ISSN 2753-3298 (Online)

Journal of
Scottish Thought

Research Articles

Painting the Invisible: a philosophical comment on Kenneth White's poem 'McTaggart'

Authors: Alexander Broadie

Volume 13, Issue 1
Pp: 24-34
2024
Published on: 12th Feb 2024

https://doi.org/10.57132/jst.131

1495
ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Painting the Invisible: a philosophical comment on Kenneth White's poem 'McTaggart'

Alexander Broadie

McTaggart

by Kenneth White

What was he after there at Machrihanish
this man whose painting
the little critics said had no finish?

(that sense of windswept space
sea and sky in multiple movement
landscape seen as mindscape
the human figures
more and more transparent
till they disappeared)

if the question had been put to him directly
he would have made no answer
simply walked a little farther along the shore.

The Scottish painter William McTaggart (1835–1910) was born not far from Machrihanish, a small settlement on the coast of the Kintyre peninsula. Aged sixteen he left Kintyre to attend the Trustees Academy, forerunner of the Edinburgh College of Art, but thereafter until the end of his life he returned frequently to Kintyre, and the shorescapes and seascapes that he painted there are without peer in the Scottish artistic canon. Kenneth White is at home in the ceaselessly changing theatre of nature in Kintyre and arguably his entire collection entitled 'Walking the Coast' can fairly be read in terms of his experiences at and around Machrihanish. In the poem entitled 'McTaggart' those experiences are contracted down to a densely philosophical singularity and here I shall indicate some of the philosophical themes I find in the poem. As

well as thinking philosophically about McTaggart, especially regarding the idea of painting the invisible, I shall also, for purposes of establishing a comparator, turn to a consideration of Kandinsky, who is, partly through the work of Michel Henry but especially through the writings of Kandinsky himself, famously associated with the ideas of seeing and painting the invisible.

The poem, whose unifying subject is what McTaggart was seeking at Machrihanish, is in three sections. The first, composed of lines 1-3, asks a question, while quietly inserting a barb against some of the painter's critics; the second section, lines 4-9, provides an answer; and the third section, lines 10-12, affirms that McTaggart, even if asked directly, would have given no answer. The poem does not declare that the second section, the answer, represents what the painter would have said had he replied. But a clue that I wish to take up regarding the status of that second section is provided by the fact that it is in brackets. Brackets can play many roles, principally those of indicating that the enclosed information is supplementary or inessential to the principal point, but, in the present writer's judgment, the difference they make here is simply that they mark the fact that the answer provided represents the poet's judgment on the matter of what the painter was after, whether or not it also represents the painter's.

There is a sense in which a question is essentially incomplete, for it carries with it a space for an answer. In the case of the poem 'McTaggart', as we saw, the space created by the opening question is immediately filled by the poet, though McTaggart himself, we are told, would not have answered it if questioned directly; thus implying that he would have left it as uncompleted, as unfinished business. There is another piece of incompleteness or unfinished business at work here, and incompleteness emerges, to my mind, as a concept overarching the poem.

I have in mind the criticism made by the 'little critics' that McTaggart's painting 'had no finish', as if the work were still incomplete, with waves or boats only partially painted, not so much a matter of primed or even unprimed canvas on display beside the pigment, but of a painting lacking the level of detail characteristic of the classical school (I have in mind Gavin Hamilton, Jacques-Louis David and others), and therefore having more the appearance of a preliminary sketch, and therefore unfinished business much as a question asked, at the moment of asking, is unfinished business.

Particularly interesting in relation to this point is Kenneth White's reference to the human figures that become more and more transparent till they disappear, the visible rendered invisible, nothing where there should be some-

thing. In many of McTaggart's works, for example, his 'The storm' (National Galleries of Scotland) and 'The sailing of the emigrant ship' (NGS), there are human figures, including figures in the foreground, that are barely sketched in, hardly there, and all too easily prompting 'a little critic' to complain that the painter had missed out too much.

The concept of 'finish' is widely deployed in discussions about painting. In line with the poem's trajectory, we may wonder whether that same concept of finish is applicable to the natural world no less than to painted representations of it, a question that would naturally prompt enquiry into whether the natural world can be thought of as finished or indeed as unfinished except on the assumption that it owes its existence to a cosmic artificer. I refer to this matter because by the end of line 5 the poem is focused on the natural world, for it has just made reference to two mutually inseparable characteristics of Kintyre's Atlantic coast: 'windswept space' and 'sea and sky in multiple movement', nature in turmoil because the waves and the clouds are windswept, to which a further feature will be added by the reference to human beings, in all their frailty, who have been swept up into this relentless turmoil and are fighting to keep their boat afloat, and fighting to stay upright on terra firma in a howling gale. Nature, embodied in Kintyre's landscape, seascape and cloudscape, is apparently what the painter is after. But then abruptly the poet changes direction, indeed goes into reverse, with his reference to 'landscape seen as mindscape.' The poet had been pointing outward and upward, and now suddenly it is not to the outscape but to the inscape that we are bidden to give our attention.

Perhaps the feature of McTaggart's paintings that prompted the poet's switch from outside to inside is indicated by the termination of the bracketed passage: 'the human figures / more and more transparent / till they disappeared'. It is true that McTaggart was a past-master at representing human figures who are so well camouflaged as to be barely detectable, and in particular he populated many canvases with people whose skin, hair and clothing had the same colour and patterns as their natural environment. Or perhaps it would be better to keep faith with the poem's own description of the situation, namely that the figures are more and more transparent. It is not that the surfaces of the figures are more and more like the surfaces of the background nature, but that we are being enabled to see right through the figures so that it is as if we are looking not at the figures but at the land and the waters that are behind them. It is as if some of the human figures are made of glass. I should mention here a concept developed by the Scottish envi-

ronmentalist John Muir, who provides what seems a close comparator for McTaggart's painterly concept of transparent figures disappearing into the background. Writing of his experience in the mountains, Muir, who was a close contemporary of McTaggart, says in his *My First Summer in the Sierras*: 'Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams and rocks, in the waves of the sea – a part of all nature . . .'

All the elements that go to make up McTaggart's human figures are there in Muir's characterisation of his own sense of himself in his wild landscape, the glass-like transparency of his own flesh and bone, the absorption into nature, and the aesthetic dimension – the beauty of air, trees, streams and rocks – that surround him. Indeed, in some paintings the sequenced figures that are visible are marked by degrees of transparency, and we also have a sense, in 'The storm' and that hymn to Scottish nomadism 'The sailing of the emigrant ship', that other figures are there, so transparent as to be wholly invisible. And as regards those who are barely visible, including the bereft dog that we see, or almost see, in 'The sailing of the emigrant ship', all of them are directing our attention to the ship which is itself about to disappear, taking with it its cargo of emigrants. The painting is about the disappearance of people, once settled, who are about to start a new life as nomads. We know of their presence on the boat, but our imagination does much of the work in enabling us to claim that knowledge. Just how much work our imagination does in facilitating our awareness of outer objects not visible to us is a question to which I must turn in compliance with my aim to follow the trajectory of Kenneth White's poem.

In discussing the question of the relation between inside and outside and, in particular, in explaining how cognitive contact with the outside is made, one way forward would be to focus on the outside's impact on the inside, another would be to wonder whether the distinction between inside and outside is a figment or, perhaps better, a 'fiction' of the imagination. The former approach, in several versions, long dominated European philosophical reflection, and may be thought of as the Aristotelian-Thomist approach. The latter approach is a specifically Scottish narrative invented in a moment of magic by David Hume. I should like to attend briefly to these two approaches on account of their bearing on Kenneth White's conceptually packed line six 'landscape seen as mindscape'.

One answer to the question: 'What is it that makes a thought of an X a thought of an X?' is that it is the same as what makes an X an X, namely a certain form. Thus my thought of a human being is what it is because the

thought has the form of a human being and that same form is what informs real human beings, thereby making them the kind of being that they are. This is Aquinas's teaching and it derives from his Aristotelian premisses. Forms inform an outer substance and in coming to know the given substance our minds become in a sense identical with it. In this move from outside to inside, our minds do not become identical with the substance in respect of the materiality of the substance, but solely in respect of its form. Let us say therefore that in thinking about a natural substance our minds are formally identical with what we are thinking about. But this formal identity must not be allowed to mask a metaphysical distinction between what is outside and what is inside, what is in the landscape and what is in the mindscape; for though the form informing the outer substance and the form informing the mind are the same form, the mode of being of that form is different in the two cases. Medieval philosophers spoke of the natural being (*esse naturale*) of the outer form and the intentional being (*esse intentionale*) of the inner. The difference between these two modes of being could hardly be greater, for something whose mode of being is intentional is held in being by the mind that is thinking it, and in the instant that that act of thinking ceases, so also does the object of that act. In absolute contrast, the being of something that is natural, something in the natural world, is not held in being by a mental act. If no thinker attends to it, it continues in being regardless, and if it ceases to be it does not do so in virtue of the closure of a cognitive act by any thinker.

The Aristotelian-Thomist story just narrated is, more than any other, that against which the concept of 'landscape seen as mindscape' should be understood, for the earlier narrative, the Aristotelian-Thomist, focuses on the doctrine of the inside being informed by the outside – the outside provides the active principle and the mind the passive. By contrast, and here I understate Hume's account of the matter, the outside should be seen in terms of its being informed by the inside – the mind is the active principle. For the mind is doing practically all the work in making the outside both what it is and also making it appear to us to be as it appears. Indeed, the phrase 'landscape seen as mindscape' would have been an excellent title for the famous section 'Of scepticism with regard to the senses' in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (Bk. I, Pt. IV, Sect. II). The point may be made in terms of the concept of 'the direction of fit'. With regard to the Aristotelian-Thomist narrative, the mental picture of the world depends for its existence and its truth upon the outer world which is the source of the in-form-ation of the mind. What is in the mind fits what is outside and is thereby true. But with regard to the Humean

narrative, the outside depends for its existence on the mind's formation of an idea, suitably complex, of a world, which is then externalised by means of the activity of imagination, with that outer world duly fitting the complex idea formed by the imagination.

Hume finds himself on the inside, where the acts of which he is conscious are solely mental acts, of perceiving, remembering, anticipating, and so on, and where the objects of those acts are only impressions and ideas, in a word 'perceptions', which are fleeting existences in that they exist for only so long as we are conscious of them, and which do not have a lasting identity that can survive a period, however brief, of not being perceived. Surely they have intentional being and nothing more. Perhaps, trapped in this enclosed world, a Cartesian Hume might have tried to escape via a demonstration of God's existence. But Hume, being Humean, had no such escape route and was left with the problem that his description of the world, a description which constitutes the opening premiss of the *Treatise*, seems to leave unaccountable the natural world, a world whose existence does not at all depend upon us.

While we could perhaps say that our world is entirely on the inside, this position needs to be finessed for the sake of persuading those who are uneasy about the possibility of an inside if there is no outside. But Hume had a belief, that he characterised as a 'natural belief', in an outer world whose being did not depend on its being an object of perception by his mind; and his account of the existence of the outside is an account of the way in which the mind, and especially the imagination, with its three principles of association of ideas, constructs out of the disorderly, and even chaotic swirl, of impressions and ideas, a coherent picture, whose coherence gives us the illusion that the outer world thus pictured has an existence of its own and is therefore able to remain in existence without the aid of us who have provided the matter, consisting of impressions and ideas, out of which the world outside is formed.

I use the term 'illusion' here in response to Hume's repeated use of the term 'fiction' in his account of the being of the world in which we live. Somewhat as an author writes a novel we make the world outside, without even noticing that we are performing this cosmic act. Hume looked out upon the landscape of Scotland and saw it for what it really was, his own mindscape, but he also knew, through philosophical reflection, that it is a mindscape which he had detached from its moorings in his mind, detached in this sense: through the mind's own activity its mindscape acquired an appearance of otherness in relation to the mind, an otherness that secured its appearance of independ-

ence from its creator, the independence, indeed, of a cosmos from its cosmic creator, the human creature.

Here, then, is one way of handling the contrast between the inner world and the outer. It is a way that gives almost all the work to the mind in respect of the interpretation we must make of the swirling chaos of our impressions and ideas. The interpretative work itself consists principally in the construction by our imagination of a coherent world within which our simple impressions and ideas make a helpful contribution to the overall coherence of the picture. One way to understand this process or practice is to see how we read McTaggart's paintings of 'the human figures more and more transparent'; their high degree of transparency is no obstacle to knowing that it is the images of humans that we are looking at; and the presence of others so transparent as to be no longer visible is no obstacle to our sensing that there are indeed other figures actually invisible in the paintings.

This account of our search for coherence is readily recognisable from everyday practice, such as our practice of reading so much into a few words and some brief acts by strangers that we think ourselves able to reconstruct the outline of their lives and character, on the base of the almost nothing that we have seen of them and heard them say. The only difference from this practice is that this same operation, à la Hume, when carried out on perceptions of the mind, brings our world into being – a fictive world which, by an act of mental dexterity which we hide even from ourselves, we fondly imagine to be real. It is real, but somewhat as the world portrayed in a novel is real. Of course, characters and their actions have to be credible, what we would expect of real human beings, but the novel as a whole is in large measure the product of imaginative activity.

There is plainly a sense in which, for Hume, the inside has priority or primacy in its relation to the outside. I wish now to focus on a rather more modern version of this same priority. My purpose is to continue my unpacking of Kenneth White's lines: 'the human figures / more and more transparent / till they disappeared', by marking a significant similarity between McTaggart and Wassily Kandinsky, in respect of the role of invisibility in their paintings, though I acknowledge also a most important difference between them in that same area. Invisibility is, via the concept of transparency, at the heart of many of McTaggart's paintings and it is also assuredly at the heart of Kandinsky's concept of abstraction.

Transparency and camouflage are two ways to be invisible. In the case of something transparent, such as a sheet of plate glass, we not only look *at* it, but

also *through* it and may have no clue that it is present. It is invisible to us even though we are staring at it. This case is different from that of full camouflage which leaves the spectator staring directly *at*, but not *through*, the object and not knowing that it is there as something distinct from the surrounding landscape. Again, through its camouflage it is invisible to us as a distinct object, though we are staring at it. McTaggart uses both these means as a way of reducing the visibility of the players in his scenes. Sometimes it is as if we see remnants or tatters of them, so that we see though them as through a window and sometimes it is as if they are in camouflage clothing. Either way they are *en route* to invisibility.

The kinds of invisibility at issue regarding McTaggart differ crucially from the kind that underlies Kandinsky's concept of abstraction. Kandinsky's oeuvre moves from the representational to the abstract. In his earlier works an external something with a given geometric form is represented by an image that has at least a roughly similar form. As his work develops, the degree of similarity between, say, the village of Murnau and Kandinsky's paintings of the village, diminishes. What we think of as his step into abstraction comes when he produces works that are not in any sense copies or replications of external objects. In a famous reminiscence Kandinsky writes of an exhibition of French impressionist paintings in Moscow in the latter 1890s where he saw 'The haystack' by Monet, and he comments: 'That it was a haystack, the catalogue informed me. I didn't recognise it. I found this nonrecognition painful, and thought that the painter had no right to paint so indistinctly. I had a dull feeling that the object was lacking in this picture. And I noticed with surprise and confusion that the picture not only gripped me, but impressed itself ineradicably upon my memory, always hovering quite unexpectedly before my eyes, down to the last detail… Painting took on a fairy-tale power and splendor. And, albeit unconsciously, objects were discredited as an essential element within the picture.' They are instead the products of a complete move, or I should say a 'completed' move, into subjectivity; the new works are paintings of the subject's mind and the subject's mental states and actions. Kandinsky seeks to represents the life of the mind, what some call 'the inner life', though for Kandinsky that phrase is surely pleonastic in so far as, for him, life is by its nature something on the inside. The sensing, the feeling, and so on, joy, sorrow, tranquility, pain (but not the object causing pain nor the look of anguish on the face or in the bodily contortion of the sufferer) – these inner things are what Kandinsky paints when he paints abstracts. What he paints are invisible in virtue of their innerliness, while at the same time of course they also con-

stitute a framework of states, mainly affective states, which can only be on the inside, and in terms of which we interpret the outer world. Kenneth White is surely in this same territory when he writes:

> and why do I squander my life-time painting
> because when I am painting
> I know myself in the midst
> of something living
> (*Walking the Coast*, XVIII)

Kandinsky spent years thinking about individual colours, pondering them when adjacent to other colours, meditating on coloured forms, and on the affective impact of different coloured forms when in contact with each other; he meditated also on the tranquility that seemed linked to certain colours and conjunctions of colours, and the distress, anxiety or sorrow seemingly linked to others. Likewise, he noted the tranquility naturally associated with certain shapes, and on the other hand sensed a turbulence associated with jagged lines. In practical terms his relentless and intense gaze on his own inner life yielded up knowledge that enabled him to paint what was invisible, namely his own affective life. Whether his methodology and consequent knowledge are trustworthy is an empirical question, to be answered by our judgment of the value of the paintings that were an outcome of his carefully slanted, years-long, intense reflection on his inner state.

In so far as we understand abstraction in painting to be the painting of our inner states, abstracted from outer objects, then all artists have produced abstract art, in so far as their affective states are represented in their paintings. In that sense, in the act of painting, and whether the painting is of an external object or is an abstract, the abstract dimension has primacy. That is, I think, the way in which we should understand Kandinsky's report, offered in the context of a brief remark about neo-impressionist theorising on light and air: 'I felt, first dimly and later consciously, that every theory based on external resources is always only one instance, alongside which many other instances might exist with equal validity. Still later, I realized that the external grows from the internal, or else is stillborn.' We thus notice the abstract elements in a painting that can also be seen as a straightforwardly representational work; but what is required is the presence of the painter's inner being that is an active principle in any painting that is a work of art. For example, in the case of many of McTaggart's landscapes and seascapes, swathes of the paintings,

and paintings in their entirety, are abstract in that, taken by themselves and without regard to what, if anything, they picture, they bespeak affective states of mind. Note, for example, the lower right quadrant of his 'The Storm', which the spectator could readily interpret in terms of a turbulent, agitated, even desperate spirit. The quadrant, qua representational, is a likeness of a stormy sea, but qua abstract and bespeaking affective states of mind, it is not a likeness of those inner states, nor can be since the states are invisible, and therefore nothing can literally look like them.

I return finally to the opening question of Kenneth White's beautiful poem:

> What was he after there at Machrihanish?

The poet then provides an answer:

> (that sense of windswept space
> sea and sky in multiple movement
> landscape seen as mindscape
> the human figures
> more and more transparent
> till they disappeared)

That is indeed an answer, a poet's answer. Yet we are told that, if the question had been put to McTaggart directly, he would have made no answer. That is, no answer that a poet would have given, an answer that would have endowed his poem with due finish. But McTaggart was a painter, not a poet. He would let his paint brush do the talking. That peerless work 'The Storm' was surely the best possible answer. It says it all.

Bibliography

Errington, Lindsay, *William McTaggart 1835–1910*, Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 1989

Fischer, Hartwig and Sean Rainbird (eds), *Kandinsky: The Path to Abstraction*, London: Tate Publishing, 2006

Henry, Michel, *Voir l'invisible: Sur Kandinsky*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005

Kandinsky, Wassily, *Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter

Vergo, Da Capo Press, 1994
Kvaerne, Per, *Singing Songs of the Scottish Heart: William McTaggart 1835–2010*, Edinburgh: Atelier Books, 2007
John Muir, *Nature Writings*, New York: Library of America, c.1997
White, Kenneth, *Open World: The Collected Poems 1960–2000*, Edinburgh: Polygon, 2003
White, Kenneth, *The Wanderer and his Charts*, Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004

University of Glasgow