

DON BRIEL AND PAUL MURRAY, O.P.

A Conversation with Patrick Pye

*Born in Winchester in 1929 and brought up in Dublin by his mother, Patrick Pye was educated at St. Columba's and taught painting by Oisín Kelly. The formative influences in his adolescence were T. S. Eliot and El Greco. It was a Romanesque sculpture seen in Barcelona that turned his mind to painting the Christian theme. Pye was baptized into the Roman Rite in 1963, and he read von Balthasar's *The Glory of the Lord* 1985–95. His etchings are in the collection of the Marian Institute of Dayton University.*

IN AN INTRODUCTION to the catalog for a recent exhibition of Patrick Pye's works in Dublin, Brian Lynch wrote, "In the face of modernity and its reductionism, which he regards as 'destructive to the paradoxes of the opposite ends in life,' Patrick Pye has struggled to hold together imagination and reason, intuition and doctrine, emotional and moral truth."¹ But it is not merely the vast Catholic imagination of Pye's work that distinguishes it but also his remarkable artistic talent. It is clear that Patrick Pye's faith provides an underlying context for all of his work, but he is insistent that his is not the theoretical task of the philosopher or the theologian but that of the Catholic

artist. He has argued that “Art cannot tell us what to believe, but it can tell us what it feels like to believe.”² In this sense, we cannot really experience our believing or “see this life as a believer” until it is illuminated by art. In *Apples and Angels*, Pye has carefully analyzed the impoverishment of the imagination in modern culture and reflected on the task of the Christian artist in an age of radical unbelief:

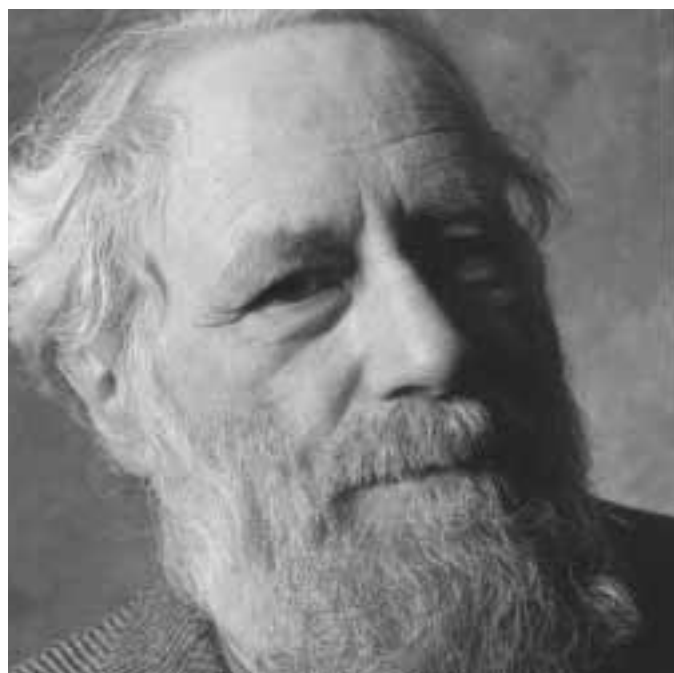
The believer (whether an artist or not) finds himself born into an age of unbelief. We cannot find in this disposition anything other than the sickness of the age. Nevertheless, we cannot put our heads into the sack of our own belief as though all were well with the world, as though our own beliefs were joyously reflected all around us. We must suffer this sickness ourselves in such a way that the infidel (our neighbour) realises that it is his own. The artist suffers this sickness in a special way. Everywhere the language appropriate to the faith has been killed off. There are no longer the words to talk of spiritual things; indeed the absence of the words is a habit that people no longer notice. In this, Rouault seems to me to be the exemplar for our generation of artists. He brought the faith to this point: Where does man suffer? We have to begin again by pointing to that sphere where man through his solitude and pain, becomes aware of the “disrelation” of his own self. Naturally, man will do everything to dull the pain, to escape the pain; he will call it morbid or “anti-life” but the believer will work to keep the pain awake, to kindle the spark of desire that is concealed.³

For Pye, art is a manifestation not only of feeling but of desire and he believes desire then connects us to religion because “as well as being the Word of God, religion is for us the passion of all passions; it is the region where we begin to deal with our desire and to deal infinitely desirously.”⁴ With Kierkegaard, Pye holds that the prevailing failure of modernity is not the depth of its sinfulness but its lack of passion. The problem with the often superficial and self-congratulatory language of modern agnosticism is that it reveals not a gen-

uine humility before a radically new awareness of cultural pluralism but a “determination to live within defining consciousness, to grasp only that over which the mind can imperiously rule.”⁵ The liberation from religious mystery has produced mechanical conformity rather than an abundance of liberated feeling. In reflecting on his own work, Pye once wrote, “I really do not know what sort of ‘Christian’ artist I am—maybe an altogether misleading one! I do take quite seriously Blake’s philosophy of the imagination but I do have to add one or two strong provisos to it. I do believe that the imagination asks for a spiritual or metaphysical task to discipline it. Then I accept that imagination is the transforming net among all our faculties that enables us to prepare for death.”⁶

In August 2004 Don Briel of the Center for Catholic Studies and Paul Murray of the Angelicum University in Rome visited Patrick Pye in his studio in the Wicklow Hills outside of Dublin and asked him to reflect on his life and work.





DON BRIEL: I wonder if you could say something about the primary artistic influences on your work.

PATRICK PYE: The first big influence on my work, apart from the poetry of T. S. Eliot, which was an enormous influence . . . the first painter who really got under my skin was El Greco. I realized that for El Greco painting was revelation, and if painting could be revelation, what an enormous thing this was, just enormous. And then I realized that El Greco was so sophisticated, his way of being eastern and western was something so extraordinary and unique, that I couldn't learn from this or cope with this at that stage, and I must look at the primitives, which I did, and look at my contemporaries, which I also did. Then, of course, I gradually became aware of the anonymous tradition before art became art. I was very moved by that. I still think that is probably the most authentic Christian art that there is and in that way I would sort of be close to the anxieties of Eric Gill that the artist is not a special sort of man, but every man is a special sort of artist.

PAUL MURRAY: By anonymous, Patrick, you mean the early Christian painters?

PP: Yes, before anybody ever got worried or anxious about the personality of the artist.

PM: Nowadays, of course, people tend to look to an artist's work for precisely this kind of revelation of the artist's personality. But your work in contrast represents, if I'm not mistaken, the beauty of impersonality, and a resistance to what we might call "the heresy of personalism," in Lawrence's phrase. But I wonder if there isn't something more to be said here, both about your own work and the work, say, of someone like T. S. Eliot. Eliot recommended, of course, the surrender of personality in the act of creating. But is it not the

case that Eliot's own personality survives, and survives with great vividness, in his own astonishing work?

PP: Of course, it's typical of our age to be so worried about this issue. Being a good Eliot man myself, I would take Eliot's wish to be impersonal pretty seriously. But, of course, the personality can never be wiped out. The personality can become a vehicle of whatever. So I would sidestep that. I hope that there would never be anybody writing a thesis about the relation of the personality of Patrick Pye, because it would miss the point as far as I would feel that God uses me whatever way He sees fit in so far as He can.

DB: Along those lines, I was very moved by your brief reflection in *Apples and Angels* that the artist is not concerned with the devotional because what is devotional is a projection of ourselves. Rather you say, "We do not look in order to see our poor love reflected in images of Christ. We need to gaze on that which draws us: to the transcendent. Our own motor does not carry us there."⁷ And perhaps that's one difference between holy pictures, which have a devotional end by definition, and the work of the Catholic artist. How does that shape the kinds of themes you choose to treat? How do you explain what draws your attention, because while many of your paintings are clearly based on Revelation or the lives of the saints or Marian portraits, others are not explicitly Christian?

PP: I've always been conscious of one particular thing, even before I became a Catholic. I didn't become a Catholic until I was thirty-three, but I had painted the sacred theme in various ways, maybe amateurish ways before that time. I was attracted toward them. What did strike me early on was what the sacred theme did for humanity by having a God-man, and by us being involved with a

God-man. It strikes me that the art of those periods before our skeptical age, before the Enlightenment, is full of the variety of human feeling. This sacred theme keeps our humanity in front of us in all its variety. If you want to express human emotion, or, indeed, the human condition, what an opportunity this is. One of the things that I would have against abstract art is that it is neutral. There's pure pleasure to be got from abstract form and so on, but this form is ultimately so deadly in its neutrality.

PM: The images you paint, Patrick, are normally within the tradition of Christian iconography. And these images quicken and awaken in the viewer a full range of human emotion: from the simplicity of the scene at Bethlehem to the drama of the Crucifixion. But you also paint landscapes. Does your work on the sacred theme affect the way you paint landscapes? Or the way you paint still life?

PP: I'm sure it does. For me the landscape is always pastoral which, I suppose, means that it is always subject to the pasteurizing of Christ. It's so much a thing of feeling that I don't think it's useful at this stage for me to say anything more about it. I'll tell you one thing, and that is that, as my subject matter has become more exclusively the religious theme, I find that my inclination is to paint still life rather than landscape. With still life I can explore possibilities of meaning without putting titles to it. The still life has become more significant for me personally the more I have got entangled with Christianity.

DB: When you look at a still life, you have a depiction of material things that reflects something beyond simply their material form, allowing an opening to the sacramental consciousness of the Christian. Does that have anything to do with why the still life might be more interesting to you now than other forms?

PP: I think, for instance, a couple years ago I spent a whole year doing Stations of the Cross. I really gave a lot to that year but in the year that followed, I did twelve still lifes and I couldn't look at a Christian theme. I was worn out. Still life allows ambivalence; it gives me time to remain hidden in the "ordinary," in a seeming "neutrality." This is necessary, too, at least for me.

DB: Did you produce more than one version of the Stations?

PP: I did produce more than one version. But of course, the Christian theme is lurking everywhere. I think that a landscape is important for me for being potentially innocent—humble and innocent. Then still life can have all sorts of symbolic resonances like cups and tables and altars and so on. You never really get far away. The artist doesn't need to be spelling out all these things so that you can identify them. It is important that you should just feel.

PM: Can I ask you a question about the colors you have used over the years as a painter? Are the colors you use now different from the colors you used when you were younger? Do you paint with more radiant colors now? Has there been any kind of development in terms of the colors you use?

PP: There has been a development. I don't know if I can describe it really. I've become more conscious of the color circle and the sort of oppositions, the complementarities within the circle. So there's a greater intensity or radiance of light. I think color is light as well as space, and I have become more conscious of that, whereas as a young fellow I would have used colors that I just felt I could get away with. I had a predisposition to certain colors for some years, which people mocked me about sometimes.

DB: Earlier in our conversation you mentioned Eric Gill. I'm wondering how you would react to a statement Gill made in an essay in 1940. There he argued,

The word "art" in spite of the obsequious worship which the modern world gives to the work of painters and sculptors and musicians, is not a holy word in this day. Art, the word, which primarily means skill, and thus human skill in making, has in literary circles and among the upper classes come to mean only the fine arts, and the fine arts have ceased to be rhetorical and are now exclusively aesthetic. . . . But art, high art, as stored in museums and picture galleries, has become a pleasure thing. It is put there to amuse. . . . And the utmost endeavor of our education is to see that our merriment shall be high class. If we put a painting of the Madonna in our art gallery, it is not because the painter has been successful in conveying a specially clear view of her significance, but simply because he has succeeded in making a specially pleasing arrangement of materials. A Raphael *Madonna*, but it is as Raphael that we honor it and not as a *Madonna*. For Raphael is, or was until recently, held by the pundits to be particularly good at making pleasing arrangements, and we are no longer concerned with meanings.⁸

I wonder if you have any reaction to Gill's observations?

PP: I think that Eric Gill was speaking from his period, his own period, which is about seventy-five years ago, and an awful lot has happened since then. Gill was a bit naughty at the expense of the art world and felt it necessary to emphasize the craftsman's extra-aesthetic concerns. Fair enough, but I don't feel that it is useful, helpful in any way, to go dividing our reactions to painting, to works of art, music, whatever it is, into aesthetic and spiritual or aesthetic and religious. I think that we have to leave that alone for people to

receive it as they may. I don't like Raphael that much. I feel he brain-washed the pope of the time into accepting a recipe for art which would be rhetorical and worthy.

But my human reaction to other artists than Raphael has been very positive. Giovanni Bellini was insistent that he was an artist, God love him. I don't think, of course, that that makes him better than an icon painter, but that was necessary for him, culturally in his situation, to insist that he was an artist. His art has a contemplative aspect, and the theme of his contemplation is the *Christ Child* and the gift of this unique Son to us by the Father.

I think it's completely false to separate that subject matter from what gives us pleasure within the work. I do believe that this is a thing that comes up between Haydn and Beethoven. Beethoven was the young tiger, and Haydn was the revered master, and the revered master corrected the young tiger for being tigerish and horribly truthful, and he said that the work of art must please. And I do think that it is a valid thing that pleasure has to come to us first. But once that pleasure comes and is dignified, in one sense erotic but non-pornographic, I think that the pleasure can lift us all over the place. I aim to give pleasure and if I couldn't enjoy painting I wouldn't paint because I wouldn't feel that I could share the pleasure of color and form with my fellow man. We can't be Puritan. One of the things that brought me into Mother Church was that they weren't too Puritan about taking pleasure in art. We call in the artist to help us to celebrate. For a feast day, if there is no God, is there much to celebrate?

DB: Gill argued in this same work that pleasure perfects the operation, but it is not the object of working. In other words, giving pleasure is part of the artist's task, but the main task is not pleasure but intelligibility and meaning. I suspect for any consciously Catholic artist, that question of intelligibility and meaning as well as pleasure

has got to inform the work. How has this question affected your own work?

PP: Well, that is another very difficult question because in a way the artist doesn't know what he does. That's why the whole business of seeing is so preposterously difficult because it is impossible to see without meaning. We are human beings. We have our search for meaning deep in our personalities and even though we can't put it into words, what things mean to us, we are concerned to express a feeling meaning or a meaning within feeling. [Pye had earlier written that the artist "is thrown straight at the deep end of the metaphysical question. If vision must be interpretative, then the interpretation must be critical. The artist is naturally in line with the writers of the gospels for whom the heart was an organ of understanding, not of feeling. The artist must learn to see with the heart."⁹]

I have two dear friends, a husband and wife, who just cannot be together, God love them, and the husband is an intellectual, and he insists that experience is the only thing that teaches us. All else is excluded by this exclusive dominance of the value of experience. The wife protests the value of innocence. And one of the reasons why I would hope to be a colorist rather than a draftsman is not because I think drawing is unimportant; drawing is very important, but drawing takes things apart. Drawing distinguishes one thing from another, and color unites them, coalesces them, allows them to belong under a light of God. My feeling would be that the work of the intellect tends to distinguish and to divide, but the permission of innocence is to unite. Innocence allows us to bring things together, and that is a very precious thing, especially in an overintellectual age. I suspect that innocence has more creative potential for artists than experience has. Not writers, maybe, but painters and poets.

DB: In a recent editorial in London's *Catholic Herald*, the author reflected on the absence of formally Catholic art and literature in contemporary culture, suggesting that this marked a new maturity in Catholic intellectual and artistic life. In this sense, he argued, Catholic artists need no longer focus on identifiably Catholic themes or images as they had once been required to do because of their minority status in English culture. Would you comment on this understanding of the role of the Catholic artist in contemporary culture?

PP: Well, that is a very loaded question. Really, it's a rather scary question. You see, at a certain point, I became a Catholic. Maybe it was a vengeance on the Evangelicals who came to Ireland and brought up my mother who became an agnostic. It was all too much for her. And maybe I am a judgment on my Grandmother who came to Ireland to convert the Irish from their papist ways. However that may be, there are very few Protestant artists who are distinguished by their Protestantism, whereas there are many artists who are distinguished by their Catholic faith. Whether this is a numbers game I would hate to judge. I leave it for others. I would eventually have the feeling the Catholic faith is deeply dependent on the aesthetic, on the aesthetic of its rituals, and the Protestant faith is dependent on the Word. The Word is sacrosanct in Protestantism. And Protestantism has that old-time, Old Testament atmosphere in which images are seen to be superficial things and should not be indulged in. Whereas, Catholicism has lived with images and used images and cast them out and rethought them. In the Renaissance, one finds the great turning of the artist from being a craftsman—a monkish craftsman—to being an interpreter of nature and of life in the fullest sense of the word. That turning was really motivated by a new theology, the theology of St. Francis and of our creatureliness as God's creatures, and that the Father had given the Son as a true image to men. So, for me, art is essentially

either Orthodox or Catholic. Of course, there are certain painters, and I can smell their Protestantism from them and more power to them that it meant so much that I can smell it from them. So that would be my feeling.

PM: I'm aware, Patrick, that you've begun reading Hans Urs von Balthasar in recent years. Has that had any impact on your work?

PP: It has had a huge effect on me because from reading von Balthasar I was flung back into the medieval and early Renaissance period, and how it felt for them to be facing these extraordinary, sacred themes. It illuminated the whole feeling world of these extraordinary historical periods and confirmed my apprehensions of what they were doing. This created the Catholic imagination that has become a victim of the Enlightenment.

DB: At one point you mentioned that one of the things you found most helpful in von Balthasar was his conveying a sense of the immediacy of that experience of the sacred themes and the danger of systematizing it, of turning it into a program of some kind. When you speak of von Balthasar's influence on you, is that what you had in mind?

PP: That and, of course, the beauty of the translations—some of the translations are wonderful. It made theology alive for me. I just feel that from von Balthasar, here is the enormity of Christian vision and what an amazing canvas it is, really. It is extraordinary to me how artists have ignored this so-comprehensive vision in their intoxication with nature.

PM: We human beings sometimes have regrets about our lives, about "the door we never opened." Do artists, do painters, have regrets about journeys not taken, choices not made?

PP: They do, and some of their regrets become too much for them. But I've been fortunate. I wish I'd spent longer in Spain. I did feel, until I read von Balthasar that I'd liked to have studied theology. But reading von Balthasar has sort of put that to rest, rightly or wrongly.

DB: Spain, not just because of El Greco, but more broadly?

PP: I love the landscape of the plateau and the way you can see down the river gorge two hundred feet below you and so clearly. The clarity of light in Spain is wonderful.

DB: Northern European painters seem to have gone to Italy rather than Spain for the light. Is it that the light there is so clear that it's almost hard—harsh in its shadows and its form?

PP: There's a terrific hard clarity. And the distances seem to go on forever.

DB: And what about Ireland? In what sense would you say you are an Irish painter?

PP: I love Ireland. It's my home and I probably feel like a privileged visitor here because I recognize in myself some English aspects. But they just help me to appreciate Ireland. I find Ireland is warm and I like the humanity of the Irish as against the skepticism of the English, the cold skepticism of the English who don't want to give themselves too easily.

PM: I'm wondering if you'd like to say something about Blake, the English painter and poet. His "visions" are, I find, often eccentric and Gnostic, but I revere the work all the same. One reason for this, I suspect, is that the paintings contain archetypal figures and images so

strong it's not difficult to suspend my disbelief and yield to the great power of the images. So is it not the case that many of the astonishing images and archetypes in your own paintings should be able to make a comparable impact on the viewer, whether that person happens to be a Buddhist or a Hindu, pagan or agnostic?

PP: Now there you are . . . that's another chapter to be written, and God help our intellectual honesty as we approach that subject. Blake, of course, is a visionary. I don't think he was always terribly successful as a painter. Maybe his poems are more successful, but sometimes he is certainly a wonderful painter. I think that Blake is a Low Church artist; he's an Evangelical. Of course, there is a sense (I don't know if you would allow this) but there is a sense in which Catholicism is Evangelical, more Evangelical than, say, the High Church in England. Blake saw himself as Job, so there immediately his personality is intruding, and he does it wonderfully, he makes it work as art, God love him.

PM: Perhaps you'd like to say something, Patrick, about a painting of yours which many of us greatly admire, *The Theologian in His Garden*. What inspired you, for example, to start working on this theme? Or what prompted you to place together, in one painting, two figures who are so different one from one another, St. Christopher and St. Jerome? Did the work take you a long time to finish? Was it a delight to paint?

PP: *The Theologian in His Garden* was inspired by one of Giovanni Bellini's paintings. Of course, I love painting, I'm just mad about painting and Bellini fascinates me, has always fascinated me, as long as I can remember. In one of his paintings, there is a sort of interior, a little sort of a corner of a building with arches opening to the wonderful world of nature. There are three saints in this painting. It's a late-ish painting in a church in Venice and it has St. Christopher

with the Child Jesus in the left-hand corner standing beside a tomb, and on the other side of the tomb, a bishop whose name I can't remember, and then, on a sort of rock, with a background of mountains, Jerome.

This painting just fascinated me. I wanted to do a painting which had this contemplative figure of the intellectual, Jerome, with his book and this unintellectual fellow who had crossed the river with the Child Jesus on his shoulder and who hardly knew what he was doing. I thought about it for two years and I did some wretched little sketches in which the format remained upright, and then one spring—God bless spring!—I thought I needed a horizontal format. I wanted an Eden landscape, a sort of innocent-Eden, unnatural landscape with the two saints as if there were nobody else in the world. It took a little figuring out, but eventually I got there, and when I actually painted that painting nothing went wrong. Usually terrible things happen. Nothing went wrong, and I just did it from start to finish. It took a long time. I took my time over it. It took about, maybe, three months. It went very steadily and slowly and smoothly.

DB: It's an extraordinary work, really. In looking at the landscape of the garden I had the sense that with the exception of the budding growth emerging from Christopher's staff and from Jerome's lectern and the small clump of daffodils in the corner of the painting, there are no signs of life. It is as if it were a portrayal of the loss of Eden with the sole mediation of the two saints disclosing the hidden Word. But perhaps this was not your intention. It was rather this pure simplicity that you had in mind. [In reflecting on this painting, Brian Lynch argued that the work was marked by a series of tensions but transformed by a mediating presence. "Most of all," he wrote, "look at the extraordinary hammer-like rock on the left and the huge blunt arrow-head shape that seems to have been fired out of it across the middle ground of the image. This

ideal world has an explosion in it, unexplained and inexplicable, but contained, not disruptive of the general peace. The *Veil of Appearance* is torn but the rent is invisibly mended. No one else could have imagined or painted this picture. It is, literally, incomparable.”^{10]}

PP: I like very much the innocence, the fantasy of the early painters where St. Christopher becomes a giant, or where Jerome is under a tree—but it could be a cloud—and then the possibilities for humanity that are opened up by such extraordinary people.

PM: Patrick, I know this last question is unusual, but let me ask it. If you had five minutes left of life, and you were given a choice by God to gaze on one image, one final painting before your death—an image that would be magically presented before your eyes—what would you choose?

PP: There’s a late El Greco of the *Annunciation* in a bank collection in Madrid.

PM: Can you say anything about that particular work?

PP: I think it’s ecstatic, utterly mysterious. It’s a perfect complement to the *Crucifixion*. Without that angel’s delivery there could have been no Crucifixion, no Resurrection! The Annunciation is the dawn of the new Man.

Notes

1. Brian Lynch, “A Twist of Faith,” Introduction to *Patrick Pye RHA: New Paintings 1999–2003* (Dublin: Jorgensen Fine Art, 2003), 8.
2. Patrick Pye, *Apples and Angels* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1980), 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 3–4.
4. *Ibid.*, 1.

5. Ibid., 2.
6. Patrick Pye, unpublished letter, November 4, 1995.
7. Pye, *Apples and Angels*, 5.
8. Eric Gill, *Essays: Last Essay and In a Strange Land* (London: Jonathan Cape Publishers, 1948) 9–10.
9. Pye, *Apples and Angels*, 17.
10. Lynch, “A Twist of Faith,” 8.