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Jacob's Night

I didn't expect to be consulted seriously about the dust-jacket of The Modern Construction of Myth, but I had given it some thought, so when my editor asked if I had any ideas for the cover, I confessed to my fantasy, a reproduction of Gauguin's Vision After the Sermon. One evening a year and a half later, as my eyes wandered over the usual assortment of books strewn on our coffee-table starving for lack of attention, they paused on the dust jacket of my own contribution to the heap long enough for me to notice its strangeness rather than its familiarity. The reproduction itself encouraged the estrangement; it reduces Gauguin's strong black, glowing yellow-white, vermillion and gold to ghostly shades of grey, white and greenish-grey. Why, I wondered, had I specified that particular painting?

It's not that I had no idea why until that moment. In the book, I cite Gauguin's early Breton and later Tahitian and Marquesan Islands paintings as examples of the fascination with myth among turn-of-the-century painters and composers. And I had certainly thought of Vision After the Sermon as a specific instance; when I proposed it I spoke of it as an appropriate emblem for some of my central concerns. But this painting wasn't unique in its suitability. To go no further than Gauguin, his Yellow Christ, would have done as well, with its kneeling peasant women and its figure on the cross of the same greenish-yellow as the dying autumn fields around it. I picked The Vision After the Sermon because of a special fondness for it, which I'd acquired during my college years. This much I had been well aware of all along, but the question I asked myself on that particular evening carried me further. At the point in my life when I conceived this fondness I had never consulted an art book or seen a Gauguin in a museum. So where had I encountered The Vision After the Sermon?

And then it came back to me. It was of course in a book, a little one by Wallace Fowlie, called Jacob's Night. The Vision After the Sermon is Fowlie's frontispiece, and though he doesn't discuss it in his main text, he does so briefly in one of several "Notes," printed as appendices. I wouldn't have been able, after all these years, to say anything so specific about the contents of Jacob's Night if I had to depend solely on memory. But when I recalled the source of my interest, I wondered if I still had my copy of it and experienced a quick image of its light tan spine sequestered in our little French poetry section. And yes, there it was, not twenty feet from where I was sitting, virtually as new as when I bought it half a century ago. Inside, its attractiveness was marred only by some pencilled notes in the margins, scrawled by that faintly familiar person who affected the placing of circles over his "i"s instead of dots. I don't remember for certain quite when or where I originally found this treasure. The loopy handwriting does help to date it, though; I'm inclined to think I bought it during the peak of my religious fervor, when I was nineteen. But it might have been as much as three years later when I was on leave from the army, visiting Janet during her psychiatric affiliation at Buffalo State. (A sudden image intrudes here--as I approach the stained tenement-like main building at Buffalo State I see floors and floors of brick-faced balconies on which, behind heavy, dark-meshed screening, dozens of patients, only dimly visible, are stirring like zoo animals; I feel a wave of waste, despair, neglect, entrapment. Is this an applicable clue?) Memory hovers in that timelessness that Freud attributes to the unconscious, yet it insists on a definite scenario about place. It now swears, in its perjurous way, that I bought Jacob's Night in the Catholic Bookstore in Buffalo. I recall this store as a small, slightly creepy shop in a decrepit block of the grimy downtown. Like the comparable and even smaller store in Elmira, it sold mainly ecclesiastical paraphernalia--prayer books, rosaries, holy cards--along with a small, and no doubt much slower-moving, stock of books.

According to my new friend, shifty-eyed Mr. Memory, who has returned home after fifty years without even pretending to explain his absence, I bought Jacob's Night for two

reasons: because it was such a pleasing production, and because of my fascination with there being such a thing as a Catholic intellectual. In fact, acquiring the book may have been the cause rather than the effect of my entertaining this notion. I certainly didn't travel in circles where the word "intellectual" had any currency; if the concept had to be expressed the word for it was "egghead," as in the distressed cry of working-class Democrats at that time, "Adlai Stevenson, that egghead!" As I inspect it now, the 114-page book shows signs of having originated in a set of lectures, though there's no actual acknowledgment that it did. It consists of four gracefully written chapters of about 25 pages apiece. It contains no footnotes, but ends with three appended "Notes," including the very brief one titled "The Frontispiece: Gauguin, Jacob and the Angel." The book as a whole is inspired by Fowlie's enthusiasm for the appearance in late nineteenth and early twentieth century France of a number of "intellectuals," several of them converts, whose specifically Catholic versions of love of la patrie are very publically at the center of their work. Fowlie focuses in successive chapters on three of these--the writer (he calls him "prophet") Charles Péguy, the painter Georges Rouault and the philosopher, Jacques Maritain. Fowlie's fourth chapter, "Myths of Modern Poetry," takes a line familiar to readers of T. S. Eliot's essays. The poet is the modern hero, who plays out in his career the agon of alienation and yearning for belief; Fowlie traces the maudit apostolic succession from Dante to Baudelaire to Rimbaud, to Mallarmé, to Rilke, Claudel, St.-John Perse (in his Anabase, translated by Eliot himself) and from there to the grand panjandrum in person.

Jacob's Night was published (by Sheed & Ward) in 1947. When I read it, at some point in the early '50s, I knew little of Eliot's verse and even less about his critical opinions. The book was a dazzler. Rereading it now induces the familiar sensation of looking through the wrong end of a telescope. As Baudelaire, Fowlie's fountainhead of this tradition of modern poetry, puts it: "Aux yeux de souvenir que le monde est petit!" What renders peculiarly remote this sensibility that I once aspired to share is not, however, merely its shrinkage in the eyes of memory; it's Fowlie's cultural blindness to what lay immediately

ahead. In his Note, on “Existentialist Theater,” and in his essay on Rouault he thinks it useful to inform his audience briefly about the emergence of Heidegger, Sartre and Camus, but they appear only as tiny, uncertain clouds on the horizon of the great noonday of religious art and philosophy.

Yet my discovery of the book’s continuing subliminal influence on me looms as a warning against dismissing it so easily. No sooner did I look again into the essay on Rouault’s religious art, than I remembered that throughout my twenties I found peculiarly appealing his fierce, monumental “portraits” of clowns and prostitutes, soldiers and judges, in their planes of jarring, glowing Fauvist color surrounded by black borders that typically remind viewers of panels of old stained glass separated by their lead casings. For many years I searched for and finally obtained a reproduction of one of Rouault’s best known works, The Old King. He sits facing right, so that we see him in left profile. His torso is turned slightly to the left, vulnerable to the gaze of the viewer he ignores, but his head is twisted further right so that his left neck cord stands out strongly and a deep black fold of shadow marks that side of his face like a scar. His eyelids are lowered so far it looks as if the eyes might be closed. His hands in his lap clutch, as if unconsciously, a sprig of white flowers; his mind is not on the present moment, but on some scene out of the past that he’s retasting as he chews his cud of remorse. He is actually portrayed as middle-aged; he’s still dark-haired, dark bearded, emanating virility. If he’s “old” it’s in a moral sense; he seems to feel himself to be the long-standing ruin of a human being. He wears his gold crown, glittering in the darkness, like a penance he accepts. Rouault makes it difficult for the viewer not to think of it as a crown of thorns, not to see this image as a semi-blasphemous portrait of Jesus, what his majesty would have come to feel like to him, perhaps, if he had yielded to the third of Satan’s temptations, and fallen down and worshipped him in return for the kingdoms of this world. Somehow, somewhere along the way, I lost my reproduction of The Old King. It surprises me to think that I could have forgotten so completely my fascination with this painting, but it surprises me still more to recognize that

even when I experienced it I had already obliterated my awareness of its source in Fowlie's essay.

The same is true of my enduring fondness for Gauguin's The Vision After the Sermon. Fowlie introduces the topic of Gauguin's painting in his chapter on Rouault when he compares Rouault's struggles with both the psychological values of his "portraits" and the plastic values of his medium to Jacob's night-long grapple with the angel. The patriarch exacts a blessing, but only at the cost of a maiming; Rouault limps beneath the weight of the sin-blackened world he carries about. In Fowlie's frontispiece of course Jacob's struggle is represented directly. The lower half of Gauguin's canvas and nearly its entire height along the entire right side are occupied by the shapes of Breton women wearing their traditional black blouses and white coifs. They kneel in a semi-circle facing into a vermillion field where (in the upper left corner of the canvas) Jacob and the angel are locked in each other's holds. The garments of the two figures are a green and blue nearly as dark as the peasants' blouses, but the wrestlers' heads, hands and bare feet are flesh-colored and the angel's outspread wings are gold or, as Gauguin said in a letter to Van Gogh describing the painting, "pure chrome." From the upper right side of the field a curious brindled cow trots toward the struggle, its legs and hooves echoing the legs and conspicuously set feet of the wrestlers. Between the beast and the combatants the arching brown trunk of a tree bisects the field (its umbrella of foliage is visible along most of the top edge of the canvas), thus isolating Jacob and the angel in a sacred space. This effect is intensified by the chrome highlights on the trunk and leaves of the tree on the wrestlers' side of the field, as if the brightness of the angel's wings defined the borders of this space. The balanced sets of four-legged activity suggest that the wrestlers share with the beast not only the red field of the vision, but a very carnal physical embodiment. Yet we sense that if the cow could pass behind the tree trunk and reach the scene of commotion on the other side of its pasture the grass would be green and the wrestlers gone.

Fowlie reads the painting as allegory, “a symbol,” he says, “for the particular kind of fidelity we have studied in these essays. France is obstinately faithful to herself. The faith of the Breton peasant women would be comparable to that of the people of France. The tree which cuts across the center of the composition would be the ancient faith of the land itself, the secular memory of the earth and of the centuries. Jacob, almost overcome in his angelic combat, would be the prophet or the artist or the thinker, who, apart from his people, engages upon a contest whereby he may extract, because of his vocation of solitude, a blessing for himself and for those who watch without always seeing or understanding.”

This account of the painting is an elegant epitome of Fowlie’s argument, but, re-reading it after all these years, I find that his allegorical appropriation of the painting interferes with his acknowledgment of the work’s complexity. Perhaps the most fundamental indication of trouble is that “Jacob’s night” is a day; this vibrant daytime vision occurs after early mass on a Sunday morning in summer. I don’t think Fowlie is mistaken about Gauguin’s identification with Jacob, but to appreciate the nature of this identification requires a longer look at where Gauguin locates himself in the work. He actually distributes his subjectivity among three aspects of the painting, not just one. Recognizing the second begins with attending to the strange figure in the lower left corner. It’s not a representation of a Breton peasant woman; in fact, it’s a middleaged man, who looks quite ashen and very sober. He’s wearing on the top of his head a small grey cap trimmed with a broad band of black fur, the hair beneath it of the same grey color as the cap and closecropped. The effect of the fur band against the hair suggests a tonsure. He stands at the end of the rank of believers, head bowed, eyes cast down, apparently at one with them in praying humbly for the outcome of the struggle. The really startling thing about this figure, though, is that it’s plainly a self-portrait of Gauguin. We know that the artist produced this canvas in September of 1888, probably in direct connection with the two-day pardon festival at Pont-Aven. This celebration entailed a procession on Sunday morning comprised of local women in traditional dress, penitential pilgrims, tourists and so forth .

After a high mass complete with relevant sermon, dances followed and games that included wrestling contests. Gauguin tells Van Gogh in the letter in which he describes the painting that “the fight only exists in the imagination of the people praying because of the sermon.” By portraying himself as one of them, Gauguin suggests that he is not merely an observer of the pardon but one of the penitents who shares the women’s vision. We know, too, from the same letter, that after finishing the picture Gauguin offered it as a gift to the church at Pont-Avens. That the parish priest did not accept it does not detract from the significance of the offer. Gauguin’s self-portrait in the corner of the painting resembles those medieval instances in which the commissioning donor requested that a portrait of him as fellow-worshipper be included in the scene.

Fowlie’s remark about “those who watch without always seeing or understanding” shows that he does experience subliminally the impact of the third level of the artist’s subjective presence in the work, but his allegory again leads him away from proper attention to its significance. I refer to the way the painter depicts his own position relative to the scene he composes. He is stationed behind that kneeling wall of caps and backs, more precisely, slightly to the left of the pious version of himself, directly behind the woman to the left of that self, over whose cap he looks straight toward the wrestlers, and to the right of the rest of the bowing or kneeling semi-circle. But he is also raised above all them as if he were standing on a slightly higher knoll or floating off the ground like an escapee from a Chagall. From this elevation he can take in the whole curving line. His projection of what he imagines this group to be imagining constitutes a powerful, but deeply ambivalent, tribute to their faith. On the one hand he has gone so far in his empathy as to include his own believing self participating in the construction of the vermillion field, the gold-winged angel, the struggling patriarch. On the other hand, he is a literally “superior” contemplator of that circle of faith; he is shut out of it physically by the backs of those absorbed in praise, but morally by what Fowlie calls the artist’s or intellectual’s “vocation of solitude,” by what is cold, disinterested, mercilessly revelatory about an act of aesthetic creation. From this point

of view, Gauguin's bodying forth of what the circle projects constitutes an emblem of "myth" in its anthropological or folkloristic sense--a story that some group of others regards as sacred truth. But the others in this case include himself! Is the quondam lapsed Catholic caught up for the moment in renewed fervor, trumped or not by his vocation of solitude? The agon of belief and unbelief dramatized in the contradiction between the second and third locations of Gauguin's presence in the work certainly seem to justify Fowlie's conviction that Gauguin identifies with the figure of Jacob. But the blessing he struggles to extort from the angel hasn't simply to do with his craft; it concerns where we come from, what we are and where we're going.

These belated reservations don't impugn in the least Fowlie's early contribution to my subliminal life in images. I've never owned a copy of The Vision of the Sermon, but a version of a related Gauguin has presided, from the wall above my desk, over the long production of The Modern Construction of Myth. This is the Ia Orana Maria, or "Hail Mary," a Tahitian painting that was actually done only three years after the Breton one. The later canvas is certainly a rethinking of the earlier. Most strikingly, perhaps, its disposition of the figures of the worshipers and what they see is The Vision turned inside out. All five figures are viewed from the front, with the Mother and Child in the foreground. They loom up, haloed, on the right side of the canvas, Mary in a red cotton print dress with the naked Christ child, who looks a sturdy three or four, held securely by the left leg with both hands as he sits astride her left shoulder leaning his right cheek on her head. The two worshipping women, their hands folded in prayer, are stationed near the center of the canvas, behind the sacred pair, facing them at a forty-five degree angle. The golden-yellow-winged angel who is sponsoring or revealing the vision to the two mortals stands at the same angle behind them on the left side of the picture, partially obscured by the thin leaves and small white flowers of a young sapling. The angel seems to be bending its force on the two women and they are absorbed in adoration of the Mother and Child. But Mary and Jesus both appear to be looking quietly and cannily at the observer, not with suspicion exactly, but as if waiting to

see what he will do. The dynamic of the vision's diagonal projection from left rear to right foreground combines with the interested gazes of Mother and Child bent upon the observer to dramatize directly the confrontation of the observer with the vision. It's as if he is being challenged not to believe.

In this painting too, Gauguin locates the sacred duo in a separate space. Here he does it by dividing the terrain horizontally into contrasting bands of color. Mary's feet are placed upon an emerald swath of grass, in front of a low altar loaded with bananas and cassava or breadfruit that occupies the lower left foreground. The two ordinary women stand in an intermediate band of violet and mauve that represents a path or road, and immediately behind them a narrower ribbon of rich brown indicates the earthen bank along the farther side of the road. The angel's feet appear to rest very lightly at a slant on the lower edge of this cut. Beyond the cut a zone of lighter yellow fields serves the double purpose of setting off the brown skin tones of the figures and suggesting the realm of secular daily life. The upper section of the canvas consists mostly of a final background of somber mountains, though further bands of blue, yellow and brown sky curve along the upper left-hand corner where the mountains recede in the distance. Once again Gauguin asserts, by means of these lateral bands of terrain, the incommensurability of mundane with visionary space, but the effect is very different from what it is in Vision After the Sermon. The border between the two sorts of space does not appear so radically impossible to cross. This difference can be attributed to several features of the painting, most immediately to Gauguin's creation of an intermediate zone between the secular and the sacred. The band of the road, in which the two worshippers have halted, is neither the richly dark greensward on which Mary's feet rest nor the parched, sunny emptiness of the everyday field from which they've come. They have entered, in the dark violet road that looks almost like the bed of a shallow stream, a liminal space of meditation that opens them to the angel's gift of sight.

The high finish of the painting also works to integrate the two realms. The horizontal planes that distinguish the three principal zones are interrupted with the verticals

of flowering trees and bushes, a distant straw-thatched dwelling-place and so on, in intricately repeated patterns of shape and color. This painterly composition creates an effect very different from that of The Vision. Whereas the blocks of primary color, the vermilion field, the chrome wings, the bold curves of white coifs and brown apple tree in the earlier work seem to accentuate the existential gap between the believers' vision and their everyday lives, the effect of the patterning in Ia Orana Maria is to harmonize the vision with the landscape and to reinforce the closeness and naturalness, the tranquillity, of the scene the worshippers contemplate.

The Tahitians' faith appears at once more exotic and more accessible than the Bretons'. The bare-footed, bare-breasted Tahitians in their shift-like skirts that repeat the patterns and colors of the flowering plants around them could hardly offer a stronger contrast to the shapeless French peasants in their dark blouses and nun-like caps. The Tahitians, furthermore, contemplate a Polynesian Mother and Child. Even the angel behind them shares their olive-brown skin and long, straight black hair. Gauguin also represents the worshippers in a characteristically Asian posture of homage; they hold their clasped palms distinctly lower than their Western counterparts do, and bend slightly forward from the waist to indicate respect. Gauguin is said to have imitated the pose from some photographs of relief carvings on the medieval Javanese temple of Borobudur. If so, the exoticism appears even more calculated. At the same time, however, this distancing is negated by the intimacy of the scene. Far from envisioning the unique and violent struggle of a Biblical patriarch with an angel, the Tahitian women, assisted by an angel, apprehend the calm presence of Mary and her child as if they were simply beholding the apotheosis of a woman of their own village taking a few minutes out from her familiar domestic routines.

Gauguin reinforces this paradoxical effect of greater intimacy in the more exotic vision by seeming to position himself very close to, if not in, the sacred space of Mother and Child. Their apparent awareness of his observation also contributes to this effect. Mary's focus is relatively patient and dreamy, as if she didn't mind being watched, but Jesus's

inquiring eyes are sharply observant of the interloper, perhaps even suspicious of him or hostile. Furthermore, the presence of the sponsoring angel, which only the painter indisputably sees, testifies to how far inside the vision he is. One might want to argue that the angel's ethnic resemblance to the worshippers intimates that she, like Mary and Jesus, is an imaginative projection of theirs even though she stands behind them. But the ethnic argument cuts both ways; after all, it's the painter-observer who sees a Polynesian Jesus, Mary and angel. While the essential connection between this painting and The Vision lies in the outsider's attempt to render what he imagines the native worshippers are seeing, the essential difference between them consists of how much more comfortably Gauguin represents the Tahitian act of faith. This greater ease appears not only in the more peaceful theme of the later vision, but in Gauguin's location of himself in relation to that vision. Gone are both the possible projection of himself as a struggling figure in the vision and the actual figure of himself as a pious sharer of it. What remains is the extra-pictorial, undistributed perspective of one who is more privileged than the worshippers themselves, who makes eye contact with Mother and Child and beholds the angelic sponsor.

The paradoxical fusion of greater exoticism with deeper intimacy in the later work implies a more inclusive, less anxiously fraught conception of religion. In The Vision After the Sermon Gauguin represents a narrowly Catholic response to a famous story out of Genesis long interpreted in Judaeo-Christian tradition as an heroic struggle for a personal relationship with Jahweh himself. Having extracted Isaac's blessing by deceit many years before, Jacob now extracts Jahweh's by hanging on all night, at the symbolic price of his dislocated hip. In Ia Orana Maria, in contrast, Gauguin's rendering of Christian iconography in Tahitian and Javanese terms suggests the perspective of comparative mythology, the world-wide worship of a mother-goddess and her divine offspring.

I've always taken for granted heretofore that my replacement of the earlier Gauguin with its Tahitian reworking was entirely accidental, merely a function of the availability of reproductions when I happened to be looking for them. But perhaps the shift, which took

only three years in Gauguin's life but more like twenty-five in mine, reflects the course of my own religious life. Perhaps I'm no more disengaged from it than Gauguin was. Why did I choose, if I did choose, to write a book focussed pervasively upon issues of belief, especially religious belief? Is it accident that the two other reproductions that overlook my desk are religious? One is a detail from Simone Martini's Annunciation--the Virgin with her Giotto-like heavy-lidded eyes almost closed to a squint while she starts modestly to draw the edge of her hood up toward her tiny downturned mouth that's hardly wider than her nostrils. The other is an anonymous St. George--piercing his unwitting dragon from behind with a lance as long and thin as a fly-fishing pole while his white steed daintily places one hoof on the beast's nose and tramples his trunk disdainfully with the other three. Now that I think of it this way, I see that the preponderance of religious icons among the reproductions in my office at school may not be accidental either--a Mughal Krishna among the milkmaids, for example, or the photos of my former student's folk-art scenes from the life of Christ, or the Ravenna mosaic of a Byzantine Savior summoning his fishermen even as they are in the act of pulling a full net out of the waters of Genesareth into their rainbow-cradle of a boat. This sequence of images seems to be living some pattern, some history of its own in some internal depth. And I am just now hauling out of these waters a glistening netful, samples far from random. My earliest religious images were the most fearsome ones. When I was about four and was supposed to be taking a nap in the spare, downstairs bedroom of my grandparents' house, Jesus came down from the crucifix hanging on the wall nearest the kitchen and kissed me on the mouth. I recall only the suddenness of the occurrence, my sense of violation, and my immediate screaming. Many years later, when I mentioned this dreamlike memory to my mother she confirmed that it had happened and added that I'd been hysterical afterwards. That house seemed charged with a peculiar power I don't recall feeling elsewhere. Once when I was five and lying on the kitchen floor leafing through a stack of old Messengers of the Sacred Heart, I flipped over a page and confronted about a foot in front of my nose a full page depiction of a creature of utter evil. His

malicious eyes looked directly into mine; he seemed to hate me in a shockingly personal way. I was pretty sure I knew who was depicted there, but didn't dare acknowledge it, as if doing so would cede him power over me. I felt without knowing why that I had to talk to someone about this terrible suspicion. I picked up the magazine and walked into the living room, where my grandmother was sitting as usual in her favorite rocking-chair. I was trembling all over as I held up the picture and asked in a voice that quaked on me, "*Who's that?*" My grandmother looked upon that shocking head and said as calmly as if I'd asked her what time it was, "Why that's the Devil." If my gentle, white-haired grandmother could take that fiendish portrait so calmly it must not have any claim on me; I could feel the fear draining downwards and into the floorboards above the cellar. I was afraid of this dark cellar and a few years later endured a series of terrible dreams in which the stone-lined stairway down into it became the mouth of Hell. There was a picture in the parlor of a pious woman, her head draped in a dark blue covering, the Blessed Virgin Mary I assumed, whose eyes seemed to follow one about the room. Frightening as I found this effect, I could not prevent myself from furtively watching and so, to my redoubled horror, becoming like it, a spy. My fear of this and other religious pictures in the house reached its peak in conjunction with a period when I became morbidly shy in the presence of adults, particularly if they paid any attention to me. I sometimes couldn't bring myself to look anywhere but at the walls. But the walls presented religious ikons. At moments of this sort, I lived in a panopticon world.

When I think of the Jewish and Muslim prohibitions of graven images, the Iconoclasts of Byzantium, Cromwell's Roundheads stripping the altars of Durham Cathedral, I wonder if some portion of that impulse stems not from a yearning for an unmediated relationship with a deity beyond gross fumbings with paint and clay, but from fear, a vertiginous fear of the sacred image with the power to lure us into its vortex and engulf our reason. Perhaps if I hadn't felt this power so strongly in childhood, it would have lost its purchase entirely with adolescence and faded into insignificance. Instead, it

returned in my young adult fascination with images of religious struggle, submerged again during the bewildering pragmatic demands of my middle years (like the one leaping fish that escapes the net of the distracted Peter and Andrew in the Ravenna mosaic) and finally surfaces in the strange creatures that now and then the deep casts up on the nearly deserted beaches of memory. But what business do I have saying ‘finally’ about a process so thoroughly out of ‘my’ control? I have read Ia Orana Maria as Gauguin’s separate peace and emphasized about my comparable late images certain whimsical or playful elements that perhaps allow me to evade in a mask of historicist amusement the live power I don’t want to encounter. Is this my passive-aggressive form of iconoclasm? Even on the most deserted beaches the occasional cry of a seabird evokes the fierceness of life, the smallness of the human witness, the vastness of what the sea conceals.