as 'a metaphorical passage from history to mystery, a mediating transitus between the visible and the invisible', see Hoffman, *Rhetoric and Theology*, 95–133.
  - 6 Erasmus, *Ratio veram theologiam*, ed. H. Holborn, in *Desiderius Erasmus Roterdamus: Ausgewählte Werke*, Munich, 1964, 274; see also Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology*, 36.
  - 7 Erasmus, *Ratio*, 260; see also Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology*, 122.
  - 8 Erasmus, *Ratio*, 262; see also Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology*, 121.
  - 9 Erasmus, *Ratio*, 263, cited in Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology*, 123.
  - 10 Erasmus, *Ciceronianus*, in D. Baker-Smith and M. J. Heat, eds, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, Toronto, 1997, vol. 28, 382. *Collected Works of Erasmus* will hereafter be cited as *CWE*, followed by the specific volume number.
  - 11 Erasmus, *Letters*, 1202, *CWE*, 8, 210; see Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology*, 123.
  - 12 Erasmus, *Paraphrases in Novum Testamentum*, Basel, 1522–24. For a presentation of the Paraphrases, see John B. Payne, Albert Rabil Jr and Warren S. Smith, 'The paraphrases of Erasmus: Origin and character', in *CWE*, 42, 10–34. *Paraphrase on John*, trans. Jane E. Phillips, in *CWE*, 46; *Paraphrase on Matthew*, *CWE*, 47; *Paraphrase on Luke*, *CWE* 48; *Paraphrase on Mark*, trans. Erika Rummel, *CWE*, 49. See also the French translation, *Paraphrases des Évangiles*, Bâle, 1563; *Les Paraphrases d'Érasme*, Paris, BNF, Rés. A-2230.
  - 13 Erasmus, *A Commentary on Psalm 2*, *CWE*, 63, 99.
  - 14 'There were women present, observing from a distance what was done', *Paraphrase on Mark*, *CWE*, 49, 173. 'For there was nothing else that the humble and weak could do against the concerted godlessness of the powerful', *Paraphrase on Luke*, *CWE*, 48, 215.
  - 15 'For the sun abhorring such great human godlessness, hits its face before the dying of the one who was the light of the whole world ... even the veil of the temple ... was split into two pieces ... openly proclaiming that the shadows and ceremonies of the Jews would soon come to an end when this sacrifice had been completed.' *Paraphrase on Luke*, *CWE*, 48, 222.
  - 16 Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Luke*, *CWE*, 48, 262.
  - 17 Erasmus frequently uses paired notions such as 'shadow-truth', or 'figure-accomplishment'. On these exegetical notions and on the idea of 'figurative prophecy', see Erich Auerbach, *Figura. La Loi juive et la Promesse chrétienne*, Paris, 2003, esp. 47–53, 92–5.
  - 18 For Erasmus' Commentary on Psalm 2, see *CWE*, 63, 179.
  - 19 *CWE*, 63, 98–114.
  - 20 On the long Erasmian exegesis of the verse of Psalm 2, 'He who dwells in heaven will laugh at them, and the Lord will laugh them to scorn', as a figurative prophecy of the passion of Christ, see *In Psalmum 2 LB V 211 E – LB V 216 D*, in *CWE*, 63, 101–11.
  - 21 On Erasmus' explanation of biblical anthropomorphism as synecdoche, see *CWE*, 63, 111.
  - 22 *CWE*, 63, 103.
  - 23 In his commentary, Erasmus repeats insistently the idea of the conspiracy of the impious being reversed by God's plan: 'God is described as laughing at the impious when their plans go wrong and when, in plotting the downfall, they fall into their own trap ... see how God's wisdom mocks their unholy enterprises: they have prepared a snare for my feet and they have bowed down my soul; they have dug a pit in my path but have fallen in it themselves ... he who is in heaven, laughs, every day, at your jealous plots; every day the Lord mocks your machinations, since he knows how to turn all your traps and tumult to the advantage of his people'; *CWE*, 63, 103–11.
  - 24 *CWE*, 109.
  - 25 *CWE*, 110–12.
  - 26 *CWE*, 109.
  - 27 For a study of Bles's Way to Calvary series, see Luc Serck, *Henri Bles et la peinture de paysage dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux avant Bruegel*, PhD dissertation, Université de Louvain, 1990, 658–778; Luc Serck, 'La Montée au Calvaire dans l'œuvre d'Henri Bles: Création et composition', in *Herri met de Bles: Studies and Explorations of the World Landscape Tradition*, Turnhout, 1998, 51–72. See also Robert A. Koch, 'A rediscovered painting: The Road to Calvary by Herri met de Bles', in *Herri met de Bles: Studies and Explorations*, 9–22; Reindert L. Falkenburg, 'Marginal Motifs in Early Flemish Landscape Paintings', in *Herri met de Bles: Studies and Explorations*, 153–70; Betty Rosasco, 'The Road to Calvary by Herri met de Bles: an Appreciation', in *Herri met de Bles: Studies and Explorations*, 183–93; Nina Eugenia Sebrennikov, 'Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 'Haymaking': A tribute to Henri Bles', in *Actes du colloque 'Autour de Henri Bles'*, Namur, 2002, 225–40.
  - 28 Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Luke*, *CWE*, 48, 215.
  - 29 For tears in the Christian logic of vision, see Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires d'aveugles*, Paris, 1991, 123.
  - 30 See also Erasmus, *CWE*, 63.
  - 31 See Joshua Bruyn, 'Christus aan het volk getoond. Brunswijkse monogrammist (ca. 1540)', *Openbar Kunstbezit*, 14, 1970, 8.



- 32 See J. A. Emmens, 'Eins aber ist nötig - Zu Inhalt und Bedeutung von Markt - und Küchenstücken des 16. Jahrhunderts', in *Album Amicorum J. van Gelder*, The Hague, 1973, 93-101; see also Reindert Falkenburg, 'Iconographical connections between Antwerp landscapes, market scenes and kitchen pieces, 1500-1580', *Oud Holland*, 102, 1988, 114-26.
- 33 For the opposition of sacred and profane in reversed compositions, see Victor Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, Cambridge, 2000.
- 34 For the negative attitude of the peasants, see Reindert L. Falkenburg, 'Pieter Bruegels Kruisdraging: Een proeve van "close reading"', *Oud Holland*, 107, 1993, 17-33.
- 35 See J. F. Gregory, 'Towards the contextualization of Pieter Bruegel's procession to Calvary', in Jan de Jong, Mark Meadow, Herman Roodenburg, Frits Scholten, eds, *Pieter Bruegel, (Nederlands Kunsthistorisches Jaarboek, 47 1996)*, Zwolle, 1997, 207-21.
- 36 For this matter see Gregory, 'Towards the contextualization'.
- 37 Erasmus' Adage 'Sileni Alcibiadi' is number 2201 of his *Chiliades Adagiorum*, Venice, 1508. Due to its success, this Adage was radically rewritten, expanded and published by Froben in Basel in 1517. On the various editions of Erasmus' *Sileni Alcibiadi*, see Jean-Claude Margolin, *Érasme, Les Silènes d'Alcibiade*, Paris, 1998, 53-4.
- 38 Erasmus, *Sileni Alcibiadis* (first edition 1508, expanded edition 1515); see *The Sileni of Alcibiades*, in *Adages III ii 100/LBII 770B, CWE*, 34, trans. R. A. Mynors, 262.
- 39 Plato, *Symposium*, 215a-223d.
- 40 On Erasmus' Christian Platonism, see, in particular, Jacques Chomarat, 'Érasme et Platon', *Bulletin Guillaume Budé*, March 1987, 25-45.
- 41 Plato, *Symposium*, 265.
- 42 Erasmus' *Sileni of Alcibiades* begins with the historical and philological recall of the antique figure of the Silenus' Box, of the antique legend of Silenus and of two antique sources: Xenophon, *Athen*, 5, 188d, and Plato, *Symposium*, 215a-223d.
- 43 Plato, *Symposium*, 269.
- 44 Plato, *Symposium*, 270.
- 45 Erasmus, *Enchiridion*, ch. 5. See also Erasmus, *CWE*, 64, 278-81.
- 46 On Erasmus' use of the Adages as a pretext for a moral commentary of his time, see, in particular, Margaret Mann Philipps, *The Adages of Erasmus*, Cambridge, 1964, and Margolin, *Érasme*, 9-85.
- 47 Sebastian Franck, *Paradoxa*, Ulm, 1534, Paradox no. 91, 125.
- 48 On the numerous editions and translations of Erasmus' *Sileni Alcibiadi* during the sixteenth century, see Margolin, *Érasme*, 53-4.
- 49 The main texts in which the figure of Silenus appears are: Pico della Mirandola, in a famous letter to Ermolao Barbaro, published in *Ioannis Pici Mirandulae Omania Opera*, Bologna, 1496, f. 8v; Erasmus, *Sileni Alcibiadi*, 1515; Erasmus, *Enchiridion*, ch. 5; Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, ch. 29; Erasmus, *Letter to Martin Dorp*, Preface to the *Praise of Folly*, ed. Froben, 1515; Martin Luther, letter, 4 June 1518, cited by Jürgen Müller, *Das Paradox als Bildform*, 111, n. 1; Rabelais, *Prologue to Gargantua*; Guillaume Budé, *De studio litterarum recte et commode instituto*, Paris, 1532; Christophe de Longueuil, *Orationes duae* ... Florence, 1524; Giordano Bruno, *Dialoghi metafisici*, ed. G. Gentile, 1925, 11; Lomazzo, *Discorso interno al Sileno*, 1568; Vida di Capodistria, *Il Sileno, Dialogo di Girolamo Vida*, Justinopolitano, Vicenza, 1589; Sebastien Franck, *Paradoxa*, ed. Siegfried Wollgast, Berlin, 1966, Paradox no. 91; Ronsard, *La Lyre*, 1550, book 50, ch. 15, 24-5, verses 181-95; Jacob Cats, *Silenus Alcibiadis, sive Proteus, vitae humanae ideam, emblemata trifariam variatio, oculis subiciens*, Middelburg, 1618.
- 50 Numerous studies have been dedicated to the figure of Silenus and to its resurgence in the humanist culture in the Renaissance; they are mainly concerned with literary examples. See, in particular, Heinrich Bulle, *Die Silene in der archaischen Kunst der Grieschen*, Munich, 1893; Gerard Defaux, 'Sagesse apparente et sagesse réelle ... Les Sileni Alcibiades: christiani et mundani', in *Pantagruel et les sophistes. Contribution à l'histoire de l'humanisme chrétien au XVI siècle*, The Hague, 1973, 136-44; Moshe Barasch, 'A Silenus Surviving in Nicola Pisano', *Art Bulletin*, 58, 1976, 13-18; G. Conrad, *Der Silen. Wandlungen einer Gestalt der griechischen Satyrspiels*, Trier, 1977; Jeanne Chenault Porter, 'Ribera's Assimilation of a Silenus', *Paragone*, 30, 1979, 41-54; Edwin Duval, 'Interpretation and the "Doctrine absconce" of Rabelais' Prologue to Gargantua', *Études Rabelaisiennes*, vol. 14; T. Dagrón, 'Silènes et statues platoniciennes, à propos du prologue du Gargantua', *Études Rabelaisiennes*, vol. 33, 79-90; Raymond La Charité, 'Rabelais and the Silenic Text: The Prologue to Gargantua', in *Rabelais's Incomparable Book, Essays on his Art*, Lexington, KT, 1986, 72-86; Guy Michael Hedreen, *Silenus in Attic Black Figure Vase Painting. Myth and Performance*, Ann Arbor, MI, 1992; Svetlana Alpers, *The Making of Rubens*, New Haven and London, 1995, ch. 2; Margolin, *Érasme*, 9-85; Françoise Graziani, 'Roland et Silène', in Belinda Cannone and Michel Orcel, eds, *Figures de Roland, Actes du colloque de Corte*, Paris, 1998; Jürgen Müller, *Das Paradox als Bildform. Studien zur Ikonologie Pieter Bruegels d.Ä.*, Munich, 1999, ch. 2; Jürgen Müller, 'Die "Silene des Alcibiades" oder Erasmus und die Frage des Christlichen Stils', 90-125; Patricia Eichel-Lojkine, *Excentricité et humanisme*, Geneva, 2002, 215; Michèle Clément, *Le Cynisme à la Renaissance en France (1515-1560)*, Geneva, 2005; Françoise Lavocat, *La Syrinx au bûcher. Pan et les satyres à la Renaissance et à l'âge baroque*, Geneva, 2005; Susan Woodford, 'Silenoi ouvrants: on

- Alcibiades's Image of Socrates in Plato's Symposium', *Source*, 2007, 4–6.
- 51 Lavocat, *La Syrinx*.
- 52 See note 42.
- 53 For the distinction between the plural term 'Silens', referring to old satyrs, and Silenus, Bacchus's preceptor, associated with witness and prophecy, see Malcolm Bull, *The Mirror of the Gods: Classical Mythology in Renaissance*, Harmondsworth, 2006, 231–42.
- 54 For an account of the myths concerning Silenus, see Bull, *Mirror of the Gods*, 230–61.
- 55 Guillaume Budé, *De studio*.
- 56 First edition, Basel, 1546; second edition, in French, Lyon, 1576.
- 57 Jacob Cats, *Silenus Alcibiadis*.
- 58 'La représentation iconographique donnée par les *Occulti* de Brescia des Silènes d'Alcibiade est en tout cas éclairante et exceptionnelle. Il n'existe en effet aucune représentation de ces fameuses statues, ou statuettes creuses, ni dans l'art grec, ni à la Renaissance, même si les enluminures et les petits bronzes en forme de satyre et de silènes, à la fin du quinzième siècle, foisonnent.' See Lavocat, *La Syrinx*, 27, n. 38. For the hypothesis of the existence of such statues during Antiquity, see Woodford, 'Silenoi ouvrants'.
- 59 See Lavocat, *La Syrinx*, 20–21.
- 60 For an explicit development by Erasmus of the Silenic principle of destabilizing meaning and ironic reversal, see his *Praise of Folly*, ch. 19.
- 61 On the Silenic Prologue to Gargantua, see Defaux, 'Sagesse apparente et sagesse réelle', 136–44; Duval, 'Interpretation'; Dagron, 'Silènes et statues platoniciennes'; La Charité, 'Rabelais and the Silenic text', 72–86; Patricia Eichel-Lojkine, *Excentricité et humanisme*, Geneva, 2002, 215.
- 62 See Maerten van Heemskerck, *Garden with Antiquities*, drawing no. 79D2, 23r, from the volume *Inventio Urbis*, Berlin: Kupferstischkabinett, reproduced in Elena Filippi, *Maerten van Heemskerck, Inventio Urbis*, Milan, 1990, plate 47 and note 107.
- 63 See Philippe Morel, *Les grottes maniéristes en Italie au XVI siècle*, Paris, 2002.
- 64 See, in particular, H. W. Janson, 'The 'Image made by chance' in Renaissance Thought', in Millard Meiss, ed., *Essays in Honour of Erwin Panofsky*, New York, 1961, 256–66; Morel, *Les grottes*, 43–87.
- 65 For this print, see Henri Zerner, *The School of Fontainebleau, Etchings and Engravings*, New York, 1969, no. 82; Catherine Jenkins, 'The Fontainebleau School of Printmakers', PhD dissertation, University of Oxford, 2003.
- 66 Piero di Cosimo, *The Discovery of Honey*, c. 1505–10. Oil on panel, 79 × 128 cm. Worcester, MA: Worcester Art Museum. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 11, 85–145.
- 67 See Barasch, 'A Silenus Surviving', and Alpers, *The Making of Rubens*, n. 43.
- 68 Rome: Galleria Doria Pamphili, inv. no. 493 (32 × 42 cm). On the version from Vienna, see also, Claudia Koch, 'Der Meister mit der Eule. Eine Gedankennotiz zur Eulen- darstellung in der 'Kreuztragung Christi' von Herri met de Bles in der Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien', *Kauzbrief*, 14, 2006, 30–3.
- 69 On the various versions of Bles's Way to Calvary, see, in particular, Serck, 'La Montée au Calvaire', 51–72. The various versions are close, in particular the version now in the Saint Gallen Museum, repeating exactly the same Silenus profile, with a somewhat more vegetal and arcimboldeque aspect.
- 70 In contrast with the usually sketchy drawings of the vegetal and rocky elements of the landscape, the recent reflectography of the Vienna *Way to Calvary* reveals an extremely precise underdrawing of the contours of the Silenic rock. The reflectography of the *Vocation of Saint Peter* (Collection Kisters, Kreuzlingen) reveals a similar precise underdrawing of the zoomorphic rock. A study based on reflectographies of the various examples of Bles's anthropomorphic motifs (in *The Sleeping Peddler Robbed by the Apes* from the Dresden Gemäldegalerie, in *The Conversion of Saint Paul* from Oberlin, in the second similar version of *The Way to Calvary* from the Saint Gallen Museum) should confirm the hypothesis that this recurrent pictorial device, far from being accidental, was part of the conception of the image at its first stage. On the matter of the double image in Renaissance art and anthropomorphic landscape, see, in particular, Anna Bentkowska, 'Anthropomorphic landscape in 16th and 17th century Western art. A question of attribution and interpretation', *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 61, 1997, 1–2, and 69–91; Stephen Campbell, *Cosmè Tura of Ferrara. Style, Politics, and the Renaissance City, 1450–1495*, New Haven and London, 1998, 131–61; Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images*, London, 2002, 21–41; Dario Gamboni, 'Ambigüité, dissimulation et interprétation', *La Revue de l'Art*, 137, 2003, 1–8; Fernand Hallyn, 'Le paysage anthropomorphe', in *Le paysage à la Renaissance*, Fribourg, 1988, 43–54; H. W. Janson, 'The 'image made by chance'', 340–53; Michel Jeanneret, *Perpetuum mobile. Métamorphoses des corps et des œuvres de Vinci à Montaigne*, Paris, 1998, 281–289; Franck Lestringant, 'Les paysages anthropomorphes à la Renaissance', in D. de Courcelles, ed., *Nature et paysages. L'émergence d'une nouvelle subjectivité à la Renaissance*, Paris, 2006, 261–79; Frances Terpak, 'Anthropomorphic landscapes', in Frances Terpak and Barbara Stafford, eds, *Devices of Wonder from the World in a Box to Images on a Screen*, Los Angeles, CA, 2001, 248–52; Felix Thuerlemann, 'L'aquarelle de Durer 'fenedier klawsen': La double mimesis dans l'analyse picturale d'un lieu géographique', *La Revue de l'Art*, 137, 2003, 9–18; Michel Weemans,

- 'Les paysages exégétiques et anthropomorphes de Henri Bles', PhD dissertation, Paris, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2004; Michel Weemans, 'Herri met de Bles's Sleeping Peddler: an exegetical and anthropomorphic landscape', *Art Bulletin*, 88, 2006, 459–81.
- 71 For a detailed account of this tradition of anthropomorphic landscape, see Weemans, 'Les paysages exégétiques', ch. 3, 405–14.
- 72 Hubert Damisch, *Traité du trait. Tractatus Tractus*, Paris, 1995, 88. On the idea of change of aspect, see, in particular, 79–90.
- 73 See Jean-Claude Bonne, 'Entre ambiguïté et ambivalence. Problématique de la sculpture romane', *La Part de l'œil*, 8, 1992, 147–64.
- 74 Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*; Berdini, *Jacopo Bassano*.
- 75 See Berdini, *Jacopo Bassano*, 67.
- 76 For a discussion of the problematic idea of *Weltlandschaft* in terms of 'autonomous landscape', see Reindert L. Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir. Landscape as an Image of the Pilgrimage of Life*, New York, 1988, 1–9.
- 77 See note 54. On Erasmus' use of the metaphor of the circle to describe the harmony and perfection of the Scriptures, see, in particular, Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text*, Oxford, 1979, part 2, ch. 1; and also Hoffmann, *Rhetoric and Theology*, 148, and 216.