



Image of *Der Zug des Todes* from ReprodArt.com

Steven Hill

The Painting Speaks (in real time)

I blink again at the museum's painting,
its tones and colors darkened

by the crystallized oil and pigments over a century and a half aged.
Yet its human figures and soft glazing still
whisper secrets
from the moment the painter set down his brush,
exhaling softly over the sad, wretched truth he had wrought;

My eyes scrunch and squint at the painting,
and all that the painter's skill had rendered;
it is magic of the type that only art can summon,
showing me a mirror to
the generations upon generations that
stand behind me,
shadowing over my shoulder.

The painting's underglow hisses its broken truth
at the center of its focus—

*der Zug des todes*¹)—

¹ *Der Zug des Todes* ("The Procession of Death," 1876), hangs in Berlin's Alte Nationalgalerie.

its deathly procession toward our ordained destiny
 mocks any meaning we thought we knew.
At the center of the painter's Death March
 shivers the Grim Reaper skeleton,
 hooded in shadow, its Bell tolling for me and thee,
leading a succession of the dearly departing
 from all stations of life, the
dismal line stretching to the horizon:
 we see the nobleman and knight
 the baker and a bishop
 a cripple in rags, and mothers and husbands and
wives and sisters and sad-looking children being
snatched away too soon.
To the side is a young soldier
 trying to comfort his beloved,
since it is his turn to join the relentless line.
Dark scavengers circle overhead,
impatient because they know what time it is.
A vulture thought rattles in me, as if
planted there by the humble painter:
 "Remember the dust, and its confessions that we come from,
 and to which we shall return."

The lonely painter's vision stares back from the brooding canvas,
the human figures and landscape
 so meticulously scraped and sculpted,
hour after hour alone with only his brushes and
ambition to seek his way to a small freedom.
I feel my eyes water and brim,
 tears trickle down my cheek,
and so I arrive at this dark realization:
that despite all our cranial defects and
soul-bared flaws,
despite our long-demonstrated ability (which we
 politely call "history")
to regularly savage each other and whole tribes,
 to shred the thin sinews of human connection,
despite this default to Sapien violence that is attached to
 the algorithms of our chromosomes,
despite our brutal cunning to

eviscerate not only foreigners but even our own family members,
nevertheless we arrive back
at the beginning to realize:

We must protect ourselves—from ourselves
yet all we have to do that with—
is ourselves.

The Human Being, the Janus-faced dual creature,
an enigma wrapped inside a puzzle inside a tragedy,
confronting the often overwhelming nature
of this reality,
the bell tolls on the crimes that the tribes
have inflicted on each other,
and the eagle soars toward the
higher points in which we conjured
laws, institutions and policies
to protect ourselves—
from ourselves!

This truth has been
on display for as long as the dim starlight
takes to arrive from a distant star;
the evidence is overwhelming and the verdict is in:
Humans are the most violent, most
extinctifying creature in the Animal Kingdom.
We are the animal that we are so afraid of,
we are the Ugly One lurking in the shadows.

No wonder we have long appealed
to a Higher Power to protect us—
not just from natural calamity or floods,
or cyclones or the parching sun or
runaway pandemic disease—
but *from ourselves!*

And in perhaps the greatest blow of all:
the captives of the Grim Reaper's death march are tramping
not only away from all that they love
but out of the world's memory;

Life will press forward without them,
the Great Churn harsh and unyielding,
the remaining Souls making room for the ones to come.
“That’s how it’s always been,” say the stars,
“don’t disappoint yourself with false expectations,”
“one dark day you will have nothing to remember.”

And yet we have a slim chance to cheat Death,
we have a power in the Stigmata of our palms
that we observe in the solemnity toward our impending date,
the Arrow of History struggles to maintain its long arc
bending in a rainbow of hope, that
the greater good will outlive us,
the low thrum of the earth awaits to swallow all in its turn,
fertilizing the future from the present and the past.

The Weed, Life (Mahatma’s Great Riddle)

I do not believe in short-violent-cuts to success. . . . I am an uncompromising
opponent of violent methods even to serve the noblest of causes. . . . I object to
violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil
it does is permanent.

— Mohandas K. Gandhi

The weed, life,
The flower, life
Equal;
Yet one lives in exclamation,
the other wraps its tentacles around the exclamation and chokes it dry.

“Weed, won’t you leave the flower alone,
let both of you thrive side-by-side?”
The weed refuses to answer,
it is a silent assassin, side by side with the flower.

The weed chooses to choke the flower and claim more turf,
I wring my hands helplessly, as I watch the weed, life,
consume flower after flower, life after life.

What can I do?

Looking into the mirror of a mountain lake
I see myself,
the solution,
comes to me crystal clear,
pristine--

How paradoxical: kill the one to save the other
kill the weed to save the flower!

I go home and yank out the weeds by their roots,
just in time, only one flower left!
I pluck out every weed in my garden,
this life that consumes life

and, burning them all in a pile,

I realize that I too am a weed, trying
to learn how to traverse lightly,
and I am also a seed, a flower
and I am divine, I pick and choose,
I labor to cultivate my garden, and
to raise a crop that feeds me.

Drama of the Birds

Big Blue lands

wanting seed from the feeder,

Sends five little Black and Browns

scurrying for cover.

Big Blue perches, puffs up

its cheeks,

The smaller tweeties tweet—

from a safe distance;

To and fro chirps of
bantam heads bobbing,
They're trying to organize,
the Black and Browns,
Intentional dialogue so that
they may confront Big Blue,
who is screeching atop the pile.
Will they wait, or placate?
Charge *contiga*,
and drive off Blue?
Will they attempt to infiltrate, or
confiscate scraps?
I hold my breath, this scene is a thousand years old—
The tweeters move in closer,
one by one, tightly
and then—
Take sudden flight in a flurry of directions.
Big Blue screeches, flaps
—and is gone.

Steven Hill is a *Caveat Lector* principal and contributing writer. He is a co-founder and former assistant director of *FairVote* and has held fellowships at the Berlin Social Science Center, American Academy in Berlin, and New America. He is the author of seven books of political non-fiction, including *Fixing Elections*, *Raw Deal*, *Europe's Promise*, and *10 Steps to Repair American Democracy*. His essays,

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