PAUL AND THE ATHLETIC IDEAL IN ANTIQUITY:
A CASE STUDY IN WRESTLING
WITH WORD AND IMAGE

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1. The Interplay of Word and Image: Paul and the “Beat” Poets

The older generation of American post-war poets and the new generation of “Beat” poets turned to the paintings of famous European masters for their inspiration. William Carlos Williams, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gregory Corso used the paintings of Brueghel, Goya, and Uccello for their reflections on the disparity between the rich and the poor, the absurdity of our technological society, and the inevitability of death. This interplay between word and image allowed these poets to draw their readers into the visually familiar and then to reorientate its imagery in a new construction of social reality.

We see this interplay in William Carlos Williams’ magisterial poem Paterson. This five-volumed work, written during 1946–1958, investigates the resemblances between the life-thoughts of a man and the regional history of an American city. Both the man and the location are symbolised by the figure of Paterson, named after the New Jersey city near which Williams lived. At the beginning of Book V Section III, Williams describes the characters painted in Peter Brueghel’s famous picture The Adoration of the Kings (AD 1564).1 The poet’s tone is discom-
forting, alternating between cynicism and pity for each group of figures. The contrast in Brueghel’s picture between the wealth of the crowned and mitred Magi and the poverty of the soldiers in their ragged clothes underlines the social inequities of life. In a homily that concludes the poem, Paterson reflects on the poverty of the atomic age driven by corporate greed and technology:

> It is no mortal sin to be poor—anything but this featureless tribe that has the money now—staring into the atom, completely blind—without grace or pity, as if they were so many shellfish. The artist, Brueghel, saw them: the suits of his peasants were of better stuff, hand woven, than we can boast.²

Another example of the interplay between word and image is found in Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s 1958 collection *A Coney Island of the Mind*. In the untitled poem introducing the collection, Ferlinghetti describes scenes of suffering, inhumanity, and insanity from Francisco de Goya’s paintings as a prelude to his onslaught on contemporary American culture. The horror of Goya’s universe finds its counterpart in the technology, consumerism, and existential angst tearing apart America. Americans, Ferlinghetti asserts, are part of Goya’s “suffering humanity,” albeit in a landscape of freeways, intersected with innocuous billboards advertising “imbecile illusions of happiness.” Ferlinghetti concludes his comparison of mid twentieth-century America with Goya’s surreal vision of the world’s inhumanity towards the weak in this manner:

> The scene shows fewer tumbrills
>   but more strung-out citizens
>   in painted cars
>   and they have strange license plates
>   and engines
>   that devour America³

Finally, in the poem entitled *Uccello*, Gregory Corso turns to the battle scenes of the Early Renaissance painter Paolo Uccello for inspiration.

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