

# Cabinet

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## THE HOLY FIRE AND THE LONELY SAINT

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What the modern world calls ergotism was known in Europe for a thousand years by many names, identical in their ferocity but varied in their symbolism, like the banners of a barbarian army. *Ignis sacer*, read one heraldic device, the holy fire. *Ignis gehennae*, read another, the fire of Gehenna, the fire of hell. *Le mal des ardents*, the sickness of the ardent, of the burning ones. St. Martial's fire, after the saint whose relics dispatched the *miracle des ardents* of 994 CE in the Limousin. And eventually, above all, St. Anthony's fire, named for the saint who could heal it and also induce it. *Nemo impune peccat in Antonium*, read the inscription above the main portal of the abbey that housed his relics—no one sins against Anthony with impunity. *Nemo invanum currit ad Antonium*, read the second line. No one runs to Anthony in vain.

Ergotism takes its modern name from ergot, the hard, dormant stage, known scientifically as the sclerotium, in the lifecycle of the fungus *Claviceps purpurea*. It manifests as a conical structure colored purple, gray, or black, and it grows parasitically among the grains of certain cereals, especially rye. The livid prisms, called ergot because they look like *argot*, a cock's spur in Old French, flourish when a cold winter is followed by a wet spring, periods when in primitive agricultural societies harvests are poor, and farmers can't afford to discard blemished crops. Ergot contains a number of potent alkaloids, including lysergic acid, the key ingredient of LSD. Midwives have for centuries known that it can be used to induce uterine contractions.

It was not widely known until the seventeenth century, however, that when baked into bread and consumed in sufficient quantities, the ergot of rye is the cause of St. Anthony's fire, a terrible series of symptoms leading to permanent injury and, frequently, death. Modern outbreaks have shown that ergot-infected flour is slightly discolored and somewhat oily in texture, but it gives off no distinct odor, and in medieval Europe it probably seemed well within the wide boundaries of the edible, boundaries delineated not so much by ignorance as by a self-reproducing cycle of famine and warfare.<sup>1</sup> In years with a high yield of ergot, tens of thousands were affected.



Ear of rye infected with ergot fungus. Illustration from Adam Neale, *Researches Respecting the Natural History, Chemical Analysis, and Medicinal Virtues, of the Spur, or Ergot of Rye, When Administered as a Remedy in Certain States of the Uterus*, 1828. Courtesy Edinburgh University Library.

A person who eats ergotic bread first suffers symptoms of an indistinct illness: a fever and an itching over his body. He may begin to feel an intermittent burning sensation in his limbs. He may plunge them into cold water for relief, and he may not think himself anything more than fatigued by hard work or, if he's a pilgrim on the way to Santiago de Compostela, by the long walk across southern France in the summer. The first distinctive sign of the ardent sickness, however, comes next. The itching becomes something subtler and more terrible, a light epidermal pattering, the feeling of ants crawling over the skin.

At this point the illness reaches a juncture, developing along two different paths. The first route sees the extremities turn pink, then yellow, and finally, as the skin peels off, black. There is acute ischemia—the reduction of blood flow—and motion becomes hard and painful. Sores begin to appear across the body, and the stomach swells. Lactating mothers

lose their milk, and pregnant women abort. There is a burning pain, and eventually gangrene sets in. The limbs—sometimes one, sometimes several—shriveled away, seem to char, and die. Sometimes they fall off on their own, sometimes they must be amputated. If the gangrenous limbs are removed completely, there is a chance of recovery. If they linger, death is almost certain.

The second path the disease takes is more insidious. It engenders involuntary spasms of the fingers and wrists, and soon convulsions of the whole body similar to epileptic seizures. Eventually the effects become as grotesque as they are painful, for the episodes can cause the body to collapse in on itself, and the patient contorts into a packed ball of limbs or a displaced gnarl of branches, resembling less a human than a human hacked into pieces and rebuilt with every appendage out of place.

Both forms, the gangrenous and the convulsive, were well described in the Middle Ages, and it was clearly understood that they were the same disease. The gangrenous tended to be more common in France, while the convulsive appeared more frequently east of the Rhine, a situation that physician Mervyn Eadie of the University of Queensland thinks might have been due to the effect of different soils on the exact chemical composition of ergot.<sup>2</sup>

There is, however, one possible, and perhaps important, difference between the modern clinical description of ergotism and the medieval clinical description of St. Anthony's fire. According to modern medical literature, mental disturbances, including confusion, dementia, and vivid hallucinations (effects of the lysergic acid), occur only in the convulsive variety. But the evidence for this is not definitive, as most of the cases of ergotism studied by science have been non-hallucinating gangrenous ones resulting from the excessive intake of ergot-based drugs, now used to treat migraines. Ergotamine drugs have not been known to cause the convulsive variety, and although doctors saw hallucinations paired with convulsions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ethical considerations make a modern study of this almost eradicated condition impossible. The most we can say for certain is that modern victims of gangrenous ergotism do not suffer hallucinations, and that victims of convulsive ergotism used to suffer them often.

Yet some circumstantial evidence suggests that for a thousand years in Europe, St. Anthony's fire caused hallucinations and mental terrors in sufferers *both* convulsive and gangrenous. For example, many artistic depictions of the disease by famous painters such as Hieronymus Bosch and Matthias Grünewald (the latter's painting commissioned for a hospital dedicated to treating *ignis sacer*) show someone with gangrenous physical symptoms who is surrounded, and in many cases totally upstaged, by a host of chimeras, by demons and angels pivoting between terror and ecstasy. There is also a striking closeness to metaphor in the otherwise literal descriptions of the French chronicles. It is written, over and over again, that the gangrenous disease arises from a fire that no water can quench and that no one can see, burning limbs from the inside out until they are black as coal. The chronicles suggest that people believed, and felt, and knew, that actual flames were burning in their stomachs and arms. This is borne out by the common depiction of St. Anthony stamping out a fire with his feet, and the fact that the walls of hospitals for *ardents* were painted all around with red flames.

This may seem a minor contention, but it has certain important implications. Something may have occurred during outbreaks of St. Anthony's fire that, were it to happen today, we would call a hallucination, but because it happened long ago, we don't. The history of St. Anthony's fire may therefore pose a question about the difference between a hallucination and a metaphor, a question that might have something to say about the effect of Christianity on the modern West, and on the role of culture in shaping consciousness.

Some further background is needed before we confront this boundary between the literal and the figurative. St. Anthony's fire is one of the most feared diseases in medieval Europe; it comes from nowhere and inflicts long-lasting horrors on its victims. They burn and blacken; they see demons; they convulse and seize; they jump from windows (as is also common during psychotic episodes triggered by consuming LSD). Medieval medicine is essentially helpless against it, though not for lack of trying. In fact, it is this disease that gives medieval medicine its distinctive character, that will impel it to make a major contribution to the history of healing. St. Anthony's fire—not the plague, not smallpox, not

syphilis—is the catalyst for the first pan-European network of hospitals, organized with a discipline unequaled in the West for many centuries.

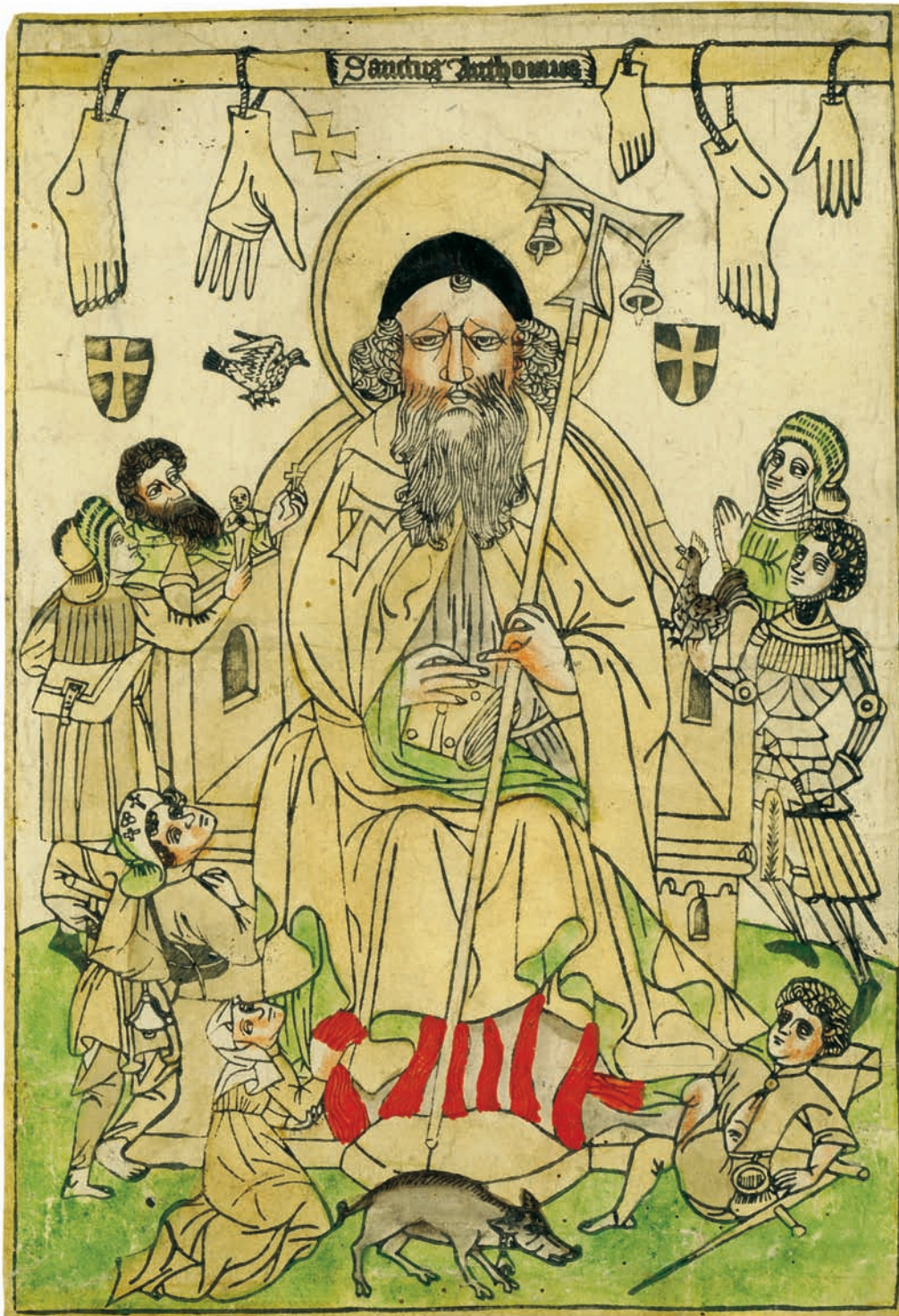
At the close of the eleventh century, the holy fire breaks out in the Dauphiné, an ancient county of the Holy Roman Empire in present-day southeastern France. According to later sources, a nobleman named Gaston de La Valloire takes his son, afflicted with the disease, to pray at the relics of St. Anthony the Great, prince of hermits. Anthony's bones had been brought to the Dauphiné thirty years before by a Frankish knight named Jocelin, who received them from the Byzantine emperor Romanos IV Diogenes in thanks for his military service against the Saracens. The bones are said to have translated miraculously from the Egyptian desert to Alexandria and subsequently to Constantinople, where they rested in the Hagia Sophia before their departure for France. Gaston promises that if his son Gérin is healed, he will devote himself, in the name of St. Anthony, to the care of the ardens.

Whatever the true outcome of this story or its relation to reality, a group of noblemen forms a lay brotherhood named for St. Anthony in the last decade of the eleventh century. They build a hospital for holy fire in the town of Saint-Antoine-en-Viennois, where the relics are kept in the care of a Benedictine priory. True to its etymology, the hospital is also a hostel for pilgrims coming to pray to St. Anthony, or continuing on to Santiago.<sup>3</sup> The brotherhood and its patron flourish. Anthony will join Roch and Sebastian as one of the great protectors against illness in the Catholic pantheon. The lay organization will become by papal bull a monastic order using the Rule of St. Augustine, fitting because the story of Anthony's life had profoundly affected Augustine on the eve of his conversion to Christianity. The Antonites will eventually unseat the Benedictines in Saint-Antoine and take control of the relics; in the little town they build their mother abbey. They build commanderies and adjoining hospitals along the pilgrim routes, in Freiburg, Isenheim, Memmingen, Basel, Cologne, Paris, Avignon, Montpellier, Carcassonne, Toulouse, Turin, Rome, Naples, Castrojeriz, and León. At the order's height in the fourteenth century, there will be 369 such satellites in Europe, including in England and Hungary. In 1253, the Antonites are mentioned in papal documents as the official nurses to the

Roman Curia, and they are the only order accorded this privilege until 1300.

The hospitals in the town of Saint-Antoine are a wonder. During times of epidemic, they house as many as two thousand patients. (On the other hand, in 1589, when a season of bubonic plague and religious war disrupts travel throughout France, only seven ardens remain in the abbey.) Everything is strictly and efficiently ordered. Upon entering, patients are carefully examined to make certain they actually suffer from St. Anthony's fire. Those who have another disease are put in separate wards and sometimes even sent away.<sup>4</sup> The true ardens, meanwhile, are ushered into a world of incredible spiritual and social strictness. They must pledge to be loyal to the faith and the order while in its care. They must live morally and chastely while in the hospital. If a male and female patient wish to be married, it can only be with explicit permission of the order. One of their number must serve as night watchman. If they are able, they must pray the canonical hours in the church, observing the matins and lauds and nones and vespers with the monks. Those who can't are taken care of by the pragmatic hospital architecture, which consists of a huge rectangular room with a rounded chapel at the end. The doors of the chapel can swing wide open, and suddenly the whole space with its hundreds of crowded beds (sometimes three or four amputees share a mattress) is an ark for prayer.

The order makes promises in return. First and foremost, the sick are fed every day, and given meat three times a week. On holidays, they get a small donation and a feast. At Easter, to each a lamb. At Christmas, white bread the size of four rolls and a full pitcher of undiluted wine, beef, pork, and a cup of wine with honey.<sup>5</sup> Although the cause of ergotism is unknown, the order somehow senses that fresh and healthy food is essential to recovery, perhaps the intuition of a society that knows intimately the many insidious effects of hunger. But possibly more than that, since the provision of food is also bound to the structures and symbols of the liturgical calendar. This is most clear when it comes to the main instruments of healing, which are, first, the *saint vinage*, wine mixed with herbs that has been poured over Anthony's bones, and second, Anthony's balsam, a closely guarded secret mixture of herbs



German woodcut by unknown artist depicting St. Anthony, ca. 1440–1450. The saint, shown with his various symbols, is surrounded by victims of the holy fire. Courtesy Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich.

(maybe the same as in the *saint vinage*) rubbed on the extremities to soothe the burning.<sup>6</sup> The main medicines—bread, wine, oil—are respectful parodies of the Eucharist and the chrism, modeled on the central spiritual performance of Christianity. Eating and drinking—essential to healing, and maybe the main reason for the order's successes—are a by-product of the Antonites' love of symbolic order, for the lamb at Easter is foremost the Lamb of God, and only second a lamb to eat.

Giorgio Agamben has written eloquently of what was variously called in European monasticism the *regula vitae*, the rule of life; the *regula et vita*, the rule and life; and the *regula vel vita*, the rule or life. He argues in his book *The Highest Poverty* that the interchangeability of these formulations (the rule of life is also rule *and* life) indicates that the governing of monastic life and the living of monastic life were thought by the monks to be completely coincident. The hours and rituals of the monastery did not compel behavior; behavior did not govern the hours and rituals. Rather, behavior and rules were meant to replicate each other exactly and organically, without any punishment or direct exercise of authority needed to make them cohere. Agamben considers this an unprecedented and unique form of non-authoritarian political organization.

The Antonites used something akin to this coincidence of rule and life as a template for healing. The sick needed continuous structure, communal protections, and, above all, a common set of symbols, like compass points indicating the way to health, in order to live. But this armature for living had to be actively embraced, not passively accepted, an axiom made explicit by the fact that the patients had to serve as their own watchmen and swear oaths of fealty, like temporary monks. An important effect of order is to invest the mutability of human experience, governed by the whim of subjective time, with a symbolic fixity. The wretchedness of illness rejects structure; it erases habit and makes time impossible to measure. Hours stretch into days, a week can seem to pass in a night. Even a minor fever without the disruptions of lysergic acid can cause confusion, delirium, dreams more vivid than reality. Aby Warburg, who went on to devote his life to studying the aliveness of images, remembered that during a bout of typhoid fever at the age of six, in 1873, the little devils and carriages

from an illustrated edition of Balzac's *Les petites misères de la vie conjugale* started to dance across his bed, becoming ever more daring and capricious.

St. Anthony's fire, we know, can cause vivid hallucinations. A probable outbreak of convulsive ergotism in southern France in the 1950s (probable because there are some who allege it was mercury poisoning) afflicted hundreds of villagers with visions of snakes, soldiers, and heavenly lights ordering them to leap from windows.<sup>7</sup> And although gangrenous ergotism does not generally produce hallucinations of this sort, it seems reasonable, even obvious, that even for gangrenous patients in the medieval period, facing a disease they did not understand and could not effectively cure, their overwhelming physical pain would have been augmented by a mercenary parade of psychic fears capitalizing on each and every consequence of the disease—the body's betrayal, the mind's impotence, the approach of death. It is entirely conceivable that the manifestations of this fear took on the weight of physical reality, and began to resemble what we in the modern world would call hallucination.<sup>8</sup> For the afflicted would have tried desperately to describe in whatever vocabulary was available to them—that of fire, or demons, or curses, or just retribution for sins—what it was that was happening to their bodies. My own experience with the harrowing effects of hypochondria, especially hypochondria manifested on top of actual illness, leaves me in no doubt of the many avenues that a fire-addled mind might take, into self-pity or terror, toward delusion and paranoia.

The Antonites, helpless against most of the physical effects, could at least discipline the spiritual ones. The shifting fears of illness were straitjacketed in a series of ritualized, symbolic actions, actions borrowed from religious practice and made into a kind of therapy, an elaborate and theatrical placebo, healing by mimesis, by performance. For those who survived, the performance ended in a decisive valediction to illness, maybe intended to prevent lingering psychic trauma: the healed victims hung their blackened limbs in the abbey church as ex-votos to St. Anthony. In Lourdes or Santiago, the healed now leave little brass models of their legs or arms, or perhaps a crutch they once used, but in Antonite churches, it was the leg itself, the very limb, that was left behind, turned from a leg into the symbol

of a leg. What looks from afar to be a gruesome practice is up close, by its own logic, a sanitizing act, the transformation of the unpredictable vagaries of bodily sensation into clean and ordered signs.

The planet around which all the symbols of healing orbit is Anthony himself. By the late Middle Ages, he is rich in iconography. He has the flames at his feet, a bell, a book, a pig, blackened hands and arms hanging above, and on his habit and his staff the order's insignia, the Greek letter *tau*, which appropriately resembles a crutch.<sup>9</sup> But why exactly is the prince of hermits the patron of these monks, and of this illness? Surprisingly, the question has been rarely asked with the thoroughness it deserves. Many scholars have written about Anthony, his life in late antiquity, and his biography by Athanasius, which is among the most famous and influential of hagiographies. Others have written about his association with the holy fire. But no one, so far as I know, has attempted rigorously to explain the connection between the historical Anthony and the symbolic one, except to suggest that medieval pictures showing the saint's temptation as a psychedelic feast of demons might owe something to the hallucinations of Anthony's fire.

A still less explored question is what he meant to the Antonites and their ingenious system of symbolic caregiving. Adalbert Mischlewski, the foremost modern historian of the Antonites, concludes that it was all chance.<sup>10</sup> Anthony was just another local saint invoked against a scourge, and circumstances worked in such a way that his followers in the Dauphiné became the founders of an international brotherhood. The situation is admittedly curious, at least on the surface. Why would a hermit be the patron of hospitals, where the sick are packed together in conditions of dependence? But this is related to a larger question. How did a man living alone in the desert serve as the model for European monasticism, one of the most intense experiments in communal living ever attempted?

For Anthony, in addition to patronizing this illness, is the key hermit of the Middle Ages. Not the first, but the one whose influence, thanks to his biographer Athanasius, becomes most widespread and accepted as a model for the holy life. His withdrawal into the desert in fourth-century Egypt does as much as any other action to destroy the foundations of the ancient world, for he turns his back on *civitas*

and *virtus*, the foundational classical notions that a person is constituted by the duties and privileges that accrue to him within his society. But the revolution is still more radical, for Anthony is not merely a person who turns his back on the community; he is a person constitutionally incapable of accepting community, at least as it exists in his own time.

A powerful detail in Athanasius, so distinctive that even after sixteen hundred years it retains an aura of authenticity, is that as a boy Anthony does not like to play, neither alone nor with other children. We often hear of artists-to-be creating extravagant realities in their nurseries, orchestrating precocious displays of puppetry or painting, corraling their friends into pageants, actions which we interpret as the necessary outpouring of the inner life. There is a certain kind of person about whom we think they *must* pour their life force into the world. Anthony is not that kind of person, or does not want to be, anyway. He keeps his life force hidden within him, pent up.

Anthony's story is about a refusal, or rather an innate inability, to externalize the experience within. His continued retreat from humanity, first into a hut, then a tomb, then the desert, then a far, arid mountain, is an attempt to reach a place where his aliveness cannot escape, for there is no vessel into which it can be poured, no piece of property, no article of clothing, no object, no person. He is afraid or unwilling to let his mind push beyond his body's boundary, to make any mark on the earth.

The temptations of St. Anthony, and the holiness he builds from them, become the blueprint for a medieval hydraulics of spirit. What happens when the pressure of the inner reservoir, kept clean and undrunk so that it might one day quench the thirst of God, builds to an unknown strength? The self vacillates between exultation and despair, borne aloft by images of other beings. Athanasius writes that in solitude, Anthony faces a "great dustcloud of thoughts" sent from the devil. They include a lascivious woman; a terrifying small black boy (this black boy will become a common apparition among monks who read Athanasius too often); a dragon; uncounted species of twisted reptile; invisible agents who beat the hermit black and blue. The farther Anthony retreats into himself and the more isolated he becomes, the more his thoughts take on the



Hieronymus Bosch, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, ca. 1500.

weight of reality, and the more his existence comes to resemble a kingdom, crowded and oppressed, in a state of continuous insurrection.

Anthony represents a spectacular insight of the Christian worldview, foreshadowed in the Gospels by the Temptation of Christ. In solitude, whether geographical, spiritual, or the physical solitude of sickness, a person becomes a society. And a person unprepared for that solitude becomes a society in a state of extreme precariousness. At one moment, his empire exceeds that of all earthly realms; it grasps at eternity in the baroque splendor of its architecture, in the glitter of its jewels, in the desirability of the slaves in its harems, in the perfection of its awards, punishments, and perversions. In the next, it is in a state of utter catastrophe, buildings aflame and in ruin, the citizens and slaves deformed into factions savaging one another while wearing the masks of beasts. The more distant a person grows from the world of other people, the more complete this private universe becomes, the more real, and if unprepared, the more volatile. It begins to approximate that paradigmatic private universe, the dream, where the productions of mind *are* the floor and sky and windows and wall, not to mention every inhabitant malignant and benign.

But the Antonine solution, which becomes the monastic solution, and maybe the modern solution, is not simply to ignore this private world, to run from it back to the social one. Instead, the private world must be tamed from the inside before the social world can be rejoined. Communal life can be an armature for private life, providing a vocabulary of actions and images through which the solitary kingdom can be brought to order. But it can't actually do the ordering, it cannot simply impose beliefs in the way that self-righteous schoolteachers will later debase the Antonine impulse into ideology. Nor can it be a substitute. A person must pass through the rise and fall and restoration of the kingdom of solitude in order to become, to the core, part of the new society of humans.

Hieronymus Bosch's Lisbon triptych of the Temptation of St. Anthony, from the early sixteenth century, articulates this worldview very directly. In the left panel, St. Anthony, who wears the *tau* of an Antonite, is shown being carried by three friends after he has been dropped from the sky by a pack of flying monsters. In the other two panels, in contrast, Anthony is shown without any companions, surrounded only by a huge host of demons. If the panels are meant to be viewed from left to right (as





Master of the Osservanza,  
*Saint Anthony Tempted by  
 the Devil in the Guise of a  
 Woman*, ca. 1435.

many of Bosch's other triptychs very clearly are), then Anthony's friends in the left panel are carrying him into his isolation in the central panel, not away from it. This point doesn't require any great stretch of interpretation, because they are walking him along a path that points directly toward the middle of the work. It is the duty of Anthony's helpers to lead him to solitude, to prepare him for the battle over his private kingdom (perhaps they have offered to take the bruised saint back to their village and he has said to them, *no dear friends, no, carry me deeper into the wilderness*). One of these helpers carries a crucifix tied to his belt. In the next panel, a crucifix, or a *tau* almost transformed into a crucifix, dangles in the same position from Anthony's garment, as if the talisman has been passed from one to the other: *here, keep this, remember there are others in the world*.

The absolute ineffectiveness of medieval medicine meant, essentially, that the Antonite monks could do little more than exactly what Anthony's friends are doing. They could carry the sufferer into the solitude of his sickness, and leave some talisman of their common faith in his hand. Physical pain,

Elaine Scarry has eloquently explained, cuts off its perceiver from the rest of the world. Bosch's St. Anthony triptych shows the terrifying reality that can arise to fill the void, the apparitions that flood the mind which stubbornly persists to work while in isolation, whether that isolation is born from geographical distance or closeness to death. In such a situation, as the bridges fall away, the mind's own figurations become its reality, and what might be a simple metaphor or symbol in some other context becomes what we would call a hallucination and is, to the perceiver, the very stuff of being.

To plant a stable and reassuring set of metaphors into the overly fertile ground of mental isolation was the project of Antonite healing. The hours, the shrines, the flames, the votaries, the wine, the *tau*, and the white bread were an attempt to influence the shape of the world that each victim would inevitably be forced to construct and then suffer through. Bosch understood this exceptionally well, as he understood the logical conflation of Anthony and Antonite healing. In the central panel of his triptych, the major symbolic devices of the Antonite order

appear amid the devil's mercenaries. In the middle ground, there is a severed foot upon a white cloth, an ex-voto offering, still bleeding, in front of the living saint. Behind Anthony, partially hidden in a dark room, Jesus stands at an altar right next to a crucifix and imparts a blessing; the symbol of the Savior has become the Savior, alive and incarnate. Still more astonishing is a burning building in the distant background being looted by a pillaging army. This rectangular structure with a curved chapel on the shorter side is none other than an Antonite hospital, its falling tower mounted by the *tau*.<sup>11</sup> The painted flames that decorated the walls of the Antonite hospital have burst into actual fire, so that the dread of dying in fire might at least have a consistent and sympathetic continuity with the external world, as powerless as the victim.

The Antonites practiced what might now be called palliative care for the mental confusions and terrors of St. Anthony's fire, wherever those terrors fell on the spectrum between chemical hallucination and psychic disturbance. It was perhaps their special insight, born as much from ignorance as wisdom, to understand how extreme suffering, and not just

suffering but many forms of extreme isolation, collapse the distinction between hallucination and imagination. In fact, the compassion of the Antonite project is the direct result of its minimal impact, as Bosch depicts with sobering clarity. In his painting, the symbols of healing are miniscule compared with everything that is not a symbol, or is a perversion of symbols (is that the *saint vinage* in the hands of a demon?), or an unformed matrix of meaning, a Eucharist and a theologian and a merchant and a fish and a devil and a monk and a chamber-pot all at once and never at all. The monks, following Anthony's example, were resigned to the fact that dreams are hostile to the influence of waking life, even though they plunder its stones to build their palaces. The Antonites mastered a discipline that we, thankfully, have been able to let lapse, although there is no guarantee that it won't be needed again soon. This discipline might be called understanding not-understanding, or helping when you are helpless, and it is a quixotic midwife to inner life, witness to the birth of attitudes that make a certain notion of selfhood possible.

1 In medieval Germany, the ergot spur was called *Hungerkorn*, the hunger grain.

2 See Mervyn J. Eadie, "Convulsive Ergotism: Epidemics of the Serotonin Syndrome?" *The Lancet Neurology*, vol. 2, no. 7 (July 2003).

3 The treatment of the holy fire was always related to the care of pilgrims on the roads to Santiago. This may be because many victims of *ignis sacer* set out for Santiago in the hope of being healed; it may also simply be because pilgrims, like all travelers, were vulnerable and in need of special care. I wonder if it might also be because pilgrims, many dependent on alms, were often given the bread no one else wanted, and so were more frequently exposed to ergot.

4 In Memmingen, the patients themselves were called on to judge whether or not a newly admitted person had their disease.

5 White bread, though less nutritious than dark bread, was highly valued in the Middle Ages. When founding his hospital, the Hôtel-Dieu in Beaune, the Burgundian chancellor Nicolas Rolin set aside funds for *white bread* to be

regularly distributed to the poor, a gesture of unheard-of largesse.

6 The recipe of the balsam was a closely guarded secret, so closely guarded, in fact, that the Order itself forgot it. Adalbert Mischlewski reports that a 1601 letter from the head of the Antonite hospital in Isenheim to the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria says that the recipe has regrettably already been lost. Some art historians have thought that a clue to its composition might be found in the herbs depicted in Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, a spectacular late medieval polyptych commissioned by the Isenheim monks. Under the panel showing St. Anthony meeting the hermit Paul, there are about a dozen herbs (by Lottelise Behling's count), including delicate tendrils of corn poppy, sage, ribwort, verben, gentian, and ranunculus. The balsam may have had vasodilatory or disinfecting properties.

7 The poisonings at Pont-Saint-Esprit in 1951 have attracted many theories, including speculation that the CIA poured LSD into the water supply as an experiment in psycho-warfare. John Fuller makes

a case for the ergotism hypothesis in *The Day of St. Anthony's Fire* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968). Albert Hoffman, who first synthesized LSD from ergot, disputes the ergotism explanation in his book *LSD: Mein Sorgenkind* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1979).

8 This argument owes a debt to an extraordinary observation in Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Scarry writes that pain and suffering so completely obliterate the normal parameters of experience that they appear to be without object: they just are, almost without cause. And yet, there is a deep need in the suffering mind to generate an objective cause for that pain: if we suffer from a terrible and mysterious pain in the spine, we say, as if to dilute the mystery, *It feels as if there is a hammer pounding on my spine*. What begins to be complicated, however, is when we begin to say, *There is a hammer pounding on my spine*, and we continue saying that until, before long, the hammer becomes enormous and alive and full of a malicious agency.

9 The pig was the famous "cochon d'Antoine," an extension of the order's communitarian principles into the lay world. Poor farmers could promise a piglet to the order, which would then feed on trash in the streets until it was fat enough to be sent to the monastery to be slaughtered and fed to the sick. It was an elegant solution, for it meant that everyone and no one was responsible for the care of the pig, and so it diminished the burden of the tithe.

10 Mischlewski's major work is *Grundzüge der Geschichte des Antoniterordens bis zum Ausgang des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau, 1976).

11 This, at least, is the convincing conclusion of the medical anthropologist Veit Harold Bauer in *Das Antonius-Feuer in Kunst und Medizin* (Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 1973). He notes that Bosch depicts another Antonite hospital in a drawing of the Temptation of Anthony now in the Kupferstich-Kabinett in Berlin.