

# Celestial Themes, Censorship and War in Henry de Groux's *The Face of Victory*

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Belgian-born artist Henry de Groux (1867–1930), a significant member of the Belgian avant-garde group Les XX, is best known for his symbolist compositions of the 1890s that tend toward cataclysmic, if not overtly Wagnerian themes. A quarter century later, in the midst of World War I, de Groux emerged from semi-obscurity having produced a prodigious body of work addressing the terrible realities of the war itself. He spent the war years in Paris where, in November 1916, the Galerie La Boetie exhibited 299 of his World-War-I-themed paintings, pastels, drawings, sculptural works, etchings and lithographs, including twenty of the 40 etchings from his portfolio, *Le Visage de la Victoire* (The Face of Victory).<sup>1</sup> In 2005 The Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas acquired 52 working proofs for this portfolio. The feverishness of the 49-year-old artist's wartime outpouring is fully evident in this group of heavily worked and reworked proofs. While the published portfolio has received attention in *Print Quarterly* and elsewhere, this article will address the handful of etchings in the Spencer Museum of Art collection, which, while clearly intended for *Le Visage de la Victoire*, did not feature in the published portfolio.<sup>2</sup>

The published portfolio included a frontispiece, an introduction by the artist, a foreword by Paul Marguerite and 40 prints in four unbound gatherings. The introduction and foreword were printed by the anarchist Parisian firm L'Emancipatrice (The Liberator).<sup>3</sup> De Groux's friend, the novelist, essayist and poet Léon Bloy, was deeply moved by the paintings and drawings

that he saw at the Galerie La Boetie exhibition and described them in terms that apply equally to the etchings in the portfolio:

I cannot say in words the tremendous sadness that weighed on me when I looked at your drawings and paintings whose crucifying perspective overwhelmed me. The ruined things and the ruined men, the 'descent into the abyss,' as you would call it, the shooting of innocent people and the massacre of captives, the grave-digging prisoners, the processions of the blind, the old people who can no longer cry and who wander amidst the rubble of their homes looking for something they had cherished, and finally, above all the rest, the amazing portrait of the imprisoned German officer who allowed himself to be drawn by you.<sup>4</sup>

According to de Groux's first biographer, Émile Bauman, the artist frequently travelled close to the front lines to see 'the fields of battle, the soldiers, the prisoners, refugees, and destroyed villages.'<sup>5</sup> Jan Dewilde and Thomas Schlessler have also demonstrated that several of de Groux's compositions derive from wartime photographs published in the Parisian journal *Le Miroir* (The Mirror).<sup>6</sup>

De Groux's introduction is an impassioned indictment of war. Quoting Arthur Schopenhauer he observed: 'There is, this German also says, "an arch-devil superior to all others, it is the conqueror who places hundreds of men in front of one another and cries: To suffer, to die, that is your destiny; therefore, shoot each

I thank Hanna Wilson for assistance with French translations and Stanley Lombardo for assistance with Latin translations.

1. De Groux's prints in this portfolio are primarily straightforward line etchings, occasionally with aquatint or soft ground, and, in a number of cases, photogravure.
2. W. Berteval, 'Le Visage de la Victoire par Henry De Groux', *Mercure de France*, XVI, 1916, pp. 678–84; N. Davenport, 'Henry De Groux, the Great War and the Apocalypse', *Print Quarterly*, XIX, 2002, pp. 147–69; J. Dewilde and T. Schlessler, *Henry De Groux 1866–1930 Oorlogsgetuige / Temoin de Guerre 1914–1918*, Ieperen, 2007; C. Morganti, *Gli orrori della Grande Guerra nelle incisioni di un geniale artista simbolista Henry de Groux Le Visage de la Victoire*, Tricase, 2013.
3. From 1901 to 1913 *L'Emancipatrice* was the *Imprimerie communiste L'Emancipatrice*. See the online version of the thesis by R. Bianco, 'Repertoire des periodiques anarchistes de langue française: Un siècle de presse anarchiste d'expression française, 1880–1983', Aix-Marseille, 1987: <http://bianco.ficedl.info/mot369.html>, accessed 10 October 2013.
4. As translated by Davenport, op. cit., pp. 161–63.
5. E. Baumann, *La Vie Terrible d'Henry de Groux*, Paris, 1936, p. 240. 'Il loue un atelier rue Chaptal, et il y passera les quatre années 'du cataclysme', non sans des voyages fréquents pres du front, pour voir les champs de bataille, les soldats, les prisonniers, les réfugiés, les villages détruits.'
6. Dewilde and Schlessler, op. cit., see especially pp. 50–79.



336. Henry de Groux, *Lanceur de grenade* (The Grenade Thrower), 1914-16, etching, 248 x 183 mm (Lawrence, KS, Spencer Museum of Art).

other, cannon each other" and they do it.<sup>7</sup> In his own remarkable voice de Groux wrote: "That which is most striking, in this war, is truly, its opulent excess of perfect

horror: its apocalyptic strangeness, its fury, and to make it worse, its undeniable and colossal absurdity like a machine functioning in a void'.<sup>8</sup>

7. H. de Groux, 'Genèse de ce Livre', Introduction to *Le visage de la Victoire*, not paginated: 'Il y a, dit encore cet Allemand, 'un archidiabole supérieur à tous les autres, c'est le conquérant qui place des centaines de mille hommes en face les uns des autres, et leur crie: Souffrir, mourir, c'est votre destinée: donc, fusillez-vous, ca-

nonnez-vous les uns les autres' et ils le font.'  
8. Ibid., 'Ce qui frappe, surtout, dans cette guerre, c'est, véritablement, son opulente somptuosité d'horreur parfaite: son apocalyptique étrangeté, sa fureur, et, aggravant tout, son indéniable et colossale absurdité de machine fonctionnant à vide'.



337. Henry de Groux, *Exposition de L'Oeuvre de Guerre de Henry de Groux* (Exhibition of the War Work by Henry de Groux), 1916, lithograph, 798 x 1,093 mm (Lawrence, KS, Spencer Museum of Art).

In this introduction de Groux also indicated that his inspiration for the portfolio was a specific event on 19 January 1915, when he was overcome with emotion upon hearing a ceremony in honour of those rendered blind during the war. No doubt this concerned soldiers blinded by poison gas, a method of warfare that is evident in several of the prints, such as *Chevaliers errants* (Knights Errant), which shows a group of soldiers in protective gear, or the eerie *Lanceur de grenade* (Grenade Thrower), who wears a simple kerchief over his mouth to protect him from the vaporous gases that swirl around him (fig. 336).

Searching for the exact words used in this ceremony, de Groux recalled that the speaker, Albert Sarraut, stated that soldiers had been blinded, 'for having seen from too close the august and terrible face, – The face of Victory!' De Groux went on to expand on the idea

of a modern 'face of victory' as something no longer heroic but rather horrific:

Treasures of heroism, it is true, demand admiration and pity. So many brave men die so magnificently without easing for us the atrocity of this cataclysm and we all tremble, more or less under the sceptre of the permanent ambient insanity that demands perpetuity. For both sides, enthusiasm from this carnage is the sole occasion for jubilation. How should one be surprised at the distortion in the notion of victory; to see such different facial hallucinations, as radiant as stars, or as mortifying as the Gorgon's face? The face of this victory – of this last face; the face of horror – is none other, in fact, than that of *Death itself* who has become the Beatrice of nations.<sup>9</sup> Several sources make it clear that the Parisian censors suppressed the original design for the poster for de

9. Ibid., 'Des trésors d'héroïsme, il est vrai, forcent l'admiration et la pitié. Tant de braves meurent si magnifiquement sans atténuer pour nous l'atrocité du cataclysme et nous tremblons tous, plus ou moins, sous le sceptre de l'ambiance démence qui en veut la perpétuité. Car d'un côté comme de l'autre le seul enthousiasme du carnage est l'unique occasion de liesse. Comment s'étonner

des lors que puisse s'altérer la notion même de la victoire; de voir si diverses les hallucinations de son visage. tantôt radieux comme l'astre, ou mortifiante comme le facies de la Gorgone? Le visage de cette victoire-la – de ce dernier visage; celui des épouvantes – n'est autre, en effet, que celui de la *Mort elle-même* devenue la Beatrix des nations.'

Groux's exhibition as well as the cover for the frontispiece on the title-page of *Le Visage de la Victoire*.<sup>10</sup> In the 12 October 1916 entry in his diary, Bloy included the text of a letter from the censors to his friend de Groux, in which the censors deny approval for a poster advertising the latter's exhibition at the Galerie La Boétie.<sup>11</sup> The censors specified that 'the stamp has been refused because there must be no sadness, no ruins. There must be no horror, no sadness. There must be no terror. But glory, heroic glory or symbols of hope, of the sacred union, etc.'<sup>12</sup> Because a poster for the exhibition does exist, and its iconography is excessively heroic, it presumably incorporates changes made by the artist (fig. 337).

As for the frontispiece, de Groux substituted a new composition when the original was suppressed.<sup>13</sup> This new one was an etching depicting the head of Medusa encircled by a halo of light. The etching was affixed to the title-page, which also included texts in letterpress (fig. 338). Nancy Davenport has shown that the head of Medusa is based on the fifth-century BC *Medusa Rondanini* in Munich.<sup>14</sup> This head is encircled by the Greek text for Psalm 104:2–3 and below the image are two Latin passages from Job 10:20 and John 18:36 (see below). There are two proofs of this composition in the Spencer Museum of Art, both titled *Medusa*. The first is a preliminary proof that is heavily worked up in ink wash (fig. 339). The second, inscribed *ter etat* (first state), is more completely etched and the inscription and rays of light seen in the published frontispiece have been added in pen and ink.

In March 1915 an article appeared in the Parisian journal of the French Astronomical Society, *L'As-*



338. Henry de Groux, Title-page for *Le Visage de la Victoire* (The Face of Victory), 1916, etching and letterpress, 380 x 280 mm (USA, Collection of Tom and Lore Firman).



339. Henry de Groux, *Medusa, Essai* (Medusa, trial proof), 1914, etching and ink wash, 125 x 176 mm (Lawrence, KS, Spencer Museum of Art).

10. In regard to the portfolio, the terms 'cover', 'frontispiece' and 'title-page' appear in the literature. This is presumably a semantic confusion. For the sake of clarity we will refer here to the frontispiece on the title-page rather than to the cover.
11. Davenport, op. cit., p. 105 and note 21. Both Davenport's source, the 12 October 1916 entry in *La Porte des Humbles* (*Journal de Leon Bloy*, IV, Paris, 1963), pp. 258–59, and Bauman, op. cit., p. 245, speak specifically of a poster ('affiche') so there is no likely confusion with the censorship of the title-page.
12. Ibid.
13. Davenport, op. cit., p. 162, fig. 78. See also R. Rapetti and P. Wat, *Henry de Groux 1866–1930* (*Journal*, Paris, 2007), p. 21. 'On sait que la censure imposa à de Groux de changer la couverture de son recueil de gravures public en 1916, et qui de ce fait prit pour titre *Le Visage de la Victoire*. Un tête de gorgone y apparaît au centre d'un soleil rayonnant, figure ambiguë par laquelle l'artiste relie le présent au mythe.' See also Dewilde and Schlessler, op. cit., pp. 27–28.
14. Davenport, op. cit., p. 166 and fig. 78.
15. C. Flammarion, 'Les Astres et la Guerre,' *Société Astronomique*, XXIX, 1915, pp. 94–99.



340. Henry de Groux, *L'Eclipse* (The Eclipse), 1916, etching, 195 x 276 mm (Lawrence, KS, Spencer Museum of Art).



341. Anonymous artist, reproduction of the life mask of Ludwig van Beethoven, after 1812, plaster cast, 225 x 118 x 145 mm (Paris, Ecole des Beaux-Arts).

*tronomie*, on the subject of celestial events and war.<sup>15</sup> A generous proportion of this article was given over to celestial events that accompanied the then current war, including a total eclipse of the sun that was visible throughout all of Europe and Asia on 21 August 1914 and a comet dubbed 'the comet of war.' It is evident that de Groux was familiar with this popular lore and probably with the article itself.

An unpublished etching in the Spencer Museum of Art, *L'Eclipse*, may well have been the suppressed frontispiece for *Le Visage de la Victoire* (fig. 340). This etching shows the face of Christ with a crown of thorns in an aura of light being eclipsed by de Groux's wartime concept of victory, a Medusa-like face of death with snakes writhing among its ringlets of hair.<sup>16</sup>

16. See Davenport, *op. cit.*, pp. 165–66, for an almost clairvoyant speculation about the likely appearance of the censored composition based on a reading of one of the prints in the portfolio, *Les Voyants* (The Seeing, her fig. 77).



342. Henry de Groux, *La Comete de la Guerre* (The Comet of War), 1914-16, etching, 172 x 225 mm (Lawrence, KS, Spencer Museum of Art).



343. Henry de Groux, *La Comete de la Guerre (21 Janvier 1913)* (The Comet of War, 21 January 1913), 1915, etching, 174 x 254 mm (Lawrence, KS, Spencer Museum of Art).



344. Henry de Groux, *Le souffre-douleur ennemi* (The Enemy Scapegoat), 1914–16, etching, 203 x 268 mm (Lawrence, KS, Spencer Museum of Art).

*L'Eclipse* bears three texts in the plate, two of which were carried forward on the published frontispiece. On a smouldering banderole beneath the composition, one reads, 1914 *Vultus* 1915 *Victoriae* 1916. De Groux incorporated Latin biblical inscriptions around the faces of Christ and Death. Around the face of Christ one reads *Ego sum resurrectio & vita non est regnum meum hujus mundi*, a combination of John 11:25 and John 18:36, 'I am the resurrection and the life' and 'my kingdom is not of this world'. Around the face of Death is written *Terram miseriae & tenebrarum ubi umbra mortis & nullus ordo sed sempiternus horror inhabitat*. The source of these phrases is Job 10:22, 'A land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death, without any order, and where

the light is as darkness'. These biblical inscriptions are nearly identical to those that accompany the Medusa-like face of victory on the frontispiece of the published portfolio, however they make much more sense in the context of *L'Eclipse* than they do in association with the image of Medusa on the revised frontispiece. De Groux's bleak and unflinching view, as garnered from *L'Eclipse* and the texts of his introduction cited above (and below), suggests that he believed the notion of victory was corrupted in the service of an unconscionable war. He conveys this by showing us the deathly face of victory eclipsing the radiant face of Christ, which bears an uncanny resemblance to Beethoven as seen in the latter's life mask of 1812 (fig. 341).<sup>17</sup> We will return to de

17. If one reverses the image of the life cast of Beethoven's face, as might have happened in the process of etching, the likeness

is even closer.

Groux's fascination with Beethoven below.

In his introduction to *Le Visage de la Victoire*, de Groux made several references to another portentous celestial event, the appearance of comets. As in the 1915 article in *L'Astronomie*, he speaks specifically of a 'comet of war,' which is also one of the titles he gives to several other unpublished etchings intended for *Le Visage de la Victoire*. There is no evidence that the comet-themed prints were also censored, but we will consider them here because of their close thematic association with *L'Eclipse*, which might have been reason enough for de Groux to hold them back. It is worth quoting de Groux at some length on celestial bodies and war:

For war has devastated the moral order as well as the material order, and our intellectual firmament as well as sublunary spaces, seem to have been visited by six forewarning comets, doubtlessly, according to the ancient beliefs, calamities that dominate

and test us. Since the comet henceforth named 'the Comet of War' seen by astronomers on 17 December 1913, five others have appeared on different dates during the same year. The year of the six comets recalls the famous oracular dialogue from the Shakespearian play that announces, according to celestial projections, Caesar's end. *Nullus advenient nisi prodigia* [sic].

The most distant traditions, in fact, associate the stars to the destiny of empires, to the prosperity or the downfall of their founders, tyrants or kind clergymen: comets also announced the demises of both Attila and Charlemagne; of Louis the Debonaire, Merovech, Chilperic as well as the demise of Charles the Bold or Pope Urban IV. But why does this matter? Do we not live in a period of enlightened barbarism that disdains henceforth these mysterious coincidences and this beautiful meteoric



345. Henry de Groux, *Lux perpetua luceat eis* (Let perpetual light shine on them), 1914-16, etching, 192 x 264 mm (Lawrence, KS. Spencer Museum of Art).

symbolism dear to the ancients?<sup>18</sup>

Among the trial proofs at the Spencer Museum of Art are two compositions of *La Comete de la Guerre* (The Comet of War), one of them in three variant impressions. The version known only in one impression has an additional inscription in the plate, *nulla adveniunt nisi prodigia*, a variant spelling of the text in de Groux's introduction (fig. 342). The Latin phrase is obscure, but expresses the notion that nothing occurs without portent. The three states of the alternate composition show a comet turning towards us in its orbit, with a face that is, again, reminiscent of Beethoven with his looming brow (fig. 343).

Why would de Groux evoke Beethoven's likeness in the eclipsed face of Christ and in the fiery face of a comet, if in fact, we are correct in recognizing Beethoven in these celestial faces? De Groux was a champion of German culture and civilization. He visited Munich in 1896 and painted and sculpted portraits of Wagner and Beethoven. When he was in Florence in 1903, he visited Richard Wagner's son Siegfried. We know from Bloy's outpouring about de Groux's 1916 exhibition that the artist had made a portrait of a German prisoner of war, and *Le Visage de la Victoire* includes a plate showing a captive German soldier who is portrayed with considerable dignity and without the anger, hatred and malice so often encountered in wartime propaganda (fig. 344). The Spencer Museum of Art proof of this plate is titled *Le souffre-douleur ennemi* (The Enemy Scapegoat), while in the published portfolio the title became the less sympathetic *Prisonnier*.

Two proofs of an etching in the Spencer Museum showing a battlefield strewn with recumbent and presumably dead soldiers are entitled *Lux perpetua luceat eis* (let perpetual light shine on them), a passage from Mozart's *Requiem* (fig. 345). In the published version, the print lost this specific Germanic reference and was titled *L'autre tranchée* (the other trench). One of the more prevalent strategies in anti-German propaganda involved the satirical use of German claims to being the

defenders of culture. In these works, 'Culture' is inevitably given as 'Kultur' and associated with images of German brutality. An important example of this is Rene Georges Hermann-Paul's 1915 portfolio of five woodcuts, *Les 4 Saisons de la Kultur* (The 4 Seasons of Kultur), which makes use of what Olena Chervonic has aptly described as 'the propagandistic convention that the Germans had reverted to the violent primitivism of the Goths instead of following the civilized route of Goethe, Schubert, or other luminaries of the Germanic world.'<sup>19</sup> De Groux, recognizing that Germany was still the home of this 'civilized route', took the high road, choosing to denounce war as a human failing rather than as the evil trait of any specific nation. In evoking Beethoven in the concluding sentence to his introduction to *Le Visage de la Victoire*, the Belgian artist de Groux makes clear his faith in individual greatness, regardless of nationality:

I also felt, over me, the weighty and disillusioned look of the great Beethoven, the true victor that we still listen to with rapture, whereas we are in war with his compatriots, and who was able to write *Hymn to Suffering*, he who had written in vain for all nations: *Hymn to Joy!*

The complete list of compositions at the Spencer Museum of Art intended for, but not included in the published portfolio, is: 'The Eclipse (*L'Eclipse*); The Comet of War (*La Comete de la Guerre*, in plate: *nulla adveniunt nisi prodigia*); The Comet of War, three impressions (*La Comete de la Guerre* [21 Janvier 1913]), *La Comete de la Guerre*, and *Comete de la Guerre*; Untitled [sun on the horizon of a battlefield]; Beneath the Divine Eye (*Sous l'oeil divin*); Silent Trench (*Tranchee Muette*); Conquered Trench (*Tranchee conquise*); The Sentry, two impressions (*Le Veilleur 1er*, and *Le Guetteur 1916*); The Flamethrower (*Le Petroleur*); Hindus in the Trenches (*Indoux aux tranchées*); Sun of the Dead, two impressions (*Sol Mortuorum*, and *Le soleil des morts*).

With the exception of *L'Eclipse*, which we have argued is the censored frontispiece for *Le Visage de la Vic-*

18. De Groux, op. cit.: 'Car la guerre a tout saccage, aussi bien dans l'ordre moral que dans l'ordre materiel et notre firmament intellectuel aussi bien que les espaces sublunaires, semble avoir ete visite par les six cometes, annonciatrices, sans doute, selon l'antique formule, des calamites qui nous dominent et nous eprouvent. Depuis la comete dite desormais 'Comete de la Guerre' signalee par les astronomes le 17 Decembre 1913, cinq autres apparurent a diverses dates de cette meme annee. L'annee des six cometes ne pouvait point ne pas rappeler le fameux dialogue oraculaire du drame shakespearien qui annonce d'apres les pronostics celestes la fin de Cesar. *Nullus advenient nisi prodigia*. Les plus lointaines traditions, en effet, associent les astres au destin des empires, a la

prosperite ou a la chute de leurs fondateurs, tyrans ou pasteurs propices: des cometes annoncerent aussi bien la fin d'Attila que celle de Charlemagne; de Louis le Debonnaire, de Merovec, de Chilperic, aussi bien que celle de Charles le Temeraire ou du Pape Urbain IV, etc. Mais qu'importe? Ne vivons-nous pas a une epoque de barbarie eclairee qui dedaigne desormais ces mystereuses coincidences et tout ce beau symbolisme meteorique cher aux anciens?'

19. O. Chervonic, label copy for the Spencer Museum of Art exhibition 'Machine in a Void: World War I and the Graphic Arts' (5 March–30 May 2010).



346. Henry de Groux *Sous l'oeil divin* (Beneath the Divine Eye), 1914-16, etching, 232 x 169 mm (Lawrence, KS, Spencer Museum of Art).

*toire*, we do not know why the ten additional compositions were not published, although we have suggested that the images of comets may have been too closely associated with the celestial imagery of *L'Eclipse*. Perhaps de Groux edited them down according

to his own taste and principles, especially if they were redundant, as with the images of sentries and trenches. Several of the unpublished compositions, however, are quite striking and unique within the context of the portfolio. Was *Sous l'oeil divin* (Beneath the



347. Henry de Groux *Le Petroleur* (The Flamethrower), 1914-16, etching, 248 x 182 mm (Lawrence, KS, Spencer Museum of Art).

Divine Eye), with its divine eye and tetragrammaton, too cabalistic (fig. 346)? Was *Le Petroleur* (The Flamethrower) too non-judgemental an image of a German soldier (fig. 347) and was *Indoux aux tranchées* (Hindus in the Trenches) not adequately franco-

centric? While we cannot answer these questions, there can be no doubt that in his *Le Visage de la Victoire* and its unpublished proofs de Groux has given us a remarkably non-partisan indictment of war in the abstract and of World War I in particular.