Enacting the Glastonbury Pilgrimage through Communitas and Aural/Visual Culture

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Enacting the Glastonbury Pilgrimage through
Communitas and Aural/Visual Culture

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The sacred sites of Glastonbury in Somerset, England have long been places of pilgrimage, connected to the legend of the journey of Joseph of Arimathea to the British Isles, and have fired the imagination from the Middle Ages to today - inspiring the Arthurian legends, folk-stories and song, and visual representations. In response to the question ‘What is Pilgrimage,’ this essay seeks to explore the conjunction of artistic representations and geographic journeys to and among the ancient topography and mysterious structures of Glastonbury, with a particular focus on how sacred travel, and especially an experience of communitas, can be engendered through art and material culture. This Turnerian notion is understood here as expanding beyond the sense of community enacted within a group of pilgrims and used to describe the complex reception of a symbol vehicle - such as a visual representation or song - as a site of community where, through the act of viewing, the beholder connects to those who have seen the object, person, or image before and those who will see the image in the future. As in all sacred art, the forms and iconography take on an ontological capacity, leading the viewer beyond the person or landscape represented to the thing itself, and hence function as powerful aids to prayer and meditative experience. The work of several thematically connected artists who live (or lived) and work in England - William Blake, Aidan Hart, and the founders of the British Pilgrimage Trust - will serve as case studies; all draw on the legends and sacred stories surrounding the imbued and highly-charged Glastonbury landscape, inviting the viewer to embark on a contemplative pilgrimage through pictures (and, in Blake’s case, lyrical poetry). A look at the efforts of the BPT to engage in an intentional temporal shift through the use of musical entrainment and Blake’s lyrics will underscore the continued importance of the Glastonbury legends in cultural expression.

Key Words: pilgrimage, art, Glastonbury, material culture, landscape, music, communitas

We first caught sight of the Glastonbury Tor from a distance as we trudged through the countryside of Somerset, England, shivering a little as our hair curled in the cold and heavy mist. The hill rose up from the levels, skirted with little wisps of fog that formed a ring like a transparent and ethereal Elizabethan ruff. It gave the impression of an ancient hillfort with its mysterious conical shape, protean in the haze and furthering a sense of temporal dislocation. It was cold for June, with slate-grey skies and mist transforming the hills to a luminescent green like something from the deep sea. Nearby are the remains of an old, rambling thorn tree which, according to belief, was planted there by the biblical figure Joseph of Arimathea who had travelled to England on an evangelical mission after witnessing the crucifixion. There is also the Chalice Well, where he was said to have deposited the holy grail which he carried with him to England. According to belief, it contained a few drops of the blood of Christ, which has forever tinged the water reddish and rendered it holy. The Abbey Church, in ruins since the Protestant Reformation, contains historic plaques pointing to the burial places of King Arthur (Figure 1). These many sacred sites of Glastonbury have long been places of pilgrimage and, as such, have inspired legends, folk-stories, and visual representations from the Middle Ages to today. In response to the question ‘What is Pilgrimage,’ this essay will focus on the conjunction of such visual representations and geographic journeys to and among...
the ancient topography and mysterious structures of Glastonbury, with a focus on how the experience of sacred travel, and especially an experience of *communitas*, can be engendered through art and material culture.

Pilgrimage, as a physical practice and mental journey, has historically encompassed metaphor and reality in the Christian tradition; for example, in the Hebrew bible, Abraham leaves his home as a ‘pilgrim and stranger’ to seek the land God has promised to reveal (Genesis 12:1-9) and in the New Testament the metaphor of the soul’s journey through the hostile wilderness of the world and towards Christ appears in, for example John 14:6 and Mark 8:34. In the British Middle Ages, literal journeys to shrines and sacred sites were themselves understood as metaphorical in the sense that they were microcosmic, geographic versions of the universal pilgrimage of the soul (Dyas, 2001:245-6 and Edwards, 2005:8). Recent scholarship in the field of medieval studies, in particular, has established the importance of visual aids such as
manuscripts, maps, and labyrinths as surrogate pilgrimages for those who could not travel for a variety of reasons, such as tenure to the land, lack of resources, and economic hardship (Connolly, 1998:1; Rudy, 2000:494-515; Beebe, 2008:39-70). Christopher Wood has discussed the ‘medial shift’ that occurs when there is a ‘transfer of meaning from original building to a replicated building to painted building’ in the context of German Renaissance art (2008:239). From a broader perspective of pilgrimages and world religions (past and present), Simon Coleman and Jas Elsner (1995) have discussed not only the metaphorical resonances of geographical pilgrimages but also the function of objects and texts as memorials for the pilgrim and as a link to the sacred goal for those who would undertake a future journey. In a medieval Book of Hours in the collection of Francis Douce at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (MS Douce, 51), a tin pilgrimage badge - a souvenir of the journey - was carefully sewn on to one of the illuminated vellum pages. Such an object, which retained the memory of both site and journey, would enhance the devotional experience for the viewer engaging with the book (Foster-Campbell, 2011:229); through touch and sight, s/he would have recourse to the pilgrimage site itself through the affective faculties of memory and imagination. This is analogous in many ways to the global phenomenon of building replicas of major pilgrimage sites, or virtual pilgrimages which Bowman has described as the ‘global becoming local, the local becoming global and then re-localised or relocated’ (Bowman, 2005:166) and Karst has posited as a translation that creates accessibility for a sacred site ‘beyond the borders’ of the original (Karst, 2017:31). There is a relationship here with the notion of second-class relics in the Catholic church, where material objects - such as cloth, a piece of fabric, or indeed an artwork which has come into contact with the remains of a saint - is believed to carry a blessing, or to take on the efficacy of the original. Perhaps in part because of this, through the ages, distinction between understandings of pilgrimage as motif, metaphor, artistic process, and actual journey have blurred together in various degrees, resulting in the creation of images that were at once narratives, memorials, and stimuli for contemplative journeys from pictorial space to imagination (Barush, 2017).

The representations of the Glastonbury landscape examined here were created specifically to facilitate an embodied experience. The work of several thematically connected artists who live (or lived) and work in England - William Blake, Aidan Hart, and the founders of the British Pilgrimage Trust (hereafter BPT), which became a Charitable Trust in 2014 - will serve as case studies in order to explore how this idea of the transfer of spirit from site to representation remains relevant today. All demonstrate the continuation of the idea of art making, in visual and aural formats, as a form of pilgrimage across the ages, inducing a sense of communitas and connection to the past.

Blake’s work spans the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; Hart, an ordained reader in the Orthodox church, is actively producing icons today. The BPT is now a thriving Charitable Incorporated Organization, seeking to ‘advance British pilgrimage as a form of cultural heritage that promotes holistic wellbeing, for the public benefit’, with a number of itineraries available (BPT, 2018). All are linked in that they have drawn on the legends and sacred stories surrounding the imbedded and highly-charged Glastonbury landscape, inviting the viewer to embark on a meditative, mental pilgrimage through pictures, lyrics, and song. As in all sacred art, the forms and iconography take on an ontological capacity, leading the viewer beyond the person or landscape represented to the thing itself, and hence function as powerful aids to prayer and meditative experience. A look at the efforts of the BPT to engage in an intentional temporal shift through the use of musical entrainment will underscore the continued importance of Glastonbury in cultural expression. Given the ‘green’ enterprises and eco-consciousness of the BPT, Blake’s famous complaints of the ‘dark satanic mills’ scouring England, which he saw as the New Jerusalem, and Hart’s interest in icons as a paradigm of Christian ecology (Hart, 1998), such representations can also offer a solution, perhaps, to the issues of pollution, littering, and amassing air miles – a growing problem as pilgrimages (re)flourish, and underscores the saliency of art as pilgrimage.

Both the Spiritual Traveler guide to sacred sites and pilgrimage routes in England, Scotland, and Wales (Palmer and Palmer, 2000:199) and journalist and Catholic Herald editor Peter Stanford’s book on pilgrimages in Britain (2011:199) open their sections on Glastonbury with the sentiment that it is a place where people feel that anything is ‘not just possible, but plausible’; Glastonbury is often called ‘The Ancient Isle of Avalon,’ which refers to the abundance of apples that grow there. The Welsh name for Glastonbury translates to ‘grassy island,’ because the landscape was indeed completely surrounded by water until various drainage projects were implemented to create arable land have formed today’s topography. As Marion Bowman has shown, Glastonbury has become

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famous as a haven for spiritual seekers of all sorts; if you ask pilgrims why they are there, many will tell you it is because of the energy of the place (Bowman, 2004:275). The town’s population is usually around 8,000, but swells in the summer for the official Anglican, Orthodox, and Catholic pilgrimages, solstice celebrations, and the Glastonbury music festival. Like an ecumenical and interreligious Lourdes, the High Street (set apart from the quietude of the sites themselves) caters to pilgrims with its shops selling bottles for collecting holy water, healing crystals, tarot decks, Catholic prayer cards bearing images of St. Joseph and Jesus, Buddhist prayer flags, and maps of the many sacred locations throughout the town. Travelers can stop in at the interfaith Pilgrim Reception Center, “open to all people on all paths providing support and information on your journey”[1] before embarking on highly personalized itineraries based on leylines, holy wells, Neolithic mazes, the Arthurian legends, or the story of St. Joseph of Arimathea. It is the latter that is the focus of this essay.

In the collection of the British Library, a manuscript illumination in MS Royal 14 E III dating from the first quarter of the 14th century (fol. 66v, Figure 2) shows Joseph of Arimathea laying down his cloak on a stylized sea – a square expanse of water, populated with fish – as pilgrims who are pure of heart are invited to cross over to England. Some stand on his cloak with expressions of awe and others wait to see whether they, too, might have a place on this miraculous journey. Joseph is mainly known in the canonical scriptures for asking Pontius Pilate for the body of Christ, and giving up his tomb so Jesus could be buried there. He was also one of Christ’s disciples, though - as John the Evangelist tells us - in secret for fear of the Jews (John 19:38). According to an ancient legend, he had travelled to Britain in the first century to found a church in honour of the Virgin Mary. In one version of the story, Joseph was accompanied by the child Christ, who built a model church out of twigs, or ‘wattle’, which is described in a late-6th century letter from St Augustine of Canterbury to Pope Gregory - Epistola ad Gregorium Papam. In another, arguably more popular version of the story, Joseph brought the Gospel and the Holy Grail, in which he caught some of the blood of Christ, to the island after the Resurrection, to which he bore witness (Alton 2001:17). He brought with him eleven companions, making twelve people altogether, reflecting the number of Christ’s apostles. When Saint Joseph arrived in Glastonbury, he is believed to have planted his staff in the ground, which miraculously grew into a holy thorn tree. Looking at his companions, he said, ‘Friends, we are weary all
hence eventually giving rise to the name of the hill - Weary-All. A scion of the original thorn has always remained on the hill, blooming at Christmas, until very recently, when it was cut down in an act of mindless iconoclasm.[2]

The earliest written account of the Saint Joseph story appears in the histories of William of Malmesbury - or De Gestis Regum Anglorum - composed around 1135. William tells us that St Patrick appeared on the scene some three hundred years after Joseph of Arimathea has first arrived and formed a community of monks under his abbotship. It was around the time that William was writing his histories that one of the monastery’s monks had a vision that King Arthur and Guinevere were buried at the Abbey. Excavations

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1. From the sign posted on the front of the Glastonbury Pilgrim Reception Center, which I photographed in June, 2013; I am indebted to Bowman’s extensive work on the culture of Glastonbury today.

2. There is a small Glastonbury thorn tree being re-grown from the tree that was destroyed in 2010.
uncovered a stone slab, a coffin, a sword thought to have been Excalibur, and a cross bearing an inscription that identified the grave as Arthur’s. Since then, legend, truth, history, and vernacular stories have been overlaid and often conflated. Religious pilgrims hence have had - and still have - a wide range of beliefs, agendas, and itineraries. 'England's Jerusalem', as it is known, is considered holy ground to this day, with pilgrims visiting the thorn tree that was said to have sprouted from Joseph's staff, the ruins of the abbey church, and Weary All Hill under the Tor where Joseph rested. In addition, the itinerary also includes the two small, healing streams which flow from the hill where Joseph was said to have washed - or even possibly hidden - the Holy Grail itself.

The religious architecture of Glastonbury, like the Abbey and the tower (Figure 3), have long functioned as powerful, temporal reminders of a promised land to come - in this case, also mediated through artistic practice. From the flat, salt marshes rises the green, strangely conical four-hundred foot hill known as the Glastonbury Tor, and atop the hill is the fourteenth-century tower of a church dedicated to St. Michael. Shrines to St. Michael are usually set on high places, where the beacon fires were lit during the festival. This tower is one of the stations in an alignment of shrines dedicated to the archangel extending along the spine of southwest England all the way to St. Michael’s Mount in Cornwall. For the pilgrim inside the tower (Figure 4), the pointed archways frame a view of the gently green landscape of Somerset, studded with grazing sheep and red-roofed houses. On the day we visited, fog encased the landscape and we were in a tower in the clouds, which disappeared in the thick mist as we descended the hill.

It is not, perhaps, surprising that such a place would captivate the artistic imagination. Blake saw the imbued English landscape as a place where spirituality might be able to flourish again. He was perpetually concerned that his contemporaries were falling into a hell of their own construction as they turned from the spiritual and embraced the commercial and material, to
the detriment of the landscape - and their own mental health. He particularly loathed the onset of the industrial revolution and the fact that children were robbed of their innocence as they went off to work in the mills. The frontispiece to Blake’s illuminated book, *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion* depicts a pilgrim entering the space of the manuscript itself, and beckoning the reader to follow (Figure 5). The matte black depth of the arched, Gothic doorway with its radiating lines draw the eye into its liminal expanse, functioning as a portal beyond the page and into the space of the non-linear narrative itself. The doorway is reminiscent of the arches of the tower atop Glastonbury Tor (Fig. 4), through which a birds-eye view of Albion unfolds for the viewer, akin to the experience of entering the extra-temporal space of his mythopoetic system as encapsulated by *Jerusalem*.

In all of Blake’s works, the pointed arches are symbolic of Gothic England - his age of imagination. Just as the pilgrim and viewer steps into the book, the Glastonbury pilgrim can physically step through the archways of St. Michael’s tower into the landscape of England, re-cast as a New Jerusalem.

Blake enshrined the British Middle Ages as an age of spirituality, creativity, and imagination where sacred art could flourish, bemoaning the lack of civic and institutional support for religious and visionary art in his own time. To name one such example, in his annotations to Royal Academy president Sir Joshua Reynolds’ *Discourses* (ca. 1820), he famously declared:

> *Who will Dare to Say that Polite Art is Encouraged or Either Wished or Tolerated in a Nation where The Society of the Encouragement of the Art Suffered Barry to Give them his Labour for Nothing . . . Barry told me that while he Did that Work, he Lived on Bread & Apples.*’
Blake here refers to his friend, the Roman Catholic artist James Barry, whose commissioned mural program was thwarted under threat of a ‘Papish’ agenda. Blake’s primary goal as a poet and artist was to help his contemporaries break free from materialism and secularity (what he called ‘mind forg’d manacles’) and tap into their spiritual and artistic natures.

To Blake, Jesus - God made flesh and as human as he was divine - was an embodiment of the human imagination; he expounds on this writing that imagination is ‘the Divine-Humanity’ (Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion, 1804-c. 1820), the ‘Divine Body of the Lord Jesus’ (Milton: A Poem, c. 1804-11) and that ‘it is the Holy Ghost himself’ in his annotations to Dante’s Divine Comedy (Damon 1998:195). Therefore, art-making and art-viewing was one way to pray, just as it was for his medieval predecessors who illuminated the gospels. Encapsulating this idea, he wrote in his ‘Annotations to the Laocoon’ project of 1826-7 that

*Prayer is the Study of Art*
*Praise is the Practice of Art*
*Fasting &c. all relate to Art.*

It is this discursive self-awareness and synthesis of aesthetics with mysticism that allows us to position Blake as both pilgrim and painter, and situate him within a historical trajectory of earlier religious, visionary artists and illuminators. Blake explained this idea very clearly in a catalogue he created for a number of paintings around 1810, insisting:

*If the Spectator could Enter into these Images in his Imagination approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought . . . or could make a Friend & Companion of one of these images of wonder . . . then would he meet the Lord in the Air & then he would be happy.*

The idea, here, is for the viewer to approach his pictures in a spirit of contemplation, with the ultimate goal being to reach an elevated spiritual state. His pictures are not just things to behold, but are an invitation to a voyage - in this case into Glastonbury.

Blake perhaps first treated the legend pictorially in an early relief etching from the National Gallery of Art (Figure 6), produced around 1794. Joseph is shown as a bearded patriarch, preaching the gospels under the tree that had sprouted from his original staff. The early
‘inhabitants of Britain’ flock around him, and are shown in various states of repentance, with down-cast eyes, and wonder as they raise their arms towards the heavens. He also, more famously, expressed his ideas about England-as-Jerusalem in a poem which was set to music in 1916 by Sir Hubert Parry. The poem is extremely well-known throughout England and has become a popular church hymn that transcends denominational boundaries. Some have even called it England’s unofficial anthem. The recent London 2012 Olympics opening ceremony, directed by Danny Boyle, opened with Blake’s words. The Tor featured prominently, although crowned with the Thorn tree rather than Tower of St. Michael. Towards the end of the opening ceremonies the parade of nations wound around depositing their flags as they climbed, which immediately evokes the rags, ribbons, and flags regularly tied around the Thorn Tree by Glastonbury pilgrims. A children’s choir sang the words that Blake wrote as a preface to his illuminated book *Milton, A Poem* (1804-8), and which encapsulate his beliefs, as well as the Arimathea legends:

> And did those feet in ancient time.  
> Walk upon Englands mountains green:  
> And was the holy Lamb of God,  
> On Englands pleasant pastures seen!  
> And did the Countenance Divine,  
> Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
> And was Jerusalem builded here,  
> Among these dark Satanic Mills?  
> Bring me my Bow of burning gold;  
> Bring me my Arrows of desire:  
> Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!  
> Bring me my Chariot of fire!  
> I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
> Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:  
> Till we have built Jerusalem,  
> In Englands green & pleasant Land

The subject of Joseph of Arimathea bringing the gospels to England in biblical times was, for Blake, tied to the memory of a cultural heritage that was not yet tainted by the ‘dark satanic mills’ that scourged the landscape and imagination.

About fifteen years later, around 1809-10, Blake would again treat the Joseph of Arimathea legend, but this time with a slightly more esoteric message. He took up his engraving burin to alter a plate he had made early in his career (Figure 7). The original image was a copy of one of Michelangelo’s biblical figures from the Crucifixion of St. Peter in the Pauline chapel. In his modifications to the original engraving, through the combined use of word and image, he re-cast Joseph as a sacred artist blazing a pilgrim trail to Glastonbury. Blake’s figure, after Michaelangelo’s, is clothed in rags and an archaic hat, stepping forward on a precipice. In the second state of the engraving - that is, the altered copy - Blake named the figure ‘Joseph of Arimathea, among the Rocks of Albion’ in a diagonal graffito inscribed on the face of the rock itself. The landscape of Glastonbury around the Tor is believed to have been surrounded by the sea, which is reflected in Blake’s pictorial setting. On the lower margin, he inscribed:

> This is One of the Gothic Artists who Built the Cathedrals in what we call the Dark Ages  
> Wandering about in sheep skins & goat skins of whom the World was not worthy  
> such were the Christians in all Ages

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The image, with its textual explanation, embodies several important aspects of literal and imagined, or contemplative, pilgrimage practice. First is the idea of corporeal relics as holy and imbued objects, as at least one version of the Arimathea legend is based on the transference of the ultimate relic: that is, the blood of Christ that was shed at Calvary and believed to have been collected by Joseph. Next is the concept of building; that is, a creative enterprise in order to construct an imaginative architectural space for the worship of God. There is some overlap with the first point, as well: Blake’s phrase ‘Gothic Artists who Built the Cathedrals’ is indicative of a particular historical moment and encapsulates sites like Glastonbury or Canterbury, where relics were displayed and to which pilgrims travelled.

Within these sacred loci, in the nineteenth century as in the early Christian era, the temporal past and future promise of the Heavenly city were manifested in the spatial, symbolic of the promise of the world to come (Pullan, 2005:408-9). The interlinking of the metaphorical idea of life’s pilgrimage and the sense of the term as a place-based practice became a major preoccupation not only for Blake but for many other visionary artists in the early nineteenth century and today. The pairing of the ideas of building / making and wandering is implicit in Blake’s graffito: artistic process becomes both a pilgrimage in itself and also the figuration of a destination.

It is the same idea which informs the work of contemporary icon painter Aidan Hart. Hart lives and works in England; he is an ordained reader of the Greek Orthodox Church, and works ‘in accordance with the Byzantine icon tradition’ with the aim being, as his website states, ‘to make liturgical art that manifests the world transfigured in Christ’. As Hans Belting has pointed out, and which is relevant to the overarching point here about the transfer of ‘spirit’ from landscape to representations (or person to representation), icons are not portraits, but rather venerated portraits, ‘representing a person to be worshipped by the beholder’ - a form of sacred material culture that was first predicated on the cult of the saints, the ‘ritual function’ of which can be said to have led, in part, to its formal properties (1994: 78). Like Blake, Hart is concerned with the role of the visual image as a mediator between this world and a higher, divine realm. Unlike Blake, he is working within a very specific liturgical tradition with its own parameters.

He has treated the subject of Joseph of Arimathea both in a portrait and two landscapes. The portrait shows Saint Joseph with a halo, eyes cast toward heaven (Figure 8). A branch from the Glastonbury thorn blooms in his hand, shown here as an attribute. As in all traditional icons, the portrait is non-mimetic. The light radiates from within the picture rather than from a natural source; icons show us that all things are filled and surrounded with heavenly effulgence.

In another treatment of the subject, the iconography is more complex (Figure 9). Joseph holds the model of the wattle church that was built by the infant Christ, and looks over the landscape. He gestures toward the tower of St Michael atop the Tor. In the foreground is the thorn which bloomed from his staff, and in the upper right-hand corner is the nomen sacrum and the hand of God, symbolizing a blessing. As viewers, our pilgrim eyes travel from Joseph to the tower at which he gestures, until resting on the final destination where Joseph himself paused to plant his staff in the earth. In a similar icon (Figure 10), Joseph’s coat radiates a luminescent red and blue and the folds of his garment recall Romanesque church architecture. He holds the
The metaphor of icons as a door is particularly relevant; this is what Blake was visually describing in his picture of the pilgrim physically travelling through the page and into the space of the manuscript itself and inviting the reader to follow, which recalls the physical doorway from the Glastonbury tower into Albion. In fact, Victor and Edith Turner invoked Blake’s idea of ‘the cleansing of the doors of perception’ to illustrate the idea that when on pilgrimage, everything appears new to the pilgrim – including images that would have been familiar from Sundays at her parish church (1978:11). Blake said that if the doors of perception were cleansed - everything would appear as it is - infinite.

Hart believes that he is called to perceive the ‘essence - or logos’ - of his subjects, in this case a holy person as well as event and sacred landscape, and then manifest this in paint. He does not copy subjects, but rather relies on the inspiration of the Spirit to unearth these spiritual qualities - what Gerard Manley Hopkins called the instress of a thing (Hart, 2011:2). This is how a subject that does not have roots in traditional icon-painting practice can be depicted and retain a trace of the original. Far from Glastonbury, the picture of the church tower, thorn, and Saint are offered as a prototype of their heavenly counterparts; a notion that Hart traces back to the 4th century, through St Basil the Great, via John of Damascus (Hart, 2011:2). Hart writes:

*Icons are not only manifestations of heaven to earth - a window or door by which saints may reveal themselves to us - but are an offering of man to God, a priestly prayer in paint rather than word* (2011:4).

Figure 9: Aidan Hart: St. Joseph of Arimathea (holding the wattle church built by Jesus), date unknown

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Just as in a foot pilgrimage to the geographic Glastonbury sites, this kind of experience of viewing unites the heavenly and earthly realms. The Glastonbury thorn tree reminds of Joseph, who was an apostle of Christ - a painted image of the thorn connects us to God by showing us an earthly mirror of a heavenly archetype. In this way, the representation is a participant in furthering the perceived sacredness of the geographic site and takes on its own significance as a locus of pilgrimage in and of itself.

Figure 10: Aidan Hart: St. Joseph of Arimathea (holding the holy grail), 2014

Gesso, gold, and pigment on board: Private Collection

Gesso, gold, and pigment on board: Private Collection
method to cultivate fearlessness, freedom, discipline and joy’, as stated on their website. William Blake’s Jerusalem lyric, set to music by Sir Hubert Parry in the early twentieth century and (perhaps) much more ancient songs connected to the Glastonbury landscapes and legends have both formed catalysts as a way to connect with the distant past and future. 2016 marked the one-hundred-year anniversary of Parry’s setting of Blake’s lyrics, coinciding with the foundation of the BPT.

The founders and trustees, Will Parsons and Guy Hayward (Figure 11), are both musicians trained in voice and (in Hayward’s case) theory. Together, they set off to re-forge the ancient pilgrimage paths of Britain, singing as they went along like ancient minstrels. On their inaugural Jerusalem pilgrimage they wrote on their website and blog:

In the deepening dark, as the year’s end approaches, the BPT and friends are making a pilgrimage from central London to coastal Sussex, to honour the 100 year anniversary of the song ‘Jerusalem’ - ‘And Did Those Feet in Ancient Times’ . . . . This song is the fruit of two people - William Blake, visionary poet and artist, and Hubert Parry, composer and director of the Royal College of Music. In 1804, Blake wrote the poem as part of his epic ‘Milton’. And in 1916, Parry set this poem to a rousing melody, designed to be sung by large groups of people. Today, the resulting song has

The Turnerian notion of communitas can also be fruitfully applied here, but must be understood as expanding beyond the sense of community enacted within a group of pilgrims and to rather think about this complex reception of a symbol vehicle - such as a work of art or song - as a site of community where, through the act of viewing, the beholder connects to those who have seen the object, person, or image before and those who will see the image in the future (Barush, 2016a:14; 2016b:6). Communitas differs from secular art-viewing through its status as a place of ‘ritualized reenactment of correspondences between a religious paradigm and shared human experiences’ 1978:254). In addition to describing the experience of a beholder when contact is made with a devotional object, communitas is also a useful term for describing the connection to the past felt by artists like Hart - this is what Wendy Pullan has helpfully described as ‘paradigmatic memory’ (2005:409). Through the revival of traditional painting methods and material, such as the panel, plaster, and gold of icons and altarpieces or the codex format of illuminated manuscripts (in Blake’s case) artists become part of a lineage of those who made devotional art in a devotional context.

This idea of art as a way to form a tangible connection to the past through communitas also has applicability beyond the realm of the visual. The work of the newly-established British Pilgrimage Trust (BPT) aims to engage with song, chant, and the act of walking along ancient British paths, which they see as ‘a proven method to cultivate fearlessness, freedom, discipline and joy’, as stated on their website. William Blake’s Jerusalem lyric, set to music by Sir Hubert Parry in the early twentieth century and (perhaps) much more ancient songs connected to the Glastonbury landscapes and legends have both formed catalysts as a way to connect with the distant past and future. 2016 marked the one-hundred-year anniversary of Parry’s setting of Blake’s lyrics, coinciding with the foundation of the BPT.

The founders and trustees, Will Parsons and Guy Hayward (Figure 11), are both musicians trained in voice and (in Hayward’s case) theory. Together, they set off to re-forge the ancient pilgrimage paths of Britain, singing as they went along like ancient minstrels. On their inaugural Jerusalem pilgrimage they wrote on their website and blog:

In the deepening dark, as the year’s end approaches, the BPT and friends are making a pilgrimage from central London to coastal Sussex, to honour the 100 year anniversary of the song ‘Jerusalem’ - ‘And Did Those Feet in Ancient Times’ . . . . This song is the fruit of two people - William Blake, visionary poet and artist, and Hubert Parry, composer and director of the Royal College of Music. In 1804, Blake wrote the poem as part of his epic ‘Milton’. And in 1916, Parry set this poem to a rousing melody, designed to be sung by large groups of people. Today, the resulting song has
become a unifying anthem for all and any English cause - from cricket / rugby / football, to the Labour Party conference and Margaret Thatcher’s funeral, to anti-frackers and far-right nationalists, to the W.I., the Olympic games and the Royal Wedding, to churches and schools and mystics and comedians. Jerusalem the song has become infused in the soul of England. It deserves pilgrimage.

Hayward has written discursively about the idea of song and chant as a way to enact communitas through entrainment, which is the ‘process…by which a group of singers can become ‘in time’ or ‘in synchrony’ with each other’ (2014:3). His work has revealed ‘through an ethnographic survey of the function of group singing throughout the world, that a central purpose of group singing is to form community’ (2014:3). Hayward invokes Clarke and Clarke to argue that entrainment creates the conditions which involve primary and higher-order consciousness, the latter which, through collective music-making, ‘brings with it the capacity to be aware of, and reflect on, a past and a future, and to construct and consider a narrative of events’ (Clarke and Clarke 2011:194-5 in Hayward 2014:76). In a recent interview, I invited Hayward and Parsons to explain how this related to the BPT pilgrimages, which involve both walking and singing. Hayward underscored the idea of entrainment through music as a way to facilitate communitas and take participants ‘outside of their comfort zone and into a new shared zone of uncertainty’, and Parsons emphasized the encounter with physical place as a way to connect with past and future:

Communitas also through Quest consciousness embodies striving for common goals and reaching them. Especially when connected with holy places, which actually work. Whatever the diffuse understanding of them, there is a shared actuality of actually being there, in the same place at the same time, and feeling what this place does. A shared awe and smallness when stood by a cathedral, a common temporality when one touches a 1000-year-old yew tree. These experiences and encounters of place, where mysterious ‘higher truth’ seems closer, or something is going on, they bring us together.

The BPT’s Jerusalem pilgrimage combined walking, singing, and experiencing the interior spaces and sacred sites associated with Blake’s song, in particular (see : https://vimeo.com/album/4249454/video/188528590).

Connected to the tree that blossomed from Joseph of Arimathea’s staff is another devotional song about thorns (Maria Durch Ein Dornwald Ging – Maria Through the Thornwood Went, (see - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XyjQWmhKnCo ), which formed the basis of a BPT pilgrimage on the Old Way, or South Downs Pilgrimage. In a recent correspondence, Parsons explained that it tells the story of Mary, who ‘walks through a thornwood which has not blossomed for 7 years, yet does so with Jesus ‘below her heart’ (in her womb) and immediately the thorns all burst into flower’. To him, this encapsulates what pilgrimage practice means for the BPT; ‘that walking through the landscape with holiness (wholeness / holisticity) can transform the nature of reality and life that we encounter.’ On the idea of communitas, or the connection to the past and future that imagery and music can facilitate, Parsons recounts the following story:

A lady taught us the song, and also told how it was her family song, sung in the Polish Ghettoes where her family were placed in WW2. All possessions were taken away, but by singing this song, and binding it into books, they could raise the money to eat and survive. The song literally transformed the reality of life.
they encountered, and caused blossoms where once there were only thorns (correspondence with author, 11/12/17).

They went on to sing the Thornwood song all along the Old Way to Canterbury, finally at the site of Becket’s Martyrdom. It was a difficult journey, marked with serious illness (Hayward and Parsons water filter failed and they had become extremely sick). However, it was the song itself that ‘caused a blossoming of [their] journey’, as Parsons explained - ‘the small song filled the place[s] and us’. The melancholy carol, the lyrics recounting the legend of Maria and Christmas story, and the landscape of German thorns which foreshadow the Passion, and the story of the Polish Ghettoes are all carried through the music as a symbol vehicle that - like the sacred artwork and icons of Blake and Hart - participates in and carries forward the ‘spirit’ of the original thing that it represents.

Two of the pilgrims also visually recorded their experiences through drawing (Figures 12 & 13). Kitty Rice and India Windsor-Clive, are both visual artists; as Rice described in an interview, ‘spiritual feelings can be translated into imagery most easily.’ They created automatic drawings in real-time during the experience, often in sites of spiritual significance, such as in William Blake’s cottage at Felpham while lying in the space where his bed once was. Often, their artmaking took place during the singing of Jerusalem, bringing art and music together and recalling the spiritualized landscape of Glastonbury, believed to be sacralised, by Blake, through Joseph’s journey thousands of years earlier.

The acts of creating and viewing these artworks, and participating in the revival of song, is not seen as subsidiary to the Glastonbury landscape itself, but rather as an opportunity for an embodied experience within it. Therefore, the process of creating art is, in both Blake and Hart’s case, and in the work of the participants of the BPT’s Jerusalem journey, a pilgrimage - yet the resultant paintings and songs also have the potential to become sites of pilgrimage for others where communitas is (and continues to be) enacted. The singing of Blake’s Jerusalem continuously is an example of the salience of this through to the present. Such awareness shifts experiences of viewing as well as the status of art objects, both medieval and modern. The journey of the pilgrim is always a shared experience with those who have come before, and art invites us to step in sync with those ‘ancient feet who walked upon England’s Mountains Green’ as a vital pilgrimage locus in and of itself.

Figure 13: India Windsor-Clive: ‘And did those feet in Ancient time.’ (2016)
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