PAINTING JESUS

An Essay on Philosophy, Art and Religion

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Painting and Philosophy

THERE IS NO QUESTION about the possibility of philosophizing about painting, for this activity has a rich tradition. But the question of whether or not painting itself can be a mode of philosophizing seems to be controversial. Consider the following claim by Mary Warnock:

> There is no real possibility of argument with the deliverances of the concrete imagination. If I see significance in some feature of the world around me, I am at liberty to say so. If I am a poet or a painter or film maker, then my vision of the world can be understood, perhaps shared, and may even be analysed, but argument need not come into the matter. But philosophy without arguments is not possible in the long run.[1]

I agree that a painting can present some vision of the world in creative, imaginative ways, and that it may be apprehended intuitively. But it seems to me that in the case of a painting, arguments are possible, in at least two ways.

First, like an axiom in logic or mathematics, a painting can be a starting point in a chain of reasoning. 'Mathematics and natural science must begin with an assumption', claims Javier Leach, 'and it is an assumption they choose'.[2] He points out that reasoning from chosen assumptions is not very different from what obtains in metaphysics and religion. So I suggest that a painting can present assumptions about the world in ways consistent with Warnock's characterization, which can then lead to philosophical argument.

[1] Mary Warnock, *Existentialism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1970), 139.
[2] Javier Leach, *Mathematics and Religion: Our Languages of Sign and Symbol* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2010), 126.

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Secondly, I think a painting may contain an argument. According to Paul Herrick,

> … within logic, an *argument* is nothing more than reasons offered in support of a claim or belief. The reasons offered in support are the *premises* of the argument, and the belief they are intended to support is the *conclusion* of the argument.[3]

I believe it is possible for a painting to present images which are the reasons (premises) intended to support the conclusion—or what the artist is saying in his or her picture. I shall discuss some examples from my own work later.

It is true that the nature of logic and its role in philosophy are disputed questions. Bertrand Russell regards logic as the essence of philosophy.[4] I do not go that far. But I believe that a painting, like logic, is a mode of symbolization and therefore a language object. It may contribute something to the 'abstract imagination' that Russell sees as the central contribution of logic to modern philosophy. Warnock's prioritising of argument in philosophy suggests that she leans in Russell's direction, although it is not clear if she would go as far as he does.

Iris Murdoch seems to share Warnock's doubt about painters as philosophers. 'Painters', she writes, 'that unphilosophical tribe who make pictures of the world, dissolve the solid object into planes and colours and space'.[5] Are painters really an 'unphilosophical tribe'? Now it may be true that that not all painters are philosophers, but some philosophers (including this writer) are painters, and it would be astonishing if they never philosophized with their paintings. (The World Congress of Philosophy has mounted exhibitions of visual art by philosophers at its meetings.) So philosophers are not an unpainterly tribe. And at least one, Spinoza—my favourite philosopher—carried a sketchbook, which was unfortunately lost after his death. I would give a lot to see what kind of artist he was.

[3] Paul Herrick, *The Many Worlds of Logic* (Philadelphia, New York and Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 2000), 1.

[4] Bertrand Russell, 'Logic as the Essence of Philosophy', in *Logic as Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*, edited by Peter T. Manicas (New York, Toronto and London: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1971), 25–36.

[5] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 37.

Murdoch's scepticism concerning the people who dissolve the solid objects of the world into colours, planes and space suggests, to me, that she sees these forms of representation as having a certain flimsiness. Is the image of less cognitive significance than the word? She seems to be suggesting that the word is a more important philosophical tool than the image. I am not going to argue for an egalitarianism of word and image in matters philosophical. But I do wish to suggest that the philosophical importance of the image has probably been underrated. More specifically, I wish to show that some of my own images have had philosophical importance to me.

Painting and Spirituality

I have spent some time examining the question of whether a painting can be philosophical, not because I want to explore the matter in detail here, but because I believe that the philosophical dimension of a painting can contribute importantly to its role in spirituality.

If there is some scepticism about painting as a mode of philosophizing, there is little reservation about its importance for spirituality. It is well known that it was and remains an aid to religious instruction and devotion. It is also a form of spiritual practice in its own right. I am mainly interested in the second of these functions. But, before proceeding further, it may be helpful to say a few things about the historical, psychological and philosophical contexts in which this connection has been explored.

Religion and Iconophobia

Historically, painting has had to wrestle with iconophobia. The Second Commandment prohibits the use of graven images (Exodus 20:4). Suspicion of the visual image was apparently also a feature of early Buddhism, and persists in much of Islam and Judaism. James Hillman, who regards imagery as a very important part of our psychic life, reminds us that the followers of Cromwell smashed images of Jesus, Mary and the saints, and that there is a history of church authorities exercising strict control over religious imagery. He points out that pro-imagery movements such as Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism and Rosicrucianism were branded as heretical and occult.[6]

[6] James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1975), 10–11.

Christianity has avoided this iconophobia by regarding Jesus himself as an icon of God.[7] Murdoch observes:

> Western art, so solid and so clear, has helped us to believe, not only in Christ and the Trinity, but in the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, innumerable saints and a whole cast of famous and well-loved scenes and persons.[8]

In her view there is religiosity in all great art, and visual art has therefore contributed to our understanding of religion.

The instructional and devotional uses of visual art are probably best known to most people. They see and respond to the stained-glass windows in their churches, and to the paintings and illustrations in religious literature or in museums. I once heard a bishop say that the paintings on the ceiling of his cathedral made him feel the presence of God. One may think of the icons of the Eastern Orthodox Church and their role in worship. I am also reminded of the intricate and amazing Thanka paintings of Tibetan Buddhism, intended to give religious instruction as well as to aid enlightenment.

Thanka of Milarepa

The fear of imagery, Hillman suggests, is the fear of the imagination. He points out that the depth psychologists Freud and Jung emphasize the importance of imagery in our lives, and especially in our dreams. I recall Nietzsche's view that when we dream we are all

[7] Ninian Smart, *The Long Search* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1971), 172.
[8] Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 82.

artists. Far from seeing dreams as mere fantasies, there are some thinkers, including Hillman, who see them as perhaps our deepest reality.

Spirit, Soul, Mind and Self

The word 'spiritual' is in need of analysis. I do not regard it as synonymous with 'religious'. I regard a religious person as someone who has embraced a body of (usually organized) doctrines, and who participates in rituals and observances connected with them. The spiritual may occur within religion, but I believe it may also be pursued outside religion. A spiritual person need not be religious in the sense just given.

John Dewey, following the poet John Keats, uses the expression 'Ethereal Things' to denote the domain many consider the spiritual.[9] It is usually contrasted with materiality, body and flesh. The cognates of 'spirit' include 'soul', 'mind' and 'self'. But although earlier philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant and Locke, wrote about the 'soul', this word has virtually disappeared from contemporary analytic philosophy. Nowadays it seems to be used mainly by theologians, poets and African American musicians. When Descartes wrote about the 'soul' he was clearly thinking of what we would call 'mind' today, and this is the word which now dominates contemporary philosophy. Few people doubt that minds exist, and, partly for this reason, I believe, philosophy of mind is at present one of the core areas of philosophy.

I was a psychology student in the 1970s, during the heyday of behaviourism, and we were encouraged to study observable and measurable behaviour, not the workings of some inner, invisible and mysterious 'mind'. Some joked that psychology had lost its mind! At around the same time Hillman was urging that psychology should return to its origins in the word 'psyche', which has a meaning similar to 'soul'.

The perplexing concept of the 'self' is a central part of contemporary philosophical discussion. It is also a key concept in psychology, which historically emerged out of philosophy. Educators speak of the importance of self-esteem in personal development. Many social theorists regard self-respect as one of the goods of social life. The size of the self-help industry suggests that the concept plays a very important role in modern life.

Yet I have chosen the word 'spiritual', a word rooted in 'spirit', which is virtually absent from contemporary analytic philosophy. None

[9] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Berkeley, 1934), 20.

of the derivatives of 'soul', 'mind' or 'self' seems appropriate—although a case could probably be made for 'soulful' and 'mindful' (in the Buddhist sense). Some may prefer to use 'spirit' to denote phenomena such as visions, miracles, prophecy, speaking in tongues and so on. While I am not a disbeliever in the possibility of numinous phenomena, I do not intend anything miraculous by my use of the word.

In my view 'spirit' is basically about the notion of nonmateriality. Thus Kandinsky suggests that a work of art has material and nonmaterial properties.[10] The canvas and paint constitute the material aspects of a painting. But it also has what he calls a 'spiritual atmosphere', and what Walter Benjamin would probably call an 'aura'.[11] Although Kandinsky does not make his ontological assumptions explicit, he seems to be a body/mind dualist, and the spiritual aspect of a painting for him is what I would call its mental aspect. This spiritual atmosphere, for him, is a nonmaterial entity which can cause vibrations in the corresponding spirit of the viewer. He goes further by linking the spirit of the individual work of art with the spirit or mind of its time and, through this link, he advances a theory about how art functions in historical development of the human spirit. For Benjamin the aura is the work's presence, uniqueness, authenticity and location in tradition.

'Spirit' is basically about the notion of nonmateriality

My use of the word 'spiritual' seems to be part of what Douglas Burton-Christie calls the anthropological or hermeneutical tradition, which is one of a number of ways of conceptualising the term. This approach, he claims, regards spirituality as a fundamental part of human experience. He quotes Sandra Schneider's definition:

> It is the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption, but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.[12]

Like Schneider I locate spirituality in the philosophical concept of the self. I am aware that my approach is similar to what Keatsians call

[10] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, translated by M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover, 1977), 55.
[11] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, edited by David Goldblatt and Lee B. Brown (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1971), 85–89.
[12] Sandra M. Schneiders, 'Spirituality in the Academy', *Theological Studies*, 50 (1989), 684, cited in Douglas Burton-Christie, 'The Literature of Nature and the Quest for the Sacred', *The Way Supplement*, 81 (Autumn 1994), 7.

'soul-making', but I prefer not to use the word 'soul'. It is also similar to what some call the cultivation of the self, but I think this view can legitimately exclude Kandinsky's spirit and Benjamin's aura, although these are notions for which I have considerable respect.

So, like Schneider, I regard self-transcendence as the core of what spirituality is about. In its earth-bound sense, transcendence may simply mean going beyond one experience to another that is qualitatively better. But on a deeper level, transcendence means going beyond human experience. Now it may be the privilege of artists to imagine things beyond human experience, but I am enough of an empiricist to prefer to remain within the bounds of experience. I suspect that when people try to transcend their humanity they will probably only end up rediscovering how human they are.

I also agree with Schneider that striving towards a goal of ultimate value is at the heart of any kind of spiritual exercise. This ultimate value may be *love*, and the spirituality may take the form of a strong desire to identify with and care for one's fellow human beings (or animals, plants and the natural environment). The ultimate value may be *truth*, if one is a scholar; *beauty*, if one is an artist; *excellence*, if one is an athlete or manufacturer; or *goodness*, a value which, as Plato recognised, is common to virtually all striving. I can imagine many values and states of being which may be regarded as the goals of spiritual striving. But the most popular candidate, I believe, would be some conception of the *sacred*.

Most probably think of the sacred as some kind of deity, God or gods, and things connected with their relationship with, and their wish to identify with, this being or beings. But there are non-theistic religions, especially in the Orient, which conceive of the sacred in other ways. The sacred may also be a mountain or river, a building, a piece of music, words in a language—or a work of art.

Jesus

I was socialised into belief in the personal God of Christianity. My mother was a deeply spiritual, Christian woman; but my father, for good reasons which he revealed to me late in his life, was sceptical of preachers and churches. I think I may have inherited something of both my mother's spiritual disposition and my father's scepticism. But the Christian God, ingrained through church-going and schooling, is so much a part of my

personal psychology and social life (prayer, rituals and observances) that He has become part of my psyche, and will probably always be there.

As far as I can recall, Jesus of Nazareth came into my consciousness in the form of a small painting on glass my mother had hanging on the bedroom wall in the house in which I was born. It showed him standing in a river, wearing only a white loincloth. His hands were clasped in front of his chest, and he was gazing into the sky with ecstatic eyes. A white dove was descending towards his head. I do not remember if John the Baptist was in the picture. But this portrayal of the baptism of Jesus was the only object of visual art in our house, and it was also my earliest encounter with painting.

At Sunday school and church I was told that Jesus was a God-man capable of working miracles. The legends and music concerning his birth, and the gory details of his trial and brutal murder on a cross—which, I was told, he abetted and willingly submitted to in spite of having the power to destroy his killers—were parts of the cycle of my childhood years. I embraced all of this uncritically, so much so that in my teens I decided that I wanted to be on his side, and I considered a career as a preacher spreading his word.

In my late teens I began to question all of this. As a student-teacher I began exploring other religious possibilities. But the person portrayed in the glass painting had a powerful grip on my imagination. I began trying to make sense of him in naturalistic terms. As a young teacher I read books on him written by Jews and Muslims. To my surprise I found their portrayals of him more plausible than the Christian ones to which I had become accustomed. I found it easier to empathize with their view of a mortal man who did extraordinary things, than with the Christian God who was only half-pretending to be a man. For a similar reason I found it easier to relate to the Buddha, who was presented, not as a god but as an extraordinarily brilliant man who was capable of very profound philosophical analysis which led to deep insights into human psychology. My very human imagination could not grasp the lofty Christian supernatural heights.

I began searching for the historical Jesus. I am now resigned to the view that unless historians and archaeologists stumble on extraordinary records, we are unlikely ever to know very much about the person behind the myth and the theology. My fiction-writer's intuitions tell me that much of what is written in the Gospels probably actually happened. There are some kinds of detail that not even the best novelists can imagine,

for real life is always a few levels above the reach of the imagination. I sense a certain realism in some of the Bible narratives.

Not all the surviving stories about Jesus are flattering. So the editors of the Bible probably selected the ones that they believed would cast him in the best possible light. These early and very partisan writers no doubt also felt that in order to promote him they had to stress what they thought was most attractive about him. So the Jesus of the Gospels is probably a very idealized figure, and one who has been mythologized over the centuries. This does not diminish his importance. Even if he is mythologized, this can tell us a good deal about human psychological needs. I often feel that the Bible tells us more about the Jewish people's thirst for God than about what such a being might be actually be like. The Bible, too, can be seen as poetry about God, in Dante's sense.

It is safe to say that no person in the West has had more hopes placed on him than Jesus. So, not surprisingly, he has inspired some of its greatest art. My favourite sculpture is Michelangelo's *Pietà*, which shows the body of the crucified Christ lying across the lap of his mother, Mary. I find it a moving work. My favourite music inspired by him is Handel's *Messiah*. My favourite painting of him was done by a fifteenth-century Flemish artist Rogier van der Weyden and is titled *Christ the Redeemer with the Virgin and St John the Evangelist*. I first saw it on the cover of a CD of Bach's *Mass in B Minor* (another favourite),

Christ the Redeemer with the Virgin and St John the Evangelist, *by Rogier van der Weyden*

and, for some reason, this face of Christ seems very familiar to me, as if it is that of someone I have known very well all my life.

Painting Jesus

Pareidolia

There are no certain records of what Jesus looked like. I have never seen the slightest suggestion in the Gospels. Yet attempts at portraying him go very far back. I became interested in this question when, in 1966, I saw what I would later learn was an isomorph or pareidolia in a newspaper. According to the story that went with the picture, a spiritually troubled Chinese photographer took a picture of melting snow and, when it was developed, he was stunned to see a picture of Jesus in it. The article challenged viewers to look closely to see if they could recognise the image. I saw the very traditional picture of Jesus at once. I cut out the article and, after nearly fifty years, I still keep it among my treasured possessions.

Shortly after, I did a painting of it, in black on yellow, thinking this would make it easier for other people to recognise the figure. Some viewers did, and others could not recognise it no matter how hard they tried. One of my student teachers, a devout Christian and artistically gifted, was very disturbed that she was unable to see it and kept coming to my flat to study the picture. I cannot recall that she ever saw it. When I resumed painting some forty years later, I revisited this theme, and incorporated the pareidolia into a painting I titled *Christ among the Rocks*. A few years later a powerful dream about a red and white cross inspired my painting *Red Jesus, White Cross: A Dream and a Pareidolia* (2005).

I am using the term 'isomorph' to mean a form which may be identical with at least two referents. Thus the photograph by the Chinese photographer may be identical with both the melting snow and the traditional image of Jesus. After a long search I came across the word 'pareidolia' in an article on astronomy. Seeing canals on Mars is an example of this phenomenon. As a child I became aware that people saw things in egg-white that they put in glasses of water before sunrise on Good Friday. As the day progressed some people (mostly women, I now realise) saw wedding cakes, and others (mostly men) saw ships that would take them to England.[13] I think

[13] This is a familiar Caribbean custom.

most of us are familiar with seeing things in clouds. Psychologists have made use of this tendency with their ink-blot tests. Apparently the phenomenon has been little studied. But it has a long and distinguished artistic pedigree. Leonardo encouraged his students to look at the stains and smudges on walls in order to get ideas for paintings. I realise now that since childhood I have had this tendency to see isomorphs or pareidolia in the images around me.

Seeing images of religious significance has resulted in some of these images becoming sacred shrines. Sceptics point out that only Roman Catholics tend to see images of the Virgin Mary, Muslims to see verses from the Qur'ān. Seeing Jesus in things is by now a well-established tradition. I have had a long interest in the Shroud of Turin. It is widely believed that it once wrapped the crucified body of Jesus, and that the image of a man imprinted on it is that of Jesus. But scientific studies suggest that it was produced sometime around the thirteenth century. However there is no generally accepted explanation of how the image was produced, so something of a mystery still remains. It seems to me that the image is not unlike some of the conventional images of Jesus. So one may wonder if the conventional pictures played a role in its production. Perhaps scholarship will solve its mystery.

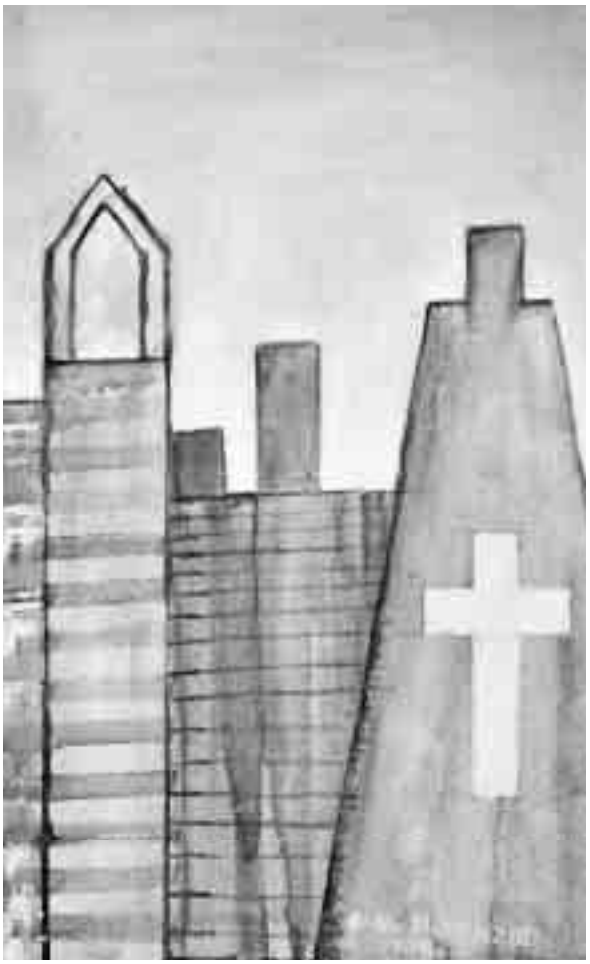
New Creation

In another dream I saw an image of a sleeping (or dead) Jesus in a brown rock beside a river. It looked as if it could have been a sculpture by Rodin, and it inspired my painting *After the Jesus Dream* (2008). The painting is not an attempt at copying the dream: I never try to make my paintings mimetic in the deprecatory Platonic sense, or even in the more positive Aristotelian one of imitation as a way of learning. I think a painting

should be a new creation, even if it is inspired by the ordinary phenomenal world of our experience, or by the world of dreams. I intend some equivocation in my use of the word 'After' in the title: it could be a slight nod in the direction of imitation, or coming later in time. Viewers have seen many religious associations, from the stone rolled away from the sepulchre of Jesus, to the name of the apostle Peter (which means 'rock'), to the river scene of the baptism of Christ. I am aware that stones have had sacred meanings in many world cultures, and have appeared as such elsewhere in my work.

The Cross

I have already mentioned my unease with the Christian celebration of the brutal murder of Jesus on a cross. (My opposition to capital punishment may have something to do with this.) But the image of the cross seems to haunt my imagination, Actually, I read somewhere that this symbol did not originate with Christianity but existed in ancient Egypt. Perhaps it is a Jungian archetype. But one night I dreamt that I saw a white cross painted on the wall of a building in a grey city. There



were no people in the dream; only the buildings and the cross suggested their existence. The dream inspired my painting *The White Cross* (2008).

It is perhaps significant that this cross, like the others in my paintings, is an example of what is called the Latin cross. Aniela Jaffé explains that the transition from the mandala-like, equilateral Greek cross to this form 'symbolized the tendency to remove the center of man and his faith from the earth and to "elevate" it into the spiritual sphere'.[14] In other words it represents what I earlier called the desire to transcend human nature. This painting is clearly about urbanisation and spirituality. Like some of my other pieces, it reminds some viewers of the works of Giorgio de Chirico, the founder of metaphysical art. The urban theme is perhaps understandable. I have rural origins and seldom feel at home in big cities. This painting was done in Kingston, a city in need of spiritual transcendence if ever there was one!

Painting as Spiritual Exercise

My thinking about painting as a spiritual exercise began after reading Pierre Hadot's claim that the ancients regarded philosophy as a spiritual exercise, and that this view of it has had considerable influence on the history of the subject.[15] At the same time I was also wrestling with the question of whether a painting can be philosophical. Having answered

[14] Aniela Jaffé, 'Symbolism in the Visual Arts', in *Man and his Symbols*, edited by Carl Gustav Jung and M.–L. von Franz (New York: Dell, 1964), 273.
[15] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Malden, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell, 1995), 79.

this question in the affirmative, and concluded that a philosopher can reason with and from images, my next question was whether painting can be a spiritual exercise as philosophy was with the ancients. A review of my own life as a painter revealed that the activity of painting has been one of my main ways of dealing with my spiritual struggles.

Although I have tried to put some of this into words, I agree with Dewey that paintings exist because they can say things that words cannot.[16] So this essay is not intended as a substitute for my paintings, all of which can be regarded as spiritual exercises, for they all spring from a spiritual disposition. The philosophy, the art and the religion are all aspects of the same quest.

Earl McKenzie taught philosophy for many years at the University of the West Indies, Mona. His publications include *Philosophy in the West Indian Novel*, three collections of poetry—*Against Linearity*, *A Poet's House* and *The Almond Leaf*—two collections of short stories—*A Boy Named Ossie: A Jamaican Childhood* and *Two Roads to Mount Joyful*—and one multi-genre volume, *A Bluebird Named Poetry: Linked Poems, Stories and Paintings*. He has had a number of solo art exhibitions, and his work is featured in Jacqueline Bishop's *Writers Who Paint / Painters Who Write*.

[16] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 77.