



What is in the Dwat

The Universe of Guston's Final Decade

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‘They call it art afterwards’

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Frontispiece *Head* (1974, detail) p. iii

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Introduction

'All your work is one work'¹

Although this book attempts a comprehensive interpretation of Guston's symbols, I still feel unsure as to what impulse gave them birth. I can show the metaphors he devised, how they fit together as a coherent structure; and I have a feel for what his myth is designed to do – but what prompts them to appear, what calls the symbols into existence, remains a deep mystery. Something in his nature, something in the nature of his past, shaped him in a way that necessitated these symbols in this structure, at this time. Perhaps Guston was in the same boat himself on these questions; maybe that is why he produced so many different metaphors that concern the same things – as if none of them can get to the centre of the subject he wants to speak about – and so it needs to be approached from many directions, and keeps returning him to invent another metaphor, another image. This is perhaps the cause of his love of Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* – for that is a story of a single event told from many points of view. One can find a similar

1. Philip Guston in, Michael Blackwood, *Philip Guston – A Life Lived*, a film by Blackwood Productions, New York, 1980. The epigraph to this book is also from this source

situation in the creation myths of a number of cultures. Those from Egypt, for example, tell that the world was created by divine expectoration – by spitting; or alternatively that the high god “copulated with his fist and took the pleasure of emission” – masturbating the world into existence. Other versions have it that the pyramid-like Benben stone was the first created thing to rise out from the primeval waters; or that the serpent Iru-To coiled himself around and delimited a place in the void; or, indeed, that Khoprer, the beetle, pushed the solar ball above the horizon – out from the Dwat.

p.14 One thing I am sure of, is that the objects Guston depicts are not themselves. Perhaps I had better say the objects are never *just* themselves. He makes this clear himself in the Blackwood film when talking about *Monument*. This painting depicts a mound of legs and shoe soles – and that is about it, apart from what could be a floor, and maybe a wall. The interviewer says: “So it’s not about feet and shoes?” And the relieved Guston – who, predictably, had encountered much confusion on that point says: “Nothing at all, am I glad you said that, I’ve been hearing enough about ... [pauses] from people who talk about feet and legs and shoes – urgh!” My sense of his approach is that in the late paintings, it is not just that legs are not legs, nor shoes shoes – *none* of the objects he depicts are themselves. Ladders, floors, eyes, basements, hammers, trashcans, oceans, deserts, skies, band-aids, tacks, nails, blinds, horseshoes, even his wife Musa, herself – none of these things is what it is, they are all symbols he uses to speak about something almost unspeakable; something that might just be within reach – but only with metaphors.

This would mean that we have to think of these late works in ways that we would think about symbolic or allegorical painting. Allegories were, for centuries, top of the heap in the hierarchy of genres, but I think Guston’s use of the metaphorical

form has more in common – typically for him – with the lowest rung of the genre ladder; that of the invention of symbolic devices or *imprese*, such as appear on the reverse of Renaissance portrait medals. Somewhat like heraldry, these symbols were usually accompanied by a short, enigmatic motto and spoke visually of the philosophy of the commissioning client in a compressed form.

But it is interesting that there is another realm in which one finds precisely this same phenomenon of compression and symbolism – and generally of things not being what they are. In dreams, everything in the dream – the objects, the people, the floor they stand on – is a symbol used by the mind of the dreamer to discourse with itself. This is not usually the case in allegories and other symbolic forms in painting. Only in dreams are all the objects symbolic of the dreamer. Taking a cue from his statement about *Monument*, I have considered each thing depicted in the paintings as a symbol of some aspect of Guston’s psyche – as if it was a dream. And I have taken him at his word and looked at the whole career as if it were one work – one sequence of dreams. Clearly, this is not at all to say that they *are* dreams, only that they can usefully be approached in the way that dreams are approached.² Therefore, beginning with this knowledge about the objects he depicts, I assume that they are all significantly placed in relation to one another. Moreover, I have come to them with the suspicion that they not only have a thoroughly personal significance for Guston, but also that in a sense they are representations of his psyche at work; they are self portraits.

2. Though Guston himself would seem to encourage this connection: “all art is a kind of hallucination, but hallucination with work. Or dreaming with your eyes open”. Quoted in William Corbett, *Philip Guston’s Late Work: A Memoir*, Cambridge, Mass., 1994, p.85.

The interpretation I offer of how these symbols fit together is put forward as an hypothesis or working model; a metaphor for what the Gustonworld is *like* rather than what it *is*. It is offered for discussion, and for either refinement or correction. As I read Guston's work now, I have to recognise that there is no getting away from the use of the term 'system'. It feels like a universe, or a world. The way the whole work coheres, from 1930 to 1980, has all the properties of a system. It is a self-consistent structure of symbols which can be read as a language. Ultimately, I believe this language arose as a means of talking with himself – of getting information about himself. However, the fact that this system is amenable to logical analysis does not mean that it was created by the logic centres of Guston's consciousness. In fact I am in no doubt that it did *not* come from that source. Where it came from is the organised part of him that we would call the non-conscious or the unconscious system. This language has some strange properties, for it is made up of antonyms that often swap places and become their opposites. One is forced into thinking about them either as a sort of yin and yang whole, where each pole contains the other, or in terms of the mystical traditions that hold the godhead to contain light and dark in unity. In such a context I do not think that we have to envisage Guston spinning in his grave at the mention of the word system.

It appears to me that Guston was himself only partially conscious of his language, and even less conscious of what it was speaking of. That was the whole point of working – to find out more. Making the paintings becomes his method of becoming more conscious of meanings, within himself, meanings that the mind, by and large, is actually designed to prevent us from becoming conscious of. This view of what he was doing makes a nonsense out of the usual assumptions behind the use of the word 'he' or 'Guston', when we say "he

did it", or "Guston did this or that". When I use those words in this book I do not necessarily mean 'him' as his conscious area. I mean the 'him' that is also his unconscious.³ But the coherence of what he says with his symbols is too tight and too finely detailed in structure for it to be an accident. He, Guston, *did* do it, and what we have to recognise is the existence of Greater Guston, the whole Guston, the total Guston; the one that is both his conscious *and* his unconscious areas. The very word 'unconscious' shows our prejudice, for it is defining something by the lack of something else. This would be like calling consciousness the *non-unconscious*. It seems to me that the reality of his unconscious was something that only gradually dawned on Guston. But when it did, I think he was shocked by its enormity. In some ways, this simple fact – the demonstration of the reality, the nature, and the tangibility of the unconscious: both his and ours by implication, is perhaps his greatest continuing relevance. For Guston discovered that the conscious area we habitually feel to be the whole self, is actually a small fragment of a much larger organism. During the final decade, I think that conscious self begins to look, to Guston, like a small, oblivious star, revolving around a million-solar-mass black hole (illus. 51).

Of course, when someone pursues such matters with the rigour and determination – not to say the obsession – that Guston did, the work pushes right through any simple-minded idea that it is self-regarding or solipsistic. It pushes beyond that into something else. The depths that Guston plumbed come out into another universe – the wide universe of the mental structures that we all carry and which are visible in the great mythologies of the past and the present. Guston says that he

3. The same applies to my use of wording like "invented" or "he designed", or "developed".

felt that he acted as a medium for information from this level of himself that is beyond self. And his daughter Musa Mayer writes movingly when she tells us, in her biography of her father, that the people closest to him – although deprived of something important by his long absences in the world he was exploring in his studio – nevertheless felt that they did not have any right to have him to themselves, for somehow he did not belong only to them. Indeed they felt that what he was doing was immense, and in a way, it did not even belong to him.⁴

If we want our heroes to consciously know what they were doing, or had done, the tendency is also to want the interpretations of others to be circumscribed by what the artist consciously knew himself. Of course, some lee-way is allowed, and the situation is extended to include what it was *possible* for the artist to have known. But with Guston I have the sense that it was all up for grabs. In the Minnesota lecture of 1978 he says so himself. Although there may be an element of rhetorical modesty here, I think in many ways he really meant it. What he says is that although he will make comments about the slides, he won't comment about what they mean: "That's impossible, totally impossible for me to do. I am certain that professional art writers could do it much better than I could."⁵ Clearly, he has his wonderfully insightful friend Ross Feld in mind here rather than Robert Hughes or Hilton Kramer, who had both missed the point in the recent past. At the same time, he makes

4. Musa Mayer, *Night Studio*, New York, 1988 (Da Capo Press edition 1997) pp.244–5.

5. The text of this University of Minnesota lecture, edited by Renee McKee, is available from a number of sources. It can be found in the catalogue to the exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, edited by Nicholas Serota: *Philip Guston: Paintings 1969–80*, 1981, pp.49–56. Recently it was republished in the catalogue to the exhibition *Philip Guston*, at the Timothy Taylor Gallery, London, 2004, pp.21–36.

it clear what the source of his block is: it lies in the realm of wishful thinking and self-delusion, and he declares that he has a tendency to distrust artists' statements about themselves – a piece of knowledge which I assume came from his own experience of past statements he had made.

The fertility of Guston's symbols mean that one could spread out in many interpretive directions. I have decided on two. I concentrate on the structure of his internal system which is very particularly an invention of his own mind; and I have also looked at similar symbols in the great religious and mythological traditions. Guston himself seems to sanction this in his forming relationships with symbols produced within several of the world's great mythologies – notably those of Christianity, Greece and Ancient Egypt.

It turns out that Guston was very excited by what he found were parallels between his own path and that taken by the Ancient Egyptians. Taking a hint from that interest, and following an Egyptian manual giving information about what one could expect to find in the underworld, I have called this book 'What is in the Dwat'. I put it forward as a preliminary, explorative guide to the shifting terrain of Guston's own 'underworld'.