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Art History as Spiritual Practice: A Case Study

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The 40th Distinguished Faculty Lecture Response

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I am very grateful to Professor Liebert for the opportunity to reflect on the important topic of “Academic Life and Scholarship as Spiritual Practice” that was brought to the fore tonight, and I would like to offer the following thoughts as a sort of experiential case study from the realm of religious art.

After completing my undergrad work, I had the unique opportunity to embark on a yearlong *wanderjahr*, funded by the Thomas J. Watson Foundation, to explore an inkling of an idea that had started to form. I had been simultaneously studying Tibetan Buddhism and Christian medieval manuscripts, and was fascinated with the idea that art-making itself could be construed as a sacred journey within the religious art of both traditions. I set off one day in April, my backpack bursting at the seams like Samwise Gamgee’s – but instead of crockery and spices I had pigments and brushes. I

would go on to work with illuminators and iconographers in their scriptoria and Thangka painters at the Norbulingka Institute in the Dalai Lama's exile community in Dharamsala.

During that trip, I had the pleasure to correspond with, and then later interview and observe an iconographer named Aidan Hart who is a member of the Orthodox Church in Britain. He believes that he is called to perceive the essence – or logos – of his subjects, in holy persons as well as events and sacred landscapes, and then manifest this in paint.¹ He does not copy subjects, but relies on the inspiration of the Spirit to unearth these spiritual qualities – what Gerard Manley Hopkins called the “instress of a thing”, and what Prof. Liebert invoked so eloquently in her lecture this evening.

In his own words, he underscores the traditional role of these sacred objects:

Icons are not only manifestations of heaven to earth...but are an offering of man to God, a priestly prayer in paint rather than word.²

The kind of experience of viewing that religious and liturgical art entails aims to unite the heavenly and earthly realms as an imperfect mirror of a heavenly archetype. To explain further, in many ways, all religious art is the embodiment of a sacred journey for maker and viewer. The process of visually narrating encounters with sacred space through visual and verbal emblems is a multi-dimensional process where art-making and viewing both form re-enacted pilgrimages in and of themselves.

Anagogic imagery is well-rooted in Christian mysticism. For example, the 12th century philosopher and theologian Hugh of St Victor presented an image as a vehicle towards finding God within.

¹ See Aidan Hart, *Beauty, Spirit, Matter: Icons in the Modern World* (London: Gracewing, 2014).

² Aidan Hart. “Icons and the Spiritual Role of Matter,” *l'Osservatore Romano*, December 7, 2011, English edition.

With its Old Testament iconography and layers of meaning, Hugh employs the image of Noah's Ark, which becomes a form of visual exegesis.³ The ark visually articulates the interior life (in the form of ladders advancing through the various stages of contemplative life and vision) as well as actually becoming the mystical body of Christ, with his limbs and head extending beyond the boat itself. This was meant to assure the viewer of God's presence within.⁴

The nineteenth century, the poet, artist, and visionary William Blake (who probably would have come into contact with Victorine mysticism via Dante or St. Teresa of Avila)⁵ spoke of 'entering into' his 'images of wonder',⁶ and expressed the hope that they would help the viewer gain a closer proximity to the divine as well as to break off the 'mind-forg'd manacles' of societal oppression.

I am going dwell here on Blake because it was a nineteenth-century context that I would ultimately focus on for my first book.⁷ The example also provides a good model for how being rooted in practice has positively impacted my scholarly research pursuits. That being said, I offer the following as a brief case study of Prof. Liebert's theory of scholarship as spiritual practice presented this evening.

To clarify, what I mean is that studying (and occasionally painting alongside) artists working within specific religious and liturgical traditions during my Watson fellowship year allowed me to take seriously the idea of painting as a meditative process. By the

³ Steven Chase, *Contemplation and Compassion: The Victorine Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 79.

⁴ Chase, *Contemplation and Compassion*, 81.

⁵ Kathryn Barush, *Art and the Sacred Journey in Britain, 1790-1850* (London: Routledge, 2016), 124-6, 129, 150.

⁶ "If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought ... or could make a Friend & Companion of one of these images of wonder", he declared, "then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then he would be happy." William Blake, "A Vision of Last Judgment for the year 1810, Additions to Blake's Catalogue of Pictures &c' (1810)," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, eds. David Erdman and Harold Bloom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 560. Hereafter, *Works by William Blake*.

⁷ K. Barush, *Art and the Sacred Journey in Britain, 1790-1850*.

time I landed in the nineteenth century, I noticed that Blake's ideas resonated with that of the traditional icon painter. He said, for example, "Prayer is the Study of Art/Praise is the Practise of Art/Fasting &c. all relate to Art."⁸ This also resonates with aspects of the *Lectio Divina* that Prof. Liebert discussed this evening.

Blake's discursive self-awareness and synthesis of aesthetics with mysticism allowed me to position him as both pilgrim and painter, and situate his work within that of a historical trajectory of earlier religious artists and illuminators. At a time when anti-Catholic rhetoric was still rampant, Blake would give a Spanish, Roman Catholic saint associated with 'mental pilgrimage' – St Teresa of Avila – a privileged place in his own mythopoetic system.

Blake's student, fellow artist Samuel Palmer related that '[Blake] was fond of the works of St Teresa, and often quoted them with other writers on interior life' and that 'St Teresa was his delight'.⁹ He gave her pride of place at the 'Wine Press of Love' (which serves as the gateway to Beulah in his illuminated book *Jerusalem*). He also started to insert an image of a small, nun-like figure into places where his visual and written texts would resonate with Teresa's writings. Of particular interest were themes regarding spiritual and corporeal vision or 'locution', the soul's pilgrimage through four transformative 'states'; and her ultimate experience of transverberation, or mystical union with the divine.

Using a number of other case-studies, I then started to tease out themes of Catholic influence that ran through the art and theology of this tricky, pre-Emancipation period when Roman Catholics were struggling to regain civil liberties in the UK, including the right to worship.

⁸ William Blake, "Annotations to the Laocoön" (c.1826-7), in *Works by William Blake*, (London), 274. For the reader, "&c." is an eighteenth/nineteenth century convention for shortening "et cetera." The dashes indicate line breaks. Generally, Blake's work contains slightly idiosyncratic capitalization, spelling, and so forth.

⁹ Samuel Palmer, 'From Palmer to Anne Gilchrist, 2 July 1862,' in *The Letters of Samuel Palmer*, Vol. 2, ed. Raymond Lister (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 663.

The overarching theme of art making as pilgrimage provided a new interpretive angle for my project. It also contributed to studies of the cultural and religious history of Britain by tracing a common enterprise and conceptual framework – that of spiritual journey – across a variety of systems of religious belief. By doing so it presented a historiographical critique of both secularist and denominational assumptions in literary criticism, cultural anthropology, and art historical studies of the period.

My project was a drop in the bucket. I hope, though, that the trajectory of my research *process* illustrates in some small way the flourishing that can take place when, as Prof. Liebert has described, scholarship meets spiritual practice. Temporal boundaries have been broken down in my scholarly practice, allowing me to confront the ‘radical otherness’ of the past that was discussed this evening.

Although the case study I have focused on here is historic, my more recent research has taken a sociological turn as I study aspects of pilgrimage practice today. I’ve had the opportunity to walk, pray, and break bread with people in marginalized communities who feel the same sense of alienation that Blake did in his own time. Given the political climate of the country at the present, I’d like to take advantage of being the last speaker before the Q&A and ask Prof. Liebert whether she would like to address the importance of ‘keeping on keeping on’, to paraphrase Bob Dylan. That is to say, how can we affect change through continuing our work – indeed, our vocation - of creating scholarship as a spiritual practice, at a time when this is so crucial?

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