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## THE ERRING OF THE SOUL

The goal of this paper is to contribute to the possible interpretations of a visual artwork that Caspar David Friedrich created in 1802 by placing it in a broader historical context of fine arts and, thus, showing its formal and thematic correspondences with modern and pre-modern iconography. The nature of the topic dictates the use of both a temporal and a comparative analysis of a group of paintings representing the aesthetic visions that prevailed in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Modern Age.

The object of the analysis is a drawing known under the title of *Old Woman with Hourglass and Bible* [Figure 1] and, indeed, it depicts all three elements: an elderly woman praying or reading, or perhaps staring thoughtfully ahead; a well-worn Bible, marked with a bookmark and a dog ear, which has obviously been turned over a lot; and a plain hourglass, with the sand trickling down in front of our eyes from the upper cone-shaped bulb into the lower bulb of glass.



Figure 1

The drawing was made in Greifswald, where the artist was born. Little is known about the circumstances of its creation. All that is certain is that Friedrich, who was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts of Copenhagen from 1794 to 1798 and in Dresden from 1798 to 1802, in the year he completed his studies in Dresden – he was twenty-eight years old at that time –, went back to his hometown to see his father, who earned his living as a candle-maker and soap-maker. Friedrich's mother, Sophie Dorothea Friedrich, was no longer alive at that time. She died in 1781, at the age of merely thirty-four. This is worth mentioning because the art historian Alfred Lichtwark writes in a letter that, in Friedrich's house, the *Old Woman* [Figure 2] was

nailed on the wall next to a drawing depicting Adolph Gottlieb Friedrich, that is the artist's father.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the side-by-side arrangement, the formal and thematic features also suggest that the old woman was a concrete, existing person who, like the beloved father, may have played an important role in Friedrich's life.



Figure 2

In his letter, Lichtwark does not provide any specific information regarding the identity of the elderly woman. He only mentions that she is “an old relative” who was “102 years old” when the drawing was made. The identity of the relative can be established by examining another drawing made four years earlier. It shows Adolph Gottlieb Friedrich's *housekeeper*, who took part in bringing up the Friedrich children after Dorothea's death. [Figure 3] The similarity between the facial features of the two women is obvious. Since the title of the 1798 drawing is *Mother Heiden* [*Mutter Heiden*], it can be inferred that she is the person shown in the 1802 drawing as well. The fact that Friedrich commemorated Mother Heiden, that is Heathen or Pagan, in two drawings suggests an emotional attachment: he probably loved the depicted person, who was a mother substitute – “a sweet stepmother” – to him after he lost his mother when he was seven years old.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Caspar David Friedrich in seiner Zeit (Zeichnungen der Romantik und des Biedermeier)*. Verlagsgesellschaft, Weinheim, 1991.



Figure 3

A closer look at the drawing exhibited at the Kunsthalle (Mannheim) museum, reveals handwriting on its surface. This handwriting is, of course, Friedrich's, and can be found on the open Bible. On the left-hand page it reads: "*Wer aber auf den Herren hoffet, der wird Gnade erlangen*" ["*But he who trusts in the Lord, mercy shall surround him.*"<sup>2</sup>] And on the right-hand page it says: "*Seelig sind, die da galuben, ob sie gleich nicht sehen.*"<sup>3</sup> ["*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"<sup>4</sup>] It can be seen that the sentence on the right-hand page in particular is a paraphrase referring to Chapter 20, verse 29 of the Gospel of John, where Jesus-Christ says to the apostle Thomas, who doubted the news of the Resurrection for eight days: "*Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*"<sup>5</sup> The sentence – Friedrich's paraphrase – can be interpreted both in biographical and art historical contexts.

In the first approach, the text on the drawing conveys Friedrich's personal view of Mother Heiden: it summarises the kind of person he has come to know over the years. According to this, Mother Heiden was a Christian, God-fearing person who lived her life in the spirit of the biblical scene with Thomas. In matters of faith she did not wish to see, experience, or "understand", but – always and above all – to believe. Also, to accept and to love like the doubting disciple who, at the decisive moment, overcame his scepticism. Furthermore, the text on the drawing may also suggest that Mother Heiden's eyesight was far from being perfect at the age of 102.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalms 32:10, New King James Version, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Helmut Börsch-Supan – Karl Wilhelm Jähnig: *Caspar David Friedrich. Gemälde, Druckgraphik und bildmässige Zeichnungen*. Prestol Verlag, München, 1975, p. 261.

<sup>4</sup> John 20:29, New King James Version, 1982.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

According to this interpretation, the sentence must have been a message to bring comfort to the model, telling her that vision was of little help in understanding what is the most essential in life – and what else could be more essential than God?

If the text on the drawing – and its relationship with the three dominant pictorial elements, the old woman, the Bible, and the hourglass – is to be read in an art-historical perspective, the method that Erwin Panofsky applied for the academic analysis of narrative visual artworks seems the most relevant.

Following this method, the primary (introductory) level of the analysis is the pre-iconographic description, that is the exploration of the artistic motifs. This requires three elements: description of object, description of expression, and description of event. The object has already been described. The pictorial elements have been identified, and it has also been pointed out that Friedrich has written a text on the drawing, which can be associated with at least two pictorial elements, namely the Bible and the old woman.

The description of expression focuses on understanding the emotional dimension. It examines what the old woman's countenance and posture express: what mood she is in, what feelings, emotions, desires, or compulsions she is affected by. It can be observed that the old woman's face does not express any distinct emotion, such as joy, anger, surprise, or despair. The drawing shows a calm, self-disciplined person who has temporarily cut off all contact with the outside world. The lack of contact is indicated by two details: the pair of barely open eyes looking at the hourglass and the two hands with fingers tightly intertwined over the Bible and in front of the hourglass.

Describing the objects and the expression does not cause any difficulty. The description of the event is, however, more challenging. This examines what *is happening* in the work of art, and what kind of interaction was, is, and will be – if this latter can be inferred from the position of the pictorial elements – between the animate and inanimate (human, animal, divine, material) elements, in our case, the hourglass, the Bible, and the old woman. For example, the following questions arise: why is the hourglass placed on the Bible and not on the table? Why did not the old woman close and lay the book aside before putting the hourglass in front of her? Is there a practical reason for this? Or is the presence of the hourglass a reference to the biblical scene with Thomas, and does it reveal a specific, Friedrichian interpretation of it?

The book is open, furthermore there is writing on the pages. This suggests that the old woman had *read* before. But now she is doing something quite different: she seems to be folding her hands in *prayer* while *looking* at an hourglass. What is the connection between these two “events”, given that the sentences on the drawing tell us what the old woman had been reading? It must be pointed out again that Friedrich has drawn a dog ear on the corner of the page where the book is open. This indicates clearly Friedrich's intention to show that one of Mother Heiden's favourite Bible stories was the Thomas episode that she often reread. But if the Thomas episode is about the close relationship, or one might say the dramatic relationship, between

faith and doubt, how does the question of the time *running out*, to which the hourglass refers, relate to this? This question cannot be answered by means of the pre-iconographic analysis that calls on stylistic knowledge. Therefore, we must move forward to the level of iconographic analysis.

Iconography examines what “themes” and “concepts” the “natural meanings” as well as their combinations identified at the primary level of the analysis can be linked with in order to reveal the “story”, “symbol”, or “allegory” captured in the work. This level of the analysis draws on literary sources, on the one hand, and on knowledge of typological history, on the other hand. An example of the former has already been provided, since the old woman has been identified in part with the help of Lichtwark’s letter, and the sentences written on the drawing led us to the Thomas episode in the Gospel of John. (It is true that these sources have been discussed at the level of the pre-iconographic analysis, but Panofsky’s method can be applied flexibly.) However, a typological analysis has not been presented so far. This type of study seeks to determine what *object* or *event* a work of art depicts to express a certain “theme” or “concept” in a given historical period, such as the theme of Resurrection or the concept of doubt, as seen (condensed into one representation) in Caravaggio’s painting *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* of 1600.

The particular work of art that this study focuses on expresses the concept of faith (the theme of creed) through the event of *reading the Bible*, and through other objects that are necessary for reading, such as a book or an hourglass that perhaps determines the amount of time that can be spent reading. This type of image can be called a *representation of faith testimony*. Within this type, two subtypes can be distinguished depending on whether a woman or a man is reading the Bible or praying after putting it down. Friedrich’s drawing belongs to the group of the *female representation of faith testimony*. So does the painting of Rembrandt’s mother painted by the Dutch artist Gerrit Dou around 1640 (*Old Woman Praying*, called *Rembrandt’s Mother*). [Figure 4]



Figure 4



The reference to Dou, one of Rembrandt's first pupils, is pertinent because this painting was exhibited in the Dresden Picture Gallery, where Friedrich could easily see it. The similarities between the two compositions are striking. Although Dou's painting lacks the table and the hourglass, the back of the chair is indistinctly recognisable in the background. The downward looking, barely open eyes, the position of the upper body, the nature of the clothing, the well-worn Bible, the medallion shape that frames the composition all suggest that Friedrich drew inspiration from Dou's painting when he sketched Mother Heiden. What makes a difference, however, is that the old woman is not pondering or praying, but is clearly reading, and reading with lips moving, as if someone who is not visible in the painting was listening to her. Dou indicates the fact that she is holding a Bible in her hand by the peculiar hand position. The position of the book, resting on the edges of the index fingers and gripped with two thumbs, is not stable. However, it makes clear that Rembrandt's mother is, indeed, reading the Bible.

Reference must be made to *a male representation of faith testimony* by Dou because in *The Hermit*, painted in 1670, there is also an hourglass placed next to the Bible. [Figure 5] It is worth noting that the solitary hermit kneeling in the ruined chapel folds his hands on the open Bible in the same way as Mother Heiden does. The hourglass stands next to a crucifix propped up on a human skull, a reference to the first man, Adam's death, under whose tongue a seed was placed that grew into the tree fashioned into the cross centuries later onto which Jesus-Christ was nailed.

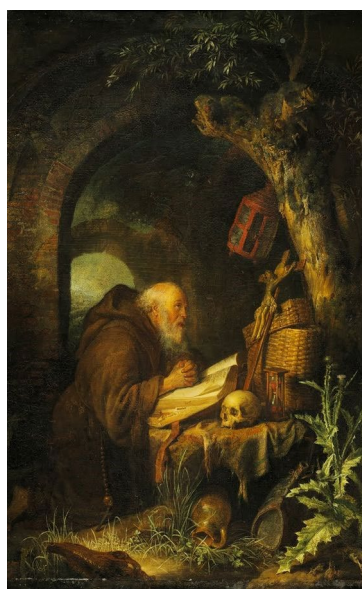


Figure 5

In comparison with Fra Angelico's fresco *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St Dominic* [Figure 6], painted between 1437 and 1446, it is obvious that Dou refers to the story of Adam's death in a different way than the Italian painter. In Fra Angelico's work, some concrete, empirical motifs of the story can still be identified. The cavity under the cross, for example, recalls the event of Adam's *sepulture*. In Dou's painting, *placing* the cross on the skull can only be interpreted symbolically – as well as the other objects around the hermit, for instance, the lantern, the basket, the jar. Or eventually, the hourglass.



Figure 6

Is it possible that the hourglass in Friedrich's drawing is also a symbolic object? If so, then Mother Heiden's portrait is a mixture of three-dimensional, perspectival *realism* and *symbolism* (this latter being able to extend as far as an allegory), that is a combination of the *modern* aesthetic vision starting from the Renaissance and the *pre-modern* aesthetic vision characterising the Middle Ages. On the account of this, the hourglass placed on the Bible can be regarded both as an *object* and a *symbol*. It is an object from the perspective of modern realism and a symbol from the perspective of pre-modern symbolism. In the latter case raises the question of what the hourglass *stands for* or *represents* as a "mimetic representation", that is a sort of representation that substitutes reality, which cannot be shown in the drawing, with a "semblance".

The answer to this question is obvious: the hourglass is a symbol of *vanitas*, of the transience of human existence, its inevitable finitude, its moral and spiritual futility. This answer is correct, but not satisfactory. For it does not explain the *relationship* between the book and the hourglass, nor does it provide an explanation why the old woman is *looking* at the hourglass or why she is holding it in a way that her body *surrounds* it? For a solid answer, one of the *individualised* sub-type of

hermit representations has to be examined. Namely the one, which depicts the *temptation of Saint Anthony*. This type of image, based on the story of Anthony in the *Golden Legend*, associates the *compulsion* to read the Bible and to pray (the pressure to create harmony) with the “demonised” desires and instincts of the body, the physiological ordeals – such as sexual ones –, and possible mental disorders of material existence. In David Teniers’ painting of 1610, Saint Anthony kneels before the Bible in the same way as the anonymous hermit in Dou’s painting: he does not gaze at the crucifix but at the book, while a bizarre, diabolical multitude tries to attract his attention. [Figure 7] One of the demons is a grinning woman with horns, who, in another of Teniers’ type variation painted a few years later, stands behind the backward-looking Anthony (meaning she distracted him successfully from his prayer), holding a glittering cup, a symbol of anger and destruction in the context of the painting. [Figure 8]



Figure 7



Figure 8

From the above study of the paintings follows the conclusion that the drawing of Mother Heiden can be associated with both the depictions of women testifying their faith and those of hermits – and within this latter type, the representations of the *temptation of Saint Anthony*. It differs, of course, from the latter as it depicts a female “hermit”. The “hermitical” character of the old woman is not intrusive, because the minimalism of the subject matter and the environment of the portrait makes the hourglass seem like an everyday object to serve the time-management of a busy woman. The symbolic meaning of the object can be revealed only with an iconographic analysis. This also illustrates how the motifs of *hermitage* and *femininity* enter into a productive relationship with each other in fine arts on religious



themes. The intersection of these motifs can be observed in the depictions of *Penitent Mary Magdalene* as well. This type of representation adds a new – psychological – layer of meaning to the drawing by Friedrich, and leads us to the depictions of *Doubting Thomas*. Mary Magdalene, as the name of the type of representation indicates, is a person who feels guilt and repentance. She does so for two reasons. Firstly, because she had lived a life of sin before she encountered Jesus-Christ (Luke says that Jesus-Christ cast “seven devils” out of her); and secondly, because she was unable to fully sublimate her *sensual* infatuation with Jesus-Christ after the Ascension. This *second* sin of hers is not revealed in the texts of the apocryphal tradition, which provide insights into the “legend” of Mary Magdalene, but first and foremost in the works of fine arts, which highlight the tension between the religious-spiritual and the erotic-sensual dimensions of the story.

We know from the *Golden Legend* that Mary Magdalene became a missionary and a church organiser after the Ascension, and then she cut off all contact with the outside world, even with the disciples, and “retreated into strict seclusion in a place prepared for her by the hands of angels”, to devote herself to contemplating “heavenly things [...] for thirty years, unknown to anyone”.

I draw attention to the duration of time, that is to the fact that Mary Magdalene spent thirty years in the wilderness, already a middle-aged woman when she began her hermitage. Despite this, in the works of art such as Gerard Seghers’ painting of 1630, we see that Mary Magdalene is beautiful and young. [Figure 9] In contrast to a statue by Donatello, which exceptionally represents an aged, haggard, and ascetic Magdalene [Image 10], Seghers’ Magdalene is about the same age as when she met Jesus-Christ. Yet, the narrative of the painting suggests that it is not the “sinful maiden” “immersed” in the pleasures of the flesh, but it is the saint woman cleansed of her sins who lies before the cave, crucifix in hand: a beautiful saint untouched by time.



Figure 9



Image 10

It is from the simultaneous representation of beauty and sanctity, the eroticism hidden behind the religious content that the ambiguity of the painting (and of all representations of Penitent Mary Magdalene) arises. The painters depict a body (according to the story, “enraptured” both spiritually and physically, not consuming “bodily nourishment”) cleansed of “devils”, but still bearing its own past, the physical sign or rather sign-system of its former sinfulness: the hair, the eyes, the mouth, the breasts, the hips all remind the viewer of the person that Mary Magdalene was before her conversion. Thus, there is a contrast between the sensual body and the spirit (its “physical” representations, such as the direction of the look, the gaze, the closed posture) eager for the suprasensible.

The depictions of the *temptation of St Anthony* and those of *Penitent Mary Magdalene* are similar in the way that both types portray the “holy” life as a ceaseless struggle with the “demonised” desires of the body. Sanctity is not a state but a battle that Saint Anthony fights with monsters and Mary Magdalene with “sinful” thoughts, which are referred to by the blood-caked whip in Seghers’ painting. Magdalene uses the book, the crucifix and the whip alternatively. She needs the latter object because she does not see a sculpted statue on the crucifix, but as a “simultaneous disciple” of the God-man, the flesh and blood person of whom she cherishes a multitude of personal memories. These memories (such as “sitting at the Lord’s feet listening to his words” or “anointing his head”) are faint and distant at that moment, but they still remained in Magdalene’s memory. So, when Seghers’ Magdalene looks at the crucifix, she is thinking of her memories of the *historical* Jesus – the memories that cannot be conveyed in oral or written form. And she perhaps also recalls memories which make the use of the whip inevitable for her if she wishes to live a “holy” life in her hermitage, that is to say, a life purified of the desires of the flesh.

Mary Magdalene looks at the crucifix, Mother Heiden at the hourglass. We wonder why. Is it possible that for Mother Heiden the hourglass is as *demonic* an object as for Saint Anthony the glittery glass held in the hand of the old woman with horns? Or as for Magdalene the crucifix that gives her sinful thoughts? If so, then the hourglass represents “something” that makes it difficult for the old woman to live a religious life, distancing herself from the possibility of scepticism.

Mother Heiden wants to believe. Not like the sceptical Thomas but like John, who did not need empirical evidence for affirmation. According to the sentences written on the drawing, Mother Heiden does not need that either. However, for the old woman a mere decision is not enough to make a successful test of faith, to come, like Mary Magdalene or Saint Anthony, to “contemplate heavenly things”, since the test of faith can be disrupted by “demons” who, according to the visual works of art, can torture or even destroy the one who wishes to “rise”. These demons are distorted, aggressive creatures in the depictions of Anthony. In the ones of Mary Magdalene, they are hidden thoughts and fantasies from which the hermit is freed by the whip. The third group of demons consists of objects.

Demonic objects can also be seen in a painting created around 1430 by an unknown Austrian or Hungarian artist. The painting, *Evagationes spiritus*, or *The Erring of the Soul*, shows a seated woman holding a mirror. [Figure 11]



Figure 11

The woman looking her own reflection in the mirror is surrounded by various objects: two barrels, a box of jewellery, and clothes. There is also a bridled horse waiting for its rider. A distinctive feature of the painting is that there is a red line leading to the objects and the living creatures, including the woman and the horse. The line enters the space of the painting from the outside, from the right-hand side,

and then it branches off. The woman's position is not prominent. The red line leads to her as well suggesting that she is only one item in the set of elements indicated. The person who thinks of the objects and creatures marked with the red line – among which the attention is shared and scattered in a fluttering manner – is not visible in the painting. According to a comment of interpretation, “here we can see the counterpart of the moralist literature, more common in woodcuts and book illustrations than in panel paintings: it shows, with an educational purpose, the example of a person who is not paying attention while praying, who, even in moments of devotion, is only thinking of a woman making her toilet, clothes, a horse, a house, and wine barrels. Obviously, the absent-minded worshipper could be seen in another panel matching this one, and the lines leading to the various earthly goods were emanating from that person, making the trajectory of his thoughts visible.”<sup>6</sup>

The absent-minded worshipper is certainly a man. But why could not it be a woman? If we embrace this idea and juxtapose Mother Heiden's portrait with *Evagationes spiritus* and, in our imagination, we connect the two images with a red line, we get the result that Mother Heiden is thinking of *herself*, the *young* woman she used to be. The hourglass fits harmoniously into the context. It is a measuring instrument but also a symbol of the time that Mother Heiden has lived through, experiencing what it means to grow old, to go from a little girl to a mature woman and then to an old woman. Is there a type of representation that depicts this process? Is there any artwork that shows the human lifespan in its *entirety*, from birth to death? Yes, there is. For instance, the age portraits, such as *Three Ages of the Woman and the Death*, painted by Hans Baldung Grien in 1510. [Figure 12]



Figure 12

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<sup>6</sup> *Keresztény múzeum* [Museum of Christianity]. Esztergom, Corvina Kiadó, 1993.

*A young woman, an old woman, a mirror, an hourglass* – in the painting by Grien, the figures and objects that have just been linked in our imagination meet and form a direct unity of thoughts justifying the juxtaposition of the portrait of Mother Heiden and the enigmatic painting by the unknown medieval artist.