

Literal lies and metaliteral truths

Was Samson a brawny muscly guy? It would certainly seem he was, if you believe the European Old Masters' interpretations of the Biblical story. Van Dyck painted the Israelite judge two times, Rubens once, Rembrandt once; there are others. If you do a Google search for images of Samson, you will find several images of comic-book-style heroes with bulging biceps and chest muscles. All of these images correspond to the popular equation of Samson's name with his profound physical strength. Yet if we study the story closely we will note that Samson's strength is never described as being due to his physique. He famously lost his strength when he (inadvertently) broke his vow to never have his hair cut. There's really nothing in the story at all to suggest Samson's strength was anything other than miraculous; it certainly was not inherent in his muscles, which would have remained after he lost his hair.



What did the historical Samson look like? We have no way of knowing, of course. But I like to think of him as having the build of Robert Plant (left) or maybe of Arthur Atherley (right); in other words, Samson quite possibly might have been a slim and slight man, endowed with miraculous strength not corresponding to his musculature.



Could it be said that the paintings of Samson mentioned earlier—the ones where he is shown full of muscle—are misleading in some way? A big beefy guy obviously *looks* strong, but Samson's strength wasn't in his physique. The images of a muscly Samson—are they lies, since they distort the truth about where Samson got his strength from?

In what way can a picture be a lie, anyway? It's not an easy question to answer because everyone has to hold in tension these two facts: that pictures can indeed

distort the truth (and often do so deliberately), but at the same time that no one should expect all pictures to show us the exact, literal truth of what they represent, especially if the subject of the painting is at all allegorical. Rubens painted some allegorical pictures for Marie de' Medici which are some of the most obtusely confusing pictures I've ever seen. The titles are deceptively straightforward; for instance, a picture titled *The Presentation of the Portrait of Marie de' Medici to Henry IV* seems like it should portray exactly what it claims to portray, but the real picture is full of all kinds of Greek and Roman gods and symbols, including, along with the French king,



Juno, Zeus, a heavenly chariot, various birds, a gender-fluid personification of France whispering in Henry's ear, and a few cupids or putti dragging away some tokens of warfare.

The things in the picture look real but no one can reasonably expect this picture to be a literal representation of an event which actually happened. Yet Henry did, in fact, see a painting of Marie de' Medici before he married her—does Rubens' painting, then, become, in some way, a depiction of a real event? Or does the inclusion of Zeus, putti, etc. automatically make it into a lie?

This is what Edward Lucie-Smith has to say about this painting, in his book *Symbolist Art*: “A representation of this sort requires a suspension of disbelief upon the part of the spectator. It jumbles together in-

congruous elements, and presents us with personages and events which would be impossible in the real, perceptual world.” An allegorical picture hardly counts as a lie, though, because it is meant to be *read*, just like the pictures on road signs. It is a proto-text, a kind of symbol-based verbal communication, a sort of hieroglyphics—and the question of how *words* can lie is one I'm not going to get into here. Pictures can, of course, show us things that are not possible in the real world, such as Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* or Salvador Dalí's *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second before Awakening*; these images depict a great number of things which we've seen before in the real world, but their juxtaposition indicates that the image as a whole is not a representation of reality. Those aren't really lies, though, any more than pictures such as Max Ernst's *Angel of Hearth and Home* or *Ubu Emperor* aren't lies despite the unreality of the subjects *they* depict.

This is all basic theory-of-images stuff and shouldn't really bother us too much. But the question “Are paintings lies?” gets interesting if we refer to the debates that sprung up in the wake of the prolonged discussion, among painters of the nineteenth century starting with Turner and moving on through the Impressionists and

such figures as Van Gogh and Cezanne, and finally culminating in Cubism, of how to interpret reality through paint. Turner's misty landscapes and blurry, light-drenched interiors cracked open a Pandora's box of commentary and discourse: does the picture really need to correspond, at all, to the truth of what we see in front of our eyes, if it is to count as representational?

Of course it doesn't! Pictures can represent things that they don't actually depict; what the Impressionists were doing was a representation of how the light played across the surface of their haystacks or cathedrals or whatever, and the Cubists were representing the underlying geometrical forms they saw in the world around them. And pictures like the pointillist works of Seurat, or the paintings by Chuck Close depicting famous people's heads using little squiggly marks, aren't lies either; they are simply exquisite contortions of the painter's skill.

One more example: while doing research for this article, I tried really hard to find the actual locations where Wayne Thiebaud painted his views of San Francisco; I had no success at all. He titled many of his vertiginous views of teetering apartment buildings and impossible hilly streets with the street address they ostensibly depict—but after an hour or so on Google Maps I had still not found any place I could confidently match to anything Thiebaud painted. Are his paintings lying about how hilly the streets of San Francisco really are? No—he's painting the mood, not the actual scene in front of him. He is "depicting" the emotion felt while driving around in the city.

Consider Emmanuel Leutze's famous painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware river. When you look closely at the picture, do you notice anything odd? Specifically, do you notice that Washington is *standing* in a little *rowboat*, putting the boat and crew at considerable risk of capsizing?



“Washington's stance, intended to depict him in a heroic fashion, would have been very hard to maintain in the choppy conditions of the crossing.” So says Wikipedia about this picture. *Intended to depict him in a heroic fashion*: it wouldn't be very heroic for Washington to be huddled in the rowboat, crouched low. He might look worried, as if he was reconsidering the crossing to Trenton, the push against the Hessians, the entire war effort, and even the fledgling nation itself. Instead, what the country needed was a portrait of Washington the decisive leader, poised and ready to exact swift retribution against the forces of oppression. This is the Washington that Leutze gave the nation, and it has become the image of Washington most familiar to the average American (with the exception of the Gilbert Stuart portrait which made its way onto the front of the one-dollar bill). The image has served its purpose well; and it isn't so much a *lie* as a *deeper*

truth. It is, literally, a lie—it depicts a historical event but does not adhere to the truth of that event—but *metaliterally* it shows the truth. Washington, huddled with his troops and officers in the middle of a rowboat that icy Christmas night, *was* acting like the decisive leader of Leutze’s portrayal.

In her excellent book *A Profound Weakness: Christians and Kitsch*, Betty Spackman describes a time when she taught a Sunday school class on the Biblical story of the angels visiting the shepherds to announce the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:8-16). She illustrates the anecdote with a Christmas card depicting the scene: in the card, the shepherds are standing silently and gazing upon the host of angels with what looks like mild curiosity at best. “Hmm, that’s interesting,” they might be thinking. Spackman relates how the kids in her class had forgotten that the Biblical text describing the visit of the angels to the shepherds says they were “sore afraid.” To help the children understand the reality of what happened that night, she had the kids re-enact the visit of the angels as if they themselves were the “sore afraid” shepherds:

Some hid under tables and chairs, some stood with their hands to their mouths. Some were shaking and clinging to one another and pointing. Inwardly I rejoiced with the heavenly host and the class was dismissed!

I don’t know if the children remember that day or not. But hopefully it destroyed, for that Christmas at least, some of the damage done by all the cheap, clichéd Christmas cards they had obviously taken as their models—models that gave them no sense of the awe or the humanity of the story in question.

There is a tension here. Spackman is absolutely correct when she declares that the “awe” and “humanity” are removed from the story by these kinds of images—but in their place, the images give us the peace and calm that the angels were sent to declare. Which is the lie, and which is the truth? A Christmas card showing the angels in a Biblically accurate form, and the shepherds running away in panic, would certainly not convey the “peace on earth” message the angels were sent to convey. The standard Christmas card conception of the scene may be kitschy, as Spackman claims, but it tells us something that a “historically accurate” rendition of the scene would not; it is literally a lie—and perhaps a boring, simple one—but *metaliterally*, it is a very complex and thought-provoking image.

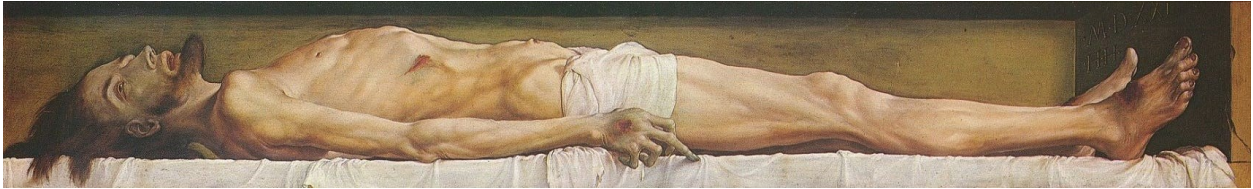
One of the most complicated paintings I know of, one which operates on several levels of literal and metaliteral truth- and lie-telling at once, is Hans Holbien’s *The Body of Christ in the Tomb*. This painting has worked its way into world literature via Fyodor Dostoevsky, who first saw it in Basel in 1867, where, according to his wife, he was “as if riveted to it,” and stared at it for at least twenty minutes. Dostoevsky discusses the painting in two key passages in *The Idiot*; in the first, the novel’s

protagonist Prince Leo Myshkin sees a copy of it in the house of the wealthy merchant Rogozhin.

“But I like looking at that painting,” Rogozhin muttered after a silence.

“At that painting!” The prince suddenly cried out, under the impression of an unexpected thought. “At that painting! A man could even lose his faith from that painting!”

“Lose it he does,” Rogozhin suddenly agreed unexpectedly.



It is a very strange painting—not least because of its bizarre dimensions (approximately 78 by 12 inches). Later in the novel, Ippolit Terentyev has this to say about it:

The picture portrays Christ just taken down from the cross. It seems to me that painters are usually in the habit of portraying Christ, both on the cross and taken down from the cross, as still having a shade of extraordinary beauty in his face; they seek to preserve this beauty for him even in his most horrible suffering. But in Rogozhin’s picture there is not a word about beauty; this is in the fullest sense the corpse of a man who had endured infinite suffering before the cross, wounds, torture, beating by the guards, beating by the people as he carried the cross and fell down under it, and had finally suffered on the cross for six hours. [. . .] When you look at the corpse of this tortured man, a particular and curious question arises: if all his disciples, his chief future apostles, if the women who followed him and stood by the cross, if all those who believed in him and worshipped him had seen a corpse like that (and it was bound to be exactly like that), how could they believe, looking at such a corpse, that this sufferer would resurrect? Here the notion involuntarily occurs to you that if death is so terrible and the laws of nature are so powerful, how can they be overcome? How overcome them, if they were not even defeated now, by the one who defeated nature while he lived, whom nature obeyed, who exclaimed, “*Talitha Cumi*” and the girl arose, “Lazarus, come forth and the dead man came out? [. . .] The people who surrounded the dead man, none of whom is in the painting, must have felt horrible anguish and confusion on that evening, which at once smashed all their hopes and almost all their beliefs.

There is absolutely nothing divine about this Jesus. His body is beginning to succumb to corruption; his hands and face are turning gray already. It is a shockingly realistic depiction of a dead body. Holbein supposedly painted it from an actual corpse. In this sense, Holbein is showing us what the disciples saw. Jesus, taken down from the cross, would have looked like this. To the disciples this *was* the truth: their beloved rabbi was dead, the kingdom he prophesied he would bring did not, in fact, come, and now they had no leader, no shepherd, no teacher. All they had left of him was a decaying corpse.

Holbein's painting is a spectacularly excellent depiction of that truth.

Here is the irony: Holbein's painting is literally a lie—it portrays Christ as just another crucifixion victim, a dead body without a soul. The literal truth is that the Lord of the Universe was descending into Hades as the creed says. But . . . to his disciples, huddled in an upstairs room in the temple or going back to whatever jobs they had before they met Jesus and started following him around, what Holbein shows us is what the emotional truth was, for them: after the crucifixion, they thought it was all over. In their hearts they felt betrayed or abandoned; some of them, I'm sure, even "lost their faith," as Myshkin says. Holbein's literal lie is the metaliteral truth for the disciples; the literal truth would have been perceived as a lie by some of them. What Holbein shows, in his painting, is both the literal truth (the dead body) and the lie (the dead God) *and* the metaliteral truth ("Jesus left us") *which is also* the metaliteral lie ("Jesus left us") *and* the literal *truth*—that Jesus is not present in his physical body; he has triumphed over death and hell and will return, even into this exact specific dead body, and it will be glorified, and will never die again.