

3 The Broken Body as Spectacle

Something pre-social seems to link us to a strong sense of disgust and horror at the prospect of a body that doesn't quite look like one, either grotesquely deformed by accident or disorganized by mayhem.

WILLIAM IAN MILLER, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1997)¹

Dislocations and improvisations

For the late medieval painter, working to forge a realist language out of the idioms of country and region, and in conversation, to a greater or lesser degree, with modish court styles, the figure of the crucified Thief presented a unique aesthetic challenge. As we've seen, conventional types for these figures were well disseminated through *trecento* art, International Style painting and their satellites in the north; the most widespread of these, by 1400, was certainly the hooked-arm type. For painters who sought to push their art beyond convention, the crucifixion of the Thieves presented an opportunity for the free deployment of their inventive powers, since no significant theological constraints were in force. Out of this dialectic of freedom and constraint were to come a panoply of wildly distorted figures whose gestural language spoke directly of pain and, by extension, of the antithetical states embodied in the Two Thieves: penitence and impenitence, redemption and damnation, sanctification and defamation. To modern eyes, this language of pain is often articulated in terms so explicit as to veer towards the disgusting and atrocious, surpassing perhaps our ability to see what's going on at all.² Was it thus for the medieval viewer?

I regard it as a principle of the history of human sensibilities that in no culture is the capacity for experiencing violence, or intensely violent imagery, unlimited. Thus we should not think it so for the 'rude and barbaric' Middle Ages. Despite what many historians have said about the medieval 'coarseness of attitudes', the 'familiarity with death' or

the 'uncivilized disregard' for public displays of bodily functions, there is evidence that later medieval people could experience disgust and revulsion over extremes of actual or represented violence. In the very text that helped popularize lay contemplation of the grisly details of Christ's torture during the Passion, the late-thirteenth-century *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, one finds an entreaty to the reader 'not [to] be repelled by those things that our lord Jesus did not hesitate to bear'.³ Without an audience capable of experiencing disgust, disgusting imagery is robbed of its antagonistic power. And without this power it can have no meaningful cultural purpose (equally culturally meaningless would be imagery that was so out of line with sensibilities that spectators could not even bear to look at it, making its violence practically invisible). Cultivating compassion as a spiritual virtue and understanding that Christ's agonies begin and end with human sinfulness, one's *own* sinfulness, medieval devotional viewers no doubt understood the value of disciplining themselves, during meditation, to face the sickening spectacle of His torments squarely, to gaze upon them with a stoutness of heart, and even to seek solace and 'refreshment' in them. 'What can be so effective a cure for the wound of conscience and so purifying to keenness of mind,' asks the Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux in a sermon, 'as steady meditation on the wounds of Christ?'⁴ Did the same viewers likewise make the effort to endure, as a cultivation of their own spiritual virtue, the shockingly 'disorganized' bodies of the Thieves? In Chapter 7, I suggest that this was the case, and that the acknowledged cultural purpose of their image was to provide just such a chastening, if not openly antagonistic, experience.

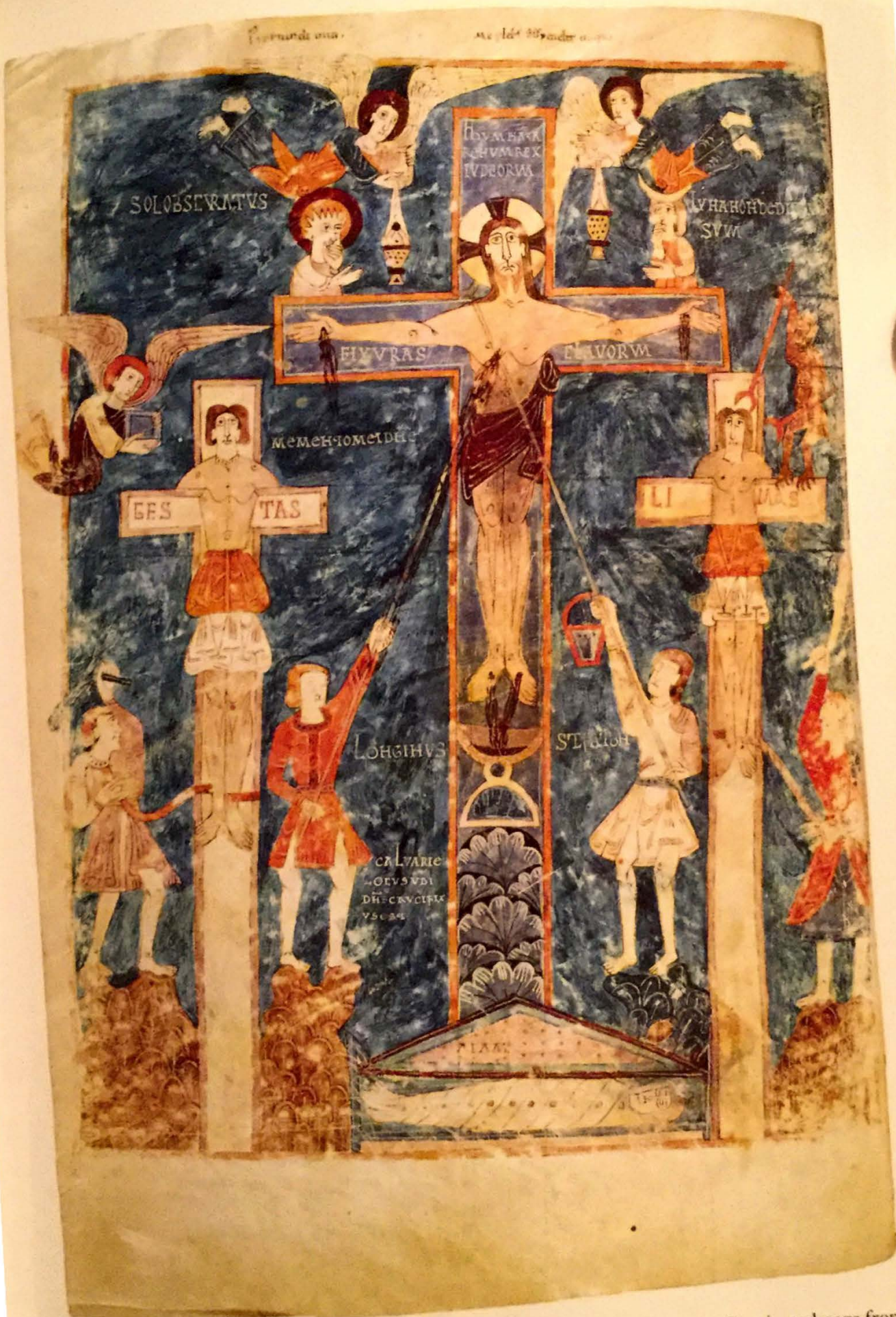
Where, then, in the long playing field of possibilities between tame conventionalism and ultimate abjection, between the fully legible body and the one which disintegrates before our vision, surpassing the *sensible* person's capacity for horror – where did the visualizations of painter and spectator meet? Was the skilled *lay* visualizer of the Passion already keen on generating such terrible spectacles for his or her own private meditations? Or did the lack of textual direction available to the pious lay person on this matter demand that the painter use his art to urge spectators towards ever crueller torments for the Thieves? Would not the ambitious painter have learned to exploit his audience's fascination with the body-in-pain, to keep their attention riveted upon the figure by crafting it with the utmost care – calibrating its effects, so to speak, against their capacity to visualize such things at all? Compared to his literary counterparts, the late medieval painter, as we know, was eloquent and precise about the punishment of the Two Thieves.

If the iconography of pain presented a special artistic challenge, one in which audience sensibilities had to be gauged and met at the extreme limits of apprehension, there was also a professional opportunity for the late medieval, guild-sanctioned master. To grasp fully the mental conditions under which such men worked would require reviewing the changing social status and self-definition of the professional painter in northern Europe. For the moment we can imagine these mostly provincial, mostly ambitious men, casting their nets widely in search of compelling models to adapt, revise and recombine, looking for new ways to make a convincing (and disgusting) display of the crucified body, and deploying all the auxiliary motives associated with it: crosses of varying shapes and sizes; ropes, nails and other technical paraphernalia they chose to assemble around the suspended figure (recall the weapons in Westphalian art); facial expressions, clothing, hair and, above all, the horrendous, often gaping wounds on legs and arms, our present concern in this chapter. Committed as they were to providing their patrons, and their local audiences, with a stimulating and edifying visualization of how the three different executions on Calvary *may have happened*, the enterprising professional painter surely hoped to leave his own mark, so to speak, upon the bodies of Christ's 'shameful company'.

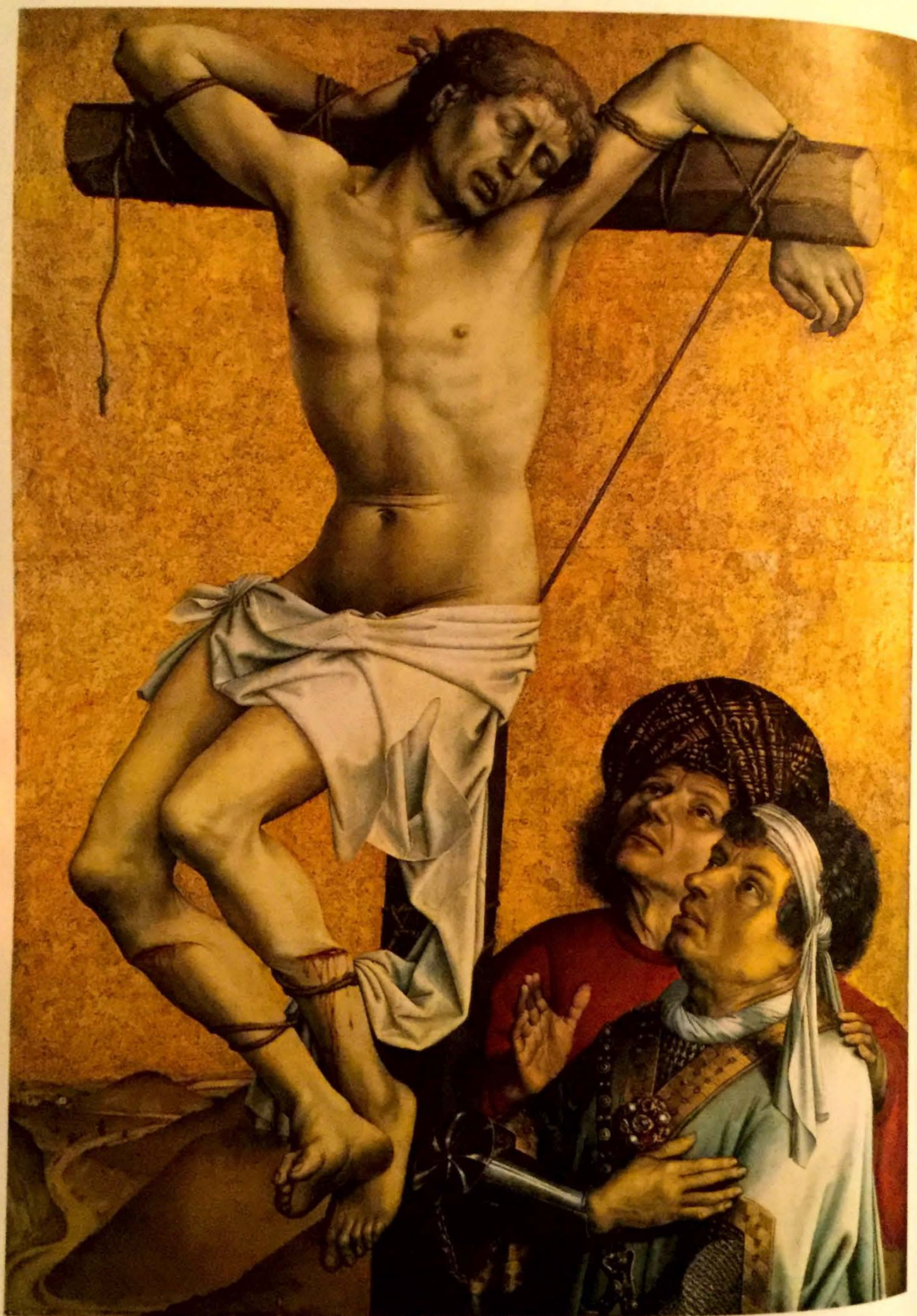
Indeed, as the fifteenth century speeded towards its irresolute end, as the 'medieval consensus' fell under the disintegrating advance of new ideas powered by the printing press, painters in the north, especially in the German-speaking territories, applied themselves with ever greater stringency to the task of arranging the dislocated limbs of the Thieves on, around and over their crosses in the cruellest fashion possible. One even gets the feeling that these men staged their own penal atrocities competitively. Painters worked in a milieu of escalating artistic self-consciousness and self-importance, and 'showed an increasing self-awareness that a major altarpiece could serve a broader role in establishing their credentials as producers of great "works"'.⁵ As more and more painters sought aesthetic inspiration from Italy and, in doing so, cemented alliances of mutual respect with circles of humanist scholars and poets – the twin defining features of 'Northern Renaissance' aesthetics – they had to find ways to make good their claims to being more than just superb craftsmen; they had to assert that their practice was more than what the word *arte* traditionally denoted: skill. Such an extension of the artisan's practice into the improvisational can be seen in terms of both the self-distinction it brought the maker and the prestige it brought the ever competitive guilds. In this sense it is an important precursor of the Renaissance ideals of *inventio*

and *fantasia* (see Chapter 8), but it is not, at this time and in this part of Europe, the same thing. Not until Albrecht Dürer's highly self-conscious presentation of the artistic self, undertaken within the burgeoning élite humanist culture of early-sixteenth-century southern Germany, did northern European artists learn to pose the question of their own poetic powers. If late medieval artists were using their image-forming powers in roughly analogous ways, it was still, primarily, in the service of the cult image, for the sake of its devotional usefulness and appeal.

One of the aims of this and the following chapters, then, is to show how an emergent professional and aesthetic practice, leading towards a synthesis of observation and improvisation, but still bound in significant ways to established models, led artists *away* from these models, and compelled them to seek new ways to convey the *reality* of crucifixion to an audience for whom it was a distant, and even exotic, form of punishment. Consciously or not, painters learned how to match the pictorial experience of these penal horrors with the judicial realities with which they lived, to make one resonate with the other. 'The power of realism in art,' writes the critic Leon Wieseltier, 'is owed to the continuity between the world which it makes and the world in which, and for which, it is made.'⁶ Later medieval devotional art demanded such a continuity, and compelled the painter to imbue his 'rhetorics' of violence with all the appurtenances of *the real*. Meanwhile, devotional culture urged those pursuing a spiritual path into Christ's dire sufferings to seek for themselves such a continuity between past and present; it compelled the *spectator* to visualize every detail of the Passion in terms of what he or she knew most intimately – in other words, to imbue his or her own imaginary violence with all the forcefulness of the real. In what follows here and in the rest of this book, I hope to develop this idea of an experiential continuity between these three key spheres of experience: the sacred image, with its realist treatment of atrocious punishment; private devotion, with its peculiar mode of meditative visualization, responsive to the antagonizing directives of an art and literature designed for its cultivation; and a public sphere of ritual action and collective piety, where many of the perceptions and feelings aroused by devotional art were channelled and expressed: the contemporary spectacle of pain, penance, expiation and redemption that the late Middle Ages called justice (*iustitia*).



38 'Crucifixion', Kingdom of León, probably Tábara monastery, AD 975, illuminated page from Beatus of Liébana's commentaries on the Apocalypse, tempera on parchment, 40 × 26 cm. Girona, Museu de la Catedral, ACG Ms. 1, fol. 16v.



39 Robert Campin (The Master of Flémalle), *Thief on a Cross*, fragment of an altar wing, c. 1428–30, oil on oak, 133 × 92.5 cm. Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt.



40 The Master of the Sterzinger Altarwings, *Crucifixion*, exterior of a *Flügelaltar*, mid-15th century, painted pine panel, 156.5 × 142 cm. Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe.

41 Detail of illus. 40, showing the legs of the Thief on Christ's left and an executioner with a club.







42 Bohemian Master, *Calvary*, central panel of an altarpiece (the so-called 'Kaufmann Crucifixion'), c. 1360, painted panel transferred to canvas over panel, 67 × 29.5 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Gemäldegalerie) (OPPOSITE).

43 The Master of the Munich Domkreuzigung, *Calvary*, Upper Bavarian, mid-15th century, painted panel. Frauenkirche, Munich (ABOVE).



44 Mutilated criminal elevated on a wheel, from the so-called *Book of Numquam*, tempera on parchment, 13th/14th century. Cathedral Library, Soest.



45 Diebold Schilling, Setting up the wheel with the murderer Duckeli in 1492, fol. 218v. from *Luzerner Chronik* (1509–13), 20 × 12.6 cm. Zentralbibliothek, Lucerne.



46 Diebold Schilling, Execution by wheel with mutilated criminals on elevated wheels, fol. 280r. from *Luzerner Chronik* (1509–13), 17.6 × 18.6 cm. Zentralbibliothek, Lucerne.



47 Circle of the Master of the Martyrdom of the Apostles, *Saints Felix, Regula and Exuperantius Broken with the Wheel*, Austrian or Hungarian, c. 1480, tempera on pine panel, 72.5 × 50.5 cm. Keresztény Múzeum, Esztergom, Hungary.

Wounds

Each distinct 'type' for the crucified Thief in northern European art displays a set of technical effects that distinguishes it from its relatives; each directs an anxious perception to the terrors of 'crucifixion' according to its own, distinct phenomenology of pain. And within each mode of body-demolition, each set of effects, a special place was reserved for the graphic depiction of wounds.

Images of wounds may be the paradigmatic generators of horror, and perhaps also disgust, because of the way they locate perception at the pulsing boundaries of the body. Once a wound appears before our eyes, it is as if a fault line has opened up across the body's topography, one that threatens to tear open ever wider expanses of the body's hidden interior. We seem to sense, in that 'pre-social' way evoked by Miller in his epigraph for this chapter, 'the inappropriateness of destroying the integrity of the body's seal'.⁷ Instinctively we fear the dissolution of that literally vital distinction between interior and exterior. Extend the wound far enough beyond its already unstable boundaries and the body, as an organic whole, threatens to disappear. In the course of my public lectures, which have included these images, it has become clear to me just how profoundly the 'civilizing process' has made the sight of serious wounds unbearable to all but a few. The sight of an opened body delivers an inchoate shock, and causes such sympathetic perceptions of pain, because the wounded body of our vision somehow ceases to be *that* body and becomes, in an uncanny way, *our* body as well. For Julia Kristeva the wound is profoundly disquieting because – like that 'utmost of abjection', the corpse – it '*show[s] me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live*'.⁸ When the wound is transformed into spectacle, we glimpse in it our own future disarray.

With a macabre virtuosity unmatched in the history of art, numerous late medieval painters applied their illusionistic skills to the problem of creating wounds whose severity and gruesomeness could expose the perviousness of the body and, for that reason, attract the spectator's gaze like powerful magnets. In the work of the great Flemish 'primitive' Robert Campin (a.k.a. the Master of Flémalle), we find a far more rigorous attempt to come to terms with the grisly leg wounds, the result of the Roman *crurifragium*, than any artist who worked before him. And more effectively than any painter of his generation, Campin grounded his 'study' of the fractured limbs in direct observation. That, at least, was the conclusion of the historian of medicine Robert

Herrlinger, who in a 1953 article placed Campin's famous Thief fragment, now in Frankfurt, on the examination table (illus. 39).⁹ Under Herrlinger's scientific gaze, Campin's near-photographic rendering of the human body revealed an astonishing exactitude. That the Tournai master's 'anatomical-surgical' rendering of the entire figure reminded him of modern anatomy manuals only underscored the historic importance he attached to Campin's achievement: more than 100 years had to elapse, he tells us, before its equivalent could be found in any European medical handbooks.¹⁰

Exceptionally large for its original time and place, the present painting in Frankfurt is but a fragment of a once larger altar panel that showed the Thief set in a rolling landscape, attended by two spectators standing on the ground (now visible only as bust portraits); this panel in turn most likely formed the right wing of a large altarpiece of the *Descent from the Cross*, the general appearance of which can be discerned from a copy now in Liverpool.¹¹ The figure languishes uneasily on the cross. Arms are bent back in two separate but equally well-described positions, and are lashed down brutally to the neatly carpentered beams: the left arm stretches up to hook over the *patibulum*, effecting what appears to be a dislocation in the elbow and leaving the hand to dangle; the right upper arm splays away from the torso but is severely locked back, the shoulder perhaps disjointed, and the wrist is tied down to the beam. Rotating like a fleshly swastika, the resulting configuration has a geometric logic that may have its source in older variations on the hooked-arm type. Combined with the tense, tormented facial features, the figure appears as a kind of disjointed, judicial analogue to the drunken sleeping satyr of Hellenistic art. Campin's soft modelling creates a plastic sense of flesh so evocative that it compelled his greatest pupil, Roger van der Weyden, to adapt its features for the Christ figure in his famous *Deposition* altarpiece in Madrid.

Of pointed interest to Herrlinger were the representations of the broken bones in the lower legs (illus. 48). Once again, the accuracy impressed him: he identified fractures in the tibia (commonly called the shinbone) and fibula of both legs, remarked on the manner in which the dislocation causes the skin to stretch in tight folds over the front edge of the tibia, and noted the indentations in the skin caused by the tightened ligatures beneath the wounds.¹² There couldn't be any doubt that Campin had based these details on careful observation of an unclothed human body, presumably a corpse. But neither he nor any other Flemish artist of his generation is likely to have brought corpses into the studio for observation or dissection. We know of no such anatomical investigations *by artists*, north or south of the Alps,

48 Detail of illus. 39, showing the fractured legs of a Thief.



until about 70 years later, when Leonardo da Vinci ventured into this high-stakes arena, touching off a period of fruitful collaboration between artists and medical doctors during the *cinquecento* that resulted in a 'revolution in the science of anatomy'.¹³ Rather than using collected anatomical specimens, which at first were always the bodies of executed persons who had been denied burial,¹⁴ Campin's studies would necessarily have been focused on the bodies of judicial victims *still displayed on the gallows*. For Herrlinger, the pallid hue of the skin – as well as the curious fact that the overtight ligatures cut into 'bloodless, dead flesh' – could not be mistaken for anything but the body of a hanging victim.¹⁵ In his eyes, Campin had successfully parlayed a common, observable sight, an everyday experience, into a masterpiece of anatomical truth-to-nature.

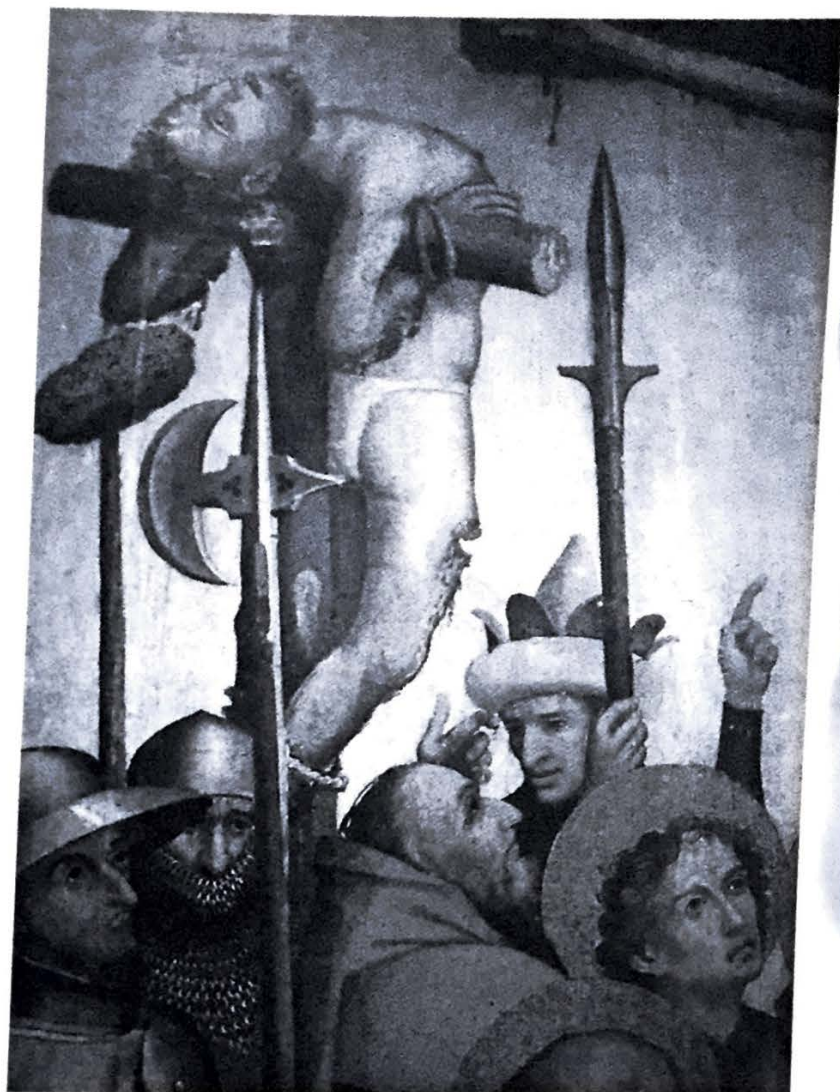
However, several related aspects of Herrlinger's analysis don't quite add up. In the first place, he believes that the leg wounds shown by Campin were caused by a blow from a sword. Second, he casually assumes that the dead convict who offered his body to Campin's proto-scientific gaze was a hanging victim (*Gehenkter*),¹⁶ ignoring the fact that hanging was not the only punishment in the medieval repertoire that included public exposure as a post-mortem indignity. Why would

a medieval hanging victim, who died from slow strangulation, have such wounds inflicted on his legs at all? Ironically, the seed of a better explanation can be found embedded in Herrlinger's observations and analysis. When he attributes the appearance of the wound to a blow from a sword, he means that the dislocations in the tibia and fibula were also the result of this blow. He does not consider that the disjuncting of the leg may have been caused instead by bodily movements made, or external pressures applied, after the blows had been struck. Yet this possibility may well be precisely the thing Campin wants to trigger, and it is a surprisingly good match with what we know of the pathophysiology of Roman crucifixion. Several further comparisons will help make this clearer.

In a mid-fifteenth-century panel, now in Karlsruhe, by the painter known as the Master of the Sterzinger Altarwings, macabre virtuosity with wounding reaches an unbearable surplus (illus. 40).¹⁷ This Ulmish painter, who worked with the sculptor Hans Multscher and was well acquainted with the art of Roger van der Weyden (the mourning figure dabbing her eyes with her robe is lifted from Roger's *Calvary Triptych* in Vienna), was certainly one of the century's greatest judicial voyeurs. Playing across the boundaries separating one Thief type from another, he shows the Good Thief arching back, with forearms savagely broken close to the elbows, locked around and tied down to the *patibulum* (illus. 49). His counterpart also has the *patibulum* shoved up under his armpits, but cannot arch back since his wrists are tied to the *stipes* behind his back. Both Christ and the Good Thief wear expressions of death: for Christ it is the impassive stare of the corpse; for the Good Thief it is the delirium of the torture victim. Only the Impenitent Thief endures, howling in pain as an executioner mercilessly batters his body (illus. 41). By angling the Thieves' crosses away from us, the Sterzing Master creates a semi-profile view from behind, one which objectifies the wounds and makes them maximally visible (we see most of them in profile). The worst of them appear as grotesque crimson mouths, surrounded by massive purple-blue contusions, gaping open to show splintered bones that look like jagged teeth. The compound fractures just above the ligatures are bad enough to disjoin the leg bone and cause it to 'hinge' outwards.

Equally chilling are the wounds described in the sprawling *Calvary* altarpiece painted between 1460 and 1470 by the so-called Kempten Master, who hailed from the Allgau region of Bavaria (illus. 50).¹⁸ Again we are faced with mouth-like openings into the body's interior, drooling blood and filled with shattered bone, as if trying to speak. And again in the most visible instances the artist has conveyed the

49 Detail of illus. 40,
showing the Thief on
Christ's right.



anatomical specificity of a compound fracture that is bad enough to disjoin the limb at the bone's midpoint (illus. 51). Unlike the Sterzing Master, who pictures the club-wielding executioner as the human agent behind these demolitions, the Kempten Master has withdrawn the executioners from the scene, leaving only the wounds as a visible index of their presence. Did this artist assume that the spectator would fill in the missing characters, the so-called 'men with clubs' (*tortores*)? And if so, would they come armed with their traditional clubs or brandish alternatives – sticks, maces, hatchets, swords – in the way numerous other painters and illuminators had envisioned them? What specific form of butchery, what 'technique', has caused these horrendous gashes? How did both of these artists cue their audiences towards a comprehension of the pain they make so palpably visible? How did the infliction of wounds fit in with the rest of the torture? Was it simply an added cruelty for the Thieves (in contrast to Christ), did it contribute to their deaths, or was it the cause of death itself?

John's Gospel tells us that, after the Crucifixion, the Jews clamoured for the removal of the dead bodies from Golgotha before the onset of



50 The Kempten Master, *Calvary*, 1460–70, oil on panel, 165.5 × 140.5 cm. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg.

the Sabbath. Since none of the three condemned men had yet died, however, they insisted that their legs be broken. Thereupon Pilate dispatched soldiers to do the job (19: 31–2). Of the few patristic authors to comment on this episode, Origen (d. 253/4) writes that this was carried out ‘according to the Roman custom’,¹⁹ by which he apparently meant a procedure called the *crurifragium*. According to Pierre Barbet, whose ‘Passion according to the surgeon’ has done much to illuminate the patho-physiology of crucifixion, the Gospel writers would have known how effective this technique was in hastening the deaths of crucified men. In breaking the legs of the crucified, one removes what has become, in the course of the torture, the primary support for the suspended and immobilized body. Barbet explains:

After crucifixion [proper] . . . the body sagged, and dropped to a considerable extent, while at the same time the knees became more bent. The victim could then use his two feet, which were fixed to the *stipes*, as a fulcrum, so as to lift his body and bring his arms, which the general sagging would have dropped by an angle of about 65°, back to the horizontal. The dragging on the hands would then be greatly reduced; the cramps would be lessened and the asphyxia [caused by the inability of the lungs to properly expel air and thus exchange gases] would disappear for the moment, through the renewal of the respiratory movements . . . Then, the fatigue of the lower limbs would supervene, which would force the crucified to drop again, and bring on a fresh attack of asphyxia. The whole agony was thus spent in an alternation of sagging and then of straightening the body, of asphyxia and of respiration.²⁰

Finally, in Barbet's opinion, the average victim of Roman crucifixion died not from loss of blood, thirst, starvation, fatty pulmonary embolisms or a cardiac arrest (all of which have had their diagnostic champions), but from asphyxiation. In John's Gospel Christ expires before the soldiers reach Calvary, and is therefore spared the *crurifragium* (though the exemption has a significance beyond this straightforward narrative logic, as I'll explain).

Barbet's account can help us reconstruct one level of intentionality behind the wound images served up by provincial painters like the



51 Detail of illus. 50, showing the Thief on Christ's right.

Kempton and Sterzing Masters, and by urbane masters like Campin. But it also exposes the limits of their 'archaeological' grasp of the penalty. Of all of the wounds found in their work, those which open up in front of a fracture severely enough to 'unhinge' the bone are the most deliberately rendered, and the hardest to look at. So let us take a closer look. If, consistent with the narrative logic of the Gospel, the fracturing blow was delivered in the midst of the up-down struggle described by Barbet, the weight of the exhausted upper body would, in fact, 'hinge out' the leg at the precise point of the fracture (and perhaps also tear open the wound still further). This is what we see. However, this reading is thrown into doubt in the case of the Kempton Thieves, whose upper bodies are not suspended in Christ's canonical pose, with arms outstretched and affixed to the cross at the furthest points of extension – yet this is the conformation assumed in Barbet's description. Rather, their arms are woven up, around and over the *patibulum* and tied down tightly with ropes. Such an immobilization of the upper body would not, strictly speaking, abandon the body to gravity's force, the precondition for the 'hinging out' of the broken limbs. What else, then, could have caused this kind of wound? Could the decisive blow in these cases have come *from behind*, fracturing the bone and pushing it through the other side of the limb? What other penal procedure could provide the model for this? And how might we have to reimagine the sequence of events in the biblical story of the breaking of legs in order to account for such a possibility?

The accuracy of Herrlinger's physiological understanding of Roman crucifixion is not really at issue here. Nor is how well Campin's understanding matches up against a modern, 'archaeological' grasp of these things. As a maker of sacred images, Campin's practice was directed towards neither reconstructing the patho-physiology of Roman crucifixion nor producing an optical recording of what he saw suspended on the gallows. His practice demanded instead that he confront the viewer with an image whose rhetorical power depended on its oscillation between past and present, partaking of both but committed to neither. In Campin the real infiltrates the rhetorical to the extent that wounds are not only shocking but shockingly *familiar*. The visual habits and devotional practices of his bourgeois audience would have compelled him, as Herrlinger rightly sensed, to draw upon that 'everyday lived experience' that included the sight of punished malefactors exposed to public view; but he also had the much harder job of reconciling that familiarity with a peculiarly medieval commitment to what the biblical story actually told. The anatomical accuracy of Campin's wounds are enough to convince us that he didn't just make them up (as one might

suspect of the cartoony Kempten Master). So where, if not upon the body of a hanging victim, could he have observed compound fractures? Are we looking at a seamless montage of elements taken from different sources? Or has Campin approximated his vision of the tortured Thief to a rather different instance of the broken body as spectacle?

Text and image: The Thief on the wheel

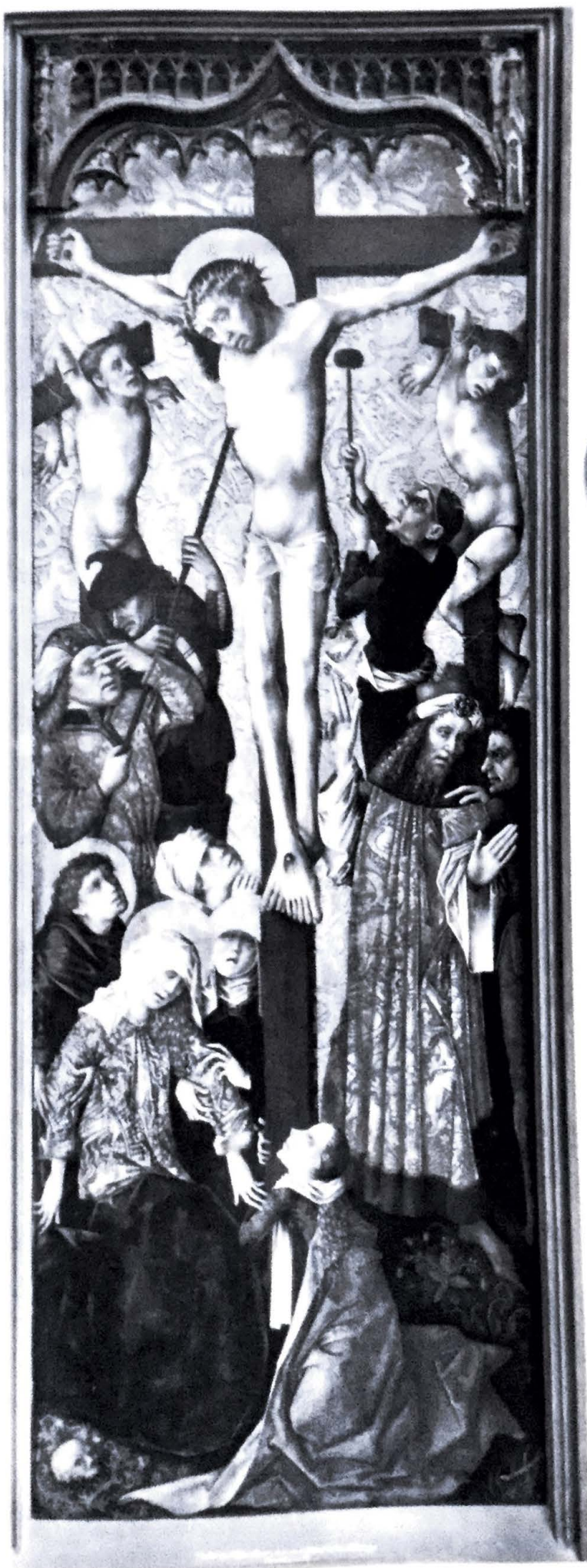
Whether or not the infliction of the *crurifragium* was, as has sometimes been thought, an expression of mercy, a death blow that spared the crucified hours of further agony, the overriding concern made plain in John's Gospel was the hastening of the men's deaths so their bodies would not remain on view during the Sabbath. Even this narrative rationale may be, symbolically speaking, beside the point. For the Gospel writer is quite deliberate about the typological spin he wants to give the incident. Christ is dead, so is spared the vicious assault; like the Paschal lamb of old, we read, 'a bone of [Christ] shall not be broken' (John 19: 36).²¹ Only the Thieves are *literally* broken, and we can see in this simple denial – the only piece of technical description in the Gospels that lets us know that the torture imposed on the Thieves was different from that of Christ – what amounted to a decisive cue for later medieval artists. Many painters, as we've seen throughout the preceding chapters, simply go about the business of 'illustrating' the episode or its bloody outcome in straightforward terms, perhaps confident that they were reconstructing the historical reality of Roman crucifixion, or at least being true to Scripture's authority. Other painters, however, take a different approach, and seem to perceive in that account of the breaking of bones a dim prototype for a judicial procedure that was familiar to them. In the Gospels the legs of the Thieves are broken *after* the fact of their crucifixion – technically speaking, *after* they were already affixed to the crosses. But the fractures and dislocations of the body visible in several important works reveal something different.

One of the pivotal works in the development of the multi-figured Calvary image in northern Europe is a gabled panel from the kingdom of Bohemia (modern Czechoslovakia), painted c. 1360 and now in Berlin (illus. 42).²² Its small size suggests that this was not a high altar but probably a domestic altar for a princely patron. Artists active at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Karl IV were well acquainted with the *trecento* art that was then in vogue, and some authors have perceived the influence of Bolognese illumination in the composition; the same design reappears later in Bohemian art, this time in a missal, completed

in 1409 for the Archbishop of Prague Zbinko von Habsburg and now in Vienna.²³

In the Berlin panel the Thieves are shown in states of wretched dislocation that involve every bodily member. Taking the hooked-arm type to a terrifying extreme, the painter levers every arm over the *patibulum*, twisting them down and locking them in place behind the figures' backs, where they are cuffed with ropes. Enough anatomical descriptiveness is in force to make the perception of crunching dislocations in the shoulders inescapable. Horror is unrelieved as our gaze traces the serpentine line of the torsos down to the legs, which are broken and bent around the *stipes* and tied down to it. It is the legs, above all, which lend an abstract, geometrical quality to the arrangements; each figure is a mutilated zigzag and, but for the symbolic craning of necks, one up, one down, a rough stereoisomerism unites the two figures. Visually the twisting of their bodies, fused to the apparatus, retains a sense of dynamism which suggests life not yet extinguished, as if the two men were still straining against the agonizing immobility of their own shattered bodies.

Broken, dislocated, twisted, bent and levered around the beams of the cross, held down with tight ligatures – the limbs of the Thieves are forced to obey the dictates of the painter, who in turn seeks to convince us, with all the skill available to him, of the anatomical plausibility of these gruesome punitive contortions. To do so, the painter hints broadly at the infliction of a procedure in which the limbs in question must *first* be broken, or dislocated, in order for them to be twisted and affixed in this manner. As visual description, this in itself recalls the procedure of 'the wheel' (*das Rad*), in which the body is laid out on the ground, broken limb by limb with a large cartwheel and then 'braided' through the spokes of another wheel (see Chapter 5). Also evocative of this procedure is something we see in numerous other examples: the painter has extended the biblical assault on the victims' legs to include the arms as well, which bleed profusely from savage wounds. Because they are exposed to view, the arms of the Bad Thief (to Christ's right in the Bohemian panel) are where the painter makes explicit the penal function of the fracture that appears precisely mid-way along the axis of the bone: it becomes a fulcrum for pivoting the arm around the *patibulum* and behind the back. Likewise, the left leg of the Good Thief is fractured right where it crosses over the *stipes*, and the resulting dislocation allows us to see the foot from the *bottom* instead of in profile (see illus. 7). The same determination to entwine the broken body around the cross is manifest in a panel made between 1450 and 1455 for the high altar of the Reglerkirche in Erfurt, and now in Karlsruhe



52 The Master of
the Regler Altar,
Crucifixion, c. 1450–55,
painted pine panel,
159.5 × 58 cm.
Staatliche Kunsthalle,
Karlsruhe.

(illus. 52).²⁴ Here it is the Bad Thief only who is pretzeled around the cross; slender gashes, surrounded by blue-purple contusions, appear on the thigh and the upper arms.

In south German and Austrian painting of the fifteenth century – both regions strongly influenced by Bohemia and cross-fertilized with one another – dramatic changes in the positional and gestural dynamics of ‘crucifixion’ produced even more stunning simulations of the wheel’s fusion of body and apparatus. A number of works from this region are discussed in Chapter 5, but for the moment we can confine ourselves to one. In the Baroque Church of Our Lady in Munich (the Frauenkirche) hangs the central panel of what was once a larger, fifteenth-century Passion altarpiece, whose eponymous maker is known as the Master of the Munich Domkreuzigung (illus. 43).²⁵ Certainly one of the most accomplished representatives of the painters’ guild in Munich, he capitalized on the stylistic advances of his (probably older) contemporary, the Master of Benediktbeuren (see illus. 15). From behind we see the body of the Bad Thief crunched forwards over the *patibulum* and therefore turned as if banished from the company of the living. Improvising, it seems, the artist has modified both the hooked-arm pose, in which the *patibulum* normally presses against the back or shoulder-blades, and what I call the arched-back pose, in which the figure bends backwards over the top of the cross (the latter is also discussed in Chapter 5).²⁶ Other visible signs of the condemned man’s infamy, especially the leprous sores which pockmark the body, give validation to the painter’s decision to subject the figure to the harshest tortures imaginable. In every detail the Munich painter’s figure supersedes the Gospel account, producing a surplus disfigurement that obviates any textual reference. Instead, the painter transposes the familiar technique of ‘braiding’ the broken body around and through the spokes of the wheel upon the ‘crucified’ Thief.

Conclusion

The two art historians who have written substantively about the relationships between art and punishment, Samuel Edgerton Jr, in *Pictures and Punishment*, and Lionello Puppi in *Torment in Art*, both recognized the similarity between certain images of the Thieves, broken on their crosses, in varying states of dislocation, and the grisly outcome of the medieval torture of ‘the wheel’. And it is significant that, as scholars of Italian art, their responses were provoked exclusively by the works of northern European painters, not their Italian counterparts.²⁷ I point out their agreement less as a way of logging a historiographic footnote, or

to acknowledge the scholarly debt that it is, than to underscore the temporal and regional parameters of our theme: a specific mode of aesthetic and imaginative assimilation of spectacle and the spectacular, to pictures and the pictorial.

In the 'hot-house atmosphere' of Bohemian painting,²⁸ as well as in Austrian and south German art in general, for about a century and a half, painters connected the Thief's hideous abjection on the cross to that of the condemned criminal broken on the wheel (illus. 44). But they did so, as I've stressed, in a manner that forces us to rethink the language we use to analyse that connection. To say that the imagery of the Thieves' punishment 'derives from', 'refers to' or 'recalls' contemporary procedures like the wheel is not only simplistic; it leaves us bereft of an understanding of how such derivations, references and recollections affected beholders. What made this imagery so compelling for medieval viewers was precisely the way it *served* the workings of the imagination: its realism stimulated the viewer's own powers of visualization without supplanting them, and therefore presented itself as a model for the viewer's synthetic assimilation of past to present, sacred history to familiar reality. It succeeded as realist religious art not when it finally approximated itself to an optical reality against which the viewer might then in turn test it, but rather when it insinuated itself into the beholder's perceptual frames as a model upon which pious imagination-work could be patterned.

Up until now I have taken it for granted that the spectacle of punishment, and in particular the *sight* of the body-in-pain, held a special place in the perceptual world of medieval people, that it had the power to focus the gaze and compel fascination in a way few other sights could. But to account for this fully we need to understand the conditions under which pain became spectacle, and that means a more detailed description of the late medieval paradigm of punitive justice.