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THE EXPRESSIONLESS: LAW, ETHICS, AND THE IMAGERY OF SUFFERING

ABSTRACT. The essay discusses law's inability to address the phenomenon of human suffering and, at the same time, investigates a possible theoretical kinship between Walter Benjamin's notion of 'the expressionless' and Emmanuel Levinas's understanding of suffering as the foundation of an interhuman ethics. The kinship between Levinas and Benjamin is examined with reference to suffering in the visual arts and, more specifically, in Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece and Francis Bacon's crucifixion triptychs. The essay argues that in the crucifixion scenes of both Grünewald's medieval altarpiece and Bacon's triptychs, suffering is what constitutes 'the expressionless'. After every detail of the image, every element of attribute, motif, composition and colour have been accurately depicted, a residue still remains, an ethical truth that cannot be appropriated into a meaningful unity but that nevertheless calls for a response. While law must always give suffering a utilitarian value in its attempts to assign responsibility for the injury occurred, the essay argues that the fragmentariness in all true art that Benjamin calls 'the expressionless' is akin to Levinas's understanding of the constitutional uselessness of suffering, its essence as 'for nothing'.

KEY WORDS: Benjamin, law and the humanities, Levinas, suffering, visual arts

ETHICS AND SUFFERING

Why does law seem to fail so consistently in its attempts to address human suffering?

Modern law is dedicated to the procedural formality of the trial. Within the trial, law imposes narrative meaning to suffering and consequently gives it a utilitarian value in the task of assigning responsibility. Even truth commissions and other institutional applications of transitional justice that are often seen as a potential

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antidote to law's formal limitations work essentially in the same way. The trivialisation of suffering through causal narratives – 'x injured y by doing z' – may perhaps assist in the therapeutic continuation of a damaged social order, but it falls necessarily short of any profound way of coming to terms with the agony of the injured individual. The law views injury primarily as a breach against itself regardless of whether we are talking about criminal or civil wrong. The trial fails to satisfy the Kantian categorical imperative by using the injury suffered by a human being as a means to reinstate its own authority. Accordingly, this essay will claim that in order to be able to deal with the trauma in a way that could involve the taking place of a genuine ethical dimension, suffering would have to be, as Emmanuel Levinas argues, considered as 'meaningless' and 'useless', as 'for nothing' in a radically non-utilitarian way.¹

But instead of discussing how signifying narratives trivialise suffering in the workings of the trial that would be the most obvious example from the world of law, this essay focuses on how human agony is portrayed in art. Why has one artistic portrayal of suffering had such devastating cultural effects whereas another seemingly similar work of art fails to move us in the same way? Why does one portrayal ring 'truer' than another? The same basic idea of the ethical dimension of 'useless' and 'meaningless' suffering is thus carried over to the domain of the visual arts: the portrayal of suffering is 'pure' if it manages to resist and to withhold the narratives that usually saturate the imagery with meaning.

The reason why Levinas's ethics has caused such violent tremors in the interdisciplinary study of law and the humanities is not because it is yet another theoretically disguised attempt to revive the longing for transcendence of traditional natural law but, rather, because taking Levinas's radical humanism seriously would require such a thoroughly revised understanding of law itself. Even before self-knowledge, before I am able to utter the words 'I am' – and the substitution of the passive voice with the first person singular is significant for me here – I must have a necessary relationship with the Other. It is not a relationship that is prescribed or regulated by either internal or external laws, because only the Other makes prescription possible to begin with. So while the law claims that it requires me to

¹ Another reply might claim that law is not meant to address suffering in an ethical way. While this view can be supported with reasonable arguments, the underlying ontological assumption betrays a very bleak understanding of what law is.

express love for my neighbour in a variety of ways, it can only do so because the Other has already appeared to me in her irreducible majesty and strangeness.

In this way Levinas's ethics is 'pre-ontological' and the 'first philosophy'; the Other precedes the self-awareness of my Being, my inclination to assimilate the world into a plurality of my likenesses, into a totality. But in the midst of my ego-centric frenzy to assimilate and appropriate, the Other abruptly appears to me as a face that resists my efforts to absorb her into my world. The face presents itself to me as a countenance that my inclination to exist wishes to negate by making it part of my world, and in this sense the Other is immediately vulnerable. But this very vulnerability also calls to me as an appeal that requires a response. Responsibility, literally my ability to respond to the appeal of the Other, is the fundamental ethical relationship that precedes any attempts to prescribe what my response should substantively be.

Nowhere can the appeal of the Other be heard more clearly than in the phenomenon of suffering. In the late essay 'Useless Suffering', Levinas claims that suffering includes within itself an apparent contradiction. It is surely data, a quantifiable fact that can be traced into the consciousness of the victim and that medical pain research can duly verify. But the very nature of suffering prevents from ordering its data into a meaningful whole or unity. The contradiction that arises from the impossibility to give this verifiable data meaning accounts for suffering's misery, for its woe. Woeful and meaningless suffering is always passive. Passivity is, however, not understood in opposition to activity, but as a vulnerability or an ordeal that is in essence even more passive than experience. And this is what makes suffering an evil.²

The passive evil through which suffering must be endured and that overwhelms its victim more violently and cruelly than any intentional violation of his personal integrity also renders suffering 'useless' as the title of Levinas's essay suggests: suffering is essentially pointless; it is 'for nothing'. But, curiously perhaps, for Levinas the uselessness of suffering also accounts for the possibility of an ethics:

The evil of suffering – extreme passivity, powerlessness, abandonment and solitude – is this not also what is unassumable and, accordingly, because of its non-integration into the unity of an order or a sense, the possibility of an opening and, more

² E. Levinas, 'La souffrance inutile', in *Entre nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1991) 107–119, at 108.

precisely, an opening through which a moan, a cry, a groan, or a sigh passes, the original appeal for aid, for healing help, for help of the other me whose alterity, whose exteriority promises salvation?³

In Levinas's terms, then, only by responding to the appeal of the Other can intrinsically useless suffering become just within the ethical perspective of the interhuman. Within this perspective, Levinas identifies two radically different types of suffering. There is the suffering that resides in the Other. The Other's suffering is unforgivable to me, and as such it solicits me and calls me demanding a response. But there is also the suffering that is in me, my own empathic experience of the suffering of the Other. The constitutional uselessness of suffering can only take on a sense in me by becoming my suffering for the suffering of the Other.⁴

Extrapolating an ethics from suffering would not seem to be the most obvious thing to do. The aim of this essay is, however, not to develop an elaborate theoretical account of how Levinas does this – it has already been done by people more qualified than I⁵ – but to isolate and investigate the single claim: confronting the phenomenon of suffering introduces a cut or a wound that prevents me from totalising my world and thus allows the taking place of an ethics. The opening does not establish ethics in any foundational way, let alone prescribe what normative principles an ethics should include. It can only make the event possible if and when I respond to the Other's appeal.

The decision to focus on suffering is also in part a criticism of a romantic strain in contemporary jurisprudence that sees recent developments in the theory of transitional justice as a possible solution to the perceived formal limitations of modern law.⁶ In a companion text to this essay⁷, I have in much a similar way dealt with the impossibility of unconditional forgiveness in the work of truth commissions through the figure of the resentful and unforgiving

³ Levinas, *supra* n. 2, at 109–110 [PM: footnote omitted]. In this passage, the French text reads *couverture* instead of *ouverture*, but this must be a misprint.

⁴ Levinas, *supra* n. 2, at 111.

⁵ See e.g. M. Diamantides, *The Ethics of Suffering: Modern Law, Philosophy, and Medicine* (Aldershot/Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000).

⁶ An excellent collection of relevant essays – some, perhaps, more 'romantic' than others – is E. Christodoulidis and S. Veitch, eds, *Lethé's Law. Justice, Law and Ethics in Reconciliation* (Oxford/Portland, OR: Hart, 2001).

⁷ P. Minkkinen, 'Ressentiment as Suffering: On Transitional Justice and the Impossibility of Forgiveness', *Law and Literature* 19/3 (2007), 513–531.

victim. The persistent resentment of the victim is interpreted as a prolongation of the original trauma to which he has been subjected. In their attempts to 'conditionalise' forgiveness in exchange for reconciliation and social restoration, truth commissions function very much like the legal trials that they are meant to replace: both contextualise the events with narrative frameworks in order to give meaning to the victim's suffering.

Finally, this essay will attempt to develop a possible theoretical affinity between Levinas and Walter Benjamin. While its point of departure is an admittedly limited and isolated reading of Levinas, the essay will try to argue that the ethical dimension that Levinas finds in the phenomenon of suffering is akin to a critical power that Benjamin ascribes to all true art: the 'expressionless'. This critical power will be examined first in relation to a renowned portrayal of human agony in the visual arts and later through modern interpretations of the same painting that have all tried to address the moral and ethical ambiguities related to the phenomenon of suffering.

THE IMAGERY OF SUFFERING

The complex and intimate relationship between suffering and ethics that Levinas identifies can be illustrated through the imagery of suffering, and especially through passion art in the Christian tradition.⁸ Being the popular culture of its day, the original aim of passion art was to convey the teachings of the Church to the illiterate masses through retables, prayer book illustrations, the *Via Crucis* and stained glass windows. Only later did passion art take on the task of addressing more profound religious truths.

As a form of passion art, crucifixion images are immediately recognisable as representations of suffering irrespective of the viewer's background. But as far as the above outlined Levinasian notion of 'useless' suffering is concerned, they seem to be caught in a paradox. They are clearly empathic representations of the suffering of an Other, of the man-God as fellow human being and neighbour. But at

⁸ On passion art in general, see J.H. Marrow, *Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance: A Study of the Transformation of Sacred Metaphor into Descriptive Narrative* (Kortrijk: Van Ghemert, 1979). On Levinas and passion art, see M. Slaughter, 'Levinas, Mercy and the Middle Ages', in M. Diamantides, ed., *Levinas, Law, Politics* (Abingdon/New York, NY: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007) 49–69, at 60–63. Slaughter's essay also deals with Levinas's views on art more generally.

the same time, crucifixion images betray the suffering they depict because they can establish the empathic rapport between viewer and the Other only through a supportive narrative of redemption.

There are two distinctly Christian themes at play here which, however, are both culturally more relevant than the religious tradition from which they arise. Firstly, crucifixes are not merely depictions of suffering but, more specifically, images of it. This essay is, then, less about crucifixions as such but rather about figurations of suffering, about 'imaging' suffering. The central claims should hold true regardless of whether we are talking about medieval altarpieces or contemporary news photos of the abused inmates of Abu Ghraib. But the emphasis on figuration and imagery is what might be considered as specifically Christian. Due to the centrality of the image, the essay is, then, in part about what art theory (aesthetics or the philosophy of art) might be able to contribute to the law and humanities project.

The second interrelated Christian theme – once again culturally more relevant than the religious tradition from which the theme arises – is the signification of pain and suffering into something purposeful or ennobling.⁹ Beginning with the mundane maxim of 'finding strength in adversity', the pinnacle of this idea of ennoblement is Christian martyrdom and 'redemption through blood'. The imposition of meaning through the signification of 'imaged' suffering establishes the utilitarian narrative in which one suffers 'for something', an ultimately immoral 'justified suffering' that Levinas so vehemently opposes. In its legal variants, suffering serves a purpose in the rectification of wrongs by assigning responsibility or in the continuation of a social order through reconciliation. So with the help of a Levinasian starting point, a debate in art theory hopefully finds a parallel in law.

One of the best known examples of religious popular culture turned high art – later commercialised as countless reproductions at the marketplace – is the crucifixion scene of the Isenheim Altarpiece.¹⁰ Even though the altarpiece is well known as images, its history is far from unambiguous. Painted by an artist known as Matthias Grünewald between 1512 and 1516, it was originally commissioned for the chapel of a monastic hospital of the Antonite order near the village of

⁹ See, e.g., Romans 5:3–5, 1 Peter 2:19–20, 1 Peter 4:1.

¹⁰ M. Grünewald, *Crucifixion*, central section of the Isenheim Altarpiece with closed wings (1512–1515). Oil on panel, 269 × 307 cm. Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar. On the Isenheim Altarpiece in general, see G. Richter, *The Isenheim Altarpiece: Suffering and Salvation in the Art of Grünewald* (Edinburgh: Floris, 1998).

Isenheim in Alsace. Grünewald's painted panels and the Late-Gothic sculpture by Nicolas von Hagenau (c. 1460-c. 1526) were mounted on a wooden predella, and the crucifixion made up the central panel of the closed altarpiece. By opening and closing the folding wings, the altarpiece provided three different scenes for the various festive events in the ecclesiastical calendar. The hospital was dedicated mainly to the treatment of those afflicted by what was then known as *ignis sacer* or 'St Anthony's fire'. The disease that was later ascribed to the poisonous *Claviceps purpurea* fungus that infects rye first brought about convulsive symptoms through its psychoactive alkaloids, but in its later stages it often developed into violent skin eruptions leading to amputations and possibly even death.¹¹

After 'St Anthony's fire', today known as ergotism, became curable and the hospital closed down, the altarpiece was dismantled. The detached paintings and sculpted figures all survived the iconoclasm of the Reformation in storage. Next they were rescued by local government officials from Robespierre's revolutionary looters in 1793, and some half a century later they were moved to a former Dominican convent that had been converted into a museum in nearby Colmar some 75 km south of Strasbourg. Since then the paintings have changed hands between the French and the Germans at about the same rate as the province of Alsace until, after World War II, they were returned to Colmar where they have remained.¹²

There is not that much that is known with certitude about the artist. According to the authoritative version, the name 'Grünewald' is an error made by the German Baroque painter and art historian Joachim von Sandrart in his encyclopedic presentation of German art *Teutsche Academie* in 1675.¹³ The artist's real name is allegedly Mathis Gothart, usually followed by his matronym Nithart, born sometime between 1470 and 1485 in Würzburg. This Bavarian city was one of the epicenters of the *Bauernkrieg*, a popular uprising affiliated with the Reformation made up of various peasant revolts in

¹¹ On the hospital-context of the altarpiece, see A. Hayum, 'The Meaning and Function of the Isenheim Altarpiece: The Hospital Context Revisited', *The Art Bulletin* 59/4 (1977), 501–517.

¹² On the Franco-German history of the altarpiece, see A. Stieglitz, 'The Reproduction of Agony: Toward a Reception-History of Grünewald's Isenheim Altar after the First World War', *Oxford Art Journal* 12/2 (1989), 87–103.

¹³ Sandrart speaks of 'Matthäus Grünewald, also known as Matthäus of Aschaffenburg'. See J. Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste. Band 2* (Nördlingen: Alfons Uhl, 1994), at 236–237.

the early 16th century. Gothart Nithart was a relatively celebrated artist and waterworks engineer in his own time and reportedly died of the plague in 1528 in Halle after which he quickly fell into obscurity. He was rediscovered only when the Isenheim Altarpiece, formerly presumed to have been the product of the genius of Albrecht Dürer, was attributed to Gothart Nithart towards the end of the 19th century.¹⁴

According to another more disputed version of the story, Grünewald and Gothart Nithart are, in fact, two separate individuals. Matthias Grün or Grünewald, the relatively unknown painter of the altarpiece, was deliberately confused with Gothart Nithart, the renowned court painter, in order to assign Aryan credentials to an unaccomplished artist who was not fit to be the author of this German masterpiece and who, to the further embarrassment of 20th century German art historians, had married a Jewish woman.¹⁵ Only a handful of paintings and sketches that have undeniably been identified as Grünewald's have survived.

Standing in larger-than-life proportions, the Isenheim crucifixion portrays the scenes at Golgotha in luminous colours against a dark and menacing background. The five sets of figures are all painted from slightly different perspectives and in varying scales. The centre of the picture is dominated by the oversized crucifix that also seems to illuminate the ground on which the remaining figures stand. At the far left, painted slightly from below, a swooning Mary is consoled and supported by John the Evangelist, himself evidently struck by grief. On their right, a diminutive Mary Magdalene, this time painted from above, is lost in delirious prayer. On the right of the cross, the sacrificial lamb, the symbol of the Christ atoning for the sins of man, bleeds into a chalice. And finally at the far right, John the Baptist has arisen from the dead and stands serenely pointing his finger at the Christ. The words '*Illum oportet crescere me autem minui*' ('He must increase, but I must decrease', John 3:30) are written beside him. Some of the painting's themes are evidently Gothic, but in its

¹⁴ An often cited historical authority on Gothart Nithart is H. Feuerstein, *Matthias Grünewald* (Bonn: Verlag der Buchgemeinde, 1930). For a fascinating account of how both Dürer and Grünewald have been used in the construction of a nationalist German identity, see K. Moxey, 'Impossible Distance: Past and Present in the Study of Dürer and Grünewald', *Art Bulletin* LXXXVI/4 (2004), 750–763.

¹⁵ This is the claim made by German historian Hans Jürgen Rieckenberg. See H.J. Rieckenberg, 'Zum Forschungsstand über die Biographie des Schöpfers des Isenheimer Altars', *Zeitschrift für Bayerische Landesgeschichte* 50 (1987), 180–196.

naturalism and use of colour Grünewald's crucifixion is typically a work inspired by the Renaissance. And so the painting has become a paradigmatic exemplar of what has been called the Northern Renaissance.¹⁶

After nearly 400 years of obscurity, the Isenheim Altarpiece was rediscovered in the late 19th century and quickly recognised as a long forgotten masterpiece. Although all panels of the polyptych have been duly praised, particularly the staggering brutality with which the suffering of the Christ is portrayed in the crucifixion scene has received the most attention. In 1904 the French decadent author Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote an influential essay about the altarpiece where he compares the Isenheim crucifixion to another painting of the crucifixion by the same artist:

In the middle of the painting, the Christ, huge and disproportionate in relation to the stature of the surrounding characters, is nailed on a poorly peeled tree that allows us to see in places the fresh paleness of the wood, and the transversal branch that is pulled by the hands twirls and draws [...] the twisted curve of the arch. The body [...] is livid and glossy, punctuated by stains of blood, pricked like a chestnut shell by the splinters from the canes that remain in the holes of the wounds; at the end of the disproportionately long arms the hands move about in convulsions and claw the air; the fetlocks of the knees are locked close together, and the feet, one clinched on the other with a nail, are but a disjointed cluster of muscles on which the surrounding flesh and the toenails that have gone blue decay; and the head, contained in a gigantic crown of thorns, it subsides on the chest making it bagged and rounded, striped with the grille of the ribs. This would be a faithful counterpart of the *Crucifixion* of Karlsruhe if only the expression of the face was different – indeed, here Jesus no longer has the terrible grin of tetanus; the jaw does not twist, but it hangs, detached, and the lips dribble. He is less terrifying but more humanly base, more dead. In the panel of Karlsruhe, the brutality of the features that this senile thaw of the mouth now betrays was redeemed by the terror of lockjaw, the shrill laughter. But the man-God of Colmar is nothing more than a sad thief destined for the gallows.¹⁷

Huysmans is drawing attention to the striking humanity of this man-God who, in his suffering, is unable to bear the attributes of godliness and divinity that most devotional paintings of the era

¹⁶ On the Northern Renaissance in general, see J. Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, the Graphic Arts from 1350 to 1575* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1985).

¹⁷ J.-K. Huysmans, *Trois primitifs. Les Grünewald du Musée de Colmar, Le maître de Flémalle et la Florentine du Musée de Francfort-sur-le-Mein* (Paris: Léon Vanier, 1905), at 15–16. For a much more innocuous description of Grünewald's crucifixion scene, see A. Burkhard, 'The Isenheim Altar', *Speculum* 9/1 (1934), 56–69, at 59.

required the figure of the Christ to embody. Indeed, if we compare the Isenheim crucifixion to, for example, Italian Early Renaissance paintings of the same era, we find here nothing of the wiry physique that later developed into the athletic Christ of High Renaissance who conquers death through his sacrifice.¹⁸ This is the theological scandal: Grünewald's Christ, rotting away on the cross, is simply too human for a world obsessed with deities and redemption. By emphasising the scandal, that is, by dissociating the depicted suffering from the mythological and theological framework that is provided by the narrative of the crucifixion, the ethical underpinnings of the image become more apparent. Once the framework and the accompanying mythological narrative have been isolated, the Christ is left to suffer 'for nothing'.

Grünewald's painting can, of course, be considered simply as a masterful exemplar of Christian devotional art, but the ability to concentrate on the Christ's suffering and, at the same time, to defocus away from the Christian mythology that surrounds the imagery is why it has been able to speak to secular modernity. Consequently, the newly-found Isenheim Altarpiece quickly became a standard point of reference for 20th century art.¹⁹ In 1930 Pablo Picasso completed a small painting entitled *Crucifixion*,²⁰ and in 1932 a series of ink drawings and studies followed that were explicitly attributed to the influence of Grünewald's crucifixion.²¹ Most commentators extend Grünewald's influence to Picasso's masterpiece from 1937, *Guernica*.²²

¹⁸ See, e.g., L. Signorelli, *The Crucifixion with St Mary Magdalene* (c. 1495–1500). Oil on canvas, 247 × 165 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

¹⁹ A well-known 20th century painting that makes direct reference to the Isenheim Altarpiece is O. Dix, *War Triptych* (1929–1932). Tempera on wood, central panel 204 × 204 cm, side panels 204 × 102 cm each. Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister, Dresden.

²⁰ P. Picasso, *Crucifixion* (1930). Oil on wood, 51 × 66 cm. Musée national Picasso, Paris. See R. Kaufmann, 'Picasso's Crucifixion of 1930', *The Burlington Magazine* 111/798 (1969), 553–561.

²¹ P. Picasso, *Crucifixion after Grünewald* (1932). Eight inkwashes and ink drawings, 34 × 51 cm each. Musée national Picasso, Paris. See L. Ullmann, *Picasso und der Krieg* (Bielefeld: Karl Kerber, 1993), at 44–47.

²² P. Picasso, *Guernica* (1937). Oil on canvas, 349 × 776 cm. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. On the much-debated political context of the painting, see W. Hofmann, 'Picasso's "Guernica" in Its Historical Context', *Artibus et Historiae* 4/7 (1983), 141–169.

Diane Apostolos-Cappadona argues that although Grünewald's vision of agony and suffering influenced Picasso's work throughout the 1930s, Picasso only attempted to capture the 'haptic' content of the painting, that is, the 'emotive physicality of the human body', while at the same time he clearly disregarded its religious content. Furthermore, Apostolos-Cappadona insists that Picasso did not draw his vision of haptic agony from the tortured body of the Christ but from Mary Magdalene at the foot of the cross:

[...] his vision was empathetic to the agonized hapticity of the Magdalen. Thus, Picasso emphasized all he thought available in the modern world: the cathartic experience of art and the sensitive dynamism of woman. Even in the age of secular spirituality, the theme of the 'essence of agony' continued to be reinterpreted through the hapticity of the female body.²³

While plausible, Apostolos-Cappadona's interpretation is only possible if the figure of the crucified Christ is downplayed as one of Picasso's motifs. This may well be the case in the 1930 painting, but the ink drawings and studies from 1932 that are explicitly attributed to Grünewald's influence would call for quite a different reading. Indeed, a recent exhibition catalogue notes that although the themes of the 1930 oil painting and the 1932 ink drawings are the same, the focus has clearly changed. Picasso now concentrates specifically on the motif of the crucified Christ while the accompanying figures that were central in the oil painting are now either 'vaguely insinuated by a few ink traces' or indistinct white silhouettes against the black background. But the theme of the crucifixion is merely a source for Picasso to develop his own vocabulary of pain and suffering that a few years later culminated in *Guernica*.²⁴ Even when working with the crucifixion theme, Picasso's secularised vision of Christian iconography seems to trace the essence of suffering in the 'haptic' physicality of the Christ's agonised body, and it can do so only by bracketing out the religious narrative that traditionally saturates the imagery. By doing so, Picasso the self-professed atheist reiterates the theological scandal that is already potentially present in the Isenheim Altarpiece.

²³ D. Apostolos-Cappadonna, 'The Essence of Agony: Grünewald's Influence on Picasso', *Artibus et Historiae* 13/26 (1992), 31–47, at 44.

²⁴ F. Calvo Serraller and C. Giménez, eds, *Spanish Painting from El Greco to Picasso: Time, Truth and History* (New York, NY: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2006), at 386–391.

SUFFERING WITHOUT NARRATIVE

Francis Bacon decontextualises the crucifixion motif from its mythological and narrative framework in a very similar way. More immediately influenced by Picasso's art of the 1930s in general than any single work, Bacon's relationship with Grünewald is in a manner of speaking mediated.²⁵ Bacon painted his first crucifixion as early as 1933, and later the crucifixion developed into one of the most important themes of his art. Not only is the crucifixion a central motif for Bacon, but he also painted his most important crucifixion paintings as triptychs which was, of course, one of the preferred forms of medieval devotional art such as altarpieces. But despite these seemingly obvious Christian references, Bacon's art conveys quite a different message. John Russell recounts the effect that Bacon's first widely acknowledged painting *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*²⁶ had when it was first exhibited at the Lefevre Gallery in London in April 1945:

Their [PM: the figures'] anatomy was half-human, half-animal, and they were confined in a low-ceilinged, windowless and oddly proportioned space. They could bite, probe, and suck, and they had very long eel-like necks, but their functioning in other respects was mysterious. Ears and mouths they had, but two at least were sightless. One was unpleasantly bandaged.²⁷

The 1944 *Three Studies* remains the most important of Bacon's crucifixion triptychs. The panels portray three fury-like figures gleefully witnessing an apparent crucifixion that is itself manifestly absent notwithstanding the painting's name. By contrast, in *Three Studies for a Crucifixion*²⁸ nearly two decades later, the right-hand panel, often attributed to the influence of 13th century Florentine artist

²⁵ When questioned about the influence of German and Dutch Renaissance painters, Bacon replies: 'They mean nothing to me.' F. Bacon, *Entretiens avec Michel Archimbaud* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), at 37. On the other hand, Wieland Schmied explicitly lists Grünewald as an immediate influence, but perhaps as a descendant of the 'primitives' celebrated by André Breton and others rather than as a representative of the Northern Renaissance. See W. Schmied, *Francis Bacon: Commitment and Conflict* (Munich/New York, NY: Prestel, 1996), at 73.

²⁶ F. Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944). Oil and pastel on hardboard. Three panels, 94 × 74 cm each. Tate Modern, London.

²⁷ J. Russell, *Francis Bacon* (London: Thames Hudson, 1971), at 10.

²⁸ F. Bacon, *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962). Oil with sand on canvas. Three panels, 198 × 145 cm each. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Cimabue, depicts the crucified body. By decentering the deformed carcass, Bacon has pulled the focus to the right destabilising the alleged aesthetic power of the triptychal form. Finally, in *Crucifixion*²⁹ from 1965, the view focuses unambiguously on the crucified carcass in the centre panel, and the tensions of the painting are for the most part created between the drama of the crucifixion and the casualness with which the identifiable human figures portrayed in the outer panels observe the events.³⁰

Russell points out that for Bacon a ‘crucifixion’ is neither a descriptive title nor a reference to an actual event. It is a ‘generic name for an environment in which bodily harm is done to one or more persons and one or more persons gather to watch’.³¹ What does this imply? Firstly, then, Bacon’s art is as much about inflicting pain as it is about the experience of suffering, and this introduces the ethical ambiguity against which both Bacon’s critics and his public have strongly reacted. In the absence of clear moral direction, Bacon’s crucifixion theme has often been interpreted as a vehicle for the artist’s personal cynicism. Secondly, Bacon’s witnesses, the furies that voluntarily gather to observe the infliction of pain at the base of the crucifixion, are entranced and mesmerised by what they are seeing. This voyeurism can only re-enforce the ethical ambiguity that the paintings are said to represent.³²

If Picasso was initially more interested in the figure of Mary Magdalene deliriously praying at the foot of the cross in Grünewald’s painting, Bacon focuses on the complex emotional and sensory ties that bind the spectator to the crucified carcass, be it visible or not. Anti-religious rather than atheist, Bacon often stressed that his paintings portray ‘a’ and not ‘the’ crucifixion. Although he was himself well aware that adopting the crucifixion theme may impose into his art the narrative or literary structures that he deplored as a non-figurative artist, he comments that:

²⁹ F. Bacon, *Crucifixion* (1965). Oil on canvas. Three panels, 197 × 147 cm each. Staatsgalerie Moderner Kunst, Munich.

³⁰ Bacon painted a fourth crucifixion triptych which, however, is inconsequential for the discussion here. F. Bacon, *Second Version of Triptych 1944* (1988). Oil and acrylic on canvas. Three panels, 198 × 147 cm each. Tate Modern, London.

³¹ Russell, *supra* n. 27, at 113.

³² Bacon identified these spectators as kin to the Oresteian Eumenides. See D. Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (New York, NY: Thames Hudson, 2004), at 44–46.

[...] I haven't found another subject so far that has been as helpful for covering certain areas of human feeling and behaviour. Perhaps it is only because so many people have worked on this particular theme that it has created this armature – I can't think of a better way of saying it – on which one can operate all types of level of feeling.³³

Bacon's reference to the armature of the plastic arts³⁴ seems to suggest that the crucifixion theme is merely a skeletal structure supporting his aesthetics rather than an expressly articulated moral or ethical condemnation of the human condition as, for example, the 1944 *Three Studies* was often seen in the aftermath of World War II. The armature implies a similar disjuncting of the image from the narrative context of the crucifixion as in the case of Picasso. But Didier Anzieu notes that, in Bacon's treatment of the crucifixion theme, one can still recognise the traces of a sacred history. But it is a history that has not lived up to its promise of redemption. It is a Christian history, but Anglican rather than Catholic or Orthodox, an insular rather than a Mediterranean reading of it.³⁵ It is suffering but left without the promised redemption, and the emphasis given to the betrayal is what Anzieu identifies as being particularly English about Bacon's art. Gilles Deleuze, on the other hand, uses the notion of 'isolating the Figure' to designate Bacon's art as an intermediate 'realist' position between the figurative and the non-figurative:

The figurative (representation) implies namely the relationship of an image to an object that it allegedly illustrates; but it also implies the relationship of an image with other images within a composite whole that precisely delivers to each its object. Narration is the correlate of illustration. A history will always slide or attempt to slide between two figures in order to animate the illustrated whole. Isolation is, then, the simplest way, necessary albeit insufficient, to break away from representation, to break the narration, to prevent illustration, to liberate the Figure: to stick with the facts.³⁶

In the triptychal form, Bacon often brings together elements that are originally unrelated. Firstly, there is the historical dimension of the form and its religious connotations as a direct reference to the medieval winged altarpieces such as Grünewald's. But secondly, as a

³³ Sylvester, *supra* n. 32, at 44.

³⁴ An armature is a standing supportive framework often made of wire around which wax or clay is then sculpted.

³⁵ D. Anzieu and M. Monjauze, *Francis Bacon, ou le portrait de l'homme désespéré* (Paris: Seuil/Archimbaud, 2004), at 60–61.

³⁶ G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), at 12 [PM: footnote deleted].

clearly modern reference, the three panels also suggest a panoramic view that envelops the viewer from three sides. The two conflicting elements bring about the contradiction that isolates the image from the narrative. As Wieland Schmied notes:

Whereas the first element establishes a sense of distance and makes the picture look remote and unapproachable, the second feature is intended to have exactly the opposite effect: the viewer is confronted directly with the work, which encircles him and forces him to engage with it. These contradictions are compounded by a further element which offered Bacon the possibility of breaking down a complex pictorial situation into separate components and dealing with several corresponding figures, while at the same time retaining the option of cutting the narrative thread at will and mercilessly expunging any hint of narrative coherence that threatened to creep into the picture.³⁷

Although Bacon was never too keen to discuss his own art in abstract and generalised terms, he had an interest in the theoretical writings of Michel Leiris who also became a close friend. Russell traces Leiris's initial influence to a book on bullfighting that Bacon received from the author shortly after their first encounter.³⁸ In a central passage allegedly highlighted by Bacon, Leiris quotes Baudelaire and claims that beauty is only possible if something accidental or contingent intervenes producing an imperfection or a crack that releases beauty from its glacial and stagnant state. For Leiris, beauty is not simply an intelligible combination of opposing elements. In their reciprocal antagonism, one element tends to erupt actively in its opposite 'making its mark like a wound, like damage'. Beauty may suggest the existence of an ideal and logical order, but this order must always include within itself the seed of its own destruction. Or if it is the destructive element that is identified as beauty, then it must be illuminated by something ideal:

Thus beauty that only exists as a function of what self-destructs and regenerates itself will sometimes appear as a calmness that is consumed by the potential of a storm, sometimes as a frenzy that sets itself into order aiming to contain its inner tempest behind an emotionless mask. Beauty will always occur between these two poles acting as living forces: on the one hand, the *right* element of immortal, sovereign, and sculpted beauty; on the other hand, the *left* sinister element associated with misfortune, accident, and sin.³⁹

³⁷ Schmied, *supra* n. 25, at 76.

³⁸ Russell, *supra* n. 27, at 88–90. See also A. Daki, 'Leiris/Bacon, une amitié à l'œuvre', *Revue de littérature comparée* No 306 (2003), 169–181 and Bacon, *supra* n. 25, at 110–113.

³⁹ M. Leiris, *Miroir de la tauromachie* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1981), at 36–37.

In a text specifically dedicated to Bacon, Leiris comments that Bacon's crucifixions limit their thematic relationship with the man on the cross to the carcass that has been hung up on display without reference to either the myth or the melodrama. Bacon's triptychs are all the result of secularising and updating ancient religious paintings that made the connection between the man-God and the resurrected body through the act of crucifying. But all that remains of this iconographic imagery is its 'majestic ordinance [*ordonnance majestueuse*]'. It is now complemented with a very different content including nothing that could be summarised in a cold and logical account. Bacon may, for example, append minor motifs to the painting, but they are not the saintly figures or peasant scenes traditionally found at the base of the cross or in its background. In Leiris's view, the Christian iconographic tradition may define the architecture of Bacon's triptychs, but it is present only as a purely formal structure.⁴⁰ Leiris's insistence on formality and structure are reminiscent of Bacon's own metaphor of the 'armature'.

Leiris insists that in Bacon's crucifixions the events as narrated by the Evangelists have been banished from the paintings. In their stead is a 'seal of blood' in the furies that dominate most of Bacon's triptychal crucifixions. But even if such compositions are undoubtedly marked with a tragic character, Leiris maintains that Bacon's tragedy takes place in the absence of all pathos and without a single element of theatricality. Only the rigidity of the general structure is set into play with the 'marmorised consistency' of the presented figures, and this, Leiris explains, conforms to the very nature of tragedy. But unlike drama where actions are animated by sentiments and circumstances, the tragedy that Bacon portrays constructs its characters from a single block and makes them puppets of their obligations or misfortunes. This is how Bacon makes manifest his profoundly realist spirit even when working with elements of myth:

[...] what he shows us does nothing but exists there, epiphanically, and with a texture that is too dense for us to be able to reject it.⁴¹

Leiris's aesthetics may lack the humanistic appeal of Levinas's philosophy, but both are explicitly opposed to a totalising tradition

⁴⁰ M. Leiris, *Francis Bacon, face et profil* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004), at 48–49.

⁴¹ Leiris, *supra* n. 40, at 130.

of thinking. Leiris's 'left' element pierces the totality of an ideal order leaving it wounded in much a similar way as the suffering that, for Levinas, is unable to take on meaning. The aesthetical wound that enables beauty to take place also provides the cut through which the ethical call of true art can be heard. In Bacon's triptychs, the call places the viewer in the paradoxical position where he has no option but to identify himself with the voyeur-ghouls at the foot of the cross and, consequently, to acknowledge his ambiguous double-role in witnessing pain. The scene of suffering both attracts and repels; it enables both condemnation of and participation in the suffering of the Other. And it is between these opposing poles that an ethics can take place.

SUFFERING, ETHICS AND THE EXPRESSIONLESS

Grünwald's painting of the crucifixion has reportedly also been on the wall or desk of numerous thinkers. For example, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth who always kept a picture of the painting above his bedside table developed his notion of God as the 'wholly Other' (*das ganz Andere*) with reference to the dialectic of the Christ and John the Baptist in the painting.⁴² More recently Jean-Luc Nancy has written a short essay on some theological aspects of the altarpiece that Martin Buber originally brought up.⁴³

Gershom Scholem recounts that Walter Benjamin also had a picture of the Isenheim Altarpiece on the wall of his study for many years. In 1913 Benjamin had made a special visit to Colmar to see the original paintings. Scholem observes that in Benjamin's notes from

⁴² See e.g. K. Barth, *Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes. Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik. Gesamtausgabe. Band 14* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982), at 340–341. On God as the wholly Other and Barth's dialectical theology, see K. Barth, 'Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie', in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925. Gesamtausgabe. Band 19* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1990) 144–175.

⁴³ See M. Buber, 'Der Altar', in *Hinweise gesammelte Essays* (Zürich: Manesse, 1953) 27–29, J.-L. Nancy, 'Athéologie chromatique', in S. Lecoq-Ramond, ed., *Histoire du Musée d'Unterlinden et de ses collections: de la Révolution à la Première guerre mondiale* (Colmar: Société Schongauer – Musée d'Unterlinden, 2003) 391–398. Both have been published in English in *Journal of Visual Culture* 4/1 (2005) 116–128.

that period, he is beginning to address the overwhelming power of the paintings as what he would come to call the expressionless (*das Ausdruckslose*).⁴⁴ Indeed, in an essay a few years after his visit, Benjamin specifically comments on how Grünewald paints his sacred figures. Sanctity is depicted in the radiance of the halos but, Benjamin concludes, the radiant can be true and expressionless only if it is refracted from the nocturnal.⁴⁵ This is what Grünewald seems to be doing in the Isenheim Altarpiece where the crucified Christ provides the light in the painting.

In her analysis of historical court trials, Shoshana Felman uses Benjamin's notion of the expressionless to depict the mute traumas that the language of law will never be able to articulate. At the same time, she notes a possible theoretical affinity between Benjamin and Levinas:

[...] expressionless [...] are those whom violence has deprived of expression; those who, on the one hand, have been historically reduced to silence, and who, on the other hand, have been historically made faceless, deprived of their *human* face – deprived, that is, not only of a language and a voice but even of the mute *expression* always present in a *living* human face.⁴⁶

In Felman's reading, the expressionless seems to be for the most part another way of accounting for the disempowerment of the traumatised victim. The expressionless is a human figure that has been denied his humanity because he is victimised into silence, and consequently the victim also loses his ability to express his humanity. Such a humanistic reading of Benjamin is problematic on a number of accounts, but especially because it makes such a concrete reading of the Hölderlinian caesura that is at the heart of Benjamin's theory.⁴⁷ Hölderlin annotated his two translations of Sophocles with notes where he discusses how in both tragedies Tiresias's intervention acts as a caesura that interrupts the 'calculable law' of the tragic structure:

⁴⁴ G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin – die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), at 51–52.

⁴⁵ W. Benjamin, 'Sokrates', in *Gesammelte Schriften. Band II · I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977) 129–132, at 130.

⁴⁶ S. Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious. Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2002), at 13. See, however, Felman, *ibid.*, at 184–185, notes 114 and 116.

⁴⁷ Felman, *supra* n. 46, at 163–164.

At such a moment, the man forgets himself and the God, and turns around, admittedly in a holy way, like a traitor – At the extreme limit of suffering, nothing indeed remains but the conditions of time or space.⁴⁸

Claudia Wegener hears in Hölderlin's words how the extreme limits of suffering drawn by the caesura form the enclosure and limiting interiority of the *agon*, and this is where Levinas steps in once again:

This interiority at the outer limit – *agonia*, agony, the struggle unto death – is also an opening to and an approaching of the other, and thus, perhaps, an opening to some kind of communion.⁴⁹

In the famous passage on the expressionless in his essay on Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities*, Benjamin begins by noting that while creation produces a world from nothingness, art always emerges from chaos. Art will never be able to completely escape its chaotic origins because it cannot make anything out of it. Instead art enchants chaos into the world, but only for a fleeting moment. For if the chaotic became truly alive, it would soon transform everything into mere semblance. For Benjamin, it is the expressionless in true art that interrupts the movement of beauty and harmony that would otherwise run the risk of turning art into mere semblance and petrifying it into a single moment:

⁴⁸ F. Hölderlin, 'Anmerkungen zum Oedipus', in *Sämtliche Werke. Fünfter Band. Übersetzungen* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1952) 193–202, at 202. See also F. Hölderlin, 'Anmerkungen zur Antigonä', in *Sämtliche Werke. Fünfter Band. Übersetzungen* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1952) 263–273. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has provided an influential contemporary reading of Hölderlin's caesura situating it within the political context of modernity. See P. Lacoue-Labarthe, 'La césure du spéculatif', in *L'imitation des modernes. Typographies II* (Paris: Galilée, 1986) 39–69 and P. Lacoue-Labarthe, *La fiction du politique: Heidegger, l'art et la politique* (Paris: Cristian Bourgois Editeur, 1987), at 64–72.

⁴⁹ C. Wegener, 'A Music of Translation', *MLN* 115/5, Comparative Literature Issue (2000), 1052–1084, at 1066. Blanchot addresses this moment of the caesura as the 'reversal' (*retournement*). See M. Blanchot, 'L'itinéraire de Hölderlin', in *L'espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955) 363–374. Further on Hölderlin: 'While rhythm disengages the multiple from the unity that eludes it, while it appears regular and seems to set its pace according to the rule, rhythm however threatens the rule because the former always exceeds the latter through a reversal: even if rhythm is at play or in operation within measure, it cannot be measured in it.' M. Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), at 173–174.

The expressionless is the critical power [*Gewalt*] which, while unable to separate semblance from essence in art, prevents them from mingling. It possesses this power as a moral dictum. In the expressionless, the sublime power of the true appears as that which determines the language of the real world according to the laws of the moral world. For it shatters whatever still survives the legacy of chaos in all beautiful semblance: the false, errant totality – the absolute totality. Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol.⁵⁰

Just as the caesura, Benjamin's expressionless is the breach or interruptive silence that enables a work of art to reveal its innermost essence. In Goethe's novel, the caesura is represented by Otilie, a beautiful and silent woman, whose qualities are then restated in Benjamin's interpretation of the artwork's – in this case the novel's – expressionless and silent beauty. In the silence of the caesura '... harmony and with it all expression collapses in order to make room for an expressionless power that is inherent in all artistic media'.⁵¹

In Grünewald's *Crucifixion*, the expressionless is the brutal experience of suffering that cannot be narrated. Not because a silenced Christ nailed to the cross has been denied the ability or possibility to express his torment as Felman's reading might suggest, but because even after every detail of the painting, after every element of attribute, composition and colour has been accurately depicted and accounted for, a residue remains, an ethical truth that cannot be appropriated but that nevertheless calls for a response. In much a similar way, a residue will always remain after the law has attempted to bring meaning to the atrocities committed through its causal narratives. The suffering of the individual will, in the end, remain expressionless, meaningless, and 'for nothing'. As such, its appeal calling for my response is much louder than anything the trial will invoke through its choreographed proceedings.

Grünewald's suffering Christ is not deprived of his humanity. On the contrary, he is radically human. His radical humanity interrupts

⁵⁰ W. Benjamin, 'Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften', in *Gesammelte Schriften*. Band I · I (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974) 123–201, at 181.

⁵¹ Benjamin, *supra* n. 50, at 182. On Benjamin's Hölderlinian affinities in general, see B. Hanssen, "'Dichtermut" and "Blödigkeit": Two Poems by Hölderlin Interpreted by Walter Benjamin', *MLN* 112/5, Comparative Literature Issue (1997), 786–816. A further example of the literary expressionless could, perhaps, be Marguerite Duras's novel *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* (1964) where the painful numbness of the protagonist's loveless life is at the same time literature's inability to express her suffering in narrative form.

the totality of the Christian myth; it questions me and summons me in its appeal, putting me into question. The Other's expressionless suffering resists my attempts to conceive of my existence within a totalising whole because it refuses to drain its meaning into my efforts to assimilate it into my world. The Other calls to me: 'My suffering is always more than you can imagine.' And by doing so, the Other reaffirms the majesty and highness that will always be her position in relation to me.

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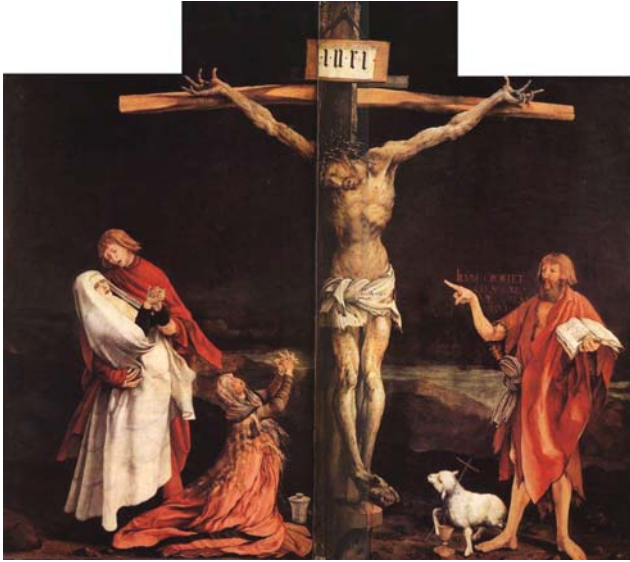
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Appendix



Matthias Grünewald, *Crucifixion*, central section of the Isenheim Altarpiece with closed wings (1512-1515). Oil on panel, 269 x 307 cm. Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar.



Pablo Picasso, *Crucifixion after Grünewald* (1932). India ink on paper, 34 x 51 cm. Musée national Picasso, Paris.



Francis Bacon, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944). Oil and pastel on hardboard. Three panels, 94 x 74 cm each. Tate Modern, London.