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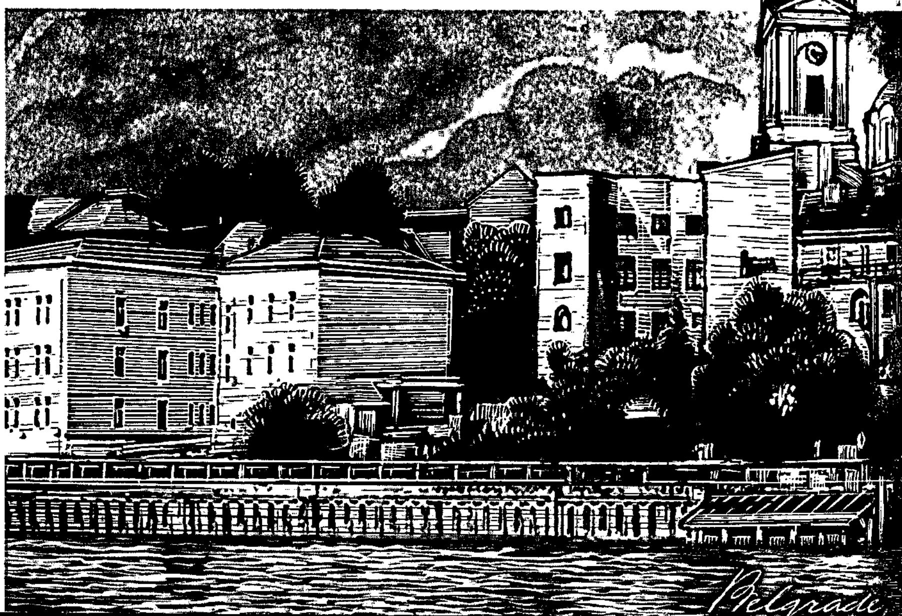
St. Antony's Fire

by Douglas Burton-Christie

TWO YEARS AGO, I traveled to Colmar in northwest France to see Mathias Grünewald's fifteenth-century Isenheim Altarpiece. I had first seen the altarpiece years earlier in a college art history class. The sight of the gaunt, lifeless Christ, the full weight of his body tearing at the nails in his hands and feet, his flesh torn to shreds by what appeared to be staples, his head hanging limp like a thing hardly attached to his body, had stirred me deeply. But not in a positive way. I felt disturbed, bewildered, and finally appalled at this awful sight. I simply had no way of taking in the enormity and profundity of this image. Also, I realized (probably unconsciously), that I wanted no part of it. It was too dark, too heavy, too sad. It seemed to speak of a world almost completely devoid of hope. So I put it from my mind, as well as I could. But now, more than twenty five years later, it had unexpectedly reemerged as an image with which I needed to reckon. In some ways, I felt no more prepared now than I had been years earlier to face this disturbing image.



But something had shifted in me. Now I wanted to face it. I needed something—what? I could not say exactly—and sensed that Grünewald's altarpiece might help me find it.

I was barely conscious of this as I drove north from Grenoble that spring day. I was more aware of a sense of my foolishness: I was driving the entire length of France to see a painting! What could possibly come of this? But by now I was committed, so I drove on, hour after hour, through the changing French countryside. Finally, toward evening, I crested a small hill and saw Colmar before me, lovely and still, in the distance. It seemed strange to me to imagine that dark and forbidding image situated amid such beauty. Still, by then I had already begun to question whether I had really understood what kind of image it was and where its particular beauty lay. Perhaps there was beauty even in that tormented figure.

WAS IT BEAUTIFUL to those who had first gazed upon it all those years earlier, especially those suffering from the terrible, painful, and often fatal bacterial disease known as St. Antony's Fire? I wondered. This disease had been ravaging Europe for almost five hundred years by the time the altarpiece was commissioned by the Antonite order. When it was completed, it had come to stand as part of a hospital complex where victims of the disease were treated. The hospital setting, with its countless suffering souls, helps to account for the distinctive and dark imagery of the altarpiece. This is true not only of its depiction of Christ, but also of its depiction of two other figures who are central to the altarpiece. One of them, appearing on a side panel, is a hideous figure whose

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flesh is covered with putrid sores, whose stomach is distended, and whose limbs appear ready to fall from his body altogether. He is suffering, in all likelihood, from the dreaded disease. The other is St. Antony of Egypt, after whom the Antonites were named, a saint who was believed to have a particular power to secure healing for those suffering from the disease. He is depicted as enduring his own torment, being pummeled, clawed, and torn at by a host of gruesome, demonic beings. The confluence of these three figures—Christ, St. Antony, and the anonymous victim of St. Antony's Fire—in Grünewald's altarpiece creates an almost overwhelming vision of human suffering. Yet the precise meaning of this vision is not easy to grasp. One has the sense that all this suffering may somehow be redemptive. But it is the depth and extent of the suffering that one feels most intensely. Nor can one avoid entirely a feeling of uncertainty regarding whether relief from this suffering is actually possible.

In the context in which the altarpiece was first created, it was crucial that neither Christ nor St. Antony be seen as aloof from the suffering and anxiety that marked the lives of those afflicted by the disease. Rather they needed to be seen as empathizing with, even participating in it. A description of the disease from a medieval source helps to show why this must have mattered so much: "The intestines [are] eaten up by the force of St. Antony's Fire, with ravaged limbs, blackened like charcoal; [victims] either die miserably, or they live more miserably seeing their feet and hands develop gangrene and separate from the rest of the body; and they suffer muscular spasms that deform them."[1] It is in light of such pathetic, gruesome scenes that Grünewald's altarpiece must be seen.

"Horror could not be painted more ruthlessly,"[2] comments Nikolaus Pevsner on the Christ figure of the crucifixion. But this comment could apply equally to Grünewald's rendering of Antony or to the anonymous figure suffering from the disease who also appears in the painting: all are plunged into the horror of this debilitating, incurable disease. None emerge unscathed. The Christ of the Isenheim altarpiece, suggests J. K. Huysmans, "personifies... the religious piety of the sick and poor... [and] would

None emerge unscathed

[1] Sigebert de Gembloux, cited in Andreé Hayum: *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 21.

[2] Nikolaus Pevsner and Michael Meier, *Grünewald* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1958), 14.

seem to have been made in the image of the [victims of the disease] who prayed to him; they must surely have found consolation in the thought that this God they invoked had suffered the same torment as themselves, and had become flesh in a form as repulsive as their own; and they must have felt less forsaken, less contemptible."[3]

This is a beautiful idea and may well reflect something of what victims of the disease felt as they gazed upon the images of the altarpiece. But in fact we do not really know what they felt about their condition, any more than we can ever know what another human being afflicted by suffering feels. Still, gazing at this magnificent altarpiece, one senses its insistent question, a question whose disturbing force we still feel five hundred years later: Is it possible to look into the darkest places of one's own experience and find hope there?

SUCH A QUESTION can emerge from almost anywhere in one's experience. But no matter what the proximate outward source of the question may be—a debilitating illness, an accident, an unexpected death, a broken heart, an implacable foe, an inexplicable malaise—there is almost always an intense interior dimension to the struggle. Here, one struggles, often amid loneliness and despair, against the temptation to give up hope. There is an urgent desire to flee to a place of safety, where one can avoid facing one's own emptiness. But then these questions arise: Is this really possible? Is there anywhere to go?

These questions are not at all unlike those that St. Antony faced in his long, solitary struggle in the Egyptian desert. If one considers the testimony of the early monastic literature concerning Antony's experience, it becomes clear how familiar he was with this place of emptiness and what it meant to struggle with it. And it helps to account for Antony's significance in Grünewald's altarpiece. There is a telling moment in Athanasius's fourth-century *Life of Antony* when one catches a glimpse of the kind of anxiety and pain that were woven deep into the ascetic's experience. It is just after Antony has moved to the tombs seeking greater solitude. Athanasius relates that "... approaching one night with a multitude of demons [the enemy] whipped [Antony] with such force that he lay on the earth, speechless from the tortures. He contended that the pains were so severe as to lead one to say that the blows could

[3] J. K. Huysmans, "The Grünewalds in the Colmar Museum," in *Grünewald* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1976), 12.

not have been delivered by humans, since they caused such agony."[4] In this depiction of demonic attack, we see Antony as utterly vulnerable. He lies alone, on the bare earth, unable to speak. The outcome of his struggle remains uncertain.

This portrayal of vulnerability in the ascetic's experience is consistent with that depicted in the sayings of Antony found in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. There one sees a monk who displays uncertainty in the face of affliction; who expects temptation to the last breath; who groans at the thought of the "snares that the enemy spreads out over the world"; who seems near despair at the recognition of how difficult it can be for the ascetic to actually change; and who expresses profound anxiety about the reality of death, and grief at the injustice that seems to reign over the world.[5]

Certainly hope was not absent from the experience of the early Christian monks. However, it is also clear that anxiety and struggle and pain were abiding elements of their lives. The experience of lying alone and helpless, without any sense of whether help will indeed arrive, is crucial to the monk's experience. And it is this willingness to make oneself vulnerable, to descend into the place of the greatest doubt and uncertainty, perhaps even hopelessness, that enabled Antony and the other early Christian monks to emerge as the bearers of compassion they became.

Hopelessness may well be the great enemy

Matthias Grünewald's depiction of Antony in the Isenheim Altarpiece, surrounded and hounded and being torn to pieces by a host of gruesome creatures, reveals a figure who is nothing if not exposed, vulnerable, helpless. And when one places this image, as Grünewald himself did, in proximity to the bruised, pierced, degraded corpse that is Grünewald's crucified Christ, and in the company of all those victims of the disease known as St. Antony's Fire, for whom the altarpiece was commissioned and who suffered the most terrible and painful and debilitating wasting away of their bodies and of their very beings, one begins to get a sense of the compelling power of Antony's witness for those in danger of losing all hope. Like Christ, he ultimately triumphs over disease and death and pain, but not before having traveled deep into an awful place of doubt and agony.

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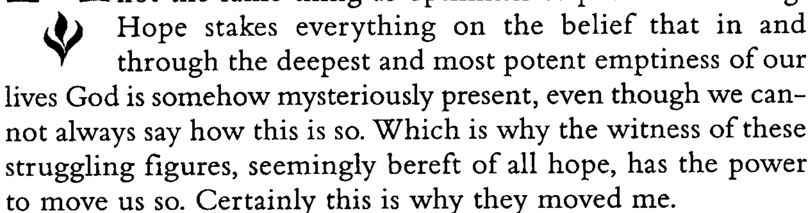
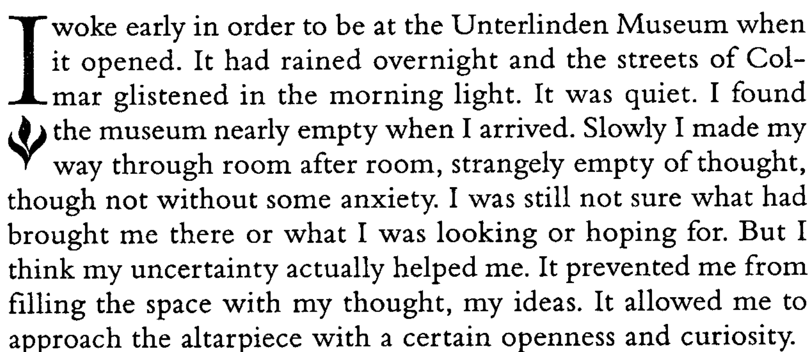
[4] Athanasius, *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus,* trans. and intro. Robert G. Gregg (New York: Paulist, 1980). Citations to the *Life of Antony* refer to this translation, unless otherwise noted, and employ the abbreviation *VA [Vita Antonii]* followed by chapter number. *VA* 8.

[5] Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Christian: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (New York: MacMillan, 1975), Antony, sayings 1, 3, 7, 19, 2; pp. 1–5.



Hopelessness may well be the great enemy. To live without hope is hardly to be alive at all. And yet hope is not the same thing as optimism or positive thinking. Hope stakes everything on the belief that in and through the deepest and most potent emptiness of our lives God is somehow mysteriously present, even though we cannot always say how this is so. Which is why the witness of these struggling figures, seemingly bereft of all hope, has the power to move us so. Certainly this is why they moved me.

Is hope possible apart from an honest reckoning with one's own deepest vulnerability? This question had become much more real to me since the time I first encountered Grünewald's altarpiece many years earlier. What had frightened and repelled me before—the staggering, unrelenting emptiness—now drew me in. My own experiences of emptiness and loss had changed me, had made me more sensitive to those places in my life and in the lives of others where resolution was not to be had, where hope seemed untenable. These are not places most of us would choose to enter, at least not willingly. There is a natural and understandable desire to protect ourselves, to find places to dwell that are not so vulnerable, so painful. But this is not always either possible or advisable. The willingness to stay put, to refrain from fleeing, often marks the first gesture of openness toward facing what we would rather not face—our own incompleteness and brokenness, even our despair. Even acknowledging these elements of our experience can surface feelings of failure, a sense that if only we had been stronger, more faithful, more hopeful none of this would have happened, we would not have found ourselves caught in the snares of such an impasse. And yet, it is sometimes only in the place of impasse that we become vulnerable enough to truly open ourselves to the possibility of renewal.



I woke early in order to be at the Unterlinden Museum when it opened. It had rained overnight and the streets of Colmar glistened in the morning light. It was quiet. I found the museum nearly empty when I arrived. Slowly I made my way through room after room, strangely empty of thought, though not without some anxiety. I was still not sure what had brought me there or what I was looking or hoping for. But I think my uncertainty actually helped me. It prevented me from filling the space with my thought, my ideas. It allowed me to approach the altarpiece with a certain openness and curiosity.

I will not attempt to describe here my feelings upon finally turning the last corner and finding myself gazing up at Grünewald's altarpiece; I am still absorbing the experience. But I will say this: I stood there in silence for a long time, stunned by its potency, which far exceeded anything that I had expected. That potency, I have begun to realize, has something to do with the darkness that is at the very heart of the painting. It is the darkness of death and of all the sadness and fear and hopelessness that gather around it. To face this darkness, our own as well as the darkness that afflicts others and that hovers continuously over our world, is perhaps our greatest challenge. It may well be the only path toward redemption.

Grünewald discovered and gave expression to a dark, wounded, all-but-defeated Christ who has been plunged into the most abysmal human suffering. The portrait of Antony that emerges in the Isenheim Altarpiece reflects and embodies this awful struggle. This saint is not so much a heroic as a sympathetic figure, intimately connected both to the crucified Christ and to the lonely, anonymous figure suffering from the terrible fire.

"Through fire everything changes," says Gaston Bachelard. "When we want everything to be changed we call on fire."[6] This observation suggests one way of understanding the enduring power of the suffering figures in the Isenheim altarpiece. In the ancient monastic tradition, fire meant ecstasy, purification, judgment—all significant images of transformation. By the time this altarpiece was painted, fire had come to mean affliction, desolation, loss. But here is Antony, together with Christ and the nameless victim of disease, descending into the inferno. The fire that ravaged the bodies and perhaps the very souls of countless victims of that terrible disease also burned in the saint and in the Redeemer. Abba Sisoes once said: "If I had one of Antony's thoughts, I should become all aflame."[7] A thousand years later, we see Antony himself aflame, and with him the suffering Christ, joined with all those anonymous souls destined to die an early, painful death. It is a haunting image of redemptive love—much of whose power comes from its refusal to evade or look away from the harsh realities of suffering and loss.

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[6] Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

[7] Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Christian,* Sisoes #9, p. 214.