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Tears, Tension and Terror: Emotion in the Works of Van der Weyden, Courbet, and Bacon

“Sorrow [is] inherent in the human condition [and is] the price we must pay for being sentient and self-conscious organisms, aspirants to liberation, but subject to the laws of nature and under orders to keep on marching, through irreversible time” (Huxley). How does art depict the human condition and how does it express the sorrow and pain each of us experience? Artists throughout time have attempted to portray love, passion, stoicism, religious fervor, loyalty, nobleness and honor. They have also depicted war, sorrow, suffering, hate, sadness, sorrow and pain. This paper will explore the different ways three artists—Rogier van der Weyden, Gustave Courbet and Francis Bacon—illustrated negative emotions, the reactions they were looking to elicit from their viewers and how both their subject matter and techniques reflected the times in which they worked.

Descent from the Cross by Van der Weyden (see fig. 1), *The Desperate Man* by Courbet (see fig. 4) and *Head VI* by Bacon (see fig. 5) are all oil paintings. Each one depicts negative emotions—human feelings that result from the difficult aspects of the human condition—in powerful ways that move the viewer to feel as well. *Descent from the Cross* is an altarpiece painted on oak wood from about 1430 to 1435 (De Vos 73) that was originally made for the Guild of Crossbowmen of Leuven and later purchased by Spanish rulers (75). It is now in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain. It depicts the removal of Jesus’s body from the cross. Included are his mother, Mary, who has fainted at Jesus’s feet, and from right to left, Mary Magdalene, bowed over in reverence and grief, a bearded man holding a jar of ointment, Nicodemus the Pharisee, dressed as a Netherlandish burgher, a young

man on the ladder helping to support Jesus's body as it is lowered, Joseph of Arimathea, in red, who donated his tomb for Jesus's burial, a young woman, probably Mary Salome, John the apostle, who is supported the fainting Mary and whose bowed over stance echoes that of Mary Magdalene, and Mary Cleopas (Collins). *The Desperate Man* by Courbet is a self-portrait from the Romantic period in art, painted from 1843 to 1845. Courbet painted himself very close up, so close that his elbow and shirt extend beyond the edge of the canvas. His hands clutch at his hair and his eyes look as if they are going to pop out of their sockets. The lighting is dramatic and comes from the side, almost from behind. *Head VI* by Bacon is a 1949 Postwar Europe painting that references Diego Velazquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, as well as a still photograph from the Russian film *The Battleship Potemkin* (Arnason 465-466). The figure is seated inside a transparent box, and the mouth at the bottom of a dissolving head is open in a scream. *Descent from the Cross*, *The Desperate Man*, and *Head VI*, respectively, portray powerful the tears of grief, the tension of despair and the terror of being trapped. The works themselves as well as the emotions depicted are reflective of the times in which they were created. Each one of them has something profound to say about what it means to be human.

Van der Weyden trained as a painter under Robert Campin in his studio in Tournai, a Flemish city in modern-day Belgium. He married Elizabeth Goffaert, Campin's niece, in 1432 and opened his own studio at that time, taking the altarpiece with him to finish three years later (De Vos 73, 75). This painting was created not long after oil paint was beginning to be used for artwork in Northern Europe and before the medium was utilized in Southern Europe. This new, slow-drying paint gave Van der Weyden and other Northern artists more time to add detail to their paintings than they had previously, when using tempera paint or making frescoes. *Descent from the Cross* is a supreme example of this attention to detail typical of Early Northern Renaissance paintings. From the pins and wrinkles in the head covering of Mary Cleopas to the fur and brocade of Nicodemus's

clothing, the detail is riveting. From the tears running down faces to the clenched lips and furrowed brows, the detail makes us feel the emotion.

Like most work of its time, *Descent from the Cross* has a religious story to tell and is meant to invoke religious feeling and devotion. Van der Weyden makes the grief of those who loved Jesus palpable. The viewer can almost taste the salt of the tears as they drip down the faces of the mourners. Mary Cleopas's nose is red and her chin is quivering in her grief (see fig. 2). Nicodemus's lips are pressed together (see fig. 3) as he tries to contain his sorrow so that he can continue with the job at hand—caring for Jesus's body. It is hard not to feel empathy as you look at the expressions of grief and pain so masterfully depicted by Van der Weyden and this empathy would have deepened the religious feeling and experience of viewers of the time.

Courbet did not consider himself a Romantic painter. His focus was on Realism, and he is credited with ushering in the Realism movement, but early in his career, he painted works with definite Romantic elements. Romantic artists were interested in expressing the sublime, or as they defined it, the awe and terror implicit in living in this world where nature can be threatening and dangerous. Courbet expressed this awe and terror in his self-portrait, *The Desperate Man*. Courbet was only interested in depicting reality, and famously said, "Show me an angel and I'll paint one" (Kleiner 696). The reality he painted in *The Desperate Man* was an expression of the terrible emotions we sometimes experience as humans.

Courbet did not grow up in Paris and was self-taught. He did not revere the Salon as an institution and liked pushing boundaries. He would paint things that he knew would be rejected, and his self-portrait is a prime example of this. It differed from any portrait ever seen before. Courbet was not painting to flatter or dignify. In the portrait, he is not posed serenely, regally, purposefully, or coyly. He is desperate. He almost seems to be flying off the canvas in his angst. His face is flush

with emotion, and his mouth is slightly open as if about to gasp. The viewer can feel the tension when they gaze into the whites of his eyes and see his hands that pull at his hair in a universal signal of overwhelming frustration. Courbet painted in a rougher way than was the style of the day (697), and the relatively unrestrained movement of the paint echoes the unrestrained feeling in the work. The way the viewer can feel what Courbet was depicting is just the reflexive emotional reaction sought for in the Romantic period, a time that “represented a shift in emphasis from reason to feeling, from calculation to intuition, and from objective nature to subjective emotion” (681).

“Perhaps no artist of the 20th century expressed in painting the tragedy of existence more realistically than Francis Bacon,” wrote art critic Luigi Ficacci (Ficacci 7). *Head VI* was created approximately four years after the end of World War II and Europe was still reeling from the horrors of war. *Head VI* depicts the horror and existential crisis felt at the time when it seemed that the foundations of society, including religion, had failed and become powerless.

Bacon was born in Ireland, but his family moved often. His childhood was tense, with a father who despised Bacon’s homosexuality, and Bacon left home at age 16. He received some acclaim for early works, but his career was not firmly established until near the end of World War II. After promising his dealer that he was working, when he really wasn’t, he had to quickly come up with enough paintings for a show, but ran out of canvases. He removed a used canvas from its stretchers, turned it over to use the backside and “found the raw canvas held the paint with more bite [and] enhanced its texture . . . [Bacon] continued painting on the unprimed side [of canvases] . . . till the end of his life” (Hage). *Head VI* was painted after Bacon discovered that he liked the challenge and the results of painting on the unprimed backside of primed canvas. In *Head VI* the sparseness and rough edges of some of the brushstrokes can be seen that resulted from painting on the unconventional surface. The figure reflects the pope in Velazquez’s portrait, but instead of looking out of the painting with serene command and control, it has no eyes to see. Instead of

exuding power, it is trapped and powerless inside a cell that is barely suggested by lines of white. Instead of warm flesh that possesses health and vitality, it has grayness, pallor and a mouth that descends into a throat of blackness. How can religion help anyone when it is so helpless itself and how can it escape from a cell that cannot be delineated, grasped or understood? The terror of powerlessness and horror of helplessness is dramatically depicted in *Head VI*.

Spanning almost five hundred years, these three paintings reflect some of the changes in subject matter and technique that artistic conventions embraced through history. Art has changed over the years in how paintings are executed, and these three paintings show some of those changes. Each one is an oil painting, but *Descent from the Cross* was painted when the medium was new, *The Desperate Man* was painted when the medium was polished and in some ways perfected, but Courbet took the technique in a new direction with his rougher style. *Head VI* was created when new ways of looking at canvas and paint were emerging, especially in the Abstract Expressionism movement in America. In addition to different ways of using paint, different artistic periods were interested in depicting different emotions, but the thread that connects all of these paintings is that as humans we experience negative emotions.

As Aldous Huxley wrote, we are “subject to the laws of nature” and thus sadness, grief, desperation, despair, anxiety, tension, horror, helplessness, and terror are all “price[s] we must pay” as “sentient and self-conscious organisms” (Huxley). These three artists depicted negative emotions in dramatically different ways, but each of them were successful in expressing emotion and in eliciting the reactions they were seeking from their viewers. Both their subject matter and techniques reflected the times in which they worked, but even those who live in a vastly different time and place share the experience of being human. These paintings still depict the negative emotions that come from being human, no matter where or when. Art is a way humans can express

these sorrows and terrors and move both towards understanding these emotions in themselves and developing empathy towards others.



Fig. 1. Rogier van der Weyden, *Descent from the Cross*, c. 1430-35, oil on wood.



Fig. 2. detail of Rogier van der Weyden,
Descent from the Cross.



Fig. 3. detail of Rogier van der Weyden,
Descent from the Cross.



Fig. 4. Gustave Courbet, *The Desperate Man*, 1843-55, oil on canvas.



Fig. 5. Francis Bacon, *Head VI*, 1949, oil on canvas.

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