

Paper prepared for the online conference
IMAGES OF HELL, IMAGES OF HEAVEN: CAN PICTURES ALLEVIATE HUMAN SUFFERING?
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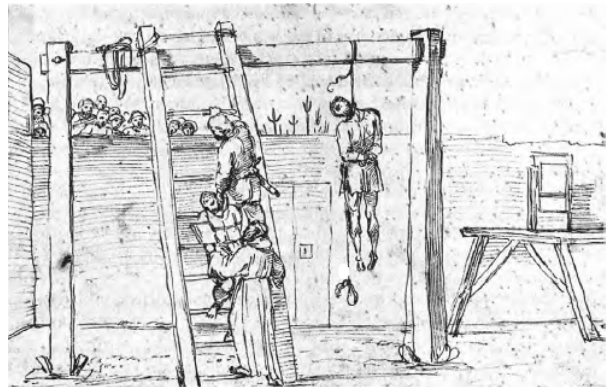
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Primordial Images

There was a custom in the Middle Ages: displaying to convicted persons led to the gallows pictures of the crucifixion of Christ so as to console them for the fate they were about to face. I will here begin with David Freedberg's description, and his doubts as to the effectivity,¹ of this institution.



Brother of the Archconfraternity of San Giovanni Decollato in Rome holding a *tavoletta* (from Corrado Ricci, *Beatrice Cena* [Milan, 1923]).



Annibale Carracci, *A Hanging* (drawing; ca. 1599). Windsor Castle, Royal Library. Reproduced by gracious permission of Her Majesty the Queen.

Source: Freedberg.

¹ Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 5–9.

“What comfort”, Freedberg asks,

could anyone conceivably offer to a man condemned to death, in the moment prior to his execution? Any word or action would seem futile... But in Italy between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, brotherhoods were set up to offer a kind of solace: and the instruments of consolation were small printed images. A fair number of these *tavalucchie*, or *tavolette*, as they were alternatively called, survive...

Preceding and during the execution, edifying words might be spoken. However, as Freedberg remarks, it is not clear “whether words or images were of greater consequences on such an occasion; and one might well feel that the whole business was ineffectual”.² This brings us to the issue of how, generally speaking, words relate to images, and to the underlying fundamental issue of how word language came into being.

It cannot be doubted that in the primordial beginnings human communication consisted but in facial expressions and gesture language.³ Then because of the advantages of communicating at a distance, and communicating in the dark – think of hunting – verbal language gradually emerged, the decisive recent book on the subject is that by Michael Corballis, *From Hand to Mouth: The Origins of Language*, published in 2002.⁴ Now note that prior to the emergence of word language human thinking of course could not have been thinking in words – the thinking behind facial expressions and gesture language was, necessarily, thinking in images. Taking a step back, *animals* obviously do think, and obviously think in images, the classic

² I have discussed Freedberg’s brilliant book at some length in my paper “[Images in Natural Theology](#)”, in Russell Re Manning, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 581–594.

³ For a summary of the literature see my “[Postscript: The Victory of the Pictorial Turn](#)”, in András Benedek and Kristóf Nyíri, eds., *Vision Fulfilled: The Victory of the Pictorial Turn*, Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences / Budapest University of Technology and Economics, 2019, pp. 251–267.

⁴ Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

work here is Darwin's 1872 *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. But let us take another step back and ask: What goes on in the mind of a primitive animal devoid yet of eyesight? Say what goes on in the mind of an earthworm digging its way through the soil when encountering a stone it has to circumvent? The formula that most fascinates me when wondering about this question is that by Titchener: "Meaning", Titchener claimed, "is, originally, kinaesthesia; the organism faces the situation by some bodily attitude... meaning is carried by all sorts of sensational and imaginal processes. ... And words themselves, let us remember, were at first motor attitudes, gestures, kinaesthetic contexts".⁵ Words build on imagery, but imagery, Titchener stressed, builds on the motor dimension.⁶ I venture

⁵ Edward Bradford Titchener, *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes*, New York: Macmillan, 1909, pp. 176 ff. –The question I am here grappling with is related to, but more specific, than the broad issue "schon die einzelligen Tiere, die Amöben, [sind] keine Automaten ..., sondern [besitzen] in ihrem freilich noch winzigen Lebenskreise einen keinen Spielraum für eine erste, einfachste Art des Lernens" ([Karl Bühler, "Die Krise der Psychologie", 1926/27](#)). I am obliged to Csaba Pléh for directing my attention to Bühler's paper.

⁶ Titchener's position was taken up and radicalized by Margaret Washburn. As she put it: "the whole of the inner life is correlated with and dependent upon bodily movement" (Margaret Floy Washburn, *Movement and Mental Imagery: Outlines of a Motor Theory of the Complexer Mental Processes*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1916, p. xiii). A recent brilliant discussion of this topic is Barbara Tversky's *Mind in Motion – How Action Shapes Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 2019. – Historically, the first step was made by Darwin's half-cousin Galton, who in his 1880 *Mind* essay "Statistics of Mental Imagery" wrote: "scientific men as a class have feeble powers of visual representation. ... I am however bound to say, that the missing faculty seems to be replaced so serviceably by other modes of conception, chiefly I believe connected with the motor sense, that men who declare themselves entirely deficient in the power of seeing mental pictures can nevertheless give life-like descriptions of what they have seen, and ... otherwise express themselves as if they were gifted with a vivid visual imagination." The story then goes on with Ribot, Binet and James, and much later with Arnheim (see the section "The Visual and the Motor", pp. 26 f., in my ["Visualization and the Horizons of Scientific Realism"](#)). Highly relevant is John M. Kennedy's *Drawing and the Blind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). Kennedy claims that "pictures in raised form can be understood by the blind, and

to sum up the first part of Titchener's message in the following way: When an organism encounters a problem, it reacts with a motor answer. If that answer is not equal to the problem, and if the organism is one gifted with sight, it then forms itself a picture of the problem – that is, it creates a specific mental image.⁷

The literature claiming that the immediate basis of thinking in words is actually thinking in images is vast, I have attempted to give an idea of that literature in my "Postscript", as well as in a number of other papers, of which I here single out my "[Images in Natural Theology](#)" (cf. note 2 above), quoting Romano Guardini, one of the most influential Catholic intellectuals of the twentieth century, who in his 1950 essay *Die Sinne und die religiöse Erkenntnis*, "The Senses and Religious Knowledge", stresses the role images play in the depths of our subconscious, ready to enter consciousness whenever appropriate external stimuli reach us. The innermost core of a human being, as Guardini puts it, is in the end essentially dependent on images, "sein inneres Wesen kann im Letzten ... nur aus Bildern leben".⁸ Guardini here very clearly echoes C. G. Jung's notions of the collective unconscious and of "primordial images"⁹ – say the "mother" image, encompassing a newborn infant's image of its mother's smile, the moth-

... untrained blind people can make recognizable sketches of objects, situations, and events [by] raised-line drawing. ... the ability to draw develops in blind people as it does in the sighted."

⁷ The last lines here I have taken over from my "Postscript", cf. note 3 above.

⁸ Romano Guardini, *Die Sinne und die religiöse Erkenntnis*, Würzburg: Werkbund-Verlag, 1950, p. 65.

⁹ Let us note that Jung's notion of the primordial image does ultimately not involve visuality, but rather some unconscious readiness for acquiring content, say also visual content.

er reciprocating, or the evil mother not reciprocating, that smile. An image of heaven, or an image of hell.¹⁰



“*Systema munditotius*”, the first mandala painted by Jung, in 1916

I am here reproducing a mandala printed in my piece [Forever Jung](#)¹²; for a number of other highly interesting mandalas by Jung see the same piece. Also, do look at Jung’s explanation on why he urged his patients to translate into paintings their dreams and fantasies – often horrible primordial images.¹³

However, not all primordial images are depressing. Say the views, and images, of *high mountains* might for some express something that is actually felt to be spiritually elevating. Similarly with

¹⁰ The name Jung is not actually mentioned in Guardini’s 1950 book, but he does refer to Jung e.g. in his 1946 *Der Heilbringer in Mythos, Offenbarung und Politik*, on p. 27. I am obliged to Prof. Robert A. Krieg, author of “Romano Guardini on Sacred Integration”, for drawing my attention to this work.

¹¹ “Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious” (“Über die Archetypen des kollektiven Unbewussten”, first published in 1934, rewritten in 1954), in *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, 9/I, §§ 16 and 21.

¹² Paper written in honour of Csaba Pléh on the occasion of his 75th birthday, Dunabogdány: 2020.

¹³ See my *Forever Jung*, pp. 11 f.



Caspar David Friedrich,
"The Wanderer above the Mists"



Albert Bierstadt, "Sunrise on
the Matterhorn" (1875)



Caspar David Friedrich,
"Oak in the Snow"

ancient, large *trees*. So too *flowers*, whether naturalistic or stylized, can give rise to a feeling for the tranquil beauty of the created world. Pattison refers to "Monet's many series of paintings of his Garden at Giverny. ... With each treatment of the subject", Pattison writes,



Claude Monet, "Water lilies" (1916)

"Monet seems to be moving further and further away from conventional concepts of imitation into the pure play of coloural presences. ... These paintings assure us, in an irreducibly pictorial way, that the world is a good place to be, that it is holy ground, that we may trust ourselves to the particularity of our carnal situatedness".¹⁴ On a humbler level, the image of any *plant* is a symbol of growth. Also, it is a symbol of transience, decay, and re-

birth. Heinrich Rombach sees in the basic experience of cultivating plants the fundamental possibility of religion.¹⁵

Still, high mountains claim many lives; trees are damaged by storms; flowers fade; plants are killed by frost or drought. Altogether my impression is that in a wretched world images represent suffering

¹⁴ George Pattison, *Art, Modernity and Faith: Restoring the Image* (1991), 2nd enlarged ed., London: SCM Press, 1998, p. 149.

¹⁵ Heinrich Rombach, *Leben des Geistes: Ein Buch der Bilder zur Fundamentalggeschichte der Menschheit*, Freiburg: Herder, 1977, p. 77.

rather than happiness. Word language, by its indirectness (say think of a Christian burial) might produce more consoling effects than images do. Perhaps this is one of the reasons – clearly not the primary reason – word language came into being.