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***Via pulchritudinis*: the narrative of violence and vulnerability in painting in view of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic aesthetics**

Abstract: In the article, I explore the many faces of violence and vulnerability evoked in religious and secular painting. Drawing upon Hans-Georg Gadamer's phenomenology of art as play, I aim to show that the creative activity of both the artist and the viewer exceeds the mere actualization of the past event or the instantiation of poetic fantasy. Bringing into conversation Bosch's, Caravaggio's, Millais's, and Waterhouse's masterpieces, this essay interrogates how their embodiments of the uncanny proximity of violence and vulnerability as two conflicting sides of our human experience complicate the expected symmetry and clear-cut distinction between belligerency and gentleness, powerfulness and the powerlessness, benevolence and malevolence. Inviting us to appreciate the authenticity of their subtle meanings in the continuous veiling and unveiling (*Verbergung/Entbergung*) of truth, the selected artworks prompt, simultaneously, a possibility of our self-recognition. In the process of our patient tarrying in front of them, we are called on to attend to and acknowledge the more complex realities that speak to our lived experience and defy its apparent homogeneity.

Keywords: art, violence, vulnerability, Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutic aesthetics.

Introduction: Gadamer's gloss on the *eventing* of art and the historical/fantastic event in art

Developing his inimitable phenomenology of art as play in *Truth and Method*, his *opus magnum*, as well as in the collections of essays, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, and *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*, Gadamer proposes a novel approach to aesthetics.¹ He examines what happens *to* us and *in* us when we contemplate art and argues that, as viewers, we enter an intimate conversation in which an artwork speaks to us, puts a claim on us, and provokes a change in us. His phenomenological-ontological conceptualization of art forefronts the performative aspect of art, which embraces the dialogic-transformational character of an aesthetic encounter. Contemplating an artwork, the viewer is addressed by it and is called on to respond. According to Gadamer, an aesthetic experience is an event (*Ereignis*): “Art has its ‘being’ in the *Vollzug*—the vital, living event of its appearing or its performance” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 215). His notion of the *eventing* of art can be explained thus: “For Gadamer, the kind of truth claim made on us by art cannot be understood in the abstract as, say, the quality of a proposition or statement. Rather, he believes, this claim to truth appears as the culmination of an event, one that thus unfolds in the sensuously embodied fullness of place and time” (George, 2011, p. 110). An aesthetic experience is an event in which we are captivated by the truth that emerges in the continuous veiling and unveiling of meaning (*Verbergung/Entbergung*) (cf. Gadamer 1987, 259), rather than master that which happens. This truth not only shatters what is familiar to the viewer but, much more importantly, effectuates his/her seminal transformation.

Using the metaphor of a game to describe what occurs when we contemplate an artwork, Gadamer argues for the uncontrollability of what happens, maintaining that it is the backward-and-forward movement itself that is decisive and speaks to the essence of play and not the conscious actions of the players. He puts the players' attitude below the “higher determination”—what is outside the players themselves—as the deciding factor in play (Gadamer, 1977, p. 53), radicalizing in this way our thinking about the passive/active role of the spectator and advocating for the “middle voice”:

¹ The first part of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, entitled: “The Question of Truth as it Emerges in the Experience of Art” is quintessential for an understanding of his approach to aesthetics (Gadamer, 2000, 1–169). Significantly, Gadamer begins his greatest work of philosophical hermeneutics with recourse to art and explication of the experience of art, placing, thus, aesthetics within hermeneutics.

The alternatives of either active or passive do not do justice to the subtle balance inherent in hermeneutics. Despite the hesitations in his account, Gadamer definitely moves beyond the active/passive mode of thinking. Play *replaces* the subject. “To replace” here means to place again, to displace and not to substitute or to supersede. The middle voice as internal *diathesis* points to the volume of the hermeneutic event: the verb speaks and encompasses the subject. Play’s replacing the subject highlights “under” in understanding. It does not submerge the *understanding* subject because it does not erase “standing” in understanding. (Eberhard 2004, p. 70).

Our stepping beyond the rigid barrier between passivity and activity, as Gadamer contends, leads us to trust deeper the fullness of the engagement that we experience in an aesthetic encounter².

In Gadamer’s phenomenological-ontological model, our contemplation of art is *an experience of Being*. This observation stands in contrast to Kant’s reduction of the experience of art to a purely subjective response (cf. Gadamer, 1986, pp. 32–33). Recognizing the impossibility of our mastering what happens to us when we contemplate art, Gadamer defies the traditional account of an aesthetic encounter as grounded in subjectivity and asserts its secondary role (cf. Grondin, 2002a, p. 39; Davey, 2016, p. 6). Maintaining that in an aesthetic encounter, what is brought to experience is “the totality of experienceable world,” Gadamer avers the ontological dimension of art. By reasoning the conversational character of an aesthetic experience as immersed in our general experience of finitude, he proposes a novel approach to aesthetics, whose core is the interrogation of the *event-like* nature of art.

The underlying motifs of Gadamer’s aesthetics: the phenomenology of art as play and the *eventing* of art draw our attention to “the being of an artwork.” His stance in this respect can be explained thus: “the game analogy suggests that the act of spectatorship contributes to enhancing the being of the artwork by bringing what is at play within it to fuller realization” (Davey, 2016, p. 6). The enhancement of the art’s being indicates yet another important facet of Gadamer’s hermeneutic aesthetics—“an increase in being” (*Zuwachs an Sein*) (Gadamer, 2000, pp. 135–136), which is the crux of his claim of the ontological dimension of the experience of art. The notion of “an

² I offer a detailed explanation of Gadamer’s disavowal of the passivity/activity distinction and of his premise of our being ruled over rather than ruling an aesthetic encounter in *On Beauty and Being: Hans-Georg Gadamer’s and Virginia Woolf’s Hermeneutics of the Beautiful* (2021).

increase in being” is two-fold; it embraces the excess that concerns a work of art itself: “...the language of art means an excess of meaning that is present in the work itself. The inexhaustibility that distinguishes the language art speaks from all translation into concepts rests on this excess of meaning” (Gadamer, 1986, p. 130), but also the viewer’s ‘increase in being’—the self’s enlargement. The excess means the realization of an artwork’s full potential in the possible, manifold interpretations. Simultaneously, while the meaning of an artwork is being unveiled and is self-manifesting, the viewer uncovers the uncharted territories of his/her *self* (Gadamer, 1986, p. 129). The unfolding of truth in an aesthetic experience precipitates the viewer’s self-understanding (cf. Hołda, 2021).

The process of self-questioning that an aesthetic encounter provokes is tied to how we are addressed by an artwork as well as our presumptive knowledge about it. To be moved by a work of art is to be moved from the inside out, with one’s entire being. The proximity of understanding its meaning creates the feeling of uncanniness³. Understanding is an epiphany that always happens at the boundary between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the accessible and the inaccessible, and is recognized as curiously relating to the human self. Gadamer accentuates the overpowering way art addresses us and speaks to us. The invasive “seeing” of us that takes place causes transformation to be inevitable; art demands our *metanoia* (Gadamer, 1986, p. 34)⁴. For Gadamer, the dialogical and the transformational aspects of an aesthetic experience are intertwined.

I shall use this brief sketching of Gadamer’s phenomenology of art as play as a point of departure for a discussion of how the embodiment of violence and vulnerability in painting can impact our understanding of the phenomena in question, and, more specifically, how it precipitates our response to the points of indeterminacy and the regions of the vacillating border line between power and powerlessness. All the pictures discussed in the next sections of this essay address violence and vulnerability from the perspective of the uncanny closeness of those two opposing sides of our human condition. Hieronymus Bosch’s *Christ Mocked*, Caravaggio’s *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, and Millais’s *The Black Brunswicker* reconstruct some

³ A detailed account of Gadamer’s explication of the uncanny in an aesthetic encounter is offered in *On Beauty and Being* (Hołda, 2021, pp. 130, 179); The notion of the uncanny in a broader context of Gadamer’s inimitable insights into the nature of language is potently explained, for instance, by Jean Grondin in *The Philosophy of Gadamer* (Grondin, 2002b, pp. 123–142).

⁴ See also, e.g., Hołda (2021, p. 130).

historical event. Waterhouse's *La Belle Dame sans Merci* rereads and reimagines the fantastic event of a romantic encounter between a knight and an elf-woman from John Keats's poem of the same title. However, neither the reconstruction of history nor the revisitation of the imaginary event is just a mimetic representation of the real or imagined past. Those pictures are instances of the creative interrogation of both the events of violence in a historical or fantastic milieu and of human disposition towards violence. They produce nuanced interpretations that chime with the various perceptions of human woundedness that can both cause outrage and set off vulnerability.

After Gadamer, we can affirm that the creative activities of the artist and viewer far exceed the actualization of the past event (cf. Gadamer, 1986, pp. 129–130), and we may add that they outstrip the concretization of the fantastic world (myth, fable) as it is reimagined in another work. In the interplay between the painter's and the spectator's imagination, an aesthetic experience, understood as a game, is the true locus of the creation of polyvalent meanings. These multifarious senses that are inferred can not only differ from a viewer to a viewer, but can possibly inspire a pivotal change in our understanding, which, according to Gadamer, is also self-understanding (*Selbstverständnis*):

... an encounter with the authentic, as a familiarity that includes surprise, the experience of art is the *experience* in a real sense and must master ever new the task that experience involves: the task of integrating it into the whole of one's own orientation to the world and one's self-understanding. The language of art is constituted precisely by the fact that it speaks to the self-understanding of every person, and it does this as something ever present and by means of its own contemporaneity. (Gadamer, 1986, p. 129)

Exploring the messages imbued in the selected artists' narrative artworks, we can ask a question whether their appeal is the same as it was at the time when they were conceived? Probably it is not, but this answer directs us to acknowledge the potential of hermeneutics in opening and re-opening us to listen to the marginalized interpretative voices and of including the new and the startlingly contradictory interpretations to the official ones.

Our reception of art, influenced by a historical moment, does not wholly predetermine the interpretative versatility of our responses. Even if the time of the artworks' creation seems to impose a certain, also, delimiting interpretation, it does not hamper our capability to infer messages that emerge from our intimate contact with them, and which transcend the

historical moment of their creation. Going further, Gadamer outstrips the argument of the significance of the limitation ensuing from the so-called author's intention and opens a wider, trans-subjective perspective, asserting, at the same time, aesthetics' legitimate and telling space within hermeneutics:

... in understanding a work of art, we cannot be satisfied with the cherished hermeneutical rule that the *mens auctoris* [author's intention] limits the task of understanding posed by a text. Rather just the expansion of the hermeneutical perspective to include the language of art makes it obvious how little the subjectivity of the act of meaning suffices to be the object of understanding. But this fact has a general significance, and to that extent aesthetics is an important element of general hermeneutic. (Gadamer, 1986, p. 130).

It is commonly acknowledged that our reception of art is never restricted to the classic explications that we can read or hear, since we create our own personal, individuated answer that is rooted in our lived experience. In addition, our reception often exceeds our experiences, inviting a new experience. Gadamer says that an experienced man is not one that has experienced a lot, but rather one that is open to new experiences. His hermeneutic sensibility makes room and advocates for "... readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by dogma" (Gadamer, 2003, p. 362)⁵.

What readings and re-readings of the events of violence and vulnerability are stimulated by Bosch's, Caravaggio's, Millais's, and Waterhouse's paintings? Can they fundamentally alter or broaden our seeing and, thus, understanding of the violent and the vulnerable as held together in a perplexing entanglement? Can interpreting these masterworks alongside Gadamer's phenomenology of art disclose some vital understanding of the profound and irreducible complexity of violence and vulnerability at the existential and phenomenological level? The answers to those queries are often filled with contradictory and aching truths about our human condition. The philosophical stance of non-violence seems to surface in those masterpieces not as the choice of a better way of life but as the inexorably deep meaning

⁵ Gadamer's remark regarding general experience is further elaborated when he draws our attention to the correlation between the "vivid presentness and contemporaneity" and the paradoxical newness and surprise that an aesthetic experience entails: "For experience in its deeper sense as experience is never merely a confirmation of expectations but a surprise of them" (Gadamer, 1986, p. 200); See also Gadamer (1986, p. 123).

of human existence. While awakening us to that which is inherent in our existence and helping us transcend our estrangement from the laws of the universe, Bosch, Caravaggio, Millais, and Waterhouse alert us to the exigency of an abandonment of a naïve belief in easy solutions and clear-cut answers to the prescient questions that pertain to our *being-in-the-world*. The symbolic richness of Bosch's, Caravaggio's, Millais's, and Waterhouse's narrative artworks invites us to appreciate the authenticity of their subtle meanings in the incessant process of unravelling the intricate ideas that they problematize. Contemplating the selected artworks, we acknowledge the revelation of deeper complexities in the seemingly unambiguous distinction between power and powerlessness, loss and gain, violence and vulnerability.

Hieronymus Bosch's *Christ mocked*: the imperative of non-violence

Hieronymus Bosch, the Dutch painter living 1474–1516 is famous for his vivid, albeit bizarre images of the garden of Eden and the equally intense and grotesque embodiments of hell that are off-limits. His surreal evocations of the religious themes of human sinfulness and fallenness⁶ draw attention mostly through their spectacular, macabre symbolism, while faithfully rendering the Bible's metaphorical language (see e.g., Robinson, 2022). As a result, Bosch's convoluted, hermeneutically opaque images, which call to the mind the Bible's figurative vocabulary, pose continuous queries for generations of art historians and critics. His painting *Christ Mocked* (1510) is an excruciating depiction of the Biblical scene in which Jesus is mocked and crowned with thorns. Cogently rendering human disposition towards violence and insidiousness, this artwork interrogates the salvific message of Christ's death (cf. Capron 2021), drawing the viewer instantly into the depths of the theology of the redeemer's passion. The outstanding appeal of the painting arises from the sharp contrast between Jesus's morbid and frail figure and the bawdy circle of his tormentors that epitomizes obnoxious malignity. A large portion of the picture's extraordinarily emotive power can also be attributed to the artist's brilliant concentration on the oppressors' eyes and facial expressions that pull us into their world of evil, distortion, frenzy, or even madness. The inward gaze of Jesus's persecutors focuses on his gaunt

⁶ The astounding and enigmatic character of Bosch's paintings has been the subject of a centuries-old debate. Walter Bosing summarizes the extant research by pinpointing a two-fold approach: "Some writers have seen him as a sort of fifteenth century Surrealist who dredged up his disturbing forms from the subconscious mind; his name is frequently linked with that of Salvador Dali. For others Bosch's art reflects esoteric practices of the Middle Ages, such as alchemy, astrology, or witchcraft" (Bosing, 2000, p. 7).

form that capably expresses his innocence, unspeakable suffering, but also mystical perseverance and an understanding of mission.

The grimaces of all four men looking intently at Christ convey a range of emotions that stimulate us to interrogate the nuanced meanings of violence and vulnerability as entangled in the peculiar *danse macabre*. The oppressors' gazes nimbly reflect their mockery, brutality, and stupidity, as well as the confusion that governs the moment of the unsettlingly humiliating encounter between the human and the divine—God's yielding to man's violent, hideous, and insane action. Interestingly, Bosch uses fully the space of the canvas for his characters, placing them on three planes: Christ in the center, two men slightly further, and two others at the very bottom of the picture, in the foreground (cf. Capron, 2021). This stratified positioning accentuates the dynamic, but, at the same time, enclosed, or even claustrophobic circle of cruelty laid bare by holiness, or sanctity as violated by abominable barbarity.

Drawing our attention to the minute particulars of the tormentors' attire, their eyes, and hands, Bosch's picture creates a daunting image of domination, wickedness, and sinfulness. Following the part-and-whole paradigm of hermeneutic interrogation, while patiently examining Christ's and his executioners' hands in the picture, we discover an engulfing blend of innocence and malignance. Jesus's hands are clasped together in a sign of submission that is drenched in ethereal calm. The artist's stunning precision in portraying the diversity of the oppressors' gestures amply embodies the complexity of their nefarious and callous deeds⁷. The hand of the man on the left, covered with an iron glove and shown in the moment of thorning, represents the unrestrained, spiteful act of torture (cf. Capron 2021), and accords with the hand of the man on the right, resting on Christ's shoulder, while the tormentor commits a perturbing act of treachery.

Bosch's ingenious representing of deceitfulness in the posture and facial expression of this character enables us to elicit a thorough exegesis of the more than one face of violence. The artist draws our attention to fiendishness that can misleadingly hide behind the veneer of susceptibility. The surreptitious kind of violence, like the mythical Trojan horse, erodes

⁷ The extant scholarship on Bosch's art highlights his meticulous rendition of human behaviors. For instance, arguing for the similarities between Leonardo da Vinci and Bosch, Ingrid Rowland indicates the latter's superb concentration on the grotesque in depicting human faces as well as behaviors: "Both artists were fascinated by grotesque human faces, but Bosch also detailed grotesque human behavior with a bawdy abandon all his own. No matter how closely we look at his minutely particular works, there is always something more to see" (Rowland, 2016).

the Other from within and destroys. It metaphorically invades the Other's integrity and safety, deceiving while appearing to be docile and innocent. Inducing trust and signaling friendliness while meaning hostility, violence camouflages the real danger. In the thought-provoking combination of the hand of the man on the right side and his head leaning towards Jesus, as if to listen attentively and subserviently, the depiction of his confrontational *dis-position* calls to the mind Judas' betrayal of Jesus. The effect of forebodingness is heightened by the image of a spiked collar—a dog's wear—on the neck of this character, which clearly suggests that Jesus is hounded by a horde of raucous oppressors, reminding us of an attack of fierce dogs: "For dogs have surrounded Me; The congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me" (Psalm 22:16)⁸. This image effectively illustrates human perversity and treacherousness.

The intimate encounter that occurs in the close physical contact between Christ's hands and the hand of the old man in red and blue, at the lower left corner, aptly communicates the severe clash between Jesus's virtuousness and piety and the dirty sedition of a human being. The profundity of Christ's inner agony in this scene of violent abuse is achieved through the depiction of his holy indifference to suffering as his robe is being torn off by the hands of the man at the bottom right corner. One is amazed by the man's callous stare that matches the filthiness of his deed. Deriving its indisputable force from the commanding juxtaposition of torture and mock homage with Christ's divinity and goodness, Bosch's rereading of God's passion makes us see how violence and vulnerability come together in a terrifying embrace.

This most moving study of humbleness and humiliation, on the one hand, and horror and depravity, on the other, is conducted with a telling use of colors and shapes (cf. Lewis-Anthony, 2008, p. 2). Christ's modest and slender body clad in a pale, unpretentious robe is contrasted with the opulence of the oppressors' gestures and the gaudiness of their wear: the domineering green, red, and black colors on the canvas. By capturing the complex nature of the contradictory features in the persecuted (physical meekness and spiritual power) and the persecutors (anxiety and wickedness), Bosch's delineation of Christ's passion remains open to the ampleness of hermeneutic investigation. Not granting us an authoritative or univocal interpretation, the painting provokes an ardent need for a deeper understanding of human

⁸ All quotations from the Bible are from the King James Bible Online. <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org>.

motivation, irrational seeking of dominance, and the execution of violence as confronted with the unspeakable vulnerability of the Incarnated God and his wounded humaneness.

Remarkably, the isolation of the episode from any contextual details draws our attention to what is happening to Christ, without diverting our thoughts to the background possibly also laden with meaning (cf. Capron, 2021; see also, e.g., Lewis-Anthony, 2008, p. 3). In this way, our reception of the painting's message is focused primarily on Jesus's poignant entrapment and is not distracted by the marginal or the secondary. The anonymity and scantiness of the backdrop directs our eyes to the figure of Christ, who emanates with an otherworldly power mixed with palpable weakness and prompts us to fully contemplate his passion. With the crown of thorns sort of hanging in the air and casting a halo over Jesus's head (Capron, 2021), the act of his crowning becomes more ambiguous and stimulates our apprehension of a range of meanings that dwell in the in-between of acquiescence and defiance⁹. We are aware that the crowning is an act of monstrous brutality, and, at the same time, it is a telling, if peculiar, confirmation of Jesus's kingship. Bosch goes beyond the schematic treatment of the Biblical episode, encouraging us to appreciate the significance and the beauty of a non-dualistic response to his pictorial narrative.

As hermeneutic investigation reveals, there is no single or magisterial interpretation of any work of art. *Christ Mocked* stimulates us to uncover the ever-deeper complexities that arise in the recognition of its meaning, which on a general level can be narrowed down to the universal story of the violent entrapment of a human being. Dramatized in innumerable works of art and literature, this foundational narrative is a rhizome story that originates multifarious and non-hierarchical interpretations of violence. Significantly, one of the most conspicuous features of Bosch's painting is the image of Christ looking at us in a way that is difficult to escape¹⁰. One may say that the performative aspect of this picture expresses the quintessence of Gadamer's phenomenology of art that takes cognizance of the intimate conversation

⁹ The moment of thorning, which contains an inherently contradictory message, does not cease to draw attention of art historians. Justin Lewis-Anthony puts its immanent ambiguity thus: "The circle of thorns hovers behind Christ's head like a kind of vicious halo" (Lewis-Anthony, 2008, p. 2). This exceptionally stirring element of the picture communicates Bosch's hermeneutic sensibility and his exquisite proclivity for elusiveness.

¹⁰ Jesus's firm yet gentle look is present in Bosch's other pictures, for instance, in his most famous *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1500). Cf. e.g., Hieronymus Bosch: At the Border of Disorder (2016).

between an artwork and the viewer. Inescapably and stirringly, our gaze encounters Jesus's gaze, which deepens the sense of the epiphanic moment of our realization that God's passion is the act of a moving defenselessness in the face of violence.

Interestingly, Christ's frailty and paleness, as well as his one-of-a-kind subtlety and unimposing comportment call to the mind the representations of him as the unicorn in the Middle Ages (cf. e.g.: Beal, 2019, pp. 154–188; see also Fernow, 2022). In medieval but also in Renaissance art, the beautiful and miraculous creature of the unicorn is often captured as hunted, encircled, and subdued. Those portrayals are saturated with profound religious symbolism. In the hunt image (*The Unicorn Crossing the Stream*, see Zucker & Harris, 2015), this extraordinary animal, which possesses healing capacity, is depicted as wounded, and its wound is commonly associated with Christ's wound on the side. We can discern the connection between Christ's wound and his power of health-giving: "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5) and unicorn's capability of healing. The image of the unicorn as enclosed, either by the circle of hunters or the low fence, calls to the mind Christ's subjugation.

In Bosch's painting as well as in the medieval and Renaissance pictures of the unicorn, the state of submission has basically a double meaning that can possibly expand to yet other, subliminal senses. The unicorn can easily leap over the low fence that encircles it. Jesus in his divine power can free himself from the most repugnant state of being ensnared. The imagery of the unthinkable surrender is expressive of love so deep that it gently pushes the lover to a complete acquiescence. The painting powerfully renders God's vulnerability—Christ's will, unified with the Father's, is filled with love for humans and yields to being tormented. Jesus's passionate love (*passio*) is the source of cure for the wounded humanity. In consequence, violence and unspeakable pain are, paradoxically, the fountain spring of deliverance and remedy.

Christ Mocked draws our attention through the richness of its author's hermeneutic sensibility, while we attempt to understand the "unreasonable" logic of capturing and being captured. Strangely enough, captivation through violence can include the uncanny sensation of being the captive of love for the one who is taken captive. The polarity but also the entanglement of love and hatred provides the liminal space where the opposing feelings seem to be conflated. Their coexistence reveals how the inconceivable becomes plausible. The apparently unlikely admixture reminds us of the Biblical image of the

calm cohabitation of a wolf and a lamb, which heralds the time of peace¹¹, echoed in William Blake's romantic imagination and his *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*¹². Bosch's painting serves as the genuine locus of both the universal narrative of suffering that is unfolding in our contemplation of the picture thanks to his masterful perception of the hermeneutic liminal space, and of the viewer's self-discovery as the suffering subject in the face of violence. The artist's ingenious grasp of the indissoluble connection between capability and vulnerability potently anticipates Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the human subject and the profundity of the truth about our capabilities (*l'homme capable*) and corresponding vulnerabilities (*l'homme souffrant*)¹³. Bosch's compelling embodiment of violence as juxtaposed with vulnerability inspires us to recognize the multivalent nature of the human predicament: the hunger for power and its failure, the will to physically and mentally overpower, and the tawdriness of the mere thought of subduing the Other.

Caravaggio's *Judith beheading holofernes*: violence and the mighty way of the weak¹⁴

It is hardly possible to think of a better match in the history of art between the artist's violent and scandalous life and his paintings depicting the depths of human viciousness and cruelty than the life and works of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610). This self-indulgent, immodest, and murderous artist who lived a violent and sinful life, is a world-known genius who created pictures of unique religious profundity and brilliance (cf.: Cook, 2016; Nixon, 2010). His masterstroke painting, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (c. 1598–1599), an exceptionally telling rendition of the Biblical scene of the decapitation of Holofernes, the Assyrian general, by an Israeli woman, named Judith, does not cease to draw the attention of art critics and

¹¹ This is one of the most vivid, Biblical images of an undisturbed peace: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, The leopard shall lie down with the young goat, The calf and the young lion and the fatling together; And a little child shall lead them" (Isiah 11:6).

¹² Cf. e.g., William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Tate. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/william-blake-39/blakes-songs-innocence-experience> [accessed 26 Nov 2022].

¹³ In his inimitable hermeneutics of a human being as *l'homme capable* and *l'homme souffrant*, Paul Ricoeur gives an account of our fundamental capabilities and vulnerabilities. See, e.g.: Ricoeur (2007, pp. 72–90); Hołda (2020, pp. 7–24); Wierciński (2019a, p. 149; 2019b, pp. 5–15).

¹⁴ St. Paul's words: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9) sensitize us of the paradoxical logic of strength in weakness.

common viewers alike. This phenomenal artwork evokes both the essence and the beyond of the oppositional binaries of terror and timidity, power and powerlessness. More intricate than it seems to be at face value, the picture takes us to the climax of the beheading narrative, with the seduction motif left only to our imagination¹⁵. Caravaggio's dexterous pictorial embodiment of Judith's belligerent act that has become the gateway to the freedom of the Jewish nation partakes of the discussion of the multifaceted reality of violence, its tangled motivations, and unforeseeable outcomes¹⁶.

It is not merely the naturalistic image of the dying Holofernes with his bleeding wound in the neck that astounds the spectator (cf. Langdon, 2012, p. 167)¹⁷. Caravaggio calls on us to hermeneutically interpret the most puzzling and meaning-laden moment of Judith thinking about her brave but monstrous act soon after she has committed it. This irresistible spectacle of ghastly violence and awesome courage is, at the same time, a deft evocation of the dynamic of feminine fear, empowerment, and revulsion. Caravaggio captures dread as it intermingles with bravura. He delves deeply into the psychology of the executor and reveals its complexity, while creating a potent image of the oppressor's tragic failure. In the formidable "dance" of crime and justice, the roles of victim (Judith as the representative of the suppressed nation) and victimizer (Holofernes, the persecutor) are reversed to the effect of a dazzling, albeit horrifying, victory.

¹⁵ In the biblical story of Judith and Holofernes one finds the clandestine suggestion of Judith's seducing the Assyrian general: "So all went forth and none was left in the bedchamber, neither little nor great" (Judith 13:4).

¹⁶ The theme of decapitating Holofernes was dramatized in numerous works of art. An involving and succinct study of some of them alongside Caravaggio's painting can be found in *The Many Faces of Judith* (2019). The works discussed in this study are: *Lucas Cranach the Elder's, Judith with the Head of Holofernes (1530)*, Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes (1612)*, *Judith by Giorgione (1504)*, Cristofano Allori's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes (1610)*, Elisabetta Sirani's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes (1638–1665)*, or Trophime Bigot's *Judith Decapitating Holofernes (c. 1640)*. Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* offers an engaging and evocative woman artist's representation of a female victory over male tyranny (cf. Ostbye, 2022).

¹⁷ Caravaggio's choosing to show the actual act of killing has also been pinpointed by other scholars. Robert Appelbaum emphasizes that "Before Caravaggio artists limited themselves to showing Judith with the head, not actually in the process of cutting it off. She poses in those paintings as if triumph over Holofernes has either been cautionary or orgasmic" (Appelbaum, 2017, p. 55). An engaging interpretation of the two versions of the picture from the medico-legal perspective is offered by Gianmarco Troiano, Isabella Mercurio, Nicola Nante, and Mauro Bacci (2017).

Interestingly, Caravaggio modeled Judith upon his love and muse, the Roman courtesan, Fillide Melandroni (cf. Langdon, 2012, p. 167)¹⁸. He famously chose sinners to portray saints, which might be viewed as a provocative attempt to express the disavowal of a rigid and hypocritical morality, as well as the more inclusive, non-dualistic approach to human condition and his own predicament. The heroine's young age, bodily fragility, and the whiteness of her dress emphasize the clash between her apparent innocuousness and the boisterous savagery of her action. Our immediate reaction to Caravaggio's downright realism—the sheer brashness of what we see—takes us to the deeper levels of meaning imbued in this exceptional manifestation of rage and strength. Undeniably, the knowledge of the biblical context helps us understand the rationale behind Judith's sweeping act of violence¹⁹. The outcome of her shrewdness and courage amounts not to a personal triumph but to the victory of the Jewish nation, guarded by God's providential care. Caravaggio's capturing of the discrepancy between the heroine's innocent comportment and her cunning action aptly foregrounds the complex nature of the history of the Jews in the Old Testament. The crux of God's intervention lies beyond the foreseeable logic—the weak and the marginalized prove to be the most effective, if unlikely, tools of and witnesses to his divine power.

An excellent example of Caravaggio's use of chiaroscuro, *Judith Beheading Holofernes* speaks through its vibrant interplay of light and darkness²⁰. The lighted figure of Judith and the darkness behind her potently convey the painting's sophisticated meaning—the internal contradictoriness

¹⁸ See also: Caravaggio: Judith and Holofernes analysis (2020, 9 September). <https://ndrw.me/caravaggio-judith-and-holofernes-analysis> [accessed 1 Dec 2022].

¹⁹ “Then Judith, standing by his bed, said in her heart, O Lord God of all power, look at this present upon the works of mine hands for the exaltation of Jerusalem. For now is the time to help thine inheritance, and to execute thine enterprizes to the destruction of the enemies which are risen against us. Then she came to the pillar of the bed, which was at Holofernes' head, and took down his fauchion from thence. And approached to his bed, and took hold of the hair of his head, and said, Strengthen me, O Lord God of Israel, this day. And she smote twice upon his neck with all her might, and she took away his head from him” (Judith 13:4–8).

²⁰ For an apt discussion of Caravaggio's poetic use of light and dark and its embeddedness in the Christian tradition see, e.g., Bosing (2000, pp. 187–190). *Judith Beheading Holofernes* marks an important stage in Bosch's career, since then on the artist will develop his inimitable way of showing the light and dark contrast. *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, Gallerie Nazionali Barberini Corsini. <https://www.barberinicorsini.org/en/opera/judith-beheading-holofernes/> [accessed 30 Nov 2022].

of violence as coexisting with virtue. In its suggestive folding and unfolding of meaning, Caravaggio's picture treats us to a feast of colors. The white and yellow colors of Judith's dress are contrasted with the dark red color of the drapery that closes the entrance to a tent. The curtain looks like a big cloud of blood emerging from the dark, half veiling and unveiling the place of murder. In this way, the abysmal darkness of the night is interpolated with the intensity of red, suggestive of passion and tragedy. The depth of the red color can be understood as signifying Judith's fervent defense of her nation as it calls to the mind the image of a blood shed. But also, it may be interpreted as an implicit evocation of the exquisite blend of pleasure and disgust—the yielding to seduction on Holofernes's part and Judith's revulsion as the aftermath of her murderous act. Metaphorically speaking, this touching admixture of two opposing feelings represents Eros and Thanatos, forever entangled and warring.

Displaying Judith's feelings of fright and detachment, Caravaggio's pictorial rereading of the biblical story offers cogent insights into the human capacity for violence. One of the greatest strengths of this artwork is a sense of liminality—vice and virtue are held together to make us discover the complex reality of violence. The process of uncovering the artwork's meaning is also the viewer's pathway of self-discovery. The uncanny feeling of cruelty's proximity to tenderheartedness prompts us to acknowledge that our humanness is stranded between holiness and vileness, and it is the subtle, hermeneutic in-between sanctity and sinfulness that determines our *being-in-the-world*. To our horror, we may also recognize our face in the face of Judith's servant, whose readiness to dispose of Holofernes' head can be seen as an apt epitome of our eagerness to rid of what seems to be disturbing and uncomfortable. Amongst the multifarious perspectives, from which Caravaggio's depiction of violence can be discussed, the prevailing one seems to be the phenomenology of terror. Focusing on the effect of a militant action, Caravaggio conveys the primordial truth about our human need for both justice and goodness. In the indispensability of executing justice, goodness calls on us to preserve the humane in us. Undoubtedly, his masterpiece can also be interpreted as an ominous reminder that gaining trust can be illusory, painful, or even fatal, and that violence can follow the blissful state of succumbing to desire.

Millais' *the Black Brunswicker*: war and peace in an intimate embrace

The embodiment of the tangled realities of subjugation and violence discussed in reference to Bosch's and Caravaggio's religious paintings, when juxtaposed with the secular painting of a similar theme, leads us to uncover still other vistas of the problematic at hand. The centrality of the topic of pugnacity in John Everett Millais's famous painting *The Black Brunswicker* (1860) stimulates us to investigate the resonance of this visual representation of human proclivity to belligerency and an attempt to counteract it. Millais was a Victorian English painter, one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in nineteenth century England. *The Black Brunswicker* is an excellent example of narrative art, telling the story of tenderness, love, and attachment, but also of violence and restraint. The picture features a young woman who is pushing the door closed in a brave attempt to stop her sweetheart, the officer, from leaving for the battle, while he is trying to open it. Famous for its embodiment of human feelings of longing and frustration (cf. e.g., Kern, 1996, 10), this potent instance of Pre-Raphaelite art is created using bright colors and exquisite detail, which heightens the emotive power of the intimate encounter that is portrayed.

The stark distinction between the dominant black on the left side of the canvas and the white on its right instantly draws our attention to a clear divide between violent and appeasing intentions. However, the red ribbon on the lady's sleeve, evocative of her affection, matched by one that appears on the collar of the dog standing at the soldier's feet, effectively deconstructs the seeming univocality of the painting's message: condemnation of the violent and the avowal of the peaceful. It introduces an element of doubt; the ribbon is a symbol of homage to the officer but also an expression of the lady's deep infatuation that is the cause of her counteraction, aimed at preventing fight. The apparent univocality is further disparaged by the rather puzzling connection between the woman and the dog. The lady's desire to keep the lover for herself can be viewed as an attempt to subjugate him, which, however, may, at the same time, indicate the lady's submissive nature, since her feelings are shown as tinged with an animalistic attachment.

The narrative's sentimentality—the rather shallow message of romantic love—takes us to a deeper and more diverse range of meanings, above all, to its ethical appeal of non-violence. The picture's passionate expressiveness, which derives precisely from the clash between the soldier's black uniform and the lady's pearly white ball gown, invites us to unravel the more complex message of this emotionally charged painting, which encompasses the question of outer commitment and personal engagement. Although its content is

appropriate to the historical moment—it is thought to have been inspired by the Duchess of Richmond’s ball in 1815 and the officers leaving for the Battle of Quatre Bras to fight Napoleon’s army (see e.g., The Black Brunswicker, 2018)—it still speaks to us today because it not only captures romance and moral integrity but thematizes the relationship between human agency and violence understood as a multi-faceted phenomenon. The picture embodies the apparently obvious, though not overtly shown, masculine combativeness and feminine, clandestine sovereignty. The *raison d’être* of conceiving this picture can be reduced to the representation of physicality of the imminent separation. However, Millais created an immensely morally charged picture that poses questions about war demanding sacrifice, the conflict between duty and love, as well as the dissonance between self and relationship (cf. Pearson 2010, pp. 137–139). The officer’s departure resonates with both a contemporary for Millais and today’s viewer as it depicts a woman’s passionate longing and her attempt to rescue the partner who is under threat. This visual representation of the impending danger and woman as a rescuer is thematically interconnected with Millais’ two other historical pictures: *The Proscribed Royalist 1651* (1852–53) and *The Order of Release 1746* (1852–53)²¹. The material concreteness of the figures’ costumes (the colors conveying a sense of difference) highlights the poignancy of the approaching peril²².

The high evocative power of Millais’s picture, which rests on the contrast between the soldier’s dark uniform and the lady’s impeccable whiteness, potently represents the astuteness of the irreconcilable conflict between war and peace. However, its blurring of the line between violence and non-violence seems to be Millais’s even more intriguing accomplishment. Despite its overt messages: the bright red ribbon symbolizing reverence for the soldier; the blackness of his uniform and skull hat representing destruction and evil, and the white of the lady’s dress signifying purity, virtue, and perhaps naivety, the painting transcends its focus on realistic details. The state of military

²¹ Michael Cohen pinpoints rescue as a male fantasy as an intriguing motif that features in Millais’s paintings. The portrayals of such a fantasy can suggest Victorian men’s discomfort with the patriarchal system of values (Cohen, 1995, p. 92)

²² Musing on the picture’s dramatic contrast of colors, Elizabeth Prettejohn notices the intimate relationship between physical objects and human feelings that they express: “Details reveal the vulnerability through artefacts rather than nature, but these commodities incarnate human needs. The girl’s ball-gown is heavily creased from its long sojourn folded unused. The wallpaper bubbles up betraying damp, and, most poignantly, a puzzling object lies draped in deep purple cloth, betraying beneath its form an empty cradle (2012, p. 145).

alert, juxtaposed with the subtlety of a peaceful existence, in this experience-meets-innocence narrative artwork, questions the formulaic, feminine innocuousness, passivity, and peacefulness. The tenderness of the conflict between the two characters, which is powerfully suggestive of the implicit desolation, forlornness, and trauma, disrupts the seeming unambiguousness of the aptly portrayed integrity and dutifulness.

Recognizing the rationale behind the officer's choice of loyalty, we also feel empathy for the woman's profound infatuation and fear. This situation of no true deliverance beclouds the univocity of our response and encourages us to intuit into the more nuanced facets of the distinction between violence and peacefulness. If we step back from the historical moment, we can notice the rather common scenario of a gentle argument between lovers. Countless acts of feminine activity that are aimed toward peace-making can be recognized in the image of the woman preventing the man from fighting. As an antiviolence manifesto, the picture sets an example of a woman's behavior (cf. e.g., Kern, 1996, p. 186). The conciliatory ethics of Millais's painting is clear, but its subliminal meanings: the woman's capability of subjugating because of her secret power and the male fantasy of rescue²³ debunk the facile understanding of its message. The inherent duality of representing the female character—she features all at once as a delicate and submissive creature and a potent agent—as well as the male's rather languid movement and indecisive gaze complicate the picture's reception and preclude the spectator's attempt to pigeonhole the painting's content and belittle its richness, and, at the same time, to fall prey to a facile distinction between violence and vulnerability.

Waterhouse's *La Belle Dame sans Merci*: the power of the powerless

The last picture in this study, John William Waterhouse's *La Belle Dames sans Merci* (1883) calls upon the viewer to appreciate its apt evocation of the formidable subtlety of beauty and love and their astounding, cruel undercurrents. In a similar vein to Millais's, this painting dramatizes feminine power and arouses ambivalent feelings concerning love and devotion that seem to be its origin. This superb example of Pre-Raphaelite art belongs to the series of paintings that are visual representations of John Keats's famous poem of the same title (1819) (Keats, 1988)²⁴. With irresistible expressivity,

²³ For more on the male fantasy of rescue, see e.g., Kern (1996, pp. 181–206).

²⁴ For the study of creative responses to Keats's poem see, e.g., Boyiopoulos, K. & Sandy, M. (2016, pp. 83–87); Scott, G.F. (1999, pp. 503–535).

Waterhouse captures the sharp distinction between blissfulness and wretchedness, and, concomitantly, shatters the paradigmatic attribution of power to a male character and powerlessness to a female character. In his nimble rereading of Keats's poem, Waterhouse draws the viewer's attention to the knight's failure in recognizing his lover as a powerful creature that brings about his destruction.

Despite his armor and militant appearance, the knight succumbs completely to the lady's devastating allurement. The stark contrast between his protective outfit and the flimsiness and airiness of the woman's wear emphasizes the stereotypical divide between masculine belligerence and feminine gentleness and innocence. However, as it seems to be clear, Waterhouse escapes such an easily drawn conclusion and complicates the picture's message by potently embodying feminine deceitful sweetness alongside predictable submissiveness. With an expression of delicacy and blissful compliance on her face, the elf-like being is depicted as having physical weakness. Her bare feet seem to imply that a long trip in the darkness of the woods is impossible. But, at the same time, she is shown as a crushing *femme fatale* capable of defeating the knight. She uses her long, strong hair, a feminine quality, to bind her lover to her²⁵. Waterhouse explores the cliché idea of a woman's secret power and foreseeable susceptibility and, by debunking the obviousness of the formulaic gender difference between maleness and femaleness, invites the viewer to interrogate the flimsy barrier between violence and vulnerability.

The interplay of violence and vulnerability in Waterhouse's painting seems to be exceptionally intense. The garish image of the knight leaning towards the lady of his heart is evocative of his loving care and unassuming attitude, whereas her attentive and docile turning to the beloved is expressive of both timidity and bold possessiveness. Exploring the beauty of the chivalric romance and the sinister possibility of a spiritual plight that it might entail, the painting disavows the classic understanding of violence and vulnerability. To be vulnerable appears to connote being violent on different grounds – innately violent, when in need of fulfilling one's deep and desperate desire. Interestingly, Keats's narrative poem referenced in other works of literature, as well as musical compositions, is abundantly present in the history of art in

²⁵ Waterhouse imagery offers a distant and subverted reference to the biblical story of Delilah attempting to overpower Samson (Judges 16:10–13).

its spectacularly versatile re-imaginings²⁶, all of which seem to provocatively exploit the unorthodox side of the power play between genders.

Waterhouse's powerful rendition of the intricacies of violence and vulnerability, power and defenselessness, cruelty and mercilessness, calls on the viewers to remain open to a more inclusive, hermeneutic understanding of the phenomena at hand. Disclosing both the profundity of a romantic liaison and its underbelly—seductiveness and despairing exhaustion—Waterhouse's imaginative world resonates with the possible and anticipated ways of interpreting Keats's poem. The ekphrastic force of this picture—the visual revisitation of the verbal art—accentuates the importance of the ancient old theme of the discrepancy between fantasy and reality, allowing the viewer to partake anew of its existential and phenomenological aspects. Waterhouse, after Keats, evokes the hidden, feminine desire to overpower man, as well as reveals masculine, covert longing for (be)longing and being overwhelmed. As Dani Cavallaro accentuates: “The knight himself is clearly unable to resist her advances, and not even his body armor, a classic symbol of masculine inviolability, is of any avail in this uneven confrontation between human and supernatural powers” (2017, p. 103). In the impressive “dance” of emasculation and emancipation, violence and vulnerability take turns to leave the viewers as enlarged in their ability to see and know, beguilingly open to a new understanding and not really confined to the old one.

In lieu of conclusion

According to Gadamer's hermeneutic-phenomenological explanation of an aesthetic experience, when we look at an artwork, we come face to face with ourselves. We are constantly being asked to investigate the complex and varied messages while also traveling the path of self-discovery. On this perpetual quest, we are in the position of learning more about ourselves as human beings in what the picture captures and discloses. Following Gadamer's aesthetics, we can gather that the claim art puts on us is about the confrontation of the unfamiliar, in which we discover something new, and are compelled to acknowledge the possibility of a different way of thinking and acting. In an aesthetic encounter, we mentally *turn around*, and the *metanoia* that we undergo delineates the ethical trajectory of a passage from the secure to the unsettlingly unknown and discomfiting. In this creative process

²⁶ Keats's discerning representation of chivalric love was echoed in the visual arts by numerous artists: Frank Dicksee, Frank Cadogan Cowper, Arthur Hughes, Walter Crane, and Henry Maynell Rheam, to mention the most famous ones (cf. e.g., Scott, 1999).

of self-discovery, we begin to comprehend who we really are—this is an opening up to truth (*aletheia*) (Gadamer, 1986, p. 34). Bosch's, Caravaggio's, Millais's, and Waterhouse's portrayals of violence are inasmuch re-readings of the historic/fantastic events as they are the readers of us the viewers. The interpretative process is two-fold: as spectators we interpret and are being interpreted (*Selbstbegegnung*).

The aesthetic encounter is a rewarding exegetical task through which we discover that the destruction of the familiar worldview gives rise to the construction of a new angle of vision. When the horizons of the viewer and the picture fuse, the viewer is touched by the reality of the painting. Remaining open to it, he/she participates in the game, which is the back-and-forth apprehension of the picture's message. Sensitizing us to the *eventing* of art, to what happens *to* and *in* us in the backward-and-forward movement of unveiling the picture's multifarious meanings, Gadamer's phenomenological approach radicalizes our thinking about the reception of art, inviting us to dwell in the dynamic of the aesthetic encounter. Interpreting the selected artworks against the backdrop of Gadamer's aesthetics, we are more aware of the deeper subtleties in the seemingly clear-cut division between power and powerlessness, loss and gain, violence and vulnerability, since we are wary that the process of interpretation is a never-ending venture that opens us to yet new understandings each time we undertake the task of interpretation.

If we are lingering and yielding in front of Bosch's, Caravaggio's, Millais's, and Waterhouse's arresting images of violence and vulnerability, we see that they neither schematize nor flatten the more complex realities that are lurking behind the stern contrasts that are operative in them. Moreover, while we are trying to seize their meaning, we are seized by it and led to effectuate a change in our course of thinking, cognizing, and acting. The vivid images of power and powerlessness; fragility and malignity, black and white; emancipation and dependence; femininity and masculinity; flamboyance and reserve, alert us to the necessity of those clear distinctions, as well as to our remaining open to the less obvious and intriguing cross-pollinations of those opposing qualities. Whereas Millais's picture draws our attention mainly to its apparently overt treatment of the conflicting faculties, Bosch's, Caravaggio's, and Waterhouse's masterpieces are compellingly balanced between the blunt oppositions of good and evil, savagery and holiness, cruelty and passive resistance, destruction and protection. All four artists attempt to grasp those meanings that transcend the monochromatic certitude of the binary opposition of forcefulness and peacefulness, leaving the viewer engrossed by eliciting the "middle voice."

Bosch's and Caravaggio's spiritually intense images reveal that violence is a space of bewilderment for those who commit it, as if testifying to and giving a troubled answer to the deep psychological truth of the religious commandment "Thou shalt not kill" (Mathew 5:21). Partaking abundantly of the teachings of moral theology, their paintings disclose that transgressing the uncrossable boundary, the human is stunned by her self-induced, moral deformation or dubiety. Bosch's intended exaggeration, which in most of his paintings takes the form of grotesqueness, and Caravaggio's outstanding subtlety bring to the surface the issue of the incomprehensibility of one's depravity or befuddlement, which is the human pathway of experiencing woundedness caused by sin. Judith's victoriousness intermingles with confusion and Christ's persecutors' barbarity is conquered by their gaze of amazement. Undeniably, Bosch and Caravaggio go beyond the human impulse to compartmentalize tangled realities to make them more comprehensible and easily controllable. Those artists hear and ingeniously respond to the existential tension of our lived experience rather than succumb to the temptation of quenching or simplifying it.

The ambiguous messages of Bosch's, Caravaggio's, and Waterhouse's paintings, seem to be counterbalanced by the seemingly unequivocal meaning of Millais's picture. However, by providing us with some hints, Millais leads us to delve deeper into the texture of what we see as captured on the canvas. On the one hand, we are confronted with an indisputable condemnation of the forthcoming bloodshed, on the other hand, though, the stereotypical understanding of masculine militancy and feminine submissiveness is further problematized as the female character in the picture is shown as gaining on her power to prevent her lover's participation in the pending calamity. Thematising the power play between genders, Waterhouse's picture seems to constitute an intriguing continuation of a similar topic. It discloses to the viewer the complex reality of power and powerlessness, violence and vulnerability, defying the relevance of the surface distinctions between those dualistic oppositions, and interrogating into their asymmetry as more genuinely expressing our lived experience.

In their evocations of the intricate and surprising connections between violence and vulnerability in both religious and secular paintings, the selected artists defy the obviousness of the dichotomy that is believed to be pervasive in our *being-in-the-world*. Those masterpieces reveal how sharp distinctions lose their weight once we intuit more into the subtleties and heterogeneousness of our human condition. Our aesthetic journey, which is also our self-discovering journey, brings us nearer to the veiled

truth about our realities and ourselves. In the continuous effort to unravel the meaning of the discussed paintings, we can view their messages as daunting and perplexing. Bosch's, Caravaggio's, Millais's, and Waterhouse's visual representations question the safe and univocal understanding of the violent and the vulnerable. The truth unfolding in front of our eyes touches our insecurities and prompts an imaginative reconsideration of the assured and even fossilized ways of comprehending the phenomena at hand, creating, thus, a prodigious opportunity to self-educate.

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