

# The Aesthetic Path to Hermeneutics in J.-L. Marion's Phenomenology

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**ABSTRACT** Recently, Jean-Luc Marion has developed the role of hermeneutics within his phenomenology of givenness. This paper aims to demonstrate that there is an aesthetic path to accessing hermeneutic engagement of a basic kind in his previous work. The Marionian hermeneutic management of the gap between what gives itself and what shows itself finds its heuristic model in the artist's task of making the unseen visible, as becomes clear in his studies of painting.

**KEYWORDS** art; givenness; hermeneutics; Marion, Jean-Luc; phenomenalization

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In his recent book *Reprise du donné*, published in June 2016, Marion gives a long overdue answer to a question raised by commentators of his work, finally explaining the role of hermeneutics within the phenomenology of givenness:<sup>1</sup>

Hermeneutics manages the gap between what gives itself and what shows itself by interpreting the call (or intuition) via the response (concept or meaning). (Marion 2016, 89)<sup>2</sup>

“All that gives itself shows itself,” but within the limits of our finitude. The phenomenon’s monstration depends on the reception of the finite gifted (*adonné*). This finitude demands that we understand reception as hermeneutic work. But what type of hermeneutics? How should we understand its interpretative task? And who is performing it?

I advance the hypothesis that the answers to these questions can be found in the figure of the painter as analyzed by Marion in *The Crossing of the Visible*, in *In Excess*, in *Ce que nous voyons et ce qui apparaît*, and in the more recently published *Courbet ou la peinture à l’œil*. The painter seems to adjust themselves to the role of the gifted, from which the hermeneutic task deploys itself, as presented in his 2016 book. Marion offers an aesthetic path to accessing the hermeneutic dimension of his phenomenology of givenness. In his own words:

what is decisive, and this is no doubt why phenomenology pays such attention, almost obsessively, to questions of painting and aesthetics in general, is because it is a question of a regime of visibility exceptional, of which above all phenomenology guesses that, far from being marginal, it is one of the paths of access to the original situation of the manifestation of phenomena. (Marion 2015a, 59–60)

Painting and aesthetics reveal the “unseen” (*in vu*) because they deal with the very givenness of phenomena and work in support of its manifestation. An analysis of the painter’s labor would allow us to understand the characteristics and scope of this radical hermeneutics, which cannot use concepts or horizons. The painter exercises a peculiar hermeneutics that

1. Since the publication of *Reduction and Givenness*, a number of commentators have pointed to the need to clarify this point (e.g., Greisch 1991; Grondin 1992; MacKinlay 2010; Serban 2012).

2. All the translations, unless noted otherwise, were made by author.

does not depend on the will of the interpreter but on the logic that the event of the work of art imposes.

With these objectives in mind, in the first section of this paper I briefly review the role of hermeneutics in the phenomenology of givenness as described by Marion in his book *Reprise du donné*. In the second section, I analyze the status of the work of art and its essential capacity to “do things”—i.e. to phenomenalyze the unseen. In the third section, I give an account of the painter’s work as a model of the hermeneuticist’s labor. Finally, I offer several conclusions regarding the radical character of Marionian hermeneutics and its relationship to painting as a route to comprehending its way of operating.

#### THE HERMENEUTICS OF GIVENNESS

In his 2016 book, Marion argues that givenness is an enigma: it is neither immediate (like subjective *sense data*) nor mediate (like objectivity). He recalls Heidegger’s question in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*: “What does it mean to say ‘given,’ ‘givenness’—this magic word for phenomenology and ‘stumbling block’ for the others?” (GA 58, 5). Marion develops an answer by noting the given’s indeterminate character:

The indeterminacy of the given offers perhaps the only proper determination, the one which distinguishes it from what comes after—*sense data*, objects, knowledge, offspring of its event. (Marion 2016, 78)

Givenness is indeterminate and enigmatic. However, within the “enigma of givenness” a second enigma comes into play: that of hermeneutics. According to Marion, hermeneutics also constitutes an enigma, because—as was noted by Heidegger in *Time and Being* (GA 2, 190–213)—interpretation depends on understanding (*Verstehen*), and understanding participates in the enigmatic character of the given (as neither immediate nor mediate) (cf. Marion 2016, 79–80). This enigmatic character prevents us from treating hermeneutics as offering a simple solution when it comes to determining the meaning of the given. The act of interpretation is as complex as the reception of the given. Hermeneutics must not be understood as an arbitrary operation that can modify objects or *sense data* at will:

Hermeneutics does not give a meaning to the given by securing and deciding it, but each time gives *its* meaning—i.e. the meaning that shows that given as itself—as a phenomenon which is shown in itself and by itself. (Marion 2016, 81)

It is a question not of giving a meaning, but each time of giving “its” meaning, of receiving the meaning given by the phenomenon itself. The hermeneuticist can only interpret the given in a phenomenon if they allow themselves to be interpreted by the given. Reception and interpretation complicate themselves. Marion emphasizes Gadamer’s proposal of an imbrication between the given and the hermeneuticist in a structure of reciprocal interpretation: the question-and-answer structure (cf. Gadamer 1990, 375–84). This structure enables us to introduce a thesis:

Hermeneutics must be understood according to the understanding of the given through the figures of call and response. It is not that hermeneutics exceeds givenness or substitutes itself for it, but that it displays itself in it, almost as a special case of the original relationship between what gives itself and what shows itself. (Marion 2016, 84)

Therefore, Marion argues that we can affirm the phenomenological status of hermeneutics, but never the hermeneutic status of phenomenology. This point is crucial, as it is essential to realize that interpretation depends on understanding, that understanding something does not imply arbitrarily deciding on the meaning of an object. Marion proposes a conclusion: if hermeneutics is rooted in understanding, and if that understanding always means pre-understanding and hence the opening up of *Dasein* to its possibility, and if the possibility opens up to the play of call and response, then we can have a glimpse of how hermeneutics can be articulated with respect to the issue of givenness:

It is only if the way the given is received and the identification of the given imply that this given is always to be interpreted as a phenomenon provided with a meaning, that the hermeneutic instance sets the locus of the given, because the instance sets there itself. (Marion 2016, 87–8)

The necessary participation of the gifted introduces a finitude that demands a hermeneutics. The given only shows itself in the answer of the gifted, and the gifted is capable of seeing the given as long as they receive themselves as gifted from this given. The infinitude of givenness must be filtered by the finitude of the gifted to accomplish manifestation. There is a gap between what gives itself and what shows itself that results from the finitude of the gifted. Hermeneutics fulfills an essential function that originates in this finitude:

Hermeneutics manages the gap between what gives itself and what shows itself by interpreting the call (or intuition) via the response (concept or meaning). (Marion 2016, 89)

But how, then, does this hermeneutics function? How does this interpretation that also implies allowing itself to be interpreted operate? How should we understand this creative task that seeks to discover what is already given?

#### HOW TO DO THINGS WITH PAINTINGS

As was claimed in the introduction, the task of managing the distance between what gives itself and what shows itself is not a new theme in Marion's work. Making the unseen visible, phenomenizing the given, is the function that Marion assigns to painting starting with the publication of his early studies in aesthetics in *The Crossing of the Visible* (2004).

In "What Gives," Marion wonders why we need painters—about their specific function. It is clear that "in order to see, we have no need for painters" (2004, 24), we see "the spectacle of the visible" in daily life without having to resort to painting: "one knows what one sees and what one must see" (2004, 24). One avoids any type of surprise: one just tries to make it so that what one sees is what one has to see. One makes sure only that what one sees coincides with what one should see. But then, what can painting contribute with respect to this visibility?

At this point Marion's response is final: art puts into question the peaceful "coincidence" between what one thinks one must see and what one actually sees. The painting shows us something else. We might add: there is an end in the realm of "finality without end"—painting has an essential function as regards phenomenality. Art can literally do things, art can phenomenize the unseen. Marion argues:

The painting—the authentic one—exposes an absolutely original phenomenon, newly discovered, without precondition or genealogy, suddenly appearing with such a violence that it explodes the limits of the visible identified to that point (Marion 2004, 25).

In this sense, it could be said that art performs a fundamental critical function. Accepting the call of the given, the artist implements in practice a hermeneutical answer through his painting.<sup>3</sup>

3. I analyze the four examples of hermeneutics introduced by Marion in *Reprise du donné*, and propose treating them as levels, in "Los cuatro niveles de hermenéutica en la fenomenología de J.-L. Marion" (Roggero 2020).

In Chapter III of *In Excess*, Marion investigates the phenomenological characteristics of the painting based on a famous phrase by Pascal: “What vanity art has that draws admiration by the resemblance to things that one scarcely admires as originals!” (Pascal 1963, 508). How should these words be interpreted? Marion dwells on “resemblance” (*ressemblance*) understood not as a relation (between model and reproduction or thing and image), but as one of the terms of the relation with the original. The “resemblance” of the painting has the peculiarity of confiscating the radiance of the original, becoming itself the original. This is the power of painting. Firstly, it displaces admiration from the physical world, that is, from the world of objects, and brings it to art: “admiration is therefore concentrated on the resemblance, precisely because it no longer resembles anything” (Marion 2002b, 58). Secondly, it confiscates phenomenality:

The painting has not repeated or adjusted phenomenality; rather, it has mastered it (to the detriment of nature, of the “original”), produced it (in instituting the privilege of the “resemblance”), and finally consecrated it in displacing the center of gravity of the pure semblance. (Marion 2002b, 59)

Painting appropriates phenomenality, it operates on the way we see things, since it is not limited to reproducing them as objects, but rather—in some way—shows how the “hermeneutical variation” acts, allowing us to see the object as an event.<sup>4</sup> But how is this possible?

Marion replies that this is achieved via the frame, the painting’s own framing that implies a cutout of what is visible. Thanks to this cut that condenses visibility, the gaze falls prey to its idol, to a visibility that exceeds it, saturates it and monopolizes all of its admiration. This is possible because, unlike what appears in the world, which is always made up of the presentable and the appresentable, the painting

reduces the object to the presentable in it, in excluding the appresentable. In short, it pulls apart the object in order to reduce it to the visible in it, to the pure visible that is without remainder. In the painting, only the visible

4. The “hermeneutical variation” is presented by Marion in *Negative Certainties* as “variations of intuition”: “The distinction of phenomena into objects and events thus finds a grounding in the variations of intuition. The more a phenomenon appears as an event (is eventualized), the more it proves itself to be saturated with intuition. The more it appears as an object (is objectivized), the more it proves itself to be poor in intuition. Or we could say: eventness fixes the degree of saturation, and saturation varies according to eventness. This distinction thus has a strictly phenomenological status” (Marion 2015b, 199).

remains entirely presented, without further promising anything else to see save what is offered already. This reduced visible, presented in the pure state without any remainder of appresentation, reaches such an intensity that it often saturates the capacity of my look, even exceeds it. (Marion 2002b, 63–4)

This “reduced visible,” according to Marion, has the intensity of a new visible, of an unseen that accesses visibility for the first time. The painting “produces . . . a visible that has never previously been seen by anyone” (Marion 2002b, 68).

In his book on Courbet, Marion reiterates the idea of reducing the painting to the visible (2014, 163), which allows access to “what is really given,” to “real and existing things” (*choses réelles et existantes*).<sup>5</sup> But to implement this in practice, Courbet’s painting must “destroy what obstructs seeing ‘immediately,’ [it must] break through the veil of dark transparency that hides things as they really are” (Marion 2014, 46). The book on Courbet clearly shows how Heidegger’s hermeneutic *Destruktion* operates within Marion’s idea of “hermeneutic variation.”<sup>6</sup> In daily life we do not “see” things. We see objects, but not things:

objects are conceived “from the idea” [*à l’idée*], by a look that completely dominates and produces them as it will, while the thing imposes itself on the painter as well as on the viewer. (Marion 2014, 128)

Marion maintains that art has the function of “fulfilling” (*accomplir*) the thing. This “fulfilment” is not equivalent to imposing a form, but rather to “fulfilling the form of the unseen that is lacking so that it ascends from itself to the visible. This implies that a glance distinguishes this form still hidden in the unseen of the thing and frees it” (Marion 2014, 135). It is therefore necessary to liberate the thing, to remove the “objective” “veil” that conceals it so that it can appear as itself.

#### THE PAINTER AS A HERMENEUTICIST

In *The Crossing of the Visible*, Marion argues that the painter is in charge of filtering the access of the unseen to the visible because what is at issue is not the simple vision of the visible but the divination of the unseen (*divination*

5. “Painting is an essentially *concrete* art and can only consist in the representation of real and existing things” (Courbet 1996, 183), cited by J.-L. Marion (2014, 112).

6. As Heidegger notes in *Ontology. The Hermeneutics of Facticity*: “Hermeneutics is Destruction!” (GA 63, 105).

*de l'invu*). As a blind person (*aveugle*) or clairvoyant (*voyant*), the painter “sees more than the visible” (Marion 2004, 26). The painter can “see more” because the painter assumes the risk of descending “to the undecidable frontier of the visible and the unseen” (Marion 2004, 27), the risk of sinking into the darkness to the point of losing themselves. The painter seeks that which is unseen, that which has neither model nor precedent. This search involves exposing themselves to the most extreme danger. The “blind gaze” (*regard aveugle*) of the painter separates itself from the foreseen, from every operation that comes from itself, to abandon itself to what is by definition unforeseen: the unseen. This abandonment implies a radical “losing of oneself,” an extreme “receptive passivity,” a “neutralization of the *ego*.”<sup>7</sup>

However, it is also true, paradoxically, that this passivity does not mean that the painter’s task consists of only “reproducing” (*reproduire*). On the contrary, their function should be understood as “producing” (*produire*). The painter “produces” and does not simply “reproduce” something already visible, because they introduce something unseen into the field of the visible. Yet what is the status of this “production”? Can one talk of “creation”? Marion states that “the true painter shares the simple mystery of the one Creation, in that he reproduces nothing, but produces” (Marion 2004, 29). However, although one could assert that some “creative” activity is involved, one cannot assign the painter the rank of “creator”—“The true painter does not know what he painted” (Marion 2004, 31). This condition obtains because the painter is not the one who creates the painting from their “will.”<sup>8</sup> The “true painter” creates in a particular way—by freeing themselves from the will, by freeing themselves from the self. The painter’s “creation” has a paradoxical character because it is not active, but passive.

In his 2014 book Marion presents Courbet as the paradigm of the painter as a hermeneuticist. In Courbet, the gesture of painting precedes any gaze that identifies the object. Courbet paints what he sees even before knowing what the object is. Courbet paints “from the eye” (*à l’œil*);<sup>9</sup> “he sees

7. I will return to the ideas of “receptive passivity” and “neutralization of the *ego*” later.

8. “Conversely, the [authentic] painter refrains from seeing what he wants in order to let what he does not want be seen, since he is no longer attempting (nor tempted) to be able to make (or to see) that which he is still able to desire or master. He is trying to let burst onto the scene much more than what is predelineated [*prevu*], more than what is seen, more than what he desires or wills. Or rather, he does what he wants—let an unseen appears (thus immediately disappear as such) in the realm of visibles—only by abandoning the production of what he could nevertheless perfectly effectuate: a predelineated object” (Marion 2004, 31–32).

9. This expression is difficult to translate. I opt for the preposition “from” to indicate place of origin, in contrast to painting executed “from the idea” (*à l’idée*). However, it is important to consider the double meaning of the syntagma that Marion wishes to preserve. The syntagma



by painting.” “To see by painting” implies painting “from the eye” and not “from the idea.” Painting “from the idea”—paradigmatically represented by Ingres in the time of Courbet—does not begin with the givenness of the phenomenon itself that is received as such by the “eye.” Instead, such painting begins in a previous conception, in an idea that the painter intends to paint before seeing: i.e. an idea that they seek to impose a form on (through drawing), or in the effort to constitute an object according to the composition, rather than abandoning themselves to an unpredictable landing in the visibility of the unseen. In contrast, painting “from the eye” “enables the visible to appear and complies with the visible in a unique energy relation, while making visually accessible to the viewer that which he had not *fore-seen*” (Marion 2014, 28–9). The painter must “see by painting” without an already predelineated model: that is, without “fore-seeing.” Such painting implies “painting in order to see” (*peindre pour voir*):

In this sense, Courbet (like all painters worthy of the name) is inscribed among the practitioners of the saturated phenomenon, of the appearance of a phenomenon where the excess and priority of intuition can never allow themselves to be ruled by one or more concepts, significations or concepts that precede them. (Marion 2014, 29)

As we have already affirmed, this practice of the saturated phenomenon requires a hermeneutic undertaking in the Heideggerian sense of *Destruktion*. According to Marion, Courbet’s painting does not seek to “invent” or simply “interpret” the world. Courbet seeks to perceive “real and existing things.” Thus, it is necessary to liberate the thing, to go beyond the constituted object that hides it so that it can appear as itself:

Certainly, the painter provides a noble service to men, causing them to see what they do no more than look at without seeing. (Marion 2014, 48)

As Marion states in *In Excess*:

It is the idols (the paintings) that in each era, reign over the natural visibles, over the appearance of constituted objects, and that oblige us to see everything starting from the paradigms their fascination imposes. The painter is

consists of thinking of a phenomenon that appears *à l’œil* “in the double sense of that which imposes itself, that which captures the attention (that which seduces? (*fait de l’œil?*)) and [that which] gives from itself, through its own pure grace (gratuitously (*à l’œil*), *gratis*)” (Marion 2014, 27).

king, as much and certainly more immediately than any philosopher (Marion 2002b, 69–70).

Paintings are paradigms of visibility, and the painter accomplishes a task of the highest importance. But how does this “painter-king” perform this noble service of “showing” that which habitually we do not see?

First, through the act of painting Courbet can perceive “real and existing things.” However, this perception is possible because the eye is an “extremely passive organ” (Marion 2014, 134): the eye allows itself to be affected by the thing. Marion affirms that Courbet’s realism is manifested in its capacity of depicting human beings and things in their grief (*peine*). The painting “The Stonebreakers”<sup>10</sup> accounts for the way in which Courbet unveils the essential attunement of grief. What is terrible about the scene is that it is deprived of all *páthos*; Courbet does not protest, adopts no position, he does not “interpret.” Human beings (and things) display themselves in their “truth” when they are despoiled of any beingness or objectness but also when they are perceived as existing beyond every determination or state of mind. Humans (and things) appear as such inasmuch as they appear indeterminate and transversed by the apathic *páthos* of grief.<sup>11</sup> Grief is the fundamental disposition of the truth of human beings (and things). However, it is also the mood that enables us to “see” human beings (and things) in their truth. It is the attunement that enables the perception of “real and existing things.” To paint grief, i.e. to reach reality, one must experience grief. Courbet “let real and existing things be seen” because he was exposed in the first person to grief. That is, with an “extreme passivity” his “eye” allowed itself to be affected by grief.

Second, this mood enables Courbet to neutralize his *ego* so as to abandon himself to the givenness of the thing. Marion emphasizes, in this regard, the importance of the self-portrait “The Wounded Man.”<sup>12</sup> This painting accounts for the “death of the painter as dominant subject and organizer of his painting” (Marion 2014, 82). Courbet is no longer the author of his

10. G. Courbet, “Casseurs de pierres” (1849), Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen.

11. Marion does not provide much detail regarding the traits of the attunement of grief. He limits himself to noting various modalities of grief (i.e. fatigue, sadness, compassion, resignation, hardness of heart) (Marion 2014, 62–64) and to relating these to Rom. 8, 22: “For we know that the whole creation is grieving (*sunstenazei*), right up to the present in the pains of childbirth” (Marion 2014, 53). However, it is clear that grief refers to our constitutive passivity as “gifted.” Marion has told me in private conversation that grief could be understood as a form of love. I explore this Marionian suggestion in my article “Hermeneutics of Grief as a Model for Hermeneutics of Love in Jean-Luc Marion” (Roggero 2022).

12. G. Courbet, “L’homme blessé” (1844–1854), Paris, Musée d’Orsay.

paintings but a witness who registers what he sees even when he does not understand it:

A wounded painter, as one could speak of a *wounded cogito*: an *ego* whose thinking no longer dominates (itself) and allows what it sees to be, to come, to appear, without ever be foreseen. (Marion 2014, 82)

The wounded painter paints without foreseeing or attempting to conceptually apprehend that which they see. Painting requires the neutralization of the *ego*, objectively suspending the objectifying consciousness, abandoning the dominating and constitutive function of the subject to surrender to the thing. This neutralization of the *ego*, which replaces the hypothesis of a constitution of the world through consciousness in a transcendental function, is reached through an “*epokhè* without reduction”:

While the reduction generally defined by Husserl only places within parentheses the world-region, reinforcing the certainty of the consciousness-region, the *epokhè* suspends the primacy of this *ego*, exposing it directly to the given of the world with anteriority. It no longer constitutes the static, eventually total and totalizing, collection of objects but arises as an event. The world comes into being without letting itself be constituted into an object or a sum of objects; without depending anymore on a subject that will constitute it. (Marion 2014, 94–5)

To “reduce the picture to the visible” (Marion 2014, 163)—i.e. to manage to see “what really exists” (“real and existing things”)—one needs an *epokhè* without reduction, an *epokhè* of the *ego* that neutralizes the *ego*’s power of constitution. The painter-hermeneuticist Courbet practices a type of “active ascesis” (*ascèse active*) (Marion 2014, 165), which enables him to see and to let be seen the thing itself by letting himself be affected by the thing.

#### THE AESTHETIC PATH TO HERMENEUTICS

In *Being Given*, Marion distinguishes between the metaphysical and the phenomenological approach. The former—like that of every science—assumes that a method for arriving at knowledge is called for, to “ground appearances” or “lead them back to the ground.” Thus, the metaphysical approach seeks to “prove” something. In addressing what this implies, Marion observes that phenomenology has a distinct purpose: its objective is not “to prove,” but “to show”: “To show implies letting appearances appear in such a way that they accomplish their own apparition, so as to

be received exactly as they give themselves” (Marion 2002a, 7). This “showing,” which is, strictly, a “letting be shown,”<sup>13</sup> displaces any primacy of the perception or the actions of a subject over and above the appearing itself:

what is at issue in phenomenology is no longer exactly what subjectivity apperceives by one or the other of its perceptive tools, but what apparition—through, despite, indeed *without* them—gives of itself and as the thing itself. (Marion 2002a, 8)

Painting—and art in general—entirely fulfill this phenomenological purpose of “showing” rather than “proving.” Marion is aware of this superiority of painting to phenomenology and hermeneutics: the power of the painter is greater than that of the philosopher, because only the former can simply “show.” Thus, painting is fundamental because it can actually “do things” by phenomenalizing the unseen, and in that way offers a model that philosophy can follow, furnishing a path to a hermeneutics of givenness. If the “phenomenology of givenness” is accomplished through hermeneutic activity that enables the showing of what gives itself, this hermeneutics should follow the guidance afforded by painting.

The figure of the painter, as the figure of the creating subject *par excellence*, enables Marion to account for the fact that even in this case it is uncertain whether an activity of constitution on the part of the subject occurs. The extreme case of the painter becomes the paradigmatic one, because Marion demonstrates that the subject-painter also behaves as gifted.

The painter becomes the model for the hermeneuticist, because this model facilitates a detailed understanding of the various angles that constitute the hermeneutic task of managing “the gap between what gives itself and what shows itself” (Marion 2016, 97). First, the painter accounts for the complex imbrication between reception and interpretation. What is received as given is received as indeterminate, and thus as requiring interpretation. The “enigma of givenness” is the enigma of the indeterminacy of the given that demands the intervention of hermeneutics. However, this need for interpretation does not imply an introduction of arbitrariness. The painter’s undertaking can be considered a hermeneutics imposed by the necessity of the thing itself. But how does this “necessary” interpretation function?

13. “. . . in the phenomenological realm it is not a question of simply showing (since in this case apparition could still be the object of a gaze, therefore a mere appearance), but rather of letting apparition show *itself* in its appearance according to its appearing” (Marion 2002a, 8).

The painter “filters” the access to the visible of the unseen because they “do nothing” and surrenders themselves to the phenomenon as its “servant.” The hermeneutics of Marionian givenness does not originate in the creative will of the interpreting subject, but in the “self” of the phenomenon. The painter creates “without will”, interpreting while enabling the phenomenon to give itself its own meaning. The painter as a hermeneuticist does not invent, does not impose arbitrary meanings or a priori concepts (i.e. does not paint “from the idea”), but registers the unpredictable landing of the phenomenon and “its” meaning. The painter sets in motion this activity/passivity that enables them to come up with an interpretation of its reception better than any other gifted, in the sense of being endowed with greater “receptive passivity”—i.e. having an “eye” (inasmuch as this is an “organ with an extreme passivity”) that is better trained. The painter is an “alchemist” who can transform the unseen into the visible, as they see better, more intensely, from an eye that allows itself to be affected by the occurrence of the unexpected.

However, this radical passivity is also an instance of action. The painter is an actor with respect to such “receptive passivity,” as the latter enables them to “destroy whatever is an obstacle to seeing,” to breach the objective veil that conceals things as they are. The painter’s radical action consists of doing nothing, of letting the phenomenon do everything. Analyzing the idea of “hermeneutic variation” and the classification of phenomena into objects and events in *Certitudes négatives*, Claudia Serban questions this in the following terms:

Can we accept that the gaze decides the event and maintains the commitment of *Étant donné* in favor of the “self” of the phenomenon, a commitment that states that the “initiative belongs in principle to the phenomenon and not to the gaze”? (Serban 2012, 92)

The response is provided by the “active ascesis” of the painter. It is not the decision of the hermeneuticist, but the absolute abandonment to the initiative of the “self” of the phenomenon that enables the “hermeneutic variation” that facilitates receiving the thing as events, in its saturated phenomenality. It is not the gaze that decides, but the phenomenon itself to which the hermeneuticist “decides” to abandon themselves.

This abandonment, which implies a “neutralization of the *ego*,” is what enables the Marionian hermeneutics to operate as it does. The passive/receptive interpretation—i.e. the “active ascesis”—is only achieved if the subject “does nothing.” “Doing nothing” implies assuming the risk of losing

oneself—i.e. of abandoning oneself to that which could not be predicted or controlled—while letting oneself be interpreted by becoming the “witness” and no longer the artificer of the “creation.” The painter implements an “*epokhè* without reduction,” meaning an *epokhè* that suspends the primacy of the *ego* and enables recognition of the “privilege of the phenomenon,” making possible the appearance of the thing itself. The painter exposes themselves in the first person, thus allowing themselves to be affected by the thing through radical passivity. This passivity, in the highest degree, is grief, which is the fundamental attunement of human beings and which enables one to displace oneself from the position of “dominant subject and organizer” to the position of witness. Courbet facilitates noting the importance of the fundamental experience of grief. Only on the basis of experiencing grief in one’s own name is it possible to “register” “real and existing things” and to cease to attempt to control visibility through objectivization in order to make possible the unpredictable landing of things themselves. Grief is the *páthos* of the subject’s decentering. It is the mood that warns of the impotence of the subject in the face of that which exceeds it. From grief, it is possible to neutralize the *ego* and to let be, let arrive and let appear what is unforeseen.

The Marionian aesthetic path casts painting in the role of a “model” that facilitates understanding the radically passive character of the hermeneutic management of the “gap between what gives itself and what shows itself”—i.e. understanding the management of the passage from the unseen given to the visible. It must be stated, though, that our hypothesis is only a possible interpretation: one that sets out to explicate a question that has not been resolved, in that Marion has not clarified the relation between art and hermeneutics. Thus, the question regarding the status of the painter and of painting in Marion’s philosophy still awaits the statement of the author himself, and becomes more urgent if we consider that we are living in the period of “conceptual art,” which has been strongly criticized by Marion.<sup>14</sup>

14. “Academicism [in art] consists only in this: claiming to foresee a painting the painter prohibits the sudden appearing of the unseen and instead fixes its shape at first sight. In this respect, academicism is encountered in many different painters and in every period, no less our own than past epochs. It could be said that conceptual art offers the exemplary and definitive model of academicism, not only because the visible itself is defined by the concept—by some exterior understanding in advance—but above all because the work itself cannot and must not appear as such” (Marion 2004, 28). “The ‘realism,’ if it is necessary still to use this term, consists in removing any *parasitical* form of the thing in order to let its proper and immanent form, the appearing of the phenomenon in itself, impose itself—against the arbitrariness of the ‘idea,’ of the ‘productive’ imagination, of ‘conceptual’ art, in short, of any constructivism of the object” (Marion 2014, 134).

If there were no painters or paintings, how would the aesthetic path operate? Who will provide the paradigms of visibility for our time?

*Translations of technical terms:*

*adonné*: gifted

*arrivage*: unpredictable landing

*ascèse active*: active ascesis

*donné*: given

*donation*: givenness

*étantité*: beingness

*invu*: unseen

*objectité*: objectness

*peine*: grief

*peinture à l'idée*: painting "from the idea"

*peinture à l'œil*: painting "from the eye"

*tonalité affective*: attunement

*voir en peignant*: "to see by painting"

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