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G. K. Chesterton's Recovery of the Catholic-Mystical Tradition and His Position in Relation to Victorian Aesthetics

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Abstract

With the increase of interest in the branch of theology known as *theological aesthetics* over the last five decades, it is notable that one Christian writer who was both an artist and art critic has been neglected. Gilbert Keith Chesterton was not a professional artist, philosopher or theologian, yet he deftly interpreted the major aesthetic currents in his late-Victorian context, and formulated a theological aesthetic in the course of his early career. In interpreting the aesthetics of the time, Chesterton was primarily commenting upon three writers: John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde. Ruskin's approach, the highly ordered natural theological approach he termed "Theoria," stood opposed to the antinomian approach of Pater and Wilde with their call of 'art for art's sake.' In this thesis I argue that these Victorian writers sought to preserve aesthetic and spiritual experience in the midst of post-Romantic aesthetic and religious fragmentation. After the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and the critical theology of David Strauss, even aesthetics struggled with new, critical interpretations of God, the Bible, and humanity. As my argument unfolds, I hold that both Theoria and Aesthesia ('art for art's sake') are attempted solutions to the problems of a post-Kantian age of "honest doubt," and I show how Chesterton took these approaches as his starting point as he formulated a Symbolist response to the aesthetic-religious fragmentation. In his response I argue that he achieves a recovery of Catholic and mystical Christianity. My thesis thus interprets Chesterton as one who drew together a variety of late-Victorian approaches to religion and aesthetics, and I ultimately conclude that Chesterton's direct contribution to theological aesthetics is his insistence that human creativity is a mirroring of divine creativity and allows the beholder to encounter in the artist the very "Image of God."

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Preface

Chesterton writes in his final chapter of *Heretics* (1905), “Religious and philosophical beliefs are, indeed, as dangerous as fire, and nothing can take from them that beauty of danger. But there is only one way of really guarding ourselves against the excessive danger of them, and that is to be steeped in philosophy and soaked in religion.”¹ When I first read these lines as a student in 2008 I knew that I was encountering a dynamic Christian writer who was doing something quite different than other popular Christian “apologists” I had come across before. In Chesterton I found a writer unabashedly proud of his Christian dogmas and rituals, beliefs and traditions. Here was a thoughtful writer who did not shrink from the impossibility of faith, but positively relished it; “The dogmas we really hold are far more fantastic, and, perhaps, far more beautiful than we think.”²

Perhaps what has made Chesterton so enduring through the last century and into the twenty-first is his turn of phrase, his delight in paradox, and his creative wit, but what makes him so valuable to the study of theology is his fresh and original voice, gathering together his widespread interests in philosophy, poetry, literature, economics, and the theatre in a thoroughly Christian vision of Truth.

In beginning my research at the University of Glasgow under two scholars of theological aesthetics, George Pattison and David Jasper, I originally had set my sights on the Russian existentialist Nicolas Berdyaev as someone who was not the subject of too many current studies and had a wealth of insight on creativity and the arts to bequeath to the curious student. However, the influence of Chesterton on my own thought and development was too strong to ignore. I began studying him and his influences, although I was still hoping to carry out research in the realm of aesthetics. Yet, after reading those critics he so frequently mentioned, specifically John Ruskin, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde, and then coming across some of Chesterton’s own works of art criticism, I realised that he was a theological-aesthetic thinker in his own right, and that he was remarkably original.

This thesis is the result of these personal and academic discoveries. Chesterton’s criticism of the artists of his day is ever in direct dialogue with the critics of his recent past: Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde. It is therefore necessary to elucidate the heart of their own aesthetic theories, and connect them to the late-Victorian religious situation. We will see that where Ruskin needs a firm aesthetic and philosophical foundation for his own faith, both Pater and Wilde ever seek the disentangling of beauty from any foundation. In this they desire a mystical and contemplative apprehension of beauty, to elevate beauty to a

¹ Chesterton, G. K. (1919, orig. 1905). *Heretics*. London: John Lane: The Bodley Head. 298-299.

² *Heretics*, 303-304.

new kind of religion. But they struggle with the exact relation between God and aesthetics, Christianity and beauty.

Chesterton is not exactly an important figure in the history of aesthetics at this time; he is not as influential as Ruskin, Pater, or Wilde, but this is precisely the reason why I believe his aesthetic thought deserves to be more closely examined. He is so similar to Ruskin and yet so different, so similar to the aesthetes, and yet so different. Chesterton is a helpful figure because he represents something much larger than himself: the widespread fascination among poets, artists, and theologians with Catholicism and mysticism, theosophy and magic, at the beginning of the twentieth century. I believe that he is most brilliant in his writings before the First World War, and this is the period when he was closest to people like Yeats and other Symbolists. It was also when he wrote his two books on art. Chesterton may not be the most “important” Christian writer from the beginning of the last century, but on a personal level I think he is probably the most interesting. Non-academic, self-taught, artistic, poetic, and creative, there is still much to discover from the journalist even today.

Feast of St Finbar of Cork

Adam Edward Carnehl

Acknowledgments

Studying theology and art under the Reverend Professors George Pattison and David Jasper has been a great pleasure. I am indebted to Professor Pattison, as my senior supervisor, for his immense help in understanding not just Ruskin, but the field of theological aesthetics itself. I also owe much to our many interesting conversations on artists. Professor Jasper, as my secondary supervisor, was a close ally, always ready to read my material and offer helpful suggestions. Our many discussions on the nineteenth century's critical spirit has opened my eyes to the importance of Chesterton's early work.

My congregation while in Glasgow, St Columba's Lutheran Church in East Kilbride, was ever supportive of my research and gave my wife and me much support while we lived far away from family and friends.

It is fitting that I write these words on the Feast day of St Finbar of Cork, Ireland. A first edition of the *Autobiography* of Chesterton was given to me by Brother Finbar of Pluscarden Abbey in Moray, Scotland during the writing of this thesis. I have all the brothers to thank for their kindness.

Finally, my wife, Lisa Grace, has put up with my many frustrations following changes in direction during this thesis work. As always, she is my constant companion and compassionate friend.

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis, written under the supervision of my primary supervisor, Reverend Professor George Pattison, and my secondary supervisor, Reverend Professor David Jasper, and that this is my original work.

I authorise the University of Glasgow to lend this thesis to individuals or institutions for the purpose of scholarly research.

Adam Edward Carnehl

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Adam Edward Carnehl

Abbreviations

MP I / MP II *Modern Painters* volumes I and II

Introduction: The Post-Romantic Religious and Aesthetic Background

At the turn of the twentieth-century, a colourful and original critic formulated an unabashedly Christian and mystical aesthetic through a scattered collection of books and essays on artists. This theological aesthetic should be seen as a response to preceding art movements in the Victorian era that also made theological claims. The critic is a frequently overlooked one, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, and the narrative is a thoroughly well-known one: the “honest doubt” of the Victorian Age.³ Rather than looking at Chesterton’s Christian apologetic as outlined in his more well-known texts, I intend to focus upon his less famous art critical works. My argument in this thesis is that in his aesthetic essays and two full-length books on artists, Chesterton establishes an original, theological-aesthetic that recovers a Catholic and mystical understanding of God’s Presence from the post-Romantic scepticism and aesthetic fragmentation of the age. Chesterton’s original contribution is his realisation that artistic creativity allows for reflection on humanity’s divine centre, where the “image of God” has been manifested and restored by a Saviour.

In making these claims for Chesterton, I realise that there are challenges. As an autodidact and as a popular author he is notoriously difficult to characterise. He stands outside of mainstream schools of thought and conventional scholarship on religious philosophy at this time, just as he stood outside of the university system in his time. Today he is remembered almost chiefly as a Christian apologist, a quick wit and popular candidate for sainthood.⁴ Yet I will argue that Chesterton, in his writings on art, pulls together important Victorian approaches to art and Christianity in Great Britain at the time of the *fin de siècle*. These approaches are primarily represented by John Ruskin’s “Theoria” and the response by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde’s in their call of ‘art for art’s sake,’ an aesthetic that sought to preserve some sense of the sacred through the experience of beauty. Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde struggled trying to find a place for their religious sensibilities and desire for religious experience in the face of new, critical schools of thought originating from thinkers as diverse as David Strauss and Charles Darwin, Ernest Renan and Herbert Spencer. Therefore, in this project I will establish how Chesterton followed the trajectory of art critics like Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde, and then used Symbolism as a way to re-validate the mystical and sacramental claims of Catholic Christianity.⁵ I make no overbold claims for Chesterton; he did not initiate a movement in the arts

³ See the classic study: Miller, J. Hillis. (1963). *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

⁴ Parker, James. (April 2015). “A Most Unlikely Saint.” *The Atlantic*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/04/a-most-unlikely-saint/386243/> [accessed 22 July 2017].

⁵ At a time when others, such as Friedrich Von Hügel and Evelyn Underhill were undertaking a similar project through their studies of mysticism through the devotional literature through the centuries. See Underhill, Evelyn. (1961; orig. 1911). *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Also see Von Hügel, Friedrich. (1999; orig. 1908). *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.

nor is he well-known for a particular theoretical work on aesthetics. He was neither an Oxbridge-educated scholar nor a trained philosopher. Rather, Chesterton was an enormously creative writer who had penetrating insight into the nineteenth century struggles. In his freedom from the academy, he embarked upon a theological-aesthetic project, following his own inclinations and faith.

Before continuing with Chesterton's connexions to these three writers or the nature of his contribution to religion and aesthetics, it would be helpful to establish the philosophical and critical background of the Victorian worldview. Thus, in the two sections that follow in this introduction, I give an overview of the religious and aesthetic contexts that shaped the end of the nineteenth century in Great Britain.

The Shape of Religion at the End of the Century in Britain

J. Hillis Miller's classic work, *The Disappearance of God* (1963), recounts the breakdown of traditional religious conceptions of God and the Bible in the post-Romantic era. Miller's work is concerned with five Victorian authors: De Quincey, Browning, Brontë, Arnold, and Hopkins, and how their quests "might be defined as so many heroic attempts to recover immanence in a world of transcendence."⁶ That is, these and other writers sought, in their creative work, to discover a God that was close and recognisable, despite the general feeling that God had become far more distant in such as sceptical age. Miller's thesis is that these five writers take the disappearance of God as "a starting place and presupposition," and that with such a beginning they then seek unity and organising principles through their creative work.⁷ Their writings, then, are indicative of wider social and cultural approaches to Christianity during this period. Miller's work is important for establishing the way artists and writers thought about their relation to God during the era following Kant, and even sought a reconstruction of belief.

Miller notes that a "fragmentation" happened in the modern era - a fragmentation of "man, God, nature, and language," one that has come about by the increasing social, material, and technological transformations, from Protestantism to urbanization.⁸ In an important passage, Miller notes, "When the old system of symbols binding man to God has finally evaporated man finds himself alone and in spiritual poverty. Modern times begin when man confronts his isolation, his separation from everything outside himself."⁹ Hence Miller is just one of many critics of nineteenth century British culture who sees this era as

⁶ *The Disappearance of God*, 15.

⁷ *The Disappearance of God*, 15.

⁸ *The Disappearance of God*, 3-6.

⁹ *The Disappearance of God*, 7.

one marked both by grave doubts in traditional forms of religion and intense longing after creative, new understandings of religion.

Miller is far from being alone in his interpretations. E. S. Shaffer reaches similar conclusions. We read in Shaffer's book '*Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem* (1975),

As dogma was psychologized, the personal experience of religious feeling became increasingly important; and this personal experience had to centre on Christ. Yet historical and psychological rationalism made the primary matter of Christianity - the Crucifixion and Resurrection - repugnant to the young men of the 1790s. Their nascent mythological understanding told them inescapably that the vision of Christ was the fundamental experience of Christianity; and that their age was incapable of it. All the writers of this period flutter on this pin... Strauss finally carried this tendency to its extreme point in his fully mythological history of Christ's life.¹⁰

The critics saw that the question of historicity was rendered moot as adherence to dogma was overshadowed by a focus upon religious feeling. This "mythological understanding" of the stories of the Church was to continue throughout critical circles during the Victorian era.

In her work, Shaffer mentions the significance of theologians such as David Strauss (1808-1874), a key theological voice of the century, who offered a modern, critical reading of the Christian scriptures and of their chief figure, Jesus Christ. At this time, Strauss and others, such as Matthew Arnold in Great Britain and Ernest Renan in France, were acknowledging that the Christian texts do indeed carry a profound message, yet it is a message that, like mythology, should be interpreted symbolically rather than historically. The essence of the Bible's symbolic message - its powerful *ideas* - transcended time and setting. In his *Das Leben Jesu* (1836) (translated by George Eliot as *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*), Strauss writes, "Though I may conceive that the divine spirit in a state of renunciation and abasement becomes the human, and that the human nature in its return into and above itself becomes the divine; this does not help me to conceive more easily, how the divine and human natures can have constituted the distinct and yet united portions of an historical person."¹¹ For Strauss it is the Idea of Christ as God united with humanity that contains immense power, whether or not the historical person was exactly as the New Testament writers described him. Strauss thought the Idea of Christ was the important, transhistorical truth and that other details of his life or impact were time-bound, legendary additions: "It is Humanity that dies, rises, and ascends to heaven, for from the negation of its phenomenal life there ever proceeds a higher spiritual life; from the suppression of its mortality as a personal, national, and terrestrial spirit, arises its union with the infinite spirit of the

¹⁰ Shaffer, E. S. (1975). '*Kubla Khan' and The Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature 1770-1880*. London: Cambridge University Press. 59.

¹¹ Strauss, David. Trans by George Eliot. (1902). *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (Fourth Edition). London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. 779.

heavens.”¹² Strauss does not have in mind a supernatural process, but a worldly one. “By faith in this Christ, especially in his death and resurrection, man is justified before God; that is, by the kindling within him of the idea of Humanity, the individual man participates in the divinely human life of the species.”¹³

This conception of Jesus Christ, shared by the emerging critical theologians during the century sent shockwaves throughout the West. Shaffer provides further elucidation of the century’s change of theological thinking when she writes, “The more the theology of the age came to stress Christ as the link between man and a distant God, or, like Schleiermacher, Christ Himself as man, the more He too became cut off from God.”¹⁴ With the idea that God is now a distant force, not a personal and immanent person, new anxieties and pressures arose in the Victorian mind. The result was a re-orientation of the Christian religion from something other-worldly to something worldly; its documents and figures began to be regarded as myths and legends, though of the highest, most important sort. “Christianity, then, is Hellenism developed and ordered, the evolved summary of all mythological revelations from the beginning of experienced time by which the race comes to understand the moral truths of its own nature;”¹⁵ Shaffer demonstrates that a result of this mythologising of the Christian Bible, post-Romantic thinkers began to see Christ not as a divine Saviour, Mediator, or Intercessor, but simply as a very great - perhaps the greatest - poet.¹⁶

Renan also impacted European conceptions of Jesus Christ, though his approach to Christ in the Gospels was of a different sort than Strauss. His poetic and non-technical work, *The Life of Jesus* (1863), represents the same appreciative yet highly critical spirit moving through the century. Renan is able to write, “That the Gospels are in part legendary is evident, since they are full of miracles and of the supernatural; but legends have not all the same value.”¹⁷ This implies that the documents of the New Testament are of a higher value than other legends. Because of their imaginative power and the unique influence of the man, Jesus Christ, the Gospels are of inestimable worth - but they are still legends, to be interpreted mythologically. “Jesus is the highest of these pillars which show to man whence he comes, and whither he ought to tend. In him was condensed all that is good and elevated in our nature. He was not sinless...”¹⁸ and Renan goes on, casting doubt upon the traditional symbols of the Christian Faith yet praising the man Jesus as an ideal individual to emulate and respect.

¹² *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. 780

¹³ *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. 780.

¹⁴ ‘Kubla Khan’ and the Fall of Jerusalem, 61.

¹⁵ ‘Kubla Khan’ and the Fall of Jerusalem, 187.

¹⁶ ‘Kubla Khan’ and the Fall of Jerusalem, 223. This was a perspective that was not lost on Wilde who described Christ as poet and artist during the *fin de siecle*.

¹⁷ Renan, Ernest. (1935). *The Life of Jesus* (Complete Edition). London: Watts & Co. 6.

¹⁸ *The Life of Jesus*, 227.

I will also situate the Englishman Matthew Arnold here, following Strauss and Renan, for the impact his views on Christ and Christianity made on the Victorian mind. Arnold's work must be read in the context of his poem, "Dover Beach" (1867), where he illustrates the situation of religious faith in his century:

The Sea of Faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
 Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.¹⁹

For Arnold a return to the traditions of this "Sea of Faith" was unthinkable. Though Christianity once, like the sea, lay "round the earth's shore," now it is withdrawing, retreating, receding, not because less people were becoming Christians,²⁰ but because it was increasingly difficult for contemporaries to accept the tenets of traditional Christianity. Arnold's significant work *Literature & Dogma* (1873) seeks to recover some sense of ethical truth in the wake of widespread doubt. Arnold's conclusion, that the Bible is a guide to ethical conduct, that "conduct makes up ¾ of life,"²¹ means that the eschatological, sacramental, mystical, and liturgical elements are eliminated from Christianity, leaving only a kernel of moral imperatives. Arnold still thinks Christianity and the Bible important enough, in some way, to devote much of his energies to defending their value, even if it is a value that is drastically different than past ages recognised.

Therefore, while traditional notions of God and Christian theology were receding during the post-Romantic age, the presence of religious sensibility, conviction, even fascination, was omnipresent. In a contemporary introduction to the literature and religion of the period, Mark Knight and Emma Mason write, "Christianity in particular interrogated and reconstructed itself over and over... stirred by new approaches to Scripture, doctrine, and the structure of the Church and its community."²² The authors further conclude, "Religion was not just another aspect of the nineteenth century: it found its way into every area of life, from

¹⁹ Tinker, C. B. and Lowry, H. F. eds. (1950). Arnold's "Dover Beach," *The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold*. London: Oxford University Press. 210-212.

²⁰ Timothy Larsen has helpfully pointed out that many high-profile atheist or agnostic writers actually converted to Christianity, and that, overall in the nineteenth-century, reconversion amongst lapsed academics, lecturers, and writers was fairly widespread. Larsen's observations are not as convincing when we look at the critical philosophers and professors during the age, but his nuanced study does need to be considered. See Larsen, Timothy. (2006). *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in 19th Century England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²¹ Arnold, Matthew (1910). *Literature & Dogma: An Essay towards a Better Apprehension of the Bible*. London: Watts & Co. 20.

²² Knight, Mark, and Mason, Emma. (2006). *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 7.

family to politics, sport to work, church architecture to philanthropy.”²³ Religion also found its way in the symbolic and artistic imagination in the Victorian era. Indeed, in Ruskin’s writings, even during his period of doubt, we see a high volume of biblical allusions. Pater and Wilde, in their call of ‘art for art’s sake,’ likewise fill their works with biblical language. Therefore, in late Victorian Great Britain, art and the imagination were impacted by the critical religious sensibilities of the time and also by philosophical currents originating from the continent. The next section will give a brief overview of the major philosophical aesthetic ideas which German philosophers introduced in the Romantic age. Like the new mythological, critical methods of interpreting the texts of Christianity, these aesthetics, especially of Kant, Schelling, and Hegel, would exert considerable influence on the major aesthetic writers in nineteenth-century Great Britain.

Aesthetic Influences in the Victorian Age

Through the writings of Coleridge and Carlyle, and, later in the century, Walter Pater, the German philosophical aesthetic of Hegel and his followers “was brought fully into the mainstream as a challenge to the spirit of the age in Victorian England.”²⁴ German Idealism had a decisive effect on British philosophy, and though Ruskin decried almost anything that smelled of German culture or philosophy, even he, like our other critics, was influenced by the spirit of Hegelianism in the air of Britain during the century.²⁵ These philosophers generally held a very high view of art, seeing the arts such as architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and poetry as means of uncovering the movement of the Spirit and the power of the Idea in human history. Yet in their estimation, art held a similar intuitive and revelatory power to religion even serving as organised religion’s replacement. For them all art, like the Christian scriptures, held immense, imaginative power. This was a power that relied not upon time-bound, historical events but timeless experiences - the perpetual unveiling of Pure Spirit. With the German philosophers, specifically Kant, we see a fragmentation. It is a fragmentation of history and mythology, of art and religion, of imagination and morality.²⁶ The forms of religion are separated from the content and appreciated for their own sake. Strauss, Renan, and the other critics of the century continued in their own way this process of fragmentation. At the conclusion to this section I shall briefly take up Coleridge as the key British figure that disseminated the Germans’ aesthetic ideas in Great Britain.

²³ *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 9.

²⁴ Simpson, David, ed., *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel*, (1984). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 24.

²⁵ See Collingwood, R. G. (1922). *Ruskin’s Philosophy*. Kendal, England: Titus Wilson & Son. 15, 21.

²⁶ In the following analyses I rely upon the excellent collection by David Simpson, cited in footnote 24 above. Hereafter I cite each work from the collection as (Original Text Title, page # in Simpson).

Immanuel Kant is certainly the giant of the German Romantic philosophers, but he is more interested in tackling the philosophical concept of the *Beautiful*, at least in the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment” portion in his major work, *The Critique of Judgment*, than he is with interpreting specific works or individual artists. In Kant’s attempt at conducting an empirical investigation of beauty he utilises a concept called “subjective universality.” Kant disagrees strongly with the notion that beauty is arbitrarily decided by societies and their tastes through time; instead, he holds that all individuals across societies universally experience beauty, and this simply must be observed as a general rule (*Critique*, 43). Therefore, something is beautiful not because it is considered so across time and especially not because it is either useful or expedient; something is beautiful because it simply is, regardless of the specific responses to beauty that individuals have (*Critique*, 38-39). Kant writes, “There can, therefore, be no rule according to which any one is to be compelled to recognize anything as beautiful” (*Critique*, 39-40). The beautiful simply is taken as a given, as an observable “subjective universality.” This means the “beautiful” is therefore detached from metaphysical or religious concepts, and devoid of ethical (utilitarian) import.

This is not to say that Kant thinks that beauty (or the sublime) leaves the individual unaffected. He actually observes that the Sublime in Nature, that which is awesome and overwhelming by its sheer grandeur, is closely linked, in some way, to a person’s moral fibre. Nature, for Kant, “should at least show a trace or give a hint that it contains in itself some ground or other for assuming a uniform accordance of its products with our wholly disinterested delight...” and in that hint the human mind finds its “interest engaged” in a somewhat moral way (*Critique*, 59). Kant does not fully elaborate how one’s moral nature is affected by the sublime or beautiful in Nature, but he suggests that the experience of these delights in Nature is best received by the moral individual: “One, then, who takes such an interest in the beautiful in nature can only do so in so far as he has previously set his interest deep in the foundations of the morally good” (*Critique*, 59). Kant grants some relation between morality and the subjective reception of sublimity and beauty. He thinks it is observable that those who are interested in the morally good are more likely to enjoy Nature’s beauty, and when they do, they are more likely to be delighted.

What we see in Kant therefore is a propensity to connect moral feelings to experiences of the sublime, but without an explanation of what that connexion is in metaphysically or religiously; it is simply an experiential inference. Also to note in Kant is that God is neither the source nor goal of beauty. The beauty or sublimity of natural phenomena or human-made artefacts is experienced in the same way regardless of the existence of God. He may be a helpful *concept*, as he is in ethics, but his absence in Kant’s aesthetics is significant.

F. W. J. Schelling (1775-1854) was a professor of philosophy at various German universities and was originally a disciple of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's, until he went his own direction.²⁷ Schelling's aesthetics hold a central role in his philosophy. "I am convinced that the highest act of reason, the one in which she encompasses all Ideas, is an aesthetic act... The philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet... the poetic act alone will outlive all the arts and sciences" (Introductory Note, 119). This is because for Schelling art is a *revelation*, an act which unveils the highest truths. He writes that "art is the sole and eternal revelation that exists and the miracle which, even if it had existed only once, must have persuaded us of the absolute reality of that highest principle" (*System of Transcendental Idealism*, 123). Talking of art as "revelation" and "miracle" is far from Kant's measured words on why individuals have a common subjective conception of "the beautiful." Philosophy and all of the sciences "were born and nurtured by poetry in the childhood of science," and for Schelling, the time is coming when all subjects will return to that "ocean of poetry" (*System of Transcendental Idealism*, 130). Because the artist's work functions as an outlet for pure Spirit, Schelling is able to write "Absolute objectivity is given to art alone" (*System of Transcendental Idealism*, 130). The goal of the artist must be to withdraw from nature, not to mimic it and therefore produce empty masks, but to "emulate this spirit of nature, which is at work in the core of things;" this emulation will enable the artist to raise herself or himself to the level of creative energy, where the universal, that is, the spirit in nature, is expressed in the creative work (*The Relation of the Plastic Arts to Nature*, 151). It is because the universal essence of all things is unveiled through art that Schelling is able to give the study of aesthetics top priority in his Idealist philosophy.

In his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (1823-1829), G. F. W. Hegel (1770-1831) turns his full attention to the fine arts and traces a philosophy of history through the artistic developments of cultures. Hegel's philosophy sought to overcome the duality of Kant's system by finding the spiritual unity of the Idea behind all things; each thesis and antithesis in the universe leads to a synthesis.²⁸ More than any of the previous German Idealists, Hegel sees in the arts an expression of the Spirit becoming materialised in human society; for this purpose, the study of aesthetics is decidedly important in developing a philosophy of history, unlike Kant. Hegel is not interested in people's subjective reactions to art, but rather, in the broad effects that art has had on the universal human spirit through time (*Aesthetics*, 208, 211). Rather, Hegel is interested in art as a revealer of ideas and mode of the spirit. It simply cannot exist "for its own sake." He writes, "But nevertheless the work of art, as a sensuous object, is not merely for sensuous apprehension; its standing is of such a kind that, though sensuous, it is essentially at the same time for spiritual apprehension; the spirit is meant to be affected by it and to find some satisfaction in it" (*Aesthetics*, 210).

²⁷ Drabble, Margaret, ed. (1985). *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 872.

²⁸ *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 448.

Interestingly, Hegel makes a remark in his introduction to *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* about the beauty of Catholicism. In his discussion of the proper “topic” (subject or model) for the artist, Hegel writes that generally a topic will be given to the artist necessarily from the outside in the form of a civic or religious commission. Hegel admits that an artist then weaves his or her own genius into the topic given from outside, but “[That] the more detailed individualization is not his. For this purpose he needs his supply of images... [the topic] always remains to him a material which is not in itself directly the substance of his own consciousness” (*Aesthetics*, 228-29). Thus an artist is constricted somewhat by the topic given to him or her, but that artist weaves personal material into the topic. Hegel goes on to write, “It is therefore no help to him to adopt again, as that substance, so to say, past world-views, i.e. to propose to root himself firmly in one of these ways of looking at things, e.g. to turn Roman Catholic as in recent times many have done for art’s sake in order to give stability to their mind and to give the character of something absolute to the specifically limited character of their artistic product in itself” (*Aesthetics*, 229). Hegel’s point is that many in his day had turned to Roman Catholicism as a stabilising foundation or normative power that could give a deeper meaning to the artistic product than would otherwise be possible. He thinks this religio-cultural system that is the Roman Church thus has a kind of legitimising effect on art products, giving limited things substance and spiritual meaning.

Finally, I would like to briefly look at S. T. Coleridge as a key translator of German Idealist aesthetics and metaphysics, not only into the English language, but into the English sensibility, though he did this in his own highly idiosyncratic way. It was specifically Coleridge’s reading of Schelling that impacted his ideas behind poetic Imagination.²⁹ It is well beyond the scope of this study to interpret Coleridge so thoroughly as to present a comprehensive picture of his multi-faceted interpretation of Christian symbols, but some comments must be made here on Coleridge’s theory of the *symbol*, and specifically the symbols of Christianity, since this symbolic theory underlies much of aesthetic thinking in the Victorian age. As Coleridge outlined, the core symbols of Christianity are the figures and events recorded in the Old and New Testaments: these are themselves “the living educts of the imagination,” and are “harmonious in themselves, and consubstantial with the truths of which they are the conductors... past and future are virtually contained in the present.”³⁰ Owen Barfield explains this theory when he notes, “We cannot comprehend nature without first having grasped that the whole may be ‘in’ each part, besides being composed of all its parts. We cannot comprehend imagination, or revelation, in literature without first having grasped that that very fact provides

²⁹ Oxford Companion to English Literature, 872.

³⁰ Coleridge, S. T., White, R. J. ed. (1953). “The Statesman’s Manual,” in *Political Tracts of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 25.

the distinction between a symbol and a metaphor.”³¹ The symbol has a mediating influence, linking past to present and eternity; it does not reduce a figure or story to non-history. A symbol, to quote Coleridge, “is characterised... [a]bove all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible.”³² It is in Coleridge, therefore, that the symbol becomes a kind of poetic-aesthetic replacement for the tangible Christian realities of the Church: the sacraments.

The Victorian writers that I am analyzing in this study, Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde, were fundamentally influenced by these philosophical ideas. A recent work on philosophical aesthetics by Paul Guyer helpfully situates Ruskin in the same camp as these German philosophers because they all readily linked aesthetics to truth. Guyer writes in his *History of Modern Aesthetics* (2014), that in Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*,

...[there was a] a theoretical dimension that aligned Ruskin squarely with the philosophical aesthetics that, as we have seen, dominated the first half of the nineteenth century, the aesthetics of truth. As already suggested, Ruskin’s version of the aesthetics of truth would then produce a powerful reaction, in the first instance the movement known as aestheticism or ‘art for art’s sake,’ which does not so much try to amplify Ruskin’s theory as to undercut the need for aesthetic theory altogether, arguing that aesthetic experience is a domain of pleasure that needs no explanation or justification from other areas of human experience.³³

Guyer sees Ruskin as a kind of mid-century continuation of Hegel’s aesthetics of truth, in contrast to Kant’s aesthetics of free play or Mill’s aesthetics of conviction/emotion.³⁴

Interpreters and critics have noted that Ruskin had other Hegelian tendencies as well. For example, philosopher R. G. Collingwood pointed out that the author of *Modern Painters* never read Hegel but was a Hegelian in his belief in the “unity and indivisibility of the spirit,” in his habit of reaching synthetic conclusions through the contradiction of opposites, and in his interpretation of history as being composed of creative epochs that deserve to be admired rather than imitated.³⁵ Collingwood wrote a short book on Ruskin, which was first given as an address to the “Ruskin Centenary Conference” in 1919, and went into great detail about his thought’s dialectic and synthetic qualities.³⁶

³¹ Barfield, Owen. (1971). *What Coleridge Thought*. London: Oxford University Press. 157.

³² “The Statesman’s Manual,” *Political Tracts of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley*. 25.

³³ Guyer, Paul. (2014). *A History of Modern Aesthetics, Volume 2: The Nineteenth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 191. Also note here that, importantly, Guyer explains Ruskin’s aesthetics created a powerful reaction known as aestheticism, the call of ‘art for art’s sake.’

³⁴ See *A History of Modern Aesthetics, Volume 2*, 86, 121.

³⁵ *Ruskin’s Philosophy*. 15, 21.

³⁶ *Ruskin’s Philosophy*. 43.

Scholars have also long noted the influence Hegelianism had upon Pater and Wilde (and even, to a lesser extent, Chesterton).³⁷ Eric Warner and Graham Hough, in their excellent anthology of nineteenth century British aesthetic writings, *Strangeness and Beauty* (1983), track Pater's intellectual development. They note that Pater gained his Hegelian notions from the influence of his Oxford mentor Benjamin Jowett and from his own reading of the German philosopher.³⁸ Throughout his essays in *The Renaissance*, Pater, "regards cultural evolution as a series of renascences or rebirths, and which connects the 'outbreak of spirit' in the Renaissance back through the High Middle Ages to ancient Greece, as well as forward to the Romantic Revival of Pater's own century."³⁹ To support this assertion, more recently, Pater scholar Giles Whiteley writes,

The identification of means and ends is, once again, that Hegelian subject-object identity which Pater had made foundational to his aestheticism. In other words, Pater's Hegelianism demands that he 'treat life in the spirit of art'; this is its own internal necessity. Because art is beautiful and because beauty is the sensible appearance of the Idea, so too life must be treated as art in that it too is an example of the Idea made sensible... Life is then art, the Idea made sensible, and thus the very substance of Morality (namely Reason).⁴⁰

My concern here is the fact that Pater was highly conversant with Idealist philosophy, carried aspects of Hegel's aesthetics into his own, and even helped to establish a culture of Hegelianism at Oxford in the latter half of the century.⁴¹

The German philosopher and his followers exerted a tremendous influence on British aesthetics in the nineteenth century. Thus these four post-Romantic critics continued, in some way, the extended conversation on aesthetics and morality, truth, and religion that the Idealists had been having. Taking into account this "honest doubt" narrative of the century which stemmed from the cultural feelings on the disappearance of God as well as the perceived obsolescence of religious faith, the writers I am analysing here had a wide variety of critical voices, agnostic and Christian, German and British, influencing them.

³⁷ See Lauer, Quentin. (2004). *G. K. Chesterton: Philosopher without Portfolio*. New York: Fordham University Press. 46-48. Lauer's exploration of both Hegel and Chesterton's interest in the "primacy of ideas" over mere matter is illuminating.

³⁸ See Warner, Eric and Hough, Graham eds. (1983). *Strangeness and Beauty: An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism 1840-1910, Volume I Ruskin to Swinburne*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 5

³⁹ *Strangeness and Beauty Volume I*, 6.

⁴⁰ Whiteley, Giles. (2010). *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death: Walter Pater and Post-Hegelianism*. London: Legenda. 43.

⁴¹ *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death*, 21. The *Oxford Companion to English Literature* notes, "Hegel enjoyed a vogue in philosophical circles in England, particularly at Oxford, in the 1880s and 1890s" (448).

Connexions to Chesterton

The influence of German Idealism with all its aesthetic-moral “fragmentation,” the “honest doubt” narrative of Victorianism, and the critical re-evaluation of Christianity now leads us to consider the response of G. K. Chesterton at the turn of the century. Chesterton’s literary output is so vast that for this project I must be highly selective in the texts I use to demonstrate Chesterton’s theological-aesthetic position; I will examine those art-critical works from the first decade of his career, 1899-1910. This was an astonishingly fruitful period, with Chesterton publishing some 26 books and many hundreds of essays, poems, and book reviews. Out of all of these I have selected the two books he wrote on individual artists: *G. F. Watts* (1904) and *William Blake* (1910). I have also selected early essays from various periodicals where Chesterton first developed his Symbolist-like response to Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde.

In this thesis, therefore, I am taking Chesterton seriously as an aesthetic thinker who is making a contribution to the Victorian and the *fin de siecle* conversation about beauty’s relation to truth, morality, and God. I will seek first to establish the context, the influences, and the major Victorian positions before moving on to describe Chesterton’s original aesthetic contribution. However, most scholars of Chesterton have overlooked his theological aesthetics and relegated his art criticism to a footnote in his journalistic career.

In a recent, thorough biography of Chesterton, Catholic scholar Ian Ker mentions some of Chesterton’s early aesthetic essays almost in passing, and Ker does not offer significant analysis.⁴² Ker’s point is biographical, and he merely proves that Chesterton was quite a young man when he began writing reviews of art books. William Oddie, in a work that is far more analytical of Chesterton’s thought, is nevertheless noticeably vague regarding Chesterton’s aesthetics. Oddie dedicates several pages to Chesterton’s early aesthetic writings, but reaches conclusions only regarding his “fluency of [his] style, [and] intellectual boldness” as well as his “perceptive and original critical writing.”⁴³ Although Oddie’s book is the most thorough analysis to-date of Chesterton’s intellectual development, he only notes the importance of these early pieces as representing the rudiments of Chesterton’s later, mature ideas. In other words, Oddie uses these critical reviews to make comments about Chesterton’s “intellectual range” rather than to develop a picture of how Chesterton was continuing the aesthetic discussion of Ruskin and the aesthetes.⁴⁴ In another work, Roman Catholic writer Gary Wills develops a better picture of the aesthetic and philosophical portrait of Chesterton than the others. Wills writes, “He did not take the ordinary critic’s approach, discussing schools, influence, etc. He approached art from the side of metaphysics, looking to the artifact’s own mode

⁴² Ker, Ian (2012), *G. K. Chesterton*, London: Oxford University Press, 39.

⁴³ Oddie, William. (2008). *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC 1874-1908*. Oxford: University of Oxford Press. 173, 175.

⁴⁴ *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy*, 175.

of existence.”⁴⁵ Wills’s point is significant in noting this important characteristic; Chesterton himself cared little for background accuracy or biographical detail, but rather for the revelation of truth behind any given artist’s work. Wills is echoed by Lauer who has noted the similarities between Hegel and Chesterton, that both were preoccupied with the “primacy of ideas.”⁴⁶ Lauer’s project does not include any of Chesterton’s art critical work, however, and he does not connect the journalist to any art movement of his day.

Two books that directly deal with Chesterton’s art or art criticism in mind, namely *The Art of G. K. Chesterton* by Alzina Stone Dale (1985), and *The Christian Imagination: G. K. Chesterton on the Arts* by Thomas C. Peters (2000). Dale includes a helpful index to every illustration Chesterton published in his lifetime, but her book is more of an introduction to Chesterton’s life than it is an analysis of his aesthetic philosophy.⁴⁷ Peters looks at Chesterton’s “imagination” through the lens of his illustrations and fictional characters. His is a popular-level work intended as an introduction to Chesterton’s optimistic outlook. In that is it successful for pointing out the journalist’s unique perspective, but it is unsuccessful in developing an analysis of it.⁴⁸

In light of these recent biographies and (now standard) secondary works, I understand that few have ever regarded Chesterton as firstly or principally an art critic. Self-described as an “old journalist,”⁴⁹ it is because of his great variety of creative and critical work that opinions on him have varied so dramatically over the last hundred years. H. Marshall McLuhan writes that “it is no contradiction to say that Chesterton is primarily an intellectual poet.”⁵⁰ Orwell considered him to be the “most outstanding proponent” of “Roman Catholic propaganda.”⁵¹ Auden writes, “By natural gift, Chesterton, was, I think, essentially a comic poet.”⁵² Gide esteemed his literary criticism, calling his *Dickens* and *Browning* “masterpieces of comprehension and psychological insight.”⁵³ The translator, priest, and fellow Catholic convert, Ronald Knox, labeled Chesterton “an artist in thought.”⁵⁴ Political historian Margaret Canovan regards him as a “free floating intellectual outside all political parties” who can be helpfully interpreted as a “populist” thinker.⁵⁵

⁴⁵ Wills, Gary. (2001, orig. 1961). *Chesterton*. New York: Image Books Doubleday. 70.

⁴⁶ *G. K. Chesterton: Philosopher without Portfolio*, 47.

⁴⁷ Dale, Alzina Stone. (1985). *The Art of G. K. Chesterton*. Chicago: Loyola University Press.

⁴⁸ Peters, Thomas C. (2000). *The Christian Imagination: G. K. Chesterton on the Arts*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

⁴⁹ Chesterton, G. K. (1936) *Autobiography*. London: Hutchinson & Co. 183.

⁵⁰ Conlon, D. J. (1987). *G. K. Chesterton: A Half Century of Views*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 10.

⁵¹ *G. K. Chesterton: A Half Century of Views*, 102.

⁵² *G. K. Chesterton: A Half Century of Views*, 323.

⁵³ Conlon, D. J. (2015). *G. K. Chesterton: A Reappraisal*. York: Methuen & Co. 411.

⁵⁴ *G. K. Chesterton: A Half Century of Views*, 46.

⁵⁵ Canovan, Margaret. (1977). *G. K. Chesterton: Radical Populist*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 9.

Chesterton may, indeed, be interpreted in a variety of ways, from witty comic poet to Catholic apologist to radical populist, but it is as an aesthetic thinker that I wish to examine him in this project. Perhaps it is the observation of his friend, Ronald Knox, which is intriguingly close to my argument. Chesterton approached truth in a singularly aesthetic way, seeing all objects, individuals, and situations as symbolic keys to deeper, mystical truths. Chesterton arose onto the scene in about 1900, the same time that Symbolists such as Huysmans, Maeterlinck, Yeats, and Symons were highly influential.⁵⁶ In my chapter on Chesterton I will argue that it is helpful to understand Chesterton as a kind of Catholic Symbolist. Lest Chesterton's connexions to Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde be questioned, I will now present what I have found to be some of the journalist's earliest and most interesting interactions with their thought and work.

A recent secondary work on Chesterton makes the claim, "Chesterton was an astute and appreciative critic of Victorian culture, defending writers that Modernists routinely debunked and desecrated. Unlike some of his contemporaries, he was capable of seeing past the apparent obsolescence of art that others deemed unfashionable."⁵⁷ One of these figures whom modern art theorists did consider obsolete was John Ruskin. Chesterton began writing in June of 1895 an unsigned book review appeared in the English periodical *The Academy* concerning a new Ruskin reader that had been edited by W. G. Collingwood.⁵⁸ This book review was the first journalistic piece G. K. Chesterton published in his life.⁵⁹ In the short review Chesterton does not offer an exhaustive interpretation of Ruskin; he does, however, point out that Ruskin (who was at this time an elderly recluse) has been "pathetically" exploited by so many persons, the publisher notwithstanding, who give him a "hesitating, condescending, and qualified approval." Furthermore, *The Ruskin Reader* only presents the most eloquent passages of early Ruskin, and so presents a modified, palatable Ruskin, presented without his most challenging teachings. Chesterton regrets that this man of high calibre and achievements, who gave his "fortune and life to the service of others," is so badly misrepresented in this particular selection.⁶⁰

Just three months after Ruskin's death, Chesterton furnishes us with another estimation of the Victorian art critic. Before his review was published in *The Speaker*'s April 1900 issue, Chesterton had written a letter to his soon-to-be wife saying, "I have got a really important job in reviewing - *The Life of*

⁵⁶ Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), French Symbolist novelist also much admired by Wilde; Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949), Belgian Symbolist playwright and essayist; W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), immensely influential Irish Symbolist poet; Arthur Symons (1865-1945), English critic who is remembered today for introducing England to the French Symbolists; see *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 488, 606, 1093, 957.

⁵⁷ Beaumont, Matthew and Ingleby, Matthew. (2013). *G. K. Chesterton, London and Modernity*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 6.

⁵⁸ Collingwood, W. G. editor, (1895), *The Ruskin Reader*, London: George Allen

⁵⁹ Ker, G. K. *Chesterton*, 39.

⁶⁰ Chesterton, G. K. (unsigned), (1895). *The Academy*, 47(1206), 523. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/docview/1298636106?accountid=14540>

Ruskin [sic] for the Speaker. As I have precisely 73 theories about Ruskin it will be brilliant and condensed.”⁶¹ Chesterton’s review again deals with a book by W. G. Collingwood.⁶² In the article Chesterton asserts that Ruskin “was the last of the prophets,” because of his “courage to mount a pulpit above the head of his fellows.” He goes on to write, “He rushed from one end of a city to another comparing ceilings. His limbs were weary, his clothes were torn, and in his eyes was that unfathomable joy of life which man will never know again until once more he takes himself seriously... But he made what he praised in the old Italian pictures - ‘an opening into eternity.’”⁶³

When considering these two early reviews, we see that even in his early twenties, Chesterton held a sympathetic stance toward Ruskin, esteemed him to be a Victorian prophet, and believed contemporary criticism had entirely missed Ruskin’s main teachings. Yet perhaps the most interesting aspect of Chesterton’s relation to Ruskin is found in the letter to his wife; it shows that Chesterton was well-acquainted with Ruskin’s ideas and life, and considered him to be a complex figure.

Furthermore, before 1914 Chesterton wrote several essays on Ruskin which appeared in various periodicals. One of them, later reprinted (with slight alterations) in *Varied Types*,⁶⁴ was the article he had written years previously for *The Bookman*; another was a more substantial article from 1908 simply titled “John Ruskin,” and later reprinted in *A Handful of Authors*.⁶⁵ In this paper Chesterton takes a look at Ruskin’s career and acknowledges: “The main thing that Ruskin existed to preach was this: that life (in the vital sense of vitality) is not a thing of gasps and spasms, but a thing consecutive, interdependent, nay laborious. Life that is alive, he meant, is continuous. Life that is alive is even conventional.”⁶⁶ There is a veiled critique of Pater, Wilde, and the aesthetes in this sentence. For in the ‘art for art’s sake’ point of view, life is a series of unconnected moments of pleasure, of “gasps” and “spasms” of beauty seeping into an otherwise dull world.⁶⁷ He goes on to muse on Ruskin’s views of art and writes, “Art means diminution. If what you want is largeness, the universe as it is is large enough for anybody. Art exists solely in order to create a miniature universe, a working model of the universe, a toy universe which we can play with as a child plays with a toy theatre.”⁶⁸ Here Chesterton confronts the reader with a paradox: art at once presents a

⁶¹ Letter quoted in Ker, G. K. *Chesterton*, 66

⁶² Collingwood, W. G. (1900). *The Life of John Ruskin*, London: Methuen

⁶³ G. K. C. (1900). RUSKIN. *The Speaker : The Liberal Review*, 2, 107-108. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/docview/6609534?accountid=14540>

⁶⁴ Chesterton, G. K. (1902). *Varied Types*, London: A. L. Humphreys.

⁶⁵ This is a posthumous collection of essays edited by Chesterton’s assistant Dorothy Collins: Chesterton, G. K., (1953). *A Handful of Authors*. London: Sheed and Ward.

⁶⁶ *A Handful of Authors*, 149.

⁶⁷ See the “Conclusion” to Pater’s most famous work *The Renaissance*, which I discuss below.

⁶⁸ *A Handful of Authors*, 150

constricted expansiveness, a point of eternity, a microcosmos, in which the viewer may engage in serious, childlike play.

Chesterton also frequently commented upon Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. Many of Chesterton's friends, including writers such as Max Beerbohm (1872-1956),⁶⁹ were the personal friends and disciples of Pater and Wilde, which perhaps led to Chesterton's tone of familiarity. In a 1909 *Daily News* article later collected in *A Handful of Authors*, Chesterton gives a sustained analysis, which is both critical and sympathetic, of Oscar Wilde. He writes,

But while he had a strain of humbug in him... he had, in his own strange way, a much deeper and more spiritual nature than they. Queerly enough, it was the very multitude of his falsities that prevented him from being entirely false. Like a many-coloured humming top, he was at once a bewilderment and a balance. He was so fond of being many-sided that among his sides he even admitted the right side. He loved so much to multiply his souls that he had among them one soul at least that was saved. He desired all beautiful things - even God.⁷⁰

Like his estimation of Ruskin, Chesterton gives Wilde a most sympathetic reading, expressing in a few sentences his many puzzling paradoxes. Full essays, book chapters, and other smaller references dealing with Pater and Wilde abound in Chesterton's many works.⁷¹ These references are far too numerous to completely account for, but like we discussed with Ruskin, they show that Chesterton was a constant reader and critic of Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde. Given his immense popularity and contemporary influence, it is indeed significant that a great deal of Chesterton's early writings, both articles and books, concerned matters of painting, aesthetics, and the influence of these Victorian critics' ideas.

In what follows I divide this thesis into three chapters on the three substantial *fin de siècle* positions on aesthetic approaches to religion. In my close readings I will show how these Victorian minds sought, in the latter half of the century, to recover some sense of a holy encounter through aesthetic experience. I argue that the attempted recoveries by Ruskin and Pater - which I term *Theoria* and *Aesthesia* - are two possible positions that attempt to find some relationship between beauty and God.

In the first full chapter I outline Ruskin's aesthetic and demonstrate how it was an attempt at defending a system of belief in God. I also point out that Ruskin had an insufficient notion of flesh, body, and incarnation in his theory. In the second chapter I will lead the reader through texts by Pater and Wilde, showing how their aesthetics owe much to Ruskin, despite their radical departure toward 'art for art's sake.' Yet, like Ruskin, even the "antinomians" Pater and Wilde display an obsession with Christian history, spirituality, and Scripture, trying to reach some sort of "religion of beauty," without the dogmatic and

⁶⁹ Beerbohm was a gifted caricaturist, a critic, and a short story author who was involved with the English avant-garde circles during the fin de siècle; *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 80.

⁷⁰ *A Handful of Authors*, 146.

⁷¹ His popular work *Heretics* (1905) contains an entire chapter discussing Paterian philosophy.

metaphysical baggage of “Christendom.” In the third chapter I argue that G. K. Chesterton is a helpful figure who follows on the heels of Victorianism and pulls together these other approaches. As an art critic of natural genius, Chesterton is an interesting figure because of his aesthetic recovery of the Catholic-Mystical religion at the dawn of a new century. I do not want to overstate my case: Chesterton was a popular journalist and not a professional philosopher. His is a particular example I find of a critic re-evaluating Victorian aesthetics and discovering the Image and Imprint of God at the centre, not of beauty, but of Woman and Man. For this, he deserves attention.

1. Theoria

1.1 *Modern Painters Volume I*

In his *Modern Painters Volume I Containing Parts I and II: Of General Principles and of Truth* (1843),⁷² Ruskin devotes hundreds of pages to his minute observations of natural phenomena. The patient, tireless observation combined with soaring prose marks this young art critic's first volume as a masterpiece of style. For Ruskin, the loving inspection of every aspect of creation - each leaf and cloud, branch and stone - is the beginning of knowledge and the key to unlocking both the value and meaning of all works of art. It is no wonder that, with as wide a readership as it had, including the significant writers Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, *Modern Painters* would make an enormous impact in Victorian Britain. It was just the first work of many works that influenced landscape art, art criticism, the revival of the Gothic, and the eventual manifestation of the Art Nouveau movement.⁷³ On Ruskin (who wrote under the *nom de plume*, "a Graduate of Oxford" in *Modern Painters* volume I), Brontë says, "He writes like a consecrated Priest of the Abstract and Ideal," and Eliot writes, "I venerate him as one of the great teachers of the day" (MP I, xxxix). This "Priest" and "great teacher" who wrote with such brilliant insight and beautiful style left his mark on the British imagination.

What was it exactly about *Modern Painters*, with the "Oxford Graduate's" precise notes on everything from clouds to grass blades that exerted such influence on the writers, poets, and artists of Britain in the mid-19th century? What was this particular art critic's creed that was so captivating, especially to an Oxford graduate named Walter Pater and a young university student named Oscar Wilde?

Ruskin's theory of art, which he later calls Theoria in volume II, is an overtly Christian aesthetic, steeped in what is traditionally called "natural theology," yet answering different questions than such a theological discipline asks. For Ruskin's purpose is neither to prove the existence of God nor provide a theodicy, that is, a defense of God's goodness in the face of contradictory evidence; his purpose is, rather, to demonstrate that beauty must be a channel for the goodness and love of a Creator God. Through aesthetic experiences, truths of God's attributes reach the heart of the beholder. Then the single greatest beholder who has received this message of God and passed it along is the landscape artist J. M. W. Turner.

⁷² I use the standard "Library Edition" of Ruskin's works. *Modern Painters* I is found in volume III: Cook, E. T. and Wedderburn, Alexander. (1903). *The Works of John Ruskin, Volume III*. London: George Allen. In order to avoid confusion, hereafter I cite this third volume of the Library Edition (which contains all of *Modern Painters* volume I) as (MP I, page #)

⁷³ Herbert, Robert L. (1964). *The Art Criticism of John Ruskin*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books. xxx.

Modern Painters is thus a kind of complex, multi-volume apology for the art of Turner, and yet, in his defense, Ruskin establishes an important aesthetic in Britain at this time which would inspire the other aesthetic movements during the century, such as ‘art for art’s sake’ and, ultimately, Symbolism.⁷⁴

Rather than summarise the entire first volume with many different arguments, I will instead focus my analysis upon three recurring theological-aesthetic loci. Ruskin was neither a philosopher nor a theologian, and yet his early and significant body of work is continuously engaged with Christian ideas. Keeping in mind the religious and aesthetic fabric of this century, I will be interpreting Ruskin as, at his core, concerned primarily with finding a place for his religion in the beauty of the natural world. His entire enterprise rests on the correspondence of material beauty to spiritual truth.

Beauty & Morality in *Modern Painters* I

Morality is central to Ruskin’s theory of beauty, and in *Modern Painters*, both the perception and production of beauty stem from the moral centre that God has given human beings. Even though one scholar, George Landow, has referred to his “theocentric system of ethics” in the book as “idiosyncratic, eclectic, and often puzzling,”⁷⁵ it is undeniable that God-centred, moral perception forms a foundation for Ruskin’s entire project. Despite his veiled critique, this same scholar has also helpfully traced Ruskin’s understanding of morality back to Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, and the other moral philosophers, demonstrating that Ruskin understood “moral” to mean “ethical,” and to include “all mental processes” of human beings.⁷⁶ Whether or not Ruskin’s system of ethics is “often puzzling,” one thing is certain; in the aesthetics of beauty, morality is an ever present force; it allows for the interpretation of the messages of God written across the natural world.

Ruskin believes that both creation and perception come from a human’s moral centre. To create beauty or to appreciate it, one must be morally pure. The intellect is not enough for beauty, for a “material object which can give us pleasure in the simple contemplation of its outward qualities without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful” (MP I, 109). The beautiful affects a person’s heart, feelings, and spirit - not simply her or his mental activities. To truly and deeply be changed by this beauty then, one must have moral good-taste: “Perfect taste is the faculty of receiving the greatest possible pleasure from those material sources which are attractive to our moral nature in its purity and perfection” (MP I, 110).

⁷⁴ *Strangeness and Beauty: Volume I*, 13.

⁷⁵ Landow, George P. (1971). *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 110.

⁷⁶ *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*. 157.

This moral good-taste allows for the reception of the messages of God through beauty in the natural world. Perception without moral nature, that is, without gratitude, love, and appreciation, becomes empty repetition. In a particularly rich passage in which he discusses moral sensibility, Ruskin writes, “I believe this kind of sensibility may be entirely resolved into the acuteness of bodily sense of which I have been speaking, associated with love, love I mean in its infinite and holy functions, as it embraces divine and human and brutal intelligences, and hallows the physical perception of external objects by association, gratitude, veneration, and other pure feelings of our moral nature” (MP I, 143). He goes on to say that “a man of deadened moral sensation is always dull in his perception of truth” (MP I, 143).

It is this hallowed perception, stemming from a moral centre, that makes a great artist. Education and reputation have nothing to do with it. To copy style rather than nature is to become a “parrot painter” (MP I, 156). For it is only the moral centre that prepares an artist to approach her or his task with the proper love and veneration. One finds the means to create beauty by it: “The teaching of nature is as varied and infinite as it is constant; and the duty of the painter is to watch for every one of her lessons, and to give (for human life will admit of nothing more) those in which she has manifested each of her principles in the most peculiar and striking way” (MP I, 156). Then Ruskin declares, “All really great pictures, therefore, exhibit the general habits of nature, manifested in some peculiar, rare, and beautiful way” (MP I, 157). The general habits of nature are not random characteristics due to chaos or to Darwinian evolution; they are, rather, the carefully ordered phenomena according to the will of God, for the benefit of his creature. This means that nature is ever truthful. It is the artist’s duty to pass along this truth, which, ultimately, is the truth of a Divine Benefactor.

Beauty & Truth in *Modern Painters* I

To demonstrate the seriousness with which Ruskin treats natural phenomena, I will now focus upon two chapters which are illustrative of the whole work. Ruskin devotes two entire chapters, which make up 61 pages (in the Library Edition), as well as many other paragraphs scattered throughout the work, just to the “truth of clouds.” These chapters are situated in the middle of Ruskin’s organisational pattern of volume I; in turn he treats skies, clouds, earth, central mountains, inferior mountains, foreground rocks, water, and vegetation, demonstrating to the reader how the old landscape artists, those Masters of the Dutch and Flemish schools as well as more recent English artists, have consistently failed to interpret God’s gift of Nature with any fidelity. In this failure to accurately paint natural scenes on the canvas, Ruskin shows such artists’ popularity in the Royal Academy is entirely unwarranted.

Regrettably, there is another artist who has been accused of telling fanciful lies despite his great fidelity to the truths of Nature: Turner. Ruskin changes the aesthetic conversation to one thing about Turner:

his *truthfulness*. If he can prove that Turner is telling the truth in his paintings while the various popular artists in England are telling lies, then he can prove the painter is the greatest of artists. After some lengthy introductory chapters dealing with introductory principles and Joshua Reynolds's lectures on art, Ruskin writes,

I shall endeavor, therefore, in the present portion of the work, to enter with care and impartiality into the investigation of the claims of the schools in ancient and modern landscape to faithfulness in representing nature. I shall pay no regard whatsoever to what may be thought beautiful, or sublime, or imaginative. I shall look only for truth: bare, clear, down-right statement of facts; showing in each particular, as far as I am able, what the truth of nature is, and then seeking for the plain expression of it, and for that alone. And I shall thus endeavor, totally regardless of fervour of imagination or brilliancy of effect, or any other of their more captivating qualities, to examine and to judge the works of the great living painter, who is, I believe, imagined by the majority of the public, to paint more falsehood and less fact than any other known master. We shall see with what reason.⁷⁷

Ruskin is not concerned with originality or greatness of style in painting. The reputation of such masters as Joshua Reynolds⁷⁸ and Poussin⁷⁹ does not silence his harsh critique of their imaginative errors in painting. Ruskin is interested in one thing in this work: truth. Natural truth (which is also, for Ruskin, theological truth) is his guiding, foundational principle, and his entire aesthetic is built upon the uncovering of this truth through the arts. His task to find truth and Turner's task to paint truth is, naturally, a moral endeavor.

For Turner as for Ruskin, landscape art must be “a witness to the omnipotence of God” (MP I, 22). In this stout first volume Ruskin is establishing a God-centred aesthetic, where nature and art continually do the work of theology, pointing to the role and attributes of a Heavenly Father. That is, both the beauty of the natural world and that beauty translated onto an artist's canvas can also inspire, convict, and teach some kind of truth about God. In his great wisdom God even intends for the arts to effect his purposes. Returning to one of Ruskin's many themes, clouds, it would be helpful to specifically track his arguments in support of faithful cloud-observation, appreciation, and then rendering.

The reader of the two cloud chapters in *Modern Painters* will learn much about the technical aspects of cloud-painting and on the many failures of the English, Dutch, and Flemish landscape artists of the past two centuries. Ruskin devotes dozens of pages to both the glories of the clouds and the inglorious way most

⁷⁷ MP I, 138-139.

⁷⁸ Reynolds (1723-1792), author of *Fifteen Discourses to the Royal Academy*, taught that “Artists should follow the rules derived from studying the great masters of the past, especially those who worked in the classical tradition; art should generalize to create the universal rather than the particular,” etc. Stokstad, Marilyn; Cateforis, David. (2005). *Art History, Revised Second Edition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/ Prentice Hall. 920.

⁷⁹ Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) was influential in his ordering of landscape elements, painting not what was visible or realistic but what was the ordered, classical ideal. *Art History, Revised Second Edition*. 745.

artists who were considered great in their day utterly failed to capture their glorious beauty. Of course their beauty reveals the infinity and majesty of God who dwells in the heavens.

Therefore painting anything from nature is certainly no small undertaking. Ruskin wastes no time in setting out his thesis of these chapters: “There is but one master whose works we can think of while we read this, one alone has taken notice of the neglected upper sky; it is his peculiar and favourite field; he has watched its every modification, and given its every phase and feature; at all hours, in all seasons, he has followed its passions and its changes, and has brought down and laid open to the world another apocalypse of Heaven” (MP I, 363). Clouds, in their ever-evolving, complex and multifaceted beauty, have been traced by God in the sky for humanity’s moral and spiritual benefit; they are not trifling amusements for artists to fancifully manipulate. Ruskin actually refers to clouds as the “apocalypse of heaven” (MP I, 363) and he writes about the many “truths connected with them” (MP I, 369). These truths are sublime ones which direct humanity’s praise to a loving Creator God.

It follows that any artistic representation of clouds should seek to present such lessons with fidelity, lest the original truths from God becomes lost in an inaccurate, subjective interpretation, or worse, a downright lie. Ruskin has no patience with those artists who depart from nature; any falsehood in art is wrong because “falsehood is in itself revolting and degrading... and because nature is so immeasurably superior to all that the human mind can conceive, that every departure from her is a fall beneath her...” (MP I, 137). This is why bad art, like bad architecture, is more than just an annoyance or eyesore. Bad art is an affront to the moral sense for it violates the truth. A painter must approach the task of painting as a teacher of the church approaches the task of commenting upon the sacred Word (MP I, 157). If this other sacred Word, this Nature-scripture, is misrepresented or portrayed in an untruthful way, then the artist is not just a bad and therefore untalented artist, but a bad person in a moral and religious way. God has created all things, and in the language of Genesis 1 and *Modern Painters*, God has seen His creation to be good - so good that the very imperfect artists who would wish to ignore it to follow personal fancy no longer proclaim fully the goodness of the Creator God. Ruskin will excuse honest mistakes, made in ignorance, but he will not tolerate dishonest mistakes, for in his aesthetics such mistakes are made in willful rebellion against God’s Book of Nature.

In these cloud chapters Ruskin again misses no opportunity to catalogue the inaccurate follies he finds in the older landscape school, represented especially by the Baroque school and the painters Poussin and Claude Lorrain,⁸⁰ and he thereby shows to the reader what are ultimately spiritual weaknesses and moral deceits. Artists who remain truthful with their clouds, who approach natural clouds with reverence and

⁸⁰ Claude Lorrain (1600-1682), was, along with Nicolas Poussin, a significant influence on painters of the following two centuries for his ideal, classical landscapes. See *Art History, Revised Second Edition*, 745.

openness, wishing to learn about God, will be powerful communicators of His providence, power, and love. This is why Ruskin is able to complete his chapter on clouds in a great praise of the one truthful, faithful artist he has come to defend: J. M. W. Turner.

The conclusion, then, to which we are led by our present examination of the truth of clouds is, that the old masters attempted the representation of only one among the thousands of their systems of scenery, and were altogether false in the little they attempted; while we can find records in modern art of every form or phenomenon of the heavens from the highest film that glorifies the aether to the wildest vapour that darkens the dust, and in all these records, we find the most clear language and close thought, firm words and true message, unstinted fulness and unfailing faith.⁸¹

Far from lessening the worth of Turner's art for endlessly connecting it to God and the study of theology, Ruskin is able to afford it a place higher than any other critic before or since has been able to give it. When art does become, as with Ruskin, a means of communicating the divine Truth to others, it becomes a moral, sacred task. This turns the artist into a prophet, the critic into a scribe. It is Ruskin's task as such a scribe to defend and propagate the message of revelation, beauty, and truth which has been given to Turner. Ruskin does his work through a medium faithful to the beauty of the original revelation and the faithful copy of the revelation: his carefully worded, detailed, and descriptive prose. In what Ruskin later described as "perhaps the best and truest piece of work done in the first volume" (MP I, 419, editor's footnote 1), he concludes his chapter on clouds with words about the colourful skies above a mountainous landscape. This eloquent passage in the present volume follows a thorough deconstruction of Claude's method of painting clouds. The crescendo is this:

And then wait yet for one hour, until the east again becomes purple... watch the white glaciers blaze in their winding paths about the mountains, like mighty serpents with scales of fire: watch the columnar peaks of solitary snow, kindling downwards, chasm by chasms, each in itself a new morning; their long avalanches cast down in keen streams brighter than the lightning, sending each his tribute of driven snow, like altar-smoke, up to the heaven... and then, when you can look no more for gladness, and when you are bowed down with fear and love of the Maker and Doer of this, tell me who has best delivered this His message unto men!⁸²

Ruskin is capable of such lofty praise of Turner because, in Ruskin's estimation, for art to be religious, it need not concern overtly biblical characters or stories. In fact, religious art to Ruskin (and to Turner) is something much more elementary, or, one might say, elemental. Turner is "the only perfect landscape painter whom the world has ever seen" (MP I, 616) because he is the celebrant of the very elements of Nature: the mountains and clouds, trees and skies that make up the holy clouds, skies, and hills that,

⁸¹ MP I, 415.

⁸² MP I, 418-419.

Ruskin, function explicitly like Scripture verses. Turner is therefore a religious artist in the truest sense, for he has seen the truth of the Lord and interpreted it for others.

Beauty & God in *Modern Painters* I

As a mid-century Evangelical Christian, Ruskin's knowledge of the Old and New Testaments was exceptional. His writing is peppered with references to biblical types. Ruskin scholar George Landow, in his work *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows* (1980), points out that, essentially, Ruskin's entire endeavor in *Modern Painters* is to show that the natural contains types of the attributes of God; or, in other words, that "all phenomena which we find beautiful, such as proportioned curves, symmetry, and pure colors [sic], act as a type of divinity."⁸³ In his work on Ruskin's aesthetics, Landow makes an important distinction between "type" and "allegory," and shows that Ruskin had a typological understanding of creation rather than an allegorical one. Typology respects the historical timeframe whereas allegories lift things out of time; "In other words, whereas a type focuses attention on both its historical existence and its meaning, an allegory places most importance on its significance."⁸⁴ In the post-Romantic era, Ruskin finds a foundation for his faith in these natural types. Apart from orthodox sacramental tradition, even apart from Jesus Christ, Ruskin sees God the Father's hand in all of his earthly types. In his continual reflection on nature acting as a witness to God, Ruskin is engaging in a kind of natural theology.

In this first volume of *Modern Painters* Ruskin is most concerned with connecting beauty, painting, creativity, imagination - in short, every aspect of aesthetics considered from above and below - as integral to humans' relationship with God. This relation is necessarily moral; it is in the right response to the appearance of God's attributes through nature that human beings can be truthful artists and beholders, filled with love and gratitude. Yet the previous sections have also hinted at something else regarding Ruskin's view of God; it is focused squarely upon a certain idea of God.

Ruskin's *Theoria*, is strictly concerned with God the Father in a kind of "First Article" exercise. I use this catechetical distinction because I believe it is helpful.⁸⁵ Ruskin is most interested in humanity's natural ability to discover God through earthly types. This natural ability is the power to perceive, appreciate, and love. First gifted to them through Adam and Eve by a gracious God, the power to see the Creator in what He has created is precious for Ruskin.

⁸³ Landow, George P. (1980). *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 216.

⁸⁴ *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*. 350.

⁸⁵ For example, if we look to the Apostles Creed, we see that it is divided into three sections which correspond to the three Persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, Spirit, and the three movements in the Christian life: creation, redemption, sanctification. See Lull, Timothy F. and Russell, William R. eds. (2012). Luther's "The Small Catechism," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 327.

God tells no lies, so then neither does his means of communication: Nature. Ruskin readily describes “that faultless, ceaseless, inconceivable, inexhaustible loveliness, which God has stamped upon all things;” we then must be “ready to receive them as He gives them” (MP I, 48). This Nature-scripture, like the written Scripture, expresses God’s thoughts and desires for humankind.

To recapitulate, these are Ruskin’s theological-aesthetic conclusions of the first volume; firstly, whereas priests, monks, or scholars are specially attuned to receive God’s message from his written Scripture, it is the artists who are specially attuned, then trained, to receive the word of God “from clouds, and leaves, and waves;” and just as religious people must practice what they read if they are to be truthful interpreters of the Bible, so must artists strive to keep natural truth unblemished if they wish to be good artists (MP I, 45). Secondly, this natural word does not replace the written word, but works alongside it as another aid: “We should use pictures not as authorities, but as comments on nature, just as we use divines not as authorities, but as comments on the Bible” (MP I, 45, his footnote). Thirdly, because of his fidelity to nature as God actually has created it, J. M. W. Turner is the painter par excellence, and in his deeply truthful paintings he has become a prophet, a chosen interpreter, of God’s Word, which is now expansively defined for us.

Next I will track these same theological-aesthetic loci in Ruskin’s second volume. Despite the fact that Ruskin veers off the path of his original plan for the work, he is still seeking the same basic answer to his theological probing: how is painting related to the purity and holiness of God? As I will demonstrate, Ruskin is able to once again discover a Providential Father figure in heaven, yet cannot find a place in his aesthetic for imperfect, fleshly humanity. Ruskin then also displays a noticeable lack of interest in the physical Incarnation and its consequences for human creativity.

1.2 Modern Painters Volume II

Modern Painters Volume II is, in several respects, a surprisingly different sort of work than the first volume.⁸⁶ One might expect to find in this book further reflections on natural phenomena: rocks, hills, rivers, trees, and other things, with a slightly older and more famous graduate of Oxford continuing to argue for Turner’s place as head of the landscape artists of the day. Instead, there is a significant change of direction, with Ruskin taking a different approach to Turner and the other modern landscape painters than he did previously. Indeed, volume II is actually an extended, theoretical treatise on beauty, imagination, and truth, examined through Ruskin’s brilliant interpretations of Italian Medieval and Renaissance artists. The critic still practices those outstanding observational powers of his, but turns them upon the classic (though at the

⁸⁶ Cook, E. T. and Wedderburn, Alexander eds. (1904). *The Works of John Ruskin, Volume IV*. London: George Allen. Hereafter I will cite as MP II, page # in Library Edition.

time, mostly overlooked) early Florentine and Venetian masters discovered in mouldering catacombs and forgotten chapels. Two events made Ruskin change his original plan for the volume: first, his reading A. F. Rio's book on Christian art, *De La Poesie Chretienne dans son principe, dans sa matiere et dans ses formes* (1836), and second, his impactful trip to Venice, Pisa, and Florence where he experienced those powerful works of the 14th and 15th century Italians (MP II, xxiii). His editors write, "His interest in this book, quickened by his studies in the Louvre, determined him to revisit Italy and study the early Christian painters before proceeding any further with his essay. The tour of 1845 was the decisive factor in making the second volume what it is, and was also the turning point in Ruskin's career (MP II, xxiii-xxiv).

Ruskin was changed by the art he experienced. The beauty and power of these early works moved Ruskin to further develop his concept of beauty. In his new, more overtly philosophical endeavor to explain aesthetic experience, Ruskin develops one of his most important concepts: that of the *theoretic faculty*.⁸⁷ The theoretic faculty, simply referred to as Theoria, is that contemplative ability, coming from the heart, that is concerned with approaching and understanding beauty in its moral depth and complexity (MP II, 35ff). Theoria is therefore a deeply penetrative and reverent perception of a thing. If *aesthesia* is the sensory experience of a thing's outward surface with its physical qualities, then Theoria is the seeing and understanding of a thing's beauty in the fullness of its relations. It takes a *pure heart* to receive beauty and the message of God in beauty (MP II, 35). Then what precisely is beauty in Ruskin's system? As we have also seen in his first volume, beauty is nothing less than moral and emotional pleasure at the revelation of the divine attributes of God (MP II, 144).

Beauty & Morality in *Modern Painters* II

Morality is linked to beauty in at least three major ways. The first is that in the theoretic faculty's perception of beauty, one must have the "moral retina" along with the "intellectual lens" to perceive rightly (MP II, 35). The second link is to the imagination itself; no artist can produce true art unless he or she cultivates the right moral feelings. These two insights were once again made by Ruskin when he was before the frescoes of the Campo Santo and the works in Florentine churches. Such early Renaissance artists were morally excellent not because they painted religious subject-matter, but rather because they approached all subject matter in this moral way; filled with reverence for the beautiful things of God, they were able to produce beautiful things for God (MP II, 30). The third link is to a creature's composition: "the beauty of the animal form in exact proportion to the amount of moral or intellectual virtue expressed in it" (MP II, 160).

⁸⁷ Taken from the Greek verb θεωρέω. Ruskin defines this as "I discern, I see mentally." It is an interpretive, contemplative action and not merely an outward, visual, aesthetic experience (MP II, 42).

Integral to this moral view of beauty is Theoria, where aesthetic perception is intertwined with the human heart. Looking at the second chapter, “Of the Theoretic Faculty,” we see that §8 is aptly summarised as “*Ideas of Beauty, how essentially moral;*” Ruskin argues here that his ideas of beauty are “the subject of moral, and not of intellectual, nor altogether of sensual perception” (MP II, 48). The sensual pleasure of beauty must always come first, as is proven by experience. “For, as it is necessary to the existence of an idea of beauty, that the sensual pleasure which may be its basis should be accompanied first with joy, then with love of the object, then with the perception of kindness in a superior intelligence, finally, with thankfulness and veneration towards that intelligence itself...” (MP II, 48). The pleasure is accompanied with joy and love, and then after a perception of God, one responds to beauty with the biblical responses of thankfulness and praise.⁸⁸ This right kind of aesthetic (theoretic) perception is tied to purity of taste. By this Ruskin does not mean sophistication and he does not mean there is only one type of style in art that is praiseworthy. Rather, he means that beauty is so universally experienced by those of pure heart and conscience, that that constitutes pure taste. “Pure” taste is taste which is unspotted by sin, baseness, or pride:

But if we can perceive beauty in everything of God’s doing, we may argue that we have reached the true perception of its universal laws. Hence, false taste may be known by its fastidiousness, by its demands of pomp, splendour, and unusual combination, by its enjoyment only of particular styles and modes of things, and by its pride also... But true taste is for ever growing, learning, reading, worshipping, laying its hand upon its mouth because it is astonished, lamenting over itself, and testing itself by the way that it fits things.⁸⁹

This is an important point, for in this sense is art related to morality; not that art teaches humanity to become moral, but that art can only be produced in the first place by moral humanity. Both pure taste and false taste are proven by fruits. This is the second way that morality is linked with aesthetics: the moral or immoral nature of artists. Beautiful art is produced by women and men who have a strong moral basis and are not led astray by lies or pomp: “No supreme power of art can be attained by impious men” (MP II, 211). Even though evil artists are capable of painting very beautiful works and sculpting very moving statues, they are to be compared to the spirit of prophecy given to Balaam or Saul despite their sins (MP II, 214). Ruskin writes, “It seems to me that much of what is great, and to all men beneficial, has been wrought by those who neither intended nor knew the good they did, and that many mighty harmonies have been discoursed by instruments that had been dumb or discordant, but that God knew their stops [sic]” (MP II, 213-214).

⁸⁸ For example, see Psalm 100

⁸⁹ MP II, 60.

Beauty & Truth in *Modern Painters II*

Ruskin makes an important distinction between beauty and truth in this second volume, a distinction that clarifies much of his earlier volume's remarks on nature being both beautiful and true at the same time. In chapter IV, "Of False Opinions Held Concerning Beauty," Ruskin argues against these three "erring" opinions: "the first, that the Beautiful is the True; the second, that the Beautiful is the Useful; the third, that it is dependent on Custom; and the fourth; that it is dependent on the Association with Ideas" (MP II, 66). We are mainly concerned with the first erring opinion discussed in this section. Ruskin argues that mingling the true with the beautiful is like mingling propositions with matter; it is a categorical mistake. Truth is different than beauty, but what is beautiful is almost always true as well, because ugliness often accompanies lies and falsehood. Regarding the holders of this mistaken opinion Ruskin writes, "But giving the best and most rational interpretation we can, and supposing the holders of this strange position to mean only that things are beautiful which appear what they indeed are, and ugly which appear what they are not, we find them instantly contradicted by each and every conclusion of experience" (MP II, 66). He uses the example that a cloud can look less like a cloud and more like a castle, and in that resemblance to something else it is found to be beautiful. Ruskin is concerned with both beauty and truth in this volume, but he carefully notes here that they are not to be mingled. In arguing that the beautiful is not the true, Ruskin is saying that true representations of natural phenomena in art can nevertheless be dull, insipid, and evil, if there is no beauty, goodness, love, or repose. Truth qualifies beauty; beauty does not qualify (or determine) truth.

Yet Ruskin actually has harsh words about the "horrid images of the Passion by which vulgar Romanism has always striven to excite the languid sympathies of its untaught flocks" (MP II, 201). Such "horrid pictures" do not uncover truth below the surface but, to Ruskin at least, aesthetically manipulate the emotions and not the spirits of the Catholic Church's "untaught flocks" by dwelling on the imperfect, the violent, and the sinful. In Ruskin's Theoria, beauty must be untouched by any stain of sin or imperfection. In a sense, beauty is then a purified and idealistic view of reality. This is an important theme that will be taken up in the final section on beauty and God in *Modern Painters II*.

It is this emphasis on beauty that Pater and Wilde draw from in their early careers while modifying the overtly theological nature of Ruskinian beauty. Theoria is, by its very nature, more than just seeing for one's enjoyment; it is, rather, the combination of seeing with spiritual and moral eyes as well as physical eyes. It is a penetrative, contemplative exercise that only human beings can practice as they are the crown of God's creation, specially equipped to sense God through the things He has made, and then to pattern these sensations through their own artworks (MP II, 35). Artists use their imagination not to "exhibit things as they are not," but to faithfully represent in another medium those truths that have been received through the natural medium.

Beauty & God in *Modern Painters II*

Ruskin organises the four ways that supernatural beings manifest themselves to human sense in time and history in this way; 1) external types, such as the flaming bush of the third chapter of Exodus; 2) symbolic forms, such as the Holy Spirit taking the form of a dove; 3) forms adopted but not necessarily seen, as the Risen Christ behind locked doors; and 4) influence on human form, such as the shining face of Moses (MP II, 314-315). Humanity experiences these manifestations through the Scriptures and also through artworks by faithful artists; these demonstrate the same kind of truth and beauty.

Ruskin's theory of typology is more explicit in this second volume than it is in the first. As we saw in the previous section on *Modern Painters I*, types are historical people, objects, and institutions which are fulfilled in their future antitype. In typology, compared to allegory, the historical and physical past of the type is crucial in its fulfillment in the present or future. Facts and materiality make the type what it is. Ruskin widens this definition to include natural and geologic phenomena which are also types; they have a history, a materiality, and they point to equally true facts about divine things; “[The] second means of obtaining supernatural character is that with which we are now concerned, namely, retaining the actual form in its full and material presence, and, without aid from any external interpretation whatsoever, to raise that form by mere inherent dignity to such pitch and power and impressiveness as cannot but assert and stamp it for superhuman” (MP II, 315-316).

Each element of the natural world, from the cleavage of a cliff to the edge of a leaf, is a natural wonder worthy of observation, study, and praise. In short, these natural things are types, not gaining their meaning from an Old Testament figure or institution, but gaining their meaning from their purpose in God's activity of creation. They stand alongside the institutions, persons, and events of the Old Testament as other modes of revelation. Yet Ruskin does not engage in flights of fancy when he relates the natural world and its wonders to lessons about God. For example, he does not hold that each type of stone or each variety of tree is a code or cypher which directly tells a different theological truth about God. He simply teaches that the types found in natural phenomena point humanity to theological truths. About this typology, Landow is once again helpful: “[Ruskin] essentially places equal emphasis upon both signifier and signified... [He] emphasizes *both* the formal elements of the beautiful and its deeper theological significance.”⁹⁰ Thus in *Modern Painters II* we see a young John Ruskin still engaged in his natural theological programme, without greatly changing his stance on typology and history that he establishes in the first volume.

Ruskin's intriguing observations in this volume, so devoted to the artists of sacred works he encountered in places like the Campo Santo in Pisa and the San Marco monastery in Florence, are made in

⁹⁰ *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*. 350.

connexion with the same concern for the Truth of God that he made in the first volume. *Modern Painters* II is a thoroughly theological work because virtually every page is concerned with the discernment of God through the *theoretic* perception of beauty (MP II, 51). Ruskin writes, “But if we can perceive beauty in everything of God’s doing, we may argue that we have reached the true perception of its universal laws” (MP II, 60). This is Ruskin’s major theological point in *Modern Painters*: that God, or traits of God, can be perceived through the beauty of His creations. These creations were most faithfully interpreted by the Italians of old who approached nature, history, and humanity with pious reverence and love. These works must be seen again for they have lessons to teach: “[T]he neglect of art, as an interpreter of divine things, has been of evil consequence to the Christian world” (MP II, 211). Like in *Modern Painters* I, Ruskin’s theological concern is with the Creator God, the Heavenly Father who dwells in the heavens and provides natural paths to his children so that they might know Him. These natural paths could be anything found in nature, but absolutely every beautiful thing must, by its loveliness, reflect the traits of a loving Father.

But here, like in the previous volume, we again see a John Ruskin who is most concerned with the natural revelation of God the Father. In his project Ruskin simply is not concerned with Jesus as Saviour or as eschatological Son of Man. Ruskin’s project takes place entirely in “First Article” territory; it is a natural theological endeavor and Ruskin is explicit in this. God ever seems a distant Father and Force in Ruskin’s writings rather than an intimate Person. In an illustrative passage Ruskin writes

But there is one thing that [distance] has, or suggests, which no other object of sight suggests in equal degree, and that is - Infinity. It is of all visible things the least material, the least finite, the most typical of the nature of God, the most suggestive of the glory of His dwelling-place. For the sky of night, though we may know it boundless, is dark; it is a studded vault, a roof that seems to shut us in and down; but the bright distance has no limit, we feel its infinity, as we rejoice in its purity of light.⁹¹

Distance, infinity, brightness - Ruskin gives us a glimpse at the glory of the God of the high heavens who alone is immortal and “dwells in unapproachable light.”⁹² Though Ruskin, at this point of his life an evangelical Christian, certainly confessed belief in the Trinity, it must be asked, what is at the centre of Ruskin’s aesthetics, and his project of Theoria? Who is known by His works and His ways? It can only be answered that this is the Father, who, though He has sent His Son to save the world from sin, has not manifested Himself primarily or essentially in Jesus the Christ to the Church, but rather, in natural phenomena to the properly educated critic and artist.

How does Ruskin then treat the artists of Italy, those “earlier and mightier” painters, who so frequently depicted Jesus and the scenes from Christian history? He wrestles with these artists’ works,

⁹¹ MP II, 81.

⁹² 1 Timothy 6:16

refusing to see the broken and bloody Jesus, and refusing to see anything that resembles mysticism. In a journal entry made in Italy (and included by the editors in volume II), Ruskin records his organisational pattern for all the religious art he had encountered in Italy. Broadly speaking, Ruskin finds there to be four classes of religious art, under which most if not all of the Medieval-Renaissance painters find their place. The first class is that of “Pure Religious Art: The School of Love,” and it includes those early Renaissance painters who were, in Ruskin’s view, as saintly as they were artistic: Fra Angelico, Perugino, Duccio, Pinturicchio, Bellini, and a few others (MP II, xxxiv-xxxv). The other three classes are “The School of the Great Men,” “The School of Painting as Such,” and “The School of Errors and Vices.”⁹³ Ruskin shows that, though such artists painted nature in a technique that differs from Turner’s, they nevertheless approached Nature in the same way: with the utmost reverence and praise of the Creator. The early Renaissance works therefore are excellent examples of purity in art by which the divine traits of the Creator can be apprehended from the brushstroke, colour, and overall treatment of subject.

Even though Ruskin handles the early Renaissance masters in this second volume and leaves aside, for the moment, Turner and the other “modern painters,” he by no means departs from his overriding concern throughout *Modern Painters*. The concern is the artists’ fidelity to nature’s truths and the beauties that display the attributes of a Father God. But Ruskin does wish to deal with the human form and the human flesh, especially if it is marred, bloodstained, or twisted. “Of Vital Beauty” and “Of the Superhuman Ideal” are the two most crucial chapters for understanding Ruskin’s view of God and the human flesh.

“Of Vital Beauty” is concerned with further explanations of the concept, along with a glance at the list of works which particularly exhibit artistic powerlessness and impiety (MP II, 200). After citing works by Salvator Rosa and Orcagna, Ruskin references, almost in passing, that all “the horrible images of Passion, by which vulgar Romanism has always striven to excite the languid sympathies of its untaught flocks” are “most foul and detestable” (MP II, 200-201). Which “horrible images of [the] Passion” does Ruskin have in mind? Surely not such moving works as Fra Angelico’s Crucifixion in San Marco or Cimabue’s Cross in the Santa Croce? Ruskin explains his views further, “Of which foulness let us reason no farther, the very image and memory of them being pollution; only noticing this, that there has always been a morbid tendency in Romanism towards the contemplation of bodily pain, owing to the attribution of saving power to it...” (MP II, 202).

Therefore, it is this image of bloody Jesus that Ruskin cannot accept. Is this because of his Victorian sensibilities? Let us allow him to continue his attack on Passion images, “which, like every other moral

⁹³ In class 2 Ruskin places Michelangelo, Giotto, Orcagna, Benozzo, and others who perceive nature with a religious feeling. In class 3 Ruskin places the great colourists who were not necessarily or overtly religious - men such as Titian, Giorgione, and Bellini. Then in class 4 Ruskin considers Rafaelle [sic] in his later years to be particularly bad, morally and therefore artistically, along with Carracci and others. MP II, xxxv-xxxvii.

error, has been of fatal effect in art, leaving not altogether without the stain and blame of it, even the highest of the Romanist painters; as Fra Angelico for instance, who, in his Passion subjects, always insists weakly on the bodily torture, and is unsparing of blood;" (MP II, 202). Ruskin will not change his mind; any frescoe with a hint of violence, death, or suffering is a polluting image because it sullies the pure perfection of God, as is glimpsed through the pure perfection of nature. Ruskin continues, "...and Giotto, though his treatment is usually grander, as in that Crucifixion over the door of the Convent of St. Mark's, where the blood is hardly actual, but issues from the feet in a conventional form, and becomes a crimson cord which is twined strangely beneath about a skull;" (MP II, 202). If Ruskin prefers the blood of Christ to appear "hardly actual," what does He think of the real blood of Christ which dripped upon Calvary? He prefers a sanitised and idealised Christ-figure because a fleshly, bloodied, empty one does not fit within His Theoria, for anything less than pure beauty and crystalline perfection is immoral, even if it is true to salvation history.

There are more examples that show Ruskin's view could not accommodate the human body in its twistedness and brokenness. A particularly illustrative example comes from later in the work:

I have affirmed... that "of that which is more than Creature no Creature ever conceived." I think this almost self-evident, for it is clear that the illimitableness [*sic*] of Divine attributes cannot be by matter represented (though it may be typified); and I believe that all who are acquainted with the range of sacred art will admit, not only that no representation of Christ has ever been even partially successful, but that the greatest painters fall therein below their accustomed level; Perugino and Fra Angelico especially[.]⁹⁴

Without engaging in matters of personal taste, it can still be pointed out that Ruskin's view here is unusual and strange; it is not that he despises a realistic human form, because many of Fra Angelico's crucifixion frescoes are not realistic in a 19th century sense, but are, instead, highly idealised and poetic. Ruskin cannot accept the reality of bloody flesh in art. This does not fit into his system because, though it is truthful, he cannot find the beauty within it.

There is a further passage which reveals much about Ruskin's negative view of the flesh. This will be even more revealing when we acquaint ourselves with Pater's view of hellenism toward the end of the volume, and demonstrate how strongly Pater differs from Ruskin in his estimation of fleshly humanity. In contrasting the two orders of art, the ancient Greek ("Pagan") on the one hand and the Italian Renaissance ("Christian") on the other, Ruskin argues, "Gather what we may of great from Pagan chisel or Pagan dream, and set it beside the orderer of Christian warfare, Michael the Archangel [by Perugino]... no lines are there of earthly strength, no trace on the divine features of earthly anger; trustful, and thoughtful, fearless, but full of love, incapable except of the repose of eternal conquest, vessel and instrument of Omnipotence..." (MP II,

⁹⁴ MP II, 317.

330). This eloquent passage continues, and before too long Ruskin concludes, “It is vain to attempt to pursue the comparison; the two orders of art have in them nothing common” (MP II, 331). This follows his extended discussion of the ways that the supernatural is manifested in history. So Ruskin draws a complete contrast between pagan and Christian depictions of humanity in art, and argues that any signs of “earthly strength,” such as we see in the best of Greek art, is vastly inferior to the more immaterial, heavenly forms of humanity which the Italian Renaissance artists gave to their men and angels. Ruskin further damns the Greek physicality when he writes, “No herculean form is spiritual, for it is degrading the spiritual creature to suppose it operative through impulse of bone and sinew; its power is immaterial and constant, neither dependent on, nor developed by, exertion” (MP II, 327). Christian painters such as Michelangelo and Raphael stooped too low in depicting an immoral, fleshly ideal when they portrayed their men and women as muscular masses; Ruskin will vilify this style.

He simply will have none of the physicality and sensuality of the human body that the ancient Greek art celebrates, that other later Renaissance masters glorify. He cannot find truth, and certainly cannot find beauty, in the “bone and sinew” of the human body, in the blood of Christ’s wounds, and generally in paintings that contain any hint of human sexuality. This is not surprising, however, because it is what we have seen throughout *Modern Painters*, Ruskin keeps physical flesh at arm’s length and prefers to deal with non-human natural phenomena or, in the case of the Pisan and Venetian masters, medieval religious art when it avoids the Passion. Notice that even when Ruskin does praise a particular form, such as in the previous passage when he praises Purigino’s Michael as the “vessel and instrument of Omnipotence.” Yet Purigino’s Michael is not praised for those physical details that root him to this earth: details such as his very fine hair, floppy beret, or perfectly modeled late-mediaeval armour. Far from looking like a mere vessel for Omnipotence; he could, in fact, be interpreted as a warrior who, fully armed, is ready to destroy demonic forces for the sake of humanity. My point is this: Ruskin is not interested in fleshly humanity, whether it is a humanity revealed in the suffering of Jesus or in the imperfection of any other, but he is only interested in the repose and perfection of the divine attributes manifesting themselves throughout time. As we will see, Pater, Wilde, and Chesterton differ with Ruskin most strongly on this point.

In Ruskin’s *Theoria*, which is strictly an aesthetics of natural theology, there is no real role for Christ. Even that classic role of sacrificial lamb has been removed by Ruskin, who has no interest in Christology and no robust way of accounting for the paradox of a suffering Saviour. When Christ is mentioned in *Modern Painters* II, this is a Christ divorced from physical, fleshly reality. This is a heavenly Christ and not a kenotic one. Christ is more of a tool or character in Ruskin’s natural theology than He is the Lamb of God sacrificed for humanity to both justify and then sanctify. Human flesh is not lifted up and glorified because of Him; it is simply saved from condemnation.

A few decades after the publication of *Modern Painters* II, the ‘art for art’s sake’ movement drew from the well of aesthetic insight and close observation while leaving behind what is for Ruskin, the most important underlying concept: a God who wishes to reveal Himself. For example, when Ruskin sets out those human responses which are necessary to the right perception of beauty, the art for art’s sake movement will adopt the first two points but not the third and fourth. These are the four necessary responses to beauty: 1) sensual pleasure accompanied by joy; 2) love of the object; 3) perception of kindness of a superior intellect; and 4) veneration towards that intelligence itself (MP II, 48). This is essentially a phenomenological approach to beauty because Ruskin is illustrating what happens to the great Italians, to Turner, and to himself in the presence of beauty; he is not arguing that a critic must manufacture or cultivate these responses. They simply happen to those who are happy and pure in heart (MP II, 4).⁹⁵

⁹⁵ See Appendix 1 for a note on *Modern Painters* volumes III, IV, and V.

2. AESTHESIS

2.1 Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*

"He who is ever looking for the breaking of a light he knows not whence about him, notes with a strange heedfulness
the faintest paleness in the sky." -Walter Pater⁹⁶

In this chapter I will now examine the two major critical works of the 'art for art's sake' aesthetic, coming from the pens of Walter Pater and his disciple Oscar Wilde. Pater and Wilde are neither theologians nor are they philosophers. However, it would take a great deal of misreading to think that Pater and Wilde disengaged from all philosophical or and theological matters. These two eminent writers actually discuss God and faith a great deal in their critical writings, they frequently interpret artworks with Christian themes, allude to the Christian Scriptures, and borrow religious terms. Pater and Wilde also have a great deal of sympathy with Jesus Christ and His teachings, though they might be stripped of all the accumulated Church dogmas from throughout history to leave only the icon of that beautiful, exquisite God-Man who never ceases to influence humanity. These writers thus draw from the entire Christian experience, and they write to an audience that, unlike today, is still generally well versed in biblical stories and theological concepts.

Pater and Wilde, in their call for an aesthetic criticism purified from any taint of metaphysics or morals, were influenced heavily by figures that preceded them. It was the American poet and theorist, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), who exerted such a great force on most major French and British critics in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁹⁷ Poe's contribution to aesthetics is his formulation of the idea that poetry and all the arts must be "uncontaminated" by didacticism, history, morality, or belief.⁹⁸ His other major contribution is the idea that the artist produces work not through inspiration, but through careful and artificial construction designed to produce an emotional mood.⁹⁹ In a dated yet still highly valuable work on the history of aesthetics by Katharine Everett Gilbert, we read that, for Poe, "The artistic workman proceeds in the full light of his rational consciousness, closely watching and controlling every step... As he starts on his work, the artist selects an effect which he wishes to produce, and his art consists in finding out and applying the proper mean to this end."¹⁰⁰ Poe's theories on the separation of art from any moral or metaphysical foundation as

⁹⁶ Warner, Eric and Hough, Graham, eds. (1983). *Strangeness and Beauty: An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism 1840-1910, Volume 2 - Pater to Arthur Symons*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 11

⁹⁷ *Strangeness and Beauty, Volume 1 - Ruskin to Swinburne*, 145.

⁹⁸ *Strangeness and Beauty Volume 1 - Ruskin to Swinburne*, 146.

⁹⁹ *Strangeness and Beauty, Volume 1 - Ruskin to Swinburne*, 147.

¹⁰⁰ Everett Gilbert, Katharine and Kuhn, Helmut. (1939). *A History of Esthetics*. New York: The Macmillan Company. 494.

well as his argument for the artificial crafting of artistic forms affected the views of all further writers and critics of the century, especially the aesthetes and decadents who followed him.

The French critic Theophile Gautier (1811-1872) was a reader of Poe and shares many of his concerns. Gautier also had no patience for didacticism or utilitarianism in the arts; the arts must not teach because they should be useless: “No, imbeciles, no, goitrous cretins that you are, a book does not make a gelatin soup; a novel is not a pair of seamless boots, a sonnet not a syringe throwing a continuous jet; a drama is not a rail-road [*sic*] - all essentially civilizing things which make humanity advance down the path of progress. By the bowels of all the popes past, present, and future, no and two hundred thousand times no!”¹⁰¹ In his concerns for the protection or even isolation of art from moral and metaphysical concerns, Gautier is a precursor to those twin critics who influenced Chesterton’s early views: Pater and Wilde.

While Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), through his supernaturalism and insistence on the power of symbols, is an influence for the French *Symbolistes*, he is also the other major force upon the aesthetes Pater and Wilde who would follow later in the century. For Baudelaire continues Poe’s vision of the artist and Gautier’s vision of the created product. He writes, “The artist owes nothing to anyone but himself. To future ages he hold out no promises but his own works. He is a guarantor of no one but himself. He died without offspring. He has been his own king, priest, and God.”¹⁰² There is this idea, in the mid-century, that the artists now fulfills the old roles that the priest, as spiritual mediator, once had, before the “disappearance of God” in the century. Baudelaire gives further credence to Gautier’s insistence that art must never teach.

As critics, Pater and Wilde argue that the critical temperament is one especially attuned and ready to receive beautiful impressions as part of a spiritual yet also very earthly experience, one that is not concerned with moral philosophy or with traditional dogmas. Yet perhaps above all else, Pater and Wilde were also personally concerned with and fascinated by the beauty of Roman Catholicism. For example, in Pater’s only novel, the semi-autobiographical *Marius the Epicurean*, the protagonist converts to Roman Catholicism at the point of death after living an exquisite life of earthly pleasure.¹⁰³ Pater perhaps saw himself in such an artistic, deathbed conversion. Then, Oscar Wilde had a lifelong fascination with the Roman Church. His spiritual anguish and his curious deathbed reception into the Church years later are intriguing biographical details that I will cover in more detail below.

In this section I will conduct a close reading of Pater’s most important critical work, *The Renaissance* (1873) and Wilde’s major critical work, *Intentions* (1891); each is a collection of assorted essays. I will be comparing these works’ views on the relation between beauty and morality, beauty and truth, and beauty and

¹⁰¹ *Strangeness and Beauty Volume 2*, 162.

¹⁰² *Strangeness and Beauty, Volume I*, 185.

¹⁰³ Pater, Walter. (1885). *Marius the Epicurean*, 2 volumes, London: MacMillan and Co.

God, because I want to demonstrate not only the writers' debt to Ruskin, but also these critics joined in a search for God, or at least for a beautiful religion, one that could still withstand the critical pressures and honest doubts of the age. Pater and Wilde's search is, if not inconclusive, then certainly ambiguous. In worshiping the physicality of humanity, in yearning for something or someone beyond any system, they reach farther than Ruskin toward incarnational theology - a religious feeling that openly accepts human physicality and sees something divine in flesh, however imperfect or incomplete it may be.

The art critic Peter Fuller described *The Renaissance* as "Ruskin inverted."¹⁰⁴ Everything that Ruskin set out to accomplish in *Modern Painters* - defend Turner, argue for artistic fidelity to nature, and reveal the moral background of aesthetic perception - is turned upside down and inside out. However, Pater represents the next development of Ruskin's aesthetic in this age of "honest doubt" that I outlined in the introduction: the search for a religious-like experience in earthly materiality. For Pater, the physicality of all beauty is not a means to a religious end, but a religious end itself.

Because of the popularity and even *edginess* of this first collection of essays, Walter Pater became the "pioneering champion" of the *art for art's sake* movement.¹⁰⁵ In this celebrated work, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, which is comprised of nine essays on art, Walter Pater calls for a new movement in art criticism that would begin from the critic's own subjective perception and would interpret art apart from any didactic or moral meaning.¹⁰⁶ To usher in this new criticism, Pater wants this new type of critic to receive sensuous impressions from art and analyse such impressions of shapes, colours, tones, harmonies for the benefit of the public; such a critic will be one "[that] experiences these impressions strongly, and drives directly at the discrimination and analysis of them, has no need to trouble himself with the abstract question what beauty is in itself, or what its exact relation to truth or experience - metaphysical questions, as unprofitable as metaphysical questions elsewhere" (*Renaissance*, xvii). For Pater the critic must dabble in all matters of beauty and then has the task of making a discriminating analysis of his or her own aesthetic experience. Such a critic may then present her aesthetic discoveries to the public for their edification. The critic also has the task of showing the public the disunity between religion, morality, and beauty. In doing so he or she essentially follows a Kantian aesthetic with its emphasis on the non-relation between morality and the discernment of the beautiful.¹⁰⁷ Yet, this aesthetic is also far removed from Kant because of its worship

¹⁰⁴ Fuller, Peter. (1988). *Theoria: Art, and the Absence of Grace*. London: Chatto & Windus. 119.

¹⁰⁵ See Fraser, Hilary. (1986). *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 197.

¹⁰⁶ Pater, Walter. (orig. 1873, reprint 1978). *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. Chicago: Pandora Books, Academy. Hereafter cited parenthetically as (*Renaissance*, page #)

¹⁰⁷ Kant writes in his *Critique of Judgment*, ¶42, "Now I willingly admit that the interest in the beautiful of art... gives no evidence at all of a habit of mind attached to the morally good, or even inclined that way." Simpson, David, ed. (1984).

of materiality and sensuality. In this exercise the critic elevates the aesthetic experience itself above other human concerns, including morality or religion, turning such appreciation into a form of worship.

More specifically, I argue in this section that, like Ruskin, Pater regards the perception of beauty as a pleasurable event, but where Ruskin directs his readers toward a spiritual and moral pleasure, Pater most definitely has in mind not only spiritual but also sensual and physical. In the process, as we have seen, Ruskin could not accommodate physical, ugly humanity in his system. Pater corrects this, though in discarding the idea of a higher God his quest for a higher sensualism, one might even say a religious sensualism, remains totally unfulfilled. Pater is left with chasing after exquisite moments, desiring God through beauty.

Beauty & Morality in *The Renaissance*

Pater is hardly concerned with social morals or personal conduct, and he declines to have a conversation with any other past critical theory about the place of ethics in aesthetics. Indeed, the question of moral meaning and didactic potential in art is discarded along with all those broader “metaphysical questions,” questions which are as a whole, totally unprofitable to the matter of aesthetics (*Renaissance*, xvii). Art has no other purpose, no outside message to communicate to the viewer; rather, the delightful lines, colours, shapes, and shadows form the purpose. The meaning is all there on the surface, not dwelling below as an eternal idea or dwelling above as immaterial spirit. Pater writes very revealingly, “[A] great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on the wall or floor...” (*Renaissance*, 133). A beautiful work does not carry a message that can morally improve a human being; it does not have a moving lesson to inspire anyone to feelings of faith or to acts of charity. A painting, even a great painting, will be just like the sunlight and shadow that accidentally play in one’s room, teaching nothing, imparting nothing, and communicating nothing. The goal of any work of art is simply to give an impression of “untranslatable charm” to its viewer for his or her own pleasure (*Renaissance*, 133). Any piece of art which supposedly was painted to teach the viewer some lesson becomes a didactic tool and ceases to be a piece with any artistic merit.

Therefore for Pater, the beautiful impression received from an artwork is what matters and certainly not morals or metaphysical questions. To become embroiled in matters of religion or metaphysics is to miss the point of art. Gone is the Ruskinian insistence on a pure heart, pure taste, pure imagination. In Pater the only “purity,” if he were even to use such a word, is the bright charm of the specific piece of art itself.

Yet, in arguing against the moral component of aesthetics, Pater is not arguing for an increase of debauchery in the world or for giving artists an excuse for licentiousness. He has no anti-morality agenda. In his discussion of Peter Abelard and medieval French dramatists (as kinds of proto-Renaissance aesthetes), his concern is to show that Christian dogmas bind and prevent the “blossoming of the humanist ideal,” not that they are bad in an ethical sense. The problem is therefore not Christ, who actually was a humanist because of his concern for humans, but dogmas people have concocted about Him (*Renaissance*, 24). The love of beauty, the worship of the body, the study of material things are beyond religious-ethical rules (*Renaissance*, 24). In writing that aesthetic appreciation is beyond dogmas or rules, Pater is not declaring aesthetics to be contrary to religion, but rather contrary to a certain narrow religiosity that would devalue the physical.

Is Pater too far from Ruskin’s *Theoria*? Pater’s examples of heroic aesthetes are not just any famous people; they are the greatest lovers, artists, and critics of the world - women and men who were perfectly attuned to the beauty of the cosmos. Their conception of art (like Pater’s, of course) has nothing to do with human intelligence, for art is always striving “to be independent of the mere intelligence” and to “present one single effect to the ‘imaginative reason,’ that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol” (*Renaissance*, 138). It will be remembered that Ruskin’s *Theoria* was also above human intelligence or emotions (MP II, 42); the theoretic act is a contemplative act of the heart. Beauty is not so much understood in the head as it is experienced in the spirit.

In Pater’s remarks on the “complex faculty,”¹⁰⁸ he also anticipates a later Chestertonian idea - that those artistic, sensible analogues - the different colours on an artist’s canvas or notes on a composer’s score - inexplicably and mysteriously correspond to movements of the inner life. Chesterton’s “reality behind symbols” that he develops in *G. F. Watts* (1904) during an interpretation of the painting called “Hope” is simply the realisation that all paintings, like all words, are attempts by human beings to catch a “broken instantaneous glimpse” of that which is even a “mystery to saints.”¹⁰⁹

We also need to note that Pater does make the comparison between the best of pictorial art and music (*Renaissance*, 139). This was certainly not foreign to Ruskin, who by now must be seen as Pater’s precursor and great influence, but this type of language was more consistent in Ruskin. For Pater has just finished writing that each art, from painting to sculpture to music, has its own “peculiar and untranslatable, sensuous charm,” and that these arts are *not* different languages that seek to express the same truth (*Renaissance*, 130). Yet he still argues that in the visual arts, the aim should be that means and ends are blended so completely

¹⁰⁸ A phrase that Pater makes up and does not adequately explain or defend. He almost sounds like the French Symbolists in this passage.

¹⁰⁹ Chesterton, G. K. (1904). *G. F. Watts*. London: Duckworth & Co. 97.

that individual works become more like music (*Renaissance*, 139) So Pater affirms that music's charm is different than painting's charm, but painting must somehow strive to be more like music.

There seems to be a contradiction here, for if all arts have their own untranslatable charm, then painting's charm should not be like music's charm. After all, in Pater's view, neither has a moral message to convey. Yet Pater ends by arguing that the chief aesthetic ideal of music is its content-lessness. Is he therefore implying that pictorial art cannot help but contain some kind of content or deliver some kind of message? Is Pater following one of his great philosophical influences, Hegel, in his belief that the arts must be ranked by their ability to explicitly communicate Truth? Hegel writes about this belief that poetry is the highest Art because, “[I]t expresses directly for its own apprehension the spirit with all its imaginative and artistic conceptions but without setting these visibly and bodily for contemplation from the outside.”¹¹⁰ Poetry thus gives the essence of the spirit in the most direct, pointed fashion. Perhaps Pater's previous words on the “complex faculty” could provide further help here; if every type of human emotion has a corresponding symbol, it may be that poetry is the broadest means of symbolising and thus triggering these emotions. In any case, Pater sees the arts, especially poetry, as stirring within the beholder specific feelings that may be untranslatable, directing all to the art-object itself again and again.

Beauty & Truth in *The Renaissance*

Walter Pater frequently uses the word *charm* in these essays (*Renaissance*, 19, 72, etc.). By using this word he is saying that there is nothing beyond or beneath the beautiful surface of the piece of art itself. Like in a musical composition with melodies and harmonies, the form of the art, its colours and lines, are not signifiers for deeper truths. Rather, the truth of art lies in the purest beauty that is displayed by the artist and received by the discerning critic. This is not some kind of inner, metaphysical beauty, but simply a beauty of the outside. The discerning critic must receive the surface-level beauty of a painting, of a statue, of a piece of music. This surface is all that matters. Interpreting Renaissance artists like Giorgione and Titian, Pater argues that these Venetian artists realised the “truth” that painting “must be before all things decorative” (*Renaissance*, 140). Pater's use of the word “truth” here should not go unnoticed. Such decorative beauty does not uncover objective truth; neither does it interpret truth, unveil truth, or communicate truth. Rather, beauty *is* truth, the highest mode of expression that exists, and such beauty is experienced, analysed, interpreted when it is properly received by an art critic. Pater thus holds one of the “false opinions” which Ruskin critiques; he holds that the highest truth is the beautiful.

¹¹⁰ Simpson, David, ed. (1984). *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Hegel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 233.

Throughout these essays Pater also stresses the subjectivity inherent in both creation and in aesthetics. He urges his reader to ask the question, “What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me?” (*Renaissance*, xviii). Shortly after this he argues that the art critic should not bother with definitions of beauty, but must attain “a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects” (*Renaissance*, xx). One’s own unique perception is a precious experience and constitutes a very true experience to the beholder. This is an inner, subjective truth.

In his famous conclusion to *The Renaissance*, Pater writes, “Of such wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire for beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most [importance]. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake” (*Renaissance*, 239). Since beauty has no higher function than to physically and emotionally delight by its sheer *charm*, there is no need for a complex definition. The truth of beauty lies in its experience, what it gives to the beholder by means of its decorative charm and aesthetic delight. Pater writes,

With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own. Philosophical theories or ideas, as points of view, instruments of criticism, may help us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us. "Philosophy is the microscope of thought." The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves...¹¹¹

This “facile orthodoxy” is the common enemy of not only Pater and the aesthetes, but of Ruskin. Once again here is evidence of Pater’s debt to Ruskin. For both hold that in any shallow system, indirect discussion replaces direct experience, and complicated rules detract from simple truths. Ruskin argues in *Modern Painters* for a simple and intuitive approach to beauty (and then ultimately, to the knowledge of God the Father). This direct, aesthetic perception is all that Pater asks his readers to practice as well, for in aesthetics is the whole meaning of life with its myriad forms, colours, textures, and beauties. Pater would argue that if a person could simply experience it and not waste any effort forming theories about it, then she or he would finally be able to fully enjoy these splendid moments of passion. Three final conclusions are worth pointing out regarding Pater’s view of truth in aesthetics.

¹¹¹ *The Renaissance*, 237.

The first is that Pater believes in truth. His question is not Pilate's question. To translate into 21st century terms, he is not "post-truth." For Pater truth is "out there." In some inexplicable and mysterious way *truth is beauty*, to be discovered not through the intellect but through the eyes and heart. Beautiful truth in its complexity and brilliancy it is revealed at certain points in the history of the breaking forth of the human spirit, such as the Renaissance. It is not so much dissected through theory as it is experienced directly through aesthesis at the highest moments of spiritual contemplation. The very fact that Pater accepts the emergence of the human spirit at different points in human history is a reflection of the influence of Hegel, though not of Hegel's entire metaphysical-aesthetic system.

The second conclusion is that truth must be discovered through experimentation, that is, through many and various experiences. Pater is not a nihilist, for he does not declare this continual seeking is either impossible or vain. On the contrary, truth is only found when it breaks forth at certain special moments and the human beholder (critic) is ready to selflessly accept it. In passionately seeking after those moments, artist-lovers from Abelard to Pater himself have experienced the truth that breaks forth in beauty.

Thirdly, the only type of truth that Pater will accept is that which one might *enter*. Philosophy may be the microscope of thought, but Pater is ready to cast it aside if it leads away from his direct experiences and from those truths which he finds within himself. Abstract theories actually might be important, but insofar as they enlarge the truths discovered in visions of rapturous beauty.

Beauty & God in *The Renaissance*

The purpose of life is one of the central problems in Pater's *The Renaissance*. The ultimate message Pater has for the reader is that every individual's total experience of life, with its passions and beauties, is an "interlude" before death, made up of priceless moments that must be completely experienced in order to give all of one's pitifully short life any meaning (*Renaissance*, 238). Human life is thus defined by powerful aesthetic encounters with the outbreaking spirit.

In lieu of any traditional conception of infinity, eternity, or immortality, Pater offers a substitute in the aesthetically experienced eternal moment. This moment, which feels longer than it actually is, functions as the only possible channel for reprieve, peace, and joy in the midst of a very short and very imperfect life. Pater writes

To such a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down. It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of

impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off - that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves.¹¹²

This is a tenuous conception of the very temporary experience of a (beautiful) moment. For the sad fate of humankind is to always lose the sensation as soon as it is attained, to become “unweaved,” as Pater puts it, even after one is “weaved” by whatever exquisite experience one had. There is a tragedy in the slipping away of time and the unraveling of all experience. Pater responds with a pointed question a few lines later when he asks, “How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?” (*Renaissance*, 236).

Yet, is it even possible to be “present always” at the point where beautiful, charming experiences flow together, uniting in such a way? Pater answers with the famous words, “To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (*Renaissance*, 236). Such a burning often looks like desperate grasping, for exquisite shapes, colours, and textures are not always readily available (*Renaissance*, 237). But this grasping must continue, for those sensory experiences are all that human beings have.

In a mellifluous and poetical prose passage on the Mona Lisa, Pater writes that Da Vinci has somehow captured the possibility, in “Lady Lisa’s” expression, this kind of cyclical, perpetual enjoyment of various experiences: “The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea” (*Renaissance*, 126). In this work by the Renaissance humanist genius, a thousand passions from a thousand years have been preserved - captured - in a perfectly timeless repose. Pater treats the Lady Lisa in almost a religiously typological way; her sensuous charm is in no way devalued, but it points forward to a higher reality in which all aesthetic expression is gathered: the modern idea. The modern idea, that “cyclical enjoyment of various experiences,” makes room for tradition, ritual, and history. Any of these “modes of thought” can include Christian modes if they are beautiful and expressive.

Pater does not, therefore, take a negative stance against religion, faith, or spirituality in *The Renaissance*. Yet, in these collected essays Pater takes a sceptical and generally negative view toward “Christendom.” He insists on the fact that organised, authoritarian religion has only ever prevented the blossoming of art (*Renaissance*, 24), and that traditional Christianity in general has devalued the flesh and enslaved the spirit (*Renaissance*, 184). In this separation of art and religion, Pater attempts to preserve beauty from what he sees as the corrupting influence of doctrine, and distances his aestheticism from any

¹¹² *The Renaissance*, 236.

ideal that could possibly bind or limit this ideal perception of beauty (*Renaissance*, 24). Pater interprets the Renaissance as a critical moment in the history of the human spirit, when there was that outbreaking of the free spirit and a celebration of humanism, “in which the love of the things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake” became greater than the love of intellectual or imaginative things which existed for the sake of bolstering moral philosophy or supporting the Christian Church (*Renaissance*, 2).

Yet in this work Pater adopts (or adapts) religious language in his discussion of the critic’s aesthetic experience. Sense-impressions may be devoid of outside moral, religious, or philosophical content, but in themselves these impressions form the raw material for a new, aesthetic religion. Pater intentionally calls for a new movement in aesthetics that re-appropriates traditional religious experiences and vocabulary, and this movement which loves, worships, and sacrifices to beauty takes on ritualistic, spiritual, mystical, and even monastic dimensions. Pater’s famous final words in *The Renaissance* demonstrate this.¹¹³

It is therefore interesting that Pater begins this work that would become the sacred text of the art for art’s sake movement by musing upon the Mediaeval scholastic theologian Peter Abelard. In Pater’s interpretation, Abelard was an ecclesiastical outsider, probing deeper than the established orthodoxy allowed, who was also wrongly rejected and misunderstood by the religious authorities of the day. In Abelard Pater sees a 12th century aesthete, a hero and forerunner of the Renaissance humanist, and also, perhaps, a spiritual-aesthetic forerunner of himself. In Abelard’s passion for Heloise and his yearning for beautiful love, he is an example of someone who tragically lived the art for art’s sake ideal; Pater writes that in Abelard, “we see... that [aesthetic] spirit going abroad... its intimacy, its languid sweetness, its rebellion, its subtle skill in dividing the elements of human passion, its care for physical beauty, its worship of the body...” (*Renaissance*, 5). Abelard’s aesthetic spirit, his impassioned love for Heloise and for the delights of physical pleasure, did not replace his Christianity, but in a sense, transcended it. Abelard is thus a perfect example of that type of critic whom Pater praises, one who worships neither dusty dogmas or enslaves himself or herself to a rigid moral system, but receives these sensations, pleasures, and passions because these are the pinnacle of human life and experience. These exquisite impressions are opposed to traditional religion with its canon laws and regulations, its devaluing of the body and insecurity with sexual love. So this medieval theologian “prefigures the character of the Renaissance, that movement in which, in various ways, the human mind wins for itself a new kingdom of feeling, and sensation and thought, not opposed to but only beyond and independent of the spiritual system then actually realised” (*Renaissance*, 6).

Abelard is thus one of the boldest critics in his assertions that there is something beautiful about sexual love and the human body, something about such beauties that drive a person to the act of worship.

¹¹³ As do Wilde’s final words in “The Critic as Artist,” which I introduce later in this chapter.

Pater says this point of view is “not opposed to but beyond and independent of the spiritual system” (*Renaissance*, 6). These words are significant. These impressions of beauty - physical, sexual, material - are far greater and, if received and enjoyed correctly, actually open up a point of view that lies “beyond” all religious dogma (*Renaissance*, 24). In Pater’s glorifying of the perfection of the human body, he is rebelling against those theological and philosophical currents that had nothing to do with physical bodies. Pater longs for an established and embodied religion of beauty.

Similarly, in his discussion of Greek art, Pater admires any work, such as the “Venus of Melos [sic],” which glorifies the human body; he writes that this work exemplifies “[t]he mind [that] begins and ends with the finite image, yet loses no part of the spiritual motive” (*Renaissance*, 205). His argument is that the Greeks who carved the Venus and the other statues that seem to glory in every curve of the human body had a spiritual motive that was more spiritual, not less spiritual, for this bodily worship. Warner and Hough argue that Pater’s writing is marked by this “natural supernaturalism,”¹¹⁴ that for him spirit and substance are inseparable in the work of art. This inseparability makes the physical statue of the Greeks praiseworthy. Similarly, Paterian scholar Kate Hext writes that, for Pater, “Venus suggests not the eradication of spirit with sensuality, but rather a pantheistic fusion of spirit and matter.”¹¹⁵ When Hext uses the word “pantheistic” here, she does not mean in a strict sense that Pater believed God or “the gods” were to be found in all of nature. Rather, she points to his urge to modify this “dichotomy between the sensual and the spiritual,” a dichotomy, that is pervasive, no doubt, in post-Kantian Victorian culture.¹¹⁶

So Pater sees that the Greeks had a spiritual motive that was not lessened by its fixation on the surface of the body, but deepened by it. The experience of beauty in the minds of the sculptors and in the hearts of the viewers has nothing to do with theoretical religious tenets from some neoplatonic worldview, but rather, they stemmed from a deeper, more primordial sensuality that nevertheless lost nothing of spiritual motives. Pater’s remarks on Greek sculpture are so opposed to Ruskin’s views, already encountered, in *Modern Painters* II.

In this estimation of the sensuous surfaces of Greek art, Pater’s “spiritual motive” is undeniably present; he sees art for art’s sake as a way to cut through the burdens of dogma and ethics to uncover the flaming centre of human life that certain artists and poets have laid bare throughout the highest moments of history. This is the experience of spirit and matter in one complete, sensuous whole.

This enjoyment of spirit and matter melded together is not overtly Christian in Pater. It is certainly not an explicit “theology of the body” or “sacramental theology” in the strictest sense. However, we can

¹¹⁴ *Strangeness and Beauty*, Volume 2, 5.

¹¹⁵ Hext, Kate. (2013). *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 95.

¹¹⁶ *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy*. 94-95.

detect the echoes of such a theological striving in his aesthetics. Pater declares that life's purpose is to burn; "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life" (*Renaissance*, 236). This notable and powerful sentence demonstrates that the critic's purpose in life is not to find salvation or eventually reach heaven; it is to "burn" with pleasurable sense-perceptions, to take in as much bodily, physical charm as possible before expiring.

Pater continually fashions his aesthetic essays utilising spiritual imagery, language, and allusion. In the final paragraph of his work Pater seems to reference words from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians about a "sentence of death," and he also references Christ's words as recorded in Luke's "Parable of the Unjust Steward," about "the sons (children) of the world."¹¹⁷ In an interesting yet brief allusion to these scriptural passages, Pater writes:

[For] we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve... we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among "the children of the world," in art and song. For our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion - that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness.¹¹⁸

Whereas in Saint Paul's letter, this language about the "sentence of death" was intended to convince the Corinthians to trust in God who has power over such death, Pater makes a much more pessimistic point. This "sentence of death" is fate; there is the interval of life, and then all experiences simply cease. One must therefore be sure to hold onto those experiences of beauty. Aesthesia is religion, for it provides meaning to the purpose of life and even ritual for accomplishing its ends; its "texts" are the paintings of Giorgione and Leonardo, and the writings of Abelard and Winckelmann. Anything that gives this passion, including the words of the New Testament, may be used by the aesthete to bring forth fruit from "a quickened, multiplied consciousness" (*Renaissance*, 238).

Pater then freely borrows Christ's language about "the children of the world," but he gives these children a radically different task than Jesus of Nazareth does. Rather than calling for them to be cunning in their relations with others by generosity, love, and compassion, they are to be wise in art and song. Pater's usage of New Testament allusions here is subtle, yet important. This is one more section of *The Renaissance*

¹¹⁷ The "sentence of death" is a reference to 2 Cor. 1:9: "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." (ESV). The "children of the world" is a reference to Luke 16:8: "The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light (ESV)." For this English translation of the Bible, see (2001), *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV)*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway.

¹¹⁸ *The Renaissance*, 238.

where he redefines aesthetic enjoyment as a kind of new consciousness. Pater's *art for art's sake* view does not reject all Christian things; even the Scriptures, the stories, and the person of Christ himself can be interpreted and even enjoyed in a new, aesthetic sense.

Walter Pater reaches several powerful conclusions on beauty's relation to morality, truth, and religion. We have seen that Pater believes morality has little to do with enjoying life's exquisite moments, but actually detracts from them. Morality must be separate from the enjoyment of beauty, though morality and beauty are not opposed. We've also seen that beauty is a subjective response of the receiver, and the truth of colour, line, form is the only truth that Pater is concerned with. This is an earthy and physical truth that breaks out in different epochs. Then also conventional religion should be replaced by aesthetic experience, though the study of aesthetic experience creates a new kind of consciousness that can fill the void left by the absence of religion in a sceptical age. Pater argues that the conventional mysticism and monasticism of Christians throughout the ages has served only to devalue the glories of the body and human creativity. This is most certainly because such passions and visions were seen as means to ends, as well as means that engaged in the and not as the highest, most beautiful experiences themselves. So for Pater, what is now needed is an unorthodox religion of beauty, a humanist aesthetic where the critics serve as priests and beauty is the only dogma. It is the task of the critics, the task of Pater, to demonstrate that beautiful things are to be worshiped for their own sake.

Pater strives to demonstrate that receiving beauty is an experience beyond religious dogmas, but not exactly above religious feeling. For Pater freely uses biblical and churchly language; he dwells at length on religious thinkers and artists; and all the time he is concerned with how women and men find meaning in their lives. Pater stays far away from the kind of critical analysis of Christianity that figures like Strauss, Renan, and Arnold engaged in, but he was certainly responding to the general religious feelings and doubts of the century. It is therefore interesting that he strives after an ideal apprehension where the aesthete can soak in beauty, experiencing it as truth beyond any dogma and underneath any confession. Beauty, like the Catholicism Pater so appreciated, simply *is*, and it demands to be enjoyed for its own sake.

2.2 Oscar Wilde's *Intentions*

Oscar Wilde, who came to know and deeply respect both Pater and Ruskin while at Oxford in the 1870s, came to regard *The Renaissance* as his "golden book" that shaped his views toward art and life.¹¹⁹ Yet by the time of the publication of his 1891 work, *Intentions*, Wilde had come into his own as spokesman

¹¹⁹ *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature*. 187

for the art for art's sake movement. *Intentions* forms the middle work in Wilde's three books of criticism he was to publish in his lifetime.¹²⁰ Like Pater's *The Renaissance*, this is also a compilation of essays originally published separately: "The Decay of Lying," "Pen, Pencil, and Poison," "The Critic as Artist," and "The Truth of Masks." In these works Wilde more frequently means poetry, literature, and drama when he uses the word "art," yet he is also promoting an aesthetic view that takes on a more broadly inclusive definition of art as any beautiful human activity that is done for its own sake. It is Wilde's first and third essays in this work that most clearly set up his art for art's sake position. They are deliciously satirical and irreverent, written with stylistic flair and a strong use of paradox. It is not my goal to connect *Intentions* to the rest of Wilde's writings nor to situate it within the wider sexual, social, and political critiques during the *fin de siècle*. Scholars such as Lawrence Danson have already done just this.¹²¹ I simply want to uncover what Wilde says about art and how he thinks beauty relates to theology and religious feeling.

"The Decay of Lying" is a dialogue between Vivian, a dandy who acts as a spokesman for the aesthetic movement, and Cyril, his patient and attentive friend. Cyril approaches Vivian who is reading inside a private library and tries to invite him only to "go and lie on the grass, and smoke cigarettes, and enjoy nature," but Vivian responds harshly, criticising Nature itself and explaining to his friend why Art is so superior to it (*Intentions*, 73). As their conversation about this unfolds, Vivian tells Cyril of an article he is penning called "The Decay of Lying: A Protest" (*Intentions*, 74). Vivian then proceeds to read aloud this article, though he interrupts himself frequently. Wilde's intention in "The Decay of Lying" is to show that art actually is a lie, and the artist, a liar. But lies are interesting and liars are delightful, so says Vivian, whereas Nature (and "real" life) is boring. As we know from Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, such a view of Nature could not be farther from Ruskin's evangelical theological aesthetic. Wilde is unconcerned with the Romantic notion of Nature's power to move others to worship and praise. Nature is something in the way of people's artistic progress because it "keeps on repeating [its] effect until we all become absolutely wearied of it" (*Intentions*, 95). So Wilde, via his character Vivian, criticises nature along with life, which he also considers to be overwhelmingly boring. From the outset of this dialogue Vivian is sarcastic, witty, and intentionally paradoxical.

The second essay ("Pen, Pencil, and Poison") concerns the style of a much-forgotten figure from earlier in the century: the poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. Though this article is briefer than the other three in *Intentions*, Wilde still has adequate space to develop his critical and aesthetic ideas based around 'art for art's sake.'

¹²⁰ The other two being *Historical Criticism* (1879), and *The Soul of Man* (1891). Guy, Josephine ed. (2007). *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Volume 4, Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Xv. Hereafter cited parenthetically as (*Intentions*, page #).

¹²¹ Danson, Lawrence, (1997). *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The third essay in *Intentions*, “The Critic as Artist,” is also in the form of a dialogue, this time between a bitingly brilliant critic named Gilbert and an antagonist named Ernest who is converted from his previous traditional aesthetic views by Gilbert’s “absurdly sophistical argument” that critics are, in fact, more creative than artists (*Intentions*, 154, 187). As this dialogue develops, Wilde has Gilbert develop more paradoxes, including the idea that by only by leaving religion behind can a person become divine (as will be explained below).

The final essay, “The Truth of Masks,” is a piece on Shakespeare and his costumes, and it turns into another exploration of contradiction in art. The essence of art is contradiction, and Shakespeare’s use of costumes to hide the truth actually discloses it, in an aesthetic way.

Overall Wilde’s essays are more eclectic than Pater’s which make up *The Renaissance*. Whereas Pater’s function like chapters in a book somewhat loosely centred around a common theme, Wilde’s are less connected, with two of the essays being imaginative dialogues. Yet, the four essays in *Intentions* all loudly sound forth the call of ‘art for art’s sake.’ As we approach these important essays we must ask how does Wilde respond to the issues of morality, truth, and God in his *Intentions*, and what does this response owe to the influence of both Ruskin and Pater? Like the previous section on Pater, I will examine how Wilde’s aesthetic addresses the religious situation at the end of the nineteenth century, and how his aesthetic also represents another Victorian solution to the loss of faith narrative. Wilde rejects the God-centered yet bodiless religion of beauty found in his Oxford professor, John Ruskin, though he undoubtedly owes much to the art critic’s influence. Then he joins with Pater in the cry of ‘art for art’s sake,’ sharing Pater’s passion for the physicality of humanity, yet also his urge for something resembling religious belonging and ultimate meaning. I will demonstrate through my close reading that Wilde utilises biblical allusions, religious feeling, and mystical terminology in an endeavor to find a replacement for the Christian faith that seemed to be more difficult to accept in the century than ever before. Yet Wilde is even more of an enigma than Pater for at least two reasons: his ever present (and self-described) antinomianism and his lifelong obsession with Catholicism, which is apparent in this collection.

Beauty & Morality in *Intentions*

In “The Decay of Lying” we hear from Vivian that “Art, very fortunately, has never once told us the truth,” an intentionally shocking line that naturally stands opposed to virtually everything Ruskin ever wrote (*Intentions*, 99). This is to say that art should be unconcerned with anything so uninteresting and puritanical as the moral duty of communicating truth. It instead has the higher duty of expressing only itself (*Intentions*, 96). Wilde will have nothing to do with the puritanical preaching of rules and ordinances.

It is perhaps important to note that Wilde has in mind all of the arts when he uses the term “art,” though he readily admits that literature is a more perfect form of art than painting. In any case, Wilde’s opinion that art cannot teach or tell the truth stands opposed, at first sight, to Ruskin’s early evangelical views of the remarkable power of art communicate truth.

On Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, Wilde writes, “There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture. We cannot re-write [*sic*] the whole course of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what it should be” (*Intentions*, 121). Then, after pointing out that infamous figures such as Nero, Tiberius, and Caesar Borgia have become more like “puppets in a play” than like real personages, to judge from a perceived higher moral ground, Wilde writes, “They have passed into the sphere of art and science, and neither art nor science knows anything of moral approval or disapproval” (*Intentions*, 121). Art, like science, is by definition set apart from ethics; neither sensation nor cold, hard facts can have a moralising effect. They simply present the truths of physical perception.

In “The Critic as Artist” we find some of Wilde’s boldest, wildest statements about the the division between art and morality. Ernest declares “All art is immoral” (*Intentions*, 174), and later clarifies with the phrase, “Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive” (*Intentions*, 204). Following moral rules is not a spiritual task, yet the contemplation of the beauty of a thing is definitely something spiritual. Not only is Wilde totally unconcerned with moral concerns, rules, laws, but he openly declares “The artistic critic, like the mystic, is an antinomian always” (*Intentions*, 204). The use of a word well-known to students of theology is striking. The Church has ever struggled with the idea of lawlessness. This means that for the critic of art, the contemplative, subjective individual who is especially attuned to matters of exquisite beauty, the Law of God and the Law of Nature are, quite simply, never even a concern. The Law with its ethical demands belongs to the lower realm of action, which belongs to that boring world of real life, not of contemplation. With Wilde’s insistence on contemplation, the story of Mary and Martha from the Gospel of Luke comes to mind.¹²² The aim of art is never to move a person to action, but to create a mood. As the mystics did not worry about laws, according to Wilde, so too does the critic not worry herself or himself about them, either.¹²³ The critic must only seek the proper mood, and the attainment of this mood has significant similarities to the Christian contemplative tradition. Wilde mentions that while this mood-creation is highly unpractical, it is necessary (*Intentions*, 179). This word “mood” must be looked at more carefully in the later section on “Beauty & God in Intentions.” Summing up his position on the relation between beauty and

¹²² See Luke 10:38-42

¹²³ Note the difference between Wilde’s view of the mystics and Pater’s (above). Pater is emphasising that they did not value their subjective experiences highly enough, whereas Wilde is emphasising their ambivalence to ethical demands.

morality, Wilde goes on to explain later through the mouth of a character, “The critic should be able to recognise that the sphere of Art and the sphere of Ethics are absolutely distinct and separate. When they are confused, Chaos has come again” (*Intentions*, 189).

In this division of aesthetics and ethics Wilde is arguing for the integrity of art; if it were to become a tool to something else, whether that is personal or corporate ethical action, its own value as a beautiful artefact would be attenuated. The idea that art, to be truly art, must exist for its own sake and not as a prop or tool for something else is a theme we have seen in Pater as well. “The only beautiful things, as somebody once said, are the things that do not concern us. As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of art” (*Intentions*, 82).

Again we must observe that like Pater and Ruskin, Wilde does not think that ethics are nonexistent, merely that they are boring. After reading the dialogues of Vivian and Ernest one senses that Wilde himself was often bored with discussions of life, of nature, and of truth (metaphysics). Yet aesthetics do not replace or cancel ethics. Aesthetics actually are in a higher realm than ethics. In Wilde’s thought, the goal of every critic’s life must be that exquisite experience which, along with all the other experiences gained throughout life, constitutes a new kind of mood. This mood is a synonym for religious feeling. The moralising and teaching can be done by others, but the critic has a hieratic function that is higher than other occupations. He or she is an intercessor between the beautiful and the crowd. As a critic of the critics themselves, Wilde saw himself as such a priestly intercessor.

Beauty & Truth in *Intentions*

Whereas Pater’s recurring word is “charm,” Wilde’s is “exquisite,” yet both have the same pleasurable sensation in mind. Wilde holds that this experience of delightful charm or exquisite beauty is the highest aim and goal of life. For Wilde, however, the term *experience* is neither as powerful nor as accurate as the term *contemplation*, in describing what the critic must strive for in her or his encounter with beauty. Through Vivian and Gilbert, Wilde declares that the contemplation of beauty is the highest aim and goal of life. It is by definition unpractical since it deals with “useless” and beautiful objects. Similarly this contemplation is antinomian since it deals with a spiritual sphere higher than ethics. Such contemplation is the highest occupation a person can have (*Intentions*, 175).

In his first essay of *Intentions* Wilde draws an interesting parallel to Plato: “Just as those who do not love Plato more than Truth cannot pass beyond the threshold of the Academe, so those who do not love Beauty more than Truth never know the inmost shrine of Art” (*Intentions*, 101). In this interpretation, Plato is a liar, that is, an artist. As a philosopher-artist he weaves beautiful myths that have enraptured people for

centuries. For Wilde the philosopher's words are better than truth because they are more beautiful, and although Plato would certainly teach that the Truth of a Form is higher than its shadowy impression on earth, Wilde turns this around and says that Plato, as a liar, should be valued for his artistic excellence. His metaphysics must be appreciated for their sheer beauty, with all their metaphysical truths and meanings set completely aside.

The philosopher and author Iris Murdoch has insightfully explained this idea of Plato as a great artist, which further adds to Wilde's opinion. She writes,

The most obvious paradox in the problem under consideration is that Plato is a great artist and produced some of the most memorable images in European philosophy: the Cave, the charioteer, the cunning homeless Eros, the Demiurge cutting the *Anima Mundi* into strips and stretching it out crosswise. He kept emphasizing the imageless remoteness of the Good, yet kept returning in his exposition to the most elaborate uses of art... Art cheats the religious vocation at the last moment and is inimical to philosophical categories.¹²⁴

Wilde is interested in art and criticism; even in relation to the great thinkers of civilisation he has little regard for dogmatic "truths," whether religious or metaphysical. He is concerned with beauty, not facts: "And when that day dawns, or sunset reddens how joyous we shall all be! Facts will be regarded as discreditable, Truth will be found mourning over her fetters, and Romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land" (*Intentions*, 101). Romance, beauty, rapturous love - whatever words Wilde chooses for this meditative and artistic experience, which he terms *contemplation* - these words tell us about a state of the soul that is worth far more than mere facts, dogmas, or platitudes. By enjoying beauty, or lies, a person has the chance of embarking upon a life of contemplation, a life that is both meaningful and worthwhile though, utterly useless in the eyes of the world.

In "The Critic as Artist" Wilde expresses similar opinions about beauty through Gilbert as he does through Vivian. Gilbert confesses, "The longer I study, Ernest, the more clearly I see that the beauty of the visible arts is, as the beauty of music, impressive primarily, and that it may be marred, and indeed often is so, by any excess of intellectual intention on the part of the artist" (*Intentions*, 157-58). Gilbert then continues to comment upon beauty in this speech: "Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world" (*Intentions*, 158).

Wilde makes such a departure from Ruskin at this point. Ruskin would argue that the greatest artist, Turner, was so great because of his massive intellect combined with his pure heart. Turner had the intellectual and moral lenses that truly received God's messages in his Book of Nature. Though Wilde

¹²⁴ Murdoch, Iris. (1977). *The Fire & The Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, (based upon the Romanes Lecture 1976). Oxford: Clarendon Press. 87.

follows Ruskin with the same passionate search, even obsession for beautiful things, he will have none of this moral-intellectual business. An artist does not uncover truth; an artist simply paints beautiful lies. Wilde is neither for truth claims nor logic. He claims to be interested in one thing alone: the blissful experience of beauty. Yet, as I will continue to show, his search after beauty was also a response to the religious-cultural milieu of the century. When Wilde reacts so strongly against ethics, truth, and knowledge in any interpretation of art, he is also reacting strongly against the critical spirit of the century that would prevent individuals such as him from engaging in the passionate experience of religion as, perhaps, the greatest manifestation of beauty. The next section will cover this in more detail.

Beauty & God in *Intentions*

Before continuing with an interpretation of Wilde's view of God and the Christian religion in *Intentions*, it would be worthwhile to record a few important biographical details of Wilde's religious life. Wilde's curiosity of Christian spirituality, his yearning for some type of religious fulfillment, and his deathbed reception into the Roman Catholic Church are well known and controversial matters. Richard Ellmann notes that during Wilde's student days at Oxford, "Roman Catholicism threads its way through all Wilde's activities."¹²⁵ Indeed, this fascination with the Catholic Church did not abate, but rather culminated in dramatic events toward the end of Wilde's life. On the day of his release from gaol on 19 May, 1897, Ellmann tells us that Wilde "wrote a letter to the Jesuits at Farm Street, asking for a six-month retreat," and then when he received an answer from them, which was a refusal due to insufficient time, he "broke down and sobbed bitterly."¹²⁶ A few years later, while he lay upon his deathbed, a priest administered conditional baptism, absolution, and anointing.¹²⁷ Two main points must be made here about Wilde's aestheticism and religious feeling. The first is that Wilde was well-read and aware of current higher critical issues raging about the historicity of Christ's life, the authenticity of the Bible, and the origin of humanity compared to the Genesis account. He is fully conversant in these issues and accepts the critics' conclusions (*Intentions*, 205). The second point is that Wilde, as the dandy and aesthete, is bored by reality, life, and nature, including theological squabbles raging amongst the German and British theologians. What he is interested in will be demonstrated in this section. Since Wilde is drawn to art as a great lie, if religion is a great lie he will gladly embrace it. Wilde will also freely draw from the language of the Church, including biblical quotations and mystical terminology, in his description of the aesthete and critic.

¹²⁵ Ellmann, Richard. (1987). *Oscar Wilde*. London: Hamish Hamilton. 63. Also note that Wilde's early poems were mostly religious, he was a close reader of Thomas á Kempis, and he also considered Cardinal Manning to be his favorite preacher (63-64).

¹²⁶ Ellman, *Oscar Wilde*, 495.

¹²⁷ Ellman, *Oscar Wilde*, 549.

In a kind of mystical passage Wilde's character Gilbert draws a comparison, like Pater, between the art for art's sake ideal and the scholastic theologian Abelard, "We have whispered the secret of our love beneath the cowl of Abelard, and in the stained raiment of Villon have put our shame into song... Do you think that it is the imagination that enables us to live these countless lives? Yes: it is the imagination; and the imagination is the result of heredity. It is simply concentrated race-experience" (*Intentions*, 178). The human imagination is no longer linked to the creativity of a divine Creator, but it nevertheless allows humanity to transcend time by experiencing beauty through the lives of countless critics whose experiences can be felt again through the exercise of the imagination. Wilde sees the nineteenth century as an important moment in the criticism of traditional theology:

The nineteenth century is a turning point in history simply on account of the work of two men, Darwin and Renan, the one the critic of the Book of Nature, the other the critic of the books of God. Not to recognize [*sic*] this is to miss the meaning of one of the most important eras in the progress of the world. Creation is always behind the age. It is Criticism that leads us. The Critical Spirit and the World-Spirit are one.¹²⁸

Wilde writes these words, and yet he cares not for the theories of evolution or the theories of modern higher criticism. Rather, the critical urge, the progress of humanity from one system to another is what matters if, and only if, such progress allows for more moments of pleasure from objects of exquisite beauty. Such moments in the critic's life can transcend time and move humanity forward.

In "The Decay of Lying" Wilde makes an intriguing connexion between the artist and the liar, delighting in the paradox that true art must tell lies, whereas false art can only tell truths. He writes, "For the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure.... Nor will [the liar] be welcomed by society alone. Art, breaking from the prison-house of realism, will run to greet him, and will kiss his false, beautiful lips, knowing that he alone is in possession of the great secret of all her manifestations, the secret that Truth is entirely and absolutely a matter of style..." (*Intentions*, 88-89). When art seeks to communicate something other than its own beautiful surface, it fails; "the object of Art is not simple truth but complex beauty" (*Intentions*, 85). The artist should be unconcerned about objective religious matters; in short, he or she must be a liar, a constructor of exquisite textures and delightful colours, a manipulator of sensations and an inventor of the "mysterious loveliness" of an "incomparable and unique effect" (*Intentions*, 95).

It is in this close correspondence between lying and art that makes Wilde's comments on the established church so thought-provoking. Toward the end of the essay Wilde hammers those broad-minded, critical theologians of the century. Such theologians are the supreme doubters, according to Wilde, because they attempt to make the outrageous claims of Christianity more palatable and less objectionable to the

¹²⁸ *Intentions*, 205.

modern sensibility. He criticises their higher criticism and makes his character say, “Man can believe the impossible, but man can never believe the improbable” (*Intentions*, 100). In this aphorism Wilde has given a *fin de siècle* version of Tertullian’s famous “absurdist” credo,¹²⁹ and in the process he has discovered an immensely important theological truth.¹³⁰ It is that religion, in order to be religion and not something else, must stand totally on its own, with all of its paradoxes and contradictions. The impossible is the beautiful; the improbable is not.

Wilde has, in a sense, put his finger on the pulse of religious scepticism in the late 19th century; he has shown that religion should be more like art. When it is claiming to teach society something and stands above it as a lecturer and judge, it is boring. When it bravely embodies beauty in itself and thus lives out an impossible ideal, then it, too, might become exquisite. Wilde decides that there is an great similarity between religious expression and artistic expression. He thinks religion should act like art, and when it does tell a lie, it must fearlessly tell a beautiful and complex one. For in theorizing and arguing points of dogma, religion is sounding *improbable* and not being impossible. The power and force of religion lies in this beautiful quality of the impossible. Yet, Wilde only accepted the Catholic Faith with all its beautiful “impossibility” in the very final moments of his life.

Wilde finds himself in a conundrum of how to accept the beautiful lie that Christianity might be when it wars against the ultimate elevation of beauty. Chesterton describes this Wilde in a 1908 essay included in the previously mentioned collection, *A Handful of Authors*: “But while he had a strain of humbug in him... he had, in his own strange way, a much deeper and more spiritual nature than they... He desired all beautiful things, even God.”¹³¹ This is the paradox in “The Decay of Lying” that Wilde leaves intriguingly unresolved. When Christianity adapts to modern science, modifying its claims to sound less fantastic and more believable, then it instantly becomes more boring for Oscar Wilde. In doing this, religion joins all the other drab metaphysical and scientific systems that only try to communicate and convince. Wilde would prefer the Christian religion simply to “be:” to express itself without dealing in society’s arguments of rational truth. When the Church deals in truths it is stooping to “unimaginative realism” when Wilde would have it engage in “imaginative reality” (*Intentions*, 81). Again, “Man can believe the impossible, but man can never believe the improbable” (*Intentions*, 100). Wilde would only have this type of belief - glorious and beautiful in its sheer impossibility, according to the paltry modes of humanity.

¹²⁹ The history of the interpretation of this credo, written in Tertullian’s *De Carne Christi*, is far too complex to treat thoroughly. The famous words that Tertullian writes are these (as translated by Osborn): “The son of God has died: this is believable because it is silly; buried he has risen again: this is certain because it is impossible.” See Osborn, Eric. (1997). *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 48.

¹³⁰ See *A Handful of Authors*, 146.

¹³¹ See page 25 above for my first reference to this interesting work.

In “The Critic as Artist” Wilde again explores theology, making comparisons between artistic expression and traditional Christianity and using the language of the Church in his discussion of art. His character Ernest has the ultimate aim of living a life of critical contemplation. Contemplation opens up “the subjective sphere where the soul is at work” (*Intentions*, 176). It is therefore to be contrasted with the life of action, of creation. This has echoes of the classic Gospel story of Martha the busybody and Mary the contemplative. Martha works while her sister contemplates, loves, and adores Jesus Christ.¹³²

Wilde’s essay contains a further echo of the New Testament in his description of this contemplative life: “And so it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity” (*Intentions*, 176).¹³³ Wilde goes on to say that this contemplative life “has for its aim not *doing* but *being*, and not being merely, but *becoming...*” (*Intentions*, 178, italics original).¹³⁴ The life of the critic is far deeper than doing the work of a critic or exemplifying the life of a critic. It is, rather, an experience of becoming something that transcends boundaries and worlds. It is also a process that takes the past and the future into itself, transcending all times in a kind of spiritual experience.¹³⁵ For Wilde, to be a critic is to be a part of a process larger than conventional religion, with the puritanism and narrowness he perceives in it. Wilde’s process is actually one that begins with contemplation and culminates in a deeply noetic transformation. He is consciously mimicking biblical language and making biblical allusions, perhaps only to provoke his opponents, and yet, perhaps he is also drawing a parallel between the nature of religion in its most beautiful manifestations and art in its most beautiful manifestations. Contemplation, whether it is of a Catholic relic or secular painting, must involve a person’s entire existence. When it deals with anything other than the object in its sheer beauty, when it deals in truth claims and arguments, logic and morality, then the contemplation ceases and the critic has failed. Wilde’s language on aesthetic contemplation sounds similar to the Christian practice of contemplative prayer, focused on the adoration of God at the expense of all other concerns.¹³⁶

¹³² Luke 10:40

¹³³ Whether this is intentional or not, Wilde uses Pauline language, as found in Galatians 2:20 (ESV) - “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

¹³⁴ Here Wilde writes with an almost Pauline emphasis on sanctification and holy transformation; see 2 Corinthians 3:18.

¹³⁵ Could Wilde have in mind the Christian idea of a “cloud of witnesses” - all those believers across time, which connect with faithful believers in the present? The New Testament reference is from the anonymously written “Letter to the Hebrews.” The particular words are these: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight...” (Hebrews 12:1a ESV).

¹³⁶ Thomas Merton, the celebrated and popular spiritual writer, talks of contemplation as “the abandonment of other concerns” as well as an “attitude of awareness and receptivity.” The goal of contemplation “is not to arrive at an objective and apparently ‘scientific’ knowledge about God;” the similarities between Wilde and the classic, monastic practice of contemplation/adoration are intriguing. See Merton, Thomas. (1996). *Contemplative Prayer*. New York: Image Books Doubleday. 19, 41, 82.

At the end of “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde’s character Gilbert has something almost akin to a religious vision. He says passionately to Ernest:

Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change. And when we reach the true culture that is our aim, we attain that perfection of which the saints have dreamed, the perfection of those to whom sin is impossible, not because they make the renunciations of the ascetic, but because they can do everything they wish without hurt to the soul, and can wish for nothing that can do the soul harm, the soul being an entity so divine that it is able to transform into elements of a richer experience, or a finer susceptibility, or a newer mode of thought, acts or passions that with the common would be commonplace, or with the uneducated ignoble, or with the shameful vile. Is this dangerous? Yes; it is dangerous - all ideas, as I told you, are so.¹³⁷

Wilde says that the “true culture” of a passionate aesthetic is the aim of life and, if attained, will lead to a kind of worldly perfection. Wilde’s vocabulary, with words such as “perfection,” “saints,” “ascetics,” and “divine,” is not used in mockery of religion, but in demonstrating that aesthetic experience underlies all other experiences. Art is, actually, deeply, truly, and fundamentally religious - more religious than that “unimaginative realism” of traditional, dogmatic, puritanical Christianity mentioned above. Art is religious, because it allows women and men to contemplate transformative, rapturous beauty - even if that beauty is God or Christ in Catholicism.

The implication is that while the saints may have dreamed of such a perfect life, they failed to realise that their religion was not anything *higher than* those imaginative, beautiful, and exquisite moments and experiences. Such experiences were the heart and very substance of their religion. These ideas coming from Gilbert’s mouth might be considered as dangerous to the established Church because they overthrow any kind of purely cultural or purely doctrinal Christianity. The membership of such a church is not adherence to rules but contemplation of perfect beauty. Wilde exemplified this in his final religious quest. For if the most meaningful experiences of life are those moments of contemplation in the aesthetic act, then women and men who do not find these enriching, exquisite experiences are not fully alive and not fully believers in the “impossible.”

Where does Wilde’s religion begin and his aestheticism end? About Wilde’s free mixing of beauty and God throughout his career, Ellmann writes that he set forth an aestheticism that embraced religion, and “He did this not by rejecting aesthetics or ethics, but by turning sacred things inside out to make them secular, and secular things inside out to make them sacred. He showed souls becoming carnal and lusts

¹³⁷ *Intentions*, 205.

becoming spiritual. He showed the aesthetic world not isolated from experience, but infused into it. This was the new hellenism of which he liked to speak.”¹³⁸

For both Pater and Wilde, hellenism is pervasive. Hellenism for them meant a religion of the surface, a celebration of the flesh. There is no question that Ruskin’s finely tuned Theoria, born from an evangelical natural theology must be discarded in the face of the progressing age. But, aesthetically speaking, the beauties of religion, whether Greek or Christian, and the glories of Catholicism are too exquisite to be utterly rejected. The human body is too beautiful and the rites of the Church too sublime to fully discard. These are the attitudes of the aesthetes.

In our consideration of *Intentions*, we see that Wilde has treated beauty’s relation to morality, truth, and God in similar ways to Pater. He has separated morality and religion from aesthetics, but then he nearly puts them back together again in a religio-aesthetic synthesis - his hellenism. In his acceptance of the impossible, in his echoing of biblical language, in his yearning for contemplation, and in his dissatisfaction with empty activities, Wilde engages in what seems like a deeply religious yearning for beauty. Yet this is a radically new understanding of all religious experience. It is therefore also a harsh and critical reevaluation the type of Christianity that seemed to be retreating from critics such as Darwin and Renan in 19th century England. Paul Guyer’s estimation of Wilde’s *Intentions* is worth quoting at length:

Far from being an aesthete who believed in the independence of art and aesthetic experience from every other human concern, Wilde in fact conceived art as a medium for the fullest exercise of human imagination, the communication of the broadest possible range of human emotions, and for the exploration of the deepest truths about morality rather than for the celebration of superficial social conventions. He thus did not take the slogan “art for art’s sake” as the banner of a reductive or isolationist approach to aesthetic experience, but rather took it to express the power that art can have precisely when it exploits all these possibilities.¹³⁹

Ruskin’s Theoria and Pater/Wilde’s Aesthesia occupy different ends of an aesthetic spectrum. With Ruskin there is a highly ordered and systematic process whereby a Creator God channels His truth into the beauties and sublimities of nature, allowing artists and observers to faithfully receive and communicate this truth to those who might have dulled hearts and spirits. Theoria is the (morally) pure reception of God’s truths disclosed in the natural realm. It is a spiritual-aesthetic perception focused upon a Fatherly, Creator God who dwells in the heavens. I have argued that Ruskin’s conception of God at the centre of beauty, as both its cause and its destination, functions as a kind of natural theology. Pater and Wilde offer a corrective to Ruskin’s somewhat conventional, Victorian view of theology, and so occupy the other side of the

¹³⁸ Ellman, Oscar Wilde, 340-341.

¹³⁹ A History of Modern Aesthetics (Volume 2). 269.

spectrum. They shed (almost) all vestiges of established religion and raise the glory of fleshly, earthly humanity above nature. They focus upon contemplation, with all its Catholic overtones. Their Aesthesia offers passionate worship to the body, but at the expense of traditional theology, leading them to a continual urge or longing for spiritual and religious contentment apart from a conventional system.

This leads us to turn our attention, by contrast, to the critic at the end of the Long Nineteenth Century who, perhaps more than any other popular writer and critic at this time, fully realised that the paths of Theoria and Aesthesia did not adequately answer the Post-Kantian challenges of Strauss, Renan, and other historical critics of the century. What was needed was not apologetic natural theology, nor an elevation of beauty to religion, but a sacramental encounter with the source of all beauty and all symbols. This encounter happened not through art, but through the act of creating art; by encountering the artist in all of her or his unique creativity, one encountered the very Image of a mysterious God.

3. SYMBOLISM

3.1 Chesterton's Early Symbolist Essays

As I observed in the introduction, Gilbert Keith Chesterton was not an influential art theorist in his day, and in this century he is generally not regarded as an aesthetic thinker. Yet, Chesterton is an enormously helpful figure for seeing how a thoughtful Christian, apart from any professional academic training or career, could use an art movement of his day to formulate an interesting response to the problems of the last century. In this chapter, I focus upon critical and aesthetic works by this journalist. Beginning with a handful of his earliest essays and moving to his two books written on individual painters, I will show why it is helpful to situate Chesterton as a writer with affinities and connexions to the Symbolist Movement, and then I will demonstrate how he recovers a Catholic and mystical tradition in the wake of the religious and aesthetic fragmentation in the Victorian Age. Chesterton affirms the divine, sacramental presence in the physical and offers a re-validation of Christian belief in mystery and magic. His basis for faith is not natural theology, as in Ruskin, or an affirmation of the sheer desirableness of beauty, as in Pater and Wilde, but rather, it is an irrational and intuitive divine experience, or sacred encounter, mediated through physical people, visible symbols, and tangible sacraments. In making my argument in this chapter, I must first uncover what the Symbolist movement was and then suggest ways to broadly situate Chesterton within the movement.

The Symbolist movement in poetry and the arts has high Romantic origins and follows the spirit of Hegelianism in some ways with its focus upon eternal Spirit penetrating into the temporal world in sweeping, creative epochs.¹⁴⁰ Broadly speaking, the poets and artists who identified as “Symbolist” wished for the arts to recover myth, magic, religion, and ritual as the sources of human creativity and the symbols of eternal ideas. First heralded in the *Symbolist Manifesto* (1886) by poet Jean Moréas, the Symbolist movement originated in France among poets who rejected Zola and other realists.¹⁴¹ Baudelaire, whom we encountered on page 44 as one of the major influences on the aesthetes, was also a significant forerunner of the French symbolists. He writes, “[T]he whole of the visible universe is only a storehouse of images and signs to which the imagination assigns a place and a relative value; it is a kind of nourishment that the imagination must digest and transform.”¹⁴² Baudelaire’s belief that artistic symbols, whether in poetry, the visual arts, or other

¹⁴⁰ *Strangeness and Beauty Volume 2*, 162.

¹⁴¹ Chipp, Herschel B. (1968). *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*. London: University of California Press, Ltd. 48.

¹⁴² Quoted in *Theories of Modern Art*. 49

avenues, serve as gateways to higher worlds and indicators of eternal truth has strong parallels in the English Romantics (especially Coleridge and Shelley) whose works our four writers knew well.¹⁴³

This Romantic notion of the effects of symbolism exerted a strong influence throughout the century. Figures like Blake, Coleridge, and Shelley were sources of inspiration and fascination for Ruskin and his successors. With the Paterian call of ‘art for art’s sake,’ the beautiful symbol became the primary object of interest and worship rather than the truths the symbol pointed out. For, as we have seen in chapter 2, the aesthetes elevated on the here-and-now material beauty of the work of art, not denying the presence of symbols, but denying the spiritual power of such symbols. The call of ‘art for art’s sake’ meant that the symbol, if it is a beautiful one, might be enjoyed or even worshipped for its own sake. This temporal beauty is the true value of any religion, especially Christianity of the Catholic variety. A new religion of beauty is one “beyond the spiritual system” as Pater and Wilde phrased it.

With the Symbolist movement comes a return in the arts to this earlier, Romantic vision of the symbol. The English writer Arthur Symons was instrumental in introducing the English-speaking world to the Symbolist movement which, in the 1890s, was developing in France. Symons’s seminal work *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) was immensely influential. In this work, dedicated to his friend, W. B. Yeats, Symons mediates the French Symbolist re-discovery of mysticism, magic, and Catholicism. Symons argues that, during the loss of interest in symbolism in the last century, Paterian Aestheticism simply led to Decadence which is just an “interlude” to the more important development of Symbolism; it is in Symbolism “in which art returns to the one pathway, leading through beautiful things to the eternal beauty.”¹⁴⁴ Here Symons is moving past both Pater and Wilde as well as the Decadence which was the conclusion of the art for art’s sake credo. For Symons returns again and again in his work to the *mystery* that underlies all forms of expression, all human creativity. “The ideal of lyric poetry, certainly, is to be this passive, flawless medium for the deeper consciousness of things, the mysterious voice of that mystery which lies about us, out of which we have come, and into which we shall all return. It is not without reason that we cannot analyse a perfect lyric.”¹⁴⁵

Symons argues that the world is irrationally, inexplicably mysterious, and the only force that comes close to providing understanding is art. Symons is neither concerned with a “guide for conduct” nor a “plan for our happiness;”¹⁴⁶ he is, rather, concerned with “that confidence in the eternal correspondences between the visible and the invisible universe,” which the French Symbolist poets like Mallarmé have taught.¹⁴⁷ In a

¹⁴³ *Strangeness and Beauty Volume 1*, 170.

¹⁴⁴ Symons, Arthur. (2014). *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited. 7.

¹⁴⁵ *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 46.

¹⁴⁶ *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 89

¹⁴⁷ *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 71.

concluding chapter titled “Maeterlinck as Mystic” (in his first edition), Symons writes that “the whole aim of Maeterlinck is to show how mysterious all life is, ‘what an astounding thing it is, merely to live.’”¹⁴⁸

Chesterton shares much of Symons’s vision, as an illustrative essay on Maeterlinck at the turn of the century reveals. Reprinted in the compilation titled *Varied Types* (1903), Chesterton considers Maeterlinck to be “a very great man,”¹⁴⁹ for he is a writer who has brought back a “subjective intensity” by which the human soul is revealed again as an “indestructible thing.”¹⁵⁰ Chesterton goes on to write, “This human soul finds itself alone in a terrible world, afraid of the grass. It has brought forth poetry and religion in order to explain matters; it will bring them forth again.”¹⁵¹ Here the concern is for Maeterlinck’s kind of rediscovery of the soul, that invisible universe. There is no Victorian agnosticism, no Victorian insistence on conduct. Gone is the aesthetes’ elevation of beauty above conduct. Like Symons, Chesterton appreciates the French Symbolists for their desire of an artistic return to spiritual matters of ultimate importance. The Symbolist distinctions are not clear-cut; whether it is mysticism, Catholicism, Theosophy, or magic, these writers saw the need to recover these as vital sources of life and creativity.

Other early essays further demonstrate Chesterton’s affinity with Symbolism. Before moving on to his two full-length books, it would be valuable to further connect Chesterton to Symbolism through two interesting essays: the first from his longtime work at *The Daily News* and the second from some early work he did for *The Bookman*.

Chesterton began writing for the *Daily News* in 1901.¹⁵² This periodical, the “leading Liberal newspaper” of England during the Edwardian era, which increased in circulation from 80,000 in 1900 to 400,000 in 1909, was Chesterton’s primary journalistic platform in the first decade of his career.¹⁵³ In such early articles as “The Mystery of the Mystics,” “The Conundrum of Art,” and “Art and the Churches” (which is an interesting review of P. T. Forsyth’s book *Religion in Recent Art*), Chesterton further demonstrates his agreement with Symons and the French Symbolists.

In “Art and the Churches” (January 1902) Chesterton writes, “The first and most important thing about any man is his vision, or conception, of the universe.”¹⁵⁴ After explaining how art cannot replace religion, he writes, “If we are content to live from henceforward upon the surface of things, never again to ask an absorbing question, or whisper a thrilling hypothesis, then indeed we may contrive to find a common

¹⁴⁸ *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 80.

¹⁴⁹ *Varied Types*, 214.

¹⁵⁰ *Varied Types*, 214.

¹⁵¹ *Varied Types*, 214.

¹⁵² Ker, G. K. *Chesterton*, 74.

¹⁵³ Stapleton, Julia ed. (2012). *G. K. Chesterton at the Daily News: Literature, Liberalism and Revolution, 1901-1913, “Columns, Reviews, and Letters, 1901-1902.”* New York: Routledge. xv, xx.

¹⁵⁴ *Chesterton at the Daily News*, 300.

ground in the sensuous pleasures of art.”¹⁵⁵ Then, after naming artists such as Blake and Degas as well as the philosopher Schopenhauer, he admits that such figures could be enjoyed in some way purely on the surface. This is a backhanded way of making a concession to the aesthetes. “But the moment we went a little deeper, and began to feel that spirit, that moment the whole preposterous truce of modern culture would be shattered into pieces, and men would really be at each other’s throats fighting for the honour of God or for the honour of the devil.”¹⁵⁶ Beneath the surface of things, Chesterton argues, are the timeless, spiritual truths.

An even earlier article, published for *The Bookman*, which was a magazine of book reviews, self-described as “A monthly Journal for Bookreaders [sic], Bookbuyers [sic], and Booksellers,”¹⁵⁷ sheds further light on Chesterton’s close proximity to Symbolism. Chesterton found some of his earliest paid journalistic work writing reviews for this periodical; most were short pieces of only a few paragraphs regarding a new book Chesterton was handed to read and review. In such reviews as “Velasquez and Poussin,” “The Renaissance and Modern Art,” and “Correggio,” written between 1899 and early 1900, Chesterton begins to argue for a return in the art world to symbol, myth, and dogma. In a significant piece titled, “The Literary Portraits of G. F. Watts, R.A.,” Chesterton establishes the core arguments which he would expand three years later into his book titled *G. F. Watts* (1904). These essays are rarely treated by scholars, probably because of their early date and uncollected status.¹⁵⁸ They do reveal a great deal about the development of Chesterton’s early critical and aesthetic views, especially in relation to the ideas put forward by the three other writers in this study. It is the first installment of one of these essays for *The Bookman* that I will discuss.

The first three essays of 1900 were co-written with a friend, J. E. Hodder Williams, and are titled, “LITERARY PICTURES OF THE YEAR.”¹⁵⁹ In the first part, the writers examine recent pictures from the Royal Academy which deal with literary subjects, critiquing their relation to the literary characters or qualities they interact with. Even though, for the most part, the artists they mention, including such as Amelia Bauerle, Edwin Austin Abbey, Arthur Rackham, Cyrus Cuneo, John da Costa, Mabel Ashby, and Nell Tenison are largely forgotten today, the article is intriguing because of its adaptation and transformation of the established art for art’s sake aesthetic.

¹⁵⁵ Chesterton at the Daily News, 301.

¹⁵⁶ Chesterton at the Daily News, 301.

¹⁵⁷ Chesterton, G. K., Hodder Williams, J. E. (1902). *Thomas Carlyle, with numerous illustrations*. London: Hodder and Stoughton. Inside leaf.

¹⁵⁸ The more recent biographers, such as Ker and Oddie, mention them only in relation to the development of Chesterton’s career as journalist, not philosophy as critic.

¹⁵⁹ Chesterton, G. K., Hodder Williams, (1900), “LITERARY PICTURES OF THE YEAR.” *The Bookman* 18 (105), 79-84, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/docview/3030033?accountid=14540>.

Critiquing recent paintings which take their subject matter from works of literature, Chesterton and Hodder Williams also qualify and critique the aesthetic views of Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde at every step of the way. The first part of this essay has the subtitle “I - Shakespeare, Tennyson, Dickens,” revealing the three writers whom Chesterton would draw much of his inspiration from for the rest of his career. The authors waste no time in getting straight to the point: “In the years art taken as a whole, there are signs of a healthy reaction in the relation between painting and literature; and it is a matter upon which saner ideas are really needed.”¹⁶⁰ With these words the authors situate their argument within the current aesthetic context. This will be an article that critiques aesthetic viewpoints as well as particular works of art that deal with scenes, characters, and quotations from the three authors mentioned in the title. The reason that these two must write such an article in the first place is because there is today “the tyranny of a dogma equally fantastic and illogical - the notion that the two arts may not even be allied, as poetry and music are in a song.”¹⁶¹ Chesterton and his friend do not seek to prove the superiority of one art form over another, as virtually all previous aesthetic theorists from Schelling to Wilde had done. Rather, Chesterton and Hodder Williams take a very nuanced, Symbolist approach to painting and literature. They interpret Shakespeare as a great symbolist himself:

All other poets give a general sense of decorative unity - he alone is in love with contrasts, the contrasts of figure landscape and costume which make practical pictures. Touchstone and the Shepherd, Bottom and the Fairies, Lear and the Fool, Hamlet and the Gravediggers, are all scenes in which the moral irony is expressed in definite diversities of colour and form. And in this he is qualified to unite the arts. He is a symbolist: he represents the mysterious mental connection between shapes and ideas, which must finally defeat any purely technical view of painting. A man can no more see certain clouds at evening without growing thoughtful than he can see a Bengal tiger without jumping. Both feelings are equally primal, fundamental, anthropological.¹⁶²

Here the language is explicit: Shakespeare was a symbolist. Thus there is a “mysterious mental connection between shapes and ideas;” with this line the authors affirm a Romantic aesthetic from earlier in the century that established the reality of the symbol, and they implicitly suggest that a symbolist view of the arts may save the connexions between the arts that is threatening to be destroyed completely. The symbolist experience is “primal, fundamental, anthropological,” three incontestable claims made from experience.

Therefore we find that Chesterton’s love of symbolism is explicit at this early stage of his career. He was, if not actively engaging with the French *Symbolistes* (as his essay on Maeterlinck suggests), at least sharing their conclusions and echoing their concerns. The other major point to be taken into consideration is

¹⁶⁰ “LITERARY PICTURES OF THE YEAR,” 79.

¹⁶¹ “LITERARY PICTURES OF THE YEAR,” 79.

¹⁶² “LITERARY PICTURES OF THE YEAR,” 80.

Chesterton's friendship with his contemporary, the Irish poet and symbolist W. B. Yeats (1865-1939). In the chapter "The Fantastic Suburb" in his *Autobiography* Chesterton reminisces about their friendship in the early years of the century, "I knew the family more or less as a whole in those days... W. B. is perhaps the best talker I ever met, except his old father who alas will talk no more in this earthly tavern, though I hope he is still talking in Paradise."¹⁶³ Chesterton goes on to relate, "Yeats affected me strongly, but in two opposite ways; like the positive and negative poles of a magnet."¹⁶⁴ Chesterton's remarks on Yeats in the *Autobiography* are quite interesting, yet seem to be overlooked by scholars.¹⁶⁵ Yeats's strong affection on Chesterton happened in two ways; the positive was Yeats's symbolist imagination, the negative was his philosophy of Idealism, that the physical world was a construct of pure mind. Chesterton says, "So that I found myself in this odd double attitude towards the poet, agreeing with him about the fairy-tales on which most people disagreed with him, and disagreeing with him about the philosophy on which most people agreed with him..."¹⁶⁶ Whatever their exact philosophical disagreement, it can be admitted that Yeats explains their commonly held conviction well: "Why should a man cease to be a scholar, a believer, a ritualist before he begins to paint or rhyme or to compose music...?"¹⁶⁷ The products of human creation are reflections of underlying ideas; paintings and compositions are visible icons or audible signs of a deep, yet unseen reality. Symons hints at this deeper, eternal reality, and Chesterton is able to find it in anything he sees.

Could it be that Yeats's friendship as well as his essays and poetry informed Chesterton about the Symbolist Movement at a time when the young journalist was first discovering mysticism and Catholicism? Yeats's essay "William Blake and the Imagination" (1897) comes thirteen years before Chesterton's book on Blake, and Yeats's essay "Magic" finds a curious echo in Chesterton's play of 1913, *Magic*, subtitled *A Fantastic Comedy*.¹⁶⁸ Where Yeats infamously writes, "I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed;"¹⁶⁹ Chesterton replies by making his magician character, the Conjurer, say, "I don't wonder at your believing in fairies. As long as these things were my servants they seemed to me like fairies. When they

¹⁶³ *Autobiography*, 142.

¹⁶⁴ *Autobiography*, 143.

¹⁶⁵ Oddie mentions Yeats once in his book on Chesterton's early development. Yet in the *Autobiography* Chesterton sees his friendship with Yeats (which began before the publication of *Orthodoxy*) as one of the most important friendships in his life. For Example, he muses on their friendship throughout the chapter "The Fantastic Suburb." See *Autobiography*, 133-155

¹⁶⁶ *Autobiography*, 150.

¹⁶⁷ *Strangeness and Beauty*, 174.

¹⁶⁸ Chesterton, G. K. (1936). *Magic: A Fantastic Comedy*. London: Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd.

¹⁶⁹ Larrissy, Edward, ed. (1997). *W. B. Yeats*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 344.

tried to be my masters ... I found they were not fairies. I found the spirits with whom I at least had come in contact were evil ... awfully, unnaturally evil.”¹⁷⁰

Yeats and Chesterton both believed in the realm of the spirit, but Chesterton was ever wary of evil spirits. Yeats and Chesterton both believed in magic, but Chesterton was ever opposed to black magic. Their connexions in time, friendship, and concern are important in situating Chesterton alongside the Symbolists, to allow us to interpret his work as part of a larger literary, artistic, and theosophical movement at the turn of the century.

3.2 G. F. Watts

The first of Chesterton’s two art books is about a painter largely overlooked today: G. F. Watts. The slim book simply titled *G. F. Watts* (1904)¹⁷¹ is, after the popular *Robert Browning* (1903), one of Chesterton’s first, book-length critical works. I wish to look at this particular work despite the fact that it is largely overshadowed by Chesterton’s other, more famous works from the first decade of the twentieth century such as *Heretics* (1905) and *Orthodoxy* (1908). I am doing this for three reasons; firstly, it is from early in the century, and so was written during the years that Ruskin, Pater, Wilde, and Symons were widely read; secondly, like his other works, *G. F. Watts* is also primarily concerned with mystical, religious truths, yet it has not been mined as thoroughly as his spiritual autobiography *Orthodoxy*; and thirdly, *G. F. Watts* is an examination of religion through an critical and *aesthetic* lens rather than an autobiographical one (like in *Orthodoxy*) or an historical one (like in *The Everlasting Man* from 1925).

Watts the artist is rather obscure in this century. Picking up two recent works written on the Victorian artist, one finds in the introduction of each an honest estimation of the painter: “Of all the major players in the late-Victorian art world, George Frederic Watts (1817-1904) remains the most shadowy, elusive, quixotic, and yet the easiest to patronize or dismiss... Watts is still a subterranean presence in most recent scholarly accounts of nineteenth-century British art.”¹⁷² In the other work we read, “At the time of his death in 1904 Watts was one of the most famous artists of his generation. There were obituaries in newspapers across the world. Today Watts provokes a mixed reaction and, for many, his name remains unknown.”¹⁷³ Watts’s art is deeply symbolic, and is frequently engaged with Greek mythological characters as well as New Testament figures. His art is also characterised by religious feeling, for Watts wished to produce a kind of

¹⁷⁰ *Magic: A Fantastic Comedy*, 95.

¹⁷¹ Chesterton, G. K. (1904). *G. F. Watts*. London: Duckworth & Co. Hereafter cited as (*Watts*, #)

¹⁷² Trodd, Colin and Brown, Stephanie, eds. (2004). *Representations of G. F. Watts*. Hants, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited. 1.

¹⁷³ Bills, Mark and Bryant, Barbara (introduction by Hunt, Perdita). (2008). *G. F. Watts: Victorian Visionary*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. xi.

religious effect upon his audience; in *G. F. Watts: Victorian Visionary*, the artist is quoted as saying that his aim is “[that] art may speak... with the solemn and majestic ring in which the Hebrew prophet spoke to the Jews of old, demanding noble aspirations, [and] condemning... prevalent vices.”¹⁷⁴ Watts was therefore concerned, like the Symbolists, with uncovering truth through his symbolic vision, and not merely crafting a mood to charm or delight. In the following section I am utilizing the same interpretive framework I have used in my close reading of Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde, exploring the way that Chesterton interprets the relation between beauty and morality, truth, time, and religion. I argue in what follows that Chesterton’s interpretation of Watts exhibits a recovery of a kind of Catholic sacramentalism. In, with, and under the symbols that Watts has created, Chesterton is able to make discoveries, not to attributes of God, but to the mystical experiences of mankind in relation to God. I would like to note here that the terms “mysticism” and “allegory” are not technical terms in Chesterton’s writings. The autodidact found mysticism and allegory beneath virtually all the paintings and poems he ever critiqued, and so we must understand these terms in the context of Chesterton. I shall demonstrate that for him, mysticism essentially means the hidden, irrational, spiritual centre of humanity, and allegory has virtually the same meaning as symbol; in Chesterton, each is simply an outward manifestation of inward magic or spirit.

Beauty & Morality in G. F. Watts

At the outset of *G. F. Watts*, Chesterton establishes the philosophical outlook of the great Victorian sages, among whom he considers Watts to be the final, and perhaps the greatest example. Chesterton argues that the Victorians held a kind of “synthetic” philosophy; that is, whether in pulpit, poem, or painting, these creators never missed an opportunity to preach about the unity of all things in God (*Watts*, 18). Rather than chastising these Victorians for their moralising, Chesterton simply commends their bravery in preaching as well as that synthesis of craft and message that they achieved. Chesterton shows that though Watts is a painter and not a philosopher or theologian, he is nevertheless a communicator of the “synthetic philosophy” of the age; he is one in whom the creative spirit of God has emerged dramatically. Indeed, through his production of portraits and allegories, he has developed a “wonderful way of preaching... he is certain that he is right” (*Watts*, 15). Therefore Chesterton develops this picture of Watts as a giver of immortal truths to the public. Far from depicting obscure, esoteric doctrines through his allegorical pieces, Watts is actually creating approachable, democratic works which “preach” the eternal truths. “For Watts’ [sic] nature is essentially public, that is to say, it is modest and noble, and has nothing to hide” (*Watts*, 52).

¹⁷⁴ *G. F. Watts: Victorian Visionary*. 3.

Chesterton is ever concerned that art, religion, mysticism should be accessible and democratic. In an essay referenced above on page 103, a piece from *The Daily News* titled “The Mystery of the Mystics (30 August 1901),” Chesterton reviews a book on Christian mysticism but uses his column as a way to give his own estimation of the democratic nature of true mystical experience. He writes, “Christian mysticism has by its very nature one seriously important difference from other mysticism - the fact that it is democratic, while all other mysticism tends to be aristocratic.”¹⁷⁵ Christian mysticism is, like the art of Watts, democratic, accessible, revealed. The great revelation which the mystic, like Watts, has realised is that the world is filled with symbols; “It is the mystic to whom every star is like a sudden rocket, every flower an earthquake of the dust, who is the clear-minded man. Mysticism, or a sense of the mystery of things, is simply the most gigantic form of common sense.”¹⁷⁶ Like Symons and the Symbolists, Chesterton is re-evaluating mysticism and in so doing, he is offering a conception of religion in which faith rests on irrational, democratic, and experiential grounds. I will return to this later when Chesterton explicitly relates Watts’s moral intuition to mysticism.

In a further exploration of the connexion between art and morality in Watts’s art, Chesterton writes in a very revealing passage, “Like Matthew Arnold, the last and most sceptical of them [the Victorians], who expressed their basic idea in its most detached and philosophic form, they held that conduct was three-fourths of life. They were ingrainedly [sic] ethical; the mere idea of thinking anything more important than ethics would have struck them as profane” (*Watts*, 69). Chesterton is intent on demonstrating that when it comes to this foundation of both society and the arts, morality, Watts is cut from the same moral cloth as the Victorian sages. The passage continues, “There mere thought of Watts painting a picture called *The Victory of Joy over Morality*, or *Nature rebuking Conscience*, is enough to show the definite limits of that cosmic equality... He simply draws the line somewhere, as all men, including anarchists draw it somewhere; his is dogmatic as all sane men are dogmatic” (*Watts*, 70). Watts has definite ideas (dogmas) about the world, and his art is greater, broader, and more important because of its reflection of these ideas. This symbolism is not a shallow didacticism that Watts lords over his spectators, but a thoroughly dogmatic, mystical vision.

So far the reader may conclude that Chesterton’s interpretation of Watts is that his art is accessible, or, democratic, as Chesterton is fond of pointing out, and moral. Yet Chesterton fundamentally differs from Ruskin in his estimation of didacticism in art. He argues that art can never teach. The passage is worth quoting.

About the whole of this Watts controversy about didactic art there is at least one perfectly plain and preliminary thing to be said. It is said that art cannot teach a lesson. This is true,

¹⁷⁵ G. K. Chesterton at the *Daily News*, 173..

¹⁷⁶ G. K. Chesterton at the *Daily News*, 173.

and the only proper addition is the statement that neither, for the matter of that, can morality teach a lesson. For a thing to be didactic, in the strict and narrow and scholastic sense, it must be something about facts or the physical sciences: you can only teach a lesson about such a thing as Euclid or the making of paper boats... A picture cannot give a plain lesson in morals; neither can a sermon. A didactic poem was a thing known indeed among the ancients and the old Latin civilization, but as a matter of fact it scarcely ever professed to teach people how to live the higher life. It taught people how to keep bees.¹⁷⁷

Thus didacticism is simply impossible in art unless a product is created from the beginning with the intention of teaching practical lessons (e.g. "how to keep bees"). Then it is no longer a painted picture, as Chesterton refers to it, but something else. Euclid, paper boats, and bee-keeping are Chesterton's illustrations for didactic compositions which exist no longer in the realm of art but the realm of education. A painting cannot directly teach a lesson; this is impossible in the modern era. It can only hint at something unseen. His interpretation does not form a system - just a democratic kind of mysticism, an intuitive response that indeed, reality may be grasped through pictures. The didactic system of Ruskin said that art is an interpreter of truths about God gathered from nature, that it can teach, instruct, and shape hearts. Ruskin's *Theoria* considers natural phenomena to point to the ordered attributes of a Creator. As we have seen, then Ruskin is able to link landscape art to the truths of landscapes themselves. The attributes of God are both clear and discernable in what has been created, the natural phenomena of trees, mountains, and minerals upon the world, so then landscape art is the commentary on such phenomena. For this reason art must be as clear, as accurate, as faithful as possible.

Chesterton's view of art is certainly different: "Since we find, therefore, that ethics is like art, a mystic and intuitional affair, the only question that remains is, have they any kinship" (*Watts*, 121). Though Chesterton does share Ruskin's insistence that all art is moral, he does not share Ruskin's other conclusions. Art does not need rules; it does not need to be balanced; it does not even need to be "accurate." For if a painting in some way leads a viewer to the deeper, spiritual reality it symbolises, then that painting is very good in Chesterton's opinion.

Chesterton begins to answer the question of kinship between art and ethics when he writes, "If they have not, a man is not a man, but two men and probably more: if they have, there is, to say the least of it, at any rate a reasonable possibility that a note in moral feeling might have affinity with a note in art," (*Watts*, 121). An artist cannot help but symbolise. For every artist's activity is a "mystical and intuitional affair."

¹⁷⁷ *Watts*, 120-121.

This is far from meaning that all art is somehow tainted by artists' beliefs. In *G. F. Watts*, the aesthetes are the targets: "But the meanings expressed in high and delicate art are not to be classed under cheap and external ethical formulae, they deal with strange vices and stranger virtues. Art is only unmoral [sic] in so far as most morality is immoral" (*Watts*, 122). Ruskin would never engage in such a paradox. Chesterton is not contradicting himself here, but pointing out the mystery behind paintings, even paintings of ugly, broken things. Chesterton would accept these because he accepts the Symbolist paradox: sometimes the most moral act is at the same time the most immoral; Abraham's faith meant Isaac's sacrifice, and Christ's victory meant also His Passion. A truly great work does stir up, in a mysterious way, these "strange vices and stranger virtues."

Beauty & Truth in G. F. Watts

G. F. Watts' allegories fascinate Chesterton, and Chesterton seeks to uncover the mystery of these allegorical paintings for the reader. He argues that allegories unlock deeper truths, but they do not provide a simplistic key for the disclosure of the whole truth. That is, allegorical paintings do not contribute to a picture of a truth which underlies every system, as in Ruskin. Neither do allegories turn a piece of art into a moral or didactic tool, nullifying its beauty and delight, as Pater and Wilde argued. Chesterton discards Ruskin's system yet believes in his God. Then he also discards the aesthetes' agnosticism yet believes in their position regarding the immense powers of artists.

Because Watts's art is so allegorical, it is continually looking *through* characters and scenes to mysterious truths. Chesterton's interpretation of Watts's art connects it to the unveiling of these truths again and again. In an interesting sentence, Chesterton makes the argument that whether the path be painting, literature, or philosophy, each is attempting to express central truths of humanity's existence: "Watts is not a man copying literature or philosophy, but rather a man copying the great spiritual and central realities which literature and philosophy also set out to copy" (*Watts*, 115). Rather than denigrating Watts's art, Chesterton praises it when he refers to it as "copying." For this is neither a slavish copying of nature nor a shallow copying of others' styles; it is, rather a symbolising of mystical truths that lie at the bottom of all human experience. In a brilliant interpretation of what is perhaps Watts's most recognisable work, *Hope* (1886), Chesterton gives us further insight into his theory of allegory in art. As I have pointed out, the term *allegory* in Chesterton is far from being a technical one; he uses it in very much the same way as *symbol*.

The argument is that all art is allegorical, and since language is an art, it must also be so: "For the truth is, that language is not a scientific thing at all, but wholly an artistic thing, a thing invented by hunters, and killers, and such artists, long before science was dreamed of" (*Watts*, 91). All human creation then symbolises the strivings, urges, passions, and beliefs of the women and men who set out to engage with the

“great spiritual and central realities” mentioned above. In Chesterton’s highly symbolic world, each word and artefact points beyond itself to elementary truths. For him, then, both the word “hope” and the Watts painting that is named “Hope” are highly charged symbols. Chesterton writes, “It represents a certain definite thing, the word ‘hope.’ But what does the word ‘hope’ represent? It represents only a broken instantaneous glimpse of something that is immeasurably older and wilder than language, that is immeasurably older and wilder than man; a mystery to saints and a reality to wolves” (*Watts*, 96-97). Chesterton still has not explicitly answered his question, but now we know that hope is real, mysterious, and ancient. Watts’s painting is, like the word hope itself, a symbol for a great truth:

He would see something for which there is neither speech nor language, which has been too vast for any eye to see and too secret for any religion to utter, even as an esoteric doctrine. Standing before that picture he finds himself in the presence of a great truth. He perceives that there is something in man which is always apparently on the eve of disappearing, but never disappears, an assurance which is always apparently saying farewell and yet illimitably lingers, a string which is always stretched to snapping and yet never snaps.¹⁷⁸

The great truth, Chesterton goes on to explain, is that hope is faith which survives; it is “a perpetually defeated thing which survives all its conquerors” (*Watts*, 101). The word or the image of hope - this symbol - reveals this truth. “But the point is that this title is not (as those think who call it “literary”) the reality behind the symbol, but another symbol for the same thing, or to speak yet more strictly, another symbol describing another part or aspect of the same complex reality” (*Watts*, 101-102). Chesterton writes about truth as a complex, multifaceted reality. It is vast and secret, and so cannot be adequately and systematically explained, simply hinted at by words or by images. The mode does not matter to Chesterton; he does not rank the arts like German philosophers and Oscar Wilde. For Watts’s paintings demonstrate that some truths need both words and images to be hinted at, let alone grasped by the heart; words and images work in tandem to uncover hidden truths.

G. F. Watts is the earliest and fullest treatment of aesthetics in G. K. Chesterton. Ruskin was concerned above all with truth in his natural theology. His was a truth in the language of theology: ultimately words about a Creator God. Pater and Wilde were concerned with something deeper than propositional truth, something beyond it: the ordering of all other human activities through the contemplation of beauty. Chesterton’s symbolist answer posits the definite existence of truths, but accepts they are vast, secrets that can merely be hinted at. The goal is thus neither a comprehensive system nor an exquisite mood, but the creation and experience of truths. These truths are mysterious riddles to be experienced and jealously

¹⁷⁸ *Watts*, 98

protected; they are truths which, as we shall see in the two following sections, contain the meaning of humanity.

Beauty & God in G. F. Watts

Watts presents a harmony of Greece and Rome, of chiseled, Pagan beauty and deeply-layered spiritual symbolism. In this combination he represents the modern movement of symbolism: “His art is an out-door [sic] art, like that of the healthy ages of the world, like the statuesque art of Greece, like the ecclesiastical and external Gothic art of Christianity: an art that can look the sun in the face” (*Watts*, 52-53).

Not only do Watts’s paintings cross over into different epochs by their public appeal, but his paintings have the character of a kind of timeless, eternal style. Chesterton notes that in Watts’s art, there are never any ecclesiastical or civic symbols; indeed, in Watts’s so-called allegorical paintings, there is even a noticeable lack of recognisable personages, either biblical or literary. There is nothing to connect his art to historical events. Instead, “[a] primeval vagueness and archaism hangs over all the canvases and cartoons, like frescoes from some prehistoric temple. There is nothing but the eternal things, clay and fire and the sea, and motherhood and the dead” (*Watts*, 59).

Watts captures the “eternal things” and the things coming from the “palette of Creation” in his art. There is nothing in his content or his style that constricts him. Watts sounds more like a god than a mere mortal. In any case, he is a painter at the height of his divinely-given powers: “A curious lustre or glitter, conveyed chiefly by a singular and individual brush-work, lies over all his great pictures. It is the dawn of things: it is the glow of the primal sense of wonder; it is the sun of the childhood of the world;” (*Watts*, 133). Notice the connexions Chesterton readily makes between the qualities of Watts’s technique and colour with true perception itself, described as “wonder” and “childhood.” Chesterton continues on this theme of glowing sun: “[I]t is the light that never was on sea or land; but still it is a light shining on things, not shining through them. It is a light which exhibits and does honour to this world, not a light that breaks in upon this world to bring it terror or comfort [.] (*Watts*, 133)” Watts is thus an artist of this time, this world, this reality. In his work he somehow is able to channel the vital energy of creation at the primal dawn of things. He has divine-like powers.

Chesterton is capable of lofty praise not because he idolises Watts or even thinks he is the most talented of artists. Watts’s art exemplifies the God-given, creative talents of humanity, and so has revealed something of the incredible gift that artists have somehow received.

Chesterton is therefore ever willing to compare and then credit the creativity of Watts to the creativity of God. Regarding Watts’s keen use of colour, Chesterton writes, “So individual is his handling that his very choice and scale of colours betrays him. A man with a keen sense of the spiritual and symbolic history of

colours could guess at something about Watts from the mess on his palette. He would see giants and the sea and cold primeval dawns and brown earthmen and red earth-women lying in the heaps of greens and whites and reds, like forces in chaos before the first day of creation" (*Watts*, 126). Chesterton interprets Watts as such a person who has been given this "spiritual and symbolic history of colours," as he boldly argues for his personal interpretations of several works. He continues to guide the reader, demonstrating where and why Watts commands colours like God commands the elements. Noting that certain colours appear in Watts's paintings like they do nowhere else, Chesterton writes, "Then there is that tremendous autochthonous red, which was the colour of Adam, whose name was Red Earth. It is, if one may say so, the clay in which no one works, except Watts and the Eternal Potter" (*Watts*, 129).

Chesterton maintains this tone throughout his discussion: "There are other colours that have this character, a character indescribable except by saying that they come from the palette of Creation - a green especially that reappears through portraits, allegories, landscapes, heroic designs, but always has the same fierce and elfish look, like a green that has a secret" (*Watts*, 129). Chesterton goes on, "But all these colours have, as I say, the first and most characteristic and most obvious of the mental qualities of Watts; they are simple and like things just made by God" (*Watts*, 129). Where Ruskin compares the traits of God to the colours on a canvas, Chesterton compares the colours on a canvas to the traits of God. The difference may seem subtle, but it is immensely important.

Yet, Chesterton's rhetoric might appear to get out of hand here. How can this journalist claim that Watts works as God works? How can any artist have such command over colours so as to mirror the divine Creator? The human individual is, simultaneously, art and artist, a God-Image who is able to create by this Image.

The truth of the "Image of God" of each man and each woman is perfectly demonstrated through Watts's gift for painting, surprisingly, people's backs. In what is, perhaps, the most important passage in the book, Chesterton argues that hardly any other artist throughout history has had such an obsession, with the exception of Moses; Moses caught a fleeting glimpse of God's glory when God permitted him to only see His backside (*Watts*, 139). This is recorded in the second book of the Torah, Exodus, and is one of Chesterton's many biblical allusions in discussing Watts's work.¹⁷⁹ In making this comparison, Chesterton is saying that Watts, too, sees the presence or glory of God in the backs of the figures he paints, most often in his allegorical works such as "Dawn" (*Watts*, 131), "Eve Repentant" (*Watts*, 137), and "Love and Death" (*Watts*, 141). In his portraits Watts thus "makes [people] over again," and when he endeavors to depict a

¹⁷⁹ The Bible reference is this: "But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." And the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen (Exodus 33:20-23 ESV)."

man or woman, that is, a being made in the very image of the Creator of the Universe, Watts therefore “dips his hand in the clay of chaos” and re-creates the person he paints (*Watts*, 145).

Again, Chesterton’s language is bold to the point of being outrageous, according to an *art for art’s sake* point of view. But when it is considered just what Chesterton is doing here, there can be no possible alternative; if each sitter whose likeness Watts paints is made in the image of God, then Watts (who is also a man in the image of God) cannot but step into a divine role when he lays the brush upon his canvas to begin a portrait. This is the heart of Chesterton’s theological aesthetic and the most original part of his contribution. For Watts “the hero, the great man, was a man more human than humanity itself. In worshipping him you were worshipping humanity in a sacrament: and Watts seems to express in almost every line of his brush this ardent and reverent view of the great man. He overdoes it” (*Watts*, 149). Then a few pages later he explicitly states that Watts saw the image of God in his sitters where modern artists do not even see “the image of man” (*Watts*, 157). This is Chesterton’s interpretation: in his ability to see that divine image in his sitters, Watts is doing theology through symbols, even if he is doing this unknowingly. Watts re-tells or even re-performs the story of God’s creation through his art, and he steps into a God-like role by bringing out this divinity residing within each of his sitters. In this act Watts is not only a deeply moral artist, but a deeply theological one.

Chesterton brings his work to a close by commenting again upon Watts’s very human and therefore, paradoxically, truly divine powers; it is he who, “Standing before a dark canvas upon some quiet evening, has made lines and something has happened. In such an hour the strange and splendid phrase of the Psalm he has literally fulfilled. He has gone on because of the word of meekness and truth and of righteousness. And his right hand has taught him terrible things” (*Watts*, 169). This paraphrase of Psalm 45:4, giving a final, biblical touch to a criticism of such an artist who, in Chesterton’s mind, is not only the very Image of the Creator like any human, but has the creative powers to illustrate and celebrate this fact of existence.

This is more than rhetorical praise; Chesterton is acutely aware of the ‘*art for art’s sake*’ aesthetic. Here he gives a picture of the artist that does not exactly fit Ruskin’s view or Pater’s view. For Ruskin, a painter like J. M. W. Turner had the ability to comment upon Nature-Scripture; the oracles of God have been given to the artist to contemplate and then interpret for all others. Art then points to God’s traits in some way. In Ruskin the artist should be most like a prophet or a great communicator. Then we have seen that Pater and Wilde in their aestheticism argued that artistic works, with their charming colours and beauty, had no deeper meaning than was contained on their surfaces. Artists had a kind of hieratic power to provide salvation by providing such exquisite images.

So we have these two Victorian views of the artist: as scribe; to comment upon creation so it might help us understand God, and as priest, to perform beautiful and therefore salvific acts. Chesterton takes these two views and, through his discovery of each person’s uniqueness - her or his *Imago Dei* status - discovers

the creativity of a saving God behind the creativity of a painting artist. So Watts is neither just a prophetic artist nor just a priestly artist: he is a co-creator artist, putting on display the image of God within him and within all of humanity. The artist creates meaningful symbols and in this act of creation does the work of theology, or perhaps more accurately, of *theurgy*. That is, of working the very works of God. And Chesterton, as a critic, does not just explain these symbols with words, but he uncovers through his prose the same eternal truths and realities Watts uncovered through his paint. In his elevated praise of the powers of women and men, in his celebration of the Image of God in the artist, Chesterton does not quite fit Ruskin's system nor Pater's mold; he instead forges his own path; it is a path that seeks to recover the old system. It is a Symbolist path that leads closer and closer to the discovery of Jesus Christ and Roman Catholicism.

In the next part of this chapter, I argue that Chesterton takes his position a step further to an even more overtly theological position. For it is in *William Blake* that Chesterton introduces the Incarnation of God as Jesus Christ into his theological aesthetic, demonstrating that the Icon of God (Colossians 1:15), Jesus Christ, means God is tangible and fleshly, and it is He who raises humanity up to divinity.

3.3 William Blake

This slim book on Blake is part of the same series as *G. F. Watts* (1904) and is the only other full volume Chesterton wrote on an individual painter.¹⁸⁰ Published in 1910, *William Blake* concerns not only Blake's visual art, but his life, poetry, and mysticism. Like *G. F. Watts*, this book helps us to see how Chesterton recovered the Catholic and mystical tradition in the wake of the aesthetic movements of the *fin de siècle*. In the book he resolves the aesthetic tensions of art for art's sake, impressionism, and decadence into a Symbolist answer, arguing that Blake's technique and vision stemmed from his supernaturalism. Blake's overall posture toward the cosmos is Chesterton's overriding emphasis in this book, and he demonstrates how Blake's very fine and chiseled artistic technique symbolises the definiteness of the Deity as incarnated in the God-Man Jesus.

Chesterton writes about Blake's "matured and massive supernaturalism" that is reflected in style and content in every poem, picture, and prophecy (*Blake*, 9). The overriding argument is that in Blake's work there is a continual obsession with "the eternal images of things" (*Blake*, 160), that is, the eternal nature of God in the image of man/woman and even the man/woman image that is discovered as God. In Blake's work there is this strong message of a knowable, visible, definite Deity. For Blake (as for Chesterton) the Deity

¹⁸⁰ Chesterton, G. K. (1910). *William Blake*. London: Duckworth & Co. Hereafter cited as (*Blake*, page #). The series was "The Popular Library of Art" with volumes on artists from Holbein to Whistler. Ford Madox Ford was also a contributor, writing the volumes on Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites. Chesterton did write other critical works on 19th century figures, but only these two books on artists. His many other critical works dealt with novelists, poets, art critics, etc., especially Browning, Dickens, Pater, Wilde, Whistler, and Shaw.

imprints Himself into His creatures and His creatures, in their image-of-Godness, embody Him. The Incarnation of God completes each creature and changes the way humans perceive God.

Beauty & Morality in William Blake

The issue of beauty and morality is an interesting one in Blake because he seems to push the boundaries of conventional morality. This is problematic. For Blake was prone to ecstatic visions, mystical experiences, bizarre activities, and violent, even abusive, outbursts against friends and enemies alike (*Blake*, 29). So it is true that Blake was not the sort of public “preacher” that Watts and the later Victorians were in Chesterton’s estimation. Blake did not paint on large canvases in order to reach the public; his art is still truthful, allegorical, spiritual, but it is all of these because of Blake’s need to create, not his need to change society. Blake’s activities were different because his intentions were different. While Blake was capable of the greatest expressions of truth, beauty, and goodness, he was also capable of lies, heresies, and follies, at least according to Chesterton. For all the great beauty in Blake’s creations, there was also great ugliness in other creations. Chesterton holds up as an example the picture titled, “The Man Who Built the Pyramids” (1819).

For it is this somewhat strange picture, which convinced Chesterton of Blake’s capacity for utter foolishness: “I think it is impossible to look at some of the pictures which Blake drew, under what he considered direct spiritual dictation, without feeling that he was from time to time under influences that were not only evil but even foolishly evil” (*Blake*, 100). Chesterton goes on to explain that Blake claimed to have conversed with this man’s spirit, and then he goes on to describe the drawing, which is a side profile of the “face of an evil idiot, a leering, half-witted face with no chin and the protuberant nose of a pig” (*Blake*, 101). This “demonic silliness” left Blake “sillier than it found him” (*Blake*, 101).

Blake’s art corresponds to his beliefs. Yet despite his strangeness, his art was never foul or base; it was obscure, foolish even, but never completely immoral. This is because Blake’s overriding concern was a picture of God, a definite and personal God. Chesterton writes that all of his follies were inherited from the 18th century, the age “[which] was primarily the release (as its leaders held) of reason and nature from the control of the Church” (*Blake*, 123). This century, with its popular mystics and magicians, “was not the release of the natural, but also of the supernatural, and also, alas! Of the unnatural. The heathen mystics hidden for two thousand years came out of their caverns....” (*Blake*, 123). Blake was a product of this time and was caught up in the teachings of Cagliostro and Swedenborg. Yet, despite his mistakes, Blake’s genius and Blake’s message should excuse him, according to Chesterton. We read, “These things Blake did inherit from that break up of belief that can be called the eighteenth century: we will debit him with these as an

inheritance. And when we have said this we have said everything that can be said of any debt he owed. His debts are cleared here. His estate is cleared with this payment. All that follows is himself" (*Blake*, 125-126).

Chesterton argues that, rather than form the total picture of what Blake means, these 18th century mystical movements should be interpreted as influencing the artist only at his weaker moments. Blake was too strong and too much a genius to be led astray from his "massive supernaturalism." This massive supernaturalism, this ability to see the very outline of God, is what makes Blake's art so interesting in a project of theological aesthetics. For him the importance of art was not in communicating the Divine in nature and not in experiencing rapturous beauty; it was in laying bare the truth of God, humanity, and the cosmos. In Blake, the engraved line becomes a richly layered, symbolic part of God's relations of all things under an enfleshed Deity, mystically and imaginatively perceived.

There are (at least) two types of artist in Chesterton's estimation: the *specialist* and the *universalist*. Blake was a universalist like few other artists of his time were. One of Chesterton's most important discussions in the study of Blake concerns his controversy with Thomas Stothard. The patron R. H. Cromeck had commissioned Stothard to paint a scene of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims after he had already asked for it from Blake. In a mean trick he then accepted Stothard's painting and rejected Blake's (*Blake*, 50). Although this episode does reveal important biographical information about Blake's frustrating relationship with his patrons, Chesterton sees this controversy as symbolic of a much greater struggle. This is the eternal struggle in art between the "specialist" and the "universalist."¹⁸¹ Stothard was a specialist; his art from a technical standpoint is much finer than Blake's. He achieves an accuracy which Blake never achieves. Yet, he is the lesser artist compared to Blake because art is more than fidelity to nature (Ruskin) or fidelity to charm (Pater); it is fidelity to Man and Woman. Those specialists who perfect their artistic technique above all else sacrifice something very great. Only the truly great artists such as Da Vinci and Michelangelo understand "the subject as well as the picture" (*Blake*, 60).

This understanding is not technical knowledge, but poetic knowledge. The greatest artists are also the greatest poets, which means their conception of the world is grounded in their knowledge of the truth; from this they are able to draw out the essences of things (*Blake*, 101). This poetic art is necessarily courageous and honest, because it is able to communicate a true, moral image. Chesterton writes, "But the truth is that unless art is moral, art is not only immoral, but immoral in the most commonplace, slangy, and prosaic way. In the future, the fastidious artists will go down to history as the embodiment of all the vulgarities and banalities of their time" (*Blake*, 63). The views, opinions, and morals of an artist are left permanently

¹⁸¹ Chesterton first introduces these terms to describe Briton Riviere. See Chesterton, G.K., (1900), "LITERARY PICTURES OF THE YEAR." *The Bookman* 18 (105), 79-84, <http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/docview/3030033?accountid=14540>.

imprinted in his or her work. Therefore, an artist like Stothard who does not grasp Chaucer will only be able to paint an aesthetically pretty picture of Chaucer's characters. Stothard may have understood the tale, but he did not understand the man. So, such a picture will ultimately be shallow, dishonest, and immoral. Blake's greatness lies not in his accuracy or fidelity to nature, but in his understanding of things, most importantly of humanity and God. His pictures imagine the eternity that lies at the essence of all things, especially himself. Chesterton will develop this further.

Beauty & Truth in William Blake

Chesterton thinks that Blake's firm, fixed line is the chief quality of his work (*Blake*, 17). As he explained in *G. F. Watts*, no artist made in God's image can avoid demonstrating some approach to reality in her or his style. Thus the key to Blake's philosophy is in his unique style: "No one can understand Blake's pictures, no one can understand a hundred allusions in his epigrams, satires, and art criticism who does not first of all realise that William Blake was a fanatic on the subject of the firm line" (*Blake*, 17). This follows a discussion of Blake's teacher, John Flaxman, who was "known for classicism at its clearest and coldest" (*Blake*, 16). Blake was thus an artist raised in the spirit of Greece, with its definite lines, flat perspective, and glorifying of the body. "The thing he loved most in art was that lucidity and decision of outline which can be seen best in the cartoons of Raphael, in the Elgin Marbles, and in the simpler designs of Michael Angelo. The thing he hated most in art was the thing which we now call Impressionism - the substitution of atmosphere for shape, the sacrifice of form to tint, the cloudland of the mere colourist" (*Blake*, 17-18). Clear form, solid shape, fixed line - Chesterton insists that Blake is interested in real things. Blake's style thus corresponds to fixed, objective reality, not the charming dream land that Chesterton thinks impressionism is. "[Blake] loved to think that even in being a draughtsman he was also a sculptor. When he put his lines on a decorative page he would have much preferred to carve them out of marble or cut them into rock. Like every true romantic, he loved the irrevocable" (*Blake*, 21). Such a hard and final conception of figures, from Job to Satan, shows that Blake was not lacking in courage, for, "No coward could have drawn such pictures" (*Blake*, 22). Blake's pictures are *true* in the sense that they express the true hardness, materiality, and reality of people and things. His art is never suggestive because it is never timid; "The figure of man may be a monster, but he is a solid monster. The figure of God may be a mistake but it is an unmistakable mistake" (*Blake*, 23).

Whereas Ruskin insisted on the artistic fidelity to nature in all her truth and Wilde delighted on the artistic departure from truth into the realm of the lie, Chesterton insists on artistic fidelity to existence itself - the existence of persons, animals, and especially God. The interesting aspect about Blake's art is that he even goes so far to depict a physical, circumscribed God - a God horrid to Ruskin and impossible for the

aesthetes. I will return to Blake's conception of the tangibility and solidity of God below. For now, I want to focus upon Chesterton's estimation of Blake as a philosophical Realist.

Blake's solid design is the key to understanding his realism and celebration of materiality. "For the highest dogma of the spiritual is to affirm the material" (*Blake*, 135). This is a key sentence. Blake was not a materialist, accepting the existence of *only* the material, observable, temporal realm, and neither was he an impressionist, rejecting essential truths for surface-level impressions; he was a realist. Chesterton draws a distinction between the realist of today who is merely a person who "begins at the outside of a thing: sometimes merely at the end of a thing" (*Blake*, 136)." Blake shares much with the Realist of the middle ages; "In the twelfth century a Realist mean exactly the opposite; it meant a man who began at the inside of a thing" (*Blake*, 136).

Further explaining his view of Blake's philosophical outlook, Chesterton points out, "All his animals are as absolute as the animals on a shield of heraldry" (*Blake*, 136), and then encourages the reader to test this characteristic interpretation for herself or himself. "[G]o back and read William Blake's poems about animals, as, for instance, about the lamb and about the tiger. You will see quite clearly that he is talking of an eternal tiger, who rages and rejoices forever in the sight of God. You will see that he is talking of an eternal and supernatural lamb, who can only feed happily in the fields of heaven" (*Blake*, 137). The truth of Blake's art is not the truth of Turner's art as Ruskin defended it. For Blake's animals are not anatomically correct; his trees are not drawn *en plein air*; his stars, mountains, and hills look too exaggerated to be accurate to nature. Yet this is not a problem for Blake and especially not for Chesterton, because the artist has the freedom to create even ugliness, as long as it unlocks something true. It is the artist's God-given prerogative to be creative, and in her or his creativity, an experience of the Creator himself is opened.

In an interesting passage on the brilliant *fin de siecle* artist Aubrey Beardsley, Chesterton discusses Blake's exaggeration in relation to truth. In one of the most important passage of the book, Chesterton writes,

Blake's work may be fantastic; but it is a fantasia on an old and recognisable air. It exaggerates characteristics. Blake's women are too womanish, his young men are too athletic, his old men are too preposterously old. But Aubrey Beardsley does not really exaggerate; he understates. His young men have less than the energy of youth. His women fascinate by the weakness of sex rather than by its strength. In short, one must have some truth to exaggerate.¹⁸²

¹⁸² *Blake*, 195.

Such a passage would be abhorrent to Ruskin who insisted on measured, pure, and restrained beauty in all things, from landscapes to the human figure.¹⁸³ Indeed, Chesterton's delight in exaggeration could not be farther from Ruskin's view, as he outlines in *Modern Painters* II. Ruskin writes that every school of art should have one word "relieved out in deep letters of pure gold, - Moderation" (MP II, 141). Yet Chesterton is not following Ruskin's theoretic faculty with its distinction between vital and typical beauty, its rejection of the exaggerated or crude, and its call for measured restraint. Chesterton is more akin to Pater and Wilde just here in their taste for the strange and the exaggerated. Wilde writes, "Where there is no exaggeration there is no love,"¹⁸⁴ and Chesterton wholeheartedly agrees, though with this crucial caveat: there is true exaggeration and there is false exaggeration. Chesterton writes, "The decadent mystic produces an effect not by exaggerating but by distorting. True exaggeration is a thing both subtle and austere. Caricature is a serious thing; it is almost blasphemously serious. Caricature really means making a pig more like a pig than even God has made him" (*Blake*, 195).

Coming from a talented caricaturist, this "philosophy of caricature" is further enlightening.¹⁸⁵ Chesterton's caricatures are frequently brilliant, expressive, and exaggerative, as one might expect from reading such remarks on Blake. Fifteen years after *William Blake* and after his conversion to Catholicism, Chesterton would write in the seventh chapter in his biography on Aquinas, "If things deceive us, it is by being more real than they seem. As ends in themselves they always deceive us; but as things tending to a greater end, they are even more real than we think them."¹⁸⁶ For Chesterton, Blake's art presented exaggerated forms of animals, people, and God that, rather than create a false picture, imaginatively uncovered the fact that "they are even more real than we think them." God and His creatures are strange beings, filled with divine energy and physicality.

Beauty & God in William Blake

Blake's universality and his classical influences root him simultaneously in two eras. Like Watts, Blake's imagination was also a fusion of the classical and Mediaeval, of the natural (material) and supernatural. In this fusion Chesterton sees a kind of paganism raising its head throughout different epochs.

¹⁸³ For example, see MP II, 126: "Which orderly balance and arrangement are essential to the perfect operation of the more earnest and solemn qualities of the Beautiful, as being heavenly in their nature, and contrary to the violence and disorganization of sin..." See also MP II, 139: "But the least appearance of violence or extravagance, of the want of moderation and restraint, is, I think, destructive of all beauty whatsoever in everything, colour, form, motion, language, or thought..." Ruskin also reacts strongly against "that lower host of things brilliant, magnificent, and redundant," and even more strongly against "the loose, the lawless, the exaggerated, the insolent, and the profane..." (MP II, 140).

¹⁸⁴ *Strangeness and Beauty Volume 2*, 141

¹⁸⁵ See *The Art of G. K. Chesterton*, 99-101.

¹⁸⁶ Chesterton, G. K. (1986, orig. 1923). *St Thomas Aquinas - St. Francis of Assisi, In One Volume*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 164-165.

Blake is an inheritor of this paganism, which Chesterton calls “paganism in the original and frightful forest sense - pagan magic... black magic” (*Blake*, 120). Chesterton continues, “The point is that this non-Christian supernaturalism, whether it was good or bad, was continuous in spite of Christianity. Its signs and traces can be seen in every age...” (*Blake*, 120). Then Chesterton traces this pagan supernaturalism from the dying Roman Empire through Gnosticism in the ancient Church, to the Templars of the Middle Ages, then to the 16th century Reformers, and reaching the 18th century Swedenborgianism. Blake inherits this supernatural paganism, as Chesterton calls it, and it melds with the other influences in his life. What results causes some confusion because it is difficult to pin down exactly what (or who) led Blake to his own mystical conclusions. In an interesting work from 1948, *The Theology of William Blake*, J. G. Davies has pointed out that through the years critics have held very different opinions on Blake’s religious mysticism; is he a Gnostic, a pantheist, a Swedenborgian, a Spinozan, a Manichee, a follower of Joachim of Fiore, a Platonist, or even an Orthodox Christian?¹⁸⁷ It can be added that Chesterton thought Blake had “a great deal of Swedenborg” and “a little of Cagliostro” (*Blake*, 125).

The point of ascertaining Blake’s influences, though, is to reach a conclusion about his view of Christianity. Chesterton writes, “But in both cases [of Swedenborg and Cagliostro] it can be remarked that the mysticism marks an effort to escape from or even to forget the historic Christian, and especially the Catholic Church” (*Blake*, 124). Blake’s religion had little to do with the historical Church. Like Watts, Blake’s art often concerns primordial things and primeval stories. His pictures are charged with complex symbols and allegorical figures. As Chesterton writes, Blake paints the essence of a thing - the first, primal fact is it has an outline, a form, and a reality apart from our minds.

Therefore, in Chesterton’s opinion, Blake’s genius eclipses his digression and irrelevance that was due to the esotericism of the 18th century. As Chesterton puts it, after we have allowed for such eccentricities due to the influence of Swedenborg and others, “All that follows is himself,” that is, Blake the great creator and genius, whose theology took some unexpected turns, still in the end is able to imagine so clearly those “eternal images of things,” whether they are animals, people, or God Himself, with unsurpassed power (*Blake*, 126, 160). Ultimately this is Blake’s greatest triumph: the depiction of the Deity as the personal God-Man. Other theologians have followed Chesterton in declaring that despite Blake’s heterodoxy, the whole spirit of his art and poetry is undeniably Christian. At the very centre of Blake’s theology Chesterton sees the joyous truth of personal God.¹⁸⁸

Yes, from the beginning of this book Chesterton makes the case that central to understanding Blake is understanding his faith in a personal, definite God; on the first page we find, “William Blake would have

¹⁸⁷ Davies, J. G. (1948). *The Theology of William Blake*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. 2.

¹⁸⁸ *The Theology of William Blake*, 161.

been the first to understand that the biography of anybody ought really to begin with the words, ‘In the beginning God created heaven and earth... the only right way of telling a story is to begin at the beginning - at the beginning of the world’ (*Blake*, 1-2). William Blake’s visual works express in a fantastic way the awestruck imagination of the supernatural. Despite his esoteric, spiritualist, and occult eccentricities, Blake’s overall point of view was God-oriented and ultimately concerned with the knowability of God. Chesterton emphasizes this and thus describes him as having “a matured and massive supernaturalism” that is reflected in both style and content in his poems, artwork, and prophetic works (*Blake*, 9).

The essence of Blake’s theology is found in his etchings for the Book of Job, and in certain poems. Citing Blake’s poem “Auguries of Innocence,” Chesterton explicates Blake’s theological genius (*Blake*, 147). The lines he has in mind are these:

God appears, and God is light,
To those poor souls who dwell in Night;
But does a human form display
To those who dwell in realms of Day.¹⁸⁹

Blake says that God is blinding, impersonal light to those who dwell in night - in ignorance, but to those who dwell in the day - in imagination and wonder - God’s true form is revealed as that of a Man. The idea is echoed in Blake’s seventeenth illustration for the Book of Job. The verse is Job 42:5 which reads, “I have heard thee with the hearing of the ear but now my eye seeth thee.”¹⁹⁰ Blake provides a “final and fixed” image of this idea again; the sun pours out from a solid, muscular man, with a mighty beard that reaches nearly to the ground. This fixed figure is God himself. He is in the act of blessing Job and Job’s wife as they face him. All the while, Job’s friends are turned the other way, huddled together and cowering from this great God-Man, this Ancient of Days (*Blake*, 44-45).

This figure of the Deity takes on a regular form in Blake’s art. This is a Deity which is not an immaterial light nor an impersonal force; he is “the old man with the monstrous muscles, the mild stern eyebrows, the long smooth silver hair and beard” (*Blake*, 149). The idea is reflected in both Blake’s poetry and his artwork. Urizen, a divine creator in Blake’s mystical system, is likewise a concrete, personal being. In Blake’s frontispiece for his *Europe: A Prophecy* he has depicted Urizen as the “Ancient of Days” in an intensely coloured scene: he crouches in a posture of potential energy as he holds out a compass from the

¹⁸⁹ Sampson, John; Raleigh, Walter, (1905), *The Lyrical Poems of William Blake*, London: Oxford University Press, 142.

¹⁹⁰ Damon, S. Foster, (1966), *Blake’s Job: William Blake’s Illustrations of the Book of Job*, Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University Press, 45

midst of elemental, blood-red clouds.¹⁹¹ This shows that “God, though infinitely gigantic, should be as solid as a giant... Here, according to his own conceptions, he may be said to have drawn God from the life” (*Blake*, 66). Whether or not Urizen is actually God is beside the point; Blake makes Urizen and his other divine characters correspond to God and the angels. These are personal, divine beings that are central to Blake’s system. Chesterton enumerates the most important lessons of this universal artist when he writes on the final page, “[Blake] reiterates with passionate precision that which is lovable can be adorable, that deity is either a person or a puff of wind, that the more we know of higher things the more palpable and incarnate we shall find them; that the form filling the heavens is the likeness of the appearance of a man” (*Blake*, 210).

To summarise Chesterton’s arguments: all of creation is a wondrous image to be received in child-like innocence; nature exists as an outline of eternal realities. Blake is the genius - the “universalist” who achieves the balance of artist and philosopher - who is able to outline eternity for us because God has given him, along with all of us, creativity. This is the truth Chesterton finds in Blake’s art; God has an outline - the outline of the incarnated Jesus.

¹⁹¹ Blake, William, (1794), *Europe: A Prophecy*, 17 plates relief etched, Lambeth, Special Collection RX 132, Glasgow University Library, Special Collections Department, accessed 25/10/2016.

Conclusion - Chesterton's Recovery

“For imagination is almost the opposite of illusion.”

-G. K. Chesterton¹⁹²

John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and Gilbert Keith Chesterton may be an unlikely group to pull together in a thesis on theological aesthetics. Ruskin’s tendency to moralise in his writings could not be further from the cry of ‘art for art’s sake’ coming from Pater and Wilde. Chesterton’s overtly Catholic creed and love of dogma clashes with Pater and Wilde’s sympathies. Yet together these four writers form a bridge between late Romanticism and Modernism through the Victorian Era. They represent a progression in theological aesthetics that culminates in G. K. Chesterton at the close of the Victorian Age. Chesterton’s recovery of Catholic religion and his “democratic mysticism” was a response, couched in the language of the Symbolist Movement, to the aesthetics of Theoria and ‘art for art’s sake.’ Through the interpretive framework employed in this essay I have shown that there is every reason to study these critics together.

John Ruskin, sees the natural world as the primary realm of God’s relation to humanity, and the natural phenomena of the world as God’s primary mode of revelation. Ruskin’s evangelicalism and Victorian “honest doubt” contribute to an aesthetic that seeks to cope with the loss of faith narrative that Miller, Shaffer, and others have demonstrated.

Ruskin’s aesthetic, Theoria, inhabits the realm of natural theology, and his characterisation of God in his monumental *Modern Painters* is that of a magnanimous Father figure, bestowing gifts upon humanity. From the right perception of and knowledge of these gifts, humans can then come to know Him in some way. Artists, especially landscape artists, have the duty to tell the truth to the populace. Art is a moral endeavor because like any other activity, it is either rooted in one’s relationship to other people and to God, or else it flows from one’s own selfishness, pride, and doubt. For Ruskin’s link between beauty and morality/truth, he established the most important theological aesthetic in England during the century. However, as I argue above in chapter 1, Ruskin is unable to account for imperfection, sin, and suffering in his system. Ruskin’s faith in Christ as his redeemer is not in question here, but rather, what place Ruskin gave to Christ as the Son of Man in the theoretic faculty. The answer is, as we have seen, none. In *Modern Painters II* we see Ruskin’s disgust with the crucifixion scenes painted by Giotto and Fra Angelico. We read of his distrust of “Romanism” trying to “excite the languid sympathies of its untaught flocks” through the images of Christ bleeding and of Christ suffering (MP II, 201). We encounter his views of ancient Greek art compared to Mediaeval Italian art; Greek art (and neo-classical art) with its fleshy, muscular forms are far from the truth

¹⁹² *Autobiography*, 31. Chesterton writes this because imagination demonstrates to the imaginator the existence of herself or himself!

of actual bodies and are aberrations. Ruskin writes, “No herculean form is spiritual, for it is degrading the spiritual creature to suppose it operative through impulse of bone and sinew; its power is immaterial and constant...” (MP II, 327). This is crucial to our understanding of Ruskin’s *Theoria*. Ruskin’s system, which did exert such influence throughout the Victorian era, is doing something rather old-fashioned; it is arguing about God’s existence.

In this critical age of “honest doubt,” Pater finds newfound meaning and great glory in the human body, with all its muscles and bones. In one of Pater’s essays on the artist-poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, he writes, “Practically, the church of the Middle Age by its aesthetic worship, its sacramentalism, its real faith in the resurrection of the flesh, had set itself up against the Manichean opposition of spirit and matter, and its results in men’s way of taking life;”¹⁹³ Pater goes on to say, “Dante is the central representative of its spirit. To him, in the vehement and impassioned heat of his conceptions, the material and the spiritual are fused and blend: if the spiritual attains the definite visibility of a crystal, what is material loses its earthiness and impurity.”¹⁹⁴ Pater’s problem is that his ‘art for art’s sake’ has no real hope. For him life is a series of gasps until one finally dies. To burn with great passion is the final goal of each person, at least of those who have not yet encountered God.

Yet Pater understands better than most art critics of his time the inextricable reality of the flesh from the spirit in Catholic Christianity. He sees the fear of the flesh which arose within prudish Christendom of the Victorian Age. So he reacts. He will have no dogmas - just sensations. Those brilliant sensations which have the power of liberating a person from her or his situation, and opening up a “new kingdom of feeling, and sensation, and thought, not opposed to but only beyond and independent of the spiritual system...” (*Renaissance*, 6). While Pater does not discover God in human flesh, the Christ who is not a part of a system but can be found at the centre of all things, he does suggest in his writings that he longed for a kind of sacramental encounter, an experience which would govern one’s whole life by its power and complexity: “Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end” (*Renaissance*, 236).

Yet Pater’s conclusion in *The Renaissance* is a desperate grasp for truth, ultimate meaning, and God in a world of his own where things have no meaning above their own charm. For no amount of exquisite experiences can, apart from a telos, lead to the “breaking of the light.”¹⁹⁵ No amount of exquisite, “vital forces” can stave off death. Pater’s final command to the reader (or young critic) to “see and touch,” and to do this so often that there is not time to even concoct theories is a contradiction itself, for Pater’s conclusion is his own desperate theory. Aesthesia in Pater provides a framework for interpreting sensual perceptions,

¹⁹³ “Dante Gabriel Rossetti,” included in *Strangeness and Beauty Volume 2*, 67

¹⁹⁴ *Strangeness and Beauty, Volume 2*, 67-68.

¹⁹⁵ The “breaking of the light” in a spiritual sense is what he longed for. See quote on page 48 above.

but not for making any sense out of them. His disciple, Oscar Wilde, would take his art for art's sake credo a step further.

For Wilde, aesthetic contemplation should be the goal and end of every person's life. For beauty is the "symbol of symbols... When it shows itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world" (*Intentions*, 158). Beauty is such a revealing force that it changes life; real life does not change our perceptions of beauty. Wilde writes that "it is none the less true that Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" (*Intentions*, 90). Ruskin would disagree but Chesterton would agree. For the Greeks did, as Wilde reminds us, place beautiful statue near the bridal bed, with the belief that beauty in the heart gives birth to beauty in the life and the body (*Intentions*, 91). Wilde realised that artists must not attempt to use beauty as a tool for some other purpose, because ethics and art must not be thoughtlessly mingled. He saw that the power of beauty was lessened when it was harnessed to some other purpose than the mere purpose of creating exquisite delight, in short, a mood (*Intentions*, 179). In insisting on the separation of aesthetics from any metaphysical or religious system, Wilde does offer a corrective to Ruskin's Theoria, with its tendency to devalue the flesh in all its physicality, but Wilde offers no alternative, no means to actually realise fully the ultimate meaning which Theoria gives because of God. Wilde imagines that criticism will eliminate "race-prejudices by insisting upon the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms" (*Intentions*, 203), and that critics will eventually carry Europe to "the perfection of which the saints have dreamed" (*Intentions*, 205), but in this picture Wilde has no real answers as to why eliminating "race-prejudices" is good, or why saintly perfection is desirable. With no God in his Aesthesia, Wilde's *Intentions* themselves become beautiful lies, themselves. His very criticism is a work of art that delights and provokes without giving a substantial answer to fragmentation of the age and the quest for God at the *fin de siècle*.

Then G. K. Chesterton arises in 1899-1900. He is an unlikely figure to pull together these different approaches, yet he does just this, and in his art criticism he makes an original contribution. For Chesterton does not fit the same mold as Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde, and so can draw from them what he will. A brilliant autodidact, Chesterton came onto the literary scene in an abrupt and unexpected way, first by writing reviews of art books for *The Bookman*. With his *G. F. Watts* (1904) and later his *William Blake* (1910), Chesterton is able to fully articulate a theological aesthetic which directly encounters Theoria and Aesthesia at the close of the century. Chesterton's aesthetic is a Symbolist response to the doubt and skepticism of the age, rooted in the Christian conception of Jesus Christ as the Son of Man and Son of God, enfleshed for humanity's sake. All symbols, beautiful and even ugly, reflect in some way the fundamental truths of humanity, made in the Image of God and saved by the Image of the Invisible God. Spirit and flesh are combined in the paradox of the Incarnation.

I have demonstrated why I interpret his position in view of the Symbolist movement, and why I see it as something that pulls a variety of approaches together, that is, it combines Ruskin's theological centre with Pater and Wilde's views of the human body. Perhaps, more deeply, Chesterton embraces Ruskin's God with Pater and Wilde's artist. Chesterton does not think that the artist must have fidelity to the outward vision of nature, but the inward vision. It has been given to all people to become artists, that is, to *draw the truth out* of things. The style of art does not matter, but only what it expresses about each human's uniqueness. Without arguing about the existence of God, Chesterton sees that the image of God in woman and in man must be proven first. If he shows that each individual is an artist with godlike powers, godlike vision, godlike creativity, then the inference is left to the reader to encounter the Giver of such gifts.

In arguing that Chesterton's Anthropocentric and Christocentric symbolism is a synthesis of *Theoria* and *Aesthesia*, I hopefully have also demonstrated that Chesterton deserves to be seen as a unique art critic in his own right. Because of his vast journalistic output and his autodidacticism, which confounds any scholarly enquiry into discovering the sources of many of his views, parsing out particular theories from Chesterton may be a difficult task. This is why his *Autobiography*, in which he outlines his many friendships and influences, is such an aid.

For in reflecting on his life, Chesterton reflects on the place of imagination in his childhood and writes about his first memory. It is one that he returns to time and again as being his most formative memory, is of a scene he witnessed as a little child. Chapter II begins, "The very first thing I can ever remember seeing with my own eyes was a young man walking across a bridge. He had a curly moustache and an attitude of confidence verging on swagger. He carried in his hand a disproportionately large key of a shining yellow metal and wore a large golden or gilded crown... In the castle there was one window, out of which a young lady was looking."¹⁹⁶ These comments regarding his earliest memory shed light upon his entire body of work. They are immensely entertaining if one keeps in mind that Chesterton does not preface them with any information about the masterful puppet shows his father would create. This puppet show is a symbol, and Chesterton writes that this particular scene "glows in my memory like a glimpse of some incredible paradise."¹⁹⁷ For him it comes to represent the idea that most people have forgotten the divine truth, the magic, that penetrates all of reality. It is through the romantic thrill of the toy theatre that we remember that we have forgotten something, that we have been looking at life wrongly. The puppets are symbols for Chesterton, of exactly what he does not reveal until the final chapter where he reminisces about a trip he once took. He was walking with a friend in a Polish town when the friend said, "You take off your hat here." Chesterton obliged, without knowing why, and then tells the reader,

¹⁹⁶ *Autobiography*, 31.

¹⁹⁷ *Autobiography*, 34.

And then I saw the open street. It was filled with a vast crowd, all facing me; and all on their knees on the ground. It was as if someone were walking behind me; or some strange bird were hovering over my head. I faced round, and saw in the centre of the arch great windows standing open, unsealing a chamber full of gold and colours; there was a picture behind; but parts of the whole picture were moving like a puppet-show, stirring strange double memories like a dream of the bridge in the puppet-show of my childhood; and then I realised that from those shifting groups there shone and sounded the ancient magnificence of the Mass.¹⁹⁸

The puppet show symbolises the magic that the Mass enacts, where the priest reveals the great truth, Christ Himself, through ordinary means. There the full, sacramental presence of Christ's body and blood are soon to be found in the common, earthly elements. Only one must have the eyes of faith to see such a transformation. One must have eyes like Chesterton's to see that the world and all the things in it are truly astonishing because they are truly symbols for the eternal. One must have eyes of faith, wonder, and gratitude to see one's own unique self, made in the Image of God; we have been looking falsely, or perhaps, not at all.

¹⁹⁸ *Autobiography*, 318.

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