

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO

Titian

Edited by

Patricia Meilman



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2004

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Poppl-Pontifex 9/13 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

The Cambridge companion to Titian / edited by Patricia Meilman.

p. cm. – (Cambridge companions to the history of art)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-79180-4

1. Titian, ca. 1488–1576 – Criticism and interpretation. 2. Art,
Italian – Italy – Venice – 16th century. I. Meilman, Patricia, 1947– II. Series.

N6923.T57 C36 2003

759.5 – dc21

2002041242

ISBN 0 521 79180 4 hardback

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1 Inventing Mythologies

The Painter's Poetry

David Rosand

... la pittura è propria poesia, cioè invenzione. . .

Paolo Pino¹

Et è cosa iscambievole, che i Pittori cavino spesso le loro
inventioni da i Poeti, & i Poeti da i Pittori.

Lodovico Dolce²

UT PICTOR POETA

Once the plague had abated in 1576, the painters of Venice sought to commemorate their recently departed *caposcuola* with obsequies to be held in the church of their patron, San Luca. This, at least, is reported by Carlo Ridolfi, Titian's seventeenth-century biographer. Since disagreement among the painters supposedly prevented the realization of the project, Ridolfi, desiring to preserve the memory of so worthy an intention, publishes a full description of the planned *apparato* and its program.³ Between the eight Ionic columns supporting the temporary monument were to have been monochrome paintings representing "the most worthy acts of Titian" ("le azioni più degne di Titiano") – actually, images celebrating the painter through his most worthy patrons. The cycle begins in Ferrara: in a "noble room" Titian is seen painting before a courtly audience led by Duke Alfonso I d'Este and the poet Ludovico Ariosto, who is reading a book. Inscribed *Titianus Ferrariam ductus ab Alphonso I. ipsius Ludovicique Ariosti intima usus familiaritate*, the scene documents the intimate relationship that Ridolfi had elaborated in his biography, pictorial confirmation of the special affection of the duke for the painter and the collegial friendship of the two artists, "the Homer and Apelles of the modern age." Ridolfi describes Alfonso personally escorting Titian to Ferrara on his ducal barge and Ariosto visiting him while he painted. Painter and poet discussed their respective compositions, each

presumably contributing to the other's art.⁴ Ridolfi's account culminates, inevitably, with the famous passage in Canto 33 of the *Orlando furioso*, in which Titian's name appears among the list of modern masters whose fame will equal that of the ancients – thanks, that is, to the writers (“mercè degli scrittori”), who will be read by posterity. Reciprocating Ariosto's affection, Titian in turn painted the poet's portrait. More resonantly, in fact, he also drew the profile portrait that graced the definitive edition of the *Orlando furioso*, published in Ferrara in 1532, and which became the standard icon of the author.⁵

However embroidered by the biographer's fancy, Ridolfi's celebration of Titian's relationship to Ariosto actually continues an older tradition – one ultimately conforming to the early-Renaissance counsel of Leon Battista Alberti that painters associate with men of letters (poets and orators) whose literary knowledge will offer a rich source of invention for painted *istorie*.⁶ Ariosto's nomination of Titian in his grand epic was taken, along with Este patronage, as a sign of particular aesthetic approbation.⁷ Above all, it was Lodovico Dolce, Titian's most articulate contemporary apologist, who developed the comparison into a vital demonstration of the aesthetic commonplace *ut pictura poesis*. With a close reading of Ariosto's depiction of the beautiful Alcina, Dolce declares that good poets are themselves painters, and, coming to the mixed palette of Alcina's delicate cheek, he concludes that in his coloring the poet proves himself to be a Titian: “Qui l'Ariosto colorisce, & in questo suo colorire dimostra essere un Titiano.”⁸

How, then, does Titian prove himself to be an Ariosto; how is the painter a poet? We may begin to confront the issue through preliminary consideration of the poet's own achievement, especially in relation to the Ovidian legacy that inspired so much of Renaissance art, a legacy that animated the *paragone* at the core of Renaissance criticism of the arts. Ariosto stands as perhaps the greatest of Renaissance Ovidians, along with Titian. Compounding his literary heritage of Arthurian romance and chivalric tradition, he defined his poetic ambition and refined his poetic practice on that classical model, on the Latin poet whose own problematic voice sounded passionately, but with art in hand and, at times, tongue in cheek. From the narrative intricacies, strategies, and continuities, from the mix of arch self-consciousness and moments of genuine pathos, and, above all, from the mythopoesis of the *Metamorphoses*, the Ferrarese poet learned to weave his own grandly pictorial tapestry of literary realities. And Ariosto's poem, in turn, became a lens through which Ovid's was to be read – as is fully attested by the ottava rime translations, or transformations, of the *Metamorphoses* that followed

publication of the *Orlando furioso*.⁹ In Ariosto's own appropriations of classical figures – his translations of ancient Europa, Ariadne, and Andromeda into modern Angelica or Olimpia, of Perseus into Ruggiero, who is also scolded by the good sorceress Melissa for playing Adonis to Alcina's Venus – Ovidian role-playing defines character and situation.¹⁰

Playing Ovid's own game, discovering ever new possibilities in ancient models, Ariosto transforms two great literary traditions, medieval and classical, to find a poetic voice that is uniquely Renaissance in its inventive appropriation of the past. *Ut pictor poeta*: How then does the Renaissance painter deal with his cultural legacy; what kinds of pictorial invention does he claim for himself in acknowledging, transforming, and transmitting that legacy? What kinds of stories does he discover and how does he tell them with his brush? Readings of two paintings, from different phases of Titian's career as mythologist, will allow us to explore the poetic ways of the master's art: the *Bacchus and Ariadne* for Alfonso I d'Este and the *Venus and Adonis* for Philip II of Spain (Plates 7 and 18).

First, to Ferrara. In the very years that Ariosto was composing the *Orlando furioso* Titian was indeed beginning to develop his own *poesie, poesie all'antica*, and for the same Este court. Two of his canvases for the *camerino* of Alfonso, the so-called *Worship of Venus* (1518–19) and the *Bacchanal of the Andrians* (1523–5) were based on ancient images described in the *Imagines* of Philostratus the Elder; working from such ekphraseis, Titian gave new (or, renewed) pictorial reality to what had been mere literary accounts (Plates 6 and 8). In thus reconstructing antique pictorial culture, he was effectively realizing the Renaissance program prescribed by Alberti for the discovery of appropriate *invenzioni* for *istorie*.¹¹

Upon receipt of the instructions for the *Worship of Venus*, in 1518, Titian wrote to the duke and congratulated him on the choice of subject: nothing could have been more pleasing or more after his own heart.¹² Delighting in the detail of the description (*Imagines* 1.6), Titian remained faithful to the chromatic richness and playful spirit of the "original" image. Indeed, the literalism of his reading, its essentially "literary" aspect, may be measured against the drawing by Fra Bartolommeo that was probably sent to him as a model. The Florentine – from whom Titian had inherited the commission – had represented the culminating moment of the Philostratan text, the discovery of the shrine of Venus; his centralized compositional solution is fundamentally iconic, more appropriately called a "Worship of Venus," the title usually assigned to Titian's painting. The structure of Titian's composition, however, is more insistently narrative. Legibility here obeys a different visual

syntax; following the progress of the ekphrastic text across its surface, the accumulation of incident moves from left to right toward the culminating shrine.¹³

In *The Andrians* too, Titian's brush remained faithful to the text, exploring the description of this island blessed by Dionysus, its modest stream running red with wine (*Imagines* 1.25). But here he expanded upon the implications of its detail and its theme, the celebration of the particular gift of the god. Philostratus invites us to imagine we hear the song of the Andrians, "their voices thick with wine." For that song, a fitting text, in French, was chosen and depicted quite legibly in the painting: "*Qui boyt et ne reboyt il ne scet que boyre soit*" ("Who drinks and does not drink again knows not what drinking is"). These words are appropriately set as a canon, and the music has been attributed to Adrian Willaert, then musician at the Ferrarese court but soon to transform the chapel at San Marco in Venice.¹⁴ The cyclical pattern implicit in the rhythm and meaning of the inscribed text and fundamental to the imitative structure of the music – and, on a more general level, inherent in the significance of the seasonal cycle of the vine – informs the action of the painting: dancing, singing, drinking, pissing . . . to begin again, *da capo*. But especially the dancing: Titian's interlaced choreography establishes the essential order of his composition, animating his figures and investing the picture with its deepest meaning.

Like the first of the paintings for the *camerino*, Giovanni Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* of 1514, the landscape setting of which Titian so monumentally transformed,¹⁵ *Worship of Venus* and *The Andrians* are what we might term situational rather than fully narrative pictures. The images they retrieve from literary memory and bring to renewed pictorial life represent states of being, however internally complex and inflected, rather than the telling of a tale; for all their activity and variety of incident, they are without psychological conflict – pastoral, we might want to call them, rather than dramatic. As we shall see, drama is at the core of Titian's pictorial poetry.

ARIADNE DISCOVERED

Quite different is the third of the canvases Titian contributed to Alfonso's *camerino* (Plate 7). In the *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1520–23), he drew upon a number of ancient texts and visual models with a combinatorial inventiveness worthy of the Ovidian art of Ariosto.¹⁶ This picture too is inspired by ancient ekphraseis, primarily one by Catullus (*Carmina* LXIV.257–65), an

extended description of scenes embroidered on the coverlet of the marriage bed of Peleus and Thetis:

Embroidered on this coverlet were figures
 Of antique times marvellously representing
 Heroic enterprise. Here Ariadne
 On the surf-booming shore of Naxos gazes
 At Theseus and his shipmates making off
 And, still incredulous of what she sees,
 Feels love, a wild beast, tear at her: no wonder,
 For, having woken from deluding sleep,
 She finds herself abandoned pitifully
 On the bare sands, while he, oblivious,
 Batters the sea with oars, leaving behind
 Meaningless promises for the gale to play with.
 There on the seaweed fringe the weeping princess
 Stares seaward like a maenad carved in stone,
 While her heart heaves and swells across the distance.
 Gone from her yellow hair the fine-woven bonnet,
 Thrown off the light blouse and the delicate scarf
 That bound her milk-white breasts – her garments fallen
 Loose at her feet and lapped by the salt tide.
 For all she cares now bonnet and blouse and scarf
 Can float away. . . .¹⁷

The poet then rehearses the story of Theseus and Ariadne – her betrayal of her family and his of her and the tragedy of his homecoming – eventually returning to another scene on the coverlet that

Showed virile Bacchus swaggering with his crew
 Of Satyrs and the Indian-born Sileni,
 Mad for you, Ariadne, flushed with love. . .
 And, all around, the maenads pranced in frenzy,
 Crying the ritual cry, 'Euhoe! Euhoe!',
 Tossing their heads; some of them brandishing
 The sacred vine-wreathed rod, some bandying
 Gobbets of mangled bullock, others twining
 Their waists with belts of writhing snakes, and others
 Reverently bearing in deep caskets,
 Arcane things which the uninitiated
 Long, but in vain, to see, while others stretched
 Fingertips to tattoo the tambourine,
 Struck a shrill clang from the semicircular cymbals,
 Blew hullabaloo on mooing horns or made
 The oriental pipe twitter and scream.¹⁸

Another of Titian's literary sources was, inevitably, Ovid, especially the *Ars amatoria* (1.525–64). There, among the tumult of the bacchanals, was to be found drunken Silenus, who “scarce sits his crook-backed ass.” And it is Ovid who, describing the dramatic confrontation between the lamenting Ariadne and the exuberant god, resolves the tale in the metamorphosis effected by divine love:

. . . voice, colour – and Theseus, all were gone from the girl; thrice she tried flight, thrice fear stayed her. She shuddered, as when dry stalks are shaken by the wind, as when the light rush trembles in the watery marsh. Lo, here am I, said the god to her, a more faithful lover; have no fear, Cnossian maid, thou shalt be the spouse of Bacchus. For thy gift take the sky; as a star in the sky thou shalt be gazed at; the Cretan Crown shall often guide the doubtful bark! He spoke, and lest she fear the tigers leapt down from the chariot; the sand gave place to his alighting foot; and clasping her to his bosom (for she had no strength to fight) he bore her away; easy it is for a god to be all-powerful. Some chant Hail Hymenaeus! some shout Euhoe! to the Euhian; so do the bride and the god meet on the sacred couch.¹⁹

With such texts as source material and inspiration, Titian retold the tale in paint, selecting particular details, as Ariadne's disheveled state and the leap of Bacchus, as pivotal motives for the construction of his narrative. That construction is fundamentally pictorial. Although it is very likely that the *istruzioni* given to Titian for the *Bacchus and Ariadne* came from Catullus and Ovid, it seems likely that he finally followed any single literary source for his own *invenzione*.²⁰ Whatever his familiarity with those classical sources, here he was not reconstructing a single ancient painting on the basis of a detailed ekphrasis. Unlike either the *Worship of Venus* or the *Andrians*, the challenge involved a greater imaginative effort on the part of the painter: to tell a complex tale in a single image, representing an action in time and projecting a psychology of character. This he achieved by the means of his own art of painting.

Our own response to *Bacchus and Ariadne* necessarily proves that art; for, as we engage more deeply the agitated emotions of the protagonists or their fate, we become increasingly aware of the pictorial structure and the painter's choices. The triumphant Bacchic procession sweeps in from the right and, turning then back into space, comes to a rest before the lamenting Ariadne. That stop is signaled by the panthers (or cheetahs) drawing the chariot, the only members of the retinue to have come to a full halt, which is further punctuated by the directional reversal of the yapping dog. Beyond the central axis of the field, Bacchus himself continues the forward momentum, bounding from the car toward the girl in the open half of the composition, but with a turn that retards the thrust. Along with his flying

draperies, his limbs extend back in space, tracing a previous moment in time; the division of the field is marked by the vertical of his alighting leg, stabilized by the foot, so flatly and firmly planted in midair. His neck extended, he leads with – or, rather, is led by – his gaze. And she responds with hers. Between the faces of the desiring god and the startled girl, a space, a Petrarcan space, is charged by the intensity of exchanged glances: “E come ne’ begli occhi gli occhi affisse” (*Orlando furioso* X.97). The distance between the two is quietly emphasized by the intimate proximity of the two yoked panthers. Although shadowed in lost profile, the ivory white of Ariadne’s cheek is touched with blushing red – like Angelica’s, we may imagine, and Andromeda’s.

Famously evoked in the lines of Keats (“the swift bound/Of Bacchus from his chariot when his eye/Made Ariadne’s cheek look blushingly”), Titian’s *Bacchus and Ariadne* is, in every sense, a dramatic encounter, a meeting of force as both physical and psychological. Linked most firmly by their glances, these two figures respond to one another in a choreography of answering gestures, and their movements in turn define a temporal situation at once momentary and eternal. Still reaching seaward toward the horizon and the disappearing sail of faithless Theseus, Ariadne looks over her shoulder to her future husband; the major coordinates of her graceful contrapposto thus extend in two directions. Cast in a serpentine pose embodying the peripeteia of her fate, the figure of Ariadne itself is circumscribed within a rather contained silhouette. Her draperies swirl around the central axis of her body in billowing profiles that are restated and expand in the cloud rising above her. The clouds themselves reiterate the encounter taking place below, a heavenly reinforcement of the earthly drama: the long horizontal stratus articulates the narrative line of Bacchus’ movement and meets the solid cumulonimbus above Ariadne. Culminating the rising sequence of forms at the left is the Cnossian crown of stars, signal of the imminent fate of the chosen bride, the promised gift of her divine suitor: immortality attained through the love of the god.

Telling the tale of Bacchus and Ariadne, Titian establishes its full temporal scope, carrying the Bacchic train back in tumultuous triumph to the meeting of the immortal lover and mortal beloved and ascending to its celestial consummation. Figural progress carries the narrative, and the crowning constellation extends the temporal range of that narrative to its resolution in the future.²¹ Titian’s narrative skill and his ability to project affect depend of course upon his pictorial art. Drama unfolds from within the composition: its right-to-left lateral progress actively and proleptically transposed into a serpentine ascent toward constellar climax. Compositional structure achieves

the final resolution of its own internal dynamics and, in that synthesis, declares the transcendent fate of Ariadne. Operating within the immediate syntactic constraints of frame and field, the dynamics of pictorial composition here acquire a complex affective dimension. Vectorial forces assume narrative responsibility; linear shifts become dramatic and tell a tale. This happens, of course, as the actors themselves participate in the very forces they generate, inflecting them spatially and animating them with physiognomic meaning. Working with the elements of his own art, then, Titian shows himself to be an Ariosto – indeed, an Ovid.

Classical antiquity offered the Renaissance painter no visual model representing the amorous announcement of the god to a confused and embarrassed girl. On ancient sarcophagi Bacchus discovers Ariadne still asleep, unresponsive, a provocative but passive object of his gaze.²² Postclassical pictorial tradition, however, did offer a pertinent affective model of such discovery, one sharing the dialogic dynamic of the theme: the Archangel Gabriel's violation of the thalamic intimacy of the Virgin Mary (Fig. 8). As a pictorial construct, the Annunciation shares a basic presentational imperative with scenes of the discovery of female beauty, that is, a double mode of address: the object of desire is available both to the pictured lover and to the viewer of the picture. The entrance of the depicted male viewer (Gabriel) is generally represented in a narrative mode: the figure, in the third person, often in profile, moving across the picture's surface. The female object of his attention (Mary) is generally posed more complexly, as she responds simultaneously to the interloper and to another, that is, to the viewer (worshipper) on this side of the picture plane. Making herself available to both, she becomes a double object of desire. In this Christian image of discovery, the affective engagement of the third-party observer is charged, of course, with deeper consequence.

The naked beauty of sleeping Ariadne in ancient representations of the theme is revealed to the eyes of arriving Bacchus and, through the tilted adjustment of her body, to ours. In Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* such spatial complication of pose functions almost entirely within the context of the narrative, so that Ariadne's double attention is shared by arriving Bacchus and departing Theseus; we, as viewers, must be satisfied by the appealing artifice of her contrapposto *a tergo*. The emotional complexity of Ariadne's response, perturbed and unsure, compares to that so often manifested by the Virgin in scenes of the Annunciation.²³ Consciously or not, Titian drew upon the experience of religious art; in effect, he conceived his narrative, quite appropriately, as an annunciation of divine love.



8. Jacopo Caraglio, engraving after Titian, *Annunciation*, before 1539. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1949 (49.97.219). Photo: Museum.

VENUS ABANDONED

The appeal of a female figure seen from the back, “volta di schena,” was surely responsible for the extraordinary popularity of Titian’s composition of *Venus and Adonis*, of which at least seven versions by the master and his workshop are extant (Plate 18).²⁴ Intended as a pendant to the *Danaë* (Plate 13), this second of the Ovidian mythologies for Philip of Spain was sent

to the prince in 1554 – although it was almost certainly conceived during Titian's Roman sojourn of 1545–6.²⁵ In his accompanying letter, Titian affirms the generic designation of his pictures as *poesie* and announces an aesthetic that has frustrated attempts to discover a persuasive, consistent moral or political iconographic program for the series:

And as the Danaë that I have already sent to Your Majesty was seen entirely from the front, I wanted to vary [the pose] in this other *poesia* and show the figure from the opposite side, so that the room in which they are to hang will be more appealing to the eye.

Soon I will send you the *poesia* of Perseus and Andromeda, which will offer still another view, different from these; and the same with Medea and Jason.²⁶

Projecting a series of paintings calculated to whet his royal patron's appetite for the erotic, Titian was offering the kind of Ovidian cycle that was an essential part of the Renaissance poetic imagination. The realization of such mythological constructs, in both poetry and painting, generally depended upon the inventive manipulation of the figure, especially the female nude, and the arch exploitation of the aesthetic of comparison. Nowhere was it better played than in the *Orlando furioso*, in which nature is played off against art (poetry and sculpture). Ariosto proves himself the most worthy disciple of Ovid, the most artful master of the game.

The very idea of offering multiple views of the figure was a central studio topos of the Renaissance, the *paragone* between painting and sculpture. From early in his career Titian had been challenging the art of sculpture, inventing reliefs *all'antica* in paintings like the *Sacred and Profane Love* (Plate 1) or putting flesh on the carved figures of Michelangelo, as in the St. Sebastian of the *Averoldi Altarpiece* in Brescia, or expanding the dimensions of a painted portrait by juxtaposing the two arts, memorializing the woman known as "La Schiavona" (Caterina Cornaro?) by setting against her painted (frontal) presence a commemorative (profile) effigy in stone.²⁷

Titian's proposal of a dorsal view of the female nude ("la contraria parte") may well have been inspired by his experience of a particular relief sculpture, an antique design known in the Renaissance as the *Bed of Polyclitus* (Fig. 9). More certainly, his realization of that project was so inspired. Each of the protagonists of this representation of Psyche discovering the sleeping Cupid played a significant role in the figural language of the Renaissance – in the art of Raphael, Correggio, Michelangelo, Rosso Fiorentino – and the relief itself seems to have determined the very conception of Titian's *Venus and Adonis*. Although he may indeed have known a version of the relief, such



9. *Bed of Polycletus*, Renaissance copy of antique relief, marble. Rome, Palazzo Mattei.

as the bronze once in Pietro Bembo's collection in Padua, his response to it is graphically documented by a drawing he made during his visit to Rome in 1545–6 (Fig. 10).²⁸

The most remarkable feature of the *Bed of Polycletus* is the beautifully artificial contrapposto of Psyche: seen from behind, her body performs a volte-face of 180 degrees, head and feet pointing in opposite directions. It is evident just how much Titian's *Venus* owes to this contrived dorsal display, but his appropriation of the motive transcends artifice to become the very pivot of his narrative. More than merely borrowing individual figure motives, Titian responded to the total configuration of the relief, absorbing and recasting it in paint. The unusually planar structure of his composition reflects and, in turn, challenges its model. Going beyond the internal self-consciousness of pictorial glyptic invention, the depiction of sculpture in his paintings, the entire design of *Venus and Adonis* is governed by an insistent relief aesthetic. The figural group, unusual in Titian's art, is capable of being translated back into the medium of carved relief. The form of *Venus* especially maintains the planarity that intentionally betrays her sculptural origins, although stone has here been transformed into warm flesh – precisely the kind of transformation that was later to be recommended by Rubens in the pictorial study of sculpture.²⁹



10. Titian, 1545–56, and another hand, *Figure Studies*, black chalk on blue paper, 40.9 x 25.2 cm. Florence, Uffizi, no. 12907E, verso. Photo: Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Soprintendenza speciale per il Polo Museale fiorentino.

Pulled off balance in the futile attempt to restrain a determined Adonis, Venus presents to the viewer the sensual expanse of her back – which, despite repainting, retains all its appeal in the Prado canvas. The appeal of that back is both tactile and visual. Its softly inflected surface and gently spreading contours understandably provoked the primary response to the painting; its seductive invitation to imagine the hidden aspect of that body assured the active participation of the viewer, his projection of himself into the image. Dolce, presumably having seen the painting in Titian's studio, dwelt with great relish upon these features in his enthusiastic ekphrasis of the *Venus and Adonis*. He recognized in the dorsal view of the divine body a locus of erotic sensuality and inventive pictorial conceit, a field for the most satisfying kinds of aesthetic competition.

"Venus has her back turned," he writes, "not for lack of art . . . but rather to display art in double measure [per dimostrar doppia arte]."³⁰ Acknowledging the dramatic situation that determines the extreme contrapposto of the goddess – her effort to prevent the departure of a lover on his way to certain death – Dolce responds to the emotions of Venus ("alcuni sentimenti dolci e vivi") and then moves on to the nature-challenging power of Titian's art. As the body of the goddess shifts upon its draped support, we see and feel the dimpled pressure on the flesh of her buttocks ("nell'ultime parti ci si conosce la macatura della carne causata del sedere"). Every stroke of Titian's brush corresponds to the stroke of nature's own hand. This surely is the way Venus must have looked – if ever she existed.³¹

This evocation of the ancient goddess prepares a change in the tack of Dolce's discourse, leading him to the inevitable comparison with Apelles – in this case with the ancient painter's *Venus Anadyomene*, "so celebrated by the poets of antiquity" – and then to an allusion to Praxiteles' *Aphrodite* of Knidos, for which the goddess herself served as model. If the beauty of Praxiteles' marble statue had the power to inspire an extreme and shameless passion in a certain young man, what then should we expect of Titian's Venus, "which is of flesh, which is beauty itself, which seems to breathe?"³²

In a nearly full spectrum of the possibilities, evoked by a single figure, the terms of the *paragone* are set forth, the comparisons inevitable in Renaissance criticism: between ancient and modern, sculpture and painting, art and nature. And we can only assume that what a knowledgeable viewer such as Dolce read out of the image an even more knowing, feeling, and inventive painter such as Titian put into it.

Another response to the *Venus and Adonis* returns us to the subject itself, its literary source, and the painter's poetry. Writing some thirty years after

the creation of the picture, Raffaello Borghini criticized Titian's failure to respect the facts of Ovid's narrative (*Metamorphoses* X, 503-end):

Since it is said by the poets that Adonis, when he was wooed by Venus, threw himself upon his knees at her feet, thanking her for having deigned to confer her divine beauty upon a mortal man, and that he was ready to do her every pleasure with reverence: it thus seems that Titian failed in invention, depicting Adonis fleeing from Venus, who is shown in the act of embracing him, whereas he very much desired her embraces.³³

The love of the immortal Venus for the beautiful but mortal Adonis was an accident (whatever its retributive function in Ovid's larger narrative): Cupid, while caressing his mother, accidentally grazed her with one of his arrows. Not even the goddess of love herself is immune to the power of those barbs, and when her eyes fall on the youthful Adonis she is smitten. Venus abandons her Olympian realm to dally with her new lover: "Adonis is preferred to heaven. She holds him fast, is his companion. . . ." ³⁴ And, as Borghini rather properly reminds us, Adonis, for his part, showed no inclination to escape such divine amorous attention.

In the *Metamorphoses* it is Venus who leaves Adonis. Having urged him to hunt only the tamer animals, rabbits and deer, she explains her fear and loathing of the wilder beasts, the boar and the lion, and the necessity of avoiding them. Lying with her lover on a grassy couch in the shade of a tree, "pillowing her head against his breast and mingling kisses with her words," she recounts the cautionary tale of Atalanta and Hippomenes, who were transformed into lions for their impious ingratitude. Avoid the ferocious antagonism of such beasts, she warns, "lest your manly courage be the ruin of us both" (*Met.* X.705–7). "Thus the goddess warned and through the air, drawn by her swans, she took her way; but the boy's manly courage would not brook advice" (*Met.* X.708–9). Hearing the call of the hounds, Adonis the hunter cannot resist; he meets the wild boar and is gored. His subsequent metamorphosis as the anemone is not part of our immediate story, although the grief of Venus, however anticipated in the painting, most certainly is.³⁵

Titian transformed what in Ovid is a leave-taking of Venus into a flight of Adonis. In so doing, however, he was not without ancient precedent. Indeed, there is what we might call a generic imperative in such an interpretation of the myth. As recited by Ovid – or, more precisely, as sung by Ovid's Orpheus – the tale is without dramatic conflict. The apposite story of Atalanta and Hippomenes, which actually dominates the length of the narrative, prepares the fate of Adonis, but the hunter's disregard of Venus'



11. Adonis Sarcophagus, ancient Rome. Rome, Lateran Museum, Vatican. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource.

warning occurs in her absence. The immediate juxtaposition of Venus and Adonis at the moment of departure – as opposed to the threatened idyllic repose of the lovers (as in so many other late Renaissance paintings)³⁶ – thus offers dramatic possibilities unavailable in the Ovidian sequence.

Such direct confrontation, if not sanctioned for this subject by literary tradition, nonetheless claims ancient pedigree in visual representation. Titian certainly knew the Roman reliefs – which in turn probably reflect still older pictorial tradition – that had already so articulated the narrative and created the pathetic situation of the leave-taking of Adonis (Fig. 11). As illustrated in such sarcophagi, the story of Adonis begins with just that subject, the debate between the lovers: the goddess seated, a staying hand upon the breast of the young hunter, who looks back at her, one hand ambivalently reassuring yet withdrawing, his body already turned away, clearly obeying the call of the hounds and his companions. (Not incidentally, his own nudity establishes him as the object of erotic desire, a relationship reversed in the Renaissance representation.) The consequence of his departure, depicted on the right side of the relief, is of course the death of Adonis. Climaxing this sequence and assuming its central significance within the sepulchral context of the narration is the middle scene of the cleansing of the body of the deceased, represented here as the mythological hunter.³⁷

The full relief tells the story in three parts, reading generally from left to right but finally reserving its center field as privileged, at once the culmination of the narrative and yet beyond its temporal sequence: iconically frontal, it effectively transcends the mythological fiction of the dramatic episodes by which it is framed. Acknowledging the tensions implicit in such a complex presentation, here we need only stress the importance of that larger narrative impulse, which necessitated an opening scene adequate to

creating such dramatic potential. The departure of Adonis initiates an action, and as such it was more crucial to visual representation than it was to the literary. The immediate narrative syntax of such visual representation, as Lessing insisted, is spatial rather than temporal – however crucial time may be to response and interpretation. Indeed, we are tempted to assume that the departure theme originated in painting, that dramatic necessity and the discursive limits of a medium mandated such a narrative moment, a subtle generic distinction that was to add a significant dimension to established myth.

In Titian's painting, following the eager pull of his hounds, Adonis sets off resolutely, yet not unequivocally. His motion drawing the pleading Venus off balance, he pauses for an instant, a compassionate moment of hesitation and doubt, and on their exchanged glances pivots the drama. Within the rich bower of Venus, scene of the past night's love, Cupid sleeps – in a pose not unlike that of Danaë in the paired picture (see Plate 13) – his weapons hanging useless in the tree above: love off guard. In the presumably earlier version for the Farnese, Cupid was awake, clutching a dove, fully aware of the import of the scene he witnesses with terrified presentiment.³⁸ In the redaction for Philip, the moment in the sequence is defined with greater precision by the apparition in the heavens: Aurora herself (or Venus as the morning star), whose rays, interrupting the night and love, point the way to Adonis's future, his fated death. A single image thus implies the full cycle of narrative time: past, present, and future, here caught in a pivotal moment.³⁹

The leave-taking of lovers at dawn was a traditional literary theme, and it is directly relevant to Titian's painting.⁴⁰ Adonis's farewell does not imply the self-righteous frigidity of reluctant lovers such as Hippolytus or Hermaphroditus – or Shakespeare's Adonis. The glances exchanged by Titian's couple bespeak a delicate emotional ambivalence quite different from the uncompromising dialectics of those failed amorous dialogs. On the very precariousness of the present instant, in the tenuous balance of an unstable figural and emotional counterpoint, hangs the tragic fate of Adonis. Tracked in its inexorable course across the narrative field of Titian's canvas, time is measured in the shifting indications of a terribly poignant moment.

"Time glides by imperceptibly and cheats us in its flight, and nothing is swifter than the years": thus begins Ovid's narration of the actual story of Venus and Adonis (*Met.* X. 519–20).⁴¹ And it is as though Titian took that narrative incipit as inspiration for his own pictorial conception, creating a temporal richness that is not to be found in Ovid's own narrative, even as he more fully realized the tragic pathos that lies latent in the poet's tale.