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## Saying something concerning truth, violence, and education

We might just be *saying something*—participating in a conversation rather than contributing to an inquiry. Perhaps saying things is not always saying how things are.  
—Richard Rorty (italics in the original)

**Abstract:** This essay undertakes a brief engagement with Martin Heidegger’s reading of Sophocles’ “Ode to Man” to orient hermeneutic engagements with three paintings (Goya’s *Saturn Devouring His Children*, El Greco’s *Purification of the Temple*, and Hodler’s *Truth*) to say something about hermeneutic education, truth, and violence.

**Keywords:** Hermeneutics, Education, Violence, Truth, and Painting

### Joining in, making room, going otherwise

Once man-made, historical processes have become automatic, they are no less ruinous than the natural life processes that drives our organism and which in its terms, that is, biologically, leads from being to not-being, from birth to death.

—Hannah Arendt

If we eliminate the risk of love (violence), we eliminate the promise of love (non-violence).

—John Caputo

We are always in the middle of things even things we experience as new or the start of something other. This hermeneutic insight ought to belong to the understanding we take into all conversations, especially perhaps those undertaken in educational settings. It is a helpful reminder to note things are always already underway, and our coming to them is made possible by this already and ever-continuing being underway. However, it is also the case that this already underway is most often headed in a direction at odds with and headed away from the orientation hermeneutic education seeks. To the extent Arendt is showing us something of note in the epigraph above, then those whose task it is to educate have as a challenge the disrupting of the automatic—understood in this instance in terms of the programmed and seemingly natural responses we often make, which hide the inviolable nature of interpretation.

The automatic response to a violent wrong suffered is too often to answer in kind thus leaving us in a cycle it is right to call “ruinous.” Athena, who we believe must—in concert with other of the gods—keeps a watch over educational places, understands violence (at some point at least) is to be constrained in the name of justice. At the end of both Homer’s *Odyssey* and the *Oresteia* of Aesculus, Athena is said to have had enough. Something else besides a desire for violent blood revenge is to be our interpretive motivation and with this other way of seeing, then, comes the disclosure of possibilities to act otherwise. Does not the constraining of the Furies in the *Oresteia*, for example, make us believe Hamlet surely read, studied, and learned from the trilogy, learned that racing toward blood revenge is not the best nor obvious response to the message of the Ghost, his father? Notwithstanding Freud and Rank, this lesson learned at Wittenberg accounts, at least in part, for the Elsinore delay.

In any event, hermeneutic education leads us to be wary of a too quickly conceived, that is automatic, response. By way of interpretations of three paintings I shall say some things about violence, truth, and education and how stopping and tarrying before art might give us time to decline an automatic response. I shall commence with a quite brief explication of selected passages from Heidegger’s reading of Sophocles’ “Ode to Man” from *Antigone*, and then proceed to interpretations of three paintings. Goya’s *Saturn Devouring One of His Children*, El Greco’s *Purification of the Temple*, and Hodler’s *Truth* will each in its own manner will out for us a way of understanding respectively: a self-absorbed narcissistic violence in the first, an outer-directed something beyond oneself in the second, and the originary founding violence demanded of human being-in-the-world in the last. These

interpretations, it is hoped, will be of some assistance to our thinking about our themes and how hermeneutic education might resist and challenge automation metaphorically understood.

## II

### Violence as holding sway

Man transcends all other life because he is, for the first time, *life aware of itself*. Man is *in* nature, subject to its dictates and accidents, yet he *transcends* nature because he lacks the unawareness which makes the animal a part of nature—as one with it.

—Erich Fromm (italics in the original)

In his reading of the opening line of the choral “Ode to Man” Heidegger finds therein man’s being called the most uncanny (the strangest of the strange, the most wonderful of all wonders). In this name he finds both something *terrible* and a *violence* that is inviolable in the essence of Dasein. As he works out his interpretation of *deinon* these two ways necessary to think human being-in-the-world are each qualified in a manner that brings them together and sets them apart from commonplace understandings of the words. With respect to *terrible* Heidegger says: “it does not apply to petty terrors and does not have the degenerate, childish, and useless meaning that we give the word today” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 159). Insofar as the meaning of *deinon* as the naming the terrible with respect to the overwhelming sway of *phusis* the constant exposure to which Dasein must respond with violence needs qualification, *violence* too needs its nuanced understanding: “we are giving the expression ‘doing violence’ an essential sense that in principle reaches beyond the usual meaning of the expression, which generally means nothing but brutality and arbitrariness” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 160). At the origin of being-in-the-world, then, is a need for a violence that keeps the overwhelming sway from devastating Dasein itself. It is out of this inescapable having to be in this manner that allows violence in its both creative and its debilitating sense to be manifested in the world. Said otherwise, the violence that makes room for the creative beings who we are able to become is also the room wherein Dasein finds its ability to use violence in its sense of violating, occluding, misshaping, or destroying our possibilities of authentically being-with-one-another.

Furthermore, Heidegger suggests that in seeking to free ourselves from the constant onslaught of the overwhelming Dasein runs the risk of settling too easily and then too firmly and customarily into a set way of living. This settling, as it were, bars from us ways we might otherwise pursue. Writing of this not having a way out of the familiar, Heidegger avers: “Their not having a way out consists... in the fact they are continually thrown back on the paths that they themselves have laid out; they get bogged down in their routes, get stuck in ruts, and by getting stuck they draw in the circle of their world, get enmeshed in seeming,... In this way they turn around and around within their own circle” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 168). This “shutting ourselves out” from the creative use we might make of our originary condition has innumerable consequences for our being in the world and makes, I am contending, a special call to education.

It is a task of education to offer interpretations of this originary condition, to offer interpretations of how we might assume our responsibility in a world disclosed through this originary holding out against the overwhelming. Furthermore education allows us to understand how in seeking our safety from the overwhelming we might well fail in some significant sense to make the most of our being-together or worse still mar it unnecessarily. Education as the conversations fitting to finding new ways out of the old must first it seems undo the threat of the “automatic” as outlined above in light of the words from Arendt with which we began. If the familiar in conjunction with the habitual is the necessary point of departure for education, then it cannot be allowed to remain its end point. The forceful means of getting to the destinations of education as somewhere else other than this may appear as justified in response to the violence of the mere repetition of the same and to the violent defenses made by the workings in favor of the status quo. Moreover, this same force will be needed to understand how much damage is done by obscuring truth as the ground of education itself.

I shall now proceed to thinking with three paintings: the first (Goya) to see how violence can misshape both current and future (educational) endeavors, the second (El Greco) to see how a force may be needed to counter the violent profaning of (educational) space, and lastly (Hodler) to witness truth as a primal force opening up the worlding of the world as the primordial space for any (education) undertaking worthy of the name.

### III

#### Goya and Saturn *devouring one of his children*

Yet you can never actually measure tears. If you try to measure them, you measure fluid and its drops at most, but not tears.

—Martin Heidegger

And you cannot measure dreams.

—Adam Phillips

There we are in the painting.<sup>1</sup> This 19th-century Spanish painting depicting an ancient mythological tale—Goya’s black painting of Saturn devouring one of his children. Out of the dark and frighteningly ominous background and old and somehow aging-before-our-eyes Saturn emerges hunched, or squatting, or perhaps falling to his knees (and before whom we know not) preparing for a strange act of contrition that seems surely to be too late. In this awkward pose, his hands clutch one of his children—already dismembered by Saturn’s own doing—as his mouth gapes in anticipation of another cannibalistic mouthful. The opposite of nourishing appears in the wake of this devouring. This rage and fury attempting to avoid the prophesied future is getting nowhere toward that end and produces instead something dreadful. The painting presents the violent lengths to which those who have a tenuous grip on illegitimate power will go to halt that which cannot be halted—call it time or the future. A closer look—indeed, a look into Saturn’s eyes—allows us to see he seems to know the jig is up.

Bulging in their madness and terror, wide but not quite focused they express a futility. In those dark rings, one around the sunken socket housing the white of the eye and the other around the dilated pupils, which are so wide as if to confirm how dark things are in this scene, we see the hopeless of this violence. We see almost more than we can bear to look at long. The look holds something in it, something which says remorse will not be enough. The look is both cast down to the body to be devoured in the next impending bite while at the same time the look has a hold on some other thing, which as the viewer we also sense we are able to see (more on which below).

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<sup>1</sup> Francisco Goya y Lucientes, *Saturn Devouring One of His Children*, mixed technique, wall covering transferred to canvas, 1820, Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. A fine reproduction is available at the museum’s website.

This desperate holding on expressed in the eyes is echoed in the mouth and hands of Saturn as well. The devouring is not just this cannibalization, this going in for yet another bite of flesh and bone. The hands show themselves as if Saturn has two more hungry mouths to feed in addition to the one he is about to fill again. The hands are devouring the corpse as well in their own way. Goya paints these hands with fingers plunged deep into the body of the child. The upper spine of this suffering child tilts away to our right almost appearing broken and below this rightward pitch and, along what remains straight in it, Saturn's fingers press through the flesh on each side.

We know anything so violently grasped so as not to lose it is something already lost, or worse. The force of the grip is palpable, so strong in fact it seems to have the consequence of extending toward his gaping mouth the last remaining limb of the child (its other already consumed along, presumably, with its head). Through our imagining Saturn's fingertips, the internal organs of the body make their way to our senses even as they are not directly on the canvas. The painting is so visceral by being so profound in its execution that these organs are no less meaningfully before us than if they had been painted on surface of the canvas.

The destruction wrought by this type of violence destroys surface and depth alike. If we understand the child here as a figure of the future, we see in this image what grip violence has on the what-is-to-come; the manner in which these hands have a hold on things has the consequence of demonstrating to us how the misshaping of the future happens in advance. It is this misshaping of ourselves and our collective being-together toward a future that education means to overcome. Education attempts to provide the thinking necessary to twist free from this fate because education is, at the least, a concern for the future.

It will repay our attention to return once more to those eyes (similar eyes are found in Goya's *Casa de Locos*, *The Madhouse*). Exactly this devouring, this all-consuming violent praxis, this heartbreaking lunacy is conveyed in those eyes. Notwithstanding the horror conveyed by Saturn's eyes, they seem to say also: "Something in me understands the heinousness of this; if only I could stop." Something addictive is here disclosed, some strange not-wanting to do that gets carried out regardless. The eyes in particular, yet the entire painting as a whole, gives off the sense of a strange glimmer that even tyrants sometimes understand it could be otherwise. Maybe a faint, even fleeting hope could come from the fact that sometimes (although quite rarely to be sure) tyrants tire. Sometimes it dawns on them that what ought no longer go on is what they are doing. This recognition that one might

become—that somehow one still retains the possibility of becoming—the actor of another desire is also played out before us in these eyes, even as it is too late for the Saturn depicted here. Any hint of an it-could-be-otherwise is evidence of the possibility of beginning the undoing of appears to be an automatic and ruinous response. This gives education some hope, even in the face of this type of violence.

#### IV

#### **El Greco and *the purification of the temple***

The university is sometimes criticized for being too remote from the real needs of the day. But the point can be turned and the opposite criticism made: Is not the university too much a part of the society? To be consistent, should not the campus be more sharply distinguished from the marketplace... ?

—D. S. Carne-Ross

There we are in the painting. This time El Greco's *The Purification of the Temple*.<sup>2</sup> The two sides mark two quite differing responses to the forceful act of purification Jesus undertakes here as he occupies the center of the picture. Those being driven from the temple are in stark contrast to those who both await the cleansing and are also, somehow, engaged already in the practices for which room is being made. Thus, the picture seems to have a number of “times” in it, and this not including the picturing of two bas reliefs, one of Adam and Eve being exiled from the garden on the left side nor the scene of Abraham and Isaac on the right. In any event, there is much going on here. The present shows those who are being forcefully moved away are in various states of defense, warding off the actions involved in the purification acts of Jesus. The future is also there at the same time, as those for whose sake the purification is occurring are shown conversing in the devoted manner for which the place was originally created. These two times pictured at once achieve something in this retelling of the story that is prohibited in the writing we find making up the gospel accounts. In this way the painting thinks the story again and otherwise in its own idiom and

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<sup>2</sup> El Greco, *The Purification of the Temple*, oil of canvas, ca. 1600, The Frick Collection, New York, New York. A fine reproduction is available at the museum's website. Although there are a number of such scenes painted by El Greco, I shall confine this reading to the one before which I stood and experienced in person.

moves somehow beyond the original without abandoning it (this picture will never be mistaken, for example, as the retelling of Esther's dilemma).

The sellers have missed the mark. They can be said to have, in undertaking the practice of exchange here, landed in the wrong place. At the same time, they have by their actions made this place wrong, or wronged this place by their activities. The latter says by mistaking the sacred for the profane, they have wronged the temple—the place set aside for something other, a place where what ought to take place therein is barred from doing so by their wronging. By landing here and practicing thus, they have misappropriated the place, transforming it through their actions to a place in need of the arrival of Jesus in the manner in which he is there. He answers and responds fittingly to the situation as he understands it.

Freeing of the temple from its having become a place of exchange and returning it to a place of disclosure, is what Jesus can be said to be achieving in the picture. This act of purification, then, returns the place to its genuine function by opening the space again to what belongs there. In the left side of the canvas are those whose actions are defiling and profaning the temple, caught by El Greco in a series of reactions which include fleeing, taking cover, wailing. Some gather their wares; some take a defensive pose. The one who Jesus has just passed is dressed in a blue robe the color of which matches the sash wrapped around the red robe of Jesus, his hands raised as if they are an accompaniment to words being spoke. One imagines, judging from these hands and his speaking face, his words are meant as a counter-discourse to that of Jesus; they appear as an attempt to justify his action—if not the actions of all of those being driven away by the force of Jesus.

This force is what predominates in the picture. Jesus has his eyes cast on the eyes of the figure who is directly across from him in the picture plane. The being eye-to-eye with this figure catches our eye. His yellow robe has slipped from his shoulders and now seems sure to be on its way to the checkered tiled floor, making him the immediate target of the lash-wielding hand of Jesus. It remains ambiguous whether the scarlet-clothed arm of Jesus is stretched across his body as the end of a thrust already completed or is drawn there in preparation of a backhanded lashing yet to be delivered. Whether it is the conclusion of or the preamble to the act of delivering a blow, the hand of El Greco has no doubt captured here a formidable force.

If such forceful lashings are the acts of purification, at least in part, then the picture plane from back to front shows things well underway, and the opening it has created takes our eye deep into the background of the painting. It is through the arch behind the action where we might be said



to see the place where commerce is welcome. Be that as it may, commerce does not belong here where it is: inside the Temple and in the painting's foreground. What belongs here, the painting seems to say, is what occurs on the right-hand side of the picture.

Returning to the center of the picture and the figure of Jesus, we see, even though his feet can barely be said to be touching the ground, he is nonetheless path breaking. As he moves in a way that separates the two groups of accompanying figures, he makes a new path, one unique to the setting. This new path is neither any of the well-worn ones one might imagine nor those suggested by the checkered floor. He moves not along either row of squares already set out on the floor as it is, rather a new route is created that transverses them, opening a new way for learning to be. At the risk of turning too fine a phrase we might say by breaking out of all predetermined paths he has by his pathbreaking created in its wake something new by making it what it was before and ought to be again.

Art historians have no doubt named for us those figures who are represented on what we are calling above the future-side of the painting. Even as grateful as we might be to have these identifications, I leave them aside and simply say this side of the picture is the promise of how a space made for conversation and not crass exchange might appear in the aftermath of cleansing. Too much, as we all know, that is not fitting to hermeneutic education already has taken up its place and, in many ways, taken over the space meant to be set aside for learning. Today, as it has been in the past, much depends on context and perspective as to who is to be understood as the heretic.

We need room to learn. Sometimes the purification of the educational space necessary to allow for learning is less forceful, less dramatic than depicted in *The Purification of the Temple*. Despite its being able to happen anywhere if enough work is undertaken, education happens in a manner less dependent on overcoming harsh, cold, and less-than-inviting circumstances if it happens in places fitting to its essence. In the following passage from Medard Boss concerning the room in which Heidegger's teaching in Zollikon was originally meant to take place, we are given to understand how a small change of venue, perhaps only a few blocks in strict measure, can be so decisive in its rightness that it remains fitting for a decade:

The choice of this location [a large lecture hall] proved rather inauspicious. The recently renovated auditorium had such a hyper-modern, technological appearance that its atmosphere was simply not conducive to Heidegger's thinking. Therefore, the impending second seminar was moved to my house in Zollikon. All subsequent seminars continued there for the entire next decade (Boss, 1987, p. xviii).

Hermeneutic education (and an education in hermeneutics) creates a change of orientation with respect to leaving behind the quotidian and everyday way of speaking and thinking automatically and can be facilitated by a change of place. By being undertaken in a room designed for what needs to be done there, education can be said to have more of a chance.

## V

### Hodler and *truth*

The human being's being-open to being is so fundamental and decisive in being human that, due to its inconspicuousness and plainness, one can continuously overlook it in favor of contrived psychological theories.

—Martin Heidegger

There we are in the painting. This time with but a solitary figure who stands at the center of Ferdinand Hodler's *Truth*.<sup>3</sup> Long before we understand whatever we shall come to understand of this picture, we cannot help but feel welcomed by it. A strange hominess pervades the picture and yet there is something uncanny about it that pushes against the initial welcome. Not a rejection by any means, just something that lingers in the sense it hints that something profound is being asked of us. If it is a beckoning, it is also a challenge.

The nude figure in *Truth* looks at first glance far too thin to bear the name. Such thinness, with ribs visible beneath her skin, would be alarming if it were not for her wide and knowing eyes and the not-quite-a-smile that forms confidently and radiates from her firmly set lips and mouth. Every moment spent yielding to this picture increases her strength. It becomes in

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<sup>3</sup> Ferdinand Hodler, *Truth*, oil on canvas, 1898, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois. A fine reproduction is available at the museum's website. The artist has made other paintings with this name yet not quite the same scene. Again, I restrict myself here to the one before which I have stood and which I have experienced.

time overwhelming. It becomes clear she is up to the task. The challenge it makes to us begins here to unfold.

In the lower third of the canvas she stands feet a bit apart achieving a kind of balance. She stands on a rock, which in overall appearance seems to be round yet is seven-sided, each side hued somehow out of the earthy pillar whose base, if there is one, is beyond the picture's edge. Where she stands is firm but not limitless, not all-encompassing. Indeed, the rock/ground is surrounded by empty, clouded space—a vast non-ground. As solid as the ground beneath her feet may be—and it looks considerable—it is not infinitely extended. More than that, her small standing place is quite circumscribed making her site unique, bounded by the very ground on which she stands. A movement of any length would exhaust the space of her ground and have the consequence of sending her tumbling into the surrounding abyss.

Truth in Hodler's painting, then, is grounded yet confined, on a solid footing that only extends so far. If we were to imagine she is able to stand elsewhere, then it will be, it seems, on another ground similarly circumscribed. One imagines further still that all possible other groundings cannot be the infinite, solid, unfragmented expansion of where she now stands but rather an archipelago of other rounded settings, other weigh stations in the abyss.

The figure in *Truth* thus stands in the manner just sketched, yet this is not all that the picture discloses about truth. In the upper third of the picture, we find her arms stretched out wide making a strong line that runs through her shoulders through her upper arms, which bend at the elbows, and is parallel to the stance-supporting ground we have described. At the elbow of both left and right arms the forearms bend to create near right angles on each side of the canvas. At the end of these two raised-to-the-sky forearms are hands turned palm upwards, pushing toward the top corners of the picture.

These wide-”stretched arms bending at the elbow and wrists hold open our view against encroaching blotches of white paint that appear over the picture's mostly purple-grey background. This holding open against the threatening-to-obscure white billows (which we refrain from calling clouds yet would not be wrong in doing so) make way for a vista opening to the sides of and deep behind the figure. We see what the figure in *Truth* allows by her keeping the encroaching elements at bay. We see beauty and light on purple cliff faces (a deeper purple than the background) rising on each side of the picture and what easily passes for water waving, roiling, and ebbing between and beyond the dark cliffs behind the figure.

This holding open and letting be seen brings the top portion of the painting into contact and conversation with the lower portion. The top

portion's arms pushing against the closing in of what would obscure our view altogether is accomplished on the strength of the solid-enough standing ground in the lower portion. This connection runs through the picture's middle third where another aspect of the truth is revealed. The nakedness figured in the middle third of *Truth* has nothing in common with the too-popular English phrase "naked truth," which is used to insist interpretation will be unnecessary (and in such assertions cover over how much interpretation has always already accomplished). To the contrary, the nakedness appearing in *Truth* says rather: "I have added nothing—it is your responsibility to interpret, to make something of what shows itself in the disclosure I make possible."

Lastly, the figure in *Truth*, judging from the length of her hair, which falls beyond her waist to rest upon the unseen yet surely curving buttocks, is mature—appearing neither young nor old. The look that radiates from her face also provides evidence and confirmation of this maturity. Taken all together, the picture says to us: as long as truth is, it shall be up to the task of holding open a clearing so we are able to see. *Truth* (now let's call her by her Greek name: *aletheia*) does not issue propositions, does not provide blueprints for behavior, nor does it dictate anything in particular. It says nothing, save for this—in an ever-whispering summons—*question and interpret*.

## VI

### Violence, truth, education

Whoever would achieve this [becoming cultured] must recognize that life itself is an art, perhaps the finest of the fine arts—because it is the composite blend of them all.

—Alain Locke

So much more, so much other, indeed so much that might be at odds with what I have brought-forth here belongs to these paintings. However, that turns out to be, the above interpretations are not offered to say these paintings simply *illustrate* philosophical concepts, which are superior to them by virtue of being written; rather, they are attempts to say what these paintings think in their own manner and in doing so bringing-forth what they give to us for our thinking and questioning.

Education is in a sense, of course, a bit violent insofar as it disrupts the all too familiar. It means to wrest understanding from its presumptions that what has been long and firmly held is natural and thus unchangeable. For this reason, then, hermeneutic educators are described somewhat well as "heretics" because they dissent from what most persons take as being

gospel (as the phrase goes in US English). The professor's dissent begins here stepping outside what everybody already knows and so never questions. The hermeneutic education championed here often begins with this walking away from the tyranny of the familiar by attempting to get out of the rut and attempting to twist-free from what has us enmeshed in paths of mere repetition. It means to twist away from the violence that threatens to devour it, it means to begin by overturning a few things to make a space open and readied to think things otherwise, it means to disclose that which common understandings cover over by staying on the routes already trod. It attempts to do all this so as to disclose as the beginning of something new *the wonder of disclosure itself*.

Perhaps it is not so uncanny, then, to pose this way home to education by saying something about twisting free of Saturn's violent clutches, about freeing the places of education for their task with righteous force, and about orienting ourselves in the disclosure of *aletheia*, which forcibly holds back the violence of the constant overwhelming sway of all things.

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