Prudentius has been criticized for the amount and nature of the descriptions of violence in his poems on the sufferings of Christian martyrs. Judgements such as 'repugnant realism', 'bad taste', 'too realistic, over-explicit and excessive detail, leaving little to the imagination' intersperse the generally positive pronouncements on Prudentius' poetic art and achievement. Yet the portrayal of violence figures almost naturally in Homer's *Iliad* and the iliadic books of Vergil's *Aeneid* and the ancient testimonia on Prudentius are silent on this element in his poetry. Moreover, the visual art of the Late Empire presents a correlative of much in Prudentius' verbal descriptions, suggesting that the portrayal of violence in Prudentius' own time was not considered distasteful. In our own century violence and its portrayal in visual or verbal image are prevalent to the extent that we have become all but insensitive to it. Correspondingly modern scholars have tried to justify and explain the violence in Prudentius' verse.

All this arouses the suspicion that we have to do here with the variable taste and attitudes of various ages. If this is so, it seems methodologically sound to determine Prudentius' own views either in explicit statements or implicit in his handling of the theme of violence suffered by the martyrs. If we are going to pass judgement on the way in which violence is portrayed in the *Peristephanon*, it must be on literary grounds, and not on grounds of taste.

It is advisable at the outset to have some idea of the extent of the element of violence in the work under consideration. For our immediate purpose, all references to violence, including the sentences or threats of violence even when not actually carried out, have been counted in numbers of lines, without any regard for the degree of variation in the actual diction (from vague threat to real bloodshed and execution). In this widest possible measurement of the element of violence, only 20% of the total number of lines in the *Peristephanon* deal with or describe acts of violence. It seems reasonable to assume, then, that it is the nature or quality of detail in particular instances rather than the widespread quantity of violence that is responsible for the impression of excessive violence in these poems.

However, a statistical survey is not worth much as an instrument of literary analysis: its compilation entails a process of selection and grouping of key-words based on arbitrary criteria. Not every
occurrence of _cruor_ or _sanguis_ or _vulnus_ belongs in the semantic field 'violence'. Moreover, the nature and 'workings' of literary art are not reducible to numbers. In this particular case it means little to know that violence takes up, say, 10% of the measurable content of a certain poem, because, firstly, individual words within a line, or a single line as a unit can easily outweigh in its effect upon the reader a longer account in less stunning, more neutral diction; and, secondly, it is the way in which words or lines are used in a particular context that counts, rather than their quantitative presence in a work.

The title of the _Peristephanon_ already carries the central symbol, the crown of victory. Puech has compared these poems with Pindar's epinician odes, while Lavarenne has stressed the military nature of the symbol. The cult of the martyrs, influenced by ancient myth, nurtured and embellished by oral tradition, liturgy, the visual arts and memorials, and sanctioned after Constantine, celebrated the triumph of the Christian Church, recalling at the same time the heroic role played by the early martyrs. Legend and exaggeration transformed historical event into a mystic and heroic battle of good against evil, Christian against pagan, spiritual against physical, in which the martyr is the _heros_. Bodily pain and death, and the vengeful cruelty of the officials threatening, pronouncing and executing punishment are automatic elements in a work concerning the passions of Christian martyrs. Prudentius could no more avoid them than Homer or Vergil their heroes' valiant deeds of slaughter.

Prudentius also shared with Christian writers and protagonists the need and missionary desire to portray in as much clarity and detail as possible the pangs and victories of the new faith. The Christian martyr tortured by the pagan official undergoes bodily agony at the hands of the physically strong, but overcomes spiritually in the presence of his tormentors' spiritual bankruptcy. Given this antithesis as a basic structural pattern, the poet would enhance the impact by heightening the contrast with as much detail as he could muster from documentation, tradition and his own experience and imagination. The crueler the torturer and torture, the more glorious is the martyr and his passion.

There are six main interrelated themes that run through the _Peristephanon_: 1. the martyr's suffering and death ensure eternal life; 2. death is seen as a freeing of the soul, a casting off of physical fetters; 3. physical existence and suffering are transformed into spiritual life and triumph; 4. the suffering and courage of the martyr have a powerful effect on the onlookers and executioners; 5. the details are presented as true, even in the absence of documented evidence; and 6. the poet confesses his own dependence on the martyrs and presents his poetry as an offering for salvation. In the first poem, _Per. 1_, in many ways a programmatic poem, Prudentius already prepares the reader with an explicit statement touching on four of these basic...
The reward of eternal life (sanguinis dispendio, 23; lux...longior, 24), transformation of the physical passion into spiritual life and triumph (hoc genus ...pati, 25-28 - recalling Horace's dulce et decorum est pro patria morti, Carm.3.2.13), release of the soul from physical bondage through an ennobling baptism of blood (nobilis...exilit, 29f.), and beneficial effect of martyrdom (porta iustis panditur, 29) in their turn share a common factor, transformation. The physical passion of the martyr, however terrible, extended and degrading, is always transformed into noble spiritual glory. In this way the violence precedes and is a prerequisite for real life, freedom and victory. In Per. 4 the girl Eufratis, and Gaius, Crementius and Vincent survived their torture (117-144), and were therefore strictly confessores rather than martyrs proper. Prudentius tries to elevate them to martyr-status by special pleading (177-188): their passion was all the harder to endure, the wounds were especially cruel, and pieces of their flesh had in fact died.

The opening lines of Per. 1 state this transformation in symbolic terms: the names of the martyrs Emeterius and Chelidonius are written in letters of blood on earth, but in letters of gold in heaven (1-3). Further on (7-20) the poet visualizes their blood as being soaked up by the earth to be transformed into a beneficient fountain bringing healing to all who pray there. Before their actual execution, a ring and a handkerchief rise to heaven from the prison-cell, symbolizing the open way to eternal life (82-90), and the executioner nevertheless carries out the sentence me periret gloria (93).

The passion of Vincent (Per. 5) contains several instances of this ennobling transformation into the spiritual. The opening lines use the terminology of the Roman military triumph in this new context:

beate martyr, prospera
diem triumphalem tuum,
quo sanguinis merces tibi
corona, Vincenti, datur! (1-4; cf.117-128; 525-544);
	his earthly stola, washed in blood, becomes, among the angels, a
glorious robe (9-12); his dark, dismal and painful existence in a
dungeon undergoes metamorphosis when he walks unbound in a spiritual
light, surrounded by flowers, and nectar and the singing of angels
(269-324; cf. illum carcerem, honoris augmentum tut, 548f.); his
releasing death is compared with that of Abel and John the Baptist
(353-375); his body is miraculously protected from scavengers (397-
420), and from sinking into the sea (433-504, where divine power over
water is illustrated by the parting of the Red Sea and Christ's walk-
ing on the surface of the lake); and his actual burial (513-520)
is preceded by an Idealized 'burial' (501-512). This poem also con-
tains a clear statement on death as the freeing of the soul:

- si mors habenda eiusmodi est,
quae corporali ergastulo
mentem resolvit liberam
et reddit auctori Deo,
mentem piatam sanguine,
mortis lavacris elutam;
quae semet ac vitam suam
Christo immolandam praebuit
(357-364)

Earlier Vincent had taunted his tormentors:

- vox nostra quae sit, accipe:
est Christus et Pater Deus,
servi huius et testes sumus,
extorque, si potes, fiden!
tormenta, carcer, ungulae
stridensque flammis lammina
atque ipsa poenarum ultima,
mors, Christianus ludus est
(57-64),

and explained challengingly that the soul itself is untouchable, in-
violate (145-172).

The longest of the Peristephanon-poems, Per. 10, contains some of the
cruellest violence and torture, but at the same time definite expla-
nations to the tormentors but also to the reader on how this cruelty
must be understood. Romanus engages in lengthy debates with the
Roman prefect Asclepiades. The deep irony is exploited by Prudentius:
the eloquent Romanus is to have his tongue removed, yet continue to
speak the truth (561ff., 866ff.) in a way that the poet cannot emulate
(1-25). Romanus explains the ennobling effect of martyrdom, relating
it to the Roman tenure of office (111-150), taunting his persecutor:

incumbe membris, tortor, ut sim nobilis! (138). When his tongue is
removed, the blood staining his clothing symbolizes the scarlet of
nobility and royalty (906-910).
One of Romanus' most forceful speeches compares physical with spiritual disease, and the role of surgery in healing ailments (448-455, 481-520): the pain caused by the sword is like a lung-disease (484-485), the searing heat of the fire is like fever or inflammation (485-490), the crippling work of the rack is like arthritis or gout (491-495), the executioners themselves are like surgeons applying a healing knife that will set the soul free (516-520; cf. 1110). (Is Asclepiades' name, derived from Asclepius, god of healing, the germ of this lengthy analogue?). It is the diseases of the spirit (corruption, anger, desire, avarice, luxury, gluttony) that Romanus singles out as pernicious: mere physical death awaits us all, and a martyr's death has its own reward (530-545).

The tragic death of the child who supports Romanus (686-845) is sublimated by the courage and faith of the mother, and by comparison with the story of Isaac (746-750; Gen. 22), the Maccabean brothers (751-780; II Maccabees 7, with very similar details), and Abel's offering of the first-fruits to God (826-845; Gen. 4).

The martyrdom of Hippolytus (Per. 11) is one of the most bloody. Like his namesake in Greek mythology, he is torn apart by charging horses (111-122). The actual description of Hippolytus' death (105-122) concentrates on the coursing horses; only four lines (119-122) are devoted to details about the damage to the martyr's body. Prudentius explains that he saw the details in a painting (123-146), and it emerges (231-246) that he is requesting Bishop Valerian to include Hippolytus in the festival calendar of the Church. Hippolytus' death is followed by a description of the burial, the splendid memorial and the great veneration of the martyr (145-230). Despite these extenuating considerations, Prudentius does seem in this poem to have transgressed the bounds of disciplined art: was it necessary to give the gory details in an extended form when describing the picture? The painting is cited as proof of historical truth, and may even justify the type of detail used, but cannot excuse the repetitious material, the belabouring of gruesome detail in the narrative and the description of the painting.

In Per. 9 this technique works better. Prudentius describes the torture of Cassian at the hands of his pupils who stab and cut him with their styluses. He casts this extremely cruel martyrdom in the form of a verger's detailed explanation of and comment on a picture at the martyr's tomb. The verger vouches for the truth of the details:

quod prospicis, hospes,
non est inanis aut anulis fabula;
historiam pictura refert, quae tradita libris
veram vetusti temporis monstrat fidem

(17-20).
The reader accepts the violence and cruelty in this case as true and inevitable, not least because the pupils' behaviour is given a rational basis: they used the styluses to write down the *scholare murmur* (16) of their former master, and young minds resent being taught:

aspera nonnumquam praecepta et tristia visa
impube vulgus moverant ira et metu;
doctor amarus enim discenti semper ephebo,
nec dulcis ulli disciplina infantiae est

(25-28).

The way in which Agnes views her martyrdom is remarkable: her approaching executioner is preferred to a lover: the former only desecrates her body, leaving her virginity intact. Her death transforms her into a bride of Christ (14.67-84). Her freed soul ascends to heaven accompanied by angels and marvelling at the dark, sinful and foolish world receding below (89-118). She receives a double crown: one for her virginity maintained even in a brothel, the other for her martyrdom (119-123).

So far we have reviewed martyrdom by the sword, entailing bloodshed, in which the blood, by virtue of its colour and cleansing power and relation to Christ's own crucifixion, ennobles, or baptizes to or is the price for eternal life. Other forms of death are also transformed. *Per. 2* recounts the prolonged torment by fire of Lawrence (357-396). Related imagery sublimates his passion:

illi os decore splenduit
fulgorque circumfusus est

(361f.).

His radiant countenance is compared with that of Moses descending from the mountain with the laws (363-368; *Exod. 32, 34.29-30*), or that of Stephen (369-372; *Acts 7.55ff.*). The odour of his burning flesh smells like nectar to believers (385-392); the Roman torturer's Vulcan (356) gives way to the Christian God as the true and eternal fire and light:

sic ignis aeternus Deus
(nam Christus ignis verus est);
is ipse complet lumine
lustos et unxit noxios

(393-396)

In a long speech he compares the spiritual wealth of the Church with the Romans' idea of wealth (185-312): the diseased, weak and disabled faithful are spiritually healthy and strong, while the physically powerful Roman persecutors suffer from the diseases of the soul. When at last Lawrence dies, his soul finds release (485-488).
The twelve year old Eulalia (Per.3) considers the wounds torn into her flesh with claws as the letters of Christ's name and triumph (136-138). Already of noble birth, she is ennobled still further by her death (139-140; cf. 1-2). Her torture is ended on the pyre when she deliberately sucks in the flames (148-160), and her soul escapes from her mouth in the form of a white dove (161-175). A snow-fall covers her body in a shroud (176-185) as nature performs the burial rites. The heat of the torturer's fire releases her soul, while the cold of the snow extinguishes the fire and sublimes the scene in pure white.

Fructuosus, Augurius and Eulogius also died by fire (Per.6). The light of their pyres makes their city Tarraco shine far about (1-3); Augurius and Eulogius are described as ardens and lucidus respectively (7-9), adjectives with both literal and figurative meanings; Fructuosus encourages his fellow-martyrs with the promise of eternal life and the crown of victory:

ne mors terreat! est parata palma.
carcer Christicolis gradus coronae est,
carcer provehit ad superna caeli,
carcer conciliat Deum beatis.
(24-27);

and approaches the fire like Moses the Burning Bush (85ff.), and hears a voice say:

non est, credite, poena, quam videtis,
quae puncto tenui citata transit;
nec vitam rapit illa, sed reformat.
felices animae, quibus per ignem
celsa scandere contigit Tonantis,
quas olim fugiet perennis ignis!
(94-99).

They enter the furnace like the three men of Babylon (100-120; Apoth. 128-154), and their souls are seen rising to heaven (121-123).

Quirinus (Per.7) was drowned. Explicit statement explains:

nil refert, vitreo aequore
an de flumine sanguinis
tinguat passio martyrem;
aeque gloria provenit
fluctu quolibet uvida
(16-20).

At first Quirinus does not sink, and actually consoles the crowds gathered along the river-banks. Divine power over water is illustrated by Peter's walking on the water and by the reversal of the river Jordan (71-85; Josh.3.13ff.). Quirinus fears the loss of
martyrdom's rewards (51-55), and prays for death (56-85). His soul ascends and his body sinks (86-91).

When three hundred Christians leap willingly into a smouldering lime-pit (Per. 13.83-87), Prudentius again transforms their deaths into spiritual event:

\[
\text{corpora candor habet, candor vehit ad superna mentes (86);}
\]

the literal white of the lime is sublimated into the whiteness of their souls. Earlier Cyprian had prayed for death and said:

\[
\text{eripe corporeo de carcere vinculisque mundi}
\text{hanc aniam, liceat fus tibi sanguine immolari;}
\text{ne qua ferum reprimat dementia iudicem, tyranni}
\text{neu sciat invidia mitescere, gloriam negare}
\]

(63-66).

Throughout the martyr-poems this is the fundamental pattern. Whatever the degree and amount of bodily agony and disintegration, whatever the physical degradation and reduction, the Christian martyr's soul remains intact and he is transfigured into the wholeness, peace and nobility of spiritual existence. Prudentius' intention is clear: the greater the mortification of the flesh in all its terrifying details, the greater the triumph of the spirit.

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NOTES

1) J. Stam, Prudentius. Hamartigenia (Amsterdam 1940), 219.


3) M. Schanz, Geschichte der römischen Literatur (Munich 1914², repr. 1959), vol. IV, 1,239-244; A. Kurfess, RE XXIII, 1, col.
4) One should distinguish between the portrayal of violence in art (e.g. in myth, literature, sculpture) and its presence or occurrence in any society (as dealt with e.g. by A.W. Lintott, Violence in Republican Rome, Oxford 1968). This element in Prudentius' work has elicited comparison with Latin poets like Lucan, Ovid and Seneca (plays).

5) Cf. M.P. Cunningham, 'Contexts of Prudentius' Poems', CPh 71.1976. 65f., and Prudentius' own references to pictures (Per. 9 and 11).

6) K. Thraede, Studien zu Sprache und Stil des Prudentius (Hypomnemata Heft 13, Göttingen 1965), 8-9; R. Herzog, Die allegorische Dichtkunst des Prudentius (Zetemata Heft 42, Munich 1966), 13-41; Cunningham, 65f.; Peebles, 95.


8) Prudence, Tome IV, 6.

9) Cf. De Labriolle, 454; Raby, 51-53; Lavarenne, Prudence, Tome IV, 7-9; Cunningham, 65f.

10) Cf. e.g. Per. 2.50ff., 557-560.


12) Cf. Per. 4.89-92; 8.5ff., 13f.; 12.7-10.


14) Cf. the prototype in Christ's wounds, from one of which issued blood, from the other water: Per. 8, esp.17f.