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Eve Kliman

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The Figural Sources of Delacroix's 'Jacob Wrestling with the Angel'

EVE KLIMAN

University of Waterloo

Jacob Wrestling with the Angel (Fig. 1) holds a special place in Delacroix's oeuvre. It is the most admired of his three paintings in the Chapelle des Anges at Saint-Sulpice; for some its depiction of spiritual struggle makes it his supreme achievement.[1] Moreover the painting holds not only a special place in his work but has had an impact rather beyond the normal range of visual art. Because its figures seem to embody the questioning, combative mood of religious experience in the twentieth century, their struggle has given rise to diverse forms of literary metaphor which look back not so much to the biblical text, as to the painting.[2]

This study does not explore the intangible qualities of the painting, but deals with an issue that nevertheless tells us something about the sources of its power to move us: I refer to the origins of the wrestling figures. Despite much interest in Delacroix's adaptations from the art of the past, we did not know whether these figures were his invention or if they derived from some earlier work. Discovery that they belong to an ancient but little-known visual tradition, which Delacroix knew, clears up a mystery that once surrounded the painting and that seemed to set it apart from its companions, the *Saint Michael Vanquishing Lucifer* and the *Heliodorus Driven from the Temple*.

Their genesis conforms to what one expects from Delacroix, particularly in a commission of such importance. Although neither is to be explained in terms of a single source, each has a famous precedessor to which it relates in theme and to which its figures owe a certain formal debt. The *Saint Michael* looks back to a large painting of the subject in the Louvre,[3] thought to be by Raphael, while the *Heliodorus* takes as its point of departure the fresco by Raphael which Delacroix knew from engravings and from the copy by Paul and Raymond Balze.[4] In the *Jacob and Angel* Delacroix demonstrates the same sensitivity to the historically appropriate image, but with a difference. His choice falls upon a motif which was handed down in humble form. The authority that it does indeed possess is independent of any connection with a great artist.

Although the text (Gen. 32: 23-32) makes the laming of Jacob an essential part of his encounter with the Angel, this is rarely depicted in visual form. Artists focus instead upon the idea of wrestling by showing the figures in confrontation, their feet on the ground and their bodies locked in a close embrace.[5] Delacroix's image clearly differs from these, for his Jacob stands on one leg

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1 See 'Le testament d'Eugène Delacroix,' published in the *Revue hebdomadaire* (18 juin 1921) by Maurice Barrès and reprinted in his *Oeuvres complètes*, XII (Paris: Club de l'honnête homme, 1968), 225-234. The same point is made by Lucien Rudrauf in 'De la bête à l'ange,' *Acta Historiae Artium*, IX (1963), 340-341, and by René Huyghe, *Delacroix* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1963), 483-487.

2 In 'Le Mythe: Jacob et l'ange,' *Études carmélitaines*, n° 22 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1957), 160-180, Pierre Blanchard describes Delacroix's *Jacob and Angel* as the point of departure for a myth of contemporary literature of significance to Gide, Claudel and Lautréamont.

3 See Jack Spector, *The Murals of Eugène Delacroix at Saint-Sulpice* (New York: College Art Association of America, 1967), 31, 108 and 123, and Sarah Lichtenstein, *Delacroix and Raphael* (New York: Garland Press, 1979), 229-233, where the range of Delacroix's sources is discussed in detail.

4 Spector, 109-111 and Lichtenstein, 220-226 respectively.

5 The origin of this pose goes back into antiquity and continues to be used for Jacob and the Angel until well into the seventeenth century; see Betty Kurth, 'Matthew Paris and Villard de Honnecourt,' *Burlington Magazine*, LXXXI (September 1942), 227-228, and Sirarpie der Ner-

and reaches toward the Angel who grasps him firmly by the thigh of his raised bent leg. Two elements of the story are thus brought together – the wrestling with the Angel and the moment of Jacob's laming – in an image so unusual that it seems to be without precedent. Yet it is not. The motif appears in at least two seventeenth-century biblical illustrations and is relatively widespread in the Middle Ages.[6]

Among these mediaeval images are three that still survive in public places. The church of Monte Sant'Angelo in the southern Italian town of Gargano possesses a double bronze door with twenty-four damascened panels, one of which has an inscription stating that the door was commissioned by Pantaleone in Constantinople in 1076.[7] The remaining panels show acts of angelic intervention and include a tall winged Angel who grasps a lunging Jacob by the thigh, pulling it vigorously upward (Fig. 2). A similar faded image (1191-1198) appears as a fresco between the clerestory windows of S. Giovanni a Porta Latina in Rome.[8] And at Trebizond, in the church of Hagia Sophia, on the west side of the north porch, a large section of well-preserved fresco, painted between 1260 and 1263, shows a Jacob and Angel of the same type.[9]

Since Delacroix's wrestling figures incorporate important details of this iconography, both in the finished painting and in the exploratory sketches, we must consider that he knew the motif *before* he began to work out his sketches.[10] Religious and historical connections between Monte Sant'Angelo and the Chapelle des Anges – and even some of the circumstances of Delacroix's commission – suggest that it was this particular mediaeval image that he knew.

Like Monte Sant'Angelo, the Chapelle des Anges is dedicated to the Angels and to their warrior leader, the Archangel Michael. Delacroix represents St. Michael in triumph on the cupola, so he doubtless knew that during the early Middle Ages Monte Sant'Angelo was the chief site of the cult of St. Michael in western Europe.[11] He would also have known that the French had reason to remember this place of devotion to their national saint. In the mid-eleventh century, when the Normans were penetrating into the Apulian plain,[12] they took control of Monte Sant'Angelo, so that subsequently its chief glory, the bronze door, became associated with their name.

In the nineteenth century the French considered the door part of their national heritage. As indication of this we find that a book on Norman history and monuments, published in Paris in 1844, contains a complete illustration of the scenes on the door.[13] We can be confident that Delacroix had seen this, for the man who drew it was Victor Baltard (1805-1874), the architect at Saint-Sulpice with whom Delacroix was in contact late in 1849 and early in 1850,[14] when working out his sketches for the painting.[15] One of these, published by Spector, shows Jacob lunging to-

sessian, 'Program and Iconography of the Frescoes of the Parecclesion,' in *The Kariye Djami*, ed. P.A. Underwood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), IV, figs. 12-13. For a seventeenth-century use of the motif, see Oreste Ferrari & Giuseppe Scavizzi, *Luca Giordano* (Naples: Edizioni scientifiche italiene, 1966), III, fig. 372.

6 A rudimentary version of this other conception of the struggle appears on the fourth-century *Casket of Brescia* and in the early sixth-century *Vienna Genesis*. Henri Omont identifies an energetic version of the grasping of Jacob's thigh in MS. Grec 510, fol. 174v (dated ca. 880), but with the difference that Jacob stands with his back to the viewer. A fresco in St. Michael's Chapel in Hagia Sophia at Kiev, painted around 1083, shows the more common profile version, but omits the meaningful gesture of the angel. A rather stiff rendering, but with the essential details, appears in a mid-twelfth-century manuscript, the Vatican Codex Rossianus 251, fol. 5r. See respectively H. Omont, *Miniatures des plus anciens manuscrits grecs de la Bibliothèque nationale du VIe au XIVe siècle* (Paris: H. Champion, 1929), pl. XXXVII; W. Lasarew, 'Die Malerei und die Skulptur der Kiewer Rus,' in *Geschichte der russischen Kunst*, ed. I.E. Grabar (Dresden: Akademiya Nauk SSR. Institut Istorii Iskusstv., 1957), I, fig. 102; and J.R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), fig. 227.

7 The inscriptions are published by Guglielmo Matthiae, *Le porte bronzee bizantine in Italia* (Rome: Officina edizioni, 1971), 83. The early bibliography is in G. Tancredi, *La porta di bronzo delle Reale Basilica Palatina di S. Michele a Monte S. Angelo* (Torremaggiore: Caputo, 1938).

8 J. Wilpert, *Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. bis XIII. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg i. Breisgau: Herder, 1917), IV, pl. 262-263.

9 *The Church of Hagia Sophia at Trebizond*, ed. D. Talbot Rice (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968), pl. VIII and fig. 12.

10 These are published by Spector, figs. 22, 29-41.

11 For the history of the cult of St. Michael, see Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, I (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), 44 *et seq.*

12 J. J. Norwich, *The Normans in the South, 1016-1130* (London: Longmans, 1967), 67, where a date of 1042 is proposed.

13 J. Huillard-Bréholles, *Recherches sur les monuments et l'histoire des Normands ...* (Paris: C.-L.-F. Panckoucke, 1844), pl. 5.

14 For Delacroix's contacts with Baltard, see the *Journal de Eugène Delacroix*, ed. André Joubin, I (Paris: Plon, 1932), 306, 337 and 341 (1 September 1849, 4 and 14 February 1850), and the *Correspondance générale d'Eugène Delacroix*, ed. André Joubin, III (Paris: Plon, 1937), 24 (25 June 1850).

15 Delacroix told Lassalle-Bordes (22 January 1850) that although he had not made a final choice of subjects for the chapel walls, he had almost completed the compositions. On 5 October 1850, he mentioned to Dutilleux that his sketches for the chapel were complete. See *Correspondance*, III, 6 and 36.

FIGURE 1. Eugène Delacroix, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1856-1861. Saint-Sulpice, Paris (Photo: Bulloz).

FIGURE 2. *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, 1076. Monte Sant'Angelo, Gargano. After H. Leisinger, *Romanesque Bronzes: Church Portals in Medieval Europe* (1957), pl. 125.

wards the Angel as he does in the finished painting.[16] Spector dated the drawing through an inscription related to a *Journal* reference Delacroix made on 10 April 1850.[17] The artist evidently decided upon a pose having connections with the mediaeval source by a date shortly following his contacts with Baltard in September of 1849 and February, 1850.

Baltard's small line drawing of the *Jacob and Angel* is not, however, Delacroix's only source. Two seventeenth-century biblical illustrations incorporate the mediaeval image and give it solid, convincing form.[18] One of these (Fig. 3) belongs to the set engraved by Matthäus 1 Merian[19]; the other is an anonymous piece, also from a biblical series, but one compiled from the work of many artists and published as a picture book by

16 Spector, fig. 31 (Albertina, Inv. 24.515).

17 *Ibid.*, 51.

18 Links between mediaeval and post-mediaeval imagery, through the medium of the print, occur elsewhere. Poussin's painting *L'Automne ou la Grappe de la Terre promise* (Louvre, Inv. 7305) uses the motif of the Spies with Grapes from Num. 13: 23. The same motif appears on the Tremessen Chalice (ca. 1170) and on Nicholas of Verdun's Klosterneuberg Altar as a typological reference to the Crucifixion. Poussin's source was probably the Old Testament illustration of Gérard de Jode. See Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1972), II, 126, 128 and figs. 417, 421; also, Hans Mielke, 'Antwerpener Graphik in der 2. Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts: Der *Thesaurus veteris et novi Testamenti* des Gérard de Jode (1585) und seine Künstler,' *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, XXXVIII (1975), 29-83.

19 Merian issues these in the form of an emblem book – the *Icones Biblicae Praecipuas Sacra Scripturae Historias* (Strasbourg: 1625-1630) – and as illustrations to the complete Bible in Latin and German; cf. his *Veteris et Novi Testamenti* (Frankfurt a.M.: 1627) and the *Biblia: Das ist Die Gantze Schrift Alten und Newen Testaments* (Strasbourg: 1630).

FIGURE 3. Matthäus I Merian, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel.* From the *Biblia : Das ist Die Gantze Schrift Alten und Newen Testaments* (Strasbourg, 1630) (Photo: Warburg Institute).

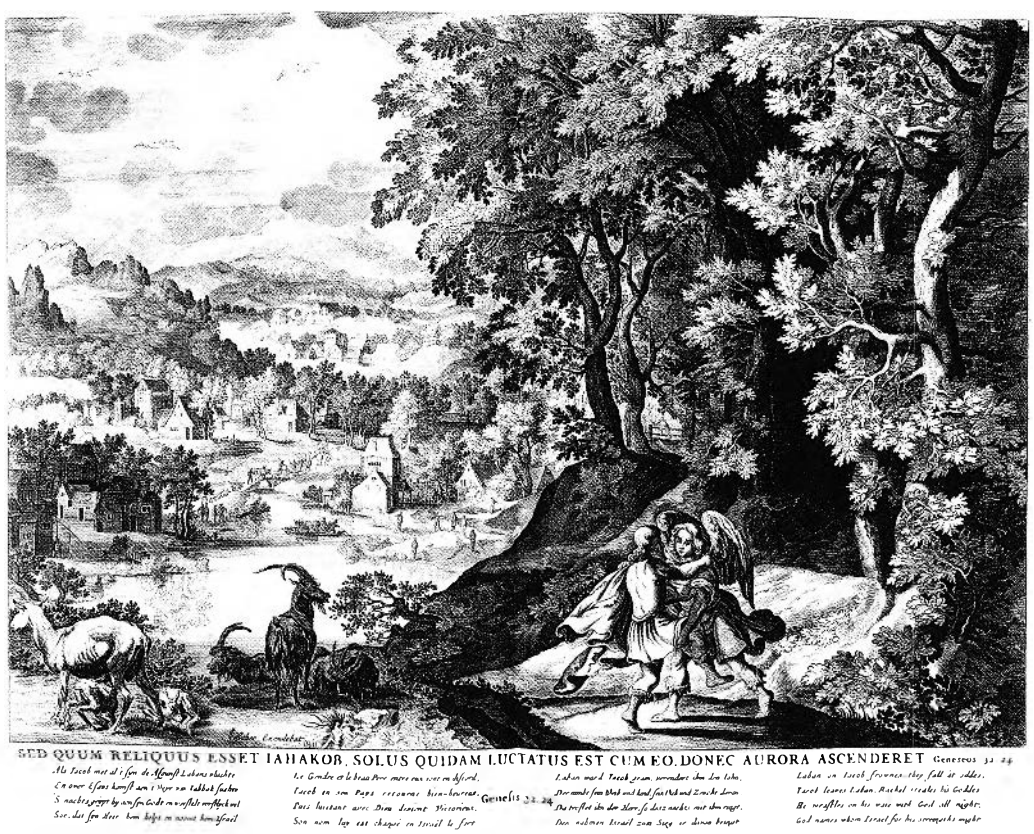

FIGURE 4. Anonymous, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel.* From the *Historiae Sacrae Veteris et Novi Testamenti* (Amsterdam: N. Visscher, ca. 1670) (Photo: Courtesy Trustees of the British Library).

Nicholas Visscher of Amsterdam (Fig. 4).[20] Merian's illustrations were produced in large numbers as an accompaniment to editions of the Bible in German, Dutch and French. In this form they were accessible to Delacroix. Between 1660 and 1771, for instance, we find them in eight printings of the Bible translated into French by the Huguenot, Isaac-Louis Le Maistre de Sacy.[21] The history of the Visscher illustrations is more obscure than those by Merian, but since there is evidence that Delacroix knew Visscher's collection and its version of the *Jacob and Angel*, their present rarity cannot accurately reflect the degree to which they were known in the nineteenth century.[22]

There is reason to think that the one hundred and thirty scenes published by Visscher were more interesting to Delacroix than the work of Merian, whose illustrations are competently, sometimes pleasingly designed, but on the whole undramatic. Visscher's prints have the faults of early reproductive engraving; they are coarse in texture and mechanical in execution; but they are also large and bold.[23] They form an enormously varied collection representing the work of some twenty Northern artists active from the beginning to the middle of the seventeenth century. They also include a generous selections from Rubens, whose work was always of interest to Delacroix.

We find that Delacroix borrows several details from prints in this collection. In his drawing for the *Raising of Lazarus* he takes the gesture of Christ's raised arm from Abraham Bloemart's version of the subject.[24] His pen drawing for a Calvary includes a dog that barks at Christ like the dog in the *Calvary* attributed to Jordaens, while his own pen sketch for an Entombment contains echoes of the Rubens' version.[25] Although the prints published by Visscher were not Delacroix's exclusive source, especially for artists such as Rubens and Jordaens, it is significant that the *Lazarus*, *Calvary* and *Entombment* are subjects associated with his early plans for Saint-Sulpice. The *Raising of Lazarus* (Salon 1850-51, n° 776) is related to the theme of resurrection from the dead that he was considering for the baptismal chapel on 10 April 1849,[26] while he mentions the *Calvary* and *Entombment* on 23 January 1847 as the subjects with which he hoped to decorate the transept.[27]

These coincidences suggest that Delacroix was using Visscher's album as a source of ideas. As further evidence we may cite the resemblance between Visscher's image of the wrestling Jacob and Angel and the figures as they appear in Delacroix's painting. Merian's illustration transmits the same mediaeval motif, however, and with greater sophistication.[28] The importance of Visscher's print does not therefore depend only upon its link with the figures on the door at Monte Sant'Angelo, but upon the fact that it provides Delacroix with one of the structural elements of his landscape.

To understand this element in its proper context we need first to review the relationship between the painting and its other sources. Delacroix's initial conception of the painting has always been traced back to a famous work by Titian, the *Death of St. Peter Martyr*, of which he owned a copy by Géricault.[29] Titian's combination of dramatic

20 *Historiae Sacrae Veteris et Novi Testamenti* (Amsterdam: N. Visscher, n.d.). I use the British Library copy, 157* b. 25. The compilation may have been published in 1670 or shortly thereafter. Essentially the same sequence of illustrations is said to be part of an elaborate edition of the Bible that appeared in 1670 under the auspices of Ernest the Pious, Archduke of Saxe-Altenburg; cf. *Veteris et Novi Testamenti Sacrae Imagines* ... (Bergamo: Instituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1967).

21 Cf. the holdings in the Cabinet des Estampes, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.

22 Because the prints in Visscher's collection were easily removed from the binding most sets have been dismantled. Hence the work is rare as a collection and should not be confused with another that survives in greater numbers, the *Theatrum Biblicum Hoc Est Historiae Sacrae Veteris et Novi Testamenti*, which Visscher issued between 1643 and 1674. This collection, called the Bible of Piscator, incorporates the Old Testament scenes published by Gérard de Jode in 1585 and, generally, is dominated by the style of the Flemish Mannerists Heemskerck and de Vos.

23 The *Jacob and Angel*, for instance, measures 405 × 512 mm. in the plate. Each illustration covers two pages.

24 Delacroix's drawing is n° 412 of the *Mémorial de l'exposition organisée à l'occasion du centenaire de l'artiste* (Louvre, Paris, 1964). Jan Muller's print after Bloemart's painting is in Walter Strauss, ed., *The Illustrated Bartsch*, IV (New York: Abaris, 1980), 467, n° 27 (274).

25 A good reproduction of the Calvary drawing is in Raymond Escholier, *Delacroix, peintre, graveur, écrivain*, III (Paris: H. Floury, 1929), opposite p. 236. For the *Entombment* drawing, see *Mémorial*, n° 499.

26 *Journal*, I, 285-286.

27 *Ibid.*, 165. Delacroix showed the paintings as n°s 819-820 of the Salon of 1859. (See *Mémorial*, n°s 486, 498, 499.)

28 If the anonymous print is not a product of Merian's workshop from the early years of the seventeenth century, it is at any rate a *pot-pourri* of his style. The landscape is similar to that in Merian's *Temptation of Christ* of 1610; see L. H. Wüthrich, *Das Druckgraphische Werk von Matthaeus Merian d. Ae.*, II (Basel: Bärenreiter, 1966), fig. 5. The costumes are more elaborate than Merian's, but the gestures of the figures are identical, and their faces are of a type seen in his illustration to Matthew XIV, the *Multiplication of the Loaves*.

29 Théophile Gautier is the first to mention the connection with Titian in his article in the *Moniteur universel* for 3 August 1861. For modern comment, see Lee Johnson, *Delacroix* (New York: Norton, 1963), 113. Spector, 119-122, 162, and Lichtenstein, 227-229.

action and rich landscape provides a precedent for Delacroix's figures in the foreground struggling beneath tall trees, but since Titian's figures are engaged in a different type of action they tell us nothing about the iconography of Jacob and the Angel. As Spector points out, Delacroix's composition is also significantly different from that of the Titian,[30] and in part depends on nature as a source of ideas. Delacroix made drawings of two massive oak trees in the forest of Sénart,[31] and he incorporated the spirit and certain details of these trees with the same freedom with which he borrowed from Titian. To this we may add that he also took details of his setting from the seventeenth-century prints. For the foreground he used something of Merian's roughly circular stage; for the middle ground he turned to the uneven, shadowy terrain at the right of the anonymous print. In their different ways the landscapes of Titian and Merian have an open character. By comparison, in the anonymous print the rough ground and thick wood hint at a closed, mysterious space nearer in feeling to the landscape of Delacroix. This relationship is underlined by a feature which is common to them both. In Delacroix's painting we find a version of the strange, tree-crowned hillocks that frame the wrestling pair. Though he condenses these into a single, rugged mass, there can be little doubt as to their source. He uses the hillock as the print uses them, to set off the human action in the foreground and to serve as a base for the towering trees.

His interest in the landscapes of Merian and Visscher stems from the fact that they incorporate an energetic version of the wrestling figures and one that is descended from the pair on the door at Monte Sant'Angelo. These depict Jacob's struggle and the moment of his laming in a gesture of such force and clarity that he need subject it only to minor changes – and one significant addition. To the pronounced diagonal of the mediaeval Jacob he added the counterbalancing element of the raised arms. These opposing lines heighten the meaning of the narrative, for they both express and contain the struggle. While Jacob's lunging body speaks of his desire to conquer the Angel, the raised arms draw attention to the Angel's power to hold him back. Moreover the trees magnify this rhythm of thrust and counter-thrust so that it informs the entire painting and extends its meaning beyond the narrative proper. Fluid wrestlers and fixed trees each embody forces caught in a balance at once fleeting and eternal: the physical pits itself against the immaterial, the body against the spirit, man against God.

Through this complement of figure and landscape Delacroix gives new force and monumentality to the ancient images and yet remains remarkably faithful to their form and spirit. In this he reveals the depth of his feeling for tradition and an unsuspected degree of humility. While he undoubtedly saw religious painting as an opportunity to express a private state of mind and as a form of competition with the great masters,[32] in this case he did not conceive his task in narrow terms, but brought to it rare insight into the remains of a distant age of faith. On the strength of this insight he could justify a daring choice of humble sources. Part of the attraction of the prints may have been their semi-anonymity, which let him use them and exploit his love of nature and his command of the language of the body free from the shadow of a rival. This may in part explain the special vigour and freshness of his execution. Still, he was drawn to these sources by more than their dramatic potential. Through Baltard's illustration he knew that his *Jacob and Angel* were descended from a composition made sacred by its presence on the oldest site of the cult of St. Michael in western Europe.

30 Spector, 120. For the engraving of the painting by Martino Rota, see fig. 71.

31 *Ibid.*, figs. 23-28.

32 *Correspondance*, III, 37 (5 October 1850), addressed to Dutilleux.