

Trinity College Cambridge

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Picturing the Christian Life

Genesis 33: 22-30

Gauguin: Vision after the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)

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On September 22nd, 1888, Paul Gauguin wrote to his friend Vincent Van Gogh from Pont-Aven in Brittany. 'I have just painted a religious picture, very badly done, but it interested me and I like it. I wanted to give it to the Church here. Naturally they don't want it.' He then describes the painting. In it 'a group of Breton women are praying, their costumes very intense black. The coifs very luminous yellowy-white. The two coifs to the right are like monstrous helmets. An apple tree cuts across the canvas, dark purple with its foliage drawn in masses like emerald green clouds with patches of green and sun yellow. The ground (pure vermilion). In the church it darkens and becomes a brown red. The angel is dressed in ultramarine blue and Jacob in bottle green. The angel's wings pure chrome yellow 1. The angel's hair chrome 2 and the feet flesh orange. I think I have achieved in the figures a great simplicity, rustic and *superstitious*. The whole thing very severe.'

This is Gauguin describing the picture you have before you. It's called 'Vision after the Sermon (Jacob wrestling with the Angel)'. It hangs in the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, and will be included in Tate Modern's major Gauguin exhibition later this year, where I hope you'll be able to see it for yourselves.

Gauguin's description of his painting is very matter of fact – painter to painter, as it were – concerned primarily with composition, and very precise about his colour scheme. Indeed it's only in the penultimate sentence of the passage I've already quoted, that he refers to the painting's content. 'I think I have achieved in the figures a great simplicity, rustic and *superstitious*'.

Now we don't even know for sure whether Gauguin had been in Pont-Aven parish church himself that morning, and had actually listened to a sermon on the passage in Genesis 33 that we ourselves have just heard in the First Lesson. And although we've already learned – from that letter to Van Gogh I quoted earlier to you – a bit about his approach to the painting's composition and colour, we really know next to nothing about what triggered his choice of this particular subject. Most painters of religious artworks – even the greatest of them, past and present – are, in my experience, often maddeningly reticent about their own religious identity and beliefs.

Hence, with so little evidence to go on, it's tempting to interpret this painting as little more than a piece of sentimental *volkskitsch* (such religious apparitions were, in fact, both recurrent, and well-known, in late nineteenth century France) or simply an exercise in visual anthropology, – literally 'Picturing the Christian Life', among the Breton peasantry, as it were! Here we find the city-bred, and very urban, Gauguin going 'bush' in rural Brittany (as he was later to do in Tahiti), observing the customs of the natives, and, like his contemporary Emile Durkheim, recording what the latter famously called 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life', with a bemused mixture of detachment and condescension. Many art historians have, alas, merely followed suit. 'This picture,' says one of them, 'depicts the moment after the sermon when the peasants, in their simplicity, almost imagine that they can

see Jacob wrestling with the Angel. The priest himself appears in the bottom right corner'. Etcetera, etcetera.

Yet this really won't do. We're not looking at some *folklorique* event here (although the head and shoulder wrestling holds are, I'm told, specific to the region!) nor at some version of rural street theatre, nor even at a communal exercise in religious imagination, invoked by a Biblical text. We are, I think, – whether Christian or not – in much more interesting, even dangerous, territory – a pictorial exercise in 'magical realism' whereby Gauguin requires us to suspend our own disbelief while witnessing the beliefs and practices of others. His motives are actually quite explicit. We know, from his contemporaries, that this seminary-educated Symbolist's own religious beliefs went far beyond the conventional anti-clericalism and apologetics of his time. 'I'm not a very convinced believer,' Gauguin told his fellow-guests at the Pension Gloanec in Pont-Aven,' and I'm forever struggling for the Truth' (capital T!). We also know that he wanted to overcome the prevailing, positivist, Comptean approach to reality, by deploying a new arsenal of visual forms through which to seek transcendence and to point himself, and us, towards an ideal, supernatural realm extending beyond everyday perceptual experience.

Unsurprising, therefore, that a few weeks after completing this painting, he wrote to his friend, the Parisian stockbroker-turned painter Emile Schuffenecker, who had been enthusing to him about the Impressionists. 'A word of advice. Don't paint too much directly from nature. Art is an abstraction! Study nature, then brood on it and think more of the creation which will result – which is the only way to ascend towards God – to create like our Divine Master.' And in 'Vision after the Sermon' we see Gauguin boldly entering such territory for himself, working primarily from memory

and imagination rather than nature. Real figures, the peasants and the priest, are juxtaposed with imaginary figures. The Breton women, with their simple, yet deep faith, have heard a sermon on the fight between Jacob and the Angel. They see it in all its reality before their eyes. Yet they are not so stupid as to think that it is a real man fighting the angel there before them – they are human! So Gauguin paints the grass red. Yet to these women the story is as real as their cows: the story took place on the same level of reality as the one on which they themselves lived – so on the same red grass we see a real cow. At the same time the weightless, and out of scale, cow, the unanchored tree and the floating women at the upper left edges of the Vision, while breaking most rules of perspective, also gives us, the viewers, like the women in the painting, the experience of transcending physical nature, and of ‘rising towards God’ by replicating divine creation above and beyond the contingencies and weight of matter.

I hope it is clear by now that I do not, as some do, see this painting as little more than a picturesque rendition of Breton folk piety. I see it rather, to borrow Debora Silverman’s memorable phrase, as ‘a composite meditation on states of consciousness and levels of reality.’ Taking an occasion of ritual action, Gauguin transforms it into a transcendent encounter across the divide of material reality, a sacred moment of contact, when the women, withdrawn from their physical senses, close their eyes to behold the ideal enacted – a miraculous mutation, as it were, from folk piety to interior vision. To make sure we get the point, Gauguin uses the brilliant pictorial device of the tree’s strong diagonal to separate the reality of the women’s prayer life from the supernaturalism of their vision. This also, I think, makes nonsense of the well-worn art-historical canard that, as H.W. Janson puts it, ‘Gauguin could paint pictures about faith, but not from faith’. On the contrary, in his ‘Vision after the Sermon’ Gauguin surely reminds us that, as Rowan Williams put it

in one of your own Clark Lectures, 'a theology of art can be a privileged vehicle of divinity'. It also carries with it a remarkable, and for me, highly-charged, elision of Word and Image. The conclusion of the Jacob story, as we heard it read, really suggests that Jacob realizes he has striven with God, prevailed and seen God face to face. Gauguin's painting surely helps to point us in the same direction. Here, seeing really can lead to believing!

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