

# In Face of Grief

Deborah Chi, 2009

In 1885, the town council of the French city of Calais commissioned artist/sculptor Auguste Rodin to produce a monument to pay tribute to the six burghers of Calaise, heroes of the Hundred Years' War. In 1347, after the victory in the Battle of Crécy, England's Edward the III laid siege to Calais. Phillip VI of France ordered the city not to surrender but failed in lifting the siege. After eleven months, its citizens were desperately short of both food and water. Six prominent citizens of Calais then decided to offer their lives to Edward III in exchange for his promise to spare Calais. Phillip VI agreed, and ordered them to dress in plain garments, wear nooses around their necks, and journey to his camp bearing the keys to the city. It was said that the King's intention was to execute the six burghers, but because the King's wife, Philippa, feared execution would be a bad omen for their unborn child, their lives were spared.

Instead of portraying the figures as conventional heroes, Rodin illustrated the burghers in agony. They were "six ordinary individuals who [were] all committed to sacrificing their lives, but who also [were] human enough to fear and tremble when they [contemplated] their harsh fate."<sup>1</sup> He sought to capture the moment as the men were leaving en route to death by providing to his viewers six individual reactions with which to identify. "What made this moment so dramatic, Rodin felt, was that the burghers now had to overcome their last remnants of fear, and this was something that could be depicted in the movements and expressions of each individual."<sup>2</sup> Rodin's figures are the embodiment of anguish and grief. By seeing the faces of the figures, the viewers are confronted with the faces of absolute grief.

In *Entre Nous: On-Thinking-of-the-Other*, Emmanuel Levinas writes about encountering the face of the "other": "underlying all the particular forms of expression in which he or she, already right 'in character,' plays a role—is no less *pure expression*, extradition with neither defense nor cover, precisely the extreme rectitude of facing, which in this nakedness is an exposure unto death: nakedness, destitution, passivity, and pure vulnerability. Face as the very *mortality* of the other human being."<sup>3</sup> The "other" in this case is anyone other than you or me. And in facing the face of the "other," particularly that of the suffering, one faces one's individual state of humanity. The acknowledgment of the "other" enables us to recognize our own state of mortality and humanity. In encountering Rodin's figures facing their state of death and mortality, the viewers of *The Burghers of Calais* encounter their state of mortality as well. Their faces reveal the mortality of humanity; their nakedness *is* humanity. This experience is something universal that all share. By identifying with the state of grief one can recognize the grief that all humans share. I have chosen Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais* due to his ability to capture this state of angst and grief. For in the face of these anguished faces, one is faced with one's own personal anguish.

In *The Precarious Life*, Judith Butler writes that grief is integral to the human experience. When we refuse to allow ourselves to grieve, we dehumanize humanity and ourselves in general. In

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Auguste Swedberg. "Rodin's The Burghers of Calais" in *Theory, Culture & Society*. (2005, vol. 22, n°2) 47-67: 63.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Entre: Nous: On-Thinking-of-the-Other*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 167

acknowledging that we grieve, we are acknowledging that we are human. Thus, it is all the more vital to sit in a space of grief, which we most often resist, due to its discomfort. Yet she warns, “when grieving is something to be feared, our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order, or to reinvigorate a fantasy that the world formerly was orderly.”<sup>4</sup> This impulse to avoid the acknowledgement of loss, if indulged, can lead to the imposition of violence on others because we cannot allow ourselves to acknowledge their grief (and thus their humanity) without risking the acknowledgment of our own sense of loss. The fear of being seen for their grief (and the shame of being exposed for being in grief), causes us, in the words of Butler, to refuse to acknowledge the “face” of the “other”: “We have been turned away from the face, sometimes through the very image of the face, one that is meant to convey the inhuman, the already dead, that which is not precarious and cannot, therefore, be killed this is the face that we are nevertheless asked to kill, as if ridding the world of this face would return us to the human rather than consummate our humanity. One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake.”<sup>5</sup> By contrast, if we are connected to our own grief and suffering, then we are able to connect with others who also grieve. This ability to connect enables us to recognize when we inflict grief on others. So those who otherwise would be considered as different from us or not human (“the other”) will be seen as human by us. To recognize the “other” as people also susceptible to grief enables us to treat people with care. It is therefore important for us to be able to grieve, for through the process “the other” will no longer be unreal, but possess a human “face.”

Grief enables us to recognize our humanity. It reveals the other that might otherwise remain alien to us. “Perhaps we can say that grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am.”<sup>6</sup> I believe that if we are in touch with our own grief, we will be in touch with humanity. While the face of the “other” does not belong to me, nevertheless, it is a part of me, for the face is the face of humanity (who thus too is like me). In knowing grief, I know myself; in knowing grief, I can know humanity as a whole. In a sense, Rodin’s *Burghers* reminds us of how to face our humanity. Their nakedness and exposure to death serves as a reminder of our vulnerability. In the face of *Burghers*’ grief, we face ours, and in facing ours, we are connected to the *mortality* of the other human being. Grief enables us to be in touch with ourselves and when one takes the time, it will reveal to us that those different from us too are vulnerable and susceptible to pain like anyone else. Grief can serve as a reminder to live ethically, consciously, and responsibly for the good of humanity.

## Bibliography

- Butler, Judith. *The Precarious Life*. (New York: Verso Publishing: 2006)  
 Levinas, Emmanuel *Entre: Nous: On-Thinking-of-the-Other*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 167  
 Swedberg, Richard Auguste. “Rodin’s The Burghers of Calais” in *Theory, Culture & Society*. (2005, vol. 22, n<sup>o</sup>2) 47-67

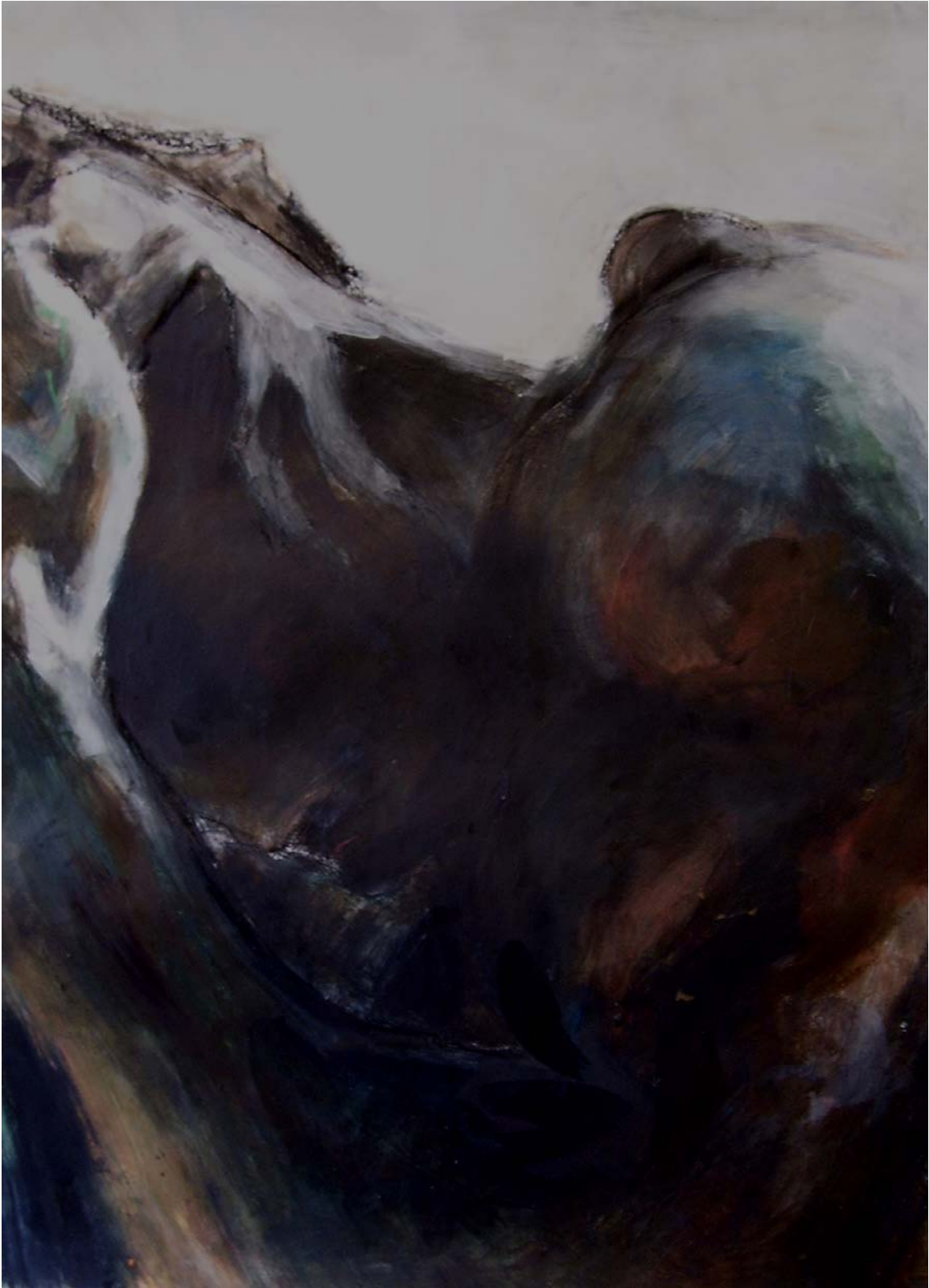
Below are my paintings of the two figures I have selected from *The Burghers of Calais*.

---

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler. *The Precarious Life*. (New York: Verso Publishing: 2006) 29-30

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 150

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 28



Portrait of the figure of Andrieu d'Andres (Acrylic and Pastels)



Portrait of the Figure of Pierre de Wiessan (Acrylic and Pastels)