

Wonder vs. Therapy

Deborah Lewer compares the uses and abuses of art in an age of self-help and quick fixes

What do people want from art? What do people find in art? And what part does religious faith or its absence play? Two books, aimed at wide readerships, have recently pursued such questions, with very different results. This article seeks to explore their implications.

Art as Therapy by Alain de Botton and John Armstrong (Phaidon, 2013) asserts that 'we' have common emotional and psychological needs, personal and corporate, that art has the potential to meet. The polemic crux of the book, however, is the claim that these needs remain lamentably unmet. Our confused and sorrowing modern selves could be aided and consoled by works of art, so the argument goes, except that the psychological access to the means for this 'therapy' is hindered by boring and/or elitist institutional 'frames' of expertise, like museums, and the tiresome things of art history, like technical information, style, patronage and chronology. The book enthusiastically proffers the remedy. What is needed instead, is not new art, but a new presentation of artworks: selected, interpreted, determined and arranged for the ease and remedial purpose of our emotional consolation and moral improvement. There is also advice on artworks to have in your 'tool' box to turn to in particular life situations. Try resolving a 2am argument by looking at an orderly arcade by Brunelleschi, say. Not to be confused with art therapy (which is something altogether different), this is the closest thing there is to quick-fix self-help by the means of art – 'quick' and 'self' being the operative words.

Art as Therapy has been around for a few years. Neither its commercial success nor the almost unanimous critical derision it has attracted are surprising – least of all to its authors, probably. I am not eager to add either to the success or to the derision, but since it clearly resonates for many people, its claims should be considered. Since Alain de Botton is both an outspoken atheist and opponent of the 'art establishment' I am also on two unavoidable counts part of the/his problem.

But a second, very different book has recently appeared. It is a highly personal account of what one of Germany's leading intellectuals, a Muslim of Iranian descent, found when he took the time to look, really look, and wonder, at the art of a faith not his own, Christianity. Newly published in translation from the original German, it bears an apt title: *Wonder Beyond Belief: On Christianity* (Polity Press, 2017) and is by the renowned (in Germany) author of fiction, prose, literary and theological scholarship and political journalism Navid Kermani.¹ His is a highly articulate public voice for inter-faith dialogue and against nationalism, intolerance, and extremism. An indication of Kermani's status in Germany is that he was chosen in 2014 to give the plenary speech in the German *Bundestag* to mark the 65th anniversary of the post-war, democratic *Grundgesetz*, or basic constitution. He moved many of the politicians there to tears and received a standing ovation.² In 2015 he was awarded the highly prestigious International Peace Prize of the German Book Trade (of which Margaret Atwood is the most recent recipient).

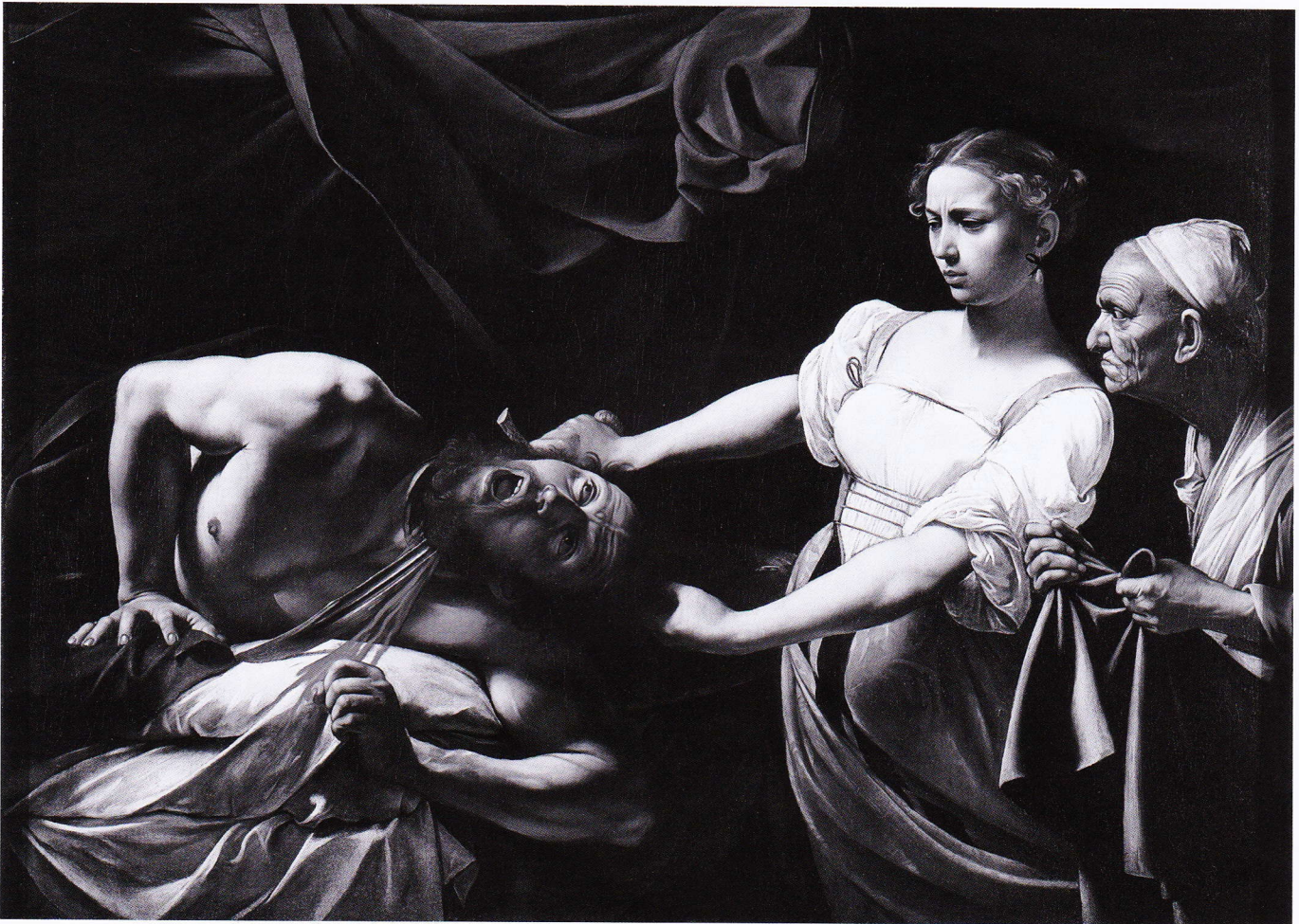
Wonder Beyond Belief is divided into some 40 short chapters, under one-word titles ('Love', 'Lamentation', 'Cain', 'Francis', 'Vocation', 'Play' etc.). Almost all narrate Kermani's approach and very individual response to a single work of art in the Christian tradition – medieval sculpture, Renaissance and Baroque paintings, modern liturgical objects, Gerhard Richter's new window for Cologne Cathedral and more. Parts are also a travelogue and a reflection on both the suffering caused by religious division and the causes for hope that he sees in the people who seek to build bridges between faiths in love and community.

Kermani draws out the rich connections between the aesthetics, poetics and theology of Islam and Christianity, always alert to both commonalities and difference. For me, the deep value of the book lies in his discovery *in art* of the deep humanity that he also sees in people of faith. They include those living

and dying in today's sites of conflict and those close to him as much as the saints of the past. The German edition of his book has a beautiful pattern design on its cover that I initially mistook for something Islamic, but which is in fact a marble floor from a medieval church in Florence. The resemblance is I think entirely intentional.

Kermani holds in fine balance his reverence and irreverence, his sense of the holy, his outrage at the outrageous. His horror at the sacrifice of Isaac, seeing in a painting the moment at which it almost happens, prompts a meditation on obedience, mercy and love. His 'wonder' at art in the Christian – mainly Catholic – tradition is expansive, responsive, humane and imaginative. Sometimes it is also very funny. His curiosity as both a scholar and an art lover is prodigious and infectious. Even in levity, he takes Christianity and the Bible seriously. He discovers great beauty, meaning and surprises in them, while remaining 'outside' on central matters of doctrine. Where he finds difficulty, with the Incarnation for example, he does not merely dismiss it. Instead, his thinking and questioning returns to it over and over again, as if looking from new angles. His very openness means that looking at Christianity and its art through his eyes can be moving, entertaining, illuminating, uncomfortable and very rewarding.

The differences between the two writers' approaches are stark and, I think, instructive. With Kermani there is ample space for confusion, pain, ugliness, complexity, ambiguity – everything de Botton would eradicate. Caravaggio's painting in the Palazzo Barberini in Rome, of Judith beheading Holofernes (the story from the deuterocanonical book of Judith) elicits a vivid imagining of what this man, this woman and their meeting were like. Caravaggio leaves Kermani unable to decide whether Judith is to be admired, abhorred, desired, or, for that matter, which of these might be our response to the decapitated tyrant. Following his ambivalent thinking about this and



Caravaggio *Judith and Holofernes*, 1598-9
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Palazzo Barberini, Rome

the other works that vex and compel him is the precise joy of the book. By coincidence, de Botton looks at the very same painting. Or rather, he doesn't. 'One might feel one ought to like it', he suggests. 'Many people enthuse about this artist's work, but in honest moments one might admit to not really liking it'. Here and elsewhere, behind the affability, it is hard to shake the feeling that de Botton does not actually like art very much. He contracts art, sacred and secular, from both faith and intellect into – literally – a prescription. He would most like to tell artists what they should represent. He even gives us an example of a predictably directive 'brief', as well as a bizarre and chilling 'commissioning strategy'.

Terry Eagleton has remarked (of the author's earlier book, *Religion for Atheists*) that 'like many an atheist, [de Botton's] theology is rather conservative and old-fashioned'.³ The same can be said for de Botton's art history. He imagines it to be the timid preserve of a lot of fussy old connoisseurs, fixating myopically on dates and stylistic terms in remote places like the Courtauld

and Yale, as well as making things much more complicated than they need to be. Such tendencies exist, of course, but he has presumably never read the passionately invested, often deeply personal, witty, insightful, sometimes difficult but never pat work of, say, John Berger, Michael Baxendall, TJ Clark, Michael Ann Holly, Joseph Leo Koerner, Claire Bishop, Thierry de Duve, Leo Steinberg, or, for that matter, other vivid writers on art like Jeanette Winterson, or Denise Levertov.

All this has implications for the public understanding of art and its practice, sites and institutions today – on that, at least, de Botton is right. Every aspect of *Art as Therapy*'s prescription for how we might 'use' art, however, involves cutting down time and effort. Historical information can go. Style, technique, and context can go. Ambiguity can go: in the museum, in the interpretation and in the work of art itself. Caravaggio's *Judith*, for that matter, can go. Who needs a young woman beheading a tyrant? It's not nice and it's hardly relevant for our needs today. Feel free to say you don't like it. You'll

feel better. When it comes to pain, artists should stage it in a modern kitchen, because we don't need to see it in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Neither art nor the indifference it can meet is easy. The novelist Jeanette Winterson puts it well:

'The solid presence of art demands from us significant effort, an effort anathema to popular culture. Effort of time, effort of money, effort of study, effort of humility, effort of imagination have each been packed by the artist into the art. Is it so unreasonable to expect a percentage of that from us in return? I worry that to ask for effort is to imply elitism, and the charge against art, that it is elitist, is too often the accuser's defence against his or her own bafflement.'⁴

I see that de Botton's unashamedly populist book might reach people who feel baffled by art (even if I would far prefer to point them to, say, Berger's classic *Ways of Seeing* instead). If it gets even a handful of reluctant, intimidated or suspicious people into an art gallery, then its publication won't have



Rembrandt *The Raising of Lazarus*, c.1630
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been for nothing. What he does with art reprises what he did with religion in *Religion for Atheists* a year earlier. Perhaps one or two of those who congregate at de Botton's 'School of Life' in London to sing Robbie Williams' *Angels* and listen to a de Botton 'sermon' (they are called this) on a Sunday might find themselves drawn into a church or another place of worship one day. The problem is what happens next. Hopefully, people seeking 'therapy' in a museum will find something much more there too.

When Kermani looks at art, he receives and responds. It begins a process that unfolds in an open-ended exploration. Like art itself, it is sometimes messy, uncomfortable, perplexing and contradictory. While reflecting on the complex early history of the doctrine of the Trinity, Kermani wishes not to reproduce in his book the 5th-century mosaic representing the baptism of Christ from the Arian baptistery in Ravenna because of Jesus's nakedness. Yet an uncompromising

chapter is devoted to discussing the exceptional ugliness of a late medieval sculpted representation of the Christ child in Berlin's Bode Museum. Looking at Rembrandt, Kermani does not know 'whether [Jesus's] hand is upraised in defence or in command' at the raising of Lazarus as the artist shows it. His unknowing leaves space for him to wonder whether Christ's tears are not at the misery to which Lazarus is recalled, in life, including the misery of mourning his friend, Jesus, whose death will soon come. And that leads to a beautiful, unexpected meditation on the nature of love: Jesus's love for Lazarus, Kermani's love for his family, and his fear of their death. 'Love' is the title of the chapter and the placement of Rembrandt/Lazarus there opens up meaning far beyond *Art as Therapy's* self-help certainties.

If de Botton got his hands on Rembrandt's painting, it would presumably be hung in one of his themed galleries, with a big post-it note to help us out

(this he actually did, in 2014, at the Rijksmuseum).⁵ Where would *The Raising of Lazarus* go? Look at de Botton's scheme for re-ordering Tate Modern. It first appeared in his book *Religion for Atheists*, and again in *Art as Therapy*. In both it is proposed as a secular alternative to a church space. If your galleries are designated places of 'Suffering', 'Compassion', 'Fear', 'Love', 'Self-Knowledge', where would you hang the Rembrandt? As soon as you put it in one of these spaces, 'Compassion', let's say, for the sake of argument, you have closed down all the ways in which the painting – and indeed the Gospel from which it draws – speaks of suffering, fear, love, self-knowledge or anything else. You have accelerated and isolated the picture's 'delivery' of meaning, like a Bible verse on a fridge magnet. It is the same with almost any other substantial work of art. And what of the museum as a place for 'creative questioning and dissent',⁶ for example, when there is only solipsistic emotionalism?

There is a great deal that could be said about the spirituality of what we do with art, the potential of receptivity and the limits of acquisitiveness. I think it can be reasonably claimed that one of the features of a life of faith is that it drastically re-calibrates what we find we 'need' in order that life has meaning and purpose. With all due respect to confirmed atheists, it must surely be a cause for sorrow if the perceived impossibility of a meaningful encounter with the divine is now exacerbated by the added impossibility of a meaningful encounter with art. The two are not unrelated, and especially if art is seen to hold out the promise of self-salvation.

At first sight, where de Botton and Kermani, both middle-aged men, appear to have something in common is in their writing about love, sex and art, Christian or otherwise. Both of them tell us (with a relish that suggests they imagine it to be startling) that they find Botticelli's Madonnas erotic. Kermani's favourite book of the Bible is the Song of Solomon. Both reject pornography and its modern prevalence but admit to finding Christianity on the whole disappointingly 'unerotic'. Both have an interest in the way high art might help flagging long-term relationships. De Botton's novel if unappetising advice on 'how to make love last' is to regard one's spouse with the same imaginative attention Manet devoted to a bundle of asparagus. Kermani is moved by the awkwardness

and 'absolutely unexpected tenderness' of Giotto's kiss between the elderly Anne and Joachim in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua and it gives him cause to rethink. He regrets having thought Christians so 'lustless'.

John Drury has remarked that 'worship and looking at pictures require the same kind of attention – a mixture of curiosity with a relaxed readiness to let things suggest themselves in their own good time.'⁷ It is a fitting description of Kermani's receptive way of looking. He seeks to understand this faith that is not his own, but which fascinates him deeply, from the inside. With de Botton there is no curiosity and minimal contact. Another difference between their books is I think related to this. One of the most consistent (and consistently annoying) features of de Botton's writing is his patronising and impersonal usage of the first person plural. 'We' have the needs he defines, 'we' can be improved in 'our' moral and emotional lives by following his guidance and vision for art in the 'ideal future'. Kermani never does this. He writes in the first person singular and in his time. Propelled by expansive curiosity, he invites the reader into his own experience of wonder, confusion, irritation, outrage, bemusement and the odd moment of salaciousness before works of art, without ever asking that we concur. He can be strident and does not mince his words (readers who are easily offended probably should not put the book on their Christmas wish list) but he allows the reader the liberty to differ from him.

More than a stylistic quirk, this individualisation and collectivisation is relevant for that sticky area of art and 'emotion' around which both books are so open. Denis Dutton remarks that, with art, you need 'the sense of entering into the feelings of a mind that is not your own.' On the other hand, 'cheap sentimentality in art traffics in emotions that are everybody's.'⁸ An example of the latter, he writes, is the genre of the soap opera. When de Botton prescribes art as 'therapy' to 'our'



Édouard Manet *Bunch of Asparagus*, 1880
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generic emotional dysfunction, he reduces both the distinct quality of the individual work of art and our own distinct lived experience to mush, or indeed, to soap.

I am sure there will be readers for whom the exasperation and the enjoyment I experienced reading these two books would be exactly reversed. Some might disparage or be offended by both books – on many possible grounds, theological, academic, political, moral or aesthetic – and some charitable souls will find each to be of value and insight in their different ways. What remains is the question of what 'we' ask and expect of art and its potential to enrich life. Whether we come to art with the needs we have decided we have or allow ourselves to be surprised into wonder may well decide it.

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1. Kermani's book was first published in its original German, *Ungläubiges Staunen. Über das Christentum* by Navid Kermani (C. H. Beck, 2015).
2. A video of Kermani's full speech with English translation can be viewed on the Bundestag website.
3. Terry Eagleton, *The Guardian*, 12 January 2012, review of Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists*, (Hamish Hamilton, 2012)
4. Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, (Vintage, 1996), p.16.
5. See eg <https://www.theguardian.com/commentis-free/2014/may/24/death-of-culture-writ-large-at-rijksmuseum>
6. See Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology*, (Koenig, 2014), p.59.
7. John Drury, *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and their Meanings*, (Yale University Press, 1999), p.xiv.
8. Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 234-235.

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