Aesthetics within the Humanities: The Good, the Beautiful, and the True

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Issue Editor
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GOOD (AND BEAUTIFUL) NEWS FOR POSTMODERN APOLOGISTS

DOUGLAS KEITH BLOUNT

“Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it never comes to the aid of spiritual things, but more frequently than not struggles against the divine Word, treating with contempt all that emanates from God.”

Martin Luther

“No one is unaware that there are two ways by which opinions are received into the soul, which are its two principle powers: understanding and will. The most natural is by the understanding, for we ought never to consent to any but demonstrated truths; but the most usual, although against nature, is by the will. For every man is almost always led to believe not through proof, but through that which is attractive.”

Blaise Pascal

“What is now decisive against Christianity is our taste, no longer our reason.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

ABSTRACT. This paper concerns the practice of Christian apologetics in postmodern contexts. Although postmodernists eschew modern accounts of rationality, contemporary apologists typically view their discipline as aimed at providing arguments and evidence for Christianity in terms of such accounts. Therefore no one should be surprised that those arguments and evidence fail to persuade postmodern audiences. Given this situation, Christian apologists need to embrace a broader, more comprehensive vision of their task, one unfettered by distinctively modern commitments. The way forward involves appreciating the significance of aesthetic judgment within postmodern contexts and pursuing an apologetic path designed to exploit that significance. The first section of this paper discusses Nietzsche as setting the stage for postmodern perspectives according to which aesthetic judgment—or, as he puts it, taste—

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becomes the guide; the second section discusses Athenagoras of Athens as providing a vision for Christian apologetics that appeals to such judgment. The paper concludes that Athenagoras’s vision, which emphasizes the beauty and goodness of the faith rather than its rationality, provides an important corrective and useful guide for apologists inclined to focus exclusively on arguments and evidence à la modernity.

KEY WORDS: beauty, philosophy, apologetics, Nietzsche, Athenagoras

Introduction
Christian apologists typically understand their discipline to aim at demonstrating the rationality of Christian belief. For instance, William Lane Craig states, “Apologetics... is that branch of Christian theology which seeks to provide a rational justification for the truth claims of the Christian faith” (Craig, 2008: 15, emphasis added). Similarly, Douglas Groothuis writes, “Christian apologetics is the rational defense of the Christian worldview as objectively true, rationally compelling and existentially or subjectively engaging” (Groothuis, 2011: 24, emphasis added). For contemporary apologists, then, demonstrating the rationality of Christian belief constitutes their discipline’s raison d’être (see, for instance, Steven B. Cowan, 2000: 8; J. P. Moreland, 1987: 11; and R. C. Sproul, 2003: 13). Such apologists see such demonstration not simply as one goal among many at which their apologetic activities aim, but rather as the end toward which all such activities properly aim. In what follows, I suggest that, while such a construal of the apologist’s task might be appropriate in a modern context, it is overly restrictive in a postmodern one. Apologists working in postmodern contexts thus need not construe their task solely—or even primarily—in terms of demonstrating the rationality of Christianity; in fact, effective apologetic ministry in such contexts not only permits but also requires a broader, more comprehensive vision of the apologist’s task.

But whence comes such a vision? And what does it look like? Fortunately, it is not far to seek, arising—as it does—from the ancient Christian apologetic tradition; and it understands the apologist’s task not as providing compelling arguments and convincing evidence but rather as painting a compelling portrait of the faith lived out. In the preceding argument, I provide a preliminary account of this vision. Before doing so, however, I seek first to motivate it.

I. Nietzsche and Reason’s Descent
The postmodern turn presents apologists with a daunting challenge. For whatever separates various postmodern perspectives from one another,
they speak with one voice concerning Enlightenment accounts of rationality (thus, what unites postmodernists is not what they accept but rather what they reject, see Jean-François Lyotard, 1984: xxiv, where he says: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives”). In so doing, they eschew such accounts, seeing them as overly optimistic about humanity’s ability to arrive at truth. Postmodernists take a skeptical view of knowledge, seeing truth in any objective sense as unattainable. Knowledge being beyond our kin, the best we can do is construct an account of the world which serves our purposes and, in light of that account, seek to make our lives beautiful by our own lights. I take this to be not only the point Nietzsche intends his work to make but also the end toward which he set himself (see Alexander Nehamas, 1985).

Modern apologists pursued their calling, appropriately enough, in accordance with the spirit of their age; and, of course, that meant defending the faith with arguments that carry weight with modernists. In short, such apologists trimmed their sails to the intellectual winds of the day, seeking to attract unbelievers with reasons they would find persuasive. As modernity has waned, however, the arguments and evidence useful for persuading a modern audience have become passé at best, counter-productive at worst. Having weighed modern accounts of rationality, postmodernists have found them wanting; naturally enough, then, they refuse to be impressed—much less persuaded—by apologetic strategies attuned to modern sensibilities. Such sophisticates see historic, orthodox Christianity as unattractive. It fails, as Nietzsche states, to satisfy their taste; and postmodernists need no further reason to reject it. So reject it they do.

Nietzsche himself lays the groundwork for postmodernity’s escape from reason by boldly proclaiming God’s death (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1977: 203). In so doing, he does not mean that God has literally died. For, of course, one cannot die unless one first exists; and on his view, God never existed in the first place. In proclaiming God’s death, then, Nietzsche makes a point not about God but rather about humanity: we can no longer reconcile God’s

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5 Perhaps it will be suggested that the obvious path for contemporary apologists to take involves developing arguments that appeal to the postmodern conception of rationality. But, the question arises, which postmodernist? Whose conception of rationality should apologists target? For, of course, postmodernists present us not with a unified conception of rationality to which arguments can be tailored, but rather with a bewildering, fragmented array of such conceptions. In short, there simply is no “postmodern conception of rationality” in light of which apologists can do their work. This does not, however, signal “the end of apologetics” (see Myron Bradley Penner, 2013).

6 As Nietzsche sees it, God’s death leads to the dissolution of all traditional values, not just moral ones; as things go for good and evil, then, so also they go for rationality and irrationality.
existence with the world as we experience it; for us, “belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable” (Nietzsche, 1977: 208-9). According to Nietzsche, talk about God’s dying refers not to some deity’s actual demise but rather to our realization that no divine being ever existed in the first place.

But if God never existed, we ourselves have not been divinely created; and in that case, our lives have no divinely appointed purpose. We thus exist to no purpose; our lives lack meaning. Rather than pursuing destinies and fulfilling purposes established by a benevolent Creator, we find ourselves in a world marked by pointless pain and suffering, adrift on a sea of misery. God’s death makes orphans of us all; worse still, we become mere cogs in a dystopian machine.

As this suggests, Nietzsche sees the world as ugly. Indeed, if we were honest with ourselves about the world and our place in it, we could not bear it. “Honesty”, he tells us, “would bring disgust and suicide in its train” (Nietzsche, 1977: 131). According to legend, King Midas seizes the wood-god Silenus, forcing him to tell the king what is best and most excellent for humans. “Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and tribulation”, Silenus answers, “why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you not to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach [:] not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1999, § 3: 22-23). “Once truth has been seen”, Nietzsche writes, “the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks; now... he grasps the wisdom of the wood-god Silenus: he feels revulsion” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1999, § 7: 40).

Fortunately, however, we have a means of coping. Art veils our eyes so that we do not despair; it makes our absurd, anguished, meaningless lives bearable by distracting us and obscuring truths which, if faced honestly, would debilitate us. It provides a “cult of the untrue” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1977: 131), serving as a palliative for the truth. Beauty, not truth, thus saves us; indeed, beauty saves us from truth! “There is no pre-established harmony”, Nietzsche tells us, “between the furtherance of truth and the well-being of mankind” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1977: 198). If our rational faculties help us survive, it is only because they lead us away from, rather than toward, truth.7

Despite all this, Nietzsche sees God’s death as cause for celebration rather than mourning. “We philosophers and ‘free spirits’”, he writes, “in fact feel at the news that the ‘old God is dead’ as if illumined by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude...” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1977: 209).

7 See Nietzsche, 1977: 198: “The irrationality of a thing is no argument against its existence, rather a condition of it.”
God’s demise, it seems, is not debilitating but rather liberating. For it means we are no longer accountable. “The concept ‘God’”, he writes, “has hitherto been the greatest objection to existence... We deny God; in denying God, we deny accountability: only by doing that do we redeem the world” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1990, § VI: 8, 54). With God dead, then, we are free to be our own masters, to be our own gods:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives—who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it? (Nietzsche, 1977: 203).

As this suggests, God’s death provides an opportunity; it creates a void that Nietzsche invites us to fill. With God dead and the established moral order overthrown, we become painters with clean, fresh, white canvases. For us, anything is possible, if only we have the courage and vision to fill the void, to apply the brush!

Nietzsche thus calls us not only to stare the apparent meaninglessness of life full in the face without blinking, but also to embrace it. He gives us the clean, fresh, white canvases. But what shall we paint? Whatever we will, he says; whatever pleases us. And what will guide us? Not morality, for it has been overthrown; not reason, for it too has been overthrown. What then? Taste; yes, taste will be our guide. “As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still endurable to us”, Nietzsche writes, “and through art we are given eye and hand, and above all a good conscience, to enable us to make of ourselves such a phenomenon” (Nietzsche, 1977: 131). To embrace the meaninglessness of life and make for oneself a life beautiful by one’s own lights—that is the task Nietzsche sets for those who, like him, have moved beyond modernity.

Now those intending to present the gospel as good news for postmodernists must find ways of attracting them that do not presuppose the modern epistemology they find wanting. In short, contemporary apologists must find ways of helping postmodernists see the faith as attractive, as beautiful and good.\footnote{While the faith is in fact beautiful and good (as well as true), the apologist’s task is not simply to assert—or even argue for—its beauty and goodness. Rather, her task is to help the unbeliever see it as such.} Plato long ago suggested that beauty, goodness and truth are inextricably linked. If this suggestion has merit—and I believe it does—then helping others see the beauty and goodness of the faith turns out to be
another way of helping them see its truth. In a postmodern world, moreover, aesthetic appeals—that is, appeals aimed at the aesthetic sensibilities or taste of one's audience—are as likely to bring people to faith as rational ones. It is to an ancient apologist who, though a skilled philosopher, emphasizes not the faith’s rationality but rather its beauty that our discussion now turns.

II. Athenagoras and Beauty’s Ascent
Athenagoras of Athens writes *Embassy for the Christians* sometime between A.D. 176 and 180, approximately twenty-five to thirty years after the appearance of Justin Martyr’s two apologies. So cogent, elegant, and well-structured is his prose that noted patrologist Johannes Quasten describes Athenagoras as “unquestionably the most eloquent of the early Christian apologists” (Quasten, 1962, vol. 1: 229). He addresses his *Embassy* to Roman Emperors Marcus Aurelius Antoninus and Lucius Aurelius Commodus, to whom he appeals for justice on behalf of the Christian community. In making his appeal, Athenagoras responds to three charges that had been brought against that community: first, that Christians are atheists; second, that they practice cannibalism; and third, that they engage in incest.

The accusation of atheism apparently arose from the refusal of Christians to worship pagan gods or to participate in the religious rites of the cities in which they lived; and it is not surprising that literally-minded pagan observers misinterpreted the Eucharistic meal, participation in which involves Christians in symbolically eating the body and drinking the blood of their Lord, as cannibalistic. Moreover, both the practice of Christian couples referring to one another as “brother” and “sister” and Christian rhetoric encouraging radical love within the community were open to misunderstanding. So an uncomprehending pagan world’s misperceptions of the early church and the accusations to which those misperceptions gave rise need not surprise us. In response to those accusations, Athenagoras seeks to give his readers a clear, accurate picture of the community against which they had been brought. Here his strategy is obvious: by showing that they arise from mischaracterizations of Christian belief and practice, he hopes to deprive the accusations of their force.

After greeting the Emperors according to the custom of the day, Athenagoras assures them that he seeks only the justice extended to all their subjects. Such justice, he argues, has been denied Christians simply because of the name they bear.

We too, then, beg to enjoy this equity of yours towards all and not to be objects of hatred and castigation because we are called Christians—for what evil does our name produce by itself?—but to be judged for anything that anyone may lay to our account. Let us be discharged when we explain away the charges or let us
be punished if found to be guilty; not guilty of our name merely—for no Christian is wicked unless he play false to his profession—but guilty of a crime (Athenagoras, 1956: 31-32).

Athenagoras’s words here echo Paul’s in Acts 25:11, perhaps indicating a common theme in early Christian apology.

Of the three accusations, the first—the charge of atheism—receives the lion’s share of Athenagoras’s attention. In fact, though he devotes twenty-seven of the Embassy’s thirty-seven chapters to rebutting that charge, the other two accusations together receive only six chapters’ worth of attention. This does not mean, however, that Athenagoras views the two latter charges as less serious. Rather, he sees his response to the charge of atheism as making unnecessary a lengthy response to the other two charges. For, as will become apparent, elements of his response to the first charge apply *mutatis mutandis* to the second and third charges.

Athenagoras begins his response to the charge of atheism by arguing that Christian “doctrine introduces one God, creator of this world, Himself unbegotten (for it is not Being that is subject to Becoming, but not-Being), and says that all things are made by the Word that proceeds from Him...” (Athenagoras, 1956: 34). Against those who defined “atheism” not as the belief that there is no God but rather as the failure to acknowledge the pagan gods and take part in the rituals of one’s community, Athenagoras points out the similarity between the Christian doctrine of God and the views of various Greek thinkers, most notably Plato, who were not seen as atheists. “If now Plato is no atheist, recognizing one unbegotten God as the maker of all things”, he states, “neither are we atheists, since we know and cherish that being as God by whose Word all things are made and by whose Spirit all things are held in being” (Athenagoras, 1956: 35). In addition to Plato, Athenagoras quotes two poets, Euripides and Sophocles, and cites Aristotle, the Stoics, and several Pythagoreans as all agreeing with the Christian view that there is only one God (Athenagoras, 1956: 34-37). Moreover, he argues, the Christian understanding of God turns out to be more solidly grounded than the views of these Greek thinkers because they arrived at their views by conjecture whereas Christians arrive at their view as a result of the Spirit working through the prophets (Athenagoras, 1956: 37).

Thus, Athenagoras sets before his readers the Christian view that there is only one God, the “creator of all this world”, and argues that it is similar—though superior—to the views of a number of well-respected Greek think-
ers. Having thus recommended to his readers the Christian view of the matter, he next sets out to undermine their confidence in the pagan alternative to that view. In so doing, he presents a sophisticated—though somewhat cumbersome—*reductio ad absurdum* argument against the view that there are two or more gods. With the view that there is only one God apparently established by argument, Athenagoras again turns his attention to Old Testament prophets, arguing that the Christian view rests ultimately upon the authority of the Spirit who speaks through those prophets “as a flautist might play upon his flute” (Athenagoras, 1956: 39).

Instructive, and perhaps surprising, is the fact that Athenagoras, described by one early church historian as a man who “became a Christian while he wore the philosopher’s cloak and was at the head of the Academy” (see Philip of Side, quoted by Schoedel, “Introduction”, in Athenagoras, 1972: ix), follows up the most sophisticated argument of his apology with an appeal to the work accomplished by the Spirit through the prophets. His point: “Consider this sophisticated argument for the truth of the Christian doctrine that there is only one God; but if that argument seems unconvincing, look to the prophets whose words are the guarantor of the faith’s truth.” According to Athenagoras, then, it is not the sophisticated argument which guarantees the truth of what the prophets say but rather the prophets’ voice—or, more precisely, the voice of the Spirit speaking through the prophets—which guarantees the truth of the conclusion reached by that argument.

The prophets proclaim, and Christians thus believe, that there is only one God (Athenagoras, 1956: 39-40). But while they believe there exists only one God, Christians also believe both that God has a Son, “Word of the Father in thought and power”, and that the prophetic Spirit is “an outflow from God, flowing out and returning like a ray of the sun” (Athenagoras, 1956: 40). “Who then”, Athenagoras asks, “would not be amazed hearing those called atheists who call God Father and Son and Holy Spirit, proclaiming their power in unity and in rank their diversity?” (Athenagoras, 1956: 40, 41)

So, in response to the first accusation, Athenagoras maintains that (1) Christians, like numerous Greek thinkers, believe in one God, (2) whom they call Father, Son, and Spirit, (3) the latter’s voice, having spoken through the prophets, providing the ultimate foundation for Christian doctrine, (4) though sophisticated arguments can be mustered to show the absurdity of pagan belief. But his response to the charge of atheism reaches its climax as Athenagoras shifts the focus away from the doctrine of God affirmed by Christians and toward their social teachings and practices.

By the dogmas to which we give assent, not man-made but divine and taught by God, we are able to persuade you that you have not to regard us as you would
atheists. What are those sayings on which we are brought up? I shall tell you: Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that persecute you, that you may be the children of your Father who is in heaven, who maketh His sun to rise upon the good and the bad, and raineth upon the just and the unjust (Athenagoras, 1956: 41).


Yet, within the Christian community, one finds genuine magnanimity—true greatness of soul—where one least expects it.

But amongst us you might find simple folk, artisans and old women, who, if they are unable to furnish in words the assistance they derive from our doctrine, yet show in their deeds the advantage that accrues from their resolution. They do not rehearse words but show forth good deeds; struck, they do not strike back, plundered, they do not prosecute; to them that ask they give, and they love their neighbors as themselves (Athenagoras, 1956: 42).

So, as he brings to its climax his primary line of defense for the authenticity of Christian belief in God, Athenagoras appeals neither to sophisticated arguments nor to doctrines which would surely seem obscure to pagan minds. Instead, he appeals to the nobility of those whose lives are shaped by their Christian commitments. Thus, as he sees it, the ultimate test of authenticity for Christian commitment—as well as the final vindication of Christian belief—lies in the power of the gospel to ennoble those within the Christian community to lives of extraordinary goodness. Not only does the love which characterizes the church mark her off as Christ’s community, but it also serves as the final defense of the truth of the faith which she confesses.

Before turning his attention to the other two accusations, Athenagoras anticipates objections likely to be raised against his response to the charge of atheism. Against those who think that Christians’ unwillingness to make sacrifices shows them to be atheists, he argues that—though God, being perfect, needs no burnt offerings—Christians offer to him “a bloodless sacrifice, our reasonable service” (Athenagoras, 1956: 44). Moreover, since pagans themselves disagree from city to city about which gods to worship, Chris-

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10 Although he does not make the point explicitly, Athenagoras’s discussion of pagan gods suggests that they, like pagan philosophers, live far less virtuously than the lowliest Christian.
11 Cf. Romans 1:16-17.
tians’ failure to worship any particular city’s gods does not make them atheists (Athenagoras, 1956: 44-45). In defense of the refusal to worship statues of the gods, Athenagoras argues that the statues—like the gods they represent—had a beginning in time and thus are not divine (Athenagoras, 1956: 49-51). While these statues might appear to manifest divine power, such appearances result from demonic activity (Athenagoras, 1956: 59-63).

Having emphasized the moral virtue of the Christian community in responding to the first accusation, Athenagoras deals with the other two accusations in relatively short order. For, he states, “I know that by what I have already said I have fully cleared myself; for you will realize, being without peers in wisdom, that those whose life has God for its rule will never come even to conceive the idea of the least transgression” (Athenagoras, 1956: 72). In response to the second accusation, he argues that Christian belief in both eternal life and eternal judgment ensures that Christians would not engage in cannibalism (Athenagoras, 1956: 72-73). Moreover, though cannibalism typically involves murder, Christians “are known to be unwilling to countenance even lawful homicide” such as occurs in the gladiatorial contests sponsored by the Emperors themselves (Athenagoras, 1956: 75-76). In response to the third accusation, Athenagoras notes the irony of Christians being falsely accused of, and persecuted for, activities in which the pagan gods engage with impunity (Athenagoras, 1956: 73). Their commitment to sexual purity makes charges that Christians engage in incest absurd.

But so far are we removed from promiscuity that it is not allowed us even to look with passion upon another; for, as Scripture says, *he that shall look on a woman to lust after her, hath already committed adultery with her in his heart.* God made our eyes to be a light to us, and we may not use them otherwise. For us a wanton glance is adultery, seeing that our eyes are made for a different purpose, and we are judged for what is no more than a thought. How then could such as ourselves fail to enjoy a reputation for chastity? (Athenagoras, 1956: 73)

Athenagoras closes the *Embassy* with a final plea as well as a pledge on behalf of the church both to pray for the Emperors and to live quiet, peaceable, and obedient lives (Athenagoras, 1956: 78).

Rather than emphasizing the faith’s rationality, Athenagoras emphasizes the goodness of Christian social practices and the beauty of the believing community’s life together. While one might construe his emphasis on such goodness and beauty in evidentiary terms—as rational evidence for Christianity’s truth—such a construal seems strained. Certainly, Athenagoras’s primary interest lies not in demonstrating the faith’s rationality—much less its truth—but rather in correcting his unbelieving audience’s misunderstandings of the faith. In so doing, he invites closer scrutiny of individual believers in particular and of the church in general. While the testimony of
the “simple folk” whom the church comprises cannot equal the rhetoric of pagan philosophers when it comes to eloquence, the lives of such folk nonetheless outshine the lives of those philosophers; however impressive the arguments of the philosophers may be, especially when compared to the testimony of the church’s “artisans and old women”, more impressive still is the Spirit-filled community’s life. As Athenagoras and other early Christian apologists see it, then, the beauty and goodness of the faith lived out serve as its ultimate vindication.

### III. Denouement

In important respects, the situation in which apologists now find themselves resembles that of their ancient forebears. Like Athenagoras, contemporary apologists work within a radically pluralistic culture, one in which numerous religious perspectives compete. Such radical pluralism “triggers the commonly heard response that one religion or set of values is as good as any other” (Dennis Hollinger, in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, 1995: 185). Like their ancient forebears, then, today’s apologists work in contexts in which Christianity is seen as simply one tradition among many equally legitimate ones; and for the most part, their unbelieving contemporaries see Christians as out of sync with themselves and their values. Moreover, just as Athenagoras’s pagan contemporaries misunderstood Christianity, so too most of those living in the West today “know scarcely anything about the Christian faith” (John G. Stackhouse, Jr., in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, 1995: 49), though they think otherwise. So contemporary apologists, like ancient ones, must concern themselves with correcting unbelievers’ misunderstandings of the faith as much as with commending it to them.

### Conclusions

One must not fail to commend the faith in ways that speak to unbelievers. Given the culture’s postmodern turn, moreover, many unbelievers eschew not only the truth of the gospel but also the very notion of truth itself. Postmodernists no longer judge between competing religions on the basis of arguments and evidence; rather, as if following Nietzsche’s cue, taste has become their guide. What constitutes an effective apology in such a context? How does one commend the gospel to a culture that sees personal preference as more relevant than evidence in judging between competing religious views? Is defense even possible in such a setting?

We suggest that contemporary apologists respond to the brave, new world in which they find themselves by embracing a broader, more comprehensive vision of their task. More specifically, I suggest that they embrace what might be called an “ancient-future” apologetic vision, one both
informed by early Christian apology and committed to commending the faith on the basis not only of rationality but also of beauty and goodness. Such a vision cannot guarantee success; unbelievers can always refuse to see Christianity’s beauty and goodness even as they refuse to see its truth. Our aesthetic sensitivities are no more immune to the Fall’s effects than our rational faculties are. But in an era when aesthetic concerns trump rational ones, apologetic appeals need to be made not only on the basis of reason but also of beauty and goodness.

References


ENCOUNTERING GOD’S BEAUTY: HOW HEGELIAN AESTHETICS HELPS THE THEOLOGIAN

JORDAN RYAN GOINGS*

ABSTRACT. This essay sets out to establish a warrant for elevating theological aesthetics from a place of trivial enjoyment, and to a place equal with reason and justice within the Christian paradigm. Through this promotion, theological aesthetics will be argued as a valid means of interacting with God, and offering the perceiver with a more whole understanding of Him and His beauty. This proposal does not demerit other avenues, but simply outlines theological aesthetics as a self contained tool for engaging God through certain mediums in life that would otherwise seem improbable for such a task. In it, I will suggest that Georg W. F. Hegel’s theory of aesthetics is beneficial for aiding the Christian in this development. This will be completed by first establishing what theological aesthetics is, both in scripture and in theory. Secondly, I will survey Georg W. F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, specifically focusing on his assessment of *Spirit* and his master/slave dialectic, so as to explicate his aesthetics. This argument will conclude with a proposal for using a hybrid between Hegel’s theory and other Christians’ as a vehicle for theological aesthetics. By analyzing how Hegel’s system can more fully engrave aesthetics into the Christian life, I propose that a cautious use of his paradigm will help ground the uncertainty that many Christians find when engaging such an abstract concept such as the beautiful.

KEY WORDS: Aesthetics, Georg W. F. Hegel, beauty, semiotics, theology, philosophy

Introduction

Throughout history, the Church has wrestled with the relevance of theological aesthetics. Whether protected under the umbrella of iconography, or dissected within the realm of iconoclasm, the concept of the beautiful inevitably makes its way into theological conversations. However, after the success of certain philosophical paradigms, such as rationalism, the scientific revolution, and modernism, enquiries into the metaphysical realm seem to occur less often (Stumpf, 2002: 422).¹ This in turn has hindered the benefit

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¹ Samuel Stumpf’s assessment of the analytic tradition communicates that this paradigm does not consider conceptual theorizing (e.g. What is humanity?) something to be grasped. This then limits their work to analyzing already established facts. Stumpf explains that this work is more so already being accomplished by the scientists, leaving very little for the analytic philosophy to create.
of having a full understanding of what many theologians and philosophers have analyzed for centuries: What is beauty? This is meant to contrast, as Wolterstorff delineates, the philosophy of art, which limits the thinker to a “reflection on the arts” and not necessarily on the beautiful (Wolterstorff, 1999: 30); the former being the focus of the medium, whereas the latter studies its content. If this distinction is not comprehended, then the wealth of theological profundity, which I argue is available in the beautiful, ambiguously attributes to a canvas, sculpture, or tree that which belongs to God.

**Thesis**

Instead of assessing an exhaustive history of the Church’s interaction with aesthetics, it would be more beneficial for the sake of this single proposal to limit the discussion to one aspect that is often overlooked by theologians: Hegelian aesthetics. This essay will focus on explaining the relevance and benefit of Georg W. F. Hegel’s aesthetics for the Christian concept of theological aesthetics. In doing so, I will first establish why theological aesthetics the warrant and validity of aesthetics for theologians. This will qualify the context for this philosophical venue, interact with the context of the Church’s biblical allowance for aesthetics, and briefly look at two problems facing the Christian aesthetician. This first section will conclude with a brief engagement with Umberto Eco’s use of semiotics as an aid for distinguishing between how aesthetics are and are not to be applied. Secondly, I will then extrapolate Hegel’s major themes from his philosophical paradigm to deduce how he intended aesthetics to be used by the reader. This section and analysis will briefly outline some of his major themes in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, then offer a summary of where aesthetics is stationed in his system, and will conclude with a discussion of how his master/slave dialectic is relevant for the aesthetician. This will then bring in the third and final section, which will argue to what extent Hegel’s perspective is valuable for the Christian aesthetic paradigm, while also warning the reader of the errors that Hegel’s paradigm can at times bring to Christian theology. This will primarily be accomplished by engaging John Navone’s concept of contemplation, and arguing it as the synthesizing medium for theological and Hegelian aesthetics. In recognizing this balance, the Christian aesthetician will find a helpful tool in Hegel’s offer, while simultaneously being informed where to draw the line between the Church’s theological truths and Hegel’s erro-

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2 In an interview with Chuck Fromm, Nicholas Wolterstorff makes the distinction between philosophy of art, with that of aesthetics. The implications Wolterstorff makes indicates the need to recognize that the former solely appraises the medium that carries in it the latter: the essence. This then communicates that the study of aesthetics conveys the attention for the ontology of beauty, and not simply its representation at a given moment.
neous tendencies. In turn, this essay will give the reader a clear understanding of how beneficial a more metaphysical aesthetic can be.

Why Theological Aesthetics
Beauty is not a foreign concept to the Church. From early Christian thinkers such as Irenaeus, Augustine, and Aquinas, to modern theologians like Luther, Edwards, and Kierkegaard, notions of the sublime, the perfect, and the transcendent all seem to be rooted in a divine beauty. In his *Soliloquies*, Augustine attributes all the perceivable beauty to come solely from God (Augustine, 2005: 30). Jonathan Edwards carries this concept a bit further in his *Images of Shadows of Divine Things* by attributing the tangibly accessible world as being beautiful because of its “resemblance of spiritual beauties” (Edwards, 2005: 171). More recently, John Navone devotes his book *Enjoying God’s Beauty* to aesthetic value by developing the notion that perceiving beauty does offer some enjoyment, but contemplating beauty in how it relates to God makes the enjoyment most complete (Navone, 1999). Furthermore, in *State of the Arts: From Bezalel to Mapplethorpe* Gene Edward Veith, Jr. not only proposes the theoretical value of theological aesthetics, but argues that God’s desire for an intentional aesthetic is an indication that this is not simply a superfluous aspect of Christianity (Veith, Jr., 1991: 106). Even though these are only four voices on the matter, they represent a larger conversation that continues to implement aesthetics into preexisting theological systems.

Terminology, Biblical Context, and Problems
Before explaining the biblical and theoretical warrants for theological aesthetics, it is important to first establish what the study of aesthetics is. Dabney Townsend defines it as “the discipline within philosophy that deals with art, beauty, and the feelings and emotions associated with them” (Townsend, 1997: 223). So not only is it a matrix for deciphering, qualifying, and categorizing the beautiful, but it is a system within the greater paradigm of philosophy proper. As philosophy is the study of wisdom, which is often expressed as an internal activity with little manifested tangibility, it would be logically coherent to claim, from Townsend’s placement of it, that aesthetics is rooted in the theoretical. This would then give credence to Frank Church Brown’s deduction that “since aesthetics is primarily theoretical, Christian aesthetics would necessarily be a task for Christian theorizing, which at its most distinctive and systematic level is undertaken by theological proper” (Brown, 1989: 16). However, this only categorizes the epistemology thus far; the next task is to move past the category, and establish what aesthetics has for its subject.
In short, the focus of aesthetics is on the beautiful. However, the beautiful is a vague metaphysical concept, thus creating relative stances and perspectives, which at times are simply used for the dichotomous dissension that they can create. Mary Mothersill indicates that “Few would deny [aesthetic’s] importance, and yet the mere suggestion that it be defined drives intelligent people to witless babble” (Mothersill, 1995: 14). Thomas Dubay argues that each person is inevitably captivated and enticed by beauty (Dubay, 1999: 11). Although these definitions are not that explicit, they give context to the value of Jonathan Edwards’ claim that

[beauty] engages the attention of the mind… The beauty and sweetness of objects draws on the faculties, and draws forth their exercise; so that reason itself is under far greater advantages for its proper and free exercises, and to attain its proper end, free of darkness and delusion” (Edwards, 1993:14).

Veith simply calls it “the perception of beauty in all its forms” (Veith, 1991: 29). Whether people want to have it defined or not, beauty is that which draws man to the object where it is found. For the purpose of the discussion here, beauty will simply be defined as the specific quality of an object that draws the perceiver in due to its goodness, excellence, and enlightening properties. Now that there is a basic understanding of what aesthetic is and what it engages, it is important to consider how the Church is called to engage it. Implying the problem facing the Church, Patrick Sherry writes:

The lack of a theology of beauty, both of beauty in general and of divine beauty in particular, follows in part from a fear and suspicion of the question, expressed in pejorative terms like “aestheticism” and “elitism”. At best, beauty has often been treated as a Cinderella, compared with the attention paid by theologians to her two sisters, truth and goodness, an attention manifested in theology’s predominant concern with doctrine and ethics, and resulting in the intellectualization of religion in recent centuries (Sherry, 2002: 19).

In order to elevate beauty from a place of trivia to a place of importance equal to that of reason and ethics, it is necessary to begin with a biblical understanding of its use. Unpacking Veith’s argument for a moment, the reader can see in Ezekiel 35 that Bezalel was given his artistic vocation by God. This work entailed an indwelling of the Holy Spirit that in turn could be argued as subsequently having equipped him with the intelligence,
knowledge, and craftsmanship mentioned. Whether that progression is sound or not is beside the point, as the case at hand is whether there is biblical warrant for a need for theological aesthetics. Carrying on from Veith’s proposal, the three attributes Bezalel possessed—despite how he acquired them—argues for a theological evaluation of beauty, and that these virtues are necessary for such an appraisal. Using Bezalel as a representative for theological aestheticians, Veith states:

Whereas intelligence involves the faculties of the mind, knowledge refers to what is in the mind… Besides knowing his materials, he had to know his subjects—both the natural (the structure of the almonds, flowers, and pomegranates) and the supernatural (the appearance of the cherubim and the meaning and function of the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant)” (Veith, Jr., 1991: 110).

The implication of Veith’s argument suggests that mankind has been given these faculties and capabilities, and thus has been called to engage in a conversation where these traits aid the person in a much more beneficial way if he or she is conscientious of that fact. As Veith implies, when the viewer perceived the decorations in the tabernacle, for example, they would see everyday items like pomegranates, almond blossoms, and lilies. If that viewer did not take time to consider the value that those items represented, then he would simply have an occurrence with them like he would as if he saw them growing in nature.

However, this is not how they were represented, as they were stationed in a holy place, thus giving them a different context completely than a field in nature would. Furthermore, the interaction with divine beauty is by no means limited to the tabernacle, as the good, perfect, and beautiful is exemplified in very clear and tangible ways at times through nature in scripture. While almost in contrast, the beauty of God is nearly incomprehensible in Ezekiel’s and Isaiah’s testimonies. This is meant in part to address two issues facing the Christian aesthetician: contextualization within semiotics, and the fear of relative hermeneutics. Given that these issues are too large to fully exhaust for the discussion here, suffice it to stand that a brief outline and articulation of their pertinence be given.

The aesthetician must be cautious of having their immediate observations limited by an unnecessarily narrow perspective; instead, they must maintain a patient attitude when engaging the object at hand. When the observer first comes to the object, there is a brief moment of consideration:

4 This is meant to imply a biblical theology that would support the progression of humanly attributes and faculties being made more full or attuned through the work of God’s providence. For example, the statement “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom…” indicates that the etiology of wisdom is God.
should he apply his previously gained understanding of the object when he comes across it at the present moment, or should he disregard those prior experiences, and begin learning the object anew in an *a posteriori* manner. This is an example of where the study of semiotics is beneficial. As mentioned above, to fully cover what semiotics is and is not in would be too large of a task for this essay.

Nevertheless, Umberto Eco offers a concise description when assessing the validity of words by stating, “Words do not designate things or states of the world, but concepts of the mind” (Eco, 1987: 552). For simplicity’s sake, I propose exchanging his use of the term “word” for the term “sign”. Semiotics is the study of signs and the content that they convey. As for the dilemma just mentioned, this is in fact a false dichotomy, as the two routes of thinking are not mutually exclusive. Albeit, this is an all too common polarity that many people find themselves within, assuming to have to choose one or the other. I use Eco here to argue that through his semiotics, the interpreter does not have to put on the cultural dogmas that force his or her reading to only be *x*. Alternatively, this proposal allows him or her to use their connotations to infer and interpret the object in a more complete sense.

Eco does not leave the reader at some vague horizon of interpretation. Instead he claims that texts explicitly provide us with much that we will never cast doubt on, but also, unlike the real world, they flag with supreme authority what we are to take as important in them, and what we must *not* take as a point of departure for free-wheeling interpretations (Eco, 2005: 5).

The aim of Eco’s approach to semiotics and narrative is to remain outside of a categorical hermeneutic, and therein have the interpreter approach the given object with an undeniable subjective freedom, believing the object to be sufficient for guiding him or her to an intended destination. Subsequently, walking away from a paradigm has had its errors, too (*e.g.* Mapplethorpe and Serrano). This error: walking directly into another, more confining paradigm.

**Eco's Literary Theory as Semiotic Template**

Throughout his writings, Eco shows the need to balance two popular interpretive styles, *reader response* and *authorial intent*, alongside one another, instead of keeping them at odds. This implies that neither one is self-

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5 In his book *On Literature* Eco has many essays directly focused on this dichotomy and proposed synthesis.
Encountering God’s Beauty: How Hegelian Aesthetics Helps the Theologian

sufficient, but both offer crucial truths for better engaging literature. For example, again from his essay “On Some Functions of Literature”, Eco claims that

Literary works encourage freedom of interpretation, because they offer us a discourse that has many layers of reading and place before us the ambiguities of language and of real life. But in order to play this game, which allows every generation to read literary works in a different way, we must be moved by a profound respect from what I have called elsewhere the intention of the text (Eco, 2005: 4-5).

This expresses his idea that the two notions are not at irreconcilable odds, but on the contrary, are able to coexist. He is arguing that there is a liberty for interpretation, but that it is to be paired with the author’s intention so as to extract the most that the author intended to convey from the text. This notion reestablishes the communication of semiotics; the object is made from one person, typically with a distinct need to communicate something, from a certain location in a specific point of time, only then to be received by another, in and with their own contextual presuppositions.

The object and what it conveys is far from being left open into a sea of endless waves of interpretations, but is simultaneously unrestricted, so as to free it from solely the communicator’s context. It cannot stay there alone, as it undeniably falls into the hands or eyes of a recipient at some point. The sign or object is handed over in that transaction with a distinct purpose, yet, the recipient brings his own unique conditions to it. This combination is inevitable, yet both of the aforementioned hermeneutical paradigms argue for the other to be done away. This might seem unhelpfully vague. Albeit, that is not the case. Eco’s overall implications leave the reader to infer that each theory on their own examines how each causes their own pendulum to swing too far.

In regards to one side, a post-structural, postmodernist reading, Eco points out that “it is possible to distinguish between the free interpretive choices elicited by a purposeful strategy of openness and the freedom taken by a reader with a text assumed as a mere stimulus” (Eco, 1979: 40). Conversely, though, he goes further on the matter by addressing how the “uncommitted stimulus” approach is a means “for a personal hallucinatory experience, cutting out levels of meaning, placing upon the expression ‘aberrant’ codes” (Eco, 1979: 40). He gives an example of this by claiming that through this style one could read Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason and assume it demonstrates that Kant “was a polymorphous pervert and a latent homosexual, or that the idea of transcendental a priori forms conceals and disguises an unconscious necrophilia” (Eco, 1981: 36). Of course, these are outlandish accusations that are not common in the interpretive traditions of
Kant. However, their randomness serves the point at hand; the pendulum of the reader’s response should not swing too far, lest it land so far away from the author’s desired reception that an entire new writing be created.

Furthermore, Eco states that “this does not mean that a text is a crystal-clear structure interpretable in a single way; on the contrary, a text is a lazy machinery which forces its possible readers to do a part of its textual work...” (Eco, 1981: 36). There is a contingency of the content’s being interpreted rightly to the form handed over to the reader, but that does not mean there needs to be a blind dependency on it. There is an ambiguity with signs that can often cause a misunderstanding as to the purpose of an author’s choices, resulting in a misinterpretation.

For example, Eco, using an example from Jurij Lotman, addresses that if a play has a scene with a rifle in the background, it does not have to go off, or even be used, to convey a message (Eco, 2005: 13). Albeit, there are some who would view such a scene to then demand an answer be given as to the prop’s purpose. The gun does not have to play an active role in the narrative, but only play a semiotic role for the reader. It can simply be used as a tag to identify something, and promote the reader’s imagination in a healthy way that allows free interpretation without breaking the intention of the text. Nevertheless, there are occurrences in readings where that balance is not had, and observers stumble on certain signs and symbols, like “rifles in the background”, confining them to “having to know why”. The pendulum swings too far when the aesthetician demands for a full explanation of all things before they can move forward. He or she then ceases to use his imagination and inferencing, and instead, limits himself or herself to a narrow perspective, not finding in the wealth of beauty offered to him.

If we allow for aesthetics to be the study of beauty, allow for semiotics to be defined as the study of signs and the content they communicate, and recognize that mankind is an experiential being—either learning through experience, or sharpening what he already knows via that experience—then it would be valid to suggest that a clear platform for theological aesthetics rests in engaging the beauty of God through the different signs experienced by man during his life. The goal is to balance the pendulum evenly during these experiences, and abstain from too narrow of reactions and perspectives until fully assessed.

Eco goes on to address that he is merely “inventing crazy forms of textual deconstruction but there are people doing similar things rather seriously” (see Eco, 1981: 36).

I am implying here the intentions of authors such as Anton Chekhov who would almost make it a requirement to explain the purpose of any object mentioned in a story.
The aesthetcian then needs to recognize two truths: the first, a divine beauty has perceivably been communicated to us by God about Himself in many ways; the second, man will be tempted to either think himself too incapable, or he communicated beauty too lofty a concept for comprehension. The difficulty with this last truth appears in acknowledging the dichotomy that mankind is a finite being, and the objects of our perceptions arguably have an ontological connotation rooted in the divinity of God. However, this does not mean that mankind is left in open waters of aesthetic interpretation.

**Hegel’s Offer**

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is arguably one of the most profound scholars in the history of philosophy. With the aspirations of carrying on Kant’s legacy of Idealism, Hegel not only established himself as one of the prominent German Idealists of his time, but also as a timeless thinker. Recognizing both the value and shortcomings of his predecessors, he sought to formulate a complete and exhaustive system to life. As Frederick Copleston ascribes, “he presented mankind with one of the most grandiose and impressive pictures of the Universe…” (Copleston, 1994: 162). Whether it was psychology, ethics, or government, one synthesizing component continued to bring commonality and purpose to all aspects of his paradigm: the **Absolute Spirit**.

Hegel’s reputation is, however, due in part to the ambiguity of his ideas and terms. His concept of the *Spirit*, or *Geist*—as anchoring as it is—continues dividing scholars and interpretations. This ambiguity is not solely contingent upon his word choice nor syntax, but on the complexity of ushering in a new system altogether. In his preface to *G. W. F. Hegel*, Howard P. Kainz argues that the first obstacle facing a reader approaching Hegel is in determining how to categorize his system (Kainz, 1998). This is not only meant to affirm that his legacy was one of complex language and ideas, but that it was one without a home. It does not simply fit within an Aristotelian logic, nor does it fully correspond with Kantian paradigms; it is its own class. Thus, in an attempt to anchor all avenues of his thought to one central location, the reader must comprehend his understanding of *Spirit*. However, to efficiently do this, I will first establish the basic foundations of his major paradigm: *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

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8 For the remainder of this essay, I will simply refer to this as *Spirit*.

9 In the opening chapter of *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide* Dietmar H. Heidemann, referencing Deiter Henrich assessment thirty years prior to his, claims “Hegel’s intentions are still more or less obscure” (Heidemann, 2008: 1). The proposal in this work goes on to encourage a counter hermeneutic to Hegel’s works, as opposed to what Dietmar argues was a common reading of the previous decades.
The Phenomenology of Spirit and the Absolute Spirit
Living within a religiously saturated culture such as Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, his context was familiar with Christian theology and pedagogy. Following behind scholars such as Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, however, he was in an academic conversation that began to interpret spiritual metaphysics differently from the Church. Still recognizing that there is an absolute essence, which Christianity calls God, Hegel's ontological assessment of said essence veers away from the confessional vein, and redefines it as the Spirit. Although he attributes it as the fullness and completion of all that is true, he all but equates its essence, problematically, with that of man's.10 John Burbidge likens the attempt to find a consensus amongst scholars regarding Hegel's theology to a courtroom full of eye-witnesses of a singular man, yet each testimony is vividly different (Burbidge, 1992: 93). However, much of the confusion found in this theology rests in the fact that he was in fact not a theologian, nor did he fully devote an entire work toward theological ontology.11 Despite discussing it several times, even the notes and lectures compiled for his three volume work Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion are not fully devoted to an complete analysis of the nature of God, nor Spirit for that matter, like the systematic works that theologians are used to.

Thus, it should be assumed for the purposes here that his works do not necessarily lend themselves to the Church in the same ways that the theologian's would. His content should be carefully appraised, not in the hopes of finding the rare gem that explicitly tells the reader what he should do, nor what God is like, but with an awareness that his system calls the thinker to wholly look at how any given moment relates to Spirit. As this section will incorporate, aesthetics is no different, in that Hegel considers it a necessary medium for thinking through Spirit. It is because of this intentionality toward metaphysics that Hegel still has much to offer the Christian thinker. This is the setting and context of his magnum opus: The Phenomenology of Spirit.

10 This is meant to reference Hegel's analysis on consciousness. Throughout his works, though none more direct than The Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel ascribes man's consciousness as having the potential to arrive at a place of absolute truth, if but for only a moment in the temporary act of cognition.

11 This is not a dismissal or omission of his early works of theology and religion, as a compilation of such works works has been made. I simply mean to assert that his major works are of ethics, history, and the science of life. Theological principles and suggestions are all through his writings, though he never devoted a major, non-compiled work strictly to exhausting the logic and argument of this.
The Phenomenology of Spirit\textsuperscript{12} is an attempt to both redefine the term science as the systematizing of all, as well as to then apply it by scientifically systematizing all that man encounters. Quentin Lauer, S.J. succinctly explains that in the Phenomenology Hegel attempts to explain what the mind does “when it knows” (Lauer, 1993: 11). Alexandre Kojève unpacks this further, implying that what the Phenomenology achieves is an assessment of the human desire. He writes, “Human Desire… produces a free and historical individual, conscious of his individuality, his freedom, his history, and finally, his historicity” (Kojève, 1980: 6).

In his argument entitled “Substance, subject, system: the justification of science in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit” Dietmar H. Heidemann carries this train of thought further still by examining Hegel’s phrase “Being as Thought”. He states that Being as Thought is “not as static subsistence but as a mediated process constituted by conceptual development in three stages from self-identity to difference and back to self-identity” (Heidemann, 2008: 8). Subsequently, Hegel does not seem to extend his all encompassing science to a true systematizing of all that is, in the sense of an Aristotelian matrix. Instead, all for Hegel is in the notion that complete fullness and wholeness of Being rests in the phenomena of the consciousness of the self and its process of knowing something. Nevertheless, this paradigm is still more than able to articulate the use of theological aesthetics.

If the goal of theological aesthetics is to use the sign or object to engage the beauty of the divine, then before moving on, it is relevant to look a further into how the Phenomenology depicts man encountering Spirit. In the spirit of Eco, Kathleen Dow Magnus’ answer to this question balances two extremes. She writes, “Spirit, for Hegel, is reducible neither to human finitude nor to metaphysical abstraction. It does not let the finite be ‘swallowed up’ in the infinite, nor does it reduce the infinite to the finite” (Magnus, 2001: 33). In summation, if the thinker takes the notion of Spirit to only be a disconnected essence that sits outside of the perceivable and finite world, then it would be incapable of interacting with the finite without losing it in itself.

The largest issue in working through this is similar to the same problem facing the reversal of the two objects. How could the finite object be placed in a paradigm made for the infinite without losing the qualities that make it finite, and vice versa? Hegel’s consciousness is the solution. In paragraph 554 of his Phenomenology he claims that “the ground of knowledge is the conscious universal, and in its truth is absolute Spirit which, in abstract pure consciousness, or in thought as such, is merely absolute Being…” (Hegel, 1977: 337). Alan Olson articulates this a bit more clearly by proposing that

\textsuperscript{12} For the remainder of this essay, I will simply refer to this work as the Phenomenology.
the Hegelian *Spirit* is nothing more than the progression of thought through the concept (Olson, 1992: 3). As the person thinks, their thought, in that it can theoretically be considered as an endless avenue of metaphysic interaction, aids the finite self with a means of engaging the infinite. It does not change his entire make-up, nor call him to a context without finite laws, as the dilemma assumed, but instead posits the act of thinking, or consciousness, as a manner of intersecting with the infinite. It is in this intersection, or through this *phenomena*, rather, that the infinite *Spirit* is engaged and then learned. As offers a basic appropriation of the Hegelian notion of *Spirit*, it is now pertinent to consider what checks and balances are offered by Hegel’s *Phenomenology* for the theological aesthetcian.

**Bringing Beauty and Spirit into Dialogue**

Arguably the most popular section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is the master/slave dialectic, which has its grounding in the *self*. Like much of his *science*, his assessment of the *self* is rooted in a social paradigm contingent upon otherness and negation. Yet, he does not imply that the *self’s* ontology is necessarily dependent upon another’s presence adjacent to it, but instead indicates that the social construct of differing thoughts offers a clearer look, albeit at times metaphorical, into that ontology. Since Hegel’s entire system is rooted in the notion of the *thought* and the pursuit of encountering truth, or *Spirit*, the study of man and his *self* is no different. Therefore, the question at hand for the reader is to determine how man’s thought is pertinent to theological aesthetics.

Hegel claims that there is a struggle within the *self*, which is rooted in recognition. This is the conflict of thought. As man works through any given thought, there will inevitably be repeals to the proposal originally positied. As reason ensues as to determine which claim is correct (*e.g.* the proposal or the repeals), one will naturally become dominant. He likens this to the establishment of master and slave identities within the thoughts. As the victorious thought proceeds, it is the master, while the other is the slave. However, the “dialogue” carries on through what he calls the “reversal” (Hegel, 1977: 337). At this point there is a recognition of the other’s state: the master soon realizes his dependence on the slave’s service to him; therein the slave realizes he is not completely powerless. This juxtaposition appears to be the nucleus within Hegelian philosophy, as it is the cornerstone to a system that propagates a dialectic of negation in most things (*e.g.* self and *Spirit*, historical progression, ethics, etc.). The brilliance of this matrix is, as Hegel set out to show in his other works, that these identities are not solely bound to thoughts, but identities as well.

In an essay, Andrew W. Haas attempts to “turn the history of mastery on its head” through aesthetic appropriation (Haas, 2011: 380). He suggests
identifying the artist as the master to his created work, thus giving an inanimate, unthinking object the role of slave, and momentarily, therefore, momentarily a role that the artists becomes dependent upon. Considering once more that the major theme in Hegelian philosophy is in fact thought, Haas’ suggestion is viable, as the artist—or master—is a thinking consciousness. Haas’ argument draws out Hegel’s for-itself language, implying that the master of the inanimate object is not solely in the relationship with the art for himself, as he cannot be as long as he serves the art by working for it until its creation. This places a level of servitude and dependence on the artist. Though helpful and insightful, Haas’ example is confined to this relationship. Therefore, I would like to take this one step further, and consider what this would mean to an established piece of art, setting of nature, or any other symbol of beauty.

Before moving forward, it is important to first recognize Hegel’s positioning of aesthetics. Where he would have the state and others as means for communicating Spirit, his primary attention is on the forms Spirit takes. Charles Taylor explains this in declaring that “Absolute spirit is thus higher than Spirit’s realization in objective reality which has not yet come to full self-consciousness” (Taylor, 1978: 466). He makes this distinction after explaining how the state is one of the clearest means of “Spirit’s realization”, but given that this is solely an example of representation, Hegel sought to move toward an absolute exemplification. Though he has three variables in this absolute category (art, religion, and philosophy), oddly enough he is said to have a hierarchy of adequacy between these (Taylor, 1978: 466). In short, for Hegel, aesthetics offers grounds for the finite man to engage the infinite absolute Spirit. Not only does Hegelian aesthetics place beauty as a means of communicating Spirit, but it allows for the object to be employed as a participant to be engaged by the perceiver. Bringing the infinite abstract to the finite, Robert Wicks claims that “beauty, according to Hegel, is the perceptual presentation of what the metaphysical theory affirms to the unconditional or absolute…” (Wicks, 1993: 349-350). Allen Speight takes this manifestation a step further by arguing that through this aesthetic, art, and I would add beauty, become autonomous from nature (Speight, 2008: 379-380). What these arguments suggest is that the metaphysical realm of the Spirit has limited means of translating to nature and mankind, yet through the conveyance of beauty through the object, the perceiver has an avenue for not only considering the reality of the metaphysical’s presence, but engaging it, as another person. This last statement is meant to highlight the event happening by the object’s communication. I argue that the beauty being conveyed is from the consciousness of God, though for Hegel, Spirit, and despite resting on an object, that object can serve as an indicator, or symbol, directing the per-
receiver’s attention back to the consciousness of God, and therein find engagement.

Finding the Balance
It is not uncommon to hear verses like “The grass wither, the flower fades: but the word of our God shall stand for ever” (Isaiah 40:8), used more to encourage a focus on the decrees and statutes of God, and discourage an appreciation of His temporal creation. This is not necessarily a completely erroneous message, as the priorities are clear and, to some degree, biblical. Notwithstanding, this hermeneutic can disconnect the perceiver from a viable medium for understanding the very theological nature commended. In fact, verses such as John 1:3, Psalm 19:1, and Genesis 1 clearly communicate that not only has God orchestrated all that has been created, but has allowed it to be seen both as good and as a declaration of him. As a declaration the communication of some content, then simply put, God created all things with the possibility of conveying His beauty.

Similarly to how theological aesthetics has been disregarded, so too has the theological contemplation within aesthetics. This can seem to be the same idea, but where the former is simply the engagement and assessment of beauty, the latter is more so a reflection on it. This helps distinguish between the temptation to come across a work of art, nature, or any other symbol, and have certain presuppositions triggered, to then result with the perceiver believing that he is fully conscientious of all that he encountered. This is not always the case.

Theologian John Navone depicts this dichotomy by examining what he calls the “look of love” (Navone, 1999: vii). He devotes a chapter of his book Enjoying God’s Beauty to the role that contemplation plays after the perceiver has seen the symbol communicating the alluring beauty. He ascribes Jesus as being the “paradigm of the dynamic” between what we have already assessed as the divine’s infiniteness and man’s finiteness. In using the idea of seeing to connote experiential encounters, Navone proceeds to argue that “Jesus’ seeing underscores the intrapersonal aspect of his divine and human contemplation” (Navone, 1999: 43). In other words, Jesus is an example for balancing the sense-immediacy that finiteness necessarily encounters with the the rich profundity that comes through eternal truths and ideas like

13 It should be noted that this is not intended to be a qualifier arguing that all symbols and sights are equally valuable and proper for the Christian to engage, and that those images would in turn easily depict the nature and beauty of God. This essay only looks at the value of theological aesthetics, but is not an exhaustive proposal for what to then use and not use for engaging said beauty. For information on this subsequent issue, Veith’s State of the Arts: From Bezalel to Mapplethorpe offers valuable insight for deciphering how to approach more sensitive art, artists, art mediums.
beauty. Before moving on, it should be noted that this is not some Fichtian or Feuerbachian idealism, which can lead to an overuse of the subjective interpretation. Instead, this is in the vein of aesthetic semiotics, as mentioned earlier, implying that there is a direct message being conveyed to a specific context. Furthermore, it should be noted that Navone nowhere explicitly claims Christ to be the example that the reader can completely aspire to in this regard, but does insinuate the relation to his balancing within a Christian, Spirit-based contemplation. According to the whole of Navone’s work, there is a level of contemplation that draws the thinker out of his finiteness to then encounter the divinity of God through reflecting on His beauty.

If this interpretation of Navone is correct, then his assessment of Christ’s contemplation is very similar to the call given to Hegel’s reader. Through consciousness man is capable of engaging the Spirit in thought. However, Navone strengthens this proposal in offering a very similar epistemology, while still grounding it in the concreteness of scripture, which is something that Hegel did not do. For example, if the aesthetician takes on the model/slave hermeneutic and engages the object with anticipation of the reversal, then he is aware of some humility. However, there is still a level of autonomy that is not completely helpful for theological aesthetics. If the Hegelian reversal is on the one hand a means of liberating the suppressed, while on the other hand an offer of balance, which in turn perpetuates some level of humility in the players, then the idea of maintaining this humility through such autonomous freedom should be addressed. In other words, if autonomous mastership is the aim, what would keep the one person who has attained it from becoming independent from otherness, which would include God?

Navone answers this in the beginning of his book by claiming that the purpose is in the “joy of seeing the beauty of God” (Navone, 1999: vii). His thesis behind the look of love is that man, once saved, can see the beauty of God in objects and occurrences, whereas prior to this enlightenment he was unable—similar to Christ giving sight to the blind. Once in this enlightened state, the Christian is capable of having the “eye” (i.e. faith), to then see beauty, and from that perception, can also “look” at (i.e. contemplate) said beauty. To have the look of love is to have an active consideration for God’s beauty. So this addition to Hegel’s system then humbles the man, whether artist or observer, in a way similar to Hass’ proposal. If man encounters some symbol of beauty, there is content being communication, which desires to be known. This is what is at stake: the infinite God is communicating Himself to finite man through aesthetic means, and if not listened to, it is thus ignored.
Conclusions
Whether people want to have it defined or not, beauty is an undeniable means in drawing man to the metaphysical. If the observer is patient, the allure of the beautiful can call him to contemplate its source, and in this, renders the object as superfluous. In this process, the ideal that the object represents becomes the focus. Appropriating this to a theological aesthetic, God is the source of all beauty, and uses objects as semiotic identifiers for communicating His supremacy. Considering this theological framework, I argue that Hegel's master/slave dialectic and Navone's look of love are both beneficial for identifying the theological connotations behind the object, as well as teaching the perceiver how to properly engage the source, which I propose is God, and not the Hegelian Spirit.

References


THE PAINTER AND THE TREE: A BIBLICAL RATIONALE FOR VISUAL ART

MATTHEW ERIC RALEY

ABSTRACT. American painter William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) exemplified devotion to high art as a spiritual cause. He saw painting as a discipline for transcending ordinary life, a discipline practiced in a holy place, the studio, by an illuminated devotee. Chase also exemplified the artistic problem created by this implicit Gnosticism. He saw that an artist needed ordinary life—the very thing he was trying to transcend—to refresh his vision. His pastel Hall at Shinnecock captures his family in a time of grief, giving a vision of domesticity unusual among Impressionists. The art world today has the same view of art and spirituality, and the same problem. How can art escape its temples and interact with ordinary life? A biblical rationale for visual art, grounded in the designs for the tabernacle, can equip the Anabaptist tradition to challenge the gnostic idolatry of high art. The menorah, an abstract sculpture of a tree that served as a lampstand in the holy place, provides a model of visual art as an apologetic for the living God against idols. It symbolizes Israel's life shining with the Lord's faithful blessing—all of ordinary life integrated for worship in shalom.

KEY WORDS: William Merritt Chase, menorah, tabernacle, Gnosticism, art, painting

Introduction
What dialogue could a Baptist possibly have had with William Merritt Chase (1849-1916)? The American painter was a flamboyant partisan for the cause of high art, a thriftless collector of bric-a-brac, and a teacher of painting not merely as a discipline but as a way of life. He gave no significant attention to religion. For any Baptist preacher, Chase's impeccably tailored, silk-hatted presentation, his European attitudes, his profession, to say nothing of his notoriously lavish studio on 10th Street in New York City, would have stigmatized him as an apostle of worldliness. One of Chase's domestic interiors, such as the 1892 pastel Hall at Shinnecock, would have seemed to be an advertisement for materialistic values, with its posh Long Island locale and luxurious decor. Confronted with such a personality, the Baptist's only message would likely have been, “Repent”.

Alienation between the art world and the Anabaptist tradition is not substantially different today. The art world advances its cause almost to the ex-

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clusion of religion, as James Elkins has written (Elkins, 2004). For the most part, Anabaptists live in separate social, economic, and political worlds from visual artists, and judge artworks based on moral content.

However, the alienation from art goes deeper. Today, Anabaptists struggle with questions about the role of visual art in churches. William Dyrness has shown that Christians in iconoclastic traditions are often drawn to visual art, but at the same time distrust its use in worship (Dyrness, 2008). Some Anabaptists are tempted to discard their emphasis on the scriptural word and their iconoclasm, embracing the visually oriented spirituality of other traditions.

This paper will argue that the Anabaptist struggle with visual art is rooted in the Gnosticism, both implicit and explicit, that informs so much thought on art and worship. If Anabaptists will sharpen their response to the gnostic thinking of Chase’s contemporary heirs, then they will be able to formulate a coherent theology for the visual arts. Such a rationale can be grounded in biblical history, as a survey of characteristics of the tabernacle menorah will show.

The Painter
To gain a more specific understanding of the issues Anabaptists need to address, we focus on Chase’s Hall at Shinnecock. In what sense did art occupy the center of Chase’s life?

Chase was a major figure on the American art scene when he died in 1916, and he attained that position in a typically American way. Chase’s father was a Midwestern retail entrepreneur in Indianapolis and St. Louis who reluctantly permitted Chase to be trained as a painter. Through talent, skill, and iconoclasm, Chase distinguished himself under art teachers first in Indianapolis, then in New York, and eventually in Munich, Germany (Pisano, 1979). By the time he showed Ready for a Ride in 1878 at the Society of American Artists exhibit, he was noted as a young artist to watch and began to gain critical praise (Marling, 1978; Rensselaer, 1881a, 1881b). Upon his return to New York, he established his famous 10th Street Studio, making a publicity splash with his enormous collection of European art objects in the midst of which lounged his Russian wolfhounds (Cikovsky, 1976). Chase was a kind of missionary for art, challenging traditionalists and attempting to fuse European and American sensibilities (Mayer & Myers, 1993).

Chase’s artistic reputation began to wane in the 1890s. By the time of his death, he was known mainly as a teacher. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the same issue of its bulletin announcing Chase’s death (“Memorial Exhibition”, 1916), published an account of one of his last lectures (“Chase as a Teacher”, 1916). He taught not only in New York, but in Shinnecock and Europe, conducting his final seminar in California (Pisano, 1979). Among
his students were Edward Hopper, Charles Sheeler, and Georgia O’Keeffe (Ness, 1973). In a letter to Chase scholar Ronald Pisano, O’Keeffe recalled Chase’s charisma: “When he entered the building a rustle seemed to flow from the ground floor to the top that ‘Chase had arrived’” (Pisano, 1979: 13).

The sources of his charisma were his challenging, nurturing pedagogy and his clear moral vision of art’s role in personal life. Katharine Roof wrote, “all of his life until his failing health forbade, Chase was tireless in the cause of art. If one asked of him in that name he gave to the full measure of his strength” (Roof, 1975: 274). His New York lecture published by the Metropolitan Museum is almost a devotional sermon:

You who are studying art have the most dignified profession in the world. Your opportunity to leave a record is wonderful and rare, and I plead with you to see to it that you leave a record of having been on this earth. What the people and the public and the world demand of you is that you will put yourself upon that canvas. What we really want to know is the personality of the painter, not the paint on the canvas (“William M. Chase as a Teacher”, 1916: 252).

An art student is to be devoted to the observation of masterpieces in museums, and Chase advises that a student “drink in” one favorite work until it yields nothing more, then move on to another (“William M. Chase as a Teacher”, 1916: 251). In his interactions with students at Shinnecock, he showed that painting was not mere personal expression, but was a kind of happy submission to the reality of the world. He challenged students to practice brushwork so that they would be able to paint freely, without anxiety, and to perceive light and color with greater precision. He also warned against mediocrity. “One must be wary, Chase stated, of doing something ‘pretty good’, for ‘destruction’ lies that way” (Ness, 1973: 10-12).

Amid the art world’s convulsions in the early 20th century, Chase’s artistic contributions and his avant garde status were largely forgotten until the 1970s. The biography published by Roof in 1918 remained the principal treatment of his life, while Chase’s reputation languished in the shadows of his friends John Singer Sargent (Fairbrother, 1982) and James Abbott McNeill Whistler (Francis, 1965). In the 1970s, scholars such as Pisano and Nicolai Cikovsky renewed interest in Chase as a painter, and a major exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in 1987 reestablished his importance.

In the course of his life, two of Chase’s decisions surprised his friends and marked dramatic changes in his artistic focus.

The first was his marriage to Alice Gerson in 1886—the demise of a confirmed bachelor (Pisano, 1979). Their marriage of three decades became far more than an addition to Chase’s artistic life, but a central focus of his work. He was unusually devoted to his family, and traveling companions com-
explained that they came close to missing a steamer “because he would sit down to write to his wife at any and all spare moments” (Roof, 1975: 267). Chase employed Alice and the children as models almost exclusively, documenting the relationships and settings of his family with a fatherly eye. Several of these domestic works attracted critical recognition. Chase’s pastel portrait of Alice, Meditation, was widely exhibited and won a medal at the Crystal Palace International Exhibition in 1892, the same year Chase produced Hall at Shinnecock (Pisano, 1979).

Chase’s second surprising decision came in 1896: he sold his 10th Street studio and all its contents. Not only had Chase’s reputation been linked with the studio for nearly two decades, but it was a spatial embodiment of his aesthetic worldview, practically a temple to art. Cikovsky writes:

“Art atmosphere” was, like the more tangible properties of the studio which contributed to it, one of the artist’s “tools”, a professional necessity that, so to speak, kept him in esthetic trim. But it was, too, a kind of mystical aura that made of the studio a sacred and ideal space, a “Kultraum”, distinct and separate from the mundane world and conducive to the most lofty thoughts and refined feelings (Cikovsky, 1976: 8).

Chase’s decision to sell it was widely publicized, but the financial return was dismal. Chase realized less than $21,000 from the auction (Pisano, 1979). It seemed that the American market did not have the same high view of art that Chase and his fellow missionaries had. It was after the sale that his attention shifted more to teaching. The sale was “an act of doubt and disillusionment, of eroded confidence and purpose, and, in a quite literal way, of disintegration” (Cikovsky, 1987: 42). By the early 1900s, “the artist seems to have become psychologically detached” from studios, and his “passion and inventiveness” waned (Gallati, 1995: 53).

These two decisions compose a useful frame for understanding Hall at Shinnecock, and for unlocking the sense in which art was the center of Chase’s life.

The principal subjects of the picture are Chase’s wife and two of his daughters, probably Alice and Koto. The scene is quiet and casual. Koto sits on the floor next to her mother’s armchair, her back turned to the viewer, absorbed in the prints that unfold across the foreground. Young Alice has looked up at the viewer from the floor, where she sits propped on her arm opposite Koto and their mother. The girls are dressed in white. Their mother sits above them in the white armchair, turned slightly away from the viewer, slouching into the cushions with her legs crossed, her hands folded on her stomach, her head resting against the back of the chair. Her downturned stare appears to lie on Koto, or perhaps at the page Koto is turning. Chase’s wife is dressed in black.
Alice is in mourning for her two-year-old son, William Merritt, Jr., who died the previous year. Her apparent languor, the absent-minded protectiveness of her hands, and her disengagement from the viewer all seem to emphasize the immediacy of her grief. Her emotional distance from her daughters is painful to observe. The casual scene seems not merely unguarded but awkward, a capture of the reality of mourning unfiltered by an awareness of others’ gaze.

In the literature, there is little comment on Alice’s grief and Chase’s perspective on it. Pisano records the death of William, Jr., and discusses the domestic focus of Chase’s art after his marriage (Pisano, 1979: 40). But he does not probe what impact the loss of a two-year-old boy might have had on Chase’s art. Gallati, in expounding *Hall at Shinnecock*, does not mention the black dress (Gallati, 1995: 59, 62). Cikovsky gives many reasons why the interiors at Shinnecock are highly personal for Chase, developing Chase’s artistic focus on his family and calling the interiors “of all his art the most inward” (Cikovsky, 1987: 40-41, 58). However, he does not comment on Alice’s grief in this pastel.

Even Roof gives relatively little attention to William, Jr.’s death. She includes a moving letter dated August 27, 1891 from Robert Blum, Chase’s close friend: “It would be useless for me to try to tell you how very sorry I feel for your great loss... Although I don’t believe in time being the healer of all things still I know that it makes us accustomed to the pain it cannot make us forget.” Roof, a former student of Chase, worked on the biography with his widow, and presumably could have provided a closer view of the tragedy. Her relative silence may reflect an unwillingness on Alice’s part to discuss it—an unwillingness that may be our best indication of the depth of her grief. Roof does choose this point in the biography to reproduce *Hall at Shinnecock* (Roof, 1975: 164–165). The pastel’s atmosphere receives far more attention from scholars.

To be sure, the atmosphere is a high priority for Chase. There is, to begin with, his documentation of the objects in his home, characteristic of all his interiors. Chase’s virtuosity in handling ceramic, metal, and lacquer is on display. The large vase in the right foreground is a marvel of economical brilliance, not only in Chase’s rendering but also in his use of the vase to reinforce the sense of space by reflecting windows behind the viewer. He makes the red lacquer chair against the far wall gleam without becoming a distraction. Chase’s quick strokes mark the presence of a brass sculpture crowning the banister of the stairs, a tapestry, lamps, mirrors, and close to a dozen pictures, some of which have sparkling gilt frames. Then there are the Japanese prints, spread like an open accordion over the rich wood floor. They are sketched as color compositions condensing the scheme of the entire pastel into a small space, evoking an exotic and important influ-
ence on Chase’s work (Atkinson, 1987). With all these objects, the hall is like a studio, a space that inspires art through immersion in sensual richness.

The hall’s atmosphere is also nurtured by Chase’s use of color. This is a warm, bright interior. The yellows, golds, and reds glow in the light coming through the windows. Chase modulates these tones with blues, greys, greens, and black. The brightness of this interior is a departure from Chase’s earlier work in the 10th Street Studio, which tended to be darker. This may be a reflection of the Long Island setting, with its open, rolling hills, as opposed to the urban canyons of New York. It may also reflect Chase’s interaction with Impressionism (Atkinson, 1987).

Yet, because of the loss of William, Jr., this atmosphere is more important than scholars seem to appreciate.

Its emotional effect seems to balance the remoteness one feels from the grieving Alice. Where she is distant, the room is embracing. Chase’s emphasis on art objects, the studio quality of the hall, almost offers a balm to Alice’s grief, as if she is taking a cure in this sunny, sensuous environment. But balance may be the wrong word. Perhaps Chase simply lets the scene’s emotional contradiction stand.

In whatever way one reads the picture, the juxtaposition of Alice’s cold grief with art’s warmth goes to the core of Chase’s beliefs about human flourishing. In the Metropolitan Museum lecture, he says students should develop their pleasure in art regardless of their success as artists. “The added joy which they will get out of life and their surroundings will pay for any amount of failure. Their life will then be worth living.” Chase contrasted the art student’s life with that of a commuter “who will bury himself in a stupid newspaper in a railway train.” Rather, “Everything that conduces to the happiness of existence coincides with just what [the students] are doing. That is absolutely so” (“William M. Chase as a Teacher”, 1916: 251). The placement of Alice in this Shinnecock setting for the purpose of this pastel was an expression of the way Chase thought life should be lived. In his view, Shinnecock is indeed a kind of cure.

Besides the atmosphere of Hall at Shinnecock, scholars also comment on the influence of Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), whom Cikovsky calls “the ruling presence at Shinnecock”, noting that Chase had made a trip to Madrid in 1881 to copy the master’s work (Cikovsky, 1987: 52-53). Hall at Shinnecock makes striking references to Las Meninas, Velázquez’s portrait of the Spanish princesses, with the king and queen reflected in a mirror and Velázquez himself in the scene. Cikovsky finds Chase’s arrangement of Alice and his daughters similar to the arrangement in Las Meninas. The most striking similarity between the works is the appearance of Chase in Hall at Shinnecock, reflected in the mirrored doors of the black cabinet (Cikovsky, 1987: 53).
However, the significance of Chase’s reference to *Las Meninas* seems not to have been fully explored. The two similarities—Chase the painter with Velázquez the painter appearing in the respective scenes, and the reflected image of Chase with the reflected image of the king and queen—have an important difference. In *Las Meninas*, the parents are reflected in the mirror, not the painter. Velázquez put himself in the middle ground, not as a reflection but as a visible and even prominent part of the painting. Chase’s reflected image, by contrast, might be missed entirely. His insertion of himself into the scene is compositionally important, as we shall see, but far more subtle than the Spanish master’s. Chase is both the painter and the parent.

Chase’s allusion to Velázquez only heightens the personal nature of *Hall at Shinnecock*, placing him as a participant in this scene of grieving and healing. He identifies with his grieving wife by framing himself in black.

Literature also finds significance in Chase’s pastel medium and his Impressionistic style.

Chase is usually classified among the American Impressionists (Preston, 1982). While his Impressionist style is clearest in his landscapes, *Hall at Shinnecock* shows the influence as well, with its sunny palette and loose strokes. The focus on casual, ordinary life is also an element of Chase’s Impressionism, the determination to move art beyond the studio and put it in the middle of everyday existence, even to glorify the everyday. The very purpose of the Shinnecock art school, the largest in America to offer outdoor painting instruction (Atkinson, 1987), was to facilitate direct contact with nature. Chase’s stylistic affinity with Impressionism indicates the personal nature of his Shinnecock work.

The pastel medium, however, may be the strongest signal that Chase intended *Hall at Shinnecock* to be a personal statement. The medium had long been treated as suitable only for sketches. But Impressionists used pastel precisely because of its more personal and subjective qualities. In Europe, Edgar Degas (1834-1917) brought pastel to prominence for finished works (Pilgrim, 1978). Whistler was influential in raising the medium’s importance for Americans. It was the Italian Giuseppe de Nittis (1846-1884) who appears to have most directly influenced Chase in his use of pastel. In 1882, Chase and others formed the Society for American Painters in Pastel, which held its last exhibition in 1890. Their enthusiasm for pastel seems to have been a distinct phenomenon from Impressionism, since it pre-dated the movement’s direct impact on Americans (Pilgrim, 1978).

Again, these aspects of *Hall at Shinnecock* are well-documented but seem under-examined in reading the work. Chase’s embrace of Impressionistic style and use of pastel both emphasize the personal nature of his statement. He is documenting his family’s emotional life in the summer of 1892.
Chase’s personal statement comes most directly in the picture’s intricate composition.

Chase entices the viewer to explore the hall interior thoroughly. By placing the viewer in front of the arch that frames the hall, Chase uses the half-wall and the blue vase as an obstruction (just as Velázquez uses the massive canvas in the foreground of *Las Meninas*). This arrangement plants the urge to look around the corner, just as the incomplete view of the upstairs in the upper middle, seductively red but blocked by another blue vase, and the incomplete staircase in the background both tease the eye with possibilities. In this way, Chase makes the composition express the richness of the interior, heightening the impact of his virtuosic rendering of the objects and underlining their emotional importance.

Chase’s composition also creates an artificially strong vanishing point in the background. From the top and the right, the lines created by the lower ceiling and the picture- and window-frames foreshorten the distance to the far wall. From the left, the frames on the back wall function as arrows pointing to the cabinet. There is a triangle created by the grieving Alice, her older daughter, and the vanishing point in the cabinet. More subtly yet, the pastel strokes of red, brown, and gold that render the wood floor further emphasize the same point in the cabinet.

The vanishing point is Chase’s reflected image. The viewer’s perspective is explicitly Chase’s own. He shows us what he sees not as a painter of models, but as a husband and father. Thus, it is to Chase that young Alice has looked. He shows us his daughter’s wide-eyed gaze as a focal-point in the picture, which must be read in juxtaposition with her mother’s inwardness. Thus, Chase conflates the two roles of father-participant and artist-participant, in this sense deploying the healing power of art in a fatherly way.

*Hall at Shinnecock*, therefore, is unusual. In the context of the traditions and methods of high art, it is an intimate and personal expression, choosing to employ finished painterly techniques in pastel. In the context of American culture, Chase continues to portray the atmosphere of high art as the gnosis of the flourishing life. But, at the same time, Chase participates in the Impressionist move to the ordinary: the exalted, the mythological, and the literary are far from this work.

Even within the international Impressionist context, Chase’s *Hall at Shinnecock* is distinct. He is not portraying hired models, his mistress, or the family of a patron, as if his own concerns as a husband and father were too prosaic to become objects of contemplation. He portrays his own wife and his daughters at a point of emotional need. Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) and Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) had shown that the domestic life of a mother was a worthy subject of art. But one struggles to think of an Impressionist paint-
ing that so directly and personally portrays domestic concern from a man’s point of view.

Chase’s *Hall at Shinnecock* glorifies the husband-father as the providential center of the family. Furthermore, the work does not express a sentimentalized ideal, or even an aspiration, but a belief that Chase held and practiced. The work reaches far into the ordinary.

The Problem
Chase’s life illustrates the problem of Gnosticism in high art. The sanctuaries in which art exerts its power also isolate art from nature, from ordinary life, and from audiences.

To experience the healing, illumination, and knowledge that art gives, a person must be initiated into the studio or the museum. Nicholas Wolterstorff writes:

One characteristic feature of our institution of high art is the important role played within it by special separated rooms and buildings—concert halls, art galleries, theaters, reading rooms. It is not difficult to discern the reason. If the action of perceptual contemplation is to be performed at all satisfactorily, particularly when its satisfactory practice requires mental concentration, rather special physical conditions are required (Wolterstorff, 1980: 25).

Elkins defines art institutionally as “whatever is exhibited in galleries in major cities, bought by museums of contemporary art, shown in biennales and the Documenta, and written about in periodicals such as *Artforum, October, Flash Art, Parkett,* or *Tema Celeste*” (Elkins, 2004: 1). As in Chase’s time, art’s holy places are central to its mission, even if the holy place is in print.

The artist whose work inhabits such spaces is a liberator, freeing human beings from the constrictions of the ordinary. Wolterstorff says:

The artist is a center of consciousness. His business is to bring forth an expression of himself in the form of a new creation. In distinction from God, however, that requires struggle. God creates in sovereign, untrammelled freedom. But confronting the artist is an actuality which exists apart from his will, threatening him with constriction: the constricting actuality of aesthetic norms, the constricting actuality of artistic and social traditions, the constricting actuality of the institution of high art itself, the constricting actuality of materials, the constricting actuality of the fact that unless the artist finds acceptance for his work he cannot live. Thus the obverse side of his urge to create is the artist’s need to fight for liberation from the prime evil of constrictions on his freedom. We in the West are confident that the struggle for liberation can be won. We are confident that actuality will prove permeable by the will of the artist (Wolterstorff, 1980: 52).
This power to transcend the actual is repeatedly ascribed to religious visual art. Herbert Kessler, for instance, concludes that Christians superseded the second commandment and embraced icons as objects of veneration less because of theological arguments and more because of the images themselves. “Pictures triumphed in Christian culture because of the magical facility of all art to transform stone and wood and pigments and glass and metal into living things” (Kessler, 1991: 64).

Transcendence through art is a gnostic spirituality. The physical world is a barrier to ultimate reality, which can only be found in the spiritual world. The secret things are opened only to the initiated, devotees who know how to cross the boundaries of the physical. Human beings seek sacred spaces in order to escape the oppression of the ordinary and connect with ultimate realities. Gnostic spirituality is often explicit in the art world. Elkins, for example, argues that contemporary artists could sincerely engage spiritual themes through “apophatic or negative theology”. He cites Gnosticism as one apophatic starting point, “and in particular the Gnostic concept of the ‘alien god’, the absent ‘Other’” (Elkins, 2004: 107).

Though Gnosticism is central to many of the claims of high art, the art world struggles against the isolation it imposes. The history of art is punctuated with forays into the ordinary, like Impressionism, producing works that are first shunned as too base for art to handle, only to be ushered into the temple later. Chase exemplifies the tension. He liquidated his 10th Street studio and embraced the Impressionist vision of art outdoors without discarding the principle that art must have a temple. He still believed his family could recover joy in an aesthetic atmosphere. In fact, the Shinnecock hall he documented was just his temple’s outer court. The house had a studio just down a flight of stairs from the hall, even more luxuriously decorated (Cikovsky, 1987). Chase never addressed the problem of whether art should leave its inner sanctum or remain. Because “his was essentially a nonintellectual approach to art” (Gallati, 1995: 130), he lived with the contradiction. But as he reached into the ordinary with his art and became disenchanted with the studio’s mystique, he did not seem able to retain his artistic vitality. The contradiction may have weakened the moral clarity of his mission.

The problem may be summed up this way: If art frees human beings from the ordinary, why does art need the ordinary to refresh its vision?

For Christians, the problem is of even greater importance, since it concerns the nature of worship. An implicitly gnostic view of spirituality can be found in many traditions. Consider the ambiguity of Dyrness’s use of the term worship. He is concerned with “the use Christian believers make of art and visual elements in their experience of worship” (Dyrness, 2008: xi). He consistently describes worship as experienced by human beings—a state of consciousness that is beyond the ordinary. He writes, “Protestants continue to
share a deeply held and broad consensus about the basic meaning of the worship experience. Worship, in whatever form it takes, has to do with the immediate and personal encounter with God” (Dyrness, 2008: 24). The inward experience for Protestants is sacred. Furthermore, their consciences seem to mandate that they experience this transcendence. Dyrness speculates that entering into this experience may be conceived by Protestants as an act of the will that rejects all outward stimulus (Dyrness, 2008: 42-43). What might Anabaptists have to say about this gnostic narrative both as an understanding of visual art and of worship?

The Tree

The ancient cultures from which Israel emerged assumed that human beings must have sacred spaces. The emotional bonds on which community depended could only be created by holy precincts, initiation into hidden realities, priestly classes, and physical objects that represented the unseen world. Whether the culture was Egyptian, Philistine, or Canaanite, the purpose of art was to bind people’s emotional world to their community.

In this context, the designs of the tabernacle and its furnishings recorded in the Mosaic Law have seemed inadequate. Scholars have argued that the Exodus designs were invented during Solomon’s reign to justify his temple (Cross, 1947). To be sure, the tabernacle has aesthetic elements that are contrary the prejudices of its time. To take just one example, holy places were regarded as fixed by definition, but the tabernacle was a holy place that travelled (Sommer, 2001). It did not enshrine a place where the Lord lived, but received his presence wherever he roved (Exod 40:34-38). Its transitory nature remained central to its design even after Israel was established in the land (2 Sam 7:1-7), and a permanent temple required explicit revelation from the Lord (1 Chr 28:9-19). If the tabernacle had been designed to impress Israelites with the sacred power of a particular spot, the design would have poor: the people could watch the tent being raised and dismantled.

The menorah is an example of how strange the Exodus designs were in their cultural context. Viewed as a functional lampstand, it is more elaborate than necessary. Viewed as an artwork for ritual practices, its symbolism is obscure. But as an expression of the purposes of the tabernacle, the menorah clarifies the nature of worship and embodies the biblical vision of human flourishing as only an artwork can.

In the vast literature on the menorah, one can find analyses of what Exodus 25:31-40 and 37:17-24 describe from Jewish and Christian scholars going back many centuries. There are abundant arguments for the menorah’s typology. In modern literature, there is considerable application of form and source criticism to the Exodus texts (e.g. Levine, 1965). One can
also find a large body of work focused on the menorah’s significance in art history, with interest in the arch of Titus (Strauss, 1959), the Brescia casket (Watson, 1981), the Synagogue of Dura-Europos (Roth, 1953; Wischnitzer, 1971), and illuminated manuscripts (Gutmann, 1967; Willetts, 1979). However, relatively few scholars have focused on the menorah’s original aesthetic properties. The inability to examine the tabernacle artifacts physically certainly hinders such an inquiry and snares it in controversy (Hurowitz, 1995). Erwin R. Goodenough and Carol L. Meyers have made valuable contributions to this focus from an archaeological perspective by developing methods for studying the symbolism of artifacts (Goodenough, 1953; C. Meyers, 1976). Still, the artistic implications of the Exodus passages remain unexplored.

What was the Lord’s purpose for the tabernacle, and what was the function of the menorah within that purpose?

The purpose of the tabernacle, as Hebrews 9:1-10 develops it, was to express the Lord’s presence with Israel visually. The tent, its furnishings, and the activities of the priests all contributed to this visual expression. The Lord’s presence was covered by the veil between the holy place (9:2) and the holy of holies (9:3-5), indicating a separation that the Mosaic covenant never offered to penetrate in a final way (9:8-10). The covenant only penetrated the holiest place once a year with animal blood (9:7). The sphere of daily priestly mediation was the first section, the holy place (9:6). This arrangement expressed the presence of the Lord in Israel in visual language, but without an image of God himself: the mercy seat, framed by two cherubim and their extended wings, holds no visible occupant (9:5).

The importance of these visual expressions cannot be overstated, since Hebrews 9:8 ascribes their content to the Holy Spirit himself. The writer alludes to biblical history. The Lord informed Moses that he had filled artists with his Spirit for all of the work of design and production for the tabernacle and the priestly service (Exod 31:1-11). The artists were not only endowed with the Spirit, but “with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship”, meaning that the Lord placed value on the theological implications of the art and on the workmanship itself.

The strangeness of the tabernacle against the backdrop of ancient visual culture, therefore, is not due to anachronism. There are clear precedents from contemporaneous cultures for the elements of the tabernacle (C. L. Meyers, 1982). Still less is the strangeness due to aesthetic incompetence, or to a low priority assigned to visual artistry. Rather, the tabernacle was strange for its time because its theological and visual logic was countercultural, asserting the paradox of God’s presence and inaccessibility in ways that undermined religious assumptions. First, the tabernacle asserted that God’s presence was in all places and could be received within the territory
of any people. Second, the tabernacle asserted that the human priesthood was inadequate to mediate constant access to the holiest place.

Hebrews 9:2 places the menorah outside the veil covering the holy of holies. The menorah was described in Exodus 25:31-40, and its fabrication recounted in Exodus 37:17-24. It was made of hammered gold, and had six branches extended from a central shaft, each featuring three cups made to look like almond blossoms. Its shape was like an abstract tree (C. Meyers, 1976; Yarden, 1971). Its lamps were to be kept burning by the priests “from evening to morning” using pure olive oil (Exod 27:20-21; Lev 24:1-4). Of the many features of this design that illustrate its unusual character, consider three.

First, as Meyers points out, the term hånq, usually translated “branches” in reference to the menorah’s structure, actually denotes a plant, “a gigantic grass growing to a height of eight to eighteen feet and a diameter of two to three inches at its base. It is common throughout Syria, Palestine, and the Sinai Peninsula particularly along the margins of watercourses or bodies of water.” This reed is associated in Scripture with Egypt, coming to symbolize the whole nation (e.g. 2 Kgs 18:21; Isa 19:6; 36:6; Ezek 29:6-7) (see C. Meyers, 1976: 19). The reed-branches of the menorah, then, can be read as a reminder of Israel’s point of origin, its slavery in Egypt.

Second, the menorah’s plant reference is composite. The design calls for cups fashioned like almond blossoms, three of which sprout from each Egyptian reed. Scholars have noted what they take to be the odd choice of fruit for this symbol. Neither the Egyptians nor their Israelite slaves grew almonds (Trever, 1959). Why call for almond blossoms on the menorah when the first Levites who cared for it would never have seen them? The common hypothesis that the Exodus designs were written centuries after Moses serves as a sufficient explanation for some (Trever, 1959). From another point of view, some ancient cultures were fascinated with the almond tree because it was the first to bloom (C. Meyers, 1976). In the biblical context, the almond appears in three places. Jacob sends almonds to the then-unknown Joseph in Genesis 43:11 as a present to appease him. Almonds were likely associated with the land of Canaan just as reeds were associated with Egypt. In Numbers 17:8, Aaron’s rod produces almond blossoms as a proof that he is the Lord’s choice as high priest. Jeremiah 1:11-12 records a similar incident. A rod sprouts almond blossoms as a sign that the Lord watches over his word to perform it. The almond blossoms on the menorah, then, can be said to symbolize the Lord’s watchful performance of his word for Israel in the land.

Third, there is a marked shift in concept in the menorah from similar lampstands in contemporaneous cultures. It has a functional purpose: to give light for the priests in a tent that has no windows. This function is often
interpreted as a Messianic type that Christ will give light just as the menorah does (Owen, 1999: 295-297). While its function is symbolically important, Meyers argues that the menorah’s overall design—the reed and blossom references with many other aspects—raises it to an artistic symbol. “Actually, it is not so much the actual detail of the decoration, such as the use of a triple floral form, which strikes us as most important. Rather it is the shift in conception of the stand from a simple and functional device to an object which assumes architectonic elements and thereby becomes important in and of itself” (C. Meyers, 1976: 83) Furthermore, as an artistic expression, it cannot be understood as a product of the cultures around Israel at the time. “Nothing in the realm of stands, cultic or otherwise, can be related to the branched form of the menorah” (Isbell, 1980: 221; C. Meyers, 1976: 84; Propp, 2006: 512).

The three features we have surveyed, together with the overall design of the tabernacle, make clear that the menorah was a unique artistic statement in the ancient world. If we consider the layers of scriptural allusion in the menorah, we can see how it embodied the countercultural mission of the tabernacle. Consider several ways in which the larger biblical narrative is harnessed to the menorah’s design.

The tabernacle was where the Lord dwelt with human beings, just as the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:4-3:24). The tree of life was the focus of the garden as the created source of renewed life, and it was from this tree that human beings were exiled. The reappearance of the tree of life in the New Jerusalem closes the story of redemption, with human beings restored to God’s dwelling place (Rev 22:1-5). The menorah as a tree within God’s dwelling yet outside the holy of holies is a natural, even necessary, furnishing. It expresses the problem of separation from God, promises the blessing of God across that separation, and anticipates the ultimate reunification of human beings with God.

Another connection with biblical narrative is the menorah’s references to Israel’s point of origin, Egypt (the reed-branches), and to Israel’s destination, the land of Canaan (almond blossoms). Its mixture of plant references might have several purposes. For instance, it might portray the emergence of Israel out of Egypt like almond blossoms out of reeds. It might also serve to recall the Lord’s promise that Israel’s new land will be fruitful. Meyers comments, “There is no question but that the Lord is the divine power behind the flourishing or non-flourishing of vegetation, and there is no appeal to any natural aspect of God’s being as a force to be confronted or dealt with in order to secure fertility. In other words, God has been completely separated from nature” (C. Meyers, 1976: 135). Regardless of how one reads the composite design, the menorah brings the narrative of the Lord’s loyal love upon Israel and its land into the tabernacle.
Still another connection with biblical narrative can be found in a motif that describes the Lord’s redemptive work for Israel both before and after the menorah’s fabrication. The song at the Red Sea closes with the picture of the Lord planting Israel on his mountain (Exod 15:17). The Lord promises David that he will “plant” Israel securely (2 Sam 7:10; 1 Chr 17:9). The image of Israel as a vine or tree planted by the Lord recurs in Psalm 80:9-11 and Isaiah 61:3, et al. Meyers believes that the menorah is a symbol of the planted nation, and that it “can be seen as the ultimate challenge to the pagan fertility and immortality themes” (C. Meyers, 1976: 156).

The menorah, then, asserts that the Lord alone is the source of Israel’s flourishing. It gleams in the Lord’s presence to represent the fruitfulness and security of the nation, the entire scope of the people’s life symbolized as witness and worship.

The Rationale

The Lord’s commands about the design, fabrication, and use of the menorah equip Anabaptists with a rationale for visual artistry. This rationale is distinctively biblical, mobilizing soteriological truths to free visual art from idolatry—specifically from the Gnosticism of Western high art.

A helpful way to see this rationale is to relate the menorah to its three original audiences: the people of Israel, the Levites, and the Lord himself.

In relation to the people, the menorah was a furnishing of the tabernacle that they only knew from the outside. They never saw the menorah in the setting God designed, since they had no access to the holy place. Conceivably, they may have seen it at points in transit. But, assuming usage that conformed to the law, the menorah’s function was not to grant the people access to God, nor even to be an object of their contemplation. They knew of the menorah from Moses’s commands, understood it as part of the apparatus of the Lord’s presence, and gave the gold from which it was made (Exod 35:4-36:7). Thus, the menorah was not the Lord’s expression to the people, but the people’s expression to the Lord. It was not a prompt to worship—the inducement of some state of spiritual consciousness—but an act of worship.

In relation to the Levites, the menorah was designed for contemplation in service (C. Meyers, 2008). The artwork itself was to serve in the Lord’s presence, and the Levites (specifically the Kohathites) were charged with transporting, maintaining, setting up, and dismantling it (Num 3:27-32; 4:1-15). As they handled the menorah, its layered symbolism could continually refresh their appreciation of God, reminding them of his power in bringing the nation out of Egypt, his faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in giving the land to the people, and his blessing year after year in making the land fruitful. It would also exhort them to be the pastoral stew-
ards of the nation’s worship, who teach the covenant so that the people would continue to flourish before the Lord, gleaming as his light to the nations (Deut 4:5-8). The menorah daily reinforced for the Levites that the whole life of the nation was to be integrated in service to the Lord. Put differently, the menorah asserted that the most significant worship was not taking place in the shrine at all, but in the fields, on the roads, in the homes and the city gates throughout the whole land.

On this analysis, the primary audience for the menorah was the Lord. He was the recipient of the people’s offerings. The menorah stood in his presence. As a symbol of his blessing upon Israel, its foremost purpose seems to have been to reflect his pleasure in the flourishing of human beings.

Therefore, a biblical rationale for the visual arts has at least the following principles. First, visual art should express human gratitude to God for his blessings, especially as the outworking of covenant relationship with him. Second, visual art should express the integration of all life under God’s rule. Third, visual art should empower specific actions of serving God, whether those actions are the proclamation of his goodness, godly ethical behavior, or even the raising of children. These principles can be inferred readily from the example of the menorah.

A fourth biblical principle needs more explanation. Visual art should subvert the domination of the human mind by idolatry. This was a key function of the tabernacle and all its artistry. It was an anti-shrine, a visual apologetic against idols in favor of the living, covenant-keeping God. Just as the Lord commanded visual artists to engage the surrounding idolatrous cultures in visual debate, so we are mandated to do today.

Consider how deeply idolatry and true worship clash. Idolatry restricts the presence of a god to a locality. True worship assumes God’s omnipresence (2 Chr 6:18). Idolatry restricts access to God to physical images and to the temples in which those images are housed. True worship opens access to God in all places through covenant relationship, affirming God’s paradoxical nearness and separateness (2 Chr 6:18-21). Idolatry focuses on a human audience, before whom it claims to represent the spiritual world. True worship mobilizes human beings to focus on God himself, represented all-sufficiently to the world by his promises (2 Chr 6.22-40). The menorah’s example calls visual art to engage this conflict energetically.

These four principles open every conceivable subject to artistic scrutiny. If the goal of visual art is to express the integration of all life under God’s rule, then artists have a warrant to explore the varieties of human flourishing. The rationale also opens the complete visual toolbox, from folk to high art, from old media to new, from conceptions that affirm a worldview to the
confrontational techniques of subversion. Such a biblical rationale addresses three issues in particular.

First, it puts the second commandment in proper perspective. The prohibition of idols does not apply broadly to all images for all purposes. The Lord validated the visual arts emphatically, empowering artists to elevate their skills for a countercultural task. This validation crosses into the New Testament, where symbols from the tabernacle and temple are affirmed (Acts 2:46; Heb 9:1-5), and churches are represented by menorahs (Rev 1:12-20).

At the same time, the rationale highlights the Bible’s own application of the second commandment, which is sweeping indeed. Any system that makes images the objects rather than the expressions of worship is false to the character of God and degrading to human beings. God does not live in temples (Acts 7:38-50; 14:11-18; 17:22-31). It is a lie to serve created things instead of the Creator (Rom 1:18-25).

Second, the rationale clarifies the theological grounds for visual art. In the Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is the ground for legitimizing visual art (Dyrness, 2001). Kessler summarizes, “[The icon] re-enacts the central Christian mystery. Christ brought mankind a life-giving spirit that abrogated the law; the holy image does the same. And just as in Jesus Christ a true man is united with God, in the icon, matter acquires Grace when it is impressed with the sacred form” (Kessler, 1991: 64).

Anabaptists can recognize and reject the Platonic categories in such formulations as gnostic presuppositions. Christ is the sole image of the invisible God in whom the entire created order, visible and invisible, holds together (Col 1:15-17). Matter per se was never the barrier between human beings and God. The barrier is sin, and in the covenant relationship we have in Christ that barrier is torn down (Col 1:19-20). There is no other image than Christ that we may venerate. Indeed, we anticipate the day when we will see him as he is, and so become like him (1 John 3:1-3).

The proper ground for legitimizing the visual arts is the doctrine of general revelation. God has expressed his glory in the created order (Rom 1:19-20). Human creativity itself is part of God’s revealed glory. Therefore, no less than Bezalel, we glorify God by exercising our visual creativity to shape and imitate the created order.

Third, this rationale for visual art helps to focus the artist on the biblical vision of human flourishing. Dyrness writes, “In the biblical view... life is viewed holistically—aesthetic and ethical (even economic) questions are constantly interrelated. Moreover, none of these important areas can be properly considered apart from their connection to the Creator and his purposes for the earth and its people” (Dyrness, 2001: 70). Human beings
flourish in all aspects of life by faith in God’s promises in Christ. Using the menorah, the Lord expressed to the Levites the power of his promises, and reminded them to integrate all aspects of the nation’s life in service to him. Wolterstorff articulates the mission of art for contemplation within the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, or wholeness:

Aesthetic delight is a component within and a species of that joy which belongs to the shalom God has ordained as the goal of human existence, and which here already, in this broken and fallen world of ours, is to be sought and experienced. That is why you and I are to pursue aesthetic delight, for ourselves and others, along with a multitude of other goals: justice, peace, community. Since it belongs to the shalom that God intends for each of us, it becomes a matter of responsible action to help make available, to ourselves and others, the experience of aesthetic delight. It becomes a norm for action—not of course the only norm, but certainly one among others (Wolterstorff, 1980: 169).

With this rationale for the visual arts, Anabaptists can assert their distinctive biblical message. In Christ, there is no separation between sacred and secular. When he purchased us out of sin, he claimed lordship of over all aspects of our lives. Worship, therefore, is not an experience that is distinct from the ordinary but is the action of uniting all the ordinary in service to Christ.

Anabaptists can also embrace visual art as indispensable for this action of worship. If they will raise their artistic skills to meet the demands of a countercultural task, they will find a formidable set of tools for proclaiming *shalom* in Christ. They will find, for example, that high art offers methods for affirming morally right actions without the degradations of crusading or sentimentalizing propaganda. Chase’s affirmation of the husband-father’s role in *Hall at Shinnecock* resounds emotionally because he combined subject, composition, medium, style, allusion, and perspective to focus the viewer’s attention. Beyond merely exciting sympathy for a grieving family, the work rewards contemplation of all the issues it raises.

The Anabaptist tradition has much to discuss with Chase’s heirs today. How might the art world leave its shrines? Is Gnosticism the art world’s only spiritual option? Why not embrace the spirituality of mobilizing the ordinary for *shalom*? Anabaptists have a covenant-keeping God to proclaim at the center of this mandate, who calls us to worship him with gratitude in whatever we do, whether word or deed (Col 3:17).

**References**


ABSTRACT. In “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”, published for the first time in 1960, Flannery O’Connor refers to the South as “Christ-haunted”, a phrase that has become synonymous with interpreting her fiction and ideals. This image has justified everything from psychoanalytic readings to the so-called “Southern Gothic” school of the 20th century. While O’Connor points to a necessary tie between the culture she observes and at least a superstitious understanding of Christianity, interpretations of her work have mainly fallen into two camps: the theological stream that seeks to read the author as allegorist and ignore the tensions in her work, and the cultural stream, which uses alternative critical lenses to focus on unraveling those tensions, but separate from any redemptive motive. That is, criticism has separated the Christ-haunted narrative from “The South” that O’Connor fictionalizes in her work. This paper argues that the richest interpretation of O’Connor’s texts must leave room for a theological and cultural reading to co-exist, and works to demonstrate that her fiction can both function in the role of parable, through its structure, and invite readings of the cultural and racial tensions at play in the details of each story. This is demonstrated through a close reading of O’Connor’s “Good Country People”. The paper also argues that in joining the two streams of criticism, readership can allow O’Connor’s non-fiction work to hold its own place in the cannon—not as decoder, to agree with or fight against, but as writing that contains within it vast cultural and theological complexities of its own.

KEY WORDS: Flannery O’Connor, parable, structure, “moment of grace”, culturalism

Introduction
In “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”, published for the first time in 1960, Flannery O’Connor makes a statement that has become synonymous with interpreting her fiction and ideals: “I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted” (Mystery and Manners, 1969: 44). That phrase—the “Christ-haunted South”—has appeared countless times and has justified everything from cultural analysis to psychoanalytic readings to defining the so-called “Southern Gothic” school of the 20th century. While the author points to a necessary tie between the culture she “feeds on” (The Habit of Being, 1979:}

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and at least a superstitious understanding of Christianity, interpretations of her work have mainly fallen into two camps: the theological stream that seeks to read O'Connor as an allegorist and bleach all other aspects of her work, and the cultural stream, focused on unraveling violence inherent in O'Connor’s fiction, separate from any redemptive motive. That is, the Christ-haunted narrative has been separated from “The South” that O'Connor observes and fictionalizes in her work.

O'Connor made no mystery of what she saw as not only her purpose in writing, but the highest calling of fiction: to reveal, to a largely secular readership, humanity’s ultimate depravity and need for Christ’s redemption. Her stories follow a clear model: protagonists, convinced of their self-sufficiency and social superiority, are confronted by their own pride, often in the form of a rage-filled social outcast. This conflict, which occurs just before the end of the story, strips away the protagonist’s arrogant, rebellious veneer and leaves him or her gasping and naked, but with the ability to see the true state of their souls and their need for redemption, should they choose to. They begin as caricatures: haughty intellectuals, cliché-spouting optimists, misfits reminiscent of grotesque medieval carvings, but are transformed in an instant into fully realized characters, retroactively as their safe veneers are stripped away. O'Connor, and much of her scholarship, refers to this as the “moment of grace” within each story, but the horrors that shepherd these grace-filled moments have been some of the most widely examined by her critics. Without exception the climax of her characters’ lives require a great physical and emotional toll. O'Connor’s characters are shot, raped, drowned, stranded, attacked by “lunatics” and gored by bulls. Their farms are burned, their daughters stolen, their parents beaten and left for dead.

Commentary on the violence of this “grace” has made up the vast majority of O'Connor’s criticism, both theological and secular. Indeed, even the author herself had a good deal to say about it, explicating her purpose and distancing herself from readings she does not “see” within her own work. She took issue with her frequent classification as a member of the Southern Gothic school, for instance, calling Gothic writing “degeneracy which is not recognized as such” (quoted in Dowell, 1965: 235). She also took pains to differentiate her view of her work from a psychoanalytic reading (an easy lens to read through, given the erratic behavior of her characters). A teasing comment to fellow writer Elizabeth Hester sums up her compromise with Freudian readings and readers: “As to Sigmund, I am against him tooth and toenail, but I am crafty: never deny, seldom confirm, always distinguish. Within his limitations I am ready to admit certain uses for him” (HB, 1979: 109). Other critics have claimed O'Connor’s violent climaxes as a hatred of women or, in equal measure, as revelatory of the systems of violence
in place against women. O'Connor, again writing to Hester, does not disagree with feminist readings, necessarily, but certainly does not see them as an explanation for her stories, seeming not to understand herself as having a specific agenda one way or another: “I...never think of qualities which are specifically feminine or masculine” (HB, 1979: 176).

At this point, a trend, if not a problem, should become clear: because O'Connor has written and spoken so clearly on her own work, critics find themselves considering her opinions closely when analyzing her writing, whether or not their ultimate aim is analysis of her letters and speeches. The first decision when writing on O'Connor tends to be whether or not to agree with her intentions in writing, even though authorial intent has been dismissed in almost all other literary criticism. In fact, in weighing the monstrosity of her stories against the beautiful clarity of a “moment of grace”, many of O'Connor’s critics have allowed her to dictate how her work should be read: not as merely grotesque for its own sake, but as revealing the sinfulness of man in a way that secular readership will recognize as hideous. To show the incomprehensible beauty of grace, she argues—and critics parrot—one must see it outlined against the horrors of sin, and what better way than to show mankind struggling with his own ego in the form of a monstrous physical opponent? In the published form of her widely critiqued essay, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction”, she writes:

There is something in us, as storytellers and as listeners to stories, that demands the redemptive act, that demands that what falls at least be offered the chance to be restored. The reader of today looks for this motion, and rightly so, but what he has forgotten is the cost of it. His sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the price of restoration (O'Connor, 1969: 48).

That is to say, the secular readership she writes for needs a good shock to realize how far mankind has fallen. Sin is hideous, but culture refuses to recognize it as such, unless it looks like a wandering gunman or an atheist Bible salesman taking women’s artificial body parts. This is, in many ways, a credible hermeneutic. It has allowed criticism to interpret her work through several veins of Catholic tradition, including Augustinian and Aquinian thought, and the Medieval fascination with “hideously beautiful” grotesque images (Edmonson, 2002; Han, 1997; DiRenzo, 1995, among others) While I believe that for any kind of full reading of O’Connor’s work one must include, or at least grapple with, the theological element contained within her texts, I disagree that we should grapple with them because O’Connor asks us to. To only read O’Connor through her published intentions is not only a fallacy, it also falls short of appreciating the richness (often in the form of tension and duality) that the work has to offer, treating
the fiction as allegory and caricature, but ignoring cultural commentary past the point of establishing a sinful world’s need for redemption.

It makes sense that theological readings of the text would look to O’Connor for explanation and affirmation. She provides a clear starting point for such interpretations. But secular understandings of the text also find themselves pulling in biographical explanations and letter analysis to answer O’Connor’s critical protestations. As rhetorist James Mellard wryly notes, “Of the modern authors who have had their way with critics, Flannery O’Connor must be among the most successful. [...] [No other author] has been so successful at simply telling the critical readers how they must interpret their works” (James Mellard, 1989: 625). Whether Mellard means this to apply to his own analysis or not, the truth of his lament goes beyond simply noting the vastness of criticism that holds O’Connor up as allegorist.

Of those who refuse to end their interrogation of the texts with the author’s own explanation, Mellard included, the two most common ways to examine O’Connor’s writing are through a cultural and psychoanalytic lens. Culturally, O’Connor fits alongside the Southern writers who were her contemporaries: William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, even Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote, when Southern Gothicists cast a wide net. Although she’s an odd bird even in this flock, her stories deal with race and class in the Jim Crow era and possess the same chilling (and often bitterly funny) quality that the aforementioned draw out when painting the desperation and fear of post-reconstruction Southerners. Because of the rich cultural lens, a psychoanalytic reading can easily be applied, both to individual stories and to trends across stories. If ignoring the theological implications, these lenses makes the most sense as an entry point for analysis. Mellard applies both Freud and Lacan. Claire Katz looks at O’Connor’s own psyche for explanation and a few others follow her lead, often digging into her letters or personal history for enlightenment. Louise Westling, moving a little past Katz, takes a feminist approach, picking up on O’Connor’s bent toward breathing life into dysfunctional mothers and daughters. Tony Magistrale comments on the fractured family trope as a whole. Still, though, these secularists and others have to wrestle with O’Connor’s own reading of her text, explaining it away as too simple, or declaring outright their refusal to be trapped under the author’s thumb. And yet, even in these protestations, O’Connor herself, more so than the implications of her framework, is the force being reckoned with.

In this paper, I propose that while the criticism that has come before is thorough and well-examined, it’s too disjointed to understand the nature of O’Connor’s parable in its most powerful form. I see two camps, which I’ll call the theological and secular streams of criticism. Of course there are many smaller veins within these two scholarly rivers and they run the gam-
ut, but the gap I want to comment on exists centrally between those critics who take O'Connor at her word and move forward, using her non-fiction as a basis for interpretation—that is, the theological stream—and those critics who must disprove O'Connor’s opinions before they can flesh out another critical lens—that is, the secular stream. The two streams seem at odds with one another, and yet both have to wrestle with the degree to which they accept what O'Connor claims about her work. The theological stream tends to perform close readings of the “grace-moment” in her texts, comparing her with Thomas Aquinas or Augustine of Hippo, using her letters to extricate theological explanations, rarely looking beyond O'Connor’s theology to other factors at play within her work. Conversely, those who read her through a lens other than the one she provided want to comment on character motivation and cultural significance, but only look at the climax for clues about the violence intrinsic to each of O'Connor’s works. These critics examine literary influence and racial awareness and make arguments about theoretical schools at play, but they have to do heavy lifting to separate these completely from O'Connor’s intended moment of grace. Indeed, they must ignore a good bit of the texts in question, or write them off as cultural color.

My argument, then, has two parts: first, that the two streams of criticism have an unnecessary gap that needs to be bridged in order to understand the view of grace being presented. The two camps currently work against each other, to their detriment. By bridging the gap between them, we can see O'Connor’s body of work as more than either religious allegory or gory psychoanalytic study of the Gothic South. We can also fit more pieces of criticism in, but give them their rightful place as pieces and not full lenses, an important distinction. This means coupling several different elements, usually treated as disparate: theological and secular readings, structural and naturalistic lenses, eternal views and temporal culture.

The second part of my argument, I think, is the harder case to make: that if we can join these two streams, we can perhaps begin to examine this body of work without the author dogging our steps. Already within this paper, I’ve referenced O'Connor’s explanation of her work four times through quotation. She was nearly as prolific in her writings explaining her work as she was in writing the fiction itself. As such, she has given critics a treasure trove, and it’s not wrong to dive in and bring up pearls. But I aim to show that we don’t have to. In looking at both the structure of the stories and the details that flesh it out, the reader can discover both a parable-like revelation of grace and a full world situated within a particular culture, influenced by psychological demons, tense family dynamics, and protagonists struggling against systems of injustice. This can only be done by joining the
readings of O’Connor, though. Separately, the two streams need her as their basis, because neither can fully explain her work.

**O’Connor’s Work and Parable Structure**

More than 20 publications on O’Connor from 1980 through the early 2000s deal with the parable-like qualities of her work, specifically noting its salvific goal. While they comment on a wide range of aspects, my focus is on the consistent, parable-like structure of the stories, which allows readership to see O’Connor’s purpose without her explicit explanation.

In the preface of his 1871 translation of Aesop’s Fables, George Fyler Townsend gives a classic definition of the parable: “the designed use of language purposely intended to convey a hidden and secret meaning other than that contained in the words themselves; and which may or may not bear a special reference to the hearer, or reader” (Townsend, 1871: a2). Thomas Oden adds that to qualify as a parable the story must have an “aesthetic balance, some trenchant elements of metaphorical imagination, brevity and economy, limited development of characterization, and a concentrated plot with a powerful ‘twist’ or verbal insight” (Oden, 1978: xvi). As a brief allegorical form, born from oral tradition and intended to remind the reader of shared faith, the parable uses simple, clear plot lines and character development, revealing only details that are necessary to unraveling the deeper levels of meaning. In examining Oden’s definition, Robert Bullough (2010) puts particular emphasis on the “powerful ‘twist’” ending, noting that the function of familiar setting and characters is to “quickly bring readers to the edge of their understanding only to drop them as something new is revealed, requiring that a troubling ‘imaginative choice’ be made that reveals who and what they are, what they value, and where they stand morally” (Bullough, 2010: 153). Finally, Sally McFague points out that “the outstanding feature of [...] parables is their extravagance. While the stories are, at one level, thoroughly ordinary and secular, events occur and decisions are made which are absurd, radical, alien, extreme” (Sally McFague, 1983: 50).

Christ’s parables, the best known examples of the form, feature familiar characters, included within his hearers: farmers, tax collectors, Pharisees, a wealthy father and his heirs. They’re set in places that a local audience would recognize: an infamously dangerous road between Jerusalem and Jericho, for instance, or the temple courts. In order to serve as reminders of the differences between true faith and self-righteous morality, the parables follow a clear pattern. They introduce a central protagonist and an issue, and then work to a conclusion that upsets the hearers’ expectations and bring back into focus the short-sighted and hard-heartedness of mankind, in stark contrast to unabashed mercy. The ends of parables are always ex-
treme. Often, they’re shockingly kind, and hearers can marvel at undeserved grace, especially in place of deserved wrath. Just as frequently, however, they end in utter and violent destruction; five of Matthew’s parables end with characters being thrown into fire or darkness “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:52, and 25:30, New International Version). In both cases, McFague’s noted “extravagance” comes into play, especially as seemingly mundane failures—a servant burying money instead of investing it—are punished with eternal banishment. The hearer is meant to understand, though, that the offense symbolizes direct disobedience to Yahweh, and is therefore more severe than sinful humanity can imagine.

The stories are short and clear, only including details that add significance or layers of meaning to the story, and yet they require unraveling; the deepest meanings are not evident to all hearers, but only to those who will, as O’Connor puts it “undergo the effort needed to understand it” (M&M, 1969: 189). Much of Christ’s teaching is spent explaining his parables to his disciples.

Similarly, O’Connor’s stories frequently contain references to Southern-American Christian morality, such as Ruby Turpin’s Pharasaical prayer thanking God that she was not born “white trash” (“Revelation”), and moments of true Christian conviction, such as the grandmother’s exhortation to the Misfit to “pray, pray, pray,” just before her death in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” or the vision of Jacob’s ladder at the end of “Revelation”. It would be reductionist to say merely that the stories are parables, but they certainly serve similar purposes through like means. One could argue that O’Connor’s characters—brightly painted with cabbage heads and potato noses—can be read as stock-types for most of the story, as much on display for the reader’s amusement and education as the hermaphrodite in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost”. The setting, also feels familiar, set specifically amongst O’Connor’s neighbors. It’s in no way a stretch to say that the stories draw from Southern story-telling traditions; both florid characters and sharp language points to oral tradition and “local color” writing—in the style of earlier writers and storytellers like Mark Twain.

To demonstrate the extent to which O’Connor’s work can be read as a parable, I want to apply parabolic parameters to one of O’Connor’s most successful and widely anthologized stories, “Good Country People”. The story’s “aesthetic balance” comes from several contrasting elements. The use of Mrs. Freeman’s limited perspective, which bookends the story, creates a tension between characters’ “mechanical” functioning and genuine experience. Physical descriptions, such as “big spectacled” Joy-Hulga Hopewell in contrast to “tall gaunt” Manly Pointer, act as balancing forces. The use of physical location as a disorientating force, conversely, acts as a reverse aes-
thetic, and, within the narrative, breaks down Hulga’s safe, self-contained worldview and, with it, readerly assumptions about human nature. As for characterization, the story portrays four of O’Connor’s most frequent stock characters: a cliché-spouting, optimistic Southern matriarch, a poor, steely farm wife, an intellectual, embittered daughter, and a cruel interruption in the form of a wandering trickster. Each of these types appears elsewhere in O’Connor’s work, and so is familiar to her readership. The characters also pull in mythic elements: the sweet but steely Southern matriarch and the traveling conman particularly are common characters who serve as signposts for a Southern audience.

The story follows a classic arc, both in O’Connor’s cannon and parabolic forms: Joy, thirty-two, miserable, unmarried but possessing “many degrees”, lives at home because of her prosthetic leg and a chronic illness. Having declared herself an atheist, and renamed herself “Hulga” to spit in the face of her mother’s desire to clothe hardship in a cheerful veneer, Joy-Hulga becomes enamored with a young man who comes to their home peddling Bibles, both because he shows interest in her and because she sees him as simple and honest—“the salt of the earth” (O’Connor, 1971: 279).

After he kisses her, she agrees to a secret rendezvous. Nervous, but seemingly assured of her worldliness and ability to keep herself aloof, Joy-Hulga leads the young man to a hayloft and, in time, shows him how to remove her false leg. In a horrific twist, he takes both her glasses and her prosthetic, leaving her stranded. As he leaves, he tells her “you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” (O’Connor, 1971: 291)

The twist that Bulloughs and Oden emphasize serves to hint at the story’s “secret meaning.” As an extravagant upset, the twist is doubly cruel: first, despite Hulga’s belief that she is mentally and emotionally above seduction, shame, or supernatural belief, she is seduced into removing her leg, leaving her both vulnerable and humiliated. Second, Hulga is seduced by the idea that this seemingly honest young man, perhaps because she sees him as innocent and simple, sees her as unique and interesting—which not only appeals to her pride (the egoism so often stamped out in O’Connor’s tales), but also confirms her worth, perhaps for the first time. That sense of self is thrown into jeopardy when Pointer leaves, spitting her name “as though he didn’t think much of it.” When the text leaves the protagonist suddenly stranded, without sight or mobility, the reader becomes disoriented, too. The physical extremity of the situation forces the reader to ask deeper questions—if security and sense of self can’t come from conquering emotion, what can keep us safe?

As in the parables she emulates, of course, O’Connor’s twist ending ultimately points to the overthrow of selfish ambition and the grace of the cross. The hayloft is a suiting place for Hulga’s humiliation—given the
humble beginnings of the God-Man she wants to be rid of. Salvation is not found in “good country people”, or in “many degrees”, or in “looking through to nothingness”, but at a disorienting crossroads when vision and wiles and physical strength fail.

The underlying meaning comes as no surprise for those familiar with O’Connor’s work and beliefs. But is it possible to uncover that based only on the structure itself? To see the story as parable without separately knowing the author’s explanation? O’Connor does not seem to think so, writing:

Many of my ardent admirers would be roundly shocked and disturbed if they realized that everything I believe is thoroughly moral, thoroughly Catholic, and that it is these beliefs that give my work its chief characteristics (HB, 1979: 147-8).

Critics such as Laurel Nesbitt (1997) agree with O’Connor in this at least—the social commentary is so clear that theological aspects do not necessarily reveal themselves to those who are not already expecting them. Nesbitt writes, “[R]eaders are perhaps embarrassed, after reading some of the criticism, to acknowledge what they have missed in the stories.” Likely, this has a lot to do with O’Connor’s choice to write extensively about her own work.

I think though, that if we’re paying attention to both literary structure and to the details of the story itself, the shadow of the Cross, at least, peers through. “Good Country People” wrestles outright with the tension between cultural morality and atheism before declaring both worldviews unsatisfactory, but it does so through juxtaposing characters that embody those hermeneutics, namely Mrs. Hopewell and Joy-Hulga. Manley Pointer appears as a phantasm of their beliefs—for the mother, he is “boring but so genuine”; for the daughter, he’s a “poor baby”, in need of her disillusionment (CS, 1971: 282, 287). His disappearance casts Joy-Hulga, at least, into temporary chaos, but with the hope that this is not the end of the parable, that she can be saved from eternal “weeping and gnashing of teeth”. While the themes are not always so explicit, the pattern remains constant throughout O’Connor’s work. Thus, the form itself, which balances worldviews before destroying them and ends in a gesture toward the model it draws from, hints heavily at the grace at work even without O’Connor’s explicit revelations.

And yet, critical readers of O’Connor’s text should continue to feel uneasy here. Thus far, our analysis has outlined character and form, looked at aesthetic balance and intentional disorientation, noted the clear moral laid out for us, but stopped just short of actually interrogating the specific tensions at work within the text. Because of O’Connor’s care in creating characters and dialogue, the tensions outside of the cut-and-dry story arc are many, and they clamor not to be ignored.
Ways of Joining Structure and Culture

While reading O’Connor as theological parable has, for decades of criticism, provided a full hermeneutic of her work (and one that she would be pleased with, as she was constantly correcting “misreadings” in letters and essays), treating her work as an open and shut allegory meant to illuminate transcendent truths is problematic for a number of reasons. Readership can certainly look at the structure and characters on display and parse out the deeper meanings, both for current readers and for the culture surrounding the author. As Claire Kahane has noted, however, “O’Connor was very much a Southerner as well as a Catholic” (Kahane, 1978: 183). This should be read as “O’Connor was very much culturally shaped as well as theologically motivated,” or “her focus was eternal, but her mindset and writing habits were still a product of temporal surroundings.” Earlier attempts to join theological and cultural readings have attempted to point out that O’Connor writes as she does because she “obviously loves her neighbor”, that she is concerned with the highest form of social justice: eternal redemption and equality under Christ (Gertlund, 1987: 198). The problem with this reading is that, while it focuses on high purpose, it cuts off any kind of culturalist reading that sees O’Connor’s work as a product of rural 1950s Georgia. Kahane and others have noted the problem with constructing black figures, specifically, as symbols for white protagonists to look on and feel the need for grace. If we carry the problem to its furthest extremity, not only minority figures, but all of O’Connor’s characters become miserable, grotesque warnings against egoism. Rather than round and dynamic, capable of change, they remain flat, one-dimensional symbols.

Instead, I suggest that a duality must exist in the reading: stories can be read as allegories pointing to higher truth, and yet as viciously funny, socially satirical, sometimes problematic, products of their culture. Again, “Good Country People”, holds within it a perfect example of this duality.

The shape of the story, is, as I’ve noted previously, brief and clear, with a strong emphasis on plot and familiar, if exaggerated, characters that fit naturally into reader’s expectations of rural Southern life. It has the structure of a parable with the aim of leaving both characters and readers looking for a higher truth and sense of security than they had previously realized they needed. But leaving the story after calling it a parable is awkward for a few reasons. First, and most simply, it doesn’t quite fit the requirements. Thomas Oden notes that a parable must be memorable, and “Good Country People”, like most of O’Connor’s stories, certainly is. But it doesn’t, as Oden continues, “lend itself to oral retelling” (Oden, 1978: xvi). It’s not an oral tale—it’s written, and in the summarized retelling, much gets lost. This may seem obvious, and thus not worth mentioning, but it’s actually crucial. A major point in creating a re-tellable tale is its “detachability from
(Re)Uniting “Christ-Haunted” and “The South”  

the original context”, its layers of meaning for many cultures and periods, separate from the time and culture of its original telling. Oden goes on to exemplify the point: “If, before telling or commenting upon the parable of the prodigal son, one were required to place it in its original historical context, the parable would seldom be told or remembered.” To that end, in the case of true parables, the story is simple and unadorned. Characters are identified as “a farmer” or “the younger son”, and given no physical description so that they could represent any of a number of listeners throughout time and history. They possess no history but the actions they are given within the context of story. Based simply on character and plot, the prodigal son might have fit medieval Europe or the nineteenth century United States as much as first century Israel, even given the disparity between these cultures. O’Connor’s characters, on the other hand, while easily identifiable by type, are not multi-cultural. They are familiar, and begin as caricatured stock-types, but they have dimension—history, opinions, facial expressions, frustrations—that exist outside of the realm of story, something that truly parabolic characters cannot have. They also possess the mindsets of post-Reconstruction Southerners, and thus represent temporal social fears as much as ageless bad theology. They are, in fact, stuck in their culture, and therefore must serve as social commentary for their immediate surroundings as well as eternal warnings.

The second issue with ceasing interpretation after finding a parable-like structure, is that it cuts off further interpretation of the story from any lens other than theology, weakening any interpretation of the story, even a redemptive interpretation. Nesbitt, Kahane, and others rightly mourn early attempts to couple theological and cultural readings that treat temporal social aspects within the text as inconsequential for the sake creating a whole theological reading. As Fredrick Crews (1990) admonishes readers: “Even the Christians among us, I should think, must feel the shortcomings of a perspective that narrows all social problems to the abiding question of whether an individual can believe that Jesus died for his sake” (quoted in Nesbitt, 1997). This is not to diminish the stories’ eternal focus, but rather to point to the problem of critical oversimplification, which tends to elevate theologically-focused texts in vogue if not to the level of gospel commentary, at least to that of a Sunday sermon—interpretation for a world in peril, separate from the snares of cultural belief and shortcoming.

While important to investigate, to avoid translating cruelty merely into benign symbolism, I do not here wish to work through Claire Kahane or Patricia Yeager’s claims that O’Connor’s treatment of her characters is “sadistic”. I do not even wish to begin untangling the layers of racial and social tension woven into the fabric of each of her stories. Readership must acknowledge that those elements exist and that to ignore them or explain
them away through suggesting a “greater good”, is to belittle the experience of a region and culture still struggling against such oppressions. Many critics, though, have labored to help such realizations come to fruition and many more after me will continue to do so. For my purpose, then, I want to return to the idea that to read O’Connor’s work as merely a theological exploration not only hinders social and cultural work, it also weakens the theological reading, because it posits that racial, social, and gendered tensions, even in the form of extreme violence, must fit into a bland, theologically-sound package, and must be explained away as nothing more than “symbol” in order for the stories to hit their mark. In fact, while O’Connor’s language and wit create a nice balance between humor and horror, theological implications and cultural mindsets, there are many elements that seem incongruous, and the play between them is makes the work interesting and complicated.

**Reading O’Connor as Author, Not Interpreter**

It seems obvious to point out the levels of tension in “Good Country People” that go unmentioned and unsolved within the world of the story, but a quick examination does a lot toward underlining my larger point. Within the story, characters must wrestle with a patriarchal system, which punishes Joy-Hulga for her sullenness and intellect, and Mrs. Hopewell for usurping her ex-husband’s place as head of house, but allows Pointer to physically assault Joy and escape unscathed; an economic system that keeps landowners and tenant farmers dependent on one another, but does not allow them to fully trust one another; and a class system in which poor fifteen-year-old girls are labeled “proper young ladies” after they’ve married and had children. Within the story, even from the title, these tensions are present, but go wholly unresolved and nearly uncommented on, merely hinted at in conversation and offhand narrative comments. Only Mrs. Freeman’s closing comment—“Some people can’t be that simple. I know I never could”—addresses the uneasiness of her position (CS, 1971: 291). Why include such details if the purpose of the story is a didactic exercise in receiving true grace?

I posit that what O’Connor has created in her stories is a hyper-tense, concentrated vision of her own culture in parable form—one in which tensions that ordinarily boil under the surface instead come to a head by the end of the work. Rather than whitewashing tense topics with a belief about the greatest good, grace is dropped into a Technicolor hyper-reality, and, is both the catalyst for ultimate social destruction, and a strangely personal force. It effects only the individual(s) that it touches. In “Good Country People”, Joy-Hulga’s sense of security is devastated. Post-story, her mother’s worldview might also be affected. The Freemans, on the other hand, likely
remain untouched and continue under the social and economic tensions that the story began with. Furthermore, while grace comes to the individual and offers a changed view of self, the systems of oppression he or she suffers under remain. The mystery of grace is that it co-exists with social horror, that it is given personally, that it has the power to, but often does not, solve systematic ills.

If we look to O'Connor for interpretation, we see numerous comments on portraying horror as an agent for grace—thus seeming to reveal a theological reading at the expense of the uglier aspects of her fiction. She also, though, writes about her compassion for her characters, expresses her own feelings of being at odds culturally in rural Georgia (and at literary gatherings as well), and contradicts her social and racial beliefs throughout her non-fiction work. That has baffled critics, and led to many an article-length debate painting O'Connor as a revolutionary or a racist villain. I must confess, though, I remain unsure as to why. Not so different from her fiction, O'Connor’s letters and talks exist in a world of contradictions: cultural artifacts that move between expressing higher truth and commenting on a temporal writer’s observations. In this way, O’Connor is of course contradictory. It would be easy to come on the side of theology and say that O'Connor means to represent redemption and grace and thus everything else falls under that all-important heading, but that’s a poor reading of the text itself. Too much else exists within her fiction—psychological oddities and violent upheavals, yes, but also offhand comments, and poignantly tense moments. It would be nearly as easy, then, to ignore the theological symbolism and write it off as familiar cultural signposts, and instead to argue with O'Connor about her place in culture, plotting her point on the spectrum between traditional and radical in any number of movements. This has been done, and will continue in circles of O'Connor criticism. Without seeing the climax of each story as a “moment of grace”, however, the fiction becomes nothing short of nihilism: acts of violence for the sake of violence, repeated again and again throughout two novels and two books of short stories. Perhaps that’s a reading that should be pursued, but if read this way the reader must at least recognize that the pattern within O'Connor’s work is one of her chief defining characteristics—if the point of the story is not to bring an individual to the end of self-satisfaction and the beginning of redemptive work, the reader must find another purpose underlying this pattern. Thus, former criticism has found itself needing to turn O'Connor’s words back on their author instead before getting to the real work of examining the work itself.
Conclusions
In working toward an interpretive model that couples the theological and cultural streams without glancing backward at O'Connor’s non-fiction, then, we must first be willing to examine O'Connor’s work as complex and contradictory: the workings of a white, Catholic, Southern woman observing and representing cultural tensions, producing artifacts of that both represent and question her upbringing, and one assumes, working through her own salvation with fear and trembling. What makes both her fiction and non-fiction interesting is the interplay between conflicting attitudes and beliefs, the balance between eternal focus and temporal situations. We also must acknowledge that, while rich, O'Connor’s commentary wants to focus centrally on the correct interpretation of grace within the lives of her characters. This is separate from her feelings on society, gender, and race, and the author seems to have wanted to excuse herself from those realms. After all, as she writes to Maryat Lee, when asked to meet James Baldwin in Georgia, “I observe the traditions of the society I feed on —it’s only fair” (HB, 1979: 329). That is, she wants to describe the culture she sees for the sake of revealing higher truth. This is the best reason for looking outside of O’Connor’s letters and essays for interpretation—the cultural issues still beg to be worked through, and because they exist alongside and throughout the parabolic narrative, they must be examined as together. Interpreting “baser” truths, O’Connor leaves to her readership. We should let her. Ultimately, these cultural inconsistencies point, as much as any grand “grace moment”, to the need for real redemption, even without O’Connor’s post-parable interpretation.

Note: References to O’Connor’s work abbreviate titles as Habit of Being (HB), Mystery and Manners (MM), The Complete Stories (CS).

References


ABSTRACT. This paper analyzes the human being’s uneasy posture on the fringe of the natural setting, in order to illustrate the aesthetic implied by mankind’s uncertain exclusion from its apparent peace. This consideration, as represented in Emily Brontë’s novel *Wuthering Heights*, originates in an early scene portraying the central characters, Heathcliff and Catherine, standing in a flower-plot in the outer darkness, gazing through a window with equal longing and scorn, at the domestic splendor and seeming comfort they witness within. The characters’ response to their position highlights their conflicting desire for both safety in the home and liberty in the wild. This analysis explores both the presence of this conflated desire in the Romantic literature and ideology prior to Brontë’s time and the implications resultant from the Victorian’s subsequent writing and scientific discovery, epitomized by evolutionary theory. Such considerations produce two conflicting views of humanity’s position in relation to nature, either outside it or wholly within it. This paper argues a third option, present in the characters’ initial yet unobserved stance in the flower-plot beneath their feet. Fundamental to this discussion is the inherent uncertainty of the Gothic aesthetic that pervades Brontë’s novel, characterized by this neglected garden and the incomplete but satisfactory aesthetic it represents.

KEY WORDS: aesthetic, representative, gardening, outside, gothic

Introduction
The primary tension expressed in Emily Brontë’s gothic novel *Wuthering Heights* first takes shape when central characters Catherine and Heathcliff stand together in a flower-plot beneath the drawing-room window of Thrushcross Grange, a fine estate which stands opposed to the children’s residence at Wuthering Heights. The young Heathcliff describes the scene he observes from his vantage outside the window: “The light came from thence; they had not put up the shutters, and the curtains were only half closed. Both of us were able to look in by standing on the basement, and clinging to the ledge, and we saw—ah! it was beautiful” (Brontë, 2007: 74). Heathcliff goes on to describe a luxurious vision of domestic splendor, tainted only by the spoiled and embattled siblings currently inhabiting this
homely paradise. His description of the place concludes with marked long-
ing, envy, and scorn: “We should have thought ourselves in heaven!” This statement epitomizes the many references to paradise throughout Brontë’s text. The characters’ preoccupation with an ideal place for humanity con-
trasts with the story’s overwhelmingly gloomy atmosphere, as well as its painfully realistic portrayal of domestic decay and familial unrest. Through this contrast, Brontë artfully belies an illusory Romantic aesthetic (illusory when taken literally) while portraying the intolerable sorrows of a harsher, realer one (harsh when robbed of its representative aspects). Heathcliff’s and Catherine’s position, standing in the dark outside the window and looking in at the light from the hearth, initiates the pervasive unrest at the heart of the novel’s literary design. Heathcliff’s simultaneous longing and scorn indicates to readers a fundamental aspect of humanity.

Both the hearth light and the outer dark appear as universal metaphors throughout the literary canon, from Beowulf to King Lear. The Bible generates this archetype through its frequent use of light and dark metaphors. In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ speaks of a people excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven, cast “into the outer darkness”, where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12, English Standard Version). Heathcliff and Catherine inhabit a similar place and their response to their exclusion is identical. They long for the comfort they see within, hating those who enjoy it. Brontë, perhaps surprisingly, seeks to draw the reader into her story primarily through these two desperate characters. Their situation points to a root state of banishment, felt in all branches of human life. Yet, while it draws its central metaphor from Scripture, Wuthering Heights chooses a more earthly path of inquiry. Brontë cleverly translates her story of humanity into a clear distinction between Man and Nature, responding to the nature-obsessed Romantic Movement before her while highlighting in her Gothic prose the robust, free uncertainty of mankind’s progress in taming wild nature. By juxtaposing these two flawed aesthetics, Brontë indicates a third—one that is better, even perfect, and yet still incomplete. With patience and slow wisdom, along with a vital dose of common sense, the author dismisses the deceptive promise of the apparent “inside” for the greater splendor of a finished and a furnished home beyond humanity’s perception. Wuthering Heights identifies a powerful uneasiness arising from the human presence in the natural setting, expressed in the characters’ desire to be “in” when they find themselves decidedly “out”, proposing a solution through nature’s incomplete and representative beauty, found in the flower-plot beneath their feet.

Introduced in this early scene, the novel’s central tension between the homely and the natural—the tamed and the wild—continues to spark throughout the text. Two key observations from this passage dictate the
story’s portrait of humanity. First, the exterior setting beyond the window, where Heathcliff and Catherine stand, is dark. In response to this outer darkness, both children develop a keen desire to be “inside”, included in the circle of light from the hearth, while knowing they are decidedly “outside”. Second, both resolutely plant themselves in the Linton’s flower-plot beneath the window, an observation reserved for the end of this analysis. Indeed, the majority of this novel spends itself in barrenness and shadow; the reader must wait for spring as it appears only in the final pages. An analysis of this Gothic darkness must account for its insistent primality in the text. Wuthering Heights is not limited to its contemporary culture and time. The novel’s portrayal of humanity in nature—that is, in the “outside”—highlights a position of banishment from proper human community, as felt by the individual, extending beyond readings of Heathcliff’s alien identity as an orphaned gypsy child. The force of the novel’s symbolism requires a reading that reaches past cultural considerations of race and class to the universal qualities of human existence. While Brontë does address the social problems of her own time period, as well as drawing from the poetry and idealism of the prior Romantic literary period, her individual and personal creative design strikes a chord at the heart of every person. She possesses a singularly painful imagination. Expressions of mankind’s fundamental feeling of exclusion are unlimited in application. Likewise, the solution to these issues depends on universal symbolism for its poignancy, requiring in turn an equally broad interpretation of the initial problem. These two observations, therefore, must be felt by the reader un-distanced from the past.

The domesticated nature
An interested reader does not have to look far before realizing that the distinction between “in” and “out”, as perceived by Heathcliff and Catherine, is illusory. Both locations are blurred and problematic. The issue, therefore, lies not in the outward constructions of home and nature, but rather in the inward perceptions of one’s place in relation to these constructions. If distinctions between the inner and the outer are inherently faulty, they provide an ultimately unreliable solace to the individual who inhabits either one of them. Emily Rena-Dozier, in her article “Gothic Criticisms: Wuthering Heights and Nineteenth-Century Literary History” (2010) brings this to bear on the historical figure of the author, Emily Brontë. In her analysis of Victorian conceptions of the domestic and the Gothic in literature, Rena-Dozier points to the pervasiveness of darker Gothic sensations within the domestic realm. “Wuthering Heights”, she posits, “…carefully breaks down this opposition between gothic and domestic modes by illustrating the ways in which the domestic is predicated on acts of violence” (Rena-Dozier, 2010: 11).
Drawing her evidence from an anecdote concerning Emily Brontë’s discipline of a vicious pet dog, Rena-Dozier writes: “Emily Brontë appears in nineteenth-century literary history as part of a story about dogs and violence, disturbing the idea of domestic tranquility by highlighting the violent traumas required by the enforcement of domestication” (Rena-Dozier, 2010: 770). Examining the portrayal of dogs as household pets in *Wuthering Heights*, Rena-Dozier goes on to articulate, “Where we would expect to find a contrast drawn between gothic and domestic, between Heights and Grange, we find instead that the two are more similar than they are different—that the domestic space is as affiliated with violence as the gothic” (Rena-Dozier, 2010: 772). The behavior of the children inside Thrushcross Grange, witnessed by Heathcliff and Catherine from their place outside the window, supports Rena-Dozier’s assertion. The spoiled pair tug viciously at opposite ends of an unfortunate pet dog.

Therefore, the domestic splendor Heathcliff observes through the window can be read as an unattainable illusion. Indeed, as Rena-Dozier’s article implies, the progress of the novel portrays a domestic space devoid of the safety it is supposed to provide. Two views of nature arise from this conflation of Gothic and domestic—that is, the presence of human perception applied to the natural setting. In one, nature promises freedom from the necessity to constrain, which might be understood as perfected domesticity (nature as a garden). Nature, from this standpoint, represents warmth, comfort, and serenity to its inhabitants. This is a more Romantic view of nature, offering peace in solitude to contemplative individuals wandering its expanses. Here the human being can be free. However, this is not the nature one finds portrayed in *Wuthering Heights*. The first description one reads of the house bearing that name describes a nature broken by continual storms: “…one may guess the power of the north wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few, stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun” (Brontë, 2007: 6). While the Gothic qualities of the novel prevent overly Romantic concepts of nature, Brontë does include this perspective in the second volume of the novel, expressed through the second Catherine, the former’s daughter, who romantically desires to explore the rustic landscape beyond Penistone Craggs, which she can see from her window (inside, looking out). The darker landscape that pervades the novel does not contradict her perception, but rather emphasizes the naivety of it. It cannot be trusted as a literal relief from suffering.

The contrasting view of nature admits to its inherent violence and thus the necessity of domestication. From this perspective, nature can be tamed and controlled, and must be in order to ensure safety (nature as wild). The story’s focus on the boundaries formed by the houses themselves implies an
effort to repulse nature’s storms. The second thing we learn about Wuthering Heights is its sturdy, stony structure: “Happily, the architect had foresight to build it strong: the narrow windows are deeply set in the wall, and the corners defended with large jutting stones” (Brontë, 2007: 6). Here the human being can be safe. Yet the house described, with its narrow windows and fortress walls, seems decidedly dark, like the nature it stands against. Here, one begins to comprehend a fundamental failure of human endeavors. One perspective flees the darkness in pursuit of fairy sun-light, the other multiplies the shadows in defense of cheery hearth-light. Both desires originate and exist simultaneously in the human consciousness confronting nature. The conclusion then is a conflation of two seemingly opposite desires in the human individual: to be at once free and contained in nature.

This paradoxical desire marks a pivotal consideration of the literature spanning the Romantic and Victorian periods, of which Brontë is very well aware. The late-Romantic poet John Keats captures it best in his famous “Ode to a Grecian Urn” Conflicting human desire lies at the heart of this poem, as the poet gazes at an ancient Grecian urn and the lively figures depicted on it. His poem moves from silence to noise in the first stanza, emphasizing the urns contrasting qualities of actual serenity and painted jubilation. Keats words it this way: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter” (Keats, 1976: 209). The melody he cannot hear yet still intuits from the urn’s art might be related to the light described above, whether sun or hearth. The poet knows the melodies he can hear will fade into obscurity and darkness, as all mortal effort does; while the melodies he cannot hear must remain unheard, and so neither accessed nor enjoyed. “Ode to a Grecian Urn” poses a crucial question and cannot give an answer: which is best, real light that will not last, or lasting light that is not real? Both options seem undesirable, according to the simultaneous and opposite desire of the human heart.

Brontë, well versed in this debate and exceedingly knowledgeable on the subject of the human heart, illustrates exactly Keats’ dilemma in the character Catherine and her love for two men, Heathcliff and Edgar Linton. Catherine describes her feelings as follows: “My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods. Time will change it, I’m well aware, as winter changes the trees—my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight, but necessary” (Brontë, 2007: 94-95). In this passage, Catherine unwittingly admits the inherent failure of her very human desires. She longs for nature-as-garden, or Romantic domesticity, in the character of Linton, all the while knowing it will pass away. She yearns also for nature-as-wild, or Gothic liberty, in her childhood companion Heathcliff, still well aware of his stony qualities. The one offers the comfort of constraint; the other the exhilaration of freedom. Both fail to satisfy.
Therefore, the prevalent darkness of the novel results from the actual absence of either light, sun and hearth. Brontë employs a universal paradox of human desire to illustrate in *Wuthering Heights* the shadowy, Gothic quality of human satisfaction in earthly things, perceiving in nature two opposing lights we cannot possess. From this opposition, Brontë builds her aesthetic. It appears first in the plausible character of Catherine, with whom we easily relate, but focuses on the more fictional Heathcliff, in whom the hidden darkness of the human spirit is expressed. Catherine’s passing from the novel comes as no surprise. Through her we access the faulty desire. Brontë then turns to the universal reality of Heathcliff, in whom the desire is condemned.

In the scene at the window, Heathcliff inhabits a place not dictated by a contrast between home and the wild, but rather a position which confuses these two views of nature from the vantage point of a presupposed habitation in the nature’s wilderness. Feeling already excluded from domestic harmony, Heathcliff enters the wild in order to make something of himself, an excursion at once liberating yet also requiring supreme control. His movement into nature initiates a pattern of exiting the community in order to reassert oneself more resolutely into it. In this way, Heathcliff’s exile—articulated in the novel as his disappearance from Wuthering Heights and subsequent reappearance as the powerful figure who controls the rest of the story—is self-inflicted. William Wordsworth’s “Lines Left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree” illustrates exactly this self-inflicted banishment and the singularly tragic consciousness it produces. In the poem, Wordsworth aims at entrance back into community. The setting of the poem is “far from all human dwelling” (Wordsworth, 1999: 30), commanding a view of wild nature from a seat in a yew-tree. The fictional character in Wordsworth’s poem has “taught this aged tree,/ Now wild, to bend its arms in circling shade...” and once sat upon the seat he made where “these gloomy boughs/ Had charms for him...” where “lifting up his head, he then would gaze/ On the more distant scene...” (Wordsworth, 1999: 31). Here Wordsworth captures a perspective conspicuously outside, looking in.

The character’s shaping of the tree, bending its arms to shade the seat, captures the capacity of the gardener to tame nature, but also nature’s untamable power to destroy the character’s creation. Where, at the end of the poem, Wordsworth declares “[t]rue dignity abides with him alone/ Who, in the silent hour of inward thought,/ Can still suspect, and still revere himself,/ In lowliness of heart”, he also warns, “[t]he man whose eye/ Is ever on himself, doth look on one,/ The least of nature’s works...”. Wordsworth recognizes a necessity to fashion one’s identity in inward thought, inspired by isolation in nature’s wilderness, while cautioning against a tendency never to re-enter the community. The desire to remain in nature is predicated...
on the individual’s sense of control over nature and a self-assertion which
claims a kind of peripheral center of the individual consciousness—shaped
by the bent boughs of the tree—opposed to the perceived center of the
community. The poem serves as a fitting emblem of Heathcliff’s project in
the novel, by which he tries to assert himself over the domestic splendor he
perceives in the Linton home. Since domestic harmony is already illusory,
Heathcliff must establish himself as the center from which he has felt ex-
cluded, which entails a breaking down of all previous centers.

Having entered nature, Heathcliff never leaves it, acting instead as if he
wields its force. In order to assert himself against the perceived domestic
splendor that excludes him, he becomes nature itself, imitating nature’s self-
containment in order to exclude all other centers from his own peripheral
one. After his return in the novel, Heathcliff sets about breaking down those
barriers which he feels once barred his way. However, in a summary of his
actions, after his energy has been expended, he confesses, “It is a poor con-
clusion…an absurd termination to my violent exertions! I get levers and
mattocks to demolish the two houses, and train myself to be capable of
working like Hercules, and when everything is ready, and in my power I
find the will to lift a slate off either roof has vanis-
shed! My old enemies have
not beaten me…” (Brontë, 2007: 300). Indeed, Heathcliff’s old enemies
have not beaten him, but rather his presumed ally, nature. At the end of the
novel, the wild power of nature continues Heathcliff’s work—as it has all
along. Lockwood, the character to whom Heathcliff’s narrative is told, walks
to the kirk and observes the graveyard in which Heathcliff is buried: “I per-
ceived decay had made progress, even in seven months—many a window
showed black gaps deprived of glass; and slates jutted off, here and there,
beyond the right line of the roof, to be gradually worked off in coming au-
tumn storms” (Brontë, 2007: 312). Two significant portions of Heathcliff’s
labor—the breaking of windows which keep him out and the symbolic lift-
ing of the roof from off the houses—are accomplished by nature’s untama-
ble power. His attempt at being wild ultimately fails. Where Wordsworth
might advocate a synthesis with nature, Heathcliff sees himself inevitably
inhabiting nature’s outer darkness, being nature in order to avoid exclusion.

The Controlled Nature

Heathcliff’s initial position in this darkness, despite his failure to live up to
its persistent force, offers a significant interpretation of the presumption of
the domestic construction. In his childish approach to the Linton home,
Heathcliff plants himself resolutely in the flower-plot—that is, the garden—
beneath the window. His actions are already driven towards the destruction
of the rival family’s attempt at order in nature. Gardens represent control
over nature and an enclosure in which nature is contained and tamed. A
garden is exclusive, based on the containment of a safe dose of nature within a realm small enough to be cultivated by human hands. Symbolically, a garden is both safe and free. Heathcliff, excluded from the metaphoric domestic garden (the control of which, as delineated above, slips through the fingers of the gardener), tramples the actual garden under his childish feet in an early attempt at exhibiting the unruly force of wild nature.

Heathcliff’s failure to carry out his wild pursuit, however, bears witness to humanity’s confounded place in nature. The self-contained quality of nature—its appearance of being both wild and at peace—represents a habitation in the unattainable place that the human individual desires. A person cannot inhabit nature because a person is not of nature—that is, its force is not ours. The recognition that this place is exclusive to humanity inspires the project of domestication which provides an imperfect imitation of nature’s wild sanctity. Real gardens illustrate this domestication, enclosing manageable nature and thus attaining a perceived place of containment. Indeed, the novel’s final resolution relies on the cultivation of an actual garden by the second Cathy, Catherine’s daughter. Kept at Wuthering Heights by Heathcliff, Cathy sets about training Hareton in both literacy and manners. Hareton is the son of Hindley, Heathcliff’s adopted brother, and is therefore the true heir to the Wuthering Heights estate. Cathy’s successful redemption of Hareton, who has been neglected and left illiterate by Heathcliff, restores order to the house. Her first action in this endeavor, with Hareton’s help, is to restore, arrange, and tend the estate’s decayed garden. Yet according to Catherine’s faulty desire and Heathcliff’s failed enterprise, this solution should not seem to work. A garden represents exactly humanity’s conflated and unattainable desire. Only through an acceptance of this problematic position and a careful observation of its implications can the image take on its representative significance. Honest humility and patience—the creeds of common sense throughout the text—enliven the garden’s aesthetic meaning. For this reason, both children, steeped in their longing and scorn, miss the flower-plot beneath their feet.

In order to understand the garden’s representative aesthetic, its real effectuality must be called into question. Only by understanding the gaps of a garden—indeed, the garden takes on its deepest meaning as an environment in which human limitation is conspicuously displayed—can one appreciate its efficacy as a balm to mankind’s broken wishes. A garden constructs a forced containment, still subject to the failures of any house and the violence of every storm. As much as it is a synthesis of conflicting desires, a human garden must also be a place of domestic uncertainty and the wild assertions of nature. A human garden is neither the free garden of nature nor a perfect enclosure; both/and quickly becomes neither/nor. For this reason, the garden at the end of *Wuthering Heights* must be representative,
as the novel itself comes to symbolize universal truths of humanity. A reading that fails to see the final garden as a glimpse of mankind’s original position in creation, a representation that only indicates the solitary hope of satisfaction available to human kind, which only human evil corrupts and makes incomplete, such a reading must also fail to see any light at all in the story. This imperfect indication of perfection stands as the only joy offered in a plot that is exceedingly (and plausibly) dark. Without the garden’s representative significance, one still finds evil, but this time without hope. Even so, Heathcliff stands obliviously in the Linton’s flower-plot, gazing at the scene he takes for Heaven instead of the true earth beneath his feet.

Many readers of Wuthering Heights make a similar mistake, with their eye on an identical false paradise. Interestingly, Brontë includes in her novel a rebuke of those who do not learn from books. The first sign of Catherine’s fatal self-absorption comes from her use of books: “Catherine’s library was select; and its state of dilapidation proved it to have been well used, though not altogether for a legitimate purpose; scarcely one chapter had escaped a pen-and-ink commentary—at least, the appearance of one, covering every morsel of blank that the printer had left. Some were detached sentences; other parts took the form of a regular diary…” (Brontë, 2007: 25). Rather than reading, interpreting, and learning from her books, Catherine uses them to record the intricacies of her own suffering. She focuses on the violence she endures in her broken domestic setting. Through Catherine, Heathcliff ultimately gains admittance to an otherwise peaceful home solely by his having shared her suffering. Catherine’s efforts to keep him near only cultivate his wild, destructive vigor. Similarly, one discovers a fundamental mistake in reading this book not as an instructive representation of the corruption of self-absorption, but as a condemning portrait of Victorian society. This marks a difference between literature that expresses truth and literature that relies on self-expression. As argued previously, Brontë’s symbolism indicates a deeper truth. However, an exploration of the alternative form of criticism serves really to bolster the novel’s ultimate design.

The significance of gardening in Victorian society has been amply explored. The practice of gardening relies on a willingness to synthesize, and therefore offers an attractive solution to social inequality. In “Gertrude Jekyll and the Late-Victorian Garden Book: Representing Nature-Culture Relations”, Grace Kehler examines the significance of gardening in Victorian society. Kehler accentuates gardening’s feminine quality, as opposed to the more masculine scientific understanding of the time, assigning it an “authority tempered by the desire for intersubjective relationships with manifold nature” (Kehler, 2007: 624). Kehler points to the way in which this intersubjectivity avoids the assumption of superiority over nature while still satisfying the desire for individual expression. Kehler writes:
If Jekyll appropriates living matter for aesthetic use in the garden, she still conceives of Nature as a force distinct from and resistant to human control. In her vision, Nature acts according to its own compulsions and agendas, which may or may not be intelligible to the human, but that possess an impressive, untameable physicality and that manifest Nature’s independent status and even evolutionary purpose or mindfulness (Kehler, 2007: 627).

Gardening, therefore, takes into consideration both nature’s unattainable self-containment and its primal force, seeking to synthesize it with the human consciousness and desire for assertion.

Jekyll’s work, like Wordsworth’s poem, drive at a delicate balance of humanity’s place in nature—taking excursions into nature in order to return to the community—and yet the tendency to want more, which Wordsworth finds in the human consciousness, remains. Towards the end of her article, Kehler posits: “Of equal importance, [Jekyll’s] proliferating observations attest to the multifariousness of the biotic world that eludes human comprehension and... precedes and informs her artistry, the artistry of gardening and writing, both of which derive from multiplied moments of observation and underscore the temporal, unfinished activity of creation” (Kehler, 2007: 629). This very subtle difference in approach results in a drastically different outcome. Kehler reads according to preconceived evolutionary principles, asserting an underlying impossibility of completion at the heart of creative endeavor. With this notion in mind, critics often require of books the implicit failures of human society. Literary criticism becomes an evolutionary force of change, bent on continually correction of societal flaws, even while undermining the sole means by which those flaws might be finally corrected. Recall the bent boughs of the yew-tree in Wordsworth’s poem. Gardening, therefore, becomes a means of domestic equality and a rebellious subversion of oppressive forces. The symbolic import it produces gets trampled down.

The scientific pursuit of biology, which gained long strides in the Victorian period through the work of Charles Darwin, naturally does not articulate a limit to human development. Yet with this promise follows a very violent ghost not previously found in the natural setting. In The Origin of Species, Darwin writes:

We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey (Darwin, 2003: 62).

Darwin reminds his readers, intent on cultivating their gardens, that the greater garden of nature which cultivates itself does so through countless
acts of violence and destruction. His subversion of the illusory nature-as-garden results in the subsequent destruction of nature’s symbolic possibilities. Humanity, at last, can wholly enter the natural setting, but only upon sacrificing the very qualities that made it desirable. Likewise, the distinction between feminine gardening and masculine science becomes blurred and ultimately untraceable. One is left in darkness; the lights of sun and hearth are put out.

Indeed, the difference of approach rests solely on one’s aesthetic perception applied to literary interpretation. George Levine, in his celebration of Darwinism entitled “Reflections on Darwin and Darwinizing”, indicates a resemblance of Darwin’s work to the epic poems which preceded him, pointing out that “[t]he fact that Darwin carried with him on the Beagle not only Lyell but Milton carries symbolic weight” (Levine, 2009: 224). This observation ties the biologist to the practice of garden writing lauded in Kehler’s article. Levine sets out to emphasize exactly Darwin’s literary side, and thus the aesthetic that follows with it. Levine even highlights the Gothic implications of Darwin’s discoveries through John Ruskin’s reaction to the theory: “Flowers for Ruskin were beautiful for humans; flowers for Darwin were means of reproduction for plants: the beautiful becomes a tool of the sexual...Ruskin’s horror at the idea that sexuality was at the root of art...gets to the core of fundamental Victorian concerns with the aesthetic” (Levine, 2009: 236).

Following Levine’s thought to its conclusion, however, certainly justifies Ruskin’s horror. Critics like John Ruskin were not surprised to discover violence or sexuality in nature. The discovery itself does nothing to mar the ideal. However, the denial of nature’s representative qualities and the loss of a symbolic aesthetic in art does injury to the human being who stands to benefit from the art. As Ruskin makes clear in his writings, he never doubts the significance of a representative aesthetic and finds cause to labor in his prose towards an understanding of its meaning. He does not seem to feel a threat to the truth itself, but rather to the person who fails to see it. Ruskin argues:

But accurately speaking, no good work whatever can be perfect, and the demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art. This for two reasons, both based on everlasting laws. The first, that no great man ever stops working till he has reached his point of failure... The second reason is, that imperfection is in some sort essential to all that we know of life...that the law of human life may be Effort, and the law of human judgment, Mercy (Ruskin, 2009: 48-49).

Incompletion not only defines but contributes to the representative aesthetic. Cultural criticism, in an effort to correct and control the failures of the
past, often misses the ultimate success of the past’s representative literature. With an eye on an illusory paradise, like the one Heathcliff sees through the window, such readings attempt to identify and tear down exclusive boundaries perceived in the text. The result is an actual failure, seen in Heathcliff’s character, of the boundary between a creative man and destructive animal. Alternatively, nature’s representative imagery, when read as a representation, indicates an ideal and provides a viable aesthetic.

Catherine’s and Heathcliff’s efforts to cheat representation result in the destruction of a final boundary, which Brontë explores throughout the novel’s entire scope. The desire for inclusion in perceived exclusivities takes on greater significance in its application to death. The initial wild, Gothic sensation produced in the reader begins with a haunting in Lockwood’s dream during his stay at Wuthering Heights. Prevented from returning to Thrushcross Grange by a snowstorm, Lockwood spends the night in Heathcliff’s house and dreams he is visited by Catherine’s ghost. Significantly, the ghost approaches his bed from outside a window and, when she breaks the window and seizes Lockwood’s arm, a struggle ensues. Lockwood narrates: “Terror made me cruel; and finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes: still it wailed, ‘Let me in!’ and maintained its tenacious gripe, almost maddening me with fear” (Brontë, 2007: 56). Lockwood’s cruel efforts to keep the ghost out signify the violence implicit in domestication, as safety is inevitably exclusive. Heathcliff’s reaction to the Linton family, seen through a window, is explained by this cruel exclusion.

The creation of the ghost in the text, in turn, is explained by Catherine’s relationship to Heathcliff, whose name implies direct association with wild nature. “I cannot express it”, Catherine explains, “but surely you and everybody have a notion that there is or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here?” (Brontë, 2007: 103). Catherine expresses, clearly enough, a desire for an existence greater or more significant than what she feels in life. Her whole being feels outside, looking in. Speaking to Heathcliff later in the novel, Catherine reiterates this desire in relation to haunting: “I’ll not lie there by myself; they may bury me twelve feet deep, and throw the church down over me; but I won’t rest till you are with me—I never will!” (Brontë, 2007: 141). Catherine again asserts an identity beyond herself, a perfect union of safety and liberty in the grave, an assertion which Heathcliff accomplishes by imitating the inimitability of nature. Both seek their ideal in life, ignoring the representative quality of the imagery they employ. Thus, the Gothic violence in the novel originates not only from the constraint of domestication, but from the will of the human individual to be its own self-
contained domestication beyond the boundaries it perceives already in place. For this reason, the two central characters of the novel exist in a state perpetually invading and destroying the inherent boundaries of human existence, an action pantomimed by Catherine’s ghost in Lockwood’s dream.

Also for this reason, the final barrier which Heathcliff must break is the grave. Death stands as the ultimate success of nature’s force, both representative and quite real. Heathcliff accomplishes his destruction of its walls quite literally, as he explains:

I’ll tell you what I did yesterday! I got the sexton, who was digging Linton’s grave, to remove the earth off [Catherine’s] coffin lid, and I opened it. I thought, once, I would have stayed there, when I saw her face again—it is her yet—he had hard work to stir me; but he said it would change if the air blew on it, and so I struck one side of the coffin loose and covered it up—not Linton’s side, damn him! I wish he’d been soldered in lead—and I bribed the sexton to pull it away, when I’m laid there, and slide mine out too. I’ll have it made so, and then, by the time Linton gets to us, he’ll not know which is which! (Brontë, 2007: 271).

Heathcliff’s vision of death bears a significant distinction from Catherine’s. Because of his association with nature, Heathcliff has no desire to exist beyond himself, but only to be united in the physical grave to the woman with which he identifies himself. Where Catherine’s desire for Heathcliff inspires haunting, Heathcliff’s passion pursues unity in death and a resultant resolution. In the same way nature, though it destroys, maintains a sense of peace to the human who perceives it. Yet this is a peace for nature, not for the human being. Heathcliff’s example makes the reader strongly aware of the inherent morbidity that results from mankind’s perfect inclusion in nature. Brontë’s text powerfully outlines the terrifying ghost behind evolutionary theory and the subversion of humanity’s confounded posture in the natural setting.

Conclusions

Brontë’s novel concludes with an image of death decidedly hindered by the anxiety of haunting. At the end of the novel, Nelly, the narrator of Heathcliff’s story, speaks to Lockwood of shutting up the house at Wuthering Heights now that it is vacated: “‘For the use of such ghosts as choose to inhabit it’ [Lockwood] observed. ‘No, Mr. Lockwood’, said Nelly, shaking her head. ‘I believe the dead are at peace, but it is not right to speak of them with levity’” (Brontë, 2007: 312). Nelly’s caution in speaking of the dead undermines her assertion of their final peace, especially considering Heathcliff’s denial of heaven near the end of his life: “I have nearly attained my heaven, and that of others is altogether unvalued and uncoveted by me!”
(Brontë, 2007: 309). It is significant to recall his previous declaration from outside the Linton window that, were he and Catherine inside that space, they should have thought themselves in heaven. Throughout the novel, Heathcliff works to remove the exclusivity of the Linton’s domestic splendor. He does this by wielding the destructive power of nature against the Linton’s domestic containment and establishing himself in its place. Where Heathcliff fails, however, nature finally succeeds in his death and the question of the place he inhabits after death remains conspicuously left open. In response to this grim anti-aesthetic, Brontë’s Gothic novel subtly submits the incomplete garden of nature, bending all of her symbolism gently towards the inherent virtue of humility and common sense. The garden represents to us our own human limitations—the only truly satisfactory aesthetic.

References
ABSTRACT. The purpose of this work is to show how interrelated film and literature are and to explore the benefits of each to viewers and readers alike. Filmic fantasy and literary fantasy both have the power to communicate the four main benefits of fantasy stories: recovery, escape, consolation, and eucatastrophe. Literary fantasy and filmic fantasy will be examined, and the different ways they signify things in fantasy story will be observed. By examining literary fantasy, it will be shown how the audience is enabled to cooperate in the imagination of fantasy’s secondary world, and thus experience its benefits. By examining filmic fantasy, it will be shown how film works as a medium to convey fantasy story visually and to enrich viewers’ capacity for imagining and experiencing fantasy’s secondary world.

KEY WORDS: fantasy, literature, film, Tolkien, imagination

Introduction

Literary scholar Tom A. Shippey has said, “The dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic” (quoted in Dickerson & O’Hara, 2006: 21). Readers seem to support this claim, since, according to several polls taken in the last twenty years, The Lord of the Rings has consistently ranked number one among novels considered to be the greatest of the century (Shippey, 2001: xx–xxiii). One could likewise say the same is true for film; at the top of the list in all time box office hits one can find Harry Potter, Marvel’s Avengers, Dark Knight, Disney’s Frozen, Pirates of the Caribbean, and The Lord of the Rings (All Time Box Office World Wide Grosses, 2015). The popularity of fantasy literature and film should cause us to examine the power and draw of this genre. What is it about fantasy that creates such attraction in readers and in viewers alike? What affect does fantasy evoke from the person who reads or watches it? How does fantasy differ in its effects when conveyed through the written word versus filmed images? Is fantasy, after all, nothing more than a mode of escape from what is relevant and significant in reality? Or, does fantasy lead us to the good, the true, and the beautiful? These questions will guide our exploration of fantasy as we examine it in the context of the fantasy story cast in two different mediums.

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Background

In 1938 Tolkien wrote an essay entitled “On Fairy Stories” (see Tolkien, 2001). His goal was to define fantasy and show how its three “faces” (i.e. the Mystical toward the Supernatural; the Magical toward Nature; and the Mirror of scorn and pity toward Man) reveal a secondary world that appears wholly separate from reality, yet is profoundly connected to it. The ideas set forth in “On Fairy Stories” have proven true to many of Tolkien’s readers, who having entered the secondary world of fantasy have found that it clarifies and transforms their understanding of the primary world of reality.

From this essay and many of Tolkien’s subsequent writings, an entire field of literary scholarship was fueled for decades to come. A close friend of Tolkien’s and a fantasy writer himself, C. S. Lewis wrote in “On Stories” that stories provide momentary flashes of insight and beauty that parallel reality (Lewis, 1982). These recurrent themes of insight and beauty are essences we lose or never have time enough to perceive in our primary world. The secondary world of stories, especially of fantasy, is often able to catch the timeless essences that elude us in the continual series of actions and events of life. Lewis says, “In life and art both... we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive” (Lewis, 1982: 19). In 1983 Verlyn Flieger’s work, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien’s World*, persuasively demonstrated that Tolkien’s fantasy world provides readers insight into the rich themes of light, darkness, hope, despair, and language (Flieger, 2002). Ten years after Flieger’s work, Belden Lane argued that fantasy enables us to imagine new places or worlds in which we may dismantle our conceptions of reality and form new ones that offer us “mythic possibilities for change” (Lane, 1993: 401). According to Lane, such an engagement of the imagination in places of fantasy can be an expression of “one’s yearning for the Kingdom of God” (Lane, 1993: 404). Fantasy may be able to lead us not only to a transformed view of reality, but also to one that is higher and spiritual.

In recent years, there has been a heightened interest in fantasy, perhaps initiated by such novels and film adaptations as J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, Phillip Pullman’s *Dark Materials*, and Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Two of the most prolific Tolkien scholars, Tom Shippey and Ralph Wood, have responded to both this renewed interest and also to Tolkien’s revival in Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. Besides making frequent contributions to the growing number of works on Tolkien and fantasy, they have specifically addressed and critiqued Jackson’s film adaptation.

Tom Shippey (2003) finds Jackson’s film version significantly altering the narrative structures of Tolkien’s work. While Tolkien kept the outcome of events always hidden from readers, Jackson makes the plot straightforward and fairly predictable. Shippey attributes this difference in structure
to a difference in worldviews. Whereas Tolkien held that victory is not inevitable or easily discerned from afar, Jackson offers a very hopeful tale with assurance of victory. Tolkien’s priority was realism, but Jackson’s was triumph. According to Shippey, this aspect of Tolkien’s worldview does not appeal to popular audiences, but Jackson’s worldview of triumph does. While this conclusion may point to the commercialism and superficiality of modern Hollywood and its audiences, it does not follow from Shippey’s analysis (nor does he suggest) that film as a medium necessarily offers a less meaningful experience than literature.

Ralph Wood, on the other hand, does seem to discredit film as a medium of depth or meaning. Wood seems to argue that the written word requires listening, and listening is necessary for receiving truth. Truth is not received through seeing, however, because physical sight “cannot penetrate depths” (Wood, 2003: 17). It would seem then that because film is primarily a medium of sight, while narrative is primarily a medium of listening, narrative can convey truth better than film. Lloyd Billingsley (1989) agrees, as is evident in the title of his book, The Seductive Image: Cinema and the Christian Faith. In chapter five, Billingsley argues that cinema is inept at capturing spiritual experience, artistic experience, thought or the life of the mind, and goodness. Chapter six conversely claims what film does well: presenting a sense of place, action, cutting between scenes, a person speaking, people’s fears, trivial subjects, amusement, crime, war, evil, and sex. Some of these ‘strengths’ are obviously worse than others, and only a few seem positive (e.g. sense of place, person speaking). He predictably concludes that film is best suited for presenting content that is mostly negative and spiritually malnourished.

Film, it would seem, is not able to convey the same richness and depth of fantasy that literature can. Tolkien himself argues that fantasy is an art “best left to words, to true literature” (Tolkien, 2001: 49). Words are able to describe the places, people, and events of fantasy in a credible way, inviting suspended disbelief, or, as Tolkien preferred, “secondary belief”. The imagination can take such descriptions to a level of vividness and credulity that descriptions of other arts would only mock and depreciate. Tolkien argues to this effect about drama when he says:

But drama is naturally hostile to fantasy. Fantasy, even of the simplest kind, hardly ever succeeds in Drama, when that is presented as it should be, visibly and audibly acted. Fantastic forms are not to be counterfeited. Men dressed up as talking animals may achieve buffoonery or mimicry, but they do not achieve Fantasy (Tolkien, 2001: 37-8).

The claim made here is that fantasy requires a level of descriptive detail that only words can convey. Fantasy’s secondary worlds are delicate. If handled
with anything but the greatest artistic care, they may turn from wonder to whimsy. Tolkien, at least at the time he delivered “On Fairy-Stories” in 1938, did not think drama could achieve fantasy. His chief reason for saying so had to do with technology. Drama, a visible art form, did not have the technological capabilities for producing believable fantasy worlds. The technology (e.g. men dressed as talking animals) was not advanced enough to convincingly portray visible fantasy stories. Drama’s heightened sensation of spectacle allows for the depreciation of fantasy if the stagecraft, costumes, and special effects are inadequate. In drama, the worlds of fantasy require advanced means of depiction, because drama is a visual medium.

As a combination of drama and photography, film is also a visual medium. It would seem that because spectacle is a necessary (and often market-driven) component of film, this medium is as prone to failure as drama in capturing the depth and richness of fantasy. In fact, this is part of C. S. Lewis’ argument against film adaptations in “On Stories”. In this essay Lewis describes the pleasures gotten from mood, descriptive detail, and the essences or themes of written stories. For readers like him, the best pleasure is not gained from the surprises of an unfolding plot, but from the sense that the story’s world is a real place with real pirates, Indians, or hobbits. Such perceptions of beauty and sublimity, Lewis says, are not available in the cinema. Movies cannot picture the worlds of story like the human imagination can. And so, because film is a visual medium, it fails to adequately convey story, especially fantasy.

Judging from the claims and arguments presented above, it would be logical to surmise that while fantasy’s power to transform our understanding of reality would be well suited in literary form, it would be extinguished or at least seriously diminished if placed in the medium of film. On the contrary, in Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue Robert Johnston (2006: 24) claims that the medium of film has a unique artistic power that can change lives and communicate truth, even to the point of “experiencing God.” Likewise, Gerard Loughlin (2007) argues that film is able to draw viewers into its images and lead them to truth within those images in the same way a religious icon leads its devotees. Even a cursory reading of these works results in at least one defense for film: it is a form of art. As an art form, film has the inherent ability to accomplish what Aristotle (1996) called mimesis, or the process of reflecting true things about reality, whether they are truths about man, the world, or God.

Our goal is to examine the ways things are signified in fantasy literature and fantasy film. This will help us determine the similarities and differences between the effects of literary fantasy upon readers and the effects of filmic fantasy upon viewers. Watching fantasy film is an experience that can draw viewers away from the primary world they see into a secondary world they
do not know, by means of filmic images. The reading of fantasy literature is an experience that likewise draws the reader to a secondary world, but by means of words. The means of conveying the world of fantasy by these two mediums is profoundly different. While one prioritizes the human senses, the other prioritizes the human imagination. By demonstrating the differences between literary fantasy and filmic fantasy, I will seek to prove that filmic fantasy has the power to arrest our emotions and draw us to the deeper meaning of what we see, while literary fantasy has the power to ignite our imaginations and draw us to a greater and clearer vision of what we read. Remarkably, the differences in their workings result in drawing readers and viewers to the same goal—fantasy story’s four main functions—but from different vantage points.

**Literature’s Main Signifier: Word**

The secondary world of fantasy literature is a magical place that entrances the reader, but it is difficult to make. Fantasy stories must be written with significant creative insight and descriptive skill, or they will not captivate the attention or enjoyment of their readers. That is why Tolkien (2001: 48) once made the following comment about writing fantasy: “Fantasy has also an essential drawback: it is difficult to achieve. Fantasy may be, as I think, not less but more sub-creative.” Artists who make fantasy worlds are attempting to sub-create, a task resembling God’s power. The difficulty inherent in producing fantasy worlds stems from the fact that in fantasy’s secondary worlds things are most unlike things in the primary world. For example, primary reality has no categories for a “green sun”, and so for a reader to suspend his disbelief about the sun’s color requires great writing. Tolkien (2001: 49) says: “To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labor and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft.” Fantasy writing is successful insofar as it entrances readers with a world that is so like primary reality that it comes short of absurdity, yet so unlike primary reality that it goes beyond scientific, materialist categories into a realm of beauty and sublimity, of meaning, and of transcendence.

Tolkien believed that the best medium for creating fantasy stories and the worlds in which they occur was literature. Contrasting literature with visual arts such as painting, drama, and film, Tolkien considered literature as the best form for fantasy stories. He said, “In human art Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature” (Tolkien, 2001: 49). Words convey fantasy best, according to Tolkien, because it begins with thought and proceeds to images.
“Literature”, as Tolkien (2001: 78) explains, “works from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive.” The signifiers in written stories signify thoughts, ideas, and forms that correspond to words and relationships between words, or syntax. The words are concrete, being typed on a page. Yet what the author intends the reader to see and understand is not contained in typed letters. The author uses words to bring up thoughts and conjure images, which are immaterial and must be made with the mind. A reader cooperates with the author by constructing or imagining the scene or image that is signified by words; both author and reader are making images. In film and other visual arts, however, only the artist makes the images. Viewers do not construct images, rather they simply view the ones set before them. In such a visual art as film, the working is not from mind to mind, but from mind to eye. In other words, the visual artist conjures the image and the viewer sees it, whereas the literary author conjures the images and the reader does also.

Word’s Images: Universal and Particular
The result of these two different workings is that literature is more “progenitive”, as Tolkien says. Literature offers myriad kinds of images, but a visual art like film “imposes one visible form”. As an example, consider the difference between drawing a tree and writing about a tree. The drawing will present only one possible image of that tree, while a written description leaves room for the reader to imagine his own unique version of that tree. A visual representation is limited to one form, but a literary representation will be imagined differently by everyone who reads it. Tolkien’s reasoning, therefore, would mean that literary fantasy has a plurality of forms for readers, while filmic fantasy is limited to one form for viewers. Tolkien posits that the great benefit of literary fantasy, which signifies by word, is that “it is at once more universal and more poignantly particular” (Tolkien, 2001: 78). It is helpful to hear a fuller portion of his reasoning at this point:

If [literature] speaks of bread or wine or stone or tree, it appeals to the whole of these things, to their ideas; yet each hearer will give to them a peculiar personal embodiment in his imagination... If a story says “he climbed a hill and saw a river in the valley below”, the illustrator may catch, or nearly catch, his own vision of such a scene; but every hearer of the words will have his own picture, and it will be made out of all the hills and rivers and dales he has ever seen, but specially out of The Hill, The River, The Valley which were for him the first embodiment of the word (Tolkien, 2001: 78).

The words “hill”, “river”, and “valley” are universal because each of them signifies a plurality of forms, not a single form as in a film or painting; everyone who reads those words, and not just the author who wrote them, can
participate in the creative process of imagining the images being signified. And while these words are universal, they are also “poignantly particular”, because the readers are allowed to construct their own image of these words in their mind. Readers can imagine the word “river” in a form most powerful to them, because whatever is most remarkable about the idea “river” will be what they imagine. An artist’s version of “river” will present what the artist finds most powerful about it, but not necessarily what the viewer finds most powerful. The freedom to imagine given by words, however, can conjure what no visual artist can: an individual’s particular embodiment—with all the most potent details—of the thing that the word(s) signify.

Conveying Fantasy: Cooperation, not Coercion

Assuming that Tolkien’s argument about signification in literature is sound, one should be able to say how literature’s main signifier, word, is conducive to fantasy. Fantasy is an art form with its own unique functions, which Tolkien (2001) identifies as fantastic sub-creation, recovery, escape, and consolation. How does literary fantasy accomplish these functions? The answer is that literature allows for reader cooperation, and reader cooperation is the reason fantasy’s functions work. In order for a work of fantasy to have its full effect on its audience, it must invite the audience to cooperate and share in the imagining process; whereas fantasy succeeds through mutual cooperation between artist and audience, it fails whenever the artist tries to coerce or impose upon the audience. Since signification by word is, by nature, a “progenitive” art form that invites readers to cooperate in the imaginative process, literature has a high potential for conveying fantasy well.

Let us now examine how cooperation, and not coercion, empowers readers of fantasy to enter into each of fantasy’s functions. Starting with sub-creation, Tolkien describes it as a function given to all human beings and not just fantasy writers: the capacity to make things for the pure delight of making. Successful fantasy allows readers to join the author in the process of sub-creation through co-creating an imaginary world. Tolkien did not intend for the world of Middle-earth to be his creation alone, but to be a process in which they participated with him in imagining the people, places, and events of his story. This shared act of sub-creation could not happen if only the author’s imagination was at work. Because signification by word is, by nature, a “progenitive” art form that invites readers to cooperate in the imaginative process, literature has a high potential for conveying fantasy well.

This author/reader cooperation also allows for the other functions of fantasy: recovery, escape, and consolation. Recovery is the regaining of a clear vision of things. Fantasy recovers things in the real world that have become drab and trite through familiarity. Recovery occurs when familiar things that have lost their intrigue and beauty are seen in a world that is
highly unfamiliar. Tolkien says, “fairy-stories deal largely...with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting” (Tolkien, 2001: 59-60). In a setting where things are less bound to natural laws, or in which things are enchanted, familiar things become suddenly new and wonderful. And so Tolkien also says:

For the story-maker who allows himself to be “free with” Nature can be her lover not her slave. It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine (Tolkien, 2001: 59-60).

Fantasy recovers because it places worn out things of the primary real world into an enchanted secondary world. But in order for the enchantment to work, the secondary world must have the consistency of reality and the willing cooperation of the audience. Without a sense that the fantastic world is fundamentally very much like the real world, it will seem a farce, that is, it will lack the qualities that pertain to human life, and thus fail to garner the audience’s trust in where the author is leading them. Without the audience’s willing cooperation with the author, they will not have a stake in creating the secondary world nor in the process of recovery.

Escape, the next function of fantasy, is a flight from imprisonment in the primary world, where fear, doubt, and the troubles of life weigh on men’s hearts. According to Tolkien, fantasy offers escape from the ugliness of the industrialized age, worldly evils and sorrows, limitations due to sin and weakness, and death. Closely related to escape is consolation. Consolation refers to the comforts to which fantasy readers are trying to escape. For example, people trying to escape from ugliness grasp for the consolation of beauty; those escaping from evil and sorrow reach for the consolation of goodness and joy; those escaping from death fly to the consolation of eternal life; finally, those escaping from despair seek the consolation of a happy ending, which is the highest consolation of fantasy, “eucatastrophe”. The eucatastrophe of a fantasy story is the happy ending that amazingly fulfills ones deepest hopes in spite of seemingly insurmountable opposition. Fantasy stories acknowledge that evil and sorrow exist and are very powerful, but contrary to the tragic and meaningless state to which many people consign the real world, fantasy stories confess a piercingly different end to what would otherwise seem an unavoidably disastrous trajectory. Speaking of this eucatastrophic end, Tolkien says, “In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure... it denies... universal final defeat” (Tolkien, 2001: 69). In this quote one will notice that it is the world of the fairy-tale that allows for final victory. Fantasy’s
secondary world is one that is by nature open to the miraculous. The world allows for this function of fantasy to work because it is miraculous. And so, for fantasy to convince a reader that miraculously happy endings are possible—for one to believe the eucatastrophic resolution to be more than an authorial coercion—fantasy’s secondary world must be believably miraculous. How can such a world be convincing to a reader? There must be the kind of author/reader cooperation that results in a poignantly believable imagined world—the kind of cooperation that is most likely to occur when word, or literature, is the medium of fantasy story.

The fact that literature’s signification by word equips fantasy stories to perform their functions is proved through common experience. From the beginning of recorded history people have delighted in fantasy stories signified by word: from the poetic verses of Homer, to the songs of Norse bards, to novels of modern times, audiences have allowed the worlds of fantasy stories spoken or written to enchant them as literary “lies breathed through silver” (see Carpenter, 1977: 151). These “lies” have been received as entertainment, escape, and even enlightenment. Due to their enchanting nature, fantasy stories have led audiences to suspend their doubt and disbelief about fabulous tales and to accept them for their worth. In fact, not only have they enchanted readers to suspend their disbelief, but some fantasy stories have warranted the encomium that is usually applied only to revelatory truth:

Fantasy literature is like a periscope. Periscopes bend our vision to allow us to see above and out of our world to help us understand our world better. Except fantasy literature does not bend our vision; at its best, it straightens our vision by showing us what is really there though often unseen (Dickerson and O’Hara, 2006: 53).

For many people, fantasy stories have revealed truths about reality that they otherwise would not have seen, and they have often done so through the literary medium.

Many fantasy stories have been considered to not only reveal truth, but to be real, factually consistent records of true persons and events. On this phenomena Tolkien remarks, “The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories... But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation” (Tolkien, 2001: 72). For many Christians, stories of the Old and New Testaments that contain elements of fantasy, like the occurrence of miracles, are the most reliable and life-changing truths revealed to humanity. One who was persuaded by the Gospel said the following about its medium: “So faith arises from hearing, and hearing arises by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17; au-
Thor’s translation and italics). The “word of Christ” refers to the written and spoken proclamation that invokes Christ’s followers, both in ancient times and the present, to listen and believe. Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, considered the message of the Gospel to have come within a medium divinely chosen and empowered to do an extraordinary work: to take an audience from no knowledge or interest in a story about a crucified Jewish man to whole-hearted belief and life-transforming response. Paul’s opinion is not an anomaly, since from the birth of Christianity the life and teaching of Jesus and his followers has been primarily conveyed through written and spoken word (i.e. the Bible and prophetic teaching or preaching).

The fact that verbal discourse, both oral and aural, have been Christianity’s primary medium for evangelism and catechism could have many explanations. One reason relates back to the cooperative process of imagination inherent in signification by word. Work does not restrict a hearer or reader to one set form or image. Rather, word is malleable, allowing the audience to envision things that are substantive, yet free to change and grow in complexity. With word-signification the audience can amend, add to, and perfect its conceptions of things with increasingly informed imaginations. A reader’s mental image of ‘the river in the valley beyond the hill’ will probably change with subsequent readings, because readers tend to get better at imagining the more they do it. The way readers conceive the worlds of fantasy (or any other kind of story) will mature with re-reading. For this reason, it is not surprising that the primary medium for Christians, who believe in a God who can never be fully circumscribed, is word. The God of Judaism and Christianity is communicated not by a static image, but by the Word, the depth and breadth of which assures humanity’s image of God will always need to be broken and recast again and again. Because of this reality about God’s nature, C. S. Lewis has called him the great iconoclast (Lewis, 2001). God is always smashing our images of him, Lewis says, since they are always in need of improvement. What better way to do so than with a medium that signifies by word?

From these thoughts, we may conclude that literary fantasy has the potential to succeed in fulfilling fantasy’s functions, because it encourages the audience to cooperate in imagining a fantasy story’s world. On the other hand, we would be hasty to suppose that because of its strengths, literary fantasy relegates filmic fantasy to a poorer, weaker, or less believable class of mediums, or that because film works differently from literature, it must be incapable of conveying fantasy. On the contrary, it will be argued that film’s expression of fantasy can supplement and improve one’s understanding and enjoyment of literature. As will be shown, film can do so because, as an art form similar to literature, it can share the same essence (or spirit) of the literary original; also, as a visual medium, it has a power that can provide
viewers with escape, consolation, recovery, and participation in sub-creation.

**The Spirit that Bridges Literature and Film is Story**

Although literature and film are often pitted against each other, at their core they share the same essence, or spirit. That spirit is story, or narrative. Robert Johnston says, “The heart of film is story”, and the same could be said of fiction literature (Johnston, 2000: 144). Story transcends media: it can be told through drama, literature, painting, sculpture, film, and many other art forms. Differences in technique do not hinder story from indwelling various media, as Claude Bremond explains:

>[Story] is independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet, that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story that we follow; and it could be the same story (quoted in Ryan, 2004: 1).

The techniques, or signifiers, used by different media will certainly make a difference in how a story is told, but if the essential elements are present, the story will remain intact. Literature’s signification by word is vastly different from film’s complex combination of word, music, drama, and especially image. Despite film’s multiple signifiers, however, story is the driving force: “But in the American cinema especially, the story reigns supreme. All the other language systems are subordinated to the plot, the structural spine of virtually all American fiction films, and most foreign movies as well” (Giannetti, 2009: 324).

If story is the heart of literature and film, how can its presence be discerned? What comprises story in these mediums? If this question is not answered, then there is no way of judging whether a fantasy story is as sufficiently conveyed through film as it is through literature. It is necessary, therefore, to observe the essential elements of story and then to decide whether they are shared by both fantasy literature and fantasy film. If these mediums share the essential elements of a story, then it can be said that they tell the same story.

**Essential Elements of Story**

What are the essential elements of story? Although authorities differ, there are at least three essential elements: plot, character, and setting.

“Plot”, according to Michael Meyer (2002: 31), “is the organizing principle that controls the order of events.” Every story has a plot that involves a
problem or situation that must be resolved through a sequence of connected events. The outcome or resolution of the plot in a fantasy novel is the eucatastrophe. In Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*, after about 200 pages he reveals the basic plot or “the driving narrative requirement: take the Ring to Orodruin and destroy it” (T. A. Shippey, 2001: 81). Viewers of Peter Jackson’s adaptation, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, have given almost exactly the same plot summary. For example, one viewer who summarized the film’s plot said it was about Frodo’s quest “to journey across Middle-Earth, deep into the shadow of the Dark Lord and destroy the Ring by casting it into the Cracks of Doom” (“Plot Summary for The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring”, n.d.). While some of the events and particular sequencing from the novel are omitted in the film (e.g. the Hobbit party’s stay at Crickhollow), the basic plotline is maintained in both the novel and film adaptation.

The characters of a story are the people involved in the events of the plot. Meyer claims that characters are inextricably tied to the plot, because, “If stories were depopulated, the plots would disappear because the two are interrelated... Characters are influenced by events just as events are shaped by characters” (Meyer, 1987: 53). A story’s plot will change if its characters are changed, and consequently, the story itself will be different. Jackson’s film adaptation leaves out several characters (e.g. Fatty Bolger, Tom Bombadil, Bill Ferny, Glorfindel), but it includes those without which the plot could not exist: Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, Aragorn, and Sauron, to name a few. What is more, the characters in the film share many traits as those in the novel (e.g. Frodo is a wise hobbit, burdened but willing to bear great cares and responsibility).

Lastly, as Meyer says, “Setting is the context in which the action of a story occurs. The major elements of setting are the time, place, and social environment that frame the characters” (Meyer, 1987: 88). If Jackson’s adaptation had set the plot and characters in modern day England surrounded by current technologies and modes of civilization, it would not be the same story. As it is, however, Jackson has followed Tolkien’s setting with fidelity. In commenting on the film story’s setting, Bradley Birzer (2002) lauds the filmmaker’s version of Middle-earth as a faithful representation, and even praises it for some of its additions. It is in this element that filmic fantasy, as in Jackson’s adaptation, can not only adequately reflect literary fantasy, but help improve our understanding and appreciation of it. The reason that film excels in conveying setting is that it is a visual medium. It does not just describe the world of fantasy, it shows it, because its main signifier is image.
Film’s Main Signifier: Image

The primacy of image signification in film results in an easy suspension of disbelief. Whereas in literature, word signification allows for readers to cooperate with their imaginations and thus more easily enter fantasy’s world, in film, image signification can also convince viewers that they have temporarily been given a window into another world. Tolkien felt leery about fantasy stories expressed through drama and other visual arts, because they tended to do a poor job of showing fantasy’s world. But Tolkien was not altogether averse to visual art, as is demonstrated by the many drawing and paintings he produced (see Hammond and Scull, 1995). According to Tolkien’s requirements, for a film to adequately portray a fantasy story it must present a believable visual presentation. He knew what Robert Johnston knows about audiences:

Audiences watch some movies...asking with their mind if what they observe is plausible. Movies take us to places, show us situations, put before us dilemmas, move us forward or backward in time, allow us to see people in ways we have yet to experience. And we must be able to put ourselves in these places, times, and situations if the movie is to have its intended effect on the viewer (Johnson, 2000: 153).

Perhaps in Tolkien’s time, it did not seem likely that film technology would ever advance to this point. And yet, today some of the most successful movies of all time are set in fantasy worlds. Filmmaking has caught up to at least one part of Tolkien’s standard for conveying fantasy story: a convincing image of fantasy’s secondary world. Signification by image can result in the suspension of a viewer’s disbelief.

The Accessibility of Image Signification

The main benefit of signification by image is its accessibility. The believability of filmic fantasy’s worlds helps understanding and enjoying them easier for viewers than literary fantasy worlds do for readers. To read that “Bilbo the hobbit went out the door with Gandalf the wizard and a band of dwarves” may make perfect sense to one familiar with fantasy terms, but to others who do not know the definition for “hobbit”, “wizard”, and “dwarves”, it is unintelligible. Of course, all one has to do in most fantasy novels is to keep reading, and they will eventually piece together what these things mean. For example, they will learn that a hobbit is (by most accounts) a short, good-natured creature with hairy feet that enjoys eating good food, living in homely comfort, and staying well away from dangerous adventures. Fantasy literature, however, cannot offer the immediate accessibility that fantasy film can. One does not need to read a few hundred pages to understand what kinds of lands lie in Middle-earth; they need only watch
the first ten minutes of Jackson’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Even if a viewer comes to this film with no concept for elves, orcs, or dwarves, he will get an immediate visualization of these things in the world in which they exist. Such a visualization of fantasy brings understanding, because it sets the unknown entities (e.g. hobbits, the Shire, ring-wraiths) into a world that, while foreign, is in many ways like our primary one with many of its resembling characteristics (e.g. forests, homes, weather). Things that readers may find unintelligible—and thus unbelievable—in a novel may become clear in a film that visualizes them. When fantasy worlds are understandable, viewers are enabled to more easily enter and believe in them.

Beyond film’s accessibility is a power that results in even greater responses than suspension of disbelief. The response it provokes in viewers leads them beyond belief, stirring their emotions and motivating their actions. This power also comes from film’s nature as visual image, and is the power of presence.

**Film’s Power of Presence**

In *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, David Freedberg (1989) claims that people respond to images as if they were or were very close to what they represented. Freedberg says that there is a fusion of image and what is represented by it, of sign and signifier. An image of a person, for example, can evoke a viewer to imagine the living and real person being represented. An image of Christ on the cross can lead viewers to an animated vision of that event in their mind. Since such a vision would be similar to the real event; it would evoke a response similar to that of one who stood in the presence of the actual crucifixion. The response might entail sorrow, weeping, empathy, hope, or joy, all of which testify to the image’s power. Taking another example, a portrait of Venus in the nude might lead to much different responses. Both images are able to evoke response because of their “verisimilitude” with reality, as Freedberg says (1989: 201). They are so close to the reality they represent, that they evoke the same kinds of responses.

Because of this aspect of images, people have attributed particular works with great power. These images have a quality that suggests presence and sometimes even divinity. For this reason such images are consecrated, or set apart, and they are used according to the kind of power they possess. Images of the crucifixion, for example, were used by medieval monks to comfort the condemned as they were being executed (Freedberg, 1989: 5-8). Images of beautiful men and women were placed in sight of lovers during intercourse in order to imprint beauty on the child being conceived (Freedberg, 1989: 2-3). Still images have a history of provoking people’s emotions
and will by their sense of presence, and, as a result, these images attain the status of powerful, consecrated objects.

Like the still images of paintings and portraiture, filmic images have the same kind of power, because they also are imbued with presence and consecrated by viewers. Film is by its very nature a medium of images. As such, film can cause powerful responses in viewers, including the sense that there is a presence behind the images to which film draws. Film is also frequently consecrated, or set apart for purposes corresponding to the responses it evokes. Film is powerful. Johnston gives numerous examples of films that radically affected movie-goers, such as the story of a man who “after watching Sylvester Stallone in Rocky, was inspired to begin seriously working out” (Johnston, 2000: 31). In another example, Johnston tells about a friend and filmmaker, Paul Woolf, whose experience of the presence of God while watching Spartacus inspired him to make movies. This power to change people’s lives shows up in other films including Schindler’s List, Becket, and even Beauty and the Beast (Johnston, 2000: 34-39).

Film is also often consecrated. Some films become so marked by their power and the responses they evoke that they are set apart by viewers and critics as particularly imbued with a sense of presence. In their book Finding God in the Dark: Taking the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius to the Movies, John Pungente and Monty Williams (2004) use several films to lead readers in their devotional life towards God. Viewing film, they say, can be an act of contemplation leading to an encounter with God and self-transformation. Their views sound strikingly similar to those of Freedberg, who, commenting on the contemplation of images, says, “By concentrating on physical images, the natural inclination of the mind to wander is kept in check, and we ascend with increasing intensity to the spiritual and emotional essence of that which is represented in material form…” (Freedberg, 1989: 162). Perhaps most people do not attend movies with the specific aim of devotional contemplation, but many people find in movies an implicit source of meaning, truth, and substantive “presence” (Marsh, 2007: 146). The cinema can offer a good meditative device for people in a depersonalized, multi-tasking society.

Here an objection must be considered. Is it not true that film lacks the same presence as still images because filmic images move? Freedberg says, “Film... forgoes the aura of living presence; but that results less from replication than from the fact that the film moves on. We cannot hold to the image in a film in the way we do with still images” (1989: 234). To answer this objection, it must be conceded that film does differ from still images in respect to what Freedberg specifically means by “the aura of living presence”. A still image has this aura, because viewers sense a tension between their knowledge of the images’ artifice (i.e. they know it is a representation and
not the real thing) and the images’ unabated reconstitution (i.e. the imaginative process of animating the still image in one’s mind). Filmic images are usually not presented on screen long enough for this aura to be sensed. In making this concession, however, there is no lost ground to the power or sense of presence in film. Filmic images do not merely intimate the sense of lively presence, they produce it outright! Film goes a step further than still images by bringing its images to life. Yet, as in still images, viewers can also sense the tension between film’s artifice and its verisimilitude to reality. In fact, the tension is increased because film is so much more similar to reality. Rather than movement attenuating film’s powerful sense of presence, or verisimilitude, it actually enhances it. As historians of early film know, audiences, who were so convinced of the images’ lifelike presence, were sometimes frightened out of their seats thinking that the images might come out of the screen. The power of film and the power of still images both result in a sense of presence felt by viewers.

If still images and filmic images share this power of presence (with film enhancing it), then it is reasonable to assume that they also evoke the same kind of response. People respond emotionally and volitionally to the presence they sense in images, both still and filmic. Emotional responses like fear, adoration, lust, empathy, and happiness are evoked. On the heels of such emotions, volitional responses follow. In some cultures, people have so adored certain cultic images that they sought to beautify them with adornments. Images of Christ have aroused such empathy in viewers that they have encouraged imitation of Christ’s life and suffering (Freedberg, 1989: 164). In Western cultures, images of all kinds evoke response from viewers, whether they reside in the art museums, pornographic magazines, or film. As has been argued, images affect viewers because of the power of verisimilitude and presence they possess. Intriguingly, most Westerners tend to dismiss or deny this power and the responses that images elicit, both still images and filmic.

According to Freedberg, Westerners ignore the basic responses to images they experience, which in primitive cultures would be considered animistic, conflating a presence with an image. Yet Freedberg exposes the fact that “we too have the kinds of beliefs about images that people who have not been educated to repress those beliefs and responses have; and we respond in the same ways” (Freedberg, 1989: 42). The difference between the West and more “primitive” cultures, according to Freedberg, is that Westerners tend to dismiss the power they sense in images and their emotional responses to them. Although they ignore it, Westerners are as much affected by and drawn to the power of images as every other culture.

Movie-goers tend to ignore the deeper reasons they see movies. The reasons most people give for going to movies revolves around “escapism”;
movies are a way to avoid reality. As Marsh posits, however, “Whatever people say they go to the cinema for, they often get more than they expect” (2007: 147). In data collected from respondents asked about attending the cinema, although most said cinema was an escapist activity, they also tended to admit many ways film affected them, influenced them, and provided meaning for them (Marsh, 2007: 148-50). Although simple entertainment, fun, and escape from life’s monotony primarily comprise movie-goers’ conscious motivations, a subconscious draw to film as a source of meaning is exposed when people stop to reflect on and admit what they actually took away from the cinema experience. Based on such admissions, Marsh makes the following claim: “Entertainment is taking the place of religion as a cultural site where the task of meaning making is undertaken” (Marsh, 2007: 150). Film has become a venue for more than escape and entertainment. It is a source of meaning for people who seek escape or deliverance from a reality that offers a paucity of significance and meaning.

Notice how the last point reiterates the strong connection between literary fantasy and filmic fantasy. Film has proven its ability to fulfill one of fantasy literature’s main functions: escape. And if viewers can escape from what they dislike about the primary world, they must expect to find the opposite in film’s secondary world, namely, consolation, which is another function of fantasy.

The power of film affects people emotionally and volitionally. It causes them to question where meaning can be found. Film’s power uses visual image to captivate viewers and draw them into the deeper meaning and themes of what they see. Theme is an element of story that has to do with meaning. It is, as Meyers says, “the central idea or meaning of a story. It provides a unifying point around which the plot, characters, setting, point-of-view, symbols, and other elements of a story are organized” (Meyers, 2002: 185). But theme is hard to discern; it takes repeated readings of a book to understand all the symbols and other elements that reveal the theme. What makes a story’s themes harder to discern in a film is film’s nature as a medium. Filmic images—even though they are supplemented by music, dialogue, and editing—cannot convey ideas and concepts with the same perspicuity as words. What filmic images can do, however, is move viewers to seek out the meaning-laden traces of theme they sense by going back to a more verbal and more perspicuous source, literature.

**Film’s Lure to Literature**

Film incites viewers to explore the world it displays. Viewers feel the presence and power film possesses because they look into a secondary world—one that seems very real to them, yet is also elusive and mystical. They come away affected by this world apart from reality, and sometimes they recog-
nize how powerful and meaning-laden watching film can be. Whether they recognize it or not, however, viewers will ineluctably desire to explore film’s power, meaning, and possible themes at a deeper level of clarity. Film draws viewers to clarify the feeling and sense that as dull or insignificant as life may seem, there are secondary worlds in film where life is given meaning after all.

Film grants feelings that lure us to explore more of the world displayed, but it cannot give us this world definitively. It cannot because film is based on images, and images do not communicate meaning as clearly as words. Film does not define like language does. Geoffrey Wagner points out that while a film provides a visual picture of a character, a novel fills that character with meaning: “Some of Dostoyevski’s characters are extremely hard to ‘see’, but they are great and real characters nonetheless. They are so because language is a completion, an entelechy, and film is not” (Wagner, 1975: 12). Language is a “completion” because it actualizes the essence of its content (e.g. characters, setting, and themes) to the extent that it shows not only what happens, but what is. Novels and other literature can clearly convey both what happens in a materialistic sense and also what exists in an ontological sense. While film can also convey both things, it does not clearly convey what exists on an ontological level. Ontology has to do with essence, which is invisible. Rather than defining and explaining invisible ontological essences, film accentuates visible things, characters, and events. While film can convey visible things easily, its nature as photographic image necessarily hinders it from a focus on invisible things, such as thought. Wagner says, “Film is a diffusion. The activity of extracting thought from a concretion... has to be so. Borderlines become unclear. This is not to denigrate cinema in any way, though it certainly is an admission of a difficulty in reaching norms about such a plural form” (Wagner, 1975: 12). Film’s concrete images can convey myriad meanings, and in so doing, film can leave the exact meaning behind events, persons, and other visible things ambiguous. This ambiguity, or lack of definition, can be a weakness or strength. When film is posed antithetically to literature, its ambiguity is a sure weakness. If film and literature are understood as complimentary mediums, however, film’s lack of ontological definition acts as a signpost pointing to the literary form. In this way, film points viewers to a fuller, more complete world, as can be conveyed through the originating novel behind a film adaptation.

Of course, film’s ambiguity in meaning can lead to other places besides their literary origin. Film’s ambiguity has also led to film criticism. Film critics exist in part to explain and judge the meanings intended in film worlds. Their attempts to interpret these worlds and all their aspects, however, are often not sufficient. The reason film criticism cannot clarify the meaning and significance offered in many films is in large part due to the fact that
viewers are not looking merely for a propositional explanation. Critics interpret and explain film’s meaning with propositional language, and while this is one source for viewers wanting to explore the meaning behind film, another way is to enter the secondary world seen in film through a different medium, namely, the novel. The novel can convey material realities and ontological realities in a more balanced way than critical exposition. Critics are understandably concerned with analyzing films in terms of mechanics, techniques, themes, and other aspects relating to how the work was made and what its content means. They are not concerned with describing all the details and meanings of a work, since its office is more judicial and expository and less filial and compatible. Critics judge and explain films, but they cannot perform the same artistic feat as the filmmakers. Only a retelling or (in the case of literary originals) pre-telling of a film’s story can be called filial, compatible, and concerned with performing the same function: telling a story about a world in which certain characters are involved in a certain plot. And so, if viewers are lured by a film to engage and understand its world in a greater and deeper way, they find the best way is by entering it again through a different medium or form: the original novel.

Conclusions. Literature’s Need for Filmic Images

Turning to literature, one finds that the secondary world of fantasy is necessarily richer and deeper because it allows for a greater use of one’s imagination. Because readers have to imagine the things being conveyed by word, they are forced to understand and inhabit fantasy’s secondary world to a much greater degree. David Jasper (1998) argues that although film is more accessible to audiences, literature’s demand for deeper intellectual engagement results in a broader and deeper understanding of the story and message of the work.

A reader’s imagination, however, has limitations. Not everyone has an imagination as sophisticated as Tolkien’s when he wrote The Lord of the Rings. Readers’ imaginations must be educated. Tolkien grew in his powers to sub-create by looking at and studying the world around him. His mental faculties were instructed in empirical, visible ways. Fantastic sub-creation, he said, must be established upon rational grounds (Tolkien, 2001: 55). The imagination required to vividly see fantasy’s secondary world is one that must be educated with not only reason, but visual images. Roger Bacon said that “nothing is completely intelligible to us unless it is displayed in figures before our eyes” (quoted in Tachau, 2006: 355). In the Old Testament book of Job, it is only after Job has seen God that he finally comes to understand his situation: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear; but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job...
And for reasons that Thomas Aquinas explains, God took on visible form in the incarnation of Christ:

But the very nature of God is the essence of goodness... it belongs to the nature of the highest good to communicate itself in the highest manner to the creature, and this is brought about chiefly by “His so joining created nature to Himself that one Person is made up of these three—the Word, a soul and flesh”, as Augustine says (Aquinas, 1952: 702).

The world of fantasy can provide sub-creation, recovery, escape, and consolation. The functions and benefits of fantasy stories are best experienced when fantasy is allowed to cross media. For when literary fantasy and filmic fantasy cooperate with each other, the imagination will mature by both words and images.

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