The Marriage at Cana

Fig. 1. Peasant Wedding Feast, c. 1568, oil on wood, 114 x 164 cm (45 x 64 ½ in.), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

This is one of Bruegel's most widely known paintings, adorning classrooms around the world, lending itself to use on Christmas cards, jigsaw puzzles, calendars and table-mats. Art historians suppose it to be a celebration of peasant festivity and greed and have seized on it as an example of the mention by van Mander, of Bruegel, together with his friend Frans Frankert, going into the country disguised as peasants and passing themselves off as *invités* at such events. Van Mander implies that this was done for amusement and fitted

in with what was assumed to be Bruegel's love for 'drollery.'[1] It is typically said of Bruegel that 'His paintings, including his landscapes and scenes of peasant life, stress the absurd and vulgar, yet are full of zest and fine detail. They also expose human weaknesses and follies. He was sometimes called the "peasant Bruegel" from such works as *Peasant Wedding Feast*'.[2] It has been suggested that the figure at the extreme right of the picture conversing with a monk may be the artist himself. All the details in the picture, as is typical of Bruegel, are minutely and accurately observed.

Analysis of this painting will propose that Bruegel saw human beings from the point of view of a student of the human condition viewed according to the blend of influences from mysticism, Gnosticism, philosophy and esoteric Christianity that we have called the Perennial Philosophy. This interpretation aims to show that Bruegel studied humanity, not just because it was interesting and amusing, but because he believed that the highest philosophical and religious truths are found within the world of man and human behaviour.

In this wedding picture the bride is identifiable seated against a black wall-hanging on which a paper crown is suspended. Her identity is the only certain one in the picture. If it is no more than just a wedding feast the groom has not been convincingly identified.[3] The absence of both Christ and his mother has precluded any historian from considering that the picture may be the Marriage at Cana though some commentators note the similarity of

[1] See Introduction , p. 2.
[2] Web Museum, Paris, http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/bruegel/
[3] Suggested candidates are the seated man at the end of the table passing plates from the two servers. Another is the prominent figure in the centre foreground who wears a blue shirt, red cap and white apron; yet another is the seated I figure in black next to him.

certain elements to the Cana theme but make no further investigation.[4] Bruegel took gospel events that, for him, had significant hidden meaning and depicted them in a contemporary 'realistic' setting and, as we have seen in his treatment of *The Adoration of the Kings*, he could use such a scene, changing it very little, to express an entirely unconventional interpretation. At the same time this new interpretation focuses on questions of spirituality at the heart of the human condition.

References have been made elsewhere in this work to a school of thought going back to Origen at the dawn of the Christian era where an allegorical interpretation existed that saw in the events of the life of Christ, as described by the gospel writers, a meaning directly related to man's spiritual life: his struggle with inner forces encountered on the journey from human existence to eternal life. The method of allegorical interpretation of scripture passed from Hellenised Jewish philosophers and Neoplatonists in Alexandria in the first and second centuries to Christian theologians, such as Clement, Origen and Augustine. The 'allegorical method' was widely accepted as a means of interpretation from the earliest times and only disappeared after the Reformation, giving way to the literalism and fundamentalism of modern times.

This work will show that the account in Chapter 2 of St John's gospel – the story of water being turned into wine at a wedding in Cana where Jesus and his mother were present – has a long tradition in theological literature of being interpreted as an allegory; that the higher meaning of this story concerns the process by which human beings, through the

[4] Hagen, R-M. and R. *Pieter Bruegel the Elder, c. 1525-1569, Peasants, Fools and Demons*. Taschen, 2000, p. 72ff. Also Wilfried Seipel ed., *Pieter Bruegel the Elder at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna,* Milan, 1998. p. 129.

agency of Christ and his mother, pass from temporal existence into Eternal Life. It has been shown in earlier parts of this thesis that Bruegel, through his connection with the House of Love, was in contact with a tradition that can be linked back through the Brethren of the Common Life and the New Devotion to Eckhart and the Perennial Philosophy. Among the ancient writers both pagan and Christian in Eckhart's writings one of the most frequently cited is Augustine. Augustine himself said: 'That which is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients and never did not exist from the beginning of the human race'.[5]

Augustine says in his own commentary on the Marriage at Cana, in a passage that discusses the mystery of Jesus being both God and a man, that 'he did it [changed water into wine] in our midst'.[6] He stresses the humanity of Christ and tells us to search for the deep hidden meaning of such events; 'beyond all doubt … there is some mystery lurking here'.[7] It will be suggested in what follows that the occurrence of the mystery *in our midst*, as Augustine says, (i.e. among human beings,) is the key to Bruegel's pictorial study of the human condition, that for him humanity is the forum in which divine and earthly energies interact. We have seen in the painting of *The Numbering at Bethlehem* that the as yet unborn Jesus is present in the midst of humanity but unrecognized. The Marriage at Cana, as theologians remind us, is the first miracle recounted in the Gospel and the point from which Christ's ministry to humanity begins. It is from this point that

[5] Augustine *Epistolae*, Lib. 1. xiii

[6] St. Augustine of Hippo, *Lectures on the Gospel of John*, Tractate 8, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701.htm

[7] ibid.

he begins to be known, though not by everyone. The gospel text tells us that ‘the servants knew’ and implies that some knew and understood what was happening while others did not. From now on there are two types of human beings: those who ‘know Christ’ in a mystical or esoteric sense, that is, who are capable of recognizing the higher or divine level in themselves, and those who do not. This distinction between human beings at different levels of spiritual awareness can be seen in images of the Cana miracle from the Byzantine and Italian Gothic traditions.

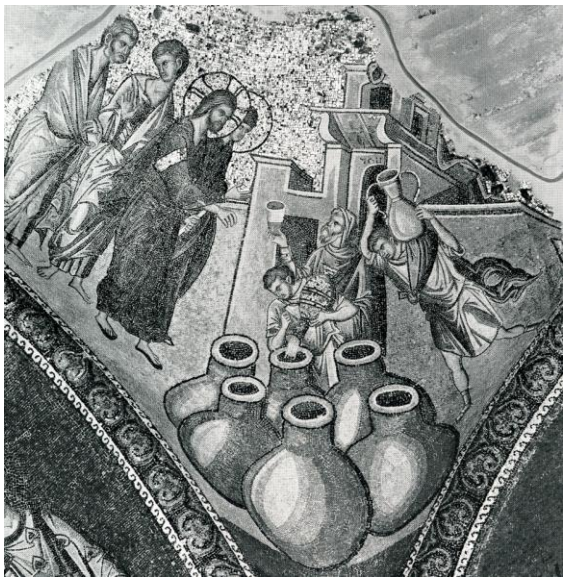

Fig. 2. Mosaic from the Kariye Djami, Istanbul, c. 1340

In the 14th-century Constantinopolitan mosaic in the Church of the Chora (today known in Istanbul as the Kariye Djami) we see the prototype for subsequent medieval images that will be discussed here (fig. 2). The composition is made up of two separate groups, one with Christ, his mother and two apostles standing a little apart with restrained gestures and attitudes while the other group consists of two servants and the master of the feast busily occupied with fetching, pouring and serving the water turned into wine. We note the prominence in the foreground of the six stone water jars. There is neither bride

nor groom; there is no table or feasting and there are no guests. By stripping out all the narrative elements the artist gives only what is essential and relevant to the mystical meaning. This is emphasized by the building in the background whose symbolic function is to denote the enclosure of space and can be understood as a reference to an inner or psycho-spiritual location rather than a literal rendering of John's text; the event is taking place in what the *Philokalia* calls 'the House of Spiritual Architecture'.[8]

In Duccio's image (fig, 3), painted at about the same time the mosaic made by the Constantinople master, there is a similar lack of concession to literalism and, though we are clearly witnessing a feast, the picture's rhythm is laconic and pervaded with an atmosphere of ritual and mystery. There is a contrast between the seven seated figures all of whom look or gesture towards Mary, and the livelier more informal movements of the servants and others (also seven in number) in the foreground. There are no obvious references to a wedding.

[8] See R. Temple, *Icons and the Mystical Origins of Christianity*, Luzac, 2000, pp 135-143, for a discussion on 'the house of spiritual architecture'.

Fig. 3, Duccio (Siena, *circa*. 1255-1319)

Fig. 4, Giotto, 1267-1337)

In the fresco attributed to Giotto, the isolated contemplative figure at the centre of the composition next to Mary can be identified as the bride while the young man between Christ and the bearded apostle is not necessarily identifiable as the groom, nor is the young man in green with his back to us. The person standing directly before Christ is probably a servant receiving instruction from Christ. The older man on the right may be

the master of the feast. Again, there is a contrast between the impassivity of those seated and the more animated figures in the foreground.


Fig. 5, Giusto de Menabuoi (1320-1391)

In Giusto de Menaubuoi's Florentine wall-painting Christ, together with apostles and apostle-like figures, and Mary, together with four women, all, as can be seen from their dress, from the highest order of society, have become 'guests' (fig. 5). By their gestures and body language they express surprise while the servants, receiving instructions from Christ, are active and busy. If the bride and groom are present it is not possible to identify who they are with any certainty.

The next painting (fig. 6), attributed to Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) or to his school, while clearly an image of the Cana miracle, breaks some of the established conventions and introduces new elements into the composition whose idea is not easy to fathom.

Fig. 6, Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516)

Again, there is a clear distinction between two different worlds. The six figures, who sit on the right hand and far side of the table, by their bearing, body-language and looks, belong to a different world to that inhabited by the others. But the artist has introduced unprecedented and odd features into the picture which, following Lynda Harris' analysis that will be considered below, suggest mystical or esoteric ideas that Bosch wanted to convey. We will return to this after briefly noting three paintings of the Renaissance era.

The roles of the participants in the Netherlandish painter Gerard David's idealised vision are differentiated in another way (fig. 7). Ten women, including Jesus' mother Mary and the bride, dominate the composition. David seems to show that everyone in the picture was a participant in the mystery and the sense of hidden meaning is present even if not all the figures can be clearly identified according to the gospel narrative. As in several of the preceding images the bride – modest, contemplative and contained – is the least doubtful after Christ and Mary. We cannot be sure of the two young servers in front of the table but their prominence at the centre of the circle suggests the same tradition that Bruegel drew on when he painted the two young men carrying a door laden with plates.

Fig. 7, Gerard David (1460-1523)

Fig. 8, Garofalo (Italian, 1481-1559)

Fig. 9, Tintorreto

Finally, we see in both Garofalo (Ferrara and Rome, 1481-1559, fig. 8), and the great Tintorreto, (Venice; 1518-1594, fig. 9), both contemporaries of Bruegel, a new approach.

Here the tendency is for art to become a vehicle for the expression of the artist's individuality and skill. The subject of the picture is still religious but the sense of a mysterious allegory is giving way to a different emotional content, appealing to human sentiments and sensibilities. The painting is no longer an object of contemplation and spirituality. This trend is typical of the Renaissance, but this writer will endeavour to show that Bruegel was an exception, that he continued to express allegorical mysteries that are, at the same time, universal truths, but he concealed his grasp of the inner meaning by appearing to be no more than an observer of human behaviour and a master of realism. Schuon seems to have intuited this when he speaks of the 'valid experiment of naturalism [which,] combined with the principles of normal and normalizing art, [and which] is in fact done by some artists'. He points out that Renaissance art 'does include some more or less isolated works which, though they fit into the style of the period, are in a deeper sense opposed to it and neutralize its errors by their own qualities'. To give a specific example he further says: 'of famous well-known painters the elder Brueghel's snow scenes may be quoted'.[9]

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The text for The Marriage at Cana is found only in the Fourth Gospel. There is a tradition in theology showing that deep meaning can be discovered in the symbolism of the story and its imagery. It was written later than the preceding three synoptic gospels

[9] Schuon, F. *Castes and Races*, translated by Marco Pallis and Macleod Matheson, Bedfont Middlesex: Perennial Books, 1982, p. 87.

and has been universally acknowledged as belonging to a different category of spirituality. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 155-220) wrote that, "last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel … and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel".[10] John Chrysostom, the great Cappadocian bishop of the 4th century tells us that 'We need much care, much watchfulness, to be able to look into the depth of the Divine Scriptures. For it is not possible to discover their meaning in a careless way or while we are asleep'.[11] When Augustine writes in his tractate on the Marriage at Cana of 'uncover[ing] the hidden meanings of the mysteries' he acknowledges the esoteric dimension of the story.[12] He refers to the 'garniture of heaven, the abounding riches of the earth … things which lie within the reach of our eyes' and compares them with another world: 'these things indeed we see; they lie before our eyes. But what of those we do not see, as angels, virtues, powers, dominions, and every inhabitant of this fabric which is above the heavens, and beyond the reach of our eyes'. Augustine is using the terminology of both Pagan and Christian Neoplatonists, in their elaborations the 'Divine Ray' or the 'Great Chain of Being'.[13]

In the Authorised Version of the Bible the text is as follows:

> [1] And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: [2] And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage.

10 Cited by Steve Ray in http://www.envoymagazine.com/backissues/4.1/bible.htm
11 Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, HOMILY XXI).
12 St. Augustine of Hippo, *Lectures on the Gospel of John*, Tractate 8, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701.htm
13 Ibid. The reference to 'angels, virtues, powers, dominions' is part of the specific language, later to be classified by Dionysius the Areopagite in the 6th century, for describing intermediate cosmic stages between man and God.

> [3] And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. [4] Jesus saith unto her, Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come. [5] His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it. [6] And there were set there six waterpots of stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three firkins apiece. [7] Jesus saith unto them, Fill the waterpots with water. And they filled them up to the brim. [8] And he saith unto them, Draw out now, and bear unto the governor of the feast. And they bare it. [9] When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not whence it was: (but the servants which drew the water knew;) the governor of the feast called the bridegroom, [10] And saith unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now.

At the literal level the episode is full of ambiguities. We are told nothing concerning the bride and the groom is only mentioned once. The exchange between Jesus and his mother is enigmatic. What is the meaning of the six-water pots and the excessive amount of wine – more than 150 gallons – that appeared?[14] From the vast amount written by theologians, a tradition can be identified that pertains to our proposal that Bruegel's treatment of the story is allegorical.

Earlier parts of this thesis aimed to establish the allegorical method at the foundations of the Perennial Philosophy. Summarising briefly it can be said that the method of

[14] The *Revised Standard Version* (1952) gives 'each holding twenty or thirty gallons'. A firkin corresponds to the attic amphora that held approximately 9 gallons. See http://christiananswers.net/dictionary/dict-f.html.

allegorical interpretation of Scripture can be traced to the Jews in Alexandria who sought to accommodate the Old Testament Scriptures to Greek philosophy. Aristobulus and Philo are the two great thinkers who worked in this way. Aristobulus, who lived around 160 B.C., held that Greek philosophy borrowed from the Old Testament, and that those teachings could be uncovered only by allegorizing. Philo (*c*. 20 B.C. - *c*. 54 A.D.) aimed to defend the Old Testament to the Greeks and, even more so, to fellow Jews. The Christian Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 155-220) was influenced by Philo and proposed a system of interpretation where any passage of the Bible might have up to five meanings. Thereafter, Origen, who studied Platonic philosophy and is thought to have been a pupil of Clement, as well as of the mysterious Ammonius Saccas, went so far as to say that Scripture itself demands that the interpreter employ the allegorical method. Origen's interpretive approach had great influence on those who would follow in the Middle Ages, as did Augustine (354-430) who, like Philo, saw allegorization as a solution to Old Testament problems.

The allegorical system of interpretation prevailed throughout most of the Middle Ages. It was in the 16th century that it was mostly rejected by the Protestant Reformers who forced the more literal interpretation of the Bible that has dominated Christian thought for the last four hundred years. Bruegel, living in the eye of the storm of the Reformation, with his knowledge of both Renaissance mystical philosophy and the Northern Schools of German and Flemish mysticism, appears to have worked to place the higher truths to which he had access into his paintings in the form of hidden allegories.

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Bearing in mind John Chrysostom's injunction to use 'much care, much watchfulness, to be able to look into the depth of the Divine Scriptures' this writer offers the following material investigating the allegorical meaning of the Cana Miracle story.

The renowned German scholar Rudolf Schnackenburg, in his three-volume commentary on John's Gospel, comments concerning the Cana Miracle:

> The first impression given by the narrative is that of a simple miracle-story. But the mysterious words about the 'hour' of Jesus, the lavish quantity of wine, the final remark of the evangelist and indeed the whole purport of the story make it clear that there is a deeper meaning behind the words of the narrative; and this level of thought forms the real problem.[15]

The work of Matthew Estrada makes a significant contribution. He has written comprehensively on the Cana Miracle story where, according to him 'almost every word and every phrase within the Cana miracle has a deeper level of meaning other than the literal'.[16] He explains: 'Many of the insights that I offer in the interpretation of the Cana Miracle have been suggested before by the scholars here and there, but no one … has attempted *and succeeded* at taking all of these "pieces"… and put them together to form a coherent whole so as to support an allegorical reading of the Cana Miracle.' His method of exposition depends on a close reading of the Greek to 'show how almost every word and/or phrase has its origin from another source, and therefore has symbolic

[15] Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St John*, vol. 2 (New York: Seabury, 1980), p. 323.
[16] Matthew Estrada in his *An Allegorical Interpretation of The Cana Miracle*, unpublished pending revision and editing but available from the author: matt_estrada@yahoo.com

significance'.[17] His method is based on the discovery of John's sources in the language and imagery of the Old Testament. He systematically traces the Evangelist's use of key words – words whose allegorical meaning is sometimes openly given in the Old Testament – which occur again in the gospel where people familiar with the Old Testament would recognise them. Readers steeped in the imagery and language of the Old Testament would recognise, at both conscious and unconscious levels, the implications of certain familiar or well-known words and phrases, or even whole set-piece scenes, whose significance is lost today.

An example of Estrada's word-parallelism, where he compares the first words of Genesis with the Prologue to John's gospel, gives an indication of his method:

> "In the **beginning** (αρχη) was the Word (ο λογος), and the Word (ο λογος) was with **God** (τον θεον), and the Word was **God** (θεος). He was with **God** (τον θεον) in the **beginning** (αρχη). Through him all things **were made** (εγενετο); without him nothing **was made** (εγενετο) that has been made (ο γεγονεν). In him was life, and that life was **the light** (το φος) of men. **The light** (το

[17] Ibid. p. 10. ' John borrows words ("glory", "stone", "servants") and themes (Old *vs* New, letter *vs* Spirit, Moses vs Christ, etc) from this source material (as well as other words and themes from other source materials), knowing that these words and themes would recall in the minds of his audience the familiar sources that he himself had turned to in order to compose his story'. p. 52

φος) shines in **the darkness** (τη σκοτια),

but **the darkness** (η σκοτια) has not

understood it" (Jn 1:1-5).

He says:

> It does not take a bible (sic) scholar to recognize that when John penned these first few verses he was thinking about and alluding to the first chapters of Genesis where we read about the First Creation story. Genesis 1:1-3 states:
>
> "In the **beginning** (αρχη) **God** (ο θεος) created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, **darkness** (σκοτος) was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of **God** (θεου) was hovering over the waters (του υδατος). And **God** (ο θεος) said, '**Let there be** (Γενηθητω) **light** (φος),' and **there was** (εγενετο) **light** (φος). **God** (ο θεος) saw that **the light** (το φος) was good, and he separated **the light** (του φωτος) from **the darkness** (του σκοτους)."[18]

[18] Ibid, p. 13

And later he tells his readers:

> By beginning his gospel with these allusions to the creation story in Genesis 1, and in mimicking this first creation story by way of rhetorical imitation, John was also telling his readers that a New Creation has begun in and through Jesus Christ. It is this story of the New Creation that John is calling to the attention of his readers. Again, he does so by alluding to the First Creation story. What John hopes to accomplish by alluding to the First Creation story is to draw out parallels between the First and Second Creation stories.[19]

Thus Estrada suggests that the Cana Miracle story, which begins the next chapter after the Prologue is actually part of the New Creation idea.[20] If, as commentators since the third century have asserted, the fourth gospel is 'a spiritual gospel', i.e. esoteric, the idea of New Creation has to be understood more as 'an event in the soul' rather than an event in history. This essay contends that Bruegel expressed his vision of the Marriage at Cana through the understanding that all the events and the people involved in it represent psycho-spiritual energies interacting between the higher world and the plane of human existence. What Estrada has discovered supports this view.

On the identities of the bride and groom and on the symbolism of the wedding idea

Estrada provides arguments that 'Mary … is being presented not only as the New Eve but

[19] Ibid, p. 14
[20] ibid, p. 14

also as the bride of Christ, and as such, is a symbolic figure for the collective people of God'.[21]

> We should, then, understand Mary, first of all, as representing the New Eve who is the mother of a New Creation, and secondly, as God's people of both the Old and New Testaments ... For this reason John has her coming to Jesus with the knowledge that He is the One who is able to supply the wine. An abundance of wine was one of the characteristics of the messianic age that the Old Testament prophets used to describe that age.[22] Mary, in recognizing Jesus as the One who could supply that wine, was, in effect, recognizing Jesus as the Messiah – the one who would inaugurate that messianic age.

Chapter I of John's Gospel begins with the famous prologue; chapter II begins with the Marriage at Cana. It is worth noting that the passage connecting the Prologue with the Cana story[23] is precisely about the *recognition* of Jesus. John the Baptist, who twice explains that he baptises only with water, says 'but among you stands one whom you do not know', further he says 'I myself did not know him'.[24]

Here Estrada introduces ideas that relate to the 'problem' in Bruegel's picture of the absence of an identifiable groom:

[21] ibid, p. 20
[22] cf. Joel 2: 19, 24; 3: 18; Amos 9: 13
[23] ch. I; 19-51
[24] Jn I, 31

A first piece of evidence among many that adds weight to the argument that Mary is the bride and that Jesus is the groom in our Cana miracle is the fact that John does not name in this story who the bride and bridegroom are. John has purposefully left the identification of the bride and bridegroom ambiguous so that his readers could wonder who they were, and in their wonderment, consider the possibility of Jesus as the bridegroom and the Church as the bride.

A second piece of evidence [suggesting that] Mary is the bride and Jesus the bridegroom is found in the very first two verses of our Cana miracle – what I call a "miniature *inclusio*". There we read:

> "On the third day there was a **wedding**
> (γαμος) at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother
> was there, and Jesus and His disciples had
> also been invited to the **wedding** (γαμος)."

Between the twice-repeated word "wedding" we find sandwiched together the mother of Jesus, Jesus and His disciples. *These are the participants in the wedding.*[25] Mary is the bride and Old Testament Church, Jesus is the groom, and the disciples, as we shall see, are the New Testament Church and future "children" (results) of this marriage.

[25] My emphasis

On the symbolism of famine imagery and Jesus' remark to his mother 'Woman what have I to do with thee?' Estrada argues:

> What then does John … wish to communicate … when he emphasizes, by stating … that there is no wine? ... what John is alluding to is a "famine situation"... not a lack of any physical need. It is rather a lack of a spiritual need.[26]

He further suggests that 'we can first look at a third source material that he used as found in Jn. 2:4a: "Woman, what between me and you?" (τι εμοι και σοι, γυναι)". This phrase is taken from I Kings 17. This is a story in which God sends a drought, and as a consequence of the drought, a famine. Elijah miraculously provides for a widow and her son until the drought has ended. Later on, the woman's son becomes sick, and dies. The woman then says to Elijah: "What between me and you (τι εμοι και σοι), man of God (ανθρωπε του θεου)? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"[27] Elijah then takes the son to the upper room, stretches himself out on top of him three times, and the boy's life returns to him.

> John, chose to borrow [from I Kings 17] … the phrase "What between me and you?" (Τι εμοι και σοι) and employ it in his own story … Even as Elijah supplied for this woman's need in time of drought, so too will Jesus supply for the "woman's" need in time of famine (the wine that is lacking).

[26] Ibid. p. 32 ff
[27] I Kings 17:18

But the symbolic implications go further. 'Even as Elijah brought back the son's life, after she was reminded of her sin … so, too, shall the Son give his life for the sins of the people and yet live again after being dead for three days.'

> In Genesis 41:55 we have a famine situation.[28] The people are in need, and … cry out to Pharaoh [who] directs them to Joseph with these words: "Go to Joseph and do what he tells you". John, in wanting to present his readers with a "spiritual" famine … recalled this … story, and thus found this phrase useful … "Do whatever he tells you". By indirectly quoting Genesis 41:55, John alludes to this story and thereby conveys the famine theme … to his own readers … So, too, are we presented with a famine situation in our Cana miracle (there is a shortage of wine twice repeated in Jn. 2:3).

Estrada continues, in further support of his argument that John was intentionally alluding to Genesis 41:55 in his use of the phrase "Do whatever he tells you", saying that we have two other source materials used by John in the Cana miracle that also contain within them a famine situation.

> In Amos 8:11-12, we read:
>
> 'The days are coming,' declares the Sovereign Lord, 'when I will send a **famine** (λιμον) through the land- not a **famine** (λιμον) of food or a thirst

[28] "The seven years of abundance in Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine (λιμου) began, just as Joseph had said. There was a famine (λιμος) in all the other lands, but in the whole land of Egypt there was food. When all Egypt began to feel the famine…" Genesis 41:55

for water, but a **famine** (λιμον) **of hearing the words of the Lord** (ακουσαι τον λογον Κυριου). Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, **searching** (ζητουνες) for **the word** of the Lord (τον λογον Κυριου), but they will not **find** (ευρωσιν) it'.

In Amos 9:13-14 we read:

'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. **New wine** (γλυκασμον) will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills. I will bring back my exiled people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their **wine** (οινον); they will make gardens and eat their fruit.'

Amos speaks of a famine that would come upon the people of Israel, but not a famine of food or water but rather a famine of the words of the Lord.

The nature of the famine that John is presenting to his readers is a famine of "hearing the words (τον λογον) of the Lord". Amos prophecies that the people are "searching for the word (τον λογον) of the Lord, but they will not find it … In opening his gospel in this way, John is presenting his readers with what the people of his time were "starving for" – the Word of God.

Estrada finds arguments to demonstrate that the Cana Miracle is a symbolic story of Jesus 'marrying the people of God via his death and resurrection … [It] is a symbolic story of Jesus both uniting and transforming the dispensation of the Law and the Prophets into the dispensation of the Holy Spirit'.[29] He goes on to tell us that the word 'water' (referred to by John on 15 occasions) symbolizes 'the Law and the Prophets' in other words the earlier or preparatory stage (the Old Testament), 'the Father's means of revelation' to be completed by the recognition of Christ as the fulfilment (the New Testament). Further symbolic meaning is suggested when we learn that Moses' name means 'drawn from the water'.[30] In the Synoptic gospels John the Baptist proclaims that he came baptizing with water.[31]

[29] p. 11
[30] 'And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses: and she said, Because I drew him out of the water'. Ex 2: 10 (AV)
[31] Mt 3: 11; Mk 1: 8; and Lk 3: 16

The same author shows that the word ‘wine’ in John 2 symbolizes ‘the dispensation of the Holy Spirit’, and that it alludes to specific Old Testament texts.[31] Performing such function, it further alludes to the prophecy in Joel,[32] which speaks of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is from Joel that John draws the symbolic meaning ‘spirit’ for the word ‘wine’. ‘An abundance of wine was one of the characteristics of the messianic age that the Old Testament prophets used to describe that age’. A further hint is given by Luke in Acts 2, where he reveals his knowledge of John's Cana Miracle allegory. There Luke plays on the word ‘wine’ as symbolizing ‘the Holy Spirit’ when he quotes the multitude mockingly saying of the apostles ‘they are filled with new wine’. He immediately recounts how Peter, quoting Joel to refute this, says ‘God declares, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh’.[33]

The mysterious bride in Bruegel’s painting may be accounted for by the idea offered by Estrada that the ‘mother of Jesus’, also referred to as ‘woman’ in the Cana story, symbolizes both the New Eve who gives birth to the New Adam, and the Old Testament people of God who, as Mary, give birth to Jesus and believe in him. ‘Mary, therefore, is being presented not only as the New Eve but also as the

[31] Amos 9: 13-14, Joel 1: 5, 10; 2: 19, 24; and 3: 18
[32] Joel 2: 28-32
[33] Acts 2; 13-17

bride of Christ, and as such, is a symbolic figure for the collective people of God'[34].

Summarizing, we can say that the case is built on the idea that the dispensation of Law and the Prophets – the Old Testament – is signified by *water* and that the dispensation of the Holy Spirit – the New Testament – is signified by *wine*. The *miracle* whereby Jesus *marries* Mary, (the New Eve, the people of God) *unites* and *transforms* the old with the new and this is signified by the changing of water into wine.

We now come to the idea of the necessity for the 'water' to be changed into 'wine' because both John the Baptist and Moses, who are identified with 'water', are personifications of the old order – 'the Law and the Prophets'. The Cana 'marriage', where 'water' is changed in to 'wine', brings into being the 'new' which replaces the 'old'. It is the metaphor for an inner process, a mystical transformation of being. Augustine is saying something similar when he states that 'For the bridegroom … to whom it was said, 'Thou hast kept the good wine until now', represented the person of the Lord. For the good wine – namely, the gospel – Christ has kept until now'.[35] If the Byzantine mosaicist and his Late Gothic contemporaries were following this tradition, it would account for the absence in their pictures of an obvious groom figure. In Bruegel's picture the absence of an obvious Christ figure does not necessarily mean that the painting does not represent the events of Jn 2, nor even that Christ is absent; he can be

[34] Estrada, p. 20

[35] Augustine, op. cit, p. 9

mysteriously present 'represented in the person' of someone else, perhaps one of the figures at the centre of the painting. Bruegel's method corresponds with what we have already seen in other paintings: by slightly adapting the standard imagery he invites his viewers to contemplate the story's mystical meaning rather than what had by then become conventional and superficial.

Bruegel seems to be following St Augustine who advises his readers:

> to uncover the hidden meanings of the mysteries … In the ancient times there was prophecy … But the prophecy, since Christ was not understood therein, was water … Prophecy … was not silent concerning Christ; but the import of the prophecy was concealed therein, for as yet it was water … And how did He make of the water wine? ... He opened their understanding … we are now permitted to seek Christ everywhere, and to drink wine from all the water-pots.[36]

There is then a tradition, traceable to John Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine in the fourth century, but probably older, uncovered by Matthew Estrada, symbolized in the Cana Marriage as an allegorical mystery. This view has been touched on by theologians and commentators within the mainstream churches. But in the 16th century, to have gone further, as Estrada does, would have amounted to declaring in favour of Gnosticism. The allegorical writings of Hendrick Niclaes were just this as has been shown earlier in this thesis. And this was the position in the 15th and 16th centuries of the non-orthodox traditions with which Hieronymus Bosch and Peter Bruegel were almost certainly

[36] Augustine, op. cit., pp. 11-14

associated. One would expect that a Gnostic view, whether in the third century or in the forms Gnosticism took in the 16th century, would be regarded by the church as heretical and, according to Lynda Harris it is into this category that Hieronymus Bosch's *Marriage at Cana*, painted *circa* 1500, falls.[37]

Fig. 10. Bosch (1450-1516)

[37] Lynda Harris, *The Secret Heresy of Hieronymus Bosch*, Floris Books, Edinburgh, 1985

Harris analyses Bosch's painting of the Marriage at Cana in Rotterdam calling it 'The Union of Soul and Spirit' with the subtitle of the 'Spiritual Marriage'.[38] The six figures at the table 'are participating at a solemn ceremony, and pay no attention to the worldly feast that surrounds them'. They are enacting a 'genuine religious ritual' in contradistinction to 'the heresy and corruption of Satan's realm' to which the other figures belong. She continues:

> The six celebrants of this private rite all sit more or less facing a seventh figure. This seventh figure is small, youthful and unidentified in gender. Nevertheless it is clearly very important. It faces the bride, with its back to the viewer. It holds a chalice in its right hand, and raises its left in some sort of ceremonial greeting. It wears a garland and a brocaded robe and stands next to an empty throne.
>
> This small but richly dressed child is extremely difficult to explain in terms of traditional Christian theology. What is its significance and why is it so little and so young? Looked at from the point of view of Catharism, its meaning becomes more clear. The Cathar and Manichean records tell us repeatedly that the fallen angels left their attributes of garland (or crown), robe and throne behind in the Lord of Light when they descended to Earth. These attributes would only be regained by the souls after they had reunited once again with their spirits. The way to achieve this reunion was through spiritual baptism or marriage. It therefore follows that, while Bosch's bride represents the initiate, the small and youthful figure which has recovered its attributes of robe, garland and throne represents her newly baptized soul. In medieval depictions of death and dying, the soul is often

[38] Spiritual marriage refers to a Cathar tenet of belief and practice. See Harris, op. cit.

shown as a child which is separated from the adult body. In Bosch's painting the bride is not on her deathbed, but her newly saved soul is a key player in the events, and is therefore depicted as a separate figure.

Comparing the two paintings – Bosch's *Marriage at Cana*, which we can assume Bruegel knew, and his so-called *Peasant Wedding*, which, we are arguing, is in fact a *Marriage at Cana* – we see in the latter painting a diminutive figure (fig. 12), also opposite the bride, that in some ways reminds us of the 'soul' figure in Bosch's work (fig. 11). We have seen in *The Numbering at Bethlehem*, and in *The Road to Calvary* how Bruegel characteristically hides or understates what is, for him, the important idea. In his picture the child wears no regalia, makes no gesture and there is no throne. Yet we feel that Bruegel, in placing the figure near the centre of the composition, opposite the bride, and in emphasising the silhouette of the face against the white tablecloth, invites us to consider its meaning.

Fig. 11

Fig. 12

If this child has the hidden significance we are suggesting he may throw light on the second child seated in the foreground whose meaning has not been satisfactorily explained. Although Bruegel hid or disguised his ideas, he often also drew attention to them by repetition (the closed window, the two magpies etc., for example in *The Numbering at Bethlehem*). The repetition of the child in a different guise and placed directly below the first invites us to see a connection. Both figures are on the same vertical line that divides the picture by the proportion of (approx) 6:15. It can be mentioned that in Western tradition the peacock signifies the Resurrection and eternal life.


Fig. 13

The figure of the bride has been described as expressing ‘stupid peasant bliss’ but this idea could only work if the picture was no more than a realistically observed bucolic feast (fig. 13). But if there is a mystery here and this ‘bride’ is at its mystical centre, then we may try to understand the figure in the light of its obvious characteristics. This is a woman inwardly concentrated and deeply contained within herself; she has the appearance of someone in a state of meditation. She is one of the personages in the picture who, like the figures in Giotto’s or Bosch’s works, belongs to ‘another world’.

In the other paintings examined, it can be seen that Bruegel treats separately certain individuals who appear to exist on a different level from those who belong to the general run of humanity and who are wholly caught up in the carnal world. These are often the holy personages of the story: Christ, his mother and the apostles in for, example, *The Road to Calvary*. In the painting under discussion a similar distinction exists but since Christ, his mother and the apostles are not present (or not obviously present), the distinguishing 'presence' of a higher level of being had to be transferred to others.

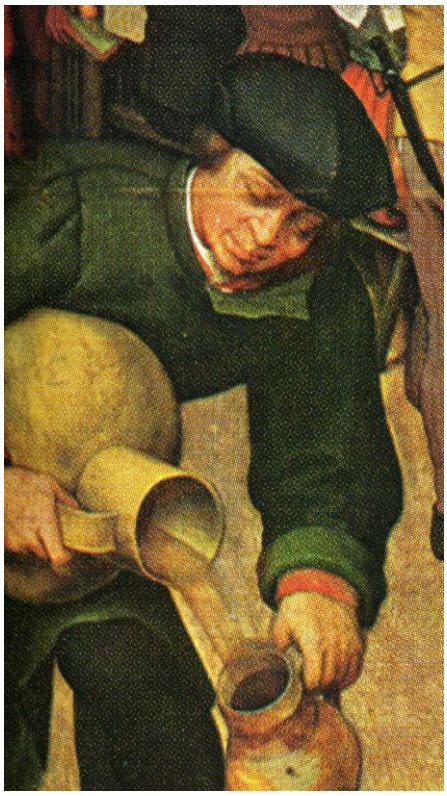

Fig. 14

A special role in the story is played by 'the servants' who 'knew' ('but the servants which drew the water knew'). One of these is the figure, given prominence in the foreground on the left, who is engaged in pouring from a large jug into a smaller one (fig.14). This has

been described to as ‘almost certainly beer’ but its appearance and colours could also be interpreted as water becoming wine. What is striking is the attitude of the water/wine pourer and the special atmosphere around him which is in contrast to the movement and energy everywhere else in the picture. From the look on his face, from the absence of agitation in his movement, from the prominence in the picture that the artist gives him and from his careful, attentive stance, the onlooker can sense that this man knows what he is doing and why he does it. A recurring theme in Bruegel’s later paintings is one that appears to refer to different levels of awareness, to the different states of consciousness of the participants. The idea that some are spiritually awake while the majority sleep is perhaps most evident in Bruegel’s painting of *The Road to Calvary* where Mary and her entourage are shown in an entirely different light from all the others. In the Cana painting the water/wine pourer is placed away from the main action almost as if he belonged to another picture much as Mary and her group are placed outside the wheel of life in *The Road to Calvary*.

What then of the group given such prominence by Bruegel in the foreground on the right? (fig. 15)

Fig. 15

There are two diagonal thrusts in the picture and at the point at which they intersect the movement of the delivery of food changes direction. The seated man handing plates of food from the improvised tray provides the axis for this new direction. Bruegel has gone to considerable lengths to show him in a pivotal position: his arms form a right angle through which the movement passes and this abrupt change of direction through ninety

degrees is energised not only by the thrust of his arms but also by the stance of his legs. His left foot, which appears beneath the improvised tray next to the right foot of the red-coated carrier, shows that he has placed his legs wide apart so as to give extra stability to the twist of his movement.

 Fig. 16

Yet his face (fig. 16) shows that he too is composed and attentive. Of all the faces in the picture only this man and the water/wine pourer express such a lack of inner agitation. It is not the same as the look of the bride which seems to be that of concentrated prayer or meditation. These men are involved in external activity while maintaining an interior regard on themselves.

The same may be true of the young man in a blue coat and a white apron that is the dominant figure of the composition (figs. 17, 17a).

Fig. 17

Fig. 18

Here we do not see his face but we see that his attention is focused and not distracted by random thoughts. The stance of his body, leaning slightly forward with knees bent, his sure grip on the pole, together with his alert look, betoken a state of self-composed awareness and confidence that most others do not have. All three in this group have an air of assurance as they go about their business. It can be seen that they are reliable and trustworthy in a way that the bagpiper obviously is not. The bagpiper (figs. 18, 18a), by contrast, dreams about something he cannot have, he is placed in the composition so as to represent the opposite state of the server. With sagging knees and slack jaw, his face expressing that his inner attention is lost to dreams, he is a victim figure who cannot participate in the event taking place that could bring about a change in his level of being

– the inner transformation signifying the passage from spiritual sleep to active attention and consciousness, a transition as miraculous as the changing of water into wine.


Fig. 17a


Fig. 18a

We have seen in *The Fall of Icarus* how Bruegel plays on the contrasting states of consciousness of two figures – the good ploughman and the bad shepherd – by placing them in a significant relationship to each other in the composition. An echo of this device can be seen *The Peasant Wedding/Marriage at Cana* in the figures of the blue-coated, white-aproned server and the bagpiper.

It may be that Bruegel took the bagpiper from the figure on the platform above the servants in Bosch's *Marriage at Cana*. The bagpipes, in Bosch's world, according to one scholar, represent the 'vacant gut, stuffed full of fear and hope' around which the 'jigging masquerade' turns on the 'disc of the world' … 'For the vacant, spectre-like existence of Goethe's "Philistine" is inflated now by fear and now by hope, so too these bagpipes are idle nothingness, blowing and squeaking only as long as living breath inflates the bag, and wretchedly collapsing as soon as the breath fails.'[39]

If the first food-bearer represents man awake and the bagpiper represents man asleep, Bruegel introduces between these two the figure of a man at the moment of awakening.

At the very centre of the picture is a man in a black coat who Bruegel, by placing him in a central position, may intend us to see as the master of the feast. He has just tasted the wine and he reacts with astonishment. Something extraordinary has happened that jerks

[39] Fränger, op. cit. p. 69

his body back and his head up in amazement while in his eyes appears a look of recognition.

He seems to see, with melting face and softening eyes, the answer to a great longing. It is as though a never-dared-for hope could at last be fulfilled.

In this work there is a distinction between the world of self-realized, enlightened beings and the world of those entirely caught on the 'wheel of life'. A similar distinction is indicated, as has been discussed, in Bruegel's *Road to Calvary* and it is a feature of early representations of the Marriage at Cana. The language of sacred scripture speaks of those who are awake and those who are asleep; those who see and those who are blind. Basing his thought on the allegorical sense of the miracle of the changing of water into wine, Bruegel is telling us *via* his painting about the process of transition from the one state to the other. Here is the real miracle whose meaning hides within the symbolic miracle: the 'awakening' from spiritual sleep, or 'resurrection' from spiritual death. The traditional symbolism and allegory of religious myth and legend refers to this. It is a central theme of the Perennial Philosophy and the ultimate challenge for Man – the transition from existence in time and in the body to existence in eternity. Conventional religion, when it becomes pseudo religion, helps us avoid confronting this idea by encouraging us to believe that heaven and hell belong to the afterlife. The view of Tradition holds that these

places are here and now; they are 'states of being' as Coomaraswamy puts in 'within ourselves'.[40] The mystical meaning of the Marriage at Cana then is about the meeting between the two opposed aspects of Man's nature: an alchemical mystery concerning the joining of otherwise irreconcilable forces; the joining, in man, of the human and the divine.

The uniting of these two opposites needs the intervention of a third, or 'reconciling' force symbolised in the action of Jesus. The idea of three and the idea of (mystical) union are inferred in the first sentence of the gospel text: 'And the third day there was a marriage.' *Synthesis* overcomes *duality* to give birth to *manifestation*. Three, according to ancient Pythagorean and Hermetic ideas and again at the heart of Renaissance mysticism, 'is the first number to which the meaning "all" was given. It is the Triad, being the number of the whole as it contains the beginning, middle and end. In the Pythagorean tradition three means harmony, completion, the world of matter.[41] In Christianity it represents the Trinity. The opening line of the *Emerald Tablets of Thoth the Atlantean* (Tablet 11) 'Three is the mystery, come from the great one'.[42]

[40] A. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*. Sophia Perennis; Revised edition (June 1979)
[41] See Peter Gorman, Pythagoras; A Life. London; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979. p.143
[42] http://www.crystalinks.com/numerology2.html

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to show Bruegel was among a group of mystics and humanist philosophers in the 16th-century who believed in and actively sought the universal philosophical truth common to both 'pagans' and Christians and not exclusively the preserve of the churches. Belief, however, was not the means whereby what they sought – transformation in the soul – might take place; rather, knowledge and practice were required.

Although I have used the modern term Perennial Philosophy to refer to this truth, I have shown that the concept existed since Plato – though Plato himself acknowledged that it was older – and was central to Renaissance humanist thinking. The verities of the Perennial Philosophy have no formal doctrine or practical structure. They are partly hidden from the rational mind and from the sense faculties and require a special initiation from those who seek them. That initiation is through self-knowledge – the insight gained through the daily practice of contemplative prayer and the inner journey from 'Ignorance' to 'Spiritual Peace'.

The Antwerp truth-seekers, whether they were followers of Hendrik Niclaes, Sebastian Franck or others, were not an isolated phenomenon; they were not a misguided aberration, 'religious libertines', as historians have sometimes seen them. Their teachers had not sprung from nowhere as is demonstrated by the influence on them of the *Imitatio Christi* and the *Theologica Germanica* and, beyond those, by Meister Eckhart. And, antecedent to Eckhart, as this thesis has shown, several lines of transmission concerning knowledge of the laws of the universe (the macrocosm) and their counterpart in man (the microcosm) can be traced from antiquity to the Reformation.

The principal method for the transmission of wisdom is oral since by words alone – that is, words in books – a writer cannot take into account the state of being or the level of knowledge of his reader. In sacred tradition both the one who transmits and the one who receives need to be aware each other's psychological, emotional and intellectual state and the teacher needs to be aware of the degree of the disciple's preparedness. Compatibility has to be established before spiritual exchange can take place – hence the symbolism of marriage.

The great works of art, architecture and music produced according to the principles of perennial wisdom are sacred art in the true sense. Works of sacred literature too, belong to this category for, according to the tradition, sacred knowledge cannot be transmitted in books other than symbolically which is why the books of the Bible or, for example, *Terra Pacis*, should be treated as esoteric and not as history. The research done by Titus Burckhardt on gothic cathedrals or Schwaller de Lubitch on Egyptian temples, to give

examples from many such workers in this field, shows how elaborate programmes of universal knowledge are conveyed in allegorical ways. If Bruegel's paintings belong to this tradition – as this thesis has demonstrated – then Bruegel himself was an initiate of a philosophical school that vouchsafed hidden knowledge which he, in an unknown way, succeeded in expressing in his art. We can see the uniqueness of this achievement when we compare his pictures with those of Peter Brueghel the Younger whose copies skillfully reproduce the style and the compositions of the father. They reproduce the form but they are empty of content.

Behind Bruegel the painter is Bruegel the spiritual master tracing out the journey of the seeker through three stages of endeavour. The first, illustrated by *The Numbering at Bethlehem, The Adoration of the Kings* and *The Massacre of the Innocents*, reveals what the practitioner of spiritual life experiences at first hand through practices that lead to self-knowledge: that our human condition is one of spiritual darkness, the title of Chapter 9. This stage corresponds to what the Greek fathers called *Praktikos*: 'mastering the knowledge of the inner self'.

Chapter 10, looking at *The Road to Calvary, The Harvesters and The Fall of Icarus,* shows how Bruegel introduces us to the means for man's possible escape from darkness. He must engage in spiritual work; the labour of planting *seed* and growing *corn* enable man to eat *bread* – all this being an allegory for spiritual work, the title of Chapter 10. This stage corresponds to what the Greek fathers called *Theoretikos*: the beginning of vision or 'seeing'.

Chapter 11 deals with the incomprehensible mystery of transformation, the 'marriage' or the perfect union of God and man, the goal of mystical ascent. This stage corresponds to what the Greek fathers called *Gnostikos*: 'knowing'.[1]

Finally, it is not a question of whether Bruegel was a member of the Hendrick Niclaes' Family of Love or of Barrefeld's Hiël group, or whether he was a pupil of Sebastian Franck or of Agostino Steuco's school in Rome. Neither is it a question whether he practiced Christianity as a Catholic or a Protestant. We have seen that the Familist association is the likely main influence on his spiritual life and that the present state of knowledge does not permit us to be categorically certain due to lack of documents. But that is not the important question. All these groups – including even, in its inner essence, the Church – express aspects of primordial truth and it is from this universal and timeless primordial tradition – the Perennial Philosophy – that Bruegel speaks to us.

[1] These terms: *praktikos, theoretikos, gnostikos*, are from John McGuckin, *The Book of Mystical Chapters: Meditations of the Soul's Ascent from the Desert Fathers and Other Early Christian Contemplatives*, Boston and London, 2002.