Nobody Dares: Freedom, Dissent, Self-Knowing, and Other Possibilities in Sebald Beham's Impossible[*]

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Featuring the image of an athlete tugging at a rooted sapling, Impossible *is the most enigmatic of the many small-scale engravings produced by Hans Sebald Beham. Juxtaposed with the adage "Nobody should dare great things that are impossible for him to do," the image not only challenges the astute viewer to a game of wits: the resulting paradox also unleashes a cascade of ethical questions concerning the boundedness of the will, Christian freedom, human perfectibility, and the paradoxical conditions of self-knowledge. These issues came to the fore in the sixteenth-century debate over free will, which pitted humanists, magisterial, and radical reformers against one another. Beham's documented experience as a religious and political dissident during the 1520s raises the possibility that the print, made later in life, embeds still another allegorical layer: the conflicted situation of the artist in an era of reform and iconoclasm, Renaissance and revolution, hope and disillusionment.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1549 the German painter-printmaker Hans Sebald Beham (1500–50) took the adage, "Niment vnderste sich groser ding / Die im zv thvn vnmvglich sindt" and set it sideways along the edge of a small copperplate engraving of a bearded athlete in a strange state of arrested motion: hunched from the effort of his task, the man tugs at the stalk of a secondary-growth

FIGURE 1. Hans Sebald Beham. *Impossible*, 1549. Engraving, 81 x 52 mm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett. Photo: Volker-H. Schneider. © Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

tree that has entwined itself around the trunk of an older tree, from whose roots it has sprung (fig. 1).[1] Puzzled before its subject and uncertain what the engraving's inscribed title, *Impossibile*, may refer to, the beholder knows that his or her own undertaking is to interpret the image, to make a discursive claim about it, to unravel its theme in a feat of rhetoric as a sixteenth-century humanist might do. Yet none of these are immediately

[1]Pauli, 153–55 (no. 146); Goddard, 81 (no. 12).

straightforward tasks. Any number of contextual or biographical facts could be deemed relevant to an interpretation of *Impossible*, and a number of these will be adduced in the course of this essay. Yet none will help us dislodge a verifiable set of meanings for the print until we have wrestled with the ambiguities arising from its seemingly contradictory visual and verbal messages. Read literally, with its negative subject in the first position, the adage seems to sound a moral warning: "Nobody should dare great things that are impossible for him to do." A weightier rendering, corresponding to the language of legal proscription, gives the imperative *vnderste sich* the authority of a biblical injunction: "Let no man dare great things."[2] In both translations the adage, taken in isolation, amounts to an admonition against pride, vanity, hubris, or some related moral failing, an attitude one commonly finds in illustrated broadsheets from the period, whose mottos might begin with the forbidding *Nobody*.[3] Nobody should undertake to do the impossible, Beham's adage tells us. At best, he who does so behaves imprudently; at worst, he exposes himself as a fool.

To speak the very possibility of resisting the impossible, of mounting a challenge against its authority, is already paradoxical. Logically, the impossible has no independent property or nature: it can exist only notionally, and can be represented only through its negations. Constitutive of limits, it polices boundaries from a domain entirely removed from them. Legally and ethically it makes no demands on us. *Impossibilium nulla obligatio est* proclaims an old precept of Roman law, "The impossible is not an obligation."[4] Yet Beham's engraving intimates that the opposite might also be true. Within the adage — in the masculine indirect object *IM* (modern German *ihm*) — there is a direct appeal to the individual's particular limits, and the possibility of their transgression. Such a testing of limits is modeled by our heroic surrogate inside the picture, who, against all odds, takes hold of the intractable stuff of reality, attempting to bend it to his will, though with no guarantee of success. Why does the individual strive in the face of the impossible, the engraving asks? To do so would seem a vain,

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[2] Compare, for example, variations on the phrase in a set of village bylaws (sixteenth to eighteenth century) from Humptrup, in Schleswig-Hollstein, where the modal *sollen* is routinely used with *unterstehen sich*: see Rheinheimer.

[3] Compare, for example, the formula used in the broadsheet *Nymandt prech sich hoher dann seinem standt gepürt, Er wirdt sunst zu schanden . . .*, which illustrates a 1531 poem by Hans Sachs with a woodcut by Georg Pencz: repr. in Röttinger, 42 (no. 22).

[4] *Impossibilium nulla obligatio est.* From the chapter "De diversis regulis iuris antiqui," in *Corpus Iuris Civilis, Digesta* 50, 17, 185 (attributed to "Celsus libro octavo digestorum"). http://web.upmf-grenoble.fr/Haiti/Cours/Ak/Corpus/d-50.htm#17 (accessed 27 September 2008).

useless thing. Who would dare undertake it? The answer is already given: nobody (*NIMENT*) dares. Right before our eyes, then, nobody's endeavor has become somebody's and, by implication, everybody's. As the proscriptive authority of the text yields to the liberating challenge of the image, a paradox of sorts arises; it alerts us, as this essay will argue, to the potentialities of human agency, to the will's freedom to choose and to guide action, and to the capacity of humans to affect the possibility their own salvation.

Not unexpectedly, Beham's print makes possible multiple competing interpretations. Though it is not my intention to defeat any one of these, in the course of this essay I hope to show that, for its educated contemporary audience, the moralizing message would have been the least stimulating, the least topical, and the least satisfying in light of the cascade of ethical and spiritual questions that the print, with its studied verbal and visual ambiguities, instigates. To begin to move away from the admonitory, one needs only suppose that Beham's engraving was designed to pose a challenge to interpretation, that it presents an invitation to intellectual-rhetorical performance. Such a supposition situates the work astride two Renaissance genres: on the one hand, the still-youthful genre of the small engraving, for which Beham and several other German printmakers of his generation who specialized in it received the nickname *Kleinmeister* (Little Masters, or Masters of the Little Engraving); and, on the other, that most subversive of all rhetorical figures, the paradox. In what follows, the framing conditions on both the visual and the verbal sides of the genre question will be important, but so too will be the porosity of boundaries between the little engraving and its affiliated word-image composites, in particular the Renaissance emblem. By placing Beham's engraving within and also astride these genres, we not only address semantics, but also glimpse something of the little engraving's social life — its life as a commodity, its role as a pivot of cultural exchange, and its function in an economy of knowledge that was rapidly expanding.

Likewise, to invoke the Renaissance tradition of paradox means setting the stage for a wider range of rhetorical maneuvers that were likely, or probable, within the print's intellectual ambit and its historical context. Renaissance writers, artists, and their educated audiences delighted in games based on hidden, doubled, and inverted meanings. To overcome the difficulties they posed and to solve their riddles; to reveal their inventor's ingenuity; and to feel oneself especially skilled, spiritually and morally fit, for the undertaking — these were valued as sources of satisfaction.[5] An

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[5]Walker, 221, suggests that "delight in skill, difficulty-value" may well amount to a metatheme of Renaissance poetics.

overarching premise of what follows is that Beham's *Impossible* thematizes the beholder's willingness to perform, as it were, the intellectual equivalent of the athlete's determined grasping, and to do so, knowingly, against the odds of discovering or validating a single truth. The same culture that understood how paradoxes could function as vehicles of truth also recognized that, unlike other forms of obscurity, such as the parable, they do not readily admit closure and often multiply contrary meanings. As Rosalie Colie reminds us in her book on Renaissance paradox, paradoxicality flourishes in eras that sense keenly the proliferation of competing truths, and those same eras reflexively call upon truth itself — or, in the language of the period, "Truth herself" — to be more vigilant in defending its sovereignty.[6] In the first half of the sixteenth century, before dissenting positions on religious matters hardened into compulsory forms of confessional knowledge, it was only the evangelical reformer, "lonely" in his heroic independence from the authority of pope and council, who could confidently champion the one and only truth, the truth of the Gospel.[7] Everyone else had to contend with a profusion of ideas, opinions, counteropinions, and platforms for change. To the extent that Beham's little engraving could draw the beholder into a contest between contradictory meanings, and reflect back the inconclusiveness of his own struggle, the work is allegorical (but in this sense only).[8]

Mirroring this situation, modern iconographic interpretations of Beham's *Impossible* have also proved inconclusive. Those few ventured so far have foundered on an inability to identify either the hero of the scene or the nature of his labor — a predictable casualty of Beham's perennial refusal to accommodate allegorical figures to the authority of any single text.[9] It is not necessary to rehearse the proofs and counterproofs that make of the figure a hero of neither Christian legend nor classical myth. Captured at the pivotal moment of a symbolic task, as a personification might be, the bearded man stands isolated in the world, as cut off from

[6]Colie, 37.

[7]Oberman, 247.

[8]Iconology's operative assumption of Renaissance artworks as "wrappings of verbal statements" whose visual form could just as well disappear after the exegesis that reveals its hidden ideas is complete has few defenders these days: for a clear-sighted critique of art history's exegetical mode, see Pächt, esp. 71–77. The author attributes the phrase "wrappings of verbal statements" to Ernst Gombrich.

[9]For a review of attempts to find the iconographic pigeonhole, see Goddard, 85 (cat. no. 14).

FIGURE 2. Marcantonio Raimondi (after Raphael). *Abduction of Helen*, ca. 1510–20. Engraving, 296 x 424 mm. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

civilization as he is distant from the iconographies of Samson, Hercules, and Sisyphus.[10]

That the figural motif itself is no invention of Sebald Beham, but represents instead an instance of the artist's savvy mode of grafting from classical and Italian art, has long been recognized, at least since Gustav Pauli's critical catalogue of 1901.[11] As in several other instances of *Kleinmeister* borrowing, the debt here is owed to Marcantonio Raimondi, himself a skillful translator of compositions by Raphael and Dürer. Marcantonio's engraving of the *Abduction of Helen* includes a soldier in the same hunched pose, pulling Helen onto a ship destined for Troy (fig. 2).[12] Perhaps those contemporaries capable of recognizing the appropriation found something iconographically meaningful smuggled into *Impossible*

[10]One is tempted to call the figure Sisyphean despite the lack of iconographic correspondence with the classical legend; to the extent that my interpretation attributes to the engraving's audience an understanding of human perfectibility grounded in the will's freedom, the archetype may have resonated strongly for some viewers: see Simon.

[11]Remarked in Goddard, 81.

[12]See Goddard, 81n3. On Marcantonio's reproductive practice, see Landau and Parshall, 120–46.

along with the Raphaelesque staffage and Homeric action, but I cannot. Nevertheless, the exploitation of Marcantonio's prints, which were generally much larger in size than *Kleinmeister* productions, is telling, both for what the relationship is and what it is not. Like Dürer, the elder statesman of the German-Italian encounter, the *Kleinmeister* used Italian art as a substitute for ancient art rather than studying the antique directly. Consequently, they drew liberally from Mantegna and Raphael. But, as Patricia Emison has explained, Sebald and his younger brother Barthel (ca. 1502–40) seem to have shared neither Dürer's regard for Italian art as "stylistically sacrosanct," nor his sense of the intellectual challenge its imitation entailed. Rather, they treated Italian engravings as a treasury ripe for plundering, and tended to appropriate isolated figures and devices rather than trying to approximate the visual style in which they were embedded.[13] The strategy is only the most obvious indicator of the exchange relationship that engravers like the Behams cultivated with their educated viewers. On the one side of this relationship one finds an artist deploying a poetic mode that combined blatant borrowing with a self-conscious manipulation of codes; on the other, a visually literate viewer who recognized the sources, pondered their transformation, and displayed his own erudite awareness of the nature of the game. It was the same culture of humanist intellectual exchange that delighted in trading medals with antique inscriptions and elucidating the *inventio* behind emblems and *imprese*, and that treated these activities as performative pastimes.[14]

Lacking a foothold in classical and biblical myth, modern scholars have read something of the contemporary situation into *Impossible*, recalling Beham's documented involvement in confessional politics, in particular his arrest and interrogation on charges of heresy and sedition in Nuremberg in 1525 as the Peasants' War was nearing its bloody climax, an episode that earned him, along with Barthel and their colleague Georg Pencz (ca. 1500–50), lasting notoriety as one of the *drei gottlosen Maler* (three godless painters). Aware of the anachronisms that such a focus on the artist's early involvement with the so-called radical Reformation has produced, I will pursue a modified version of the thesis, one that takes

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[13]Emison, 1988, 34–36.

[14]Games and pastimes were the special emphasis of Girolamo Bargagli's treatise *Dialogo de'giuochi* (Siena, 1572), discussed in Drysdall, 22–23. With the label *humanist* I wish to indicate a broader constituency than those scholars trained in the *studia humaniora*: by the mid-sixteenth century the term *humanista* had come to denote "a cultural preference . . . [it] applied to anyone favoring the New Learning and was associated with progressive thinking": see Rummel, 10.

seriously the signs of Sebald Beham's continued engagement with the contemporary spiritual crisis in German society, and thus the cause of reform. At the same time, I shall approach what Michael Baxandall calls the artist's "situated volition" — in the present case, the transformation of Beham's circumstances from those of a youthful dissident of 1525 into those of the respectable burgher-engraver of 1549 — bearing in mind what kind of religious politics the paradoxical makes possible, and what kinds it does not.[15] Like all good paradoxes, the one at the heart of *Impossible* betrays an interest in philosophical themes both timeless and topical, and ultimately it will be my contention that Beham's little work of art echoes across the rival positions in one of the great debates of early modern thought: the discourse concerning the freedom of the human will. Rooted in ancient and medieval philosophy, where the technical term *liberum arbitrium* was identified alternately with the will and the reciprocity of intellect and will, the Reformation-era debate over *Willensfreiheit* (freedom of the will) got underway in 1520 with Martin Luther's response to Pope Leo X's bull of excommunication, and flared into public awareness four years later with the publication of Erasmus of Rotterdam's treatise *De libero arbitrio* (*On Free Will*) of 1524. This in turn prompted a strident reply from Luther, his influential *De servo arbitrio* (*On the Bondage of the Will*) of 1525. Risking a fragile relationship with Erasmus, Philip Melanchthon, who had already announced his own position in the *Loci communes* of 1521, threw his weight behind his Wittenberg colleague.[16] Furthermore, in the immediate aftermath of this titanic clash a number of dissident evangelical writers — men whom Luther had already branded as sectarians, or *Schwärmer* (fanatics) — also weighed in on the debate. Determined to break through the moral confusion Luther's teachings had inflicted on all good Christians, reformist theologians such as Hans Denck (ca. 1495–1527), Balthasar Hubmaier (ca. 1480–1528), and Sebastian Franck (1499–1542) made the issues in the debate central to the task of defining a true Christianity. By midcentury, as a result of their contributions, evangelicals dissatisfied with the Lutheran, Zwinglian, and humanist platforms had at their disposal a far

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[15]See Baxandall, v, who uses the term as a shorthand for the causal intentions of a "social being in cultural circumstances," and a factor inferential criticism must capture not as "a reconstituted historical state of mind . . . but [as] a relation between the object and its circumstances": ibid., 41–42.

[16]Maurer; Wengert. Questions of the will's freedom occupied Melanchthon throughout his career, particularly in the debates with the Gnesio-Lutherans until the 1577 Formula of Concord: see Kolb.

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broader range of theories concerning the relationship between original sin, human will, Christian self-knowledge, and freedom.

My survey of the *Willensfreiheit* debate in the central section of this essay is intended to plot the controversy's coordinates across the broad intellectual and cultural landscape in which the ethical-spiritual terms of Beham's engraving became intelligible to others. What I hope will emerge is how the engraving's semantic structure — its ricochet of word and image, each possible trajectory of thought conditioned by ambiguities in the other — resonated across the spectrum of ethical positions raised by the debate. More specifically, and without reducing the complexity of either the debate or the engraving, I will contend that Beham's *Impossible* can be seen as an allegory of the will's vacillation between necessity and freedom, a movement through which Christian conscience discovers its inner resources and pursues a path toward perfectibility — not as simple subjectivism, but as a brand of that experienced faith that learns as much from its own ethical commitments as it does from doctrine and scripture. Such an interpretation should not be mistaken for a more-or-less-correct exegesis of the image. Rather, the engraving's structure demands that any satisfactions one might derive from it are to be gotten, as critical parlance might have it, performatively — by provoking in the beholder an interpretive action, one capable of producing a form of self-knowledge that itself was, paradoxically, impossible to achieve yet essential for salvation. That knowledge concerned how an individual may chart a course between the "desperation and indolence" inspired by the will's unbounded freedom, and the arrogance and laziness engendered by assurances of a predetermined grace.[17] Negotiating this space of freedom entailed, according to Franck, a spiritual recognition of the *inner mensch* (inner man), that seat of volition and judgment that this Spiritualist-humanist scholar set in opposition to the *éusser mensch* (outer man).[18] For Franck the outer man's search for selfhood engendered nothing but foolish narcissism, and had to be remedied. In his *Sprichwörter* of 1541 he diagnoses the

[17]I am paraphrasing Erasmus's concluding call for moderation: "One must not avoid the Scylla of arrogance by going into the Charybdis of desperation and indolence. In resetting a broken limb, one must not dislocate it in the opposite direction, but put it back in its place": Erasmus, 93.

[18]In Franck's epistemology, the internal self — approximate to what medieval authors called *homo interior* — is bound to the flesh, and therefore predisposed to vanity and misled by its own seeking; in contrast "the inner man believes only what he has learned, heard, seen and experienced of God in accordance with his own nature," and therefore properly seeks only God: quoted in Ozment, 1973, 148 (from Franck's *Chronica, Zeytbüch und Geschichtbibel* of 1531). Renaissance and medieval conceptions of the self remain highly controversial; for a survey of the problems, see esp. Martin.

problem: "Man remains forever in his affairs and towards himself blind and a fool. . . . Likewise if a monkey and an owl were to be looking at themselves in a mirror, the nature of animal or man is so blind that each creature, obsessed by self-love, does not know himself, does not see himself, and cannot do so."[19]

In Beham's engraving it is *Niment*, Nobody, who undertakes this task of self-knowing; it is Nobody who dares great things; and it is Nobody who wrestles with its implications. Accordingly, we must revisit the early modern career of Nobody, a paradoxical figure who, like Erasmus's Folly, spoke to his conflicted situation with "a freedom no real person would dare to exercise."[20] At a time of mounting political and ecclesiastical censorship, Nobody, like paradox itself, appealed to authors and audiences by virtue of his power to be "simultaneously subversive and conservative," to hold contrary propositions in suspension.[21] Sixteenth-century authors like Franck understood the existential dilemma in which Nobody found himself, and saw himself, as an inheritance from Adam: his reflected image was therefore a mirror for self-improvement, to be used by all. Yet Everyman, Nobody's conceptual double, dares not undertake what Nobody does, and therein lies the problem. The picture, masquerading as admonition and censure, turns out to be an indictment of a very different order.

How seriously Beham himself expected truth to emerge from the moral-rhetorical process his little engraving unleashes cannot be guessed. But there are, as we will see, ample reasons to suppose that the artist could never in good conscience have excluded himself from the cascade of religious and philosophical choices his work makes possible. That Beham's sister Ottilie had been married to Franck since 1528 makes it more than likely that the artist was acquainted with his brother-in-law's thought and spirituality, and perhaps also sympathetic to the alternative model of will, self-knowledge, action, and the soul's access to grace that his anti-Lutheran writings articulate. Whether Beham ultimately turned out to be at the end of his life a loyal Lutheran, an Erasmian humanist, or an unreconstructed sectarian of some kind is a question a close reading of the engraving may help us unravel, but the autobiographical dimension is not my principal concern. Artists of Beham's generation forged their religious and political outlooks in the crucible of reform, confessional conflict, iconoclasm, religious dissent, and revolution: they exhibit in their lives and works diverse strategies for coping with the contemporary crisis. Many must have watched the brutal

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[19]Calmann, 92.
[20]Belting, 96.
[21]Crockett, 19.

suppression of the commoners' revolt in 1525 with a profound sense of disillusionment and shock, but whether this made them more or less receptive to the anti-Lutheran positions taken by specific dissident theologians, or any of the evangelical pamphleteers publishing in the 1520s, remains an open question. My concluding remarks will address this situation of ideological flux and show that the situation of the artist between 1520 and 1550 was bound up with the will's disenchanted striving for freedom — a situation that the enterprising and philosophically astute Beham experienced firsthand.

2. Impossible Meaning

By the end of his career Sebald Beham's output included woodcuts, manuscript and panel paintings, pen drawings, and over 250 engravings, the stock of which swelled when he took over plates produced by his younger brother Barthel, who died in 1540.[22] Like other painter-printmakers who staked their livelihoods on the rising prestige of the collectible, small-scale engraving, Sebald's range of subjects was encyclopedic: Old and New Testament scenes, parables, and personages; classical heroes and allegories; proverbs and moralizing emblems; macabre admonitions; erotic ditties and smutty jokes; coats of arms and ornament prints, some interlaced with grotesques, burlesques, and visual pranks still to be comprehended. Within this sprawling oeuvre, however, *Impossible* is unique, though it shares several of its atypical qualities with other Beham productions. Its size (81 x 52 mm) makes it comparable to a number of the artist's other late engravings, for example, the 1543 *Adam and Eve* (82 x 56 mm) (fig. 3), one of several Barthel Beham plates the older brother reworked and engraved with his own monogram. It is noteworthy that this group of images falls somewhat outside the standard measurements in use for small engravings since the 1520s.[23]

    That typical *Kleinmeister* works were small enough to be folded into letters or affixed inside books has been often observed, but is worth repeating, for it establishes another baseline assumption: that engravings such as *Impossible* were marketed to the same educated public that bought

[22]For essential biographical information on the Behams, see Goddard, 221–23; Thieme and Becker, 3:191–95; *Allgemeines Künstler-Lexikon*, 8:287–93. Only a few paintings by Sebald's hand, plus a small number of pen drawings, are known.

[23]Dimensions for prints were usually obtained by halving and quartering available paper sizes, sometimes dividing them into eighths. Though it was the smallest of his preferred formats, Dürer's *Engraved Passion* series of 1509–11, sized in approximation of a duodecimo book (the images are ca. 117 x 75 mm), provided an important contemporary yardstick for sizing and perhaps also pricing, as Goddard, 18, explains.
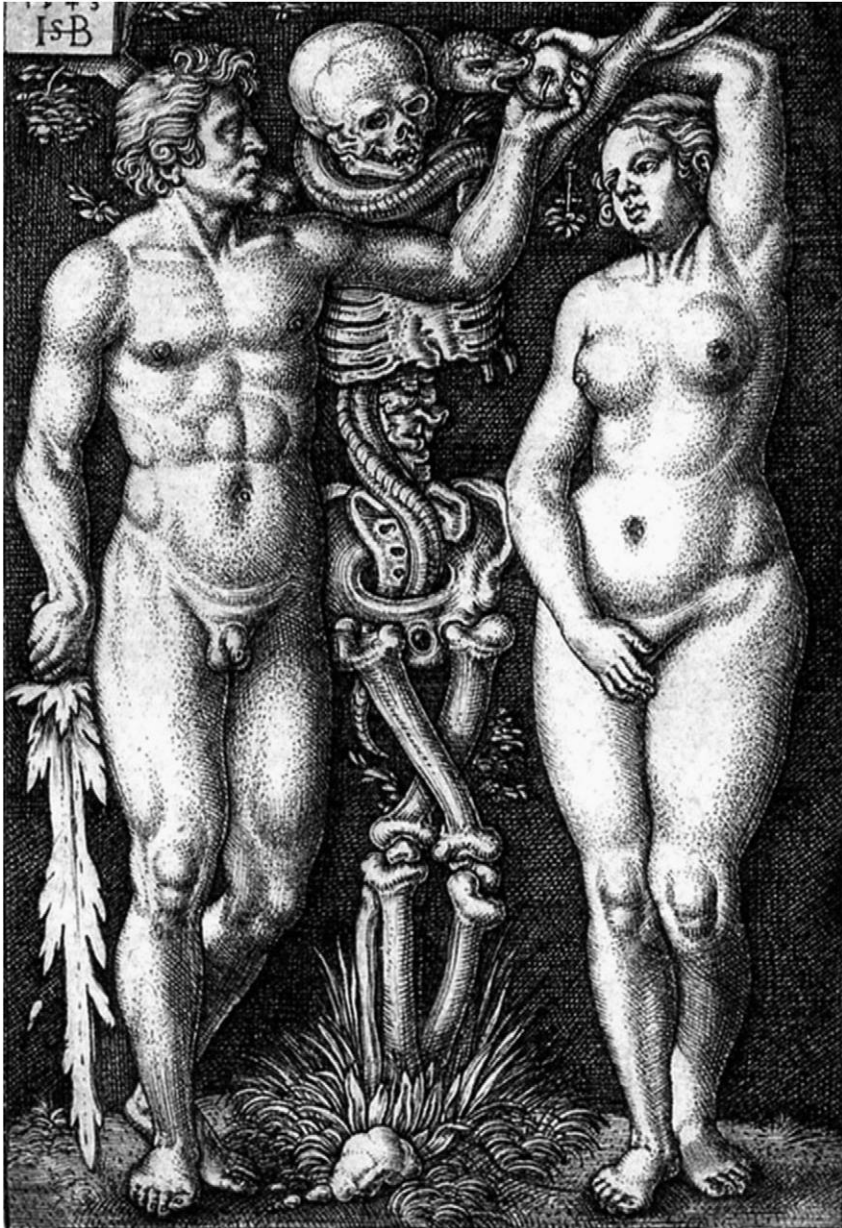
FIGURE 3. Hans Sebald Beham (after Barthel Beham). *Adam and Eve*, 1543. Engraving, 82 x 56 mm. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

books, a class of buyers with humanist credentials or inclinations: educated merchants, members of the urban patriciate, scholars, and enlightened princes. For such buyers, prints, and fine engravings especially, were more than a source of pictorial information. Sixteenth-century collectors sought in the Renaissance print several kinds of pleasurable experiences — the pleasure of discovering an author's *inventio* (concept) embedded in a tangle of referents, the pleasure of marveling at exquisite workmanship carried out on an incredibly small scale — and they found these pleasures lodged inside a commodity that was agreeably portable and adaptable to a range of practices. Participation in these practices, and the moral discourses they stimulated, was a sign of social and intellectual privilege, and artists like Beham were evidently keen on sharing this culture with their clients.[24]

Other features of *Impossible* nevertheless distance it from the routine. The print does not appear to be part of a set or series, such as were desired by collectors — though Beham did produce engraving sets across nearly every religious and secular subject area in which he worked. More importantly, we are hard pressed to identify another engraving in Beham's oeuvre in which word and image converge upon a concept in quite the same way. Several other allegorical prints of approximately equal size, made in the 1540s, employ a similar technique of disposing lines of text vertically, along the right margin of the scene. This appears, for instance, in the somewhat smaller *Cimon and Pero* of 1544, a reverse copy of a Barthel Beham plate to which Sebald added a German inscription, running the length of a framing column (fig. 4);[25] and in Sebald Beham's undated *Lucretia*, with its Latin verses, also arranged sideways, simulating an antique inscription next to the figure (fig. 5). Like *Cimon and Pero*, *Impossible* bears a vernacular inscription that runs from top to bottom along the righthand side of the image, inviting the beholder to turn the print counterclockwise to bring the words into legibility (Lucretia's verses, by contrast, run from bottom to top); but unlike the German of *Cimon* or the Latin of *Lucretia*, the German motto of *Impossible* neither identifies its subject nor quotes a classical author.

Seen in conjunction with the title darting above the hero's head, the adage would seem to gesture toward another emerging genre. Posing as an aphorism or a proverb,[26] the verse brings the print into a relation with

[24]Cf. the remarks in Emison, 1995, 12.

[25]Goddard, 91 (cat. no. 17). The inscription reads: ICH LEB VON DER BRVST MEINER DOCHTER ("I live from the breast of my daughter"), aligning the image with the story told by Valerius Maximus, an exemplum of *caritas romana* (Roman Charity).

[26]I have been unable to identify a proverb that corresponds to or closely parallels the adage of *Impossible*, and therefore I treat it as an original composition unique to this engraving.

FIGURE 4. Hans Sebald Beham (reverse copy after Barthel Beham). *Cimon and Pero*, 1544. Engraving, 70 x 49 mm. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

contemporary emblematics, where a *subscriptio* (an epigram or verse text) and *pictura* (image) play complementary roles within a tripartite structure that also includes an *inscriptio* (title).[27] A brief comparison with the Renaissance tradition of emblem books will be instructive, less so for an

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[27]Beham renders the title with a full stop, the mode found in Alciato's original emblem book and its many translations and expansions. Giovanni Marquale's Italian edition, for example, printed in Lyons in 1549, uses Alciato's form of a single-word assertion followed by a period, "Impoßibile." This edition is one of a handful of emblem books digitized by the University of Glasgow, available at http://www.italianemblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/index.php. For a lively entrée into the subject and its large literature, see Adams and Harper. Over one hundred editions, published in Italy, France, Germany, and the Spanish Netherlands, have been identified between the original publication of Alciato's *Emblemata* and the 1620s.

FIGURE 5. Hans Sebald Beham. *Lucretia*, ca. 1540–45. Engraving, 76 x 45 mm. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

understanding of our theme than for what it reveals about the semantic structure of *Impossible*. Italian jurist and humanist scholar Andrea Alciato's (1492–1550) famous emblem book, and its numerous sixteenth-century translations and expansions, included an entry for "The Impossible," but neither its figures nor their actions bear immediate comparison with Beham's engraving. Here, impossible striving presents an open-and-shut case for moral censure: "There are a thousand things for which there is no remedy. No matter how hard you try, you will not be master of them."[28] In

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[28]Translated from the French edition of Andrea Alciato, *Emblematicum liber. . . .* (Paris, 1536): in Daly, no. 59.

the image a group of men are washing down a Moor, that is, vainly trying to scrub the blackness from his skin (fig. 6), accompanied by the verses: "As you try to make the black man white, you wish night to become bright day." Under a bilingual title (*Impoßibile / Unmuglich*), Wolfgang Hunger's first German edition of 1542 matches another woodcut of the same subject to the following verses:

> No matter how long and well one washes a Moor,
> it does not help a hair.
> The night is so full of darkness
> that it cannot be made bright with any light.
> Similarly, take note that natural vice and
> what time has aged can never be eradicated,
> no matter what art one uses.[29]

Text and image in the emblem-book tradition maintain a tight referential orbit: redundancy, after all, aids moral instruction. And the moral here is unmistakably admonitory: doomed to failure are those who defy the limits of the impossible. In contrast, a more open relational semantics of the kind that characterizes the *impresa* tradition appears to be at work in Beham's engraving. In this tradition, *corpore* (figure) and *motto* (word) are mutually dependent signs, and each determines the way the other will express the author's concept. Girolamo Ruscelli (1504–66), one of the earliest *impresa* theorists, contended that although there should always be an adequate correspondence, word-and-image relationships should never be redundant: mottos should never simply explain the content of the picture, as they do (most of the time) in emblem books.[30] Thus the combinatory logic Beham employs, and the resulting semantic play across the print's three elements — figure, motto, and title — do not align it neatly with either the emblem or *impresa* traditions, both in their respective infancies at the time Beham produced his *Impossible.* Nor does its word-image structure find any clear parallels elsewhere in his oeuvre. The aim was to confront the beholder with a paradox, and place before him an opportunity to wrestle with contending, if not contradictory, meanings.

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[29]Andrea Alciato, *Emblematum libellus . . .*, ed. and trans. Wolfgang Hunger (Paris, 1542); digital facsimile at www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/books.php?id=A42b&o; and English translation from Daly, no. 59.

[30]Drysdall, 27. A more recent discussion is Caldwell. Crucially, Drysdall, 31n21, remarks that the *impresa* theorists to some extent misread (or distorted?) Alciato's intentions, for some of his emblems do signify in the allusive, relational manner typically reserved for *imprese.*
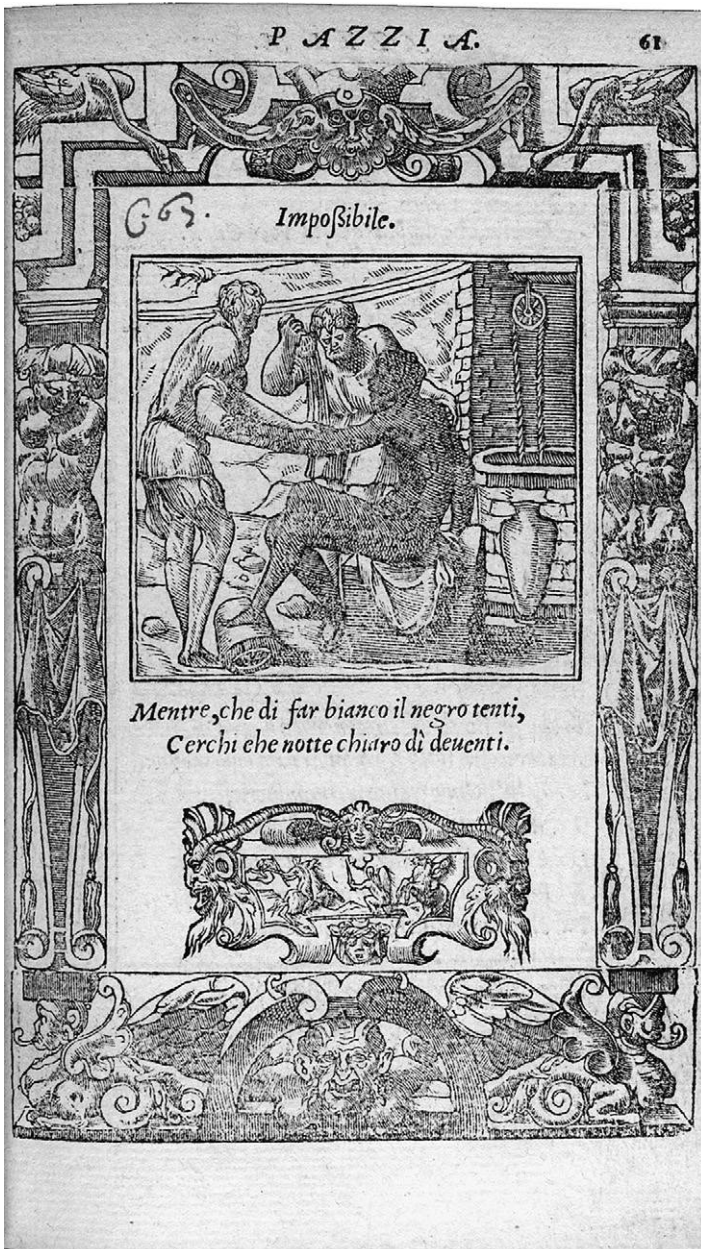
FIGURE 6. "Impossibile." Woodcut from Andrea Alciato, *Diverse Impre / se accomodate a / diverse moralitá, con versi . . .*, trans. Giovanni Marcquale. Lyons, 1551. Glasgow University Library, Stirling Maxwell Sp Coll S.M. 35a, fol. 61. Courtesy of University of Glasgow, Special Collections.

3. Impossible Agency

Sister to the trope of *serio ludere*, the serious play designed to uncover truth through ironic duplicity, paradox in the Renaissance stood essentially for a rhetorical technique. At their most playful and non-serious, paradoxes amounted to, in Colie's words, "exercises of wit designed to amuse an audience sufficiently sophisticated in the arts of language to understand them."[31] They could also be — as critiques levelled at those who take life too seriously, or those who don't take things seriously enough — vehicles of high moral and spiritual seriousness. Medieval and Reformation theologians exploited the potential of paradox to stimulate human understanding of divine truths and deepen appreciation of their mystery: Luther himself employed the technique of rhetorical paradox, for example, when formulating his theses for the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518.[32] More recent scholarship has even regarded paradox as paradigmatic for an early modern *mentalité* that embraced "the simultaneous experience of contrary states."[33]

It is not immediately apparent that the adage Beham affixed to the right margin of *Impossible* produces a rhetorical paradox when read alongside the figure, so let us test it. At its core lies the notion of that which is impossible (*vnmvglich*) to do, a notion which, like its noun form, is already paradoxical because it has no independent existence or nature. Since the impossible does not exist, one may reason, any attempt to achieve it is illusory. Whoever dares try will do little more than expose his own folly. Likewise foolish, if not impossible too, are any statements praising the impossible, for it — like folly itself, or any number of ridiculous topics — can never be praiseworthy, and thus logically is not praisable. Upping the ante is the absurdity of positing (or praising) such great things (*groser ding*) with whose magnitude the impossible might be equated. Finally — but really in the first place — we are presented with the paradox of who would ever dare to undertake the thing that must forever remain undone, though the answer has already been provided: nobody (*Niment*). The subject of an absurd striving for things so great they are on a par with nothing is, in the end, nobody at all. By formalizing the nonexistence of both its own defining object and subject, withdrawing the possibility of praising them in the very act of speaking their names, the adage collapses in on itself, taking with it the force of any simple moral admonition.

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[31]Colie, 5.
[32]Evans, 98.
[33]See the valuable discussion in Crockett, 18–28.

Before sorting out the implications of these negative affirmations, it may be instructive to note that the Beham adage is both much less, and much more, than a logical paradox such as the famous Liar Paradox in which Epimenides the Cretan is credited with the statement, "All Cretans are liars." A classic example of a perfect equivocation, its meanings are "literally, speculative," according to Colie, "infinitely mirrored, infinitely reflected, in each other."[34] The situated illogic of Beham's paradox in the engraving is less pure in its recursive contrariety. But contemporary readers — educated Christians — would likely have recognized one significant way out of the hall of mirrors that paradox normally produces: the notion of faith as the only possible mode of apprehending the *impossibilium* of divinity, which is removed, by its very nature, from normal modes of sensory experience and intellectual speculation. Drawing upon the Neoplatonism associated with Dionysus the Areopagite, late-medieval mystical theologians such as Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) developed this awareness into a rigorous rhetorical technique designed to avoid falsifying or insufficient statements about God by directly asserting only what he is not.[35] By the mid-sixteenth century this principle had already become something of a commonplace. Several participants in the *Willensfreiheit* controversy were, in fact, heirs to this tradition of "negative theology." The best example again may be Franck, who, with his thoroughgoing ontological conception of God, required that the illuminating truth of the divine Word be sought as a hidden entity in puzzles and paradoxes.[36] On both sides of the confessional divide, but especially among Protestants, it was understood that one exercises one's faith purely and appropriately only in grappling with that which is most difficult, or well-nigh impossible. Luther's valorization of faith's power to overcome all obstacles formed the cornerstone of his catechism projects and echoed across the sixteenth century, even among his polemical opponents. "Faith produces virtue," wrote Sebastian Castellio (1515–63) in the preface to his Latin translation (1557) of the *Theologia Deutsch*, "that is, the force and power makes what we believe come a reality."[37] Rooted in Jesus' proclamation in Mark 9:22 — "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth" — this valorization of faith's authority over reason found its philosophical fountainhead in Tertullian (d. ca. 220), who declaimed in his treatise *De carne Christi* with regard to the Resurrection,

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[34]Colie, 6.
[35]Ibid., 24–28.
[36]On Franck's hermeneutics, also discussed further below, see Hayden-Roy, esp. 51–58.
[37]Quoted in Ozment, 1973, 45.

"It is certain — because it is impossible."[38] But the idea also shared in the Pauline trope of "God's fool," which was reinterpreted in the sixteenth century across the ideological spectrum.[39]

If the impossible thing in Beham's adage were truly coded in this way, and the hero's struggle seen as a straightforward visual metaphor for that which challenges human effort — or that which defeats the wrong kind of effort — then the engraving's tensions would quietly resolve themselves into an allegory of faith. Modern commentators, more or less certain of the elder Beham's Protestant identity, and preferring to see the engraving as expressive of well-worn Lutheran precepts, have embraced this meaning for the print. A parallel appears in Melanchthon's adage, "Do not struggle in vain doing useless things," concerning the futility of earthly works and the misplaced trust in what reformers called *adiaphora*.[40] Faith is now, in this interpretation, more than the better part of valor: it is the only part, exclusive of any other possible striving. The athlete figure appears in the fullness of his Sisyphean despair, though it still remains unclear if the legend mocks the figure's futile grasping or valorizes his heroic determination. Is this struggle misdirected toward inessential things or is it virtue born of faith, sure of itself against all odds, even in the absence of consolation?

Alone and isolated against a distant horizon, Beham's personification gives no indication of the prospects for success or failure. Only the insistent no-thing, the title *Impossibile*, trumpeted above him in capital letters as if spoken by the tree's branches — a spelling that could be Latin, but could also be the Italian adjective — seems to cast judgment on his undertaking. A full stop comes after the word itself. Does the impossible refer to the runner growing from the base of the older tree? Entwined around an older tree luxurious with foliage, the runner, mostly dead but displaying a few slender new growths, does seem conspicuously symbolic. Educated contemporaries would surely have suspected as much, given the ubiquity of symbolic plants, trees, and various arboreal manipulations — watering, pruning, grafting, transplanting, felling, etc. — found in emblem books.[41] Beham's engraving and its relatives do indeed have much in common with contemporary

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[38]"Certum est, quia impossibile est." From Tertullian (*De carne Christi*, 5.4), where the author, concerned with refuting the Marcionite heresy, references the *impossibilium* of the Resurrection: "Et sepultus resurrexit; certum est, quia impossibile" ("He was buried, and rose again: it is certain — because it is impossible"). For a discussion of the text and its history of misappropriation, see Sider.

[39]1 Corinthians 3:18–20.

[40]Goddard, 80n1, who translates the adage incorrectly as "No one undertakes a greater thing than attempting the impossible."

[41]For critical editions, see Daly and Callahan; Daly.

emblems and *imprese*, as noted. But within the emblem-book tradition the entwined-tree motif bore a multiplicity of meanings, and depended largely on the imagery of encroaching vines. In one example an old olive tree, symbol of wisdom, complains of being embraced by the young vine, from whose fruits the virtuous must abstain; in another, a withered elm supports a grape vine even beyond death; while in still another an old tree is entangled and choked by the vines it had once nourished, an allegory of ingratitude.[42]

Over and against such an impossible polysemy, the German art historian Herbert Zschelletzschky, in his 1975 study of the graphic work of the Beham brothers and Pencz, set about situating the engraving in its historical and biographical contexts. Convinced of the trio's lifelong commitment to the cause of a *Volksreformation* (People's Reformation), Zschelletzschky discerned in the image something of the elder Beham's profound disillusionment with the progress of Protestant reform. Noting that the print came one year after the imposition of the so-called Augsburg Interim of 1548 — when Lutherans, defeated on the battlefield, were forced to renounce many hard-won reforms — he pegged *Impossible* as the "resigned resumé of a decidedly negative life experience." In light of Beham's stubborn refusal to relinquish the idealism of the 1520s, the "impossible" task worth striving for, the argument runs, had to be the achievement of lasting religious reform, a breakthrough that would, once and for all, uproot heresy, reconcile opposing factions, and bring about Christian unity. The straining figure thus embodies not the godly virtue that brings about Christian renewal, but the reactionary efforts of the Reformation's enemies; and the old-growth tree of the engraving represents "an emblem of the Reformation deeply rooted in the German people." Thus does Beham's image bespeak, in Zschelletzschky's view, "a confident conviction about the desperation of the adversary's efforts to uproot the Reformation like a tree."[43]

In pressing his image of Beham as the unreconstructed revolutionary artist, Zschelletzschky may well have overreached for symbolic equivalences; but his interpretation is invigorating for another reason he may not have intended. Consciously or not, his words embed a folkloric association of rooted trees with impossible tests of vitality and strength. Someone said to be feeling so well-rested and fit that they, in the words of an old German idiom, *Bäume ausreißen können* (could uproot trees), is possessed of a lusty, can-do enthusiasm, inspired to take on the impossible. Alternatively, someone not quite up to a task may couch their excuse in the understatement, *Wie*

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[42]Henkel and Schöne, with cited examples in cols. 208, 259, 276; cf. Daly, (no. 24).
[43]Zschelletzschky, 1975b, 323–24; cf. discussion in Goddard, 81n6.

Bäumeausreißen ist mir's nicht gerade zumute (Like tearing up trees, I'm not exactly in the mood for it).[44] Of course, someone so sure of their strength in the face of an impossible task becomes either risible or praiseworthy, depending on the context and the nature of the task at hand. In the well-known folktale, "Das tapfere Schneiderlein" ("The Brave Little Tailor"), tree-ripping features in the competitive show of strength between two giants who are tricked into mortal combat — and a mutually-assured destruction — by an unseen provocateur, himself intent on maintaining the illusion of his own invincibility.[45] Both word and image in Beham's *Impossible*, it seems, are shot through with such proverbial allusions, though the print sustains its own ambivalence about human strength, will, motivation, and their effects by relying on paradox to defeat the interpreter's own efforts to match motifs to morals. Despite the declaration that the task he undertakes is impossible, the figure's physical virtue and determination declare the opposite. He is fit, but forces remain in check; human agency is suspended between confidence and doubt; all is undetermined. Likewise, our judgment of the endeavor remains suspended; the moral contours of the situation are blurred.

What resistence we have met in our first round of grappling with Beham's paradox has thrown us back upon one of the great issues debated by humanists and reformers in the two decades following the debacle of the Peasants' War, the problem of the will's bounded freedom. Before revisiting this controversy, however, one further clue to the identity of the central figure, and the impossible nature of his struggle, must be considered more closely. Whether it is the case that nobody dares, or that nobody should dare, we are still left with the paradox of an impossible agency. For right before our eyes somebody does dare, yet that somebody is really nobody.

4. IMPOSSIBLE IDENTITY

Already by the first decade of the sixteenth century, Nobody, known to contemporary audiences by the indefinite pronoun *Niment*, or *Nimant*, was quite somebody; just as recognizable was the trope bearing his name. Well-established as a stock character in the German moralizing tradition, he signified the common man or average man, put upon by the sins and follies of humankind. Descended from the ancient rhetorical trick associated with Odysseus's escape from the blinded Cyclops, who knew his assailant only as

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[44]See Röhrich, 1:82, 107–08. Thanks to my anonymous *RQ* reviewer for this felicitous translation.

[45]"Das tapfere Schneiderlein" first appeared in the first volume of the first edition (1812) of the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*.

Noman, the character became more widely known in connection with a certain medieval Saint Nemo, whose Latin sermons seem to have their origins in a devotional exercise by the monastic author Radulphus of Anjou (before 1290), who collected biblical citations containing the word *nemo*.[46] These were published in Augsburg in 1510 and, from then on, translated into several vernacular languages. Deviously aware of the saint's paradoxical authorship, the publisher of the first edition of the sermons left the frame of the title page blank, compounding the joke with a caption reading "Figura neminis, quia neo in ea depictus" ("A picture of nobody, since nobody is depicted in it"; fig. 7).[47]

It may have been with such precursors in mind that the barber-satirist of Strasbourg, Jörg Schan, pushed his own Nobody onto the European stage around 1507, when he published a broadsheet with the title *Nimants hais ich, was jeder man tut, das zücht man mich* (*Nobody is my name, what everybody does, for that I am blamed*; fig. 8).[48] In the poem Schan lampoons the sloth, insolence, thievery, and deceit of a group of household servants who blame every one of their mistakes, mishaps, and misdeeds on a phantom "nobody." Every transgression is deflected onto him. But the servants are not Schan's only target. Equally so does the folly of the householder come in for criticism, since it is his unwillingness to supervise his workers properly, as well as his ridiculous credulity in the face of such brazen lies, that ultimately brings him ruin and shame:

> The master says and cannot suppress it:
> "Ay, a pox on Nobody,
> Who always lives in my house!
> I had rather he should stay away
> And leave my servants alone.
> It is his doing that they lie and steal food."[49]

More than a comic device, Nobody's paradoxical omnipotence in the poem brings with it a paradoxical ubiquity, and vice-versa: he is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, so can never be found. Here we find a remarkable, if backhanded, grant of critical prowess for this most unlikely of moral heroes.

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[46]For the foundational studies, see Bolte and Tieck, esp. 8–27; Calmann, esp. 60–61; Schuster; Fricke, 62–72.

[47]See Fricke, 62.

[48]The sole exemplar is in the Bayerisches Staatsbibliothek in Munich. For the transcribed text, see Bolte and Tieck, 10–13; the best discussion to date is Fricke, 79–93, with source text on 458–61.

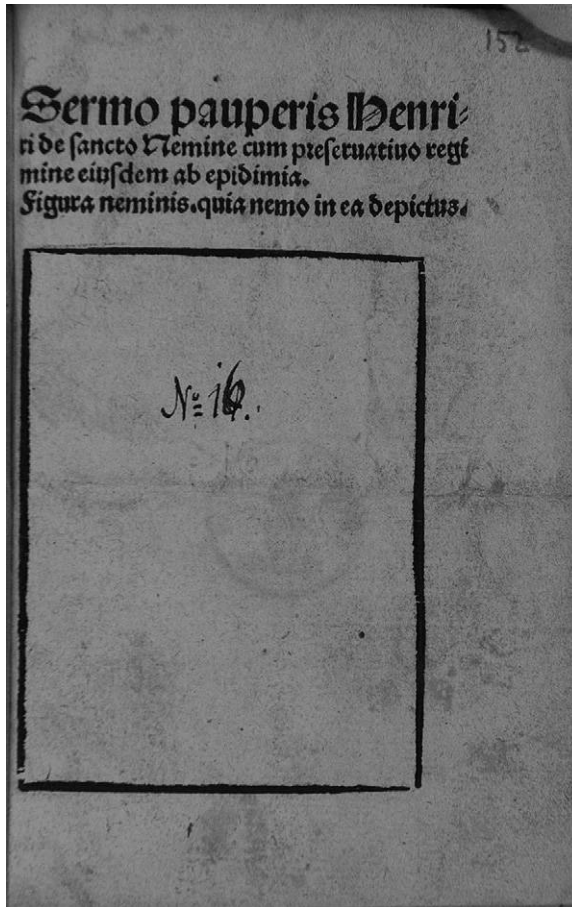[49]Translation in Calmann, 101.

FIGURE 7. Title page of *Sermo pauperis Henrici de sancto Nemine cum preservativo eiusdem ab epidemia.* Augsburg, ca. 1510. Augsburg, Staats- und Stadtbibliothek. Rar 58, Beibd. 15, fol. 152ʳ. Photo: Staats- und Stadtbibliothek Augsburg.

His visual image becomes that of a wayfarer or a beggar with traveling staff in hand, among other attributes. A colored woodcut, evidently designed by Schan himself, depicts the hapless Nobody tripping across a sprawl of broken and overturned household implements, his mouth sealed shut against unwelcome truth-telling by a padlock, an attribute of Secretia, and his hat ornamented with bird's wings, a common attribute of folly.[50] A close relative of Schan's invention appears on a painted table of around 1515, once attributed to Hans

[50]Schuster, 32.

FIGURE 8. Jörg Schan. *Nimants hais ich, was jeder man tut, das zücht man mich . . .*, 1507. Hand-colored woodcut, 365 x 275 mm. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Einbl. I, 47.

Holbein the Younger but now given to the Basel painter Hans Herbst.[51] The allegory has been recognized by a number of commentators as a predecessor to Pieter Bruegel's niggardly Everyman, labeled "Elck" in the British Museum drawing of around 1558, which provided the design for an engraving published by Hieronymus Cock shortly thereafter. Here Nobody, dressed in a fool's costume and regarding himself in a mirror, appears in an image within the image, a posted placard of some sort, to which Brueghel added the inscription, *Nymant en ekent sy selven* ("Nobody knows [or recognizes] himself").[52] Several threads connect Beham's *Impossible* to the spiritual and intellectual impulses that coalesced around *Elck*, not least of all the Spiritualist ideas of Sebastian Franck, but we will come to them along a different path.

Later editions of Schan's poem, likewise addressed to householders, modified the figure of Nobody and the moral thrust of his complaints, "turning him from a person [patiently] suffering insults into an accuser of culpable men."[53] Prominent among these reinterpretations is a broadsheet printed in Nuremberg for Bohemian patrons around 1533–35, with Georg Pencz supplying the woodcut (fig. 9).[54] Among the trio of so-called radical painters — including the Beham brothers — who were expelled from Nuremberg in 1525 for heresy and sedition, Pencz produced the image shortly after returning to Nuremberg to assume the office of city painter in 1532.[55] In the broadsheet *Nimant* is recast as *Nevim* ("I know not"). Padlocked at the lips and surrounded by a disorderly heap of household goods (as in Schan's composition), Pencz's figure differs, however, in being depicted as tall, powerful, and bearded, and as being armed with a sword rather than as a hapless dunce. And despite his enforced silence in the image — and the banderole's having been left blank — the poem gives Nobody a degree of critical eloquence. In the poem he takes the cook boldly to task for her romantic dalliances — undertaken at the expense of her duties — while all of her mishaps land on his head. Called upon in one passage to account for a broken pot, the cook, Pencz's hero complains, "reckon[s] on me, Nevim, and use[s] me monstrously as an excuse: 'Nevim,

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[51]As Joachim von Sandrart remembered it from a visit to Zurich in 1679, this image of the "so-called Saint Nobody" was "imprisoned, quite sad, his mouth closed with a large padlock, sitting on a broken old tub"; see Calmann, 72–73. See also Kohlhaussen, 19–28; Schuster, 34–35. The painting was made for Hans Bär, the city's standard bearer, in the year of his death; it is now in the Schweizerisches Landesmuseum Zurich (Inv. DEP-527).

[52]Calmann, 87–92. See also Zupnick; Fricke, 93–96; J. Müller, 56–76; Rothstein.

[53]Calmann, 75.

[54]Röttinger, no. 26. For discussion, see Calmann, 74–75; Fricke, 90; J. Müller, 61.

[55]On Pencz's life and work, see Landau; Timann.

FIGURE 9. Georg Pencz. *Nevim*, 1533–35. Colored woodcut broadsheet, 157 x 243 mm. Stiftung Schloss Friedenstein Gotha, Schlossmuseum, Inv. 40,63.

I do not know [who overturned and cracked it], dear lady. . . . It happened before I got up; I do not know, dear lady, because I was not there.'"[56]

[56]Translation in Calmann, 74.

In all these examples Nobody becomes a figure of patient suffering — a secular saint and a "fool for God" — bearing the sins and ingratitude of the world; already does he begin to appear, in a word, Christlike.[57] Precisely here the paradox of Nobody's impossible innocence becomes something of a moral trap. With our natural sympathies aroused by the injustice of his impossible culpability, we take his side against his false accusers. When we proclaim Nobody to be perfectly innocent, however, having now said it ourselves, we are backed into an inescapable self-recrimination. The beholder who insists that Nobody is blameless looks into a mirror, and must in turn blame himself, even while it remains true of the broadsheet's message that, "in the last resort the householder who allows Nobody to be blamed [by the servants] is himself the culprit."[58] In terms of its emotional charge and its reliance on inversion, the moral reflexivity that Nobody's persecution inspires closely parallels the structuring of response often described for images of Christ's Passion. In fact, the visual schema of Nobody stranded amid an array of household goods, objects that double as tokens of his affliction, may resemble nothing so much as medieval and Renaissance images of the suffering *imago pietatis* (Man of Sorrows) surrounded by the *arma Christi* (Instruments of the Passion). One variation of this devotional formula in particular, showing the tools and implements of those who sin by working on Sundays, traditionally known as the *Feiertagschristus*, prompted Peter-Klaus Schuster to regard the Nobody allegory as a secularized version of the "perpetual Passion."[59] The analogy is compelling. Like the wounded and bleeding Man of Sorrows, Nobody in Schan's poem and its imitators accuses his tormentors in the midst of his suffering, laments their ingratitude, yet intercedes on their behalf. Everyone is to blame for the sins that tear open his wounds over and over again. Only Nobody is perfectly innocent.

From a negative exemplum in the sphere of *ars oeconomica* and an erstwhile model for *imitatio Christi* — a "wise fool" in the Pauline and Erasmian tradition — Nobody was soon enough catapulted into the sphere of politics, where he served as a satirical mouthpiece for reform-minded critics. Inverting the trope of Nobody's paradoxical blamelessness in his poem *Nemo*, the knight-turned-humanist agitator Ulrich von Hutten (1488–1523), went far beyond the admonition to householders. Nobody was to blame for misrule and corruption, the decline of virtue, the

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[57]Schuster. In fact, one could add that Nobody's combination of ubiquity, omnipotence, and sacrificial suffering uncannily reproduces the conditions of *realia praesentis* (Real Presence).

[58]Calmann, 71.

[59]Schuster, esp. 29–31.

abrogation of reason, and the reign of folly. The humanist fascination with negative words — *utis*, *utopia*, *nihil*, *nemo* — along with the advantage dissidents have often found in the mask of anonymity combined to unleash the radical potential of Hutten's religious and political ideas.[60] Following upon the success of his first poem employing the trope (composed in 1507 and first published in 1510), Hutten later added thirty more lines to produce a *Nemo II* (1518), which was likewise reprinted many times, bringing its author even greater fame.[61] Title pages for these consecutive editions employed a new visual characterization of Nobody, created by Hans Weiditz, the so-called Petrarch Master. In a woodcut made for the first Augsburg edition of *Nemo II* Weiditz transforms him into a Roman emperor in armor, with the overgrown white beard and hair of a medieval wild man, mouth unpadlocked, and surrounded by erudite references to Homer as well as the expected scattering of household things. Another edition from the same year, this one from Leipzig, recasts Weiditz's stoic figure as a nerve-wracked ogre, dressed in tatters and chasing hornets with a fly swatter.[62]

Inspired by Hutten's elevation of Schan's downtrodden fool to a revolutionary hero, Protestant pamphleteers likewise turned to Nobody. Lutherans employed the trope in polemical disputes with Catholics, for example, when the rector-scholar of Wittenberg University, Johannes Ferrarius (1486[?]–1558), satirized the partisans of Johannes Eck, Luther's opponent in the Leipzig Disputation, with a pamphlet issued under the pseudonym Nemo. Recycling Weiditz's woodcut for the 1518 edition of Hutten's *Nemo II* on its title page, the pamphlet's designer added an inscription to the bizarre hero-figure, "Nemo dictavit."[63] Radical evangelicals and propagandists for the rebellious peasants likewise employed the trope when expressing their disillusionment with the progress of magisterial reform.[64]

Such a rapid sketch undoubtedly blurs the contours of what was, by midcentury, a complex set of resources, but it is sufficient to ground a preliminary appraisal of Beham's engraving astride this tradition. To the

[60]Anonymous writers frequently adopted the moniker *Nemo*; see Calmann, 84n148; Fricke, 76–78.

[61]Hutten. Reissues appeared in the same year in Basel, Strasbourg, and Leipzig.

[62]Repr. in Calmann, fig. 11d.

[63]Johannes Ferrarius, *Encomium Rvbii Longi Polli / apvd Lipsim in errores qvos / pveriliter commisit adverisvs Wittenb.* (*Praise of Rubeus Longus Pollus in Leipzig for the Childlike Errors He Has Committed Against the Wittenbergers*): discussed in Fricke, 96–100.

[64]See Calmann, 84–86.

extent that *Impossible* betrays an awareness of Nobody's rich and varied career as a secular saint and a dissident hero, as the maligned common man and the spiritually blind Everyman, it also reveals the artist's effort to retool the paradox along very different moral lines, starting with a new visual formula. Although the character of Nobody was, as we have seen, recast in the mold of the beleaguered Protestant by Hutten and Pencz (as well as by Schan, who reissued the broadsheet in 1533), this is clearly not how Beham wished to present him. Bulging with masculine strength, the bearded athlete of our engraving has little in common with the bespectacled fool tripping over broken crockery in Schan's broadsheet, or the hapless seeker carrying his lantern in Bruegel's *Elck*, nor do the compositions in which their respective trials unfold invite comparison. Nothing suggests the theme of displacement, poverty, and blame that made Bruegel's image echo the myth of Ahasuerus the Wandering Jew, as Jürgen Müller has argued.[65] Unconstrained, unhindered, and unburdened by the sins of others, Beham's *Niment* is also unaccompanied and unassisted in his task. He expresses nothing in words. Without calculation he relies solely on his own strength, his own will, to affect the situation at hand. He is, however, willing to suffer, and in that willingness defies the limits placed on his endeavor by wisdom's admonitions. Nobody turns the censure of the world upside down, and though the true source of his strength lies hidden, his awareness of it betokens self-knowledge at least. If Nobody in Beham's conception regards himself, he does not do so through a penitential looking glass, but in the mirror of his own impossible striving, which he undertakes alone. And the outcome remains, for now, uncertain.

5. Impossible Freedom

Is no one free to strive toward the impossible? Or is everyone? Can nobody's will ever effect his salvation, or can everybody's? In confronting these questions — among others that Beham's text-image paradox opens up — intellectually astute sixteenth-century viewers of *Impossible* were faced with a proliferation of competing truths. Decisive for the course of the Reformation, these interrelated questions concerned the ultimate criteria of faith, the problems of sin and evil, predestination, the anthropological seat of volition and knowledge, the role of the human will and action in salvation, and the nature of what the sixteenth century called *Christian liberty*. Between the opening salvos in the Reformation-era debate over

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[65]J. Müller, 61–67.

Willensfreiheit in the 1520s and the period from roughly 1535 to 1550 encompassing Beham's activities as an artist-citizen of Frankfurt, and then onward into the 1570s, writers across the ideological spectrum revived a discussion that had exercised medieval theologians from Augustine to Duns Scotus, and that had found a new, humanist grounding in the famous dialogue by Lorenzo Valla (ca. 1440).[66] In Germany especially the debate became harnessed to competing visions for Christian transformation as they emerged and clashed. Provocations on both sides of the debate quickly exposed "the appealing alliance of Renaissance and Reformation," in Heiko Oberman's studied appraisal, "as only a temporary coalition."[67] In this and other ways the debate indexes an internal crisis in the Reformation as bitterly divisive as the Peasants' War of 1524–25, or the aftermath of the failures of the Schmalkaldic War two decades later, two external crises that reverberated through religious polemics at a time when opinions and counteropinions were hardening behind the walls of confessional identity.

Turning over the major positions in the debate exposes representative conceptualizations of human psychology and human nature itself — that is, representative anthropologies — each with its own presuppositions about the soul's dynamic relationship with the will of God. Their divergence came into the open not only in the *Willensfreiheit* debate but in other fundamental disagreements among evangelicals, for example, at the discussions of Eucharist at the Marburg Colloquy of 1529.[68] These positions, driven by theological commitments, also carried with them important presuppositions about religious authority, its proper locus, and its proper definition.[69] The clash of Lutheranism with an evangelical humanism whose spokesman was Erasmus, and the resistance to both positions by dissident theologians such as Hans Denck, Balthasar Hubmaier, and Sebastian Franck, therefore produced more than a simple polarization of opinion. Such a proliferation of truths reveals just how complex the ethical challenge mounted by Beham's paradox could become for its learned audience. A review of these divergent positions will illuminate those ethical alternatives with which, I am arguing, Beham's impossible allegory invites the beholder to grapple.

[66]Valla. A good overview is provided by McCluskey.

[67]Oberman, 211–20, quotation at 219.

[68]See Wandel, 195–213.

[69]Ozment, 1973, is an indispensible guide to the Spiritualist positions informing these debates. Ibid., 49, signals the epochal importance of an ideological shift in which "anthropological structures replace institutional structures as the authoritative locus of the spirit of God."

6. EVERYMAN'S UNFREEDOM: AN ICONOGRAPHIC EXCURSUS

Consideration of several images closely related to the central motif of Beham's *Impossible*, images that may count among the print's iconographic resources, can set this venture on a clearer course. Eight years before Beham published his little engraving, another innovator in the genre, Heinrich Aldegrever (1502–60[?]), a Protestant artist working in Soest at the time, produced a Genesis cycle in six scenes, each of them signed with the artist's AG monogram (modeled on Dürer's) and dated 1540. The final engraving in the series depicts Adam and Eve in their labors (fig. 10). Late medieval images of the postlapsarian situation typically featured Eve nursing the infant Cain and posed with a distaff, while Adam labors upon the land, wielding a hoe or a pick, as in a fifteenth-century German woodcut (fig. 11).[70] By telling contrast, Aldegrever shows Adam pulling up a rooted stump with his bare hands. In so doing he delivers to us a devastating portrait of despair. Isolated in his struggle, Adam's face flashes in the panicked recognition that he has been condemned by his own misguided will. Just as his physical strength fails him, he can neither reverse the curse of labor nor effect his salvation through force of will. God has withdrawn, leaving man alone, "burdened with a definite punishment," as Luther writes in his Genesis commentaries (after 1535), "since it is the husband's duty to support his family, to rule, to direct, and to instruct; and these things cannot be done without extraordinary trouble and very great effort."[71] Did Aldegrever have in mind something like Luther's insistence that, rendered impotent by original sin, we "labor with no guarantee of success"?[72] Such as it is, the self-knowledge first won through Adam's transgression includes this premonition of impotent suffering, to be endured unto death.

Curiously enough, Adam's incapacity and helplessness in the 1540 Genesis cycle appears to extend to an ignorance of basic land-clearing techniques, for at his feet lies a heavy wooden lever that Aldegrever would, one year later, in a related image, show the First Man wielding with expert proficiency (fig. 12). Technology, the product of man's rational intellect, here transforms Adam's world but not his estate, a conclusion the iconographic context makes clear. Intepreting the curse of Genesis 3:17 quoted in the inscription — "cursed is the earth in thy work; with labor and

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[70]On the medieval iconographical tradition, see esp. Camille.
[71]Luther, 1958, 203 (on Genesis 3:17–19). On the Genesis commentary, begun in 1535, see Nestingen.
[72]Luther, 2004, 135.

FIGURE 10. Heinrich Aldegrever. *After the Fall*, 1540. Engraving, 88 x 63 mm.
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

toil shalt thou eat thereof all the days of thy life" — Aldegrever now shows
Adam laboring alongside Death.[73] This engraving is one of eight in a series

73Translation from the Douay-Reims Bible.

FIGURE 11. German. *Adam and Eve Laboring*, ca. 1460. Hand-colored woodcut, 70 x 62 mm. Courtesy of the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

that conjoins Genesis scenes with anticlerical *danse macabre* images, all of them dated 1541 and accompanied by the artist's monogram. Its source was almost certainly Hans Holbein the Younger's composition for his Pictures of Death cycle, completed in fifty-one woodblocks in 1525 or 1526 (when all but ten were first printed), and published in its entirety in Lyons twelve years later (fig. 13).[74] Most revealing is that whereas Aldegrever's Adam of 1540 was marked by the acute awareness of his accursedness under God, here, in collaboration with Death, he performs his work with gusto. Focused on the betterment of his earthly lot — and thus the one thing his human will, in Luther's view, can effect — he labors on, heedless of work's curse and its link to his own mortality. Meanwhile, all around him, life slips away. "Now the entire creation in all its parts reminds us of the curse that was inflicted because of sin . . . [and is] marred by . . . useless and even harmful trees, fruits, and herbs, which the wrath of God sows."[75] The hourglass in the

[74]See esp. Parshall, 2001.
[75]Luther, 1958, 204–05.

FIGURE 12. Heinrich Aldegrever. *Adam and Eve Laboring with Death*, 1541. Engraving, 67 x 52 mm. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

FIGURE 13. Hans Holbein the Younger. *Adam and Eve at Labor with Death*, from *Les simulachres & historiees faces de la mort. . . .* Lyons, 1526. Woodcut, 64 x 49 mm. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

lower corner reminds us of the Horatian maxim, embraced by both reformers and humanists, "Death is the ultimate limit of everything."[76] Knowing not whether he is driven forward by God or the devil, Adam's

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[76]"Mors ultima linea rerum est." From Horace, 2001, 79 (*Epistles*, bk.1, no. 16), where the motto is translated, "Death is the finish line that everyone crosses."

figure captures the bleak existential condition that prompted Luther to liken man to a beast of burden, dispossessed of decision and self-determination, a mule whose "riders themselves contend who shall have and hold it."[77]

It is possible that Aldegrever's two intepretations of Genesis 3:17, which I introduced as iconographic resources for *Impossible*, were already elaborations of a pictorial idea introduced by Beham himself. Among the scenes Sebald produced for the multipaneled woodcut frontispiece to Christian Egenolff's edition of the German Bible, first published in Frankfurt in 1535,[78] is one showing Eve seated in a clearing — nursing the infant Abel with the toddler Cain close by — while a bearded Adam yanks at the base of a runner in an effort to uproot it (figs. 14–15). Reproduced here, this same woodcut was employed for another Egenolff publication, a collection of biblical commentaries by the Württemberg Lutheran reformer Johannes Brenz (1499–1570), the first edition of which appeared in 1556.[79] Rather than leveraging his body's weight and straining backwards, as Aldegrever's Adam of 1540 does, Beham's figure lunges forward to seize the root with his arms. This pose, though closer in dynamism to the hunched torsion of the figure that Beham adapted from Marcantonio and grafted into *Impossible*, is something quite different still. The comparison reveals all the more the studied ambiguity in the engraving's depiction of impossible struggle.

Whatever lines of affiliation we can trace between Beham's and Aldegrever's interpretations of this theme, then, it is clear that in adapting Marcantonio's figure in this way Beham struck upon a visual formula compelling in its potential to counter the adage's paradoxical admonition, creating a word-image ricochet that leaves unresolved the questions of success or failure, efficacy or futility, valor or vanity, heroism or folly, wisdom or stupidity. Alone, such a tantalizing irresolution, arising from the internal semantics of *Impossible*, could have thrown the beholder back upon the terms of the *Willensfreiheit* controversy. But so too the print's extended

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[77]Luther, 2004, 112.

[78]The so-called Beham Bibel of 1535–40 is *Biblicae Historiae, Artificiosissimis picturis effigiatae Per Sebaldum Behem Pictorem Francoforten / Biblische Historien Künstlich fürgemalet. Durch den wolberümten Sebald Behem / Malern zu Franckfurt* (Frankfurt: Christian Egenolff).

[79]*Postill. Ausslegung der Evangelien / so auff die Sontage / vnd fürnemsten Feste / Durchs gantze Jar geprediget werden [. . .] angehenckter Erklärung der Histori vom Leiden vñd Sterben vnsers Herren Jesu Christi / Nach Beschreibung der Vier Evangelisten / Zusammen bracht vñ verteuchscht / Inhalts der Außlegung / Predigen vnnd Homilien des Ehrwirdigen vnnd hochgelerten Herrn Johann Brentzen* (Frankfurt: Christian Egenolffen, n.d. [1556]).

FIGURE 14. Hans Sebald Beham. Frontispiece for *Postill. Ausslegung der Evangelien . . . Predigen vnnd Homilien des Ehrwirdigen vnnd hochgelerten Herrn Johann Brentzen.* Frankfurt, n.d. [1556]. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett. Photo: Volker-H. Schneider. © Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

FIGURE 15. Detail of fig. 14: Adam and Eve laboring.

iconographic affiliations — seen through which the figure connotes the dilemmas of a postlapsarian Adam — could have suggested the free-will debate as the key framework for any exercise in moral rhetoric the viewer might undertake with the print in hand. These affiliations present us with the possibility that Beham's Nobody is Everyman in the sense that mattered most to sixteenth-century thinkers: the anthropological sense. My contention is that *Impossible* is indeed negotiating around the Lutheran conception of the Christian as *simul peccator et iustus* ("simultaneously sinner and justified"), and the subordination of ethics to faith such a definition entailed. If it is, the question is whether this end-run around Lutheran anthropology presupposed a commitment to an alternative model of will, self-knowledge, action, and the soul's access to grace. The following sketch of the controversy from the initial public confrontation between Erasmus and Luther to the key interventions by dissident evangelical theologians Hans Denck, Balthasar Hubmaier, and Sebastian Franck pinpoints the spiritual and ethical coordinates of these alternatives, and suggests the protean openness of Beham's *Impossible* in demanding rhetorical engagement with them.

7. Debating Free Will in the Sixteenth Century: A Sketch

Between 1524 and 1525 Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther clashed over the fundamental question of the freedom of the human will in relation

to divine grace. Neither doubted that there was a realm of human action not wholly governed by necessity. The divisive issue hinged, rather, on the endowment and capacity of people to participate in the work of salvation — in other words, what the will can do in relation to the will of God, whether it is active or passive in relation to divine agency, and whether it can cooperate with the unfolding of grace. Luther had already thrown down the gauntlet in article 36 of his *Assertio*, written against Leo X's bull *Exsurge Domine* (15 June 1520), which had condemned forty-two of Luther's propositions as heretical, and threatened excommunication unless they were retracted. Correcting what he regarded as a dangerous earlier hint, on his part, that equivocation on the matter was possible, Luther would now insist that his own view was pure: "This article must be revoked. I have expressed it improperly, when I said that the free will, before obtaining grace, is really an empty name. I should have said straightforwardly that the free will is really a fiction and a label without a reality, because it is in no man's power to plan any evil or good. As the article of [John] Wycliffe, condemned at [the Council of] Constance, correctly teaches: everything takes place by absolute necessity."[80]

Generations would recoil from Luther's provocative intransigence and rightly remember it as a "slap in the face of humanist progress," and a fatal one at that, at least where Luther's reputation as a modern man is concerned.[81] Its theological rationale can, however, be approached from one of several angles. Central to Luther's soteriology was the Pauline doctrine of the independence of God's righteousness from God's law. Sinners have no power to effect their salvation through adherence to this law, Paul contended, but were justified "freely by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God has set forth as a propitiation by his blood through faith, etc."[82] For Luther, these words were devastating "thunderbolts against free will."[83] Only grace can justify the sinner, and it does so "without the law": "For if the righteousness of God exists without the law, and without the works of the law, how shall it not much more exist without free will? The supreme concern of free will is to exercise itself in moral righteousness, or the works of that law by which its blindness and impotency derive their assistance. But this word *without* abolishes all morally good works, all moral righteousness and all preparations for grace. . . . And though I should grant that free will by its endeavors can advance in some direction, namely, unto

[80]Luther, as quoted in Erasmus, 44–45.
[81]Oberman, 219.
[82]Romans 3:21–25.
[83]Luther, 2004, 134.

good works, or unto the righteousness of the civil or moral law, it does not yet advance toward God's righteousness."[84]

Stripped of all its presumptions and vain conceits, the exercise of man's will can be applied only toward the external betterment of an otherwise benighted earthly existence, and even then not principally with regard to the individual's own situation. Good works, though useless in advancing salvation or inducing God to grant his mercy, were essential for survival in a world rent by the devil's depredations, according to Luther. By elevating service to others as the only sphere in which Christians can confidently act alongside God, Luther "horizontalized Christian ethics . . . [transferring] its goal from Heaven to earth."[85]

Throughout *De servo arbitrio* Luther characterizes human will in abject terms, as "a captive, servant and bond-slave, [beholden] either to the will of God, or to the will of Satan."[86] Elsewhere in the treatise he likens it to "a beast of burden" to be driven by whichever master gains the greater possession of it: "If God rides it, it wills and goes where God wills. . . . If Satan rides it, it wills and goes where Satan wills. Nor may it choose to which rider it will run, nor which it will seek. But the riders themselves contend who shall have and hold it."[87] Luther's anthropology sees the human condition as fallen and carnal, incorrigible in its tendency toward self-love and its resistance to God, prey to the devil, and inescapably inclined toward sin. God places before man laws that he is incapable of obeying, and does so, according to Luther, to press a form of self-knowledge upon the sinner, one that is both terrifying and liberating. Salvation depends entirely on God's mercy and only by the free grant of Christ's righteousness can sinners be justified. For Luther, Christian man was "simultaneously sinner and justified."[88] Only by properly distinguishing between God's power and our own, between God's works and our own, can Christians lead a godly life.

Such a conception was not only contrary to scripture, Erasmus countered in *De libero arbitrio Diatribe sive collatio* (September 1524), it was deleterious to faith and godliness. For all the awe and gratitude before God's boundless mercy it was bound to inspire, it could not but also become a source of despair, and even beget a kind of moral turpitude when the Christian realized he bore no responsibility whatsoever for his own improvement. It also raised — unjustly, in the humanist's view — the

[84]Ibid., 135.
[85]Oberman, 80.
[86]Luther, 2004, 113.
[87]Ibid., 112.
[88]On Luther's anthropology, see Oberman, 184; Wandel, 203.

specter of God's apparent cruelty in holding sinners accountable for things beyond their control: "Why does holy scripture so frequently mention judgment, if merit cannot be weighed at all? Or why must we stand before the seat of judgment if nothing has happened according to our will, but everything according to mere necessity? It is disturbing to think of all the many admonitions, commandments, threats, exhortations, and complaints, if we can do nothing, but God's unchangeable will causes the willing as well as the carrying out in us. He wants us to pray perserveringly. He wants us to watch, to fight, and to struggle for the reward of eternal life. Why does he continuously want to be asked, when he has already decided whether to give us or not to give us, and when he himself, unchangeable, is unable to change his resolutions? Why does he command us to strive laboriously for what he has decided to give freely?"[89]

To sin through necessity and then be accursed in the eyes of God was an abominable notion for Erasmus, as it would likewise be for evangelical writers whose disagreements with Luther drew them into the debate a few years later. Incompatible with human and divine justice,[90] the Lutheran concept of the will's bondage, by producing a "false sense of security," sabotaged all honest efforts at self-improvement and self-reform.[91] According to Erasmus, free will's most exalted purpose is to stimulate the human striving toward godliness, imperfect though it may be. Piling up selections from the prophets, the exegete Erasmus concludes: "Scripture desires nothing but conversion, ardor, and improvement. All these exhortations would lose their meaning if really necessity were to determine good or evil acts."[92] Shrewdly discerning the tipping point in Luther's anthropology, Erasmus ventured the very question that would lure his opponent into the open. Given God's insistence in Deuteronomy 30:11–14 that the greatest of all commandments was "not too mysterious and remote," but was "something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out," Erasmus drew the target plainly on the wall: "to turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and your whole soul."[93] What meaning could turning to God otherwise have if such a thing were never in one's power in the first place? Luther took the bait, and what followed amounted to a fateful "proclamation

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[89]Erasmus, 81. Central to Erasmus's position in the debate was his exegesis of Romans 9: see Payne. Peter Starenko kindly provided this reference.

[90]Erasmus, 28: "It is incompatible with the infinite love of God for man that a man's striving with all his might for grace should be frustrated."

[91]Ibid., 93.

[92]Ibid., 34.

[93]Ibid., 35.

of man's total impotence on the eve of man's greatest scientific discoveries and enduring cultural achievements," one that could, in Oberman's view, "only eliminate Luther as a point of spiritual orientation in the tumult of modern times."[94]

Though it admits the sinful proclivities of man after the Fall, Erasmian anthropology retains its sense of human dignity alongside guilt and moral responsibility. Sin would not be deserving of the name, after all, nor could it be attributed to man, unless its voluntary nature were assumed as part of God's gift to man. This same sin, infecting all of Adam's progeny since the Fall, actually weakens the human faculties through which free will operates: reason, judgment, discernment. In Erasmus's view, although free will has been "wounded through sin, it is not extinct; though it has contracted a paralysis, making us before the reception of grace more readily inclined towards evil than good, free will has not been destroyed." Those who think it destroyed may even be forgiven for this incorrect perception, since, "to the extent that monstrous crimes or the habit of sin, having become our nature, [dims] at times the judgment of our intellect," free will has become submerged beyond all appearances, and taken for dead.[95] Nevertheless, human will is hardly impotent. That Paul took heed of the manner in which "the Spirit also helps our weakness" means, for Erasmus, that human strength is insufficient to go it alone; but it does not mean that it can do nothing at all.[96] Challenging Luther on his interpretation of Jesus' words in John 15:5, "Without me you can do nothing," Erasmus reminds the reader that the contrary is not impossible: "'unable to do' usually means to be unable to reach what one strives for. This does not exclude the possibility of the striver proceeding in some way just the same."[97] Only our effort must be stimulated, not our pride: imperfect man must never boast of his powers, but acknowledge he "owes it completely to God." Ineffectual as it may be without grace, free will imparts an essential dignity to man because it is not in God's will to reduce man to utter passivity. "Someone says, what's the good of free will, if it does not effect anything? I answer, what's the good of the entire man, if God treats him like the potter his clay, or as he can deal with a pebble?"[98]

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[94]Oberman, 219. Luther's turn against Erasmus was so profound that the reformer "sensed the Devil in Erasmus and wanted him to come out and reveal himself": ibid, 301.

[95]Erasmus, 25–26.

[96]Ibid., 78. Cf. Romans 8:26.

[97]Erasmus, 67–68.

[98]Ibid., 93.

Evangelical writers provoked by Luther's proclamations of human impotence but still distant from Erasmian conservatism likewise asserted the will's capacity for cooperation in the work of salvation, but from very different theological and anthropological assumptions. In 1526, shortly after his expulsion from Nuremberg on charges of heresy, Hans Denck, the former rector of the prestigious school at St. Sebald's and a gifted biblical philologist, published the treatise *Whether God Is the Cause of Evil.*[99] Following on the heels of a distinction between the good and bad operations of sin, Denck sets up his discussion of free will by rehearsing this common argument: if human wilfullness can scuttle God's efforts to provide one with the means of accessing grace, does it not follow that, in reforming oneself, one can positively affect one's own salvation? The answer is a resounding no. What defeats this reasoning, according to Denck, is the necessary realization that "everything [that] is in me belongs to God — omnipotence, righteousness, mercy." But even this awareness is not enough. Guided by the principle, "Salvation is *in* us, not *of* us," Christians must also come to terms with a complementary imperative: "you must also be in God."[100]

At the heart of this mandate is Denck's Spiritualist understanding of the structure of the soul, in particular, the *synteresis voluntatis*, what German mystics in the preceding two centuries called the *Seelenfunklein* ("spark of the soul"). This they treated, in Stephen Ozment's words, as a "special anthropological base for the achievement of mystical experience, the unique locus for God's mystical birth in the soul."[101] Like Erasmus, Denck understood the will to be living a petty existence, yet hardly extinct. For him, it was the will's radical separation from divinity that defined this lapsed condition: it is what prevents one from "gladly wishing to accept" what God has freely given, as he gives to everyone. Unlike God, who "seeks not himself in his willing," human willing is fundamentally misdirected. "That you, however, seek yourself and not God for his own sake, you demonstrate in your lack of composure [*ungelassenheit*] the fact that you are always looking for a hiding place from which you would like to escape the hand of God."[102]

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[99] *Was geredt sey das die Schrifft sagt Gott thue vnd mache guts vnd böses . . .* (Augsburg, 1526). That the treatise combines Denck's critique of Luther's *De servo abitrio* with responses to Andreas Karlstadt's sermons on whether God is the cause of the devil, and Diebold Schuster's ideas on predestination, accounts for the subtitle: "Whether It Is Fair That Man Exculpate Himself for Sins and Blame Them on God" (*Ob es auch billich das sich yemandt entschuldgie der Sünden vnd sy Gott vberbinde*). See Denck.

[100] Denck, 93.

[101] Ozment, 1973, 5.

[102] Denck, 94. I modify the published translation by rendering Denck's term *ungelassenheit* as "lack of composure."

A tragic error in human self-knowing comes about when willing veers from the proper search for God's will — already in us, according to Denck — into a search for the self. Nobody knows himself, in other words, because everybody wrongly seeks for himself in his own willing, in a blind subjectivism that buries the spark of the soul ever deeper. What is required for the human will to effectively participate in salvation is, paradoxically, the opposite of this curving into the self: "this is the only way to salvation, namely, to lose oneself."[103]

This demand brings us uncannily close to the paradoxes opening across the interaction of word and image in Beham's *Impossible*. For Nobody to know himself, he has to come face to face with the impossible thing upon which his will, programmed by nature for self-protection and self-seeking, will invariably be broken: "For, since God and his action is the best [for man], it must necessarily follow that his breaking [*brechen*] of the will, which is surely contrary to our nature, is infinitely better than to do all things in heaven, on, and under the earth. Yea, since blood and flesh are thus obstinate toward God, so that before God our activity [*thun*] is passivity [*lassen*], our making before God a breaking, our something before God a nothing — we always ought to hear what the Spirit says to us: that God's breaking, as it appears to us, is the best making and that the nought of God — that which seems like nothing to us — is the highest and noblest something. This testimony is in all people and it preaches to every single one in particular, according to how one listens."[104] Like other sixteenth-century theologians in the mystical tradition, Denck placed his hopes for Christian renewal in the individual's spiritual enlightenment, a conscious striving toward *Gelassenheit* (passive release and tranquility) that would allow the *Seelenfunklein* to return to its creator.[105] Radical freedom is real and present in every man, but it belongs to God: it is the duty of every individual, as Denck explains in the seven *Hauptreden* (propositions) he published with the 1528 Worms edition of the *Theologia Deutsch*, to seek "the seed of God or the image of God which craves freedom incessantly."[106] To do otherwise, to squander this reality of freedom — which Denck calls *das Frei* — constitutes an insult to God. Free will, however handicapped by the obstinacy of the flesh, is only properly exercised in the paradoxical

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[103]Ibid., 95.

[104]Ibid.

[105]That the soul's illumination by the Holy Spirit comes before the testimony of scripture, and that it precedes any proper understanding of its words, would become a central tenet of the entire free-church tradition.

[106]Ozment, 1973, 30.

self-breaking that disabuses the will of its extraneous search for itself, and redirects it inward, toward God's will. Impossible as this challenge to the will may seem, "he who chooses to do it can do it; let him who doubts it only try it."[107]

Denck's paradoxical empowering of free will to accomplish its own transcendence furnished the basis of a mode of ethical sanctification that would come to inform South German Anabaptism and its later offshoots. Polemically aimed at Luther's three *solae* — *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), *solus Christus incarnatus* (Christ incarnate alone), and *sola fides* (faith alone) — the two treatises Denck produced during his period of activity in Augsburg in 1526 inverted the Wittenberg reformer's subordination of ethics to faith.[108] In the process, Denck, the dissident theologian who would soon become a practicing Anabaptist,[109] not only made "an ethical criterion . . . primary in the definition of the religious man," but also, as Ozment notes, "put himself in the position to argue that ethical shortcomings indicate false authority."[110]

A parallel linking of Spiritualist ethics and institutional dissent animated the respective contributions that Balthasar Hubmaier and Sebastian Franck made to the free-will discussion in the years following. Whereas Denck had refrained from offering a fully-worked-out anthropological scaffolding for his discussion of sin and its effects on will, and whereas Erasmus had not specified the causes of the will's infirmity or diagnosed the possibilities of its revitalization, Hubmaier, in two consecutive treatises written in Nicolsburg in 1527, defended free will in a wide-ranging scholastic discussion intended to fill just these gaps.[111] A brief review of the speculative anthropology that resulted will reveal something of the broad strata of alternative assumptions about the relationship between original sin, will, Christian self-knowledge, and freedom that circulated among nonaligned South German Protestants at midcentury. These assumptions were central to the precepts that alienated these groups from the Lutheran mainstream, and may also have underwritten

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[107]Ibid., 31.

[108]Perhaps the most powerful statement of this position is in Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian* (*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*) of 1520, which includes the maxim: "As man is, whether believer or unbeliever, so also is his work": Ozment, 1973, 130.

[109]In the spring of 1526 Denck baptized the former bookbinder Hans Hut, who was later hounded out of Augsburg. Useful summaries of Denck's career, each with further bibliography, are ibid., 116–36; Packull, 62–71; Bauman.

[110]Ozment, 1973, 131.

[111]Hubmaier. Its original title is *Von der Freyheit des Willens, Die Gott durch sein gesendet wort anbeüt menschen, und jnen dar jn gwalt gibt seine Khinder ze werden, auch die waal guttes ze wöllen und ze hon . . .* (Nicolsburg, 1527).

Sebald Beham's allegorizing reinterpretation of Aldegrever's Genesis imagery in *Impossible*.

"Man is a corporal and rational creature," Hubmaier begins, evoking the tripartite human being of Pauline tradition, "made up by God of body, spirit, and soul." Corresponding to this distinction between *corpus*, *spiritus*, and *anima*, "three kinds of will must be recognized in man."[112] As each component of man was differently implicated in the Fall, with important consequences for human freedom, Hubmaier undertakes to describe their vicissitudes across the three stages of humankind's spiritual evolution: as it was before the Fall, as it became after the Fall, and as it shall be once properly restored by Christ. The descent into original sin was exclusively an affair of the body and the soul: it was the body, aided and abetted by the soul, that fatefully ate the fruit. Through the disobedience of Adam, who chose to obey Eve and thereby forfeit the freedom God gave him and his descendants, the body was rendered "worthless and good for nought." At the same time the soul, for its part, was "so maimed in will and wounded unto death that it can itself not even choose good or reject evil, for it has lost the knowledge of good and evil, and nothing is left to it but to sin and die. As for doing good, it has become powerless and impotent. This comes from the flesh, without which the soul can do no outward act, for the flesh is its implement."[113]

Fortunately, amid this horrifying onset of decrepitude, the spirit "remained utterly upright and intact before, during, and after the Fall." Although it neither consented in the body's gross impulse nor approved the soul's shameful collusion, Hubmaier reasons, "it was forced, against its will, as a prisoner of the body, to participate in the eating." Yet the will of the spirit went unaffected by this coerced participation, and remained unchanged throughout its postlapsarian ordeal. When, therefore, the time of man's renewal through Christ is finally at hand, the spirit will be found "happy, willing and ready for all [that is] good." Not so with the body and soul. Flesh remains flesh, still condemned to "do nothing except sin, strive against God, and hate his commands."[114] Radical renewal belongs only to the soul, its will, and the manifestations of freedom peculiar to them. In its postlapsarian infirmity the soul had been "sad and anxious, standing between the spirit and the flesh, [knowing] not what to do . . . blind and uncomprehending as to heavenly things, in its natural powers. But because it has been awakened by the Word of God . . . made whole through his dear son; also enlightened through the Holy Spirit . . . thereby the soul now again comes to know what is good

[112]Ibid., 116–17.
[113]Ibid., 121.
[114]Ibid., 119–20.

and what is evil. It has recovered its lost freedom. It can now freely and willingly be obedient to the spirit and can will and choose the good, just as well as though it were in paradise."[115]

Restoration of this lost freedom repairs the relationship between God and man. For Hubmaier this outcome proves that God created free will in man for a specific reason: to ensure that he receives from humankind only praise that is freely given. The divine logic is simple: God's revealed will offers man two aspects, one *Zukherenden* (attracting) and the other *Abkehrenden* (repelling) — the one a turning toward those who receive, hear, and follow him faithfully; the other a turning away from those who do not. Whether or not praise is freely given is the sole criterion for God's deciding which way to turn. This is why "choice is still left to man, since God wants him without pressure, unconstrained, under no compulsion."[116]

Implicit in this is a critique of the apparent injustice, and the resulting moral confusion, that Luther's bondage thesis inspired in every Christian conscience according to Hubmaier, who summarizes Luther's thesis thus: "If I will, I can be saved, [but only] by the grace of God. If I will not, I shall be damned — and that [entirely] by my own fault, from obstinancy and self-will."[117] As we have seen, this caricature is not innacurate. For evangelical humanists such as Erasmus and Spiritualist Protestants such as Hubmaier, it was inconceivable that God would rig the game of man's moral perfection in this way. Lutheran and Zwinglian preachers only made things worse, from this perspective, when they failed to distinguish for their listeners *praedestinatio* (predestination) from God's *praescientia* (foreknowledge) of every Christian's salvation.[118] In doing so they sowed the seeds of a deep spiritual confusion and thwarted humans' sincere effort to lead a moral life.

Among the sixteenth-century's partisans of a mystically-informed turn to ethical activism, Sebastian Franck has attracted the greatest share of scholarly attention.[119] Certainly the most intriguingly modern among the

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[115]Ibid., 124.

[116]Ibid., 135. Cf. 2 Corinthians 9:7.

[117]Hubmaier, 125.

[118]In *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 131n9, Williams points out that this was no small feat. Although Luther claimed Lorenzo Valla as a partisan in his argument with Erasmus, he made little use of Valla's effort to decouple "the necessity for our volitions and actions," which are effects of God's will, from God's foreknowledge. At a pivotal moment in the dialogue Valla, 169, asserts the following (without intending to be paradoxical): "It is possible for you to do otherwise than God foreknows, nevertheless you will not do otherwise, nor will you deceive him."

[119]Useful summaries of Franck's career are in Franck, 1966, v–xxxvi (Wollgast's introduction); Ozment, 1973, 137–67; Ozment, 1982, 226–33. More recent appraisals are

Reformation's panoply of dissident theologians, he is also the commentator on *Willensfreiheit* with the closest demonstrable ties to Sebald and Barthel Beham, since he had married their sister, Ottilie, in May 1528. From the earliest stage of his thought, Franck rejected the Lutheran model of *sola fides* and sought to replace it with a model of Christian striving toward the Gospel — premised not on blind faith, but on a commitment to the moral life. A living faith worthy of the name had to be an "experienced faith," in Franck's view, and the Word of God had to be comprehended not with a suffering patience and passive trust, as Luther recommended, but actively, *mit der that* (by a deed).[120] This cultivation of an experiential basis for faith entailed two things, each tied to Franck's view of free will and each with crucial implications for the process of Christian self-knowing.

On the one hand, experienced faith meant an active search within the individual's heart for the *inner mensch*, and the hopeful realization of that *fünklein gotlicher lieb* (little spark of divine love) so prized by the mystical tradition connecting the revolutionary theologian Thomas Müntzer (1488[?]–1525), Denck, and the Anabaptists, to Meister Eckhart (Eckart von Hochheim, ca. 1260–1327), Johannes Tauler (ca. 1300–61), the *Theologia Deutsch*, and their common *synteresis* anthropology. The epistemological importance of that inner spark cannot be overlooked. In a characteristic passage from the *Paradoxa* (1534), we find Franck pressing multiple metaphors into service to evoke it. Capturing his sense — shared by Denck and Hubmaier — of a continuum connecting God and man, one that found fulfillment in the individual's deification, he writes: "God placed into the human heart a model, spark, trace, light, and image of the kind and nature of his wisdom in which God may see himself. And this divine image and character scripture sometimes calls God's word, will, son, seed, hand, light, life, and truth in us. Thus we are capable of being like God and in some measure in this image we are of divine nature. The light has been kindled in the lamp or lantern of our heart and the treasure is already in the ground, placed into the ground of our soul, if we but let it burn and shine forth instead of preferring the lantern of the flesh. Indeed, anyone who turns into himself to look for this treasure, will find it not beyond the sea nor should he

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assembled in J.-D. Müller. Trained in Heidelberg, Franck started his career as a Catholic priest in the Augsburg bishopric, but early on (probably in 1525 or 1526) turned to Luther. Several years later, disillusioned with the course of reform, he forsook his ministry in Gustenfelden and established himself as a citizen-scholar in Nuremberg. He eventually relocated his family to Ulm, where a tenuous toleration by the city's authorities allowed for a period of scholarly activity, though his enemies saw him chased out of the city in July 1539. He died in Basel in 1542.

[120]Ozment, 1973, 138.

look for it in heaven; rather, the word, the image of God, is in us."[121] As Priscilla Hayden-Roy points out in her commentary on this passage, the inner spark in Franck's anthropology "is both an extension of the divine being and an epistemological faculty for spiritual knowledge. When this faculty is activated, the individual grasps spiritual truths immediately: the need for any mediating structures between the individual and God is obviated."[122] To this embedded potential for grasping spiritual truths we shall shortly return.

For Franck the social critic, "experienced faith" also meant an activist confrontation with the follies, vanities, stupidities, and vices of the world. Exposing them, and discerning within the course of ordinary life as well as world history something of the directed purpose of God's willing was just as much a responsibility of the individual as his seeking for God within himself. Both efforts posed daunting challenges to the spiritually minded, since both required a capacity to look through the domains of the sensible and the carnal — whether the literal words of scripture or the temporal facts of one's social and political worlds — to an inner word that remained otherwise hidden. In the realm of language, paradoxes and puzzles were the primary forms of cover, the sensible outer sheaths, for this inner word.[123]

Franck tackled the question of free will with uncharacteristic directness in his philosophically ambitious collection of *Paradoxa*. Paradox 26 bears the title, "In the will both that which God and the human being will, take place," and urges reflection on "how the will is free to choose and will, but not to effect."[124] At first glance this formulation bears a close similarity to Erasmus's view that two wills, human and divine, cooperate in the work of salvation, but Franck is careful to insist that it is only God's will that effects, and only his will that stands forever. Paradox 28, entitled "Thoughts and the will are both free from obligation. No one can impede them," develops this line of thought: "But whatever a person wills and undertakes apart from or not in God, pertains to willing and choosing only and never to deed, unless, of course, God wills it and then leads our will to accomplish the work. Thus our will is never stopped by God, though the execution of the will is often stopped. . . . What God wills in and with a person also happens in deed.

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[121]Franck, 1986, 187. See also Franck, 1966, 174–75 (nos. 101–102). Cf. Deuteronomy 30; Romans 2:10. The translation I use here and in the following examples is Franck, 1986 (here 187).

[122]Hayden-Roy, 53.

[123]Ibid., 55.

[124]Franck, 1986, 66; Franck, 1966, 63: "Das lies mit Fleiß, wie der Wille frei sei zu wählen und zu wollen, aber nicht zu wirken."

What a person wills, on the other hand, apart from and not in God, takes place in the will only and without any impediment, but not ever in deed, unless God causes it to be. Therefore, whatever God and a person will, takes place, although not [necessarily] in deed."[125] This formulation allows Franck to affirm that even the godless are free to will and to choose without interference from God, though their external actions may well find their impediment when they clash with his will. Likewise, the Christian is free to turn away from God. Echoing Hubmaier's speculative rationale for why God created free will in the face of all its obvious dangers, Franck insists that whoever resists "simply robs himself of God." But meanwhile, "God who is free, allows himself thus to be resisted. For whoever does not want him, is not worthy of him." Just as the sun, from whose radiance anyone can choose to turn, does not stop shining on account of this turning, let alone on account of the choosing prior to the action, so too is "the invincible God . . . easily overcome by everyone," though he remains unaffected in his radiance, as "always good and a light that knows no setting."[126]

Free will bridges the two aspects of ethical activism Franck endorses, the one directed toward the *ëusser mensch* and the other toward the *inner mensch.* As we have already noted, close to the heart of Franck's ethics are anthropological assumptions about a dynamic exchange between divine and human will that connects him theologically to the German mystical tradition. *Gelassenheit*, the tranquil resignation that frees the soul from its obsessive self-seeking in order that God's "seed" can take root there, is a paradoxical form of activism, for it harnesses the will's freedom to the cultivation of "no thing" — yet this is precisely how it cooperates in the work of salvation. Later dissident theologians would continue this line of thought. At the culmination of this tradition, Valentin Weigel (1533–88) wrote in *Von der Bekehrung des Menschen*: "Man must bring forth sheer passivity, resignation, a surrendered will, a dying to self, and hold himself still. For as soon as man goes out of himself with his own will, just so soon does God enter with his will."[127] This radical conception of the Christian soul's rebirth as a kind of deification was hardly original to Weigel, but can be traced through the Spiritualist tradition and back further, into medieval mysticism. For Franck, *Gelassenheit* meant the hope of discovering the spark of God's light in one's own heart. All spiritual understanding, including scriptural exegesis, was premised on the prior activation — contra Luther — of this epistemological faculty within the soul.

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[125]Franck, 1986, 71–72, with minor modifications. See also Franck, 1966, 68–69.
[126]Franck, 1986, 65; Franck, 1966, 62 (Paradox 25).
[127]Ozment, 1973, 47.

But mysticism, and the preoccupation with discovering the identity between the inner man and God, had to be coupled with a close observation of the outer man, his behavior, and deeds. Grasping control of one's own moral biography, as it were, now became an equally indispensable task. Everything the Christian needs to know is learned, Franck explains in his *Chronica, Zeytbüch und Geschichtbibel* (1531), not from scripture, but from reading the "living histories and experiences, especially those which God himself brings about in every man, [as] he directs [each] by experience from one [thing] to another." The relevant passage continues: "He who attends to his own life, observes what God is doing with him, and sees how God leads him in and out of all things from his youth, will become aware of a great deal and have a personal chronicle to write of his own life. . . . Living faith must also be learned and received in experience. . . . The inner man believes only what he has learned, heard, seen, and experienced of God in accordance with his own nature."[128]

All that remains, then, is finding a hermeneutic equal to the task. Looking to the chronicle of one's own life, and attempting to read its pages with the eyes of the inner man, one will encounter nothing that is literally true, nothing illuminated by a clear light, no words or images that are unequivocal in their meanings, no easily discernable truths. Instead, the inner word will be concealed behind visible signs that, like the flesh, point to false meanings — the same meanings given them by a corrupt world — to be deciphered. Only by "judging according to the opposite," Franck writes, will one discover the true spiritual meaning of things. Parables, paradoxes, riddles, hieroglyphs, *impossibilia* — these are now the privileged forms of mediation, since such representations exemplify the rule that "absolutely all things behave differently in truth than they appear to be on the outside. God always maintains in everything the very opposite of the world and judges contraries. Therefore, when you take hold of the opposite and counterjudgment of what the world holds, names, believes, speaks of and wills, etc., a thing to be, you will have taken hold of God's word, wisdom, and will."[129]

8. NOBODY'S FREEDOM: IMPLICATIONS

Whether Sebald Beham counted himself among those spiritually minded individuals who, after the fashion recommended by Franck, sought the inner word through paradoxes and puzzles is an important question that remains to be asked, and this I will do in the final section of this article. Yet we

[128]Ibid., 150.
[129]Franck, 1986, 38 (Paradox 14); cf. Hayden-Roy, 56.

have not undertaken a survey of the *Willensfreiheit* controversy solely as a speculative archaeology of one man's mental strata, but rather as a plotting of coordinates across the broad intellectual and cultural landscape that made his work intelligible to others. What kinds of truths could the astute sixteenth-century beholder dislodge when he took hold of *Impossible*, applied his reason, and wrestled with its ambiguities and paradoxes? Perhaps he discovered there a Sisyphean hero whose impossible effort evokes each Christian's search for the inner man, as Sebastian Franck conceived the process of human perfectibility. Or perhaps he found that the ambiguously poised figure, torsioned against his task, conveys something of the struggle of self-knowing — an effort that demanded, as Hans Denck would insist, the will's self-breaking, and the active pursuit of *Gelassenheit* in order to realize the spark of the soul that is nothing less than God within us. Perhaps instead he considered Everyman's striving to exemplify, in line with Balthasar Hubmaier's teachings, the wounded soul's eagerness for renewal through Christ, the recovery of its lost freedom and, with it, the responsibility to turn toward God and give him praise. Possibly he found that Everyman's determination in the absence of guarantees or consolation affirmed the possibility that Erasmian humanism held out in the face of the will's infirmity and disrepute — that is, the possibility of "the striver proceeding in some way just the same." Or maybe he preferred to see in the image an indictment of these positions. It is, after all, Nobody whose free will is applied toward these goals, and the adage never lets us stop doubting the wisdom of individuals who exploit their God-given freedom in the pursuit of vain, foolish, illusory, or impossible things.

I am not arguing that Sebald Beham ingeniously condensed this full spectrum of interpretive possibilities into the little engraving before us. But I am suggesting that, for its intended audience, *Impossible* lent itself to an expansive range of moral-rhetorical maneuvers by virtue of the ambiguities Beham provocatively built into its semantic structure, where word and image determine, or trouble, how the other will be read. What it offered the willing participant, in other words, was an assemblage of elements without clear and independent meanings, motifs without exact coordinates, and therefore an opportunity to make meaning, to perform it rhetorically, through an act of intellectual engagement. One did so with the implicit understanding that, as in all paradoxes, the truth of the matter remains hidden and unrealized "until [paradoxes] become part of a dialectic action. They do not become themselves until they are overthrown."[130] What makes

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[130]Malloch, 195.

Beham's *Impossible* "behave differently in truth" is therefore nothing more, but also nothing less, than the beholder's willingness to accept the dare, and to perform, as it were, the intellectual equivalent of the athlete's determined grasping. As John Donne (1572–1631) insisted about paradoxes and the nature of the truth-game they ask us to play, "if they make you to find better reasons against them, they do their office: for they are but swaggerers: quiet enough if you resist them."[131] Turning the moral on its head, one risks confusion for the sake of understanding, folly for the sake of self-knowledge, stupidity for the sake of wisdom. Identifying which truths, specifically, are at stake is left for the individual to decide.

9. IMPOSSIBLE FORTUNE

Little chance exists for us to recover the contents of his library, no Dürerian *Nachlass* bears his name, and documents relating to his career are scanty: yet the accumulated life experiences of Hans Sebald Beham need not remain a closed book. There are, it turns out, a number of reasons for thinking the artist took seriously the ethical and spiritual challenges his little allegory of impossible virtue makes possible.

When Zschelletzschky waxed elegiac about the autobiographical element in *Impossible*, calling it the "resigned résumé of a decidedly negative life-experience," he did so in the confidence that the artist's biography held the keys to understanding the religious-political motives behind his imagery. In *Die 'Drei gottlosen Maler' von Nürnberg* (1975), Zschelletzschky interprets the work of the two Beham brothers and their associate Pencz in terms of an anticlerical and antifeudal critique of society, and identified some features of their imagery as anti-Lutheran, placing the artists in the camp of evangelicals sympathetic to the cause of the Peasants' War of 1525, as well as the communistic streak in South German and Swiss Anabaptism.[132] From this historical perspective, the date of 1549 on *Impossible* already casts it in a melancholic mode. Like Sebald's 1544 engraving of two stout peasant soldiers entitled *Farmer Conrad. Klaus Swineherd. In the Peasants' War 1525* (fig. 16),[133] which for Zschelletzschky was strongly suggestive of the artist's lifelong sympathies for the commoners' cause, *Impossible* is a testament to lost,

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[131]Quoted in Colie, 37, from a letter of ca. 1600 Donne sent to an unknown friend, accompanying some of the author's paradoxes; cf. Malloch, 192.

[132]Zschelletzschky 1975b. See also Zschelletzschky, 1968 and 1975a.

[133]Zschelletzschky, 1975b, 318–19; Goddard, 199–200.

FIGURE 16. Hans Sebald Beham. *Farmer Conrad. Klaus Swineherd. In the Peasants' War 1525*, 1544. Engraving, 71 x 48 mm. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

but not forsaken, ideals — a paradigmatic late work, made within two years of the Schmalkaldic League's defeat by the combined forces of Duke Maurice I of (Albertine) Saxony (d. 1553) and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Lending further moment to the engraving's date: it appeared one year after the introduction of the humiliating Augsburg Interim (decreed 15 May 1548), and one year before the artist's own death in 1550.

That artists might have joined the ranks of the early sixteenth century's religious nonconformists and insurgents, in some cases lending their talents to the revolutionary cause, was not simply the wishful thinking of Marxist scholars in the 1970s, but a reasoned inference from the documentary record — and in the case of Sebald and Barthel Beham, one well-documented episode in particular: the arrest of the brothers in

Nuremberg, at the height of the Peasants' War, in January 1525, on charges of heresy and public sedition.[134] Surviving is a set of interrogation protocols that stands, ironically, as the only substantive written testimony for any of the three artists involved.[135] Drastically summarized, the protocols record the following set of exchanges between the artists and their inquisitors. First the elder brother, Sebald, confessed his doubts about how the body and blood of Christ could be present in the bread and wine upon the altar, adding that Luther's own writings had not been able to illuminate the matter for him. As for baptism, the painter admitted that he could neither deny nor affirm its sacramental value. Barthel, in a more defiant attitude, denied outright the efficacy of the Lord's Supper and baptism, calling them — in words that echoed those of Müntzer — "human inventions," mere "triflings" with no basis in the Word of God. Barthel also said that he recognized no authority other than God himself, thus defying both the ministers and the council. Sebald eventually confessed to conversations with several associates: Georg Pencz; the sculptor Veit Wirsberger; and the rector of St. Sebald's, Hans Denck. Authorities had already pegged Denck as the leader of a Müntzerite cell operating out of Nuremberg: he was alleged to have given refuge to Müntzer when he was a fugitive, and to have disseminated his writings. Completing the conspirators' circle was none other than the artists' sister, Ottilie Beham. Already branded a dangerous fanatic by Luther, three years later she would marry Sebastian Franck, himself already an acquaintance of Denck.[136]

New arrests brought a flood of testimony against the Behams, and on 12 January the brothers were imprisoned along with Pencz; two days later the interrogation resumed with a list of six questions each of the defendants had to answer. In the final analysis all three artists were found guilty of anti-Christian opinions and public sedition, and were expelled from the city. Ten

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[134]Zschelletzschky, 1975b, was preceded by Kolde; Waldmann. The most reliable modern treatments are Vogler, 270–310; Löcher, 9–16; Kilpatrick, 140–47.

[135]Preserved in the Nuremberg city archives; excerpted in Kolde, 244–49; Löcher, 253–58; and reviewed in Zschelletzschky, 1975b, 31–50. Although the transcribed portion of the text that details the proceedings is itself undated, the sequence of the folios allows for a reliable reconstruction of events between 10 January 1525, their first interrogation; through their imprisonment with Pencz, which began on 12 January; and onward to their release fourteen days later, on 26 January or immediately thereafter. These dates are confirmed by Staatsarchiv Nürnberg, Rst. Nürnberg, Stadtrechnung nr. 182, from 1 February 1525, which records "room and board" charges from the prison for fourteen days, which the convicts were obliged to pay: Löcher, 14, with references in n31.

[136]A reasoned assessment of the mutual influences among this group is provided by Stewart, 30–34.

months later, and after the patrician government had formally adopted the Lutheran reform, the Behams, whose citizenship and connections surely spared them a worse fate, were quietly admitted back into the city. Pencz, stripped of his citizenship but allowed to settle in nearby Windsheim — another imperial free city in Franconia — did not gain readmission to the city for another seven years.[137] Denck was banished for life.[138] From this dramatic episode in the painters' early lives, the trio eventually became known as the *drei gottlosen Maler* (three godless painters).[139]

Zschelletzschky's characterization of the Beham brothers as radicals paralleled the enterprise of non-Marxist scholars such as Wilhelm Fraenger, whose studies of the wildly inventive Stuttgart painter Jörg Ratgeb likewise sought to tease from the artist's work sectarian tendencies that heralded an involvement with the commoners' cause.[140] Similar radical credentials have been fashioned for contemporaries such as Tilman Riemenschneider; Veit Stoss; Hans Weiditz; Matthis Gothart-Neihart (aka Grünewald); and even Dürer, an avowed partisan of Luther. Inspiring dramatic recreations in the form of operas and historical novels up to the present day,[141] the lives and works of artists who seemed, as Thomas Mann claimed for Riemenschneider in 1949, "to emerge from his sphere of purely spiritual and esthetic artistic

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[137]Timann, 97–112.

[138]Denck's confession, addressed to the Nuremberg city council, may have succeeded in clearing him of heresy charges, but showed him to be sufficiently at odds with Lutheran biblicism. Combined with his alleged associations with Müntzer and his writings, this was enough for the magistrates to recommend banishment for life to prevent him from spreading further his *gifftig irthumb* (poisonous errors) among the people: see Kolde, 231–37, for the confession; ibid., 237–42, for the ministers' judgment against him; on Denck as a partisan of Müntzer, see Baring.

[139]Fixed in the historiography since the mid-nineteenth century, the appellation *drei gottlosen Maler* has its origins in the legal opinions issued, along with the hearing records, in late January 1525 ("Acta Vernehmung der drei gottlosen maler betr. 1525"), specifically the ruling that enumerates reasons why the painters could no longer be tolerated. See Kolde, 228, for the earliest historiographic use, ca. 1860; ibid., 249–50, for the legal ruling. From these documentary origins the moniker found its way into humanist letters, notably those of Willibald Pirckheimer (1470–1530) and Luther himself, for example his letter of 4 February 1525 to Lazarus Spengler in Nuremberg: see Pfeiffer, 342 (letter no. 114).

[140]The painter was put on trial for collusion during a critical stage in the military conflict in Württemberg; after the defeat of the rebels, he was rounded up with those who fought on the side of the peasants, imprisoned, and eventually drawn and quartered for treason. See Fraenger, 1972, which is based on Fraenger, 1956. Bushart disputed Fraenger's evidence and dismantled some aspects of his theory. More recent challenges to the Fraenger thesis are found in Farber, esp. 3–7.

[141]For example, Paul Hindemith's opera *Mathis der Maler* (1935); Tilman Röhrig's novel *Riemenschneider* (2007).

life and to become a fighter for liberty and justice," have attracted an ongoing public fascination, especially in Germany.[142] In contrast, more recent scholarship has criticized and categorically rejected the very possibility of so-called dissident artists in the sixteenth century. Charges of anachronism have been leveled against those who would imagine Pencz and the Behams as freethinking revolutionaries, atheists, or early modern incarnations of the *Gesinnungskünstler* — the artist of principle who fuses artistic creativity with social and political conviction.

Frustrating efforts to imagine Pencz and the Behams as the ancestors of modern socialist and anarchist poets and painters are a number of facts concerning their post-trial experiences. All three went on to prodigious careers. Working for a variety of patrons as well as an open market for collector's prints at a time of economic expansion, they engaged actively with Italian models, reestablished their artistic reputations, inspired imitators of their own, and, along with Aldegrever, won the praises of Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), Karel van Mander (1548–1606), and every important print connoisseur of later centuries.[143] Pencz eventually managed to return to Nuremberg, there to ascend to the office of city painter on 31 May 1532.[144] Important commissions followed his appointment; in 1539 he undertook his second trip to Italy; and in 1550 he was appointed court painter to Duke Albrecht of Prussia (1490–1568), though he died that same year, en route to Königsberg. Barthel Beham traveled to Munich and entered the service of the Dukes of Bavaria, staunch Catholics and opponents of the Reformation, and there continued his activities as an engraver and also worked as a portrait painter. He completed a commission to decorate the summer residence in Munich, and was eventually sent to Italy by his patron "for the sake of art and experience," though he never returned: he evidently died there in 1540. Sebald's career remained unsettled for several years after the trial. Though he returned to Nuremberg, he fled the city again in 1528, this time under false indictment for pirating Dürer's unpublished treatise,

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[142]Mann, 8, from the text of a speech delivered on 29 May 1945, shortly after the German surrender. For critical discussion, see Borchert.

[143]Vasari, 3:86 (in the life of Marcantonio Raimondi, where the works of "Master I. B." — apparently meaning Sebald Beham — are praised as "wonderfully minute"); and Van Mander, 1:166–69 (fols. 227^{r-v}), in his life of Heinrich Aldegrever, remarks that his "prints are to be seen everywhere." Print connoisseurs who mention the artists include Joachim von Sandrart (1675), Adam Bartsch (1811), Johann David Passavant (1860), and Gustav Pauli: see Emison, 1988, 31–33.

[144]At the time of his appointment, citing "extreme need," Pencz requested an advance on his stipend of ten gulden: Goddard, 225; Timann, 99.
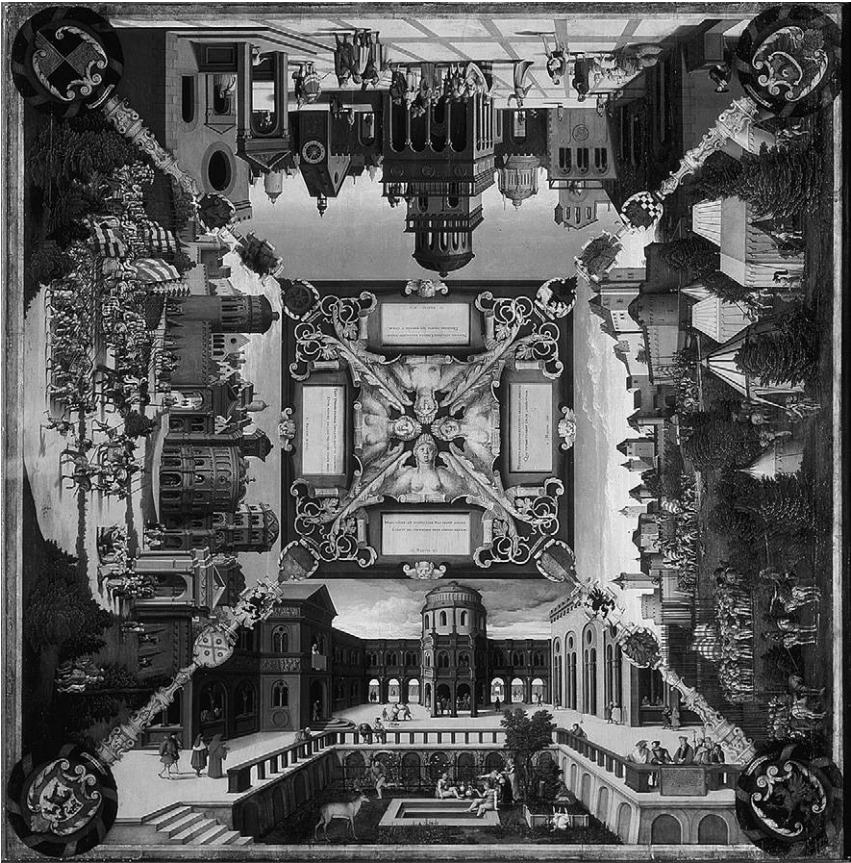
FIGURE 17. Hans Sebald Beham. *Scenes from the Life of King David*, 1534. Oil on wood, 128 x 131 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

the *Art of Measurement* (1528).[145] After this period, woodcuts by his hand surface in publications in Ingolstadt and Augsburg, and from 1531 Beham is documented at work for that great Catholic opponent of the Reformation, Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg (1490–1545), for whom he painted a number of manuscript miniatures and a tabletop with scenes from the life of King David (fig. 17), where he also portrayed himself in patrician finery, holding a compass rather than a paintbrush (fig. 18). Finally settling in Frankfurt, Sebald renounced his Nuremberg citizenship in 1535. By 1547

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[145]Cf. Sebald's later publication, *Das Kunst und Lehrbüchlein* (Frankfurt, 1546). A close examination of Beham's *Buchlein* reveals the piracy charge to be a red herring; his real offense was publishing in defiance of the city council's ban.

SEBALDVS BEHAM NORIBERGENSIS
PICTVRAM HANC ILLVSTRISSIMO
PRINCIPI ALBERTO CARD: ARCHIEP
MOG: HVIVS ARTIS ALIARVMQVE
OMNIVM AMATORI, SVMMA CVRA
PINGENS ABSOLVEBAT. AÑO. 1534.

·M·BRANDENBVRG·

FIGURE 18. Detail of fig. 17: self-portrait of Hans Sebald Beham.

he was living in the doorkeeper's residence of the St. Leonhard's Gate, adjacent to the Buchgasse, site of the great Frankfurt book fair.[146] Later he received numerous honors from the Frankfurt city council, and, despite some bizarre legends to the contrary, enjoyed the privileges of a prosperous burgher. Shortly after remarrying, he died on 22 November 1550.

Thus did all three artists rehabilitate themselves and their careers after the troubles of 1525. Whatever might be inferred about their individual

[146]Goddard, 223.

spiritual orientations, it is clear that none was so radical a Protestant as to give up image-making altogether.[147] Their dogged pursuit of professional reputation in the visual arts would suggest, rather, that none of them scrupled over abandoning certain nonconformist opinions, at least publicly, for the sake of commercial success. This is consistent with the solution many other artists found to the tensions that often existed between commercial viability and personal conviction: a certain pragmatic aloofness from confessional politics may have been the order of the day. From this perspective on the whole of their careers, then, the question of a youthful heterodoxy might begin to look like something of a red herring.[148]

Compounding the question are two methodological problems. The first concerns our confidence in recovering from an official document such as an interrogation protocol the ideas and beliefs the Beham brothers actually held in 1525; the second concerns what we can deduce about the persistence or transformation of these ideas and beliefs over the course of the brothers' lives. To say the three painters were susceptible to dissenting views of religion and state at the time of their arrest only makes them typical of young men of their social and economic standing. At the beginning of the century South Germany's artisan class was already predisposed to a more radical attitude toward the reform of church and society: the peculiar situation that obtained in Nuremberg made their sympathy with the commoners' demands all the more likely. Following an uprising in 1394, artisan guilds in the imperial city were forcibly dissolved and effectively excluded from participation in government. This was one solution for containing artisan unrest, a problem that plagued other cities of similar size.[149] Although Nuremberg's artisans were not especially poor in comparison with other cities, they appear in disproportionately high numbers among the one-third of the city's population who could be considered poor around 1500.[150] During the first decades of the sixteenth century, the city council shrewdly managed wage levels among the poorer artisans and day laborers in order to keep pace with inflation, further dampening the chances of organized unrest.

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[147]Such instances are rare and their circumstances instructive. Niklaus Manuel of Bern, for example, turned his back on the visual arts in 1522 and concentrated on playwrighting as he agitated for reform in that city; see Hof.

[148]No one has championed this perspective more persuasively than Moxey, 1989a and 1989b, 29–34. Stewart develops a version of the same argument. See also the useful remarks in Landau and Parshall, 217–18 (on Hieronymus Andreae), 341–42 (on Altdorfer and Cranach).

[149]In 1450 the city's population hovered around 30,000, making it second in size only to Cologne; of this population, roughly 16 percent were artisans (about 5,000 persons): Russell, 148.

[150]Ibid., 150.

The city was also home to a number of high-profile and upwardly mobile artists such as Dürer, whose talents had allowed them to accumulate a fair amount of wealth and to buy their way into the patrician class.

Yet the success of a rare few could hardly offset the growing sense of despair that younger journeymen artists — especially painters and sculptors — must have felt as they watched evangelical reform measures erode the commercial sphere in which they plied their trades. The story of ecclesiastical art's near-foreclosure in the wake of evangelical denunciations and organized iconoclastic sweeps is well known, and needs no rehearsal here.[151] Second- and third-rate artists and artisans were hit especially hard, and many were forced to abandon their trade. Heinrich Vogtherr the Elder's (1490–1556) book of instruction in pattern and ornament, *Ein frembds vnd wunderbars Kunstbuechlin . . .* (*A Strange and Wonderful Little Art Book . . .*), published in Strasbourg in 1538, addresses precisely this disenfranchised group, and reveals the continuing efforts of German artists to reestablish their trade on firmer ground.[152] As frustration with their precarious economic and social situation grew, Paul Russell notes, "the acceptance of radical theological ideas by this group [became] more likely." Printers and printmakers routinely came under suspicion for trafficking in banned religious books and pamphlets; thus when fears of a conspiracy that threatened the fragile political, economic, and religious equilibrium that the Nuremberg council had worked so hard to attain finally came to a head, urban craftsmen and lower-level artists "were the first to be accused."[153] The city's campaign to root out dissidents from this artisan class neither began nor ended with the prosecution of the *drei gottlosen Maler.*[154]

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[151]Key studies concentrating on Germany and Switzerland are Christensen; Eire; Michalski; Schnitzler; Koerner.

[152]See Byrne, 20.

[153]Russell, 156; ibid., 156–57, adds that "Nuremberg city council investigations document the popularity of Hussite and other radical ideas among young journeymen and apprentice painters."

[154]The series of indictments that led to the questioning of the Behams began in late October 1524, when the council summoned the evangelical painter and pamphleteer Hans Greiffenberg to appear before its Inquisition, charging him with holding unorthodox views about the Eucharist, and making several *ungeschickten* (scurrilous) paintings of the pope (presumably Leo X, whose pontificate ended in December 1521): see Kolde, 229–30; Löcher, 9 (citing Staatsarchiv Nürnberg, Rst. Nürnberg, Ratsverlässe, no. 709, fol. 16, dated 31 October 1524). For the fullest account of the Greiffenberg case, see Russell, 157–65. Shortly after this interrogation, on 31 December, the investigation continued when the council summoned another painter, Hans Plattner, in connection with blasphemous remarks he allegedly made about the Holy Sacrament: Kolde, 230 (citing Ratsverlässe no. 711, fol. 19, from 31 December 1524); for the document, see Pfeiffer, 36 (RV no. 255). Later, in

There is, then, no reason to doubt that behind the ideas expressed by Pencz and the Behams in the trial records of 1525 were real feelings of discontent and disenfranchisement, the same that aligned urban artisans with the armed commoners outside the city walls. Anxiety about the loss of economic support for their trades also seems to have made artisans more receptive to the anti-Lutheran precepts of Spiritualist theologians such as Andreas Karlstadt (1486–1541), Müntzer, Denck, Hubmaier, and other, lesser-known evangelical pamphleteers of the 1520s. It is also safe to say that these men must have watched the failure and brutal suppression of the 1525 commoners' revolt with profound disillusionment. Both detractors and supporters of the Wittenberg reform were shocked and outraged by Luther's abusive condemnation of the rebels, an interdict that many saw as a betrayal of a *Volksreformation* through an alliance of Lutheran princes and magisterial reformers.

Reading defeat in terms of betrayal keeps open the possibilities for redemption: hopes can be recalibrated, strategies of resistance reframed, to suit the new, postrevolutionary situation. Social historians have discerned both processes in the period of recovery following the dislocations of 1525.[155] Perceptively, Zschelletzschky read something of this reframing of dissident energy into key works produced by the *Kleinmeister* in and after 1525. He did not, however, offer an explanatory model for how Beham might have coped — materially, socially, spiritually — with the setbacks that arose from the historic failure of the revolution and from his own situation. Can we improve the picture?

Artists south and north of the Alps were already enjoying an unprecedented mobility when, in 1520, the economic disruptions to local craft economies began rippling outward as the urban Reformation spread. These disruptions produced their own kind of mobility, one based as much on depredation and need as on positive opportunity. At the same time, in the teeth of Protestant denunciations of religious art, traditional audiences were progressively broken down, differentiated, and reconstituted into new viewer categories, positions, tastes, interests, and capacities.[156] The shift in

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May 1525, the renowned woodblock cutter of Nuremberg, Hieronymus Andreae (aka Hieronymus Formschneider), was arrested for sympathizing with the commoners' cause and for his alleged relationship with the radical preacher Bernhard Bubenleben: see Landau and Parshall, 217 (with further references).

[155]See Stayer, which traces the continuities of idealism and leadership from the commoner's revolt to Anabaptist experiments in communistic living.

[156]Emison, 1995, 2, writes: "Renaissance art developed a plurality not only of styles or *manière*, but also of viewer categories. When the patron and his contract were displaced not simply by the artist as entrepreneur, but by a pool of collectors engineered by the artist himself, it became possible to adhere pictorially to factional ideas."

patronage that resulted offered ambitious painter-printmakers a new arena for commercial enterprise, and for artistic and intellectual experimentation. The increasing availability of prints stimulated new collecting practices and these, in turn, ratcheted up demand. An expanding "cultural market" in the Renaissance,[157] whose signature products for intellectual stimulation and religious edification — books and prints — were equally products of the revolution in reproduction techniques, resulted in what might be called a progressive liberalization of the image. For all that has been claimed about the secularization — or the disenchantment, or the reformation — of the image between the Middle Ages and modernity, it is beyond dispute that Renaissance prints were, as Emison points out, "crucial to the inauguration of politically or ethically controversial art." Because they were "less obliged to obey strict ideas of decorum," they became not only the most likely arena for this liberalization to unfold, but the only one in which it could be pushed as far and as fast as it was.[158] All of this allowed German and Swiss artists to cope with the bottoming-out of Catholic ecclesiastical art and the patterns of lay patronage that buttressed it. In the case of the Beham brothers and Pencz, this new conception of the image offered a flexible vehicle for carrying forward some part of the subversive vision that animated them as nonaligned Protestants during the early Reformation.

Further research will show the need for adjustments to this model, but its implications for the case of Sebald Beham and *Impossible* should be clear. Like many of his compatriots, the intelligent Beham confronted his doubts on religious matters as a young man, and discussed them with likeminded people at a time of ideological confusion and change. Gravitating toward a radical dream of Christian liberty that was at first Lutheran, and then anti-Lutheran, he found himself at odds with an emerging religious establishment that brooked no dissent, and saw the maintenance of public order as the *sine qua non* of its reform legislation. In the aftermath of the 1525 affair, and in the course of his professional self-rehabilitation, Beham must have retreated from religious politics per se. Disillusioned and searching, he perhaps refashioned himself — as had his brother-in-law (and likely intellectual mentor) Sebastian Franck — as *unparteiisch* (neutral), believing it better "to present and instruct; to judge would be up to his readers."[159] A reconstructed radical, as it were, Beham adopted — in a strikingly modern fashion — a

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[157]My thinking on this matter is informed by Baxandall, 48, who describes the reciprocity between painters and patrons in terms of a "pattern of barter, barter primarily of mental goods."

[158]Emison, 1995, 2.

[159]Bietenholz, 234.

kind of disenchanted conservatism in which a compensatory artistic freedom and a newly liberalized conception of the image, combined with commercial motives, encouraged him to put forth novel interpretations of biblical, classical, and vernacular subjects in competition with other artists plying the same international markets and courting the same audiences. Renaissance printmakers were keen on exploiting the potential of a new kind of image that was not so much a secular replacement for the discredited medieval cult image, but rather a relay point for intellectual exchange, and a fitting component in the miniaturized theaters of knowledge then being created by top-flight collectors.[160] To serve this new paradigm and participate in the culture it represented, the *Kleinmeister* cultivated an attitude that preferred paradox over moralizing, game playing over decorum, and ethics over theology. *Impossible* exemplifies, and in certain ways allegorizes, the new intellectual terms on which controversial public art had to be staked if it was to provide any kind of freedom for the artist. How this attitude played out in the other modes these men worked in — the erotic, the macabre, the satirical — has yet to be adequately explored.

German Renaissance printmakers such as Hans Sebald Beham staked much of their livelihoods on the popularity of the little engraving. In widening its compass for rhetorical parry-and-thrust, intellectual play, and moral subversion, even a kind of cynical realism, specialists in the little engraving could also use the medium to register the persistence of a certain kind of spiritual hope. Far from being atheists or revolutionaries, these men remained throughout their lives representatives of the "century that wanted to believe," as Lucien Febvre called the sixteenth century.[161] Given his own experience as a victim of religious conformity, perhaps Sebald Beham can be forgiven for trusting in his own power — just a little, and without hubris — to invent an allegory of impossible striving after Christian liberty, Christian ethics, and Christian self-knowledge in the face of ideological conformity and doubt. Perfection on earth was always nobody's achievement. In a fallen and disenchanted world the spark of radical freedom dwelled within each person, and that presence, the artist seemed to recognize, was already a kind of grace.

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[160]Collecting practices are crucial to my argument, though I cannot devote the necessary space here to developing this: critical discussions must begin with Parshall, 1982, 139–84; Parshall, 1994, 7–36.
[161]Febvre, 455–64.

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