

**A Philosophy of  
Christian Art**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis offers an original and comprehensive philosophical approach to the understanding of Christian art. It draws on a range of sources, from analytic and theological aesthetics, philosophy and theology, to interpret and articulate a vision of the aims and prerogatives of Christian art.

Works by William Blake, David Jones, and R. S. Thomas are among those receiving close attention; works which yield a picture of art and creative labour as deeply implicated in the central mysteries and practices of the Christian faith.

In five chapters, the thesis addresses the nature and the implications of the Form, the Beauty, the Good, the Ontology, and the Love of Christian art.

It is the aim of Christian art to manifest God under the particular forms and beauty of the artwork. These forms are realised and discerned in the context of a Christian life. The artwork's beauty invites a response of delight, gratitude, and the reorientation of our desires and dispositions towards the infinite beauty of God.

As a sacramental object, the Christian artwork is positioned in a Christian ontological narrative, in which we humans are entrusted with transformative stewardship of the world. Outside this conceptual and ontological context, the work will not be experienced as what it is.

Ultimately, the Christian artwork begs to be perceived and engaged with – as indeed it is created – as an object of love. Thus the artwork finds its place within an understanding of Christian faith as the striving for a personal union with God. Above all, Christian art is made, received and loved as part of our calling to grow in the divine likeness.

In presenting this vision, the thesis breaks new ground, and not only makes significant contributions to analytic and theological aesthetics, but also offers material with implications for philosophy and theology more widely.

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## Preface

It has been my aim here to give an account of Christian art on its own terms; that is, not in terms imported and imposed from a remote philosophical discourse, but in terms consonant with the beliefs and conceptions of those who make this art and of those who receive it.

The reader should expect a work, strictly speaking, neither of analytic nor theological aesthetics; while I borrow, widely, from both philosophy and theology, I engage with these disciplines insofar as they may serve to interpret, and re-articulate, the visions and presuppositions of Christian artworks and artists themselves. It is my hope that the confluence of different approaches will not confuse and obscure matters, but rather illuminate both the art in question and the ways of engaging with the forms, the meanings, and the beauty of this art.

I am wary, in general, of philosophy's presumption of a vantage from which to pronounce sentence on all things according to its own criteria. This apprehension is most keenly felt, perhaps, in the application of philosophy to the practice and experience of art; hence I feel with Robert Bridges,

How in its naked self

Reason wer powerless showeth when philosophers  
Wil treat of art, the which they are full ready to do,  
Having good intuition that their master-key  
May lie therein: but since they must lack vision of Art  
(for else they had been artists, not philosophers)  
They will miss the way (Bridges 1934, pp.69-70).

Philosophy, I believe, is bound to more severely misconstrue art the more reluctant it is to allow its own methods to be informed by the languages of art and those who love it. I am acutely aware of Blake's indictment of certain brands of

Abstract Philosophy warring in enmity against Imagination

Which is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus (Blake 2000, p.302).

I have been at pains, therefore, to articulate the hopes and assumptions of Christian art as I have found them, implicit or explicit, in the artworks themselves. I have eschewed – as far as is permissible in an academic philosophical work – undue abstractions and technicalities, for the sake of an idiom more fluently dialogic between the various disciplines and, crucially, more pliantly responsive to the artworks under discussion. In particular, I have sought to take seriously the very original visions and proposals of the art that has most deeply moved and inspired me, such as the work of Blake, of David Jones, and the tradition of icon painting.

Work on this thesis has confirmed my initial intuition that to engage with Christian art is not to attend to one category of art among others, but to engage an original tradition with its own prerogatives and aims, both aesthetic and ontological. What should concern us, in an exploration of Christian art, is the nature and role of art within the life of man as understood by Christianity. We should ask, with David Jones, “What is the nature of the thing called art? What sort of thing is it [and] how does this activity stand *vis-à-vis* the creature said by Christians to be a rational animal with a supernatural end?” (Jones 1959, p.145).

If indeed this life is properly understood from the start as that of man-the-artist, no less than that of man the communicant with God, we may find some commanding reasons why a Christian conception of art should give us cause, not only for serious enquiry, but for confident exposition. From the contributions of Jones, Blake and others, what we get is an account of art’s essential implication in the central practices of Christianity. For Jones writes that “the Christian religion is committed to Ars in the most explicit, compelling, and integral manner” (p.167); while Blake, with poetic licence, exclaims that

A Poet a Painter a Musician an Architect: the Man

Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian (Blake 2000, p.403)

Thus I propose a model of understanding Christian art as deeply committed to the regeneration of the material and spiritual world; I hold that the Christian artwork is, ultimately, an object of love, the aim of which object – and the aim of which love – is the manifestation of the form and beauty of God.

I have proceeded in the conviction that Christian art addresses us as an invitation, not to enquiry or speculation, but to worship and praise; indeed, that all Christian art speaks to us in some variation on these words of T. S. Eliot's from "Little Gidding":

You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid (Eliot 1944, p.36).

A philosophical account of Christian art may only be justified, it seems to me, if it manages to re-issue this invitation in such a way as to guide the reader to a transformative encounter with the artworks themselves. Thus the mode of presentation of this thesis may perhaps be described as more discursive than dialectical; though opponents are identified and engaged, it has been my aim here to present a personal, but comprehensive – and I hope persuasive – vision of Christian art. The motivation governing this work has been my love of the art and beauty under discussion; and it is my hope in presenting this thesis that it may serve, in some small measure, to return the reader to the treasures of Christian art with renewed perceptions and, above all, with a new readiness for love.



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## Author's declaration

I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to present work related to this thesis at several conferences and workshops, and to have had some of this work accepted for publication. I am grateful to all editors, organisers and participants for these opportunities, from which I have benefitted greatly. This is a list of relevant publications and conference papers, including forthcoming ones:

### *Book chapters:*

The love of art: art, oikophilia, and philokalia. In T. Milligan, K. Pacovská, and C. Maurer, eds. (2014). *Love and its objects*. Palgrave Macmillan. [Forthcoming].

### *Papers:*

Atheist aesthetics: a critical response. [Under review for a volume, *Atheisms*, to be published by Ashgate in 2014].

Blake & Orthodoxy part 2. *Language. Literature. Culture*. [Forthcoming 2014].

The beauty of Christian art. *Forum Philosophicum*, 17(2), 2013.

Blake & Orthodoxy. *Language. Literature. Culture*, 1, 2013. Republished in *Sobornost*, 35(1-2), 2014

### *Conference papers:*

“Poetry as Sacrament”. Shaped by Beauty, Heythrop College, June 2014.

With David Efird: “Experiencing Christian Art”. Religious Studies at 50, Leeds, June 2014; and The 3<sup>rd</sup> Biennial Glasgow Philosophy of Religion Seminar, Glasgow, May 2014.

“Atheist aesthetics: the rejection of beauty and Christian art”. BSPR: *Atheisms*, Oxford, September 2013.

“The love of art”. Love and its Objects workshop, University of Pardubice, Czech Republic, July 2013.

“Art, oikophilia and philokalia”. ATINER 8<sup>th</sup> Annual International Conference of Philosophy, Athens, Greece, May 2013.

“The beauty of Christian art”. The 53<sup>rd</sup> annual meeting of the Christian Philosophy Conference, Womersley, England, January 2013.

*Prayer is the Study of art*  
*Praise is the Practice of art*

William Blake

## Synopsis

### Chapter 1: The Form of Christian Art

We may understand Christian art to answer to David Jones' succinct aesthetic-ontological thesis that "This is not a representation of a mountain, it is 'mountain' under the form of paint" (Jones 1959, p.170); for Christian art should be understood as granting a manifestation of the form and beauty of God 'under the form' of icon, sonnet, cathedral or sonata.

As an artwork's 'significant form' is always contextually realised and discerned, Christian art is a matter of Christian form giving a Christian experience in the context of Christian concepts and practices, ultimately granting an experience of the real presence of God.

#### 1.1 Form and appearance

We can't tell a Christian artwork from other artworks by the way it looks or what appears to be its subject, but by the way we are asked to look at it and, crucially, by its *likeness* to God. This likeness may come in a multitude of forms, for the Christ-form admits of endless re-imaginings and re-presentations; but every Christian artwork invites a Christian experience, by raising the eyes, minds and hearts of the perceiver to a vision of what God *is like*.

##### 1.1.1 Recognising Christian art

As so-called representational content is neither sufficient nor necessary to make something a work of art, ostensibly Christian representation is neither necessary nor sufficient to make a Christian work of art. We recognise Christian art by its contextually embedded invitation to a Christian experience.

### 1.1.2 Negative icons

While all Christian art is *iconic*, in the broad sense of manifesting the form and beauty of God, not all Christian art is iconic in a ‘positive’ sense; there is also scope in Christian art for an *apophatic* artistic method. The poetry of R. S. Thomas is exemplary for being Christian art which, for theological and artistic reasons, does not offer us God as representation or content but invites profound experiences of God’s disclosure.

## 1.2 Form and life

It is vital to engage with Christian art in the context of a Christian life; while significant form is contextually discerned, the pursuit of significant form is a purpose, not only of Christian art, but indeed of Christian life. Christian art is both expressive of and indissolubly embedded in the religious pursuit of a valid form of life.

### 1.2.1 Form in context

It is especially important for Christian art that ‘form’ is understood as involving the experience of the work’s intrinsic and *relational* qualities. The experience of Christian art unfolds within a tradition of Christian making and within the communal life of the Church.

### 1.2.2 The Christian pursuit of form

Christian life is the perpetual effort at achieving form. Formlessness is a failing of love and discipline, and a falling away from the likeness of God. Creative labour may be fully integrated into – and may be a valid

manifestation of – the religious life. Christian art works with ‘the materials of life’ to realise the form and beauty of God.

### 1.3 Form and reality

If, as Clive Bell argues, significant forms disclose *the real*, then the significant forms of Christian art should be taken as disclosing the real as understood by Christianity. Thus the significant forms of Christian art aim to manifest the particulars and the patterns of God’s creation and revelation.

#### 1.3.1 Communicating the real

Art is not, as Tolstoy thought, a means for the communication of emotion. Christian art aims to reveal divine realities, communal and extra-personal in nature. Indeed, Christian art labours with and against the limitations of language to render God present under the forms of our making.

#### 1.3.2 Form and presence

For the Christian, significant form – the uniqueness and integrity of a thing – is significant of God’s presence in all things. The forms and symbols of Christian art are understood to instantiate the thing there re-presented; as, in the theology of icons, the form and beauty of the image makes the saint really present to the perceiver.

## **Chapter 2: The Beauty of Christian Art**

Beauty is the central aim, and a necessary criterion, of Christian art. An artwork that is not beautiful would fall short of granting an experience – aesthetic and religious in one – of God’s manifested glory and goodness.

Irreducible to material or formal properties, beauty is experienced as ineffable and gratuitous. Christian art always understands the beauty of a particular work to be a gift from the Trinitarian God; a gift which gives delight, but which also makes a claim upon us as spiritual beings and asks of us, not only that we make beautiful works, but also that we reorient our desires and dispositions to grow beautiful in the divine likeness.

## 2.1 Delight and gratitude

To argue that beauty is delightful is *not* to define beauty *as* pleasure. Beauty does not only delight, but also makes a claim upon us. The appropriate Christian response to beauty is gratitude; a response which may encompass the attitudes of reverence and veneration. Ultimately, the beautiful object should so train and transform our desire so as to become an object of *love*.

### 2.1.1 The pleasure given

Beauty cannot be dismissed as a subjective sensation of pleasure. The delight that beauty gives should lead us to recognise its objectivity; for our grateful response to beauty's gratuity entails the acknowledgement both of a quality and *reality* to beauty exterior to our senses and faculties, as well as suggesting a *giver* wholly other than ourselves.

### 2.1.2 The acceptance of the gift

Beauty engages our moral responsibilities as well as our aesthetic responses. The perception of beauty is an invitation to spiritual growth. Thus beauty as manifested in the particular thing or artwork raises our vision, and directs our desires, towards the infinite beauty of God.



## 2.2 Discernment and desire

The perception of beauty demands a discerning effort of understanding the forms and meanings where beauty is found, embedded in the material and cultural world. At the same time, we must embody a real receptiveness to beauty, by seeking to be conformed to and transformed by the beauty we see – and so to become beautiful ourselves.

### 2.2.1 The trained and luminous eye

The engagement required by beautiful works of Christian art may ask a great deal of us; we may be expected, not only to be literate in the forms of the art in question, but also to have some lived familiarity with profound human and Christian experiences. Our task is not only to train our perceptions, but also to purify our hearts in receptiveness to the divine light.

### 2.2.2 Becoming what we see

Beauty itself asks of us that, in order that we may see it more fully, we become like it. The appropriate response to the beautiful is therefore to grow, through love, ever more receptive and ever nearer to it. The Christian artist, pursuing his work within the cultivation of a Christian life, must conform fully to the end he hopes to realise.

## 2.3 The gift not made by hands

In the words of David Bentley Hart, “The Christian use of the word ‘beauty’ refers most properly to a relationship of donation and transfiguration, a handing over and return of the riches of being” (Hart 2004, p.18). I draw on this

understanding to suggest some crucial ontological implications of the beauty of Christian art.

### 2.3.1 Beauty's gratuity

The Christian artist works in the hope and vision of beauty; but beauty is not of his provenance. Nor, importantly, is there anything necessary or law-governed about beauty's manifestation; it is not reducible to such formal properties as integrity, proportion and clarity, but remains ineffable and gratuitous.

### 2.3.2 In the likeness of God

For something to be beautiful means for that thing to be in the likeness of God, to partake of the gifted beauty of God. It is in response to beauty's original gifts that the Christian artist wants to produce something worthy of being a beautiful gift in return. Beauty, even the beauty of our created forms, is itself uncreated.

### 2.3.3 A Trinitarian model

I support this model of bestowal by suggesting a Trinitarian understanding of beauty; in which beauty belongs to the dynamic *perichoresis* of the Three Persons. I argue further that beauty – being gift, and not a formal property – is best identified with the Spirit, and not, as is common in Scholastic thought, with the Son.

## **Chapter 3: The Good of Christian Art**

On an *iconic* model of the good, that is good which partakes of and manifests the Good, where this good is Beautiful. I argue that beauty is the relevant and decisive good of

Christian art, as the Beauty of God is the good above others towards which our lives should be oriented.

Christian art requires that we challenge some familiar dichotomies of aesthetic discourse – between the ‘good for’ and the ‘good in itself’; and between particular and transcendent goods – under a concern for what transfigures the world and manifests divine realities.

### 3.1 Ends and instruments of the good

Like all other art, Christian art should be appreciated and evaluated for its ‘intrinsic’ qualities. At the same time, this art is both created and engaged with in the hope that it may enrich – and be good for – the Christian life.

#### 3.1.1 Good ‘in itself’ and good *for*

The work of Christian art could not be good ‘in itself’ without also being ‘good for’. The work of Christian art is such that, ‘in itself’ (but not *of* itself) it manifest the glory of God.

#### 3.1.2 Doing and making good

Art is an activity. To *make* a good work of art, therefore, is a good thing to *do*. This doing is integral to Christian life. The artist, whatever his other ‘moral’ qualities, is iconic in his making of beautiful things.

### 3.2 Particular and transcendent goods

Christian art is committed to an objective, transcendent, and divine Good. As such, Christian art cannot be good *as* Christian art if it does not partake of and manifest the Good of God.

### 3.2.1 The good and the real

To be good, Christian art does not simply have to communicate ‘good feelings’ or present reality in a good way, but more precisely to manifest a good reality; indeed, to manifest the reality of the Good.

### 3.2.2 Integrity and openness

An artwork that is entirely self-contained will fail to delight and to invite a profound spiritual experience. On the iconic model of the good, the goodness of a thing, its likeness to God, is grounded in a *relation* – an openness, a reaching out towards God – and in the reciprocal attitude of God towards the thing in question.

## 3.3 The Good and the Beautiful

The experience of Christian art may fruitfully be placed within an account, like Gregory of Nyssa’s, of the spiritual life and the growth in virtue as a journey in and towards the infinite beauty of God.

### 3.3.1 Resemblance and likeness

A thing is good, says Robert Adams, insofar as it resembles God in some respect. A thing is only truly good, and in the likeness of God, I say, if it manifests the beauty of God.

### 3.3.2 God as co-appreciator and co-creator

On my account of the beauty of an artwork as a divine gift, it would seem to follow that this artwork is good, not simply by its relation to

the Good and the Beauty of God, but by God having a hand in its making.

### 3.3.3 Love of the good

The Christian is called to love the beautiful. This is also the motivating force behind the work of Christian art, which is most good when most beautiful; and which is offered as a particular object of love for that *eros* which leads us, ultimately, to the Beauty of God.

## **Chapter 4: The Ontology of Christian Art**

A consistent engagement with Christian art demands that the artwork is positioned firmly in the context, not only of a Christian culture, but of a Christian ontological narrative; for in dealing with Christian art, the Christian and the non-Christian will be seen to be talking, not only about two completely different things, but about two different (possible) worlds.

Christian art itself yields a comprehensive vision of the Christian artwork as a sacramental object deeply implicated in the regeneration of the world.

### 4.1 Christian art for the Christian imagination

Contrary to the assumptions of Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley, the Christian artwork asks to be seen – to be an object of vision and appreciation, as indeed of love – within a Christian apprehension of the world.

#### 4.1.1 Ontological context

The Christian nature of the Christian artwork is to be located, from the very first, in the realm of ontology; not in pedagogy or didacticism. The work aspires to be a redeemed part of creation.

#### 4.1.2 Beliefs in and about the work

The beliefs found *in* the work are to a great extent beliefs *about* the work, about what kind of thing this work *is*. The atheist, unable to adopt the Christian view of the world, will subject the Christian artwork to categorical and conceptual imprisonment and thus fail to see it as what it is.

#### 4.1.3 Psychological and ontological transformation

Rilke's *Duino Elegies* is used to elucidate diverging understandings of creative transformation; and to illustrate how two diverging readings, one Christian and one non-Christian, may not simply yield two sets of meaning, but indeed two different kinds of works.

### 4.2 Making other and making new

The transformative ambitions of the Christian artwork are only intelligible – indeed, are only possible – in a world in which God may become man and wine may become blood. The Christian artwork begs to be seen as really altering the world to become more assimilated to God. This transformative ambition is integral to the nature of man as well as to the nature of his artistic making.

#### 4.2.1 Man the artist

Christian art suggests a picture of man as essentially a creative and imaginative being whose practices of making new and making other

are inextricably entwined with his pursuit of communion with the divine.

#### 4.2.2 Art and sacrament

For David Jones, our creative works are sacramental in nature; all our thing- and sign-making is understood in relation to the supreme 'making other' of the Eucharist. Thus Christian artists seek to make God present under the forms of their making; language and metaphor, line and colour, tone and harmony.

#### 4.2.3 Golgonooza

Christian art envisions the transfiguration of the cosmos. William Blake's 'Golgonooza' provides an ambitious and compelling model of how humankind's artistic labours seek their fruition in a communal work of art which constitute the eternal city and true home for our creative and divinely inspired natures.

### **Chapter 5: The Love of Christian art**

Love pertains to all that has previously been argued in this thesis. Indeed, unless we apprehend the Christian artwork as an invitation to love, we can be said not to have seen or engaged with it at all. Fundamentally, also the making of the Christian artwork should be seen as a labour of love.

Christian art is implicated in an understanding of Christian faith which holds that love is a requisite for the vision and knowledge of God, and that the life of faith takes the form of a loving second-person relation between the believer and God. We may also apply the experience of Christian art to consider our loving prerogatives more widely, as creative

beings entrusted – not only with the making and keeping of art – but indeed with stewardship of the world

## 5.1 Works of love

Love is a requisite condition of the experience of Christian art; this understanding is anchored both in the nature of the artwork, understood as dialogic and second-personal, and in Christian life and theology at large, where any knowledge and experience of God takes the form of an encounter with, and in, love.

### 5.1.1 We love therefore we see

It is a crucial theological point that love is integral to right perception and right belief. We need love to also inform our making, perception and experience of Christian art; as the ‘purpose’ of this art is to bring us closer to God.

### 5.1.2 Dialogue and *metanoia*

The Christian artwork invites us to a lived and transformative dialogue, and further invites the conversion of our perceptions and dispositions. One who does not acknowledge the work’s address – one who does not feel answerable to the work, and to God, and who is not willing to change his life in responsiveness to the work’s meanings – does not really experience the work at all as what it is.

### 5.1.3 Union and communion

For all Christians, the aim is *union* with God. A right engagement with the Christian artwork is dependent upon our effort at such a relation.



Ultimately, the Christian artwork asks to be experienced in the first-person plural, the communal *we*, of the Church.

## 5.2 Imaginative custodians

This final part of the thesis offers an approach to the love of art more generally, drawing upon the arguments above, but also further explores the implications of the love that Christian art cultivates. As microcosms, we humans are the custodians of the created world, entrusted with its imaginative care and cultivation in the light and likeness of God. The love of art may intelligibly find its purposes within such a picture; in particular, the love of artworks may find its place within the wider practices of *oikophilia*, the cultural love of home, and *philokalia*, the theological love of beauty.

### 5.2.1 Art and oikophilia

*Oikophilia*, used by Roger Scruton in seeking to characterise a proper care for the natural and human environment, is a concept wonderfully suited to our love of art. On this view, the work of art is loved for its capacity to render the world emotionally and spiritually our home. Our artworks do not simply speak about, but indeed constitute, the *oikos* we inhabit as cultural beings.

### 5.2.2 Conservation and transfiguration

As a weapon against social and spiritual entropy, the work of art has a great role to play in cultural conservation, but its purpose and power is also one of transfiguration. On a Christian model, our stewardship is inseparable from our calling to also beautify the world through works of art; the motivations of *oikophilia* thus find themselves transmuted into our cultivation of *philokalia*.

### 5.2.3 Love against the machine

Christian art provides emphatic support for critiques of the impersonal and de-humanising, as well as ecologically harmful, implications of mechanisation and industrialisation. The misuse of the sacramental potentials of art, labour and language constitute a threat to divine communication.

### 5.2.4 The challenges of love

Under pressure of modern tendencies in art and art criticism, as well as in morals and religion, the aims of *oikophilia* and *philokalia* may be difficult to maintain. But our greatest artworks reaffirm the love of home and beauty, precisely by engaging with their perennial challenges.

### 5.2.5 A home in but not of the world

Confirming the tensions between *oikophilia* and *philokalia*, Christian art proclaims that, while the earth is entrusted to our care, we have no abiding home here, but are perennially pilgrims for God's glory. While our iconic works may manifest this glory here and now, the love and the creative labour of Christian art are always cultivated in response to a beauty not of this world.

## CHAPTER 1: THE FORM OF CHRISTIAN ART

Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness (Eliot 1944, p.8).

Thus writes T. S. Eliot in “Burnt Norton”. The concept of form, here suggested, is crucial to an understanding of the nature and ambitions of Christian art, as indeed of art in general.

It is the central tenet of the formalism of Clive Bell, to which approach I am rather sympathetic, that what makes for *art* is a matter not of ‘content’ or mimetic ‘representation’ but of the achievement of *significant form*; I believe, however, that this needs to be complemented by an institutional approach, such as that proposed by Peter Lamarque, according to which an artwork must be understood, appreciated and engaged with, as culturally and contextually embedded.

Christian art is a matter of Christian form yielding a Christian experience in the context of Christian concepts and practices. It is my hope that the account given here will go some way towards intelligibly placing the Christian artwork in relation to what Hans Urs von Balthasar calls the ‘Christ-form’; that is, I hope we may begin to see how the Christian artwork both draws its significance from, and significantly contributes to, the manifestation of the form of Christ.

Though Bell is a worthy interlocutor, his theory is for several reasons insufficient to characterise the special nature of Christian art. My own position is more closely aligned with the formulations of David Jones; who, in his art-practice as well as in his art-philosophical pronouncements, sought a fusion between the insights of a Bell-like formalism and the various demands posed, of an aesthetic, anthropological and ontological nature, by the Christian culture to which he belonged and to which he hoped to contribute.

Jones, importantly, stresses that an artwork is a “‘thing’ and not (necessarily) the impression of some other thing” (Jones 1959, p.172); something he learned from what he calls Post-Impressionist theory, and which we also find articulated, with a theological

emphasis, in Jacques Maritain. This makes for an understanding of art which holds that, even if a painting is ostensibly ‘representational’, in that it presents or depicts something that is recognisably a goat or a mountain, this should not be misunderstood as characterising the nature of the artwork or granting its status as art. For the painting does much more than give us an image, resemblance or reflection of something else; indeed, its success *as* art depends upon its ability to give us something new, and to give us something *real*, in a much more radical sense. As Jones puts it, “the painter may say to himself: ‘This is not a representation of a mountain, it *is* “mountain” under the form of paint: Indeed, unless he says this unconsciously or consciously he will not be a painter worth a candle” (Jones 1959, p.170). This is the kind of formalism I endorse; what Jones would call, in contrast to ‘representation’, *re-presentation*.

I will argue in this chapter that a Christian work of art does not need to have any Christian representational content, so called, but that its forms need to invite a Christian perspective and a Christian experience. We can’t tell a Christian artwork from other artworks by the way it looks or what it looks like, but by the way we are asked to look at it and, crucially, by its *likeness* to God. I will argue further that the Christian artwork begs to be engaged with in the context of the forms of Christian life; and, finally, that the Christian artwork harbours the ambition that its significant forms disclose and give us *the real*, understood as the revelation and the presence of God.

## 1.1 FORM & APPEARANCE

It seems appropriate to begin by considering what a Christian work of art may look like and what we may look for in it. A brief enquiry along these lines will provide us with some basic criteria upon which, in what follows, to build a fuller account of the forms and meanings of Christian art.

The first thing to say is that Christian art may look like anything and everything. The Christ-form admits of endless re-imaginings and re-presentations; God cannot be paraphrased, but there are infinite variations on the theme of his glory. There are, therefore, inexhaustible ways of responding to God. Each Christian artwork constitutes such a response; and for the Christian artist, as David Jones observes, “There is only one tale to tell even though the telling is patient of endless development and ingenuity and can take on a million variant forms” (Jones 1959, p.130). Crucially, not only may Christian artworks come in a multitude of guises, they also may *not* be identified as Christian from their appearance.

Christian art is recognised by its ability to manipulate an artistic medium in such a way that we may there behold and encounter the form and beauty of God; such work, we say, is in the *likeness* of God. Likeness to God, of course, does not mean that something ‘looks like’ God; it means rather that the work raises the eyes, minds and hearts of the perceiver, by artistic and aesthetic means, to a vision of what God *is like*.

While *beauty* is a necessary aim for the attainment of this likeness<sup>1</sup> – under a conception of beauty to be defended in the following chapter – it is neither necessary nor sufficient for a Christian work of art to have Christian representational content in any literal sense of that term. Crucially, though the content and the appearance of the work need not be ostensibly Christian, the *form* of the work must be, and the work must issue an invitation to a Christian experience<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> While beauty is not *sufficient* to make an artwork Christian, because this beauty needs to attend a Christian form (in order to invite a Christian experience), we should affirm that – when it comes to recognising or identifying whether an artwork is Christian or not – beauty is one thing we look for.

<sup>2</sup> Form, for the purposes of this study, should not be taken to denote only the narrowly formal properties of an artwork (such as the metre of a poem, for example), but rather to signify what we may call its *gestalt*, its ‘thing-ness’ and, via Pavel Florensky, its ‘countenance’. My adaptation of Bell’s ‘significant form’ will, I hope, become clear in the course of this chapter.

### 1.1.1 Recognising Christian art

Let us start with the claim, supported by formalist as well as institutional theories, that so-called representational content is neither sufficient nor necessary to make something a work of art.<sup>3</sup>

The formalist, like Clive Bell, would say that to hold representational content as either the aim of a particular work of art or as the defining criterion of art in general would be to miss the point entirely; it is rather the aim of a painting, or a poem, to achieve what we might call ‘significant form,’ or what we might characterise as an internally successful manipulation of materials – using line and colour, for example, to produce something that has integrity and consonance, that is an end in itself as an object of aesthetic attention and appreciation. “Significant form”, so Bell argues, is “the one quality common to all works of visual art” – from “Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres” to “the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cezanne” – as in each of these “lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions” (Bell 1914, p.8).

Even for the portrait-painter, in so far as he seeks to make art and not just deliver a physical or photographic likeness, it is something over and above the accomplishment of representation that really counts. Far from trying to achieve a visual resemblance alone, the painter will seek to give us an image of and insight into the *real* character or quality of the person portrayed. Thus David Jones’ painter will seek to reveal to us, through the form of paint, something true about ‘mountain’ or mountain-*ness*. The success of the work, as art, is conditional upon its ability to make us share in the artist’s way of seeing, his apprehension of the real or true quality of a subject – what Bell calls, rather unfortunately I think, the artist’s ‘aesthetic emotion’ – and this can only be communicated to us through significant form. If he succeeds, he has not simply represented the appearance of a thing but has rather *re-presented* it, given us the reality of it anew, under a new form.

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<sup>3</sup> As the definitions of both ‘representational’ and ‘content’ are fiercely contested in analytic aesthetics, we do best to sidestep those snares as far as is permissible; it is all the same to my account, I believe, if by representative content we mean the mimetic, the figurative or symbolic, the visceral or the cognitive.

The institutional theorist, like Arthur Danto or Peter Lamarque, can amplify our position. This theorist would say that even though representational content is a salient feature of much art, and often a source of interest and value to the viewer or reader, it is not this aspect of a work which defines that work as being art; rather, if we want to explain what makes something a work of art, we must make reference to the cultural context and practice in which the work is embedded and in which it may be produced, received and appreciated *as* art. Only within certain conventions, of creation as well as evaluation, will an abstract painting or a piece of nonsense verse, no less than a representational work, be granted the distinction of ‘art’, whether this is construed as an honorific or simply a classificatory term.

While each of the above approaches are deserving of a far more in-depth engagement, there are certainly enough strong arguments between the two to allow for and augment the position I have adopted. Thus, having claimed that not every painting or narrative which has representational content is a work of art, we can also affirm that something that is not art in the first place cannot possibly be Christian art. It follows that no amount of ostensibly Christian representation in a painting or a narrative can ensure that this piece is necessarily a Christian work of art.

Christian art offers and invites a Christian experience. We may think of many reasons why artworks with ostensibly Christian content do not invite such an experience, and do not seek to glorify God. There are cases of artworks where the representational content happens to be of a seemingly Christian kind, and where the artwork manifestly makes appeal to the viewer’s familiarity with the Christian story – a painting of the Crucifixion, for example, or an image of Salomé holding the severed head of John the Baptist – but where the artwork may well belong in a ‘secular’ category such as history painting, epic or even satire. It may be that the work is simply exploiting a motif from a universally known narrative, or it may even be a critique of the subject and its attendant beliefs. Such works which either are not meant to, or which fail to be, iconic of the form and beauty of God, are not Christian.

At the same time as there are artworks with Christian content that do not give a Christian experience, there are also works without such content that nevertheless seek to do precisely that; as we shall see from examples below.

However, if it's clear that Christian representational content is not sufficient for a Christian artwork, it might seem far more problematic to argue that no such content at all is necessary; for it seems true that in order to respond properly to a Christian work of art, we must first identify it as such – and how, if there were no representational clues as to the character of the artwork, would we know that such an experience and such an interpretation are invited? It looks as if there needs to be some aspect of the work which really lets the viewer, at least the perceptive viewer, know what kind of engagement is expected of him. Still, this aspect does not need to be strictly speaking representative; nor does it need to be internal to the work.

I will therefore argue at greater length below, not only that the Christian artwork should be experienced in a Christian context, but indeed that the artwork's significant form is indivisible from its context; where context may be understood in several ways – as being the setting of an artwork or performance, for example, or as being constituted by requisite knowledge about the conditions of an artwork's conception and reception. Ultimately, the context of the Christian artwork is the Christian life – its practices and culture, its meanings and beliefs.

As examples of Christian art which seem to have no 'content' at all, we could offer instances of several kinds. For visual art, we may take the case of the paintings in the Rothko Chapel. Here are visual works with no representational or figurative content at all, simply fields of colour, which nevertheless – by virtue of the place they are in, the triptych-formats used, and so on – invite the viewer or visitor to a deeply inspiring aesthetic and religious experience; the paintings offer opportunities or intimations of consolation, gratitude, ecstasy, and peace, by asking to be seen in the light of religious conceptions. In a recent article, Florence Waters describes Rothko's paintings as granting the viewer "a similar lofty experience that one gets in a place of worship, like a cathedral." She notes the paintings' non-representative and non-referential character – "their refusal to associate with language, or any period in art history" – as well as their



tactile and visceral thing-ness, claiming that “Physically, they rank among the most precious objects in contemporary art” (Waters, 2012).

Then there is Christian music – purely instrumental music, without the accompaniment of words, where there is no content to speak of – which, partly by virtue of being embedded in a culture of worship, is capable of giving rise to some of our strongest and most profound religious experiences. Think of Arvo Pärt or of Bach; music powerful enough to move mountains, or at least to grant lasting moments of joy, resolve and repentance. There is also the significant case of Christian architecture; where no representational content, no figures or symbols are needed (even if these are often present), but simply the shapes, the space and the spirit of a place are capable of stirring our hearts or stilling our souls to reverence.

It may be harder to find examples of literary art where figurative or symbolic content is irrelevant or non-existent, while there is certainly much poetry where we’d be hard pressed to specify what constitutes its content. However, there are significant cases in which we may not without contention speak of its content or its subject matter as Christian; some of William Blake’s symbolic poetry is one example, the fiction of Dostoevsky another, of writing whose Christian merits and meanings are perennially, divisively debated. In *The Anathemata* of David Jones, which we will encounter in more detail later, the Christian form of the work is discernible, not on the level of content (for the content in this poetic work is of a supremely elusive kind), but rather on the level of metaphysical and as it were meta-historical argument. The Christ-form, all but invisible in the ‘narrative’, is the centre around which – and the background before which – is spun a phenomenally ambitious account of human sacramental history. The Christ-form gives significance, gives meaning, to what may appear a loose fabric of the most cryptically antiquarian, etymological and symbolic associations. Though we may consider as more immediate contextual factors the acknowledged influences and the avowed intentions of its author, the Christ-form is ultimately the context in which Jones’ work asks to be read.

We will turn shortly to the poetry of R. S. Thomas for an exemplary body of Christian art which, for theological no less than artistic reasons, does not offer us God as representation or content, which but invites profound contemplations upon, and experiences of, the nature of God’s disclosure.

### 1.1.2 Negative Icons

We ask of all Christian art that it is *iconic*, in the broad sense of manifesting the form and beauty of God. Importantly, however, not all iconic works are so in the ‘positive’ sense of presenting us with a paradigm of spiritual perfection. Traditional icons do this, giving us the spiritual form of Christ and his saints as objects of veneration as well as models of emulation; and here, though I maintain that it is the form and beauty of the artwork – and indeed the form and beauty of the saint’s life – which is iconic, it is possible to speak of the representational ‘content’ of the work being integral to the work’s iconicity and value. But there are also, I would argue, what we may call *negative icons*, which offer no such exemplary content.

Crucial aspects – perhaps entire novels – of the fiction of Graham Greene, Fyodor Dostoevsky and Flannery O’Connor would seem to fit this category; as, again, would the visual art of Rothko<sup>4</sup>. In these works there are no – or, seldom at best – positive exemplars of the Christian life or positive proclamations of God’s glory. Yet, in the absence of saints and doxologies, God’s glory is invoked precisely by this very absence.

We may speak here of a kind of *apophatic* artistic method, of deliberate poetic and theological understatements, of analogy by negation, where the space left by the failings of character, and the lack of light and fruition, does somehow take the form of – and asks to be filled by – Christ’s revelation; and where this negative space does shed light on everything else. Though they seem to lack iconic ‘content’ – though there are no representations of saintliness as such, no real reassurances of the religious life – there is something about the *form*, as indeed the unconventional beauty, of these works, which invite real Christian experiences and encounters.

The poems of R. S. Thomas, with their profound, piercing and consistent apophaticism, may not only stand as exemplars of such negative icons, but are indeed, to my mind, exemplary of the complexities of Christian art. The discussion below will owe much to D. Z. Phillips’s excellent study of the poet; a study which is judiciously and penetratingly

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<sup>4</sup> A recent paper in ASAGE, “Rothko’s Negative Theology” by Matthew Lovett, is on the right track; discussing Rothko’s visual art in relation to the theology of Dionysius the Areopagite.

conducted in the light of the works' negative theology. Thomas, writes Phillips (1986), is "absorbed in the struggle of mediating the sense of a *Deus absconditus*, a hidden God, in language" (p.xv).

We may take Iago Pryterch, Thomas' recurring "adversary" (Phillips 1986, p.2) as a negative icon. We first meet him in "A Peasant". Marred and marked by the earth he labours,

sour with years of sweat

And animal contact,

he also seems to stand at times like a door (albeit a dark and narrow one) to a world beyond this one;

enduring like a tree under the curious stars (Thomas 1993, p.4),

he bears witness, perhaps, not just to an order of necessity, but an order of grace. Yet, as Phillips notes, the stars' curiosity indicates an ambivalence, an uneasy relation between the two worlds: "There is no neat fit, no ready intelligibility" (Phillips 1986, p.4), and so Pryterch, insofar as he speaks at all of realities beyond his lot, remains an ambiguous symbol; never comforting, never easily conforming to our preconceptions, he remains a stumbling block for complacent pieties and a challenge for poet and priest alike.

Another example of such an ambivalent gesture is provided in "Peasant Greeting":

No speech; the raised hand affirms

All that is left unsaid

By the mute tongue and the unmoistened lips:

The land's patience and a tree's

Knotted endurance and

The heart's doubt whether to curse or bless,

All packed into a single gesture (Thomas 1993, p.12).

The peasant in these poems is less a revelation or proclamation than a question mark, and a very inarticulate one at that; indeed, Thomas writes elsewhere of Pryterch's

dark figure

Marring the simple geometry

Of the square fields with its gaunt question (p.87).

We may infer very little of the divine purposes from such a figure, such a fate – nor, as evinced by the stars' curious gaze, does he render human life more intelligible to the heavens either.

Phillips comments that the “endured toil and suffering [of the people the poet-priest is confronted by] extracts a respect for a religion which wants to make something more of it. Yet, we have little indication [...] of what that ‘something more’ can be. The very attempt to give it a content comes under severe threat from the life which surrounds the priest” (Phillips 1986, p.9).

So, for the life witnessed and re-presented by the poet, in its lack of ‘content’ – its reluctance to lend itself to propositional sense, to constructive apologetics – it is the *form* of this life which must speak (if at all possible) of man's relation to God; and it is the *form* of the poetry – and so poetry rather than apologetics – which must seek to mediate this life, to render it intelligible and significant, to poet and reader both, to priest and people alike. Crucially, then, it is the hiddenness of God which makes demands of an apophatic poetic method; a method which doesn't seek to present God by way of content, but which must somehow render God's absence a kind of presence – render God present in his absence.

Pryterch and the land he inhabits, to be sure, prove very resistant material for the poet; but it is in the hard-won clarity of the poems where Thomas succeeds, that we may see Pryterch and his kind in a perspective that allows them to speak (despite and beyond themselves) of his likeness (however tarnished) to a God who became incarnate and suffered his Passion on earth.

For an early example of the hard-won beauty of Thomas' poetry, we may look to "In A Country Church"; in which we glimpse the iconicity of a place where God may alleviate the sense of absence, and so hallow the hard life, in the most humble way:

To one kneeling down no word came [...]

Was he balked by silence? He kneeled long,  
And saw love in a dark crown  
Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree  
Golden with fruit of a man's body (Thomas 1993, p.67).

There is no real depiction here, but the sketched evocation of a scene, and there is no attempt to draw a conclusion, or to preach a lesson; what iconicity the poem possesses lies in its terse distillation of experience – in the subtle confluence of some central symbols of the Christian faith, and the glimpse of a possible life briefly graced by significance in the light of these symbols.

These poems contain no proof or justification of God's ways, any more than do the fictions of Greene or Dostoevsky, but they demand of us to adopt a religious view on the world, from which perspective alone these poems reveal the significance of their forms and of the forms of life they re-present.

R. S. Thomas is clear in his aims and methods; we may perhaps read his "Via Negativa" as a manifesto for his approach to poetry and to God:

Why no! I never thought other than  
That God is that great absence  
In our lives [...]  
    the place where we go  
Seeking, not in hope to arrive  
Or find [...]  
    We look at people  
And places as though he had looked

At them, too; but miss the reflection (Thomas 1993, p.220).

Crucially, the poems themselves may constitute negative icons, not only in their deliberate apophaticism, their lack of affirmation, but also in their (acknowledged) failure to even trace or illumine this way of negation. Indicative of this is Phillips' comment that "The poet may have nothing to offer but songs which can do no more than express the failure of his own language" (Phillips 1986, p.40). At best, it seems, the poems may succeed to mark the limits of our conceptions and our language about God. The poet-priest, hence, may have

nothing to leave

But a few songs, cold as stones

In the thin hands that asked for bread (Thomas 1993, p.84).

In such a case the negative way is not a choice, but an insurmountable constraint, not only on the abilities of Thomas, or any other poet in particular, but on human conception and expression at large. Yet, in writing against this barrier, we may, perhaps, serve to render it a little more translucent, however monochrome our renditions of the divine; and even a glimpse through a 'glass, darkly', is better than the utter opacity of a surrendered effort to re-present God's glory in language, image and metaphor.

What artworks of Thomas' kind may fail to reveal, or may hold back from presuming to reveal, may nevertheless be intimated in the way they point beyond themselves; in the longing these artworks kindle, the waiting on God they enjoin us to practice, and the wonders and verities they suggest beyond the frontiers of their language.

R. S. Thomas perceives, and feels deeply, also the failure of others to generate creative and devotional responses to the silence that surrounds us. We may see this in "In Church", where the church itself – which should be the crowning of our religious labours – not only falls short of being an icon of our heavenly home, but even fails to offer any earthly warmth and light, and so fails to kindle the energies and the inspiration requisite for our reaching towards God, in and beyond language:

These are the hard ribs  
Of a body that our prayers have failed  
To animate.

[...]

There is no other sound  
In the darkness but the sound of a man  
Breathing, testing his faith  
On emptiness, nailing his questions  
One by one to an untenanted cross (Thomas 1993, p.180).

There is a wonderful negative iconicity in the invocation of the ‘untenanted’ cross; which may suggest an absent or indifferent, even a non-existent, God, but which may also speak in the starkest terms – indeed, by the very absence of a positive sign – of Christ’ victory over death. To our perpetual question – where is he? – the empty cross offers the inescapably ambiguous response: he is not here, he is no longer here.

In the poem “Pietà”, the same or another untenanted cross is left as if forlorn, robbed of its prize, much as the mind confronting the image or scene is robbed of its questions – for the answer given, the answer glimpsed, of a love or compassion both stranger and stronger than death, is too vast for comprehension:

The tall Cross,  
Sombre, untenanted,  
Aches for the Body  
That is back in the cradle  
Of a maid’s arms

(p.159).

The cross in these poems may be seen to provide content of a Christian kind; but it is not the inclusion of the cross – of such a cross as these, which hold no glorified God up to our gaze, but rather confront us with a vacancy of sense – in the inventory of the

poems' contents that make these poems Christian. If these are Christian artworks, they are so for the form the poetry builds around the cross, the form the cross assumes in the language, and for the kind of experience the poems invite. Thomas invites the reader into a properly Christian sphere of signs and significance, all centred on the love for and the love of the crucified God. The cross, even when unspoken and scarcely hinted at, is the centre of gravity and the fount of meaning in Thomas's work; as such, perhaps, his work may be said to be cruciform.

The ambivalence of the cross as a signifier is reflected in the tone of the poet, his almost impartial gaze, and the poems' refusal to provide clear interpretations; I say 'almost', for there are clues as to the tendency of Thomas' thought and attitude. In "Pietà", for example, the capitalised 'Cross' and 'Body' provide an emphasis, betray an attitude, which renders the scene an object, not of empathy or curiosity, but of reverence.

In poems like these, language, form and metaphor bring us to the very borderlands of our concepts and preconceptions; and by their subtle but insistent challenge to our settled modes of thought and our standard models of sense, they may indeed manage to gesture to a new way, a new *form*, of apprehension and 'making sense' altogether – where the act of waiting, the suspension of conclusive explanations, both yields and constitutes the only kind of significance we may hope for.

Another kind, another degree of apophaticism, is reached in such poems as "The Island", where we read:

And God said, I will [...]  
cause this people to worship me,  
And afflict them with poverty and sickness  
In return for centuries of hard work  
And patience [...]

And their women shall bring forth  
On my altars, and I will choose the best  
Of them to be thrown back into the sea (Thomas 1993, p.222).



This is a poem which could only be read as a most savage rejection and ridiculing of God, if we did not know the poet who penned it, if we weren't sensitive to his techniques; a poem which, like Ivan Karamazov's allegory of the Grand Inquisitor, in fact constitutes an assault on false conceptions of God (whether the speaker understands this or not; in fact, the ignorance of the speaking voice in such cases may indeed be crucial to the work's effect).

We enter the territory here of what is sometimes termed a 'purifying atheism,' whereby such claims or images of God as may constitute a hindrance to right belief are disproved or deconstructed; often what is done away with are false presumptions of knowledge of God, in favour of an apophatic attitude of ignorance before the mysteries of the faith. If poems such as "The Island" may succeed in smashing an idol, this is as important as any right affirmation of God; in the hope that a recovery of right belief may grow among the ruins of our positivism and our propositions.

The fierce satire of "The Island" is fuelled, not only by the righteous indignation of the speaker, but more importantly by the inspired fury of the poet-priest against the attempt (even of Christian apologists, not only deluded atheists) to justify a God who wills, not only tolerates, human suffering. The dialectic at work here is very similar to that in Dostoevsky's treatment of the Grand Inquisitor. It is a risky method, in both cases, for the attack is so convincing that we may fall into thinking that the effigy being destroyed is in fact the real thing; the challenge is for us to see, and for the artist to enable us to see, why the apparent triumph of the iconoclast is not the triumph he thinks it is.

The vulnerability of this approach – as well as its force – is nowhere better illustrated than in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in Dostoevsky's response to the ideas presented by Ivan; where, instead of offering a systematic critique of Ivan's vision, Dostoevsky lets Alyosha silently give his older brother a kiss. Dostoevsky has realised, as has Thomas, that the rejection of the false critique of God must entail a rejection not only of its premises and conclusions, but indeed of its very methods. There are layers of negation here, therefore; beneath which we may find the stark clarity wherein to ground our further labours of right perception, right praise and right belief.

So far does Thomas go in his rejection of any systematic justification of God's ways to men, that Phillips can call this body of work "the graveyard of theodicies" (Phillips 1986, p.74). It is in the light of such an assessment, and in the light of such a crucial poetic contribution as Thomas's truly is, that we must understand why ostensible Christian 'content' is not a necessary feature of Christian art.

For such work to remain Christian, some other powers of perception and articulation must be at work; another approach to God, by a way of negation, in which God's absence as content may be rendered a kind of presence as a form or *gestalt* quality – indeed, as the form or *gestalt* which constitutes the inverse or negative of the poems' inability to speak positively of God, and of their unwillingness to provide positive justifications of his ways.

These are poems, then, that also asks much of its reader's willingness to walk such a path, which offers such scant encouragement and such meagre provisions for the journey. Thomas could say, with Eliot, that

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession (Eliot 1944, p.17).

This is to demand of the reader a real Christian experience, an engagement that requires belief in the very gift the poems are forced to withhold.

We can see in the example of R. S. Thomas how the choice of poetic method has real implications for philosophical and theological thinking and speaking about God, as well as for aesthetic and religious experience.

D. Z. Phillips seeks to show how Thomas' poetry in fact builds a powerful rebuttal of the kind of theology and philosophy of religion which supposes a God of theodicy, by giving us instead a God who suffers. A key poem here is "The Coming", where we may glimpse the significance of the cross from quite another perspective than in the previous poems quoted:

On a bare  
Hill a bare tree saddened  
The sky. Many people  
Held out their thin arms  
To it, as though waiting  
For a vanished April  
To return to its crossed  
Boughs. The son watched  
Them. Let me go there, he said (Thomas 1993, p.234).

We may see the cross here as from the very first a result of love, of the profoundest divine compassion for a suffering humanity in their desperate longing for deliverance.

Phillips comments on this poem: “This coming of God is the emergence of a God very different in kind from the product of the theodicies” (Phillips 1986, p.81). According to Phillips, Thomas points to the flawed presuppositions of such thinking, which fashions a philosophers’ God of omni-attributes that the existence of evil cannot but throw into logical difficulties; thus, “what R. S. Thomas is showing us is that we should not accept the assumption [that God has] two attributes, omnipotence and love. On the contrary, the God that R. S. Thomas’ deepest poems reveal is a God whose only omnipotence *is* that of love” (p.81). Alyosha kissing Ivan may be understood in this same way.

According to Phillips, Thomas is a poet who, “like Simone Weil, sees creation [...] in terms of a self-emptying love” (p.83), and we may understand faith in such a God as also demanding the same *kenotic* love of ourselves. In particular, it is in surrendering our claims to knowledge, in dying to expectations of closure and full disclosure, that we may become present to God, and the absent God may become present to us.

The poems of R. S. Thomas seek, not only to guide us along such a *via negativa*, but to offer occasions for such intimations of presence; by giving examples and images of self-emptying, and by asking of us – in our acts of reading – that we suspend our cravings for convenient sense and our customary habits of rationalisation, and learn instead to wait

on grace. In such a way, these Christian artworks offer an experience which is indissolubly aesthetic and religious, and which may grant us an experience of God in and through the engagement with the artistic work.

Indeed, we should see that also Thomas' poems, as Christian artworks, seek to manifest the form and beauty of God, though their medium and manner of mediation is to reveal God's light by, as it were, placing us in its shadow; as in "Alive":

The darkness  
is the deepening shadow  
of your presence; the silence a  
process in the metabolism  
of the being of love (Thomas 1993, p.296).

Yet, every now and then, Thomas too allows the light to break forth, however briefly, from our cloud of unknowing, as in "The Bright Field"; where we may learn that

Life is not hurrying

On to a receding future, nor hankering after  
An imagined past. It is the turning  
Aside like Moses to the miracle  
Of the lit bush, to a brightness  
That seemed as transitory as your youth  
Once, but is the eternity that awaits you (p.302).

This poem in itself may be seen as such a light, in the dark landscape of Thomas' poetry, and such an invitation to turn aside. Indeed, the real light of this poem may only be appreciated relative to the pieces which surround it, to the general tendency and temperament of Thomas' work. What Thomas wants with his poems, so Phillips astutely argues, is to provide the conditions where "wonder and grace [may] come in at the right time [so that it becomes] possible to see all things as coming from God" (Phillips 1986,

p.127). The real experience of these poems is one that partakes of the patience, the endurance and waiting on God, that the poems themselves both practice and re-present; and thereby partakes of that breaking in of solace through the walls of language that the poems, at their best, accomplish.

It is right, I believe, to call these poems – in their terseness, sparseness, and searing dedication to bare essentials – *beautiful*; and their beauty is absolutely integral to their success as Christian works. This is the real manifestation of God; and it is this beauty, not merely the experience rendered or re-presented ‘within’ the poems, which makes us accept the poems themselves as occasions for Christian experience, as objects of real significance and value.

## 1.2 FORM & LIFE

Whatever the merits of Clive Bell's formalist theory as concerns the strictly aesthetic qualities of an artwork, I am unable to condone its account of the artwork's relation to the wider world in which it is situated; that is, sympathetic though I am to the notion of significant form, and fruitful as that concept is for Christian art, I must redress Bell's unforgiving division between art and 'life.' Christian art shows us that what Bell calls life is merely formless living, to be overcome precisely in the achievement of lived form; and that the success and value of art is conditional upon the ability of its forms to transfigure lived experience.

Such Christian artists as T. S. Eliot, William Blake and David Jones are united in their understanding of the practice of art, the creation of form, as both expressive of and indissolubly embedded in the religious pursuit of a valid form of life. Bell's "first commandment of art – thou shalt create form" (Bell 1914, p.44) should also be the first commandment of Christian art, differently construed; for it is a basic assumption of Christianity that, as Rowan Williams notes in his reflections on David Jones, "a life may become a significant form – as, decisively and uniquely, in the life of Christ" (Williams 2010, p.89).

### 1.2.1 Form in Context

Clive Bell is quite right that art is not history; but neither is art mathematics, as he sometimes seems to think. For art is – Christian art most certainly is – culturally and institutionally embedded; inescapably implicated in human experience and in a collective history of forms and meanings. Bell's neglect of experience leads him to underestimate that sphere of cultural relations within which, and only within which, the work is fully intelligible and meaningful.

It is especially important for Christian art that 'form' is not understood in the narrow sense of formal properties pertaining only to the material of the artwork per se, but rather involves the apprehension and experience of the work's intrinsic *and* relational

qualities; we may say that form is symbiotic with the artwork's proper cultural habitat. We may endorse Lamarque's point that, if we accept that "cultural objects have intentional and relational properties as part of their identity conditions, then we might say, albeit with a hint of paradox, that works are *intrinsically* intentional and relational" (Lamarque 2010, p.28).

In the case of a musical work such as Rachmaninov's *All-Night Vigil*, for example, the setting can indisputably make the experience of the music more intense, its power and significance more pronounced; ideally of course, the work would be experienced as part of the properly celebrated religious service, but also in the case of a straight performance of the work as an artistic piece, the setting of a church would almost invariably offer a fuller experience than the concert hall. When the *Vigil* is sung in full synergy with the architecture, the icons, the 'choreography' of ritual and the response of prayer, we may speak of a 'total Christian artwork' offering a Christian experience of tremendous depth and resonance.

R. S. Thomas' work is not an exception to this. Having seen the kind of experiences offered by his poems, it must be emphasised that the right conditions for such experiences are not only internal to the poems but is truly a matter of perceiving the poetry in the right context. In many of Thomas' poems, certain small words, by no means specific to Christian discourse, evoke meanings not only great in scope but also decidedly Christian in character – for the reader attuned to Christian language and experience, and attuned to the tendencies of Thomas' work as a whole. For example, we know who the 'He' of such poems as "Migrants" is, not chiefly (if at all) by virtue of the poem's internal pointers, but by the poem's place in Thomas' oeuvre; the significance of that 'He', as of the poem at large, is in no small part conditioned by its context. "The Annunciation by Veneziano", meanwhile, only really works – as art, and as Christian art – by reference to another, visual, work; in itself, the poem is so subtle, so fragile, saying little; but in its dialogue with the visual motif – in articulating what is not there in the scene as we see it – the poem is hauntingly poignant.

Thus, as our discussion above should have illustrated, a real engagement with Thomas' work entails an effort on the part of the reader which is not limited to close readings of the poems, but which is also appreciative of the context of their creation and,

moreover, attuned to the works' theological and philosophical implications. Phillips makes the point, with Robert Matthias, that, since the poet is a priest in the Church in Wales, "To forget that would be to misunderstand [...] the nature of the journey in verse" (Phillips 1986, p.51) which his *oeuvre* constitutes. Above all, the vital Christian contribution of this body of work only becomes apparent to a readership attentive to the Christian culture (of practices and concepts; of doing, making and meaning) in which the poems are embedded; indeed, more than being attentive to this context, the ideal reader is himself embedded in it, and so possesses lived experience of the kind of life the poems re-present.

Bell claims that "To praise or abuse or be interested in a work of art because it leads or does not lead to another work of art is to treat it as though it were not a work of art" (Bell 1914, p.102). This is sound up to a point, for our attention to the artwork should be primarily directed at discerning its significant form; to assess it as a piece in a puzzle of provenance or biography is to consider aspects extrinsic to the art-nature and art-status of the work. It is far less accurate, however, to say that "The connection of one work of art with another may have everything to do with history: it has nothing to do with appreciation" (p.102); for connections between works can have something to do with appreciation, if one work is in close stylistic or thematic dialogue with another and thus demands our awareness of their points of intersection – for the sake, not only of mutual elucidation, but of a proper response to the significant form of the work in question.

It is my position that crucial elements of an artwork remain obscure for one who does not possess the requisite frames of reference. This is not to say that the meaning of the work itself is to be found only externally to it, but that the internal qualities and significance of the work are yielded up only to a mind which is perceptually and conceptually prepared. Blake's *Milton* does not ask of me to read the works of John Milton for the sake of establishing links of historical causality or influence, but for the sake of a fuller enjoyment of Blake's initially difficult poem. Similarly, my familiarity with such works as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the *Revelations* of Julian of Norwich may serve to enhance my experience of the *Four Quartets*. Neither of these exercises in complementary reading implies a case for historical analysis against the formalist approach to art, but simply illustrate that a full and fruitful reading is also one that is



informed about the influences or inheritance of the work, and which is thus literate in the language used by the work in question.

To clarify: it is not a matter of gaining *knowledge* of one work, so as to identify, with a pedant's or scholar's relish, the technical or thematic echoes in another, but entirely a matter of undergoing those *experiences* of relevant works of art which may prepare the heart as well as the eyes for the new aesthetic encounter. I can read all the commentaries there are on Milton's epics, without getting any nearer to a proper understanding of Blake's *Milton* – or even of Milton's epics, for that matter. On the other hand, if I have read the works of the former as works of art in their own right, I am likely to discover – as I read Blake in his own right – that my alertness to even implicit allusions and inflections will make this a more rewarding and revealing aesthetic experience.

William Hood (1993), in his wonderful study of Fra Angelico's monastic frescoes, states what ought to be a commonplace as we approach any meaningful art: "an adequate interpretation of Fra Angelico's formal or aesthetic decisions rests on a clear understanding of the messages that he intended his paintings to support" (p.263); I would also argue that, vice versa, an adequate grasp of the message or meaning also demands a keen attention to the aesthetic properties of the works in question.

A rudimentary schooling, at least, in the rich sign-world of Christianity would seem to be a prerequisite for a recognition of what is *significant* about the aesthetic solutions employed, the associations invoked and, ultimately, the forms created by Fra Angelico or R. S. Thomas; and thus prerequisite, too, for a proper appreciation of this art on its own terms, as an art which indisputably guides the viewer to a Christian experience, to a vision of the Christian God.

Similarly, the identity of Eliot's interlocutor in the second section of "Little Gidding" is unmasked as Dante (though not solely Dante) only through the 'clue' – the homage, the emulation, the application – of Eliot's adaptation of the *terza rima* form of the *Divine Comedy*; poetically, as indeed religiously, by this adoption of his master's form, Eliot achieves an effect much more powerful than would the mere invocation of Dante's name, or some more explicit paraphrase of his ideas.

For Christian art, the lesson is this: that an immersion in the wider aesthetic, figurative and conceptual life of the faith and culture of Christianity make us abundantly better prepared to embrace the experience offered by the work of art; which work will not only ask of us that we recognise certain implications or articulations, but which will ask of us that we are prepared to hold certain attitudes and beliefs as valid.

Thus, when I stress that we do not encounter the work of Christian art in a cultural vacuum, this is not only to say that we may not appreciate the art-qualities of Christian art in such a vacuum, but that also the Christian nature of the experience is conditional upon the context of the engagement; for, as von Balthasar writes, the “form of Jesus Christ does not stand in isolation before the gaze of the believer. On the contrary: in an inextricable manner, Christ’s form is embedded into a context of truths [and] offers itself to view only within these contexts, which for the eyes of faith are not separable from himself since they stand in a most intimate ontological connection with the form that is beheld” (von Balthasar 1982, p.198).

We glean here that Jesus Christ, as the ultimate form towards which every Christian artwork points, is also the ultimate context of these artworks and the experiences they offer. The cultivation of a right responsiveness to the Christ-form is the prerogative of every Christian practice; the case of Christian art is not an exception, but is rather exemplary and instructive in this respect. The Christ-form, importantly, refers not only to Christ himself, but also what we may call his ‘cultural extension’; the ecclesiastical, liturgical, sacramental, and artistic forms which he himself instituted or which are established in his name for the perpetuation of his revelation.

Importantly, the need for real familiarity with the Christian world – its internal language, its collectively lived experience – pertains both to the viewer of art and, perhaps to an even more crucial degree, to the maker of it. Fra Angelico’s only recorded saying has him asserting that “Art demands great tranquillity, and to paint the things of Christ, the artist must live with Christ” (Robertson 1947, p.21). This attitude is consistently enshrined in the practice of icon-painting; which, to this day, entails the observance of prayer, fast, communion and liturgy, as well as close compliance with the style and iconography of precedent works. In short, the icon-painter carries out his creative work within the institution of the Church; indeed, his creative work both

confirms his bonds to, and fruitfully contributes to the life and vitality of, that greater body. He, as any Christian artist, therefore hopes and asks for a viewer or reader who may share, in some form, his lived dedication to the form of Christ; as Blake writes at the very beginning of his masterpiece *Jerusalem the Emanation of the Giant Albion*, “I hope the Reader will be with me. wholly One in Jesus our Lord” (Blake 2000, p.300).

This, then, is my message to Bell: We do not appreciate art in isolation any more than we create it in isolation. The Christian artist, importantly, does not only create his works within a set of cultural expectations, but also in the light of a religious vision of God – which it is the work’s responsibility to reflect. As the cases of R. S. Thomas, Fra Angelico and the painters of icons show us, the gravity of this task – as well as the joyful privilege of it – asks that the artist not only works but also *lives* in conformity to this vision. Moreover, for the Christian artist, the making and the living are not two distinct pursuits, but one (composite or unified) discipline: the creative life is the religious life.

### **1.2.2 The Christian pursuit of form**

It is Bell’s conviction that “to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas or affairs, no familiarity with its emotions” (Bell 1914, p.25). This is manifestly false. While Bell is quite right that representation is not the point of art, he is perfectly wrong that life does not inform the experience of art and that this experience does not bear on life. In Bell’s account, as we appreciate or experience the significant form of a work of art, “For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life” (p.25). While there is something intuitively true in this characterisation – for we all know those moments of epiphany, peace and inspiration – Bell misrepresents both the phenomenology and the implications of the experience. For our interests, our anticipations and memories – which Bell here admits we bring with us, even if he thinks we leave them at the very threshold of the art-experience – are not simply disbanded or dispelled, but rather distilled by this experience and returned to us in a different form.

That art moulds the stuff of experience – whether it elevates our perceptions or makes us descend into the underground – should be beyond dispute. It is Bell’s contention, however, that insofar as we allow this to happen, we have adulterated the experience, and so failed to partake of that rarefied atmosphere that belongs to the realm of purely ‘aesthetic emotion’. But art can make us feel more intensely and fully alive; this is why we value it so, why we seek it out for substance, solace and sustenance. This is *not* a concession to content, reference and sentiment, to a view of art as some kind of therapeutic ‘means’ for our emotional succour; for it is precisely my understanding that art may bring us the world anew – distilled, transformed, re-presented – through the ‘ends’ of its significant forms.

For life, properly understood, *is* form. This is a perennially and thoroughly Christian notion. We mustn’t forget that the very Creation of the world entailed the creation of form – for before its completion as a place of life and beauty, and a suitable habitat for man, “the earth was without form, and void” (Genesis 1:2). David Jones speaks on several instances of a “will to form” as characterising human life (Jones 2008, p.104); he calls man a “form-maker,” seeing our creation of forms as absolutely integral to human nature (pp.86-87). Blake, too, consistently posits the creation of form as absolutely central, not only to divine and human labours of generation and regeneration, but also to a life lived in responsiveness to the divine vision and likeness. Thus

Albion was slain upon his Mountains

And in his Tent. thro envy of Living Form. even of the Divine Vision

and thus Los

laboured at his resolute Anvil

among indefinite Druid Rocks & snows of doubt & reasoning.

Refusing all Definite Form (Blake 2000, p.248),

tirelessly resisting the powers of dissolution and perpetually

delivering Form out of confusion (p.355).

With Los' example in mind, and Blake's own relentless labours to manifest the living form of Christ, we can aim the following words of von Balthasar's, steeped in Christian experience, against Bell's abstractions: "The recalcitrance and drudgery of everyday existence induce us to flee into a sphere of illusion where we think we are going to come face to face with the beautiful in distilled form. And yet we know that it is only the overcoming of workaday rigours and perseverance in them that will hew out the precious stone which has to emerge from the rough block of our existence" (von Balthasar 1982, p.239). This is a vindication of the labours of Christian artists, as well as Christian saints, through the centuries, whose arduous work witnesses to the manifestation of form and beauty in the midst of the conditions of human life.

Let us say then that life is the perpetual – and perilous – effort at achieving form. Formlessness, on the contrary, is death and dissolution, a failing of love and discipline, and a falling away from the likeness of God. So, in a sense, art in giving us form gives life. Herein, above all, lies its value: not in the escape from life, but in the transfiguration of that disorder which so often passes for – and which Bell confuses with – life.

The artist who does not work at all with the raw materials of life will not be a great artist, though he may become a great logician, mathematician or designer of satellites or space-shuttles. It is indeed part of the poet's task that he is attuned, not only to his own experience, but to the experience of the people among whom he lives. Not only the quality of his empathy, but also the potency of his imagination, depend upon his sensitivity towards his neighbours' triumphs and travails. We see this at work in R. S. Thomas, in his unflinching – by no means always sympathetic – attention to Pryterch and his fellows.

The case of T. S. Eliot is also illustrative, as Derek Traversi's excellent study of the longer poems makes clear. "As always for Eliot," Traversi writes, "the poet is not an original philosopher, or one whose business it is to argue the truth of any particular set of convictions: 'It is not the poet's job to think: his job is to express the greatest emotional

intensity of his time, based on whatever his time happened to think” (Traversi 1976, pp.88-89).

A poet who is not *responsive* to life around him can be said to be deficient in that responsibility that constitutes no small part of his vocation and his expectations. For life, no less than language, is shared, and as the poet will learn, borrow and steal from his contemporaries no less than his predecessors, so he is honour-bound to return to them the fruits of his labour, in some intelligible and meaningful form. Thus Traversi continues: “The criterion by which we, as readers of poetry, may judge his success in doing this is not one of reasoned assent or dissent to a set of propositions which may be said to emerge from the poem, but our feeling of his success – or lack of it – in moulding his emotional material into a shape, or form, which seem to fulfil our instinct for a satisfying, integrating ‘pattern’ of experience” (pp.88-89). Eliot achieves this in the *Four Quartets*. R. S. Thomas achieves this too; which is not to say that the pattern must be either easily discerned or easily followed. Indeed, the Christian pattern and form of life will demand a great deal of sacrifice from us.

Bell may still be right to say that “in the spectator a tendency to seek, behind form, the emotions of life is a sign of defective sensibility always” (Bell 1914, p.28); but instead of prescribing a complete break with the emotions of life, for the sole attention to form, say instead that we should seek in art the emotions of life refashioned, rescued from the flotsam of contingency and cast in an eternal aspect, as seen in the light of their contribution to significant form. Say, too, that he who has no such baggage, no such schooling in despair and desire, will come to the work of art unprepared; that his ‘aesthetic sensibility,’ if untutored in human history, will not reveal the artwork to him at all, but will leave him like a deaf man at a concert, to borrow Bell’s own metaphor.

For the insensitive or uncultured spectator, Bell claims, “a work of art depends on what they bring to it; nothing new is added to their lives, only the old material is stirred” (p.29). What I want to say, of course, is that life is indeed made new in the work of art. This is a gift that will certainly elude those who cannot see past the accumulated prejudice and preoccupations of their own selves. But, and here is where I differ markedly from Bell, this gift will also be lost on those who do not allow art to address life at all, who could not fully appreciate the fact of renewal because they did not first

recognise the need for it, and for whom the experience of the artwork would not be allowed to cast its light and transformative influence beyond the closed circuit of the painted canvas and the perceiver's prejudiced eyeballs. Art, for this kind of person, would not be granted its full capacity to replenish, reinvigorate and reorient a life at large. Some art, certainly, may not entertain such far-reaching ambitions, or possess such reserves of generosity, but Christian art certainly does, and I suspect that Bell's beloved Cezanne and Matisse do as well.

It seems foolish, frankly, to suggest that something like the *Four Quartets* does not both demand and reward lived familiarity with the themes that give flesh and blood to the poem. Similarly, he who sees in a Crucifixion only 'form' and not life (or death, for that matter), does not even see *form* but sees only shapes and shades which obscure the recognition of significance; unlike him who comes versed in the human (and Christian) story as well as with aesthetic sensibility (and ideally with some faith as well), who will experience life and form embodied in line and colour.

What Bell fails to acknowledge is that form and life are not antonyms, but are rather given us to be perceived and inhabited as one. Ordinary life, so slighted by Bell, is not the sloppy and haphazard collision of disparate emotions and half-baked ideas alone, but is rather the attempt, strenuous as nothing else, of walking straight and speaking clearly, of sifting the wheat from the chaff, of seeing outline and savouring substance, setting stone to stone and building an inhabitable home – in short, of making and preserving significant forms.

Thus, at the end of "East Coker", we find the parallel drawn between the poet's efforts at the creation of intelligible and meaningful structures, and the effort which characterises life itself. Indeed, the former seems embedded in the latter, while the latter may only become explicit and become conscious of itself in the former. In the words of Traversi, "The impulse to use words accurately reflects another, still more universal, to find *form*, significance and coherence in the material given by experience" (Traversi 1976, p.147). It is not an easy business, as the poem makes clear:

So here I am [...]

Trying to use words, and every attempt

Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure [...]

And so each venture

Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate

With shabby equipment always deteriorating

In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,

Undisciplined squads of emotion (Eliot 1944, p.19).

What is clear from Eliot's example is that the tapestry of significant form which the poet seeks to articulate is inescapably implicated in, informed by, and perennially indebted to, the fabric of human experience and the struggle of the emotional life. By no means is the stuff of life discarded as irrelevant to the artistic project. Any attainment of a perception or embodiment of significance is reliant on this stuff as a fire is reliant on fuel. Indeed, the accomplishment of a poetic form, a pattern of word and image, is symbiotic or synergetic, if not synonymous, with the attainment of a lived pattern, in which the mass and the mess of daily life may be read and spoken of as meaningful. This pursuit, and this trust in the possibility of meaning, is decisively central to Christian art, but I suspect that it pervades all good art. I strongly distrust both the motives and the merits of any art which presumes to do without the attempt at, and the appeal to, the formation of meaning.

The Christian critique of Bell should, I believe, be directed above all at his purely abstract concept of significant form; his failure, consequent upon his hostility towards 'life', to see the human form divine (to borrow Blake's phrase) as the fulfilment of form. It is precisely this fulfilment, I would argue, which motivates Christian art, which sees both the end and origin of form in the face of Christ. This is, of course, the same vision which motivates the Christian life.

Bell's abstraction is evident in his conception of significant form and the aesthetic experience as 'timeless', not in the sense of transfiguring the stuff of time, of casting this and holding it up in an eternal aspect, but in the sense of having nothing whatever to do with either a particular present or the general passing of time. This is in grave contrast to the Christian artist, committed to all the implications of the Incarnation. In the words of



David Jones, “It is axiomatic that the function of the artist is to make things sub specie aeternitatis [...] True, but the works of man, unless they are of ‘now’ and ‘this place,’ can have no ‘for ever’” (Jones 1959, p.120). This is entirely in line with Eliot’s view of poetry as presented in *Four Quartets* and other writings; for

Words move, music moves  
Only in time (Eliot 1944, p.8)

and

Only through time is time conquered (p.6).

This Christian stress on life as inescapably and essentially lived *in time* (in order, ultimately, to redeem or ‘conquer time’) is in danger of being omitted altogether from Bell, whose vision risks being simply escapist rather than redemptive. Hence, perhaps, his mistaken parallels between Christianity and Buddhism. For the Christian, time is essentially – and not simply malevolently – our arena of spiritual activity. This relates, of course, to St John Damascene’s (1898) understanding of iconic art as the fruitful use of matter; his defence of visual re-presentation entails a powerful defence of matter as potentially graced and spirit-bearing, the stuff not only of our created bodies but also of our regenerative and sacramental making.

While Christian art certainly proclaims a kingdom not of this world, this by no means precludes that it awakens and works with feelings particular to the time and space in which it finds itself; indeed, anything else would be both impossible and contrary to purpose, for in order to grant the viewer access to that other kingdom, the road and the door must be first established in this world. As Blake knew full well, the return of Jerusalem to Albion’s shores may only be inaugurated through our unflinching care to the minute particulars of this world. Eliot, similarly, knew that the emotions suffered in a provincial village, be it Burnt Norton or any other, do matter for the attainment of the Heavenly City. Eliot’s experience in the *Four Quartets* provides a conclusive case against Bell, culminating as it does in the combined understanding, both

phenomenological and ontological in import, that “History is now and England” while “All manner of thing shall be well [when] the fire and the rose are one” (Eliot 1979, p.43).

Bell’s claim that, “Art and religion are, then, two roads by which men escape from circumstance to ecstasy” (Bell 1914, p.92) implies that each road is of itself sufficient, and that a person who chooses the one could do well without the other. This is not the Christian experience, where the two roads – more like two tributary rivers – ceaselessly feed each other; and where the attainment of ecstasy, or of sustained joyfulness in love, owes gratitude to both forces, to their mutual enrichment and inspiration. This attitude of art’s essential contribution to the religious life also informs Pavel Florensky’s bold claim that “The artery of iconpainting sustains the whole ecclesiastical body” (Florensky 1996, p.90). Christian art and Christian religion are *not*, as Bell would have it, distinct and self-sufficient expressions of the same ‘spirit’; nor do their pursuits of form indicate hostility to life, but rather constitute the concerted effort at giving form to, thereby transforming and spiritualizing, the materials of life.

These so-called materials of life, as we have seen, are not held in any high esteem by Bell. Crucially, Bell’s contemplative understanding of religion ignores the consecration of matter that is so absolutely intrinsic to a sacramental religion – and Christianity is the sacramental religion par excellence, as explored by David Jones in *The Anathemata*. Now, being a sacramental religion, as we will see Jones argue in a later part of this thesis, entails being a form-making religion. Insofar as Christianity is indeed a religion of ecstasy – though Christos Yannaras, not Bell, provide the right Christian understanding of this term<sup>5</sup> – this ecstasy not only draws upon, but also directs itself at, the making of forms, whether these be creations of arts and crafts, the formulations of liturgy and dogma, or the cultivation of charity. Yes, the life and ‘occupation of the saint,’ as Eliot puts it, no less than that of the artist, is an exercise in and accomplishment of significant form. This is how the bond between art and religion, and between the artist and the religious, should be understood, and not, as in Bell’s account, by positing a desire to escape the world.

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<sup>5</sup> *Person and Eros*, 2007.

It is Bell's notion that "Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation" (Bell 1914, p.25). There is something pseudo-religious about this, and also something naively false. The first thing to say is that art is activity. The second is to stress that religion, too, is activity; not simply meditation and epiphany, but ceaseless spiritual *labour*.

In Eliot, the interlacing and mutual fruition of the life of the artist and the religious life is extensively explored and affirmed. As Traversi comments, "The exploration" of 'the hints and guesses', the intuitions and intimations of an extra-temporal order of meaning and beauty, "in the process of artistic creation represents for the majority of human beings immersed in and conditioned by the temporal process the limit of spiritual possibility" (Traversi 1976, p.179). Only very occasionally, if at all, are we granted real experiences of what Eliot calls "the intersection of the timeless with time"; the rest, Eliot writes, "Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action" in the light of, and for the sake of, that "hint half-guessed" and that "gift half-understood" which is "Incarnation" (Eliot 1944, p.30).

Here, then, I see Eliot affirming my claim that the search for 'significant form' not only involves art and the artist in human life, but that the same search indeed *constitutes* life as understood religiously; for 'life' lived without any reference to what Eliot calls 'the timeless' would not be much of a life at all.

We may perhaps understand now this startling dictum of Blake's:

Prayer is the Study of art

Praise is the Practice of art (Blake 2000, p.403).

Blake, importantly, is not alone in making such claims; we recall the example of Fra Angelico. St John Damascene, similarly, in his defence of holy images, calls upon the Christian to express his faith through such re-presentations of moments from the life of Christ: "Give to it all the endurance of engraving and colour," he urges, and he adds encouragement and reassurance by writing, "Have no fear or anxiety; worship is not all of the same kind" (Damascene 1898, p.9). Thus creative labour and expression are

strongly encouraged by this great theologian, not as a pastime, but as a form of worship integral to the Christian life.

Perhaps no one has been such a strong formalist as William Blake, but he was a ‘spiritual formalist,’ for whom aesthetic outline was spiritual form and form was spirit embodied, and for whom the perfection of art was implicated in the redemption of man, in the attainment of a transfiguring union of the material and the divine. Importantly, Blake also held that “Art can never exist without Naked Beauty displayed” (Blake 2000, p.403), by which Beauty he meant precisely the true spiritual form of man, perfected in Christ. To Blake, the artist cannot be an atheist any more than the saint can be an atheist; life lived for the expression of significant form is life lived for Christ, and vice versa. Crucially, it was Blake’s conviction – as I think it is the aim and hope of every Christian artist – that the forms of Christian art may really manifest the form and beauty of Christ.

With this ambition, then, we move into the question of the ontological aspirations and implications of Christian art.

### 1.3 FORM & REALITY

It is Clive Bell's bold 'metaphysical thesis' that the significant forms of art are significant because they reveal or connect with what he calls *the Real*. He holds "that what the artist surprises behind form, or seizes by sheer force of imagination, is the all-pervading rhythm that informs all things" (Bell 1914, p.57). This suggestion is an attractive one, and congenial to a philosophy of Christian art; I can embrace the gist of Bell's understanding, for Christian art indeed has the aspiration of showing what is real and true.

Bell, however, is very vague about what this ultimate reality is, though he flirts with both Platonic and theological ideas; we must be more precise and emphatic than Bell is. For Christianity the Real must be identified with God. If, as Bell argues, significant forms disclose the real, then the significant forms of Christian art should be taken as disclosing the real as understood by Christianity; that is, to manifest that which is of God: the patterns and energies of his creation, the forms and beauty of his revelation. Thus, in icons and other Christian art, in the words of St John Damascene (1898), "the invisible things of God since the creation of the world are made visible through images" (p.11).

The claim is that art shows us what *is*, not simply what was or even what could be. Recalling David Jones' painter, we can see his painting as an original and unique expression of mountain-*ness*; which is something like saying that a kind act is not simply the representation or imitation of a previous kind act, but that it does indeed possess and manifest real kind-*ness*, or like insisting that the bread and the wine of the Eucharist are not simply tokens of remembrance but indeed the real body and blood of Christ.

While a fuller exploration of the ontological dimensions of Christian art will be given in chapter 4, my concern here is chiefly to establish that Christian art harbours the ambition to communicate and make present the real, understood as that which is of God, and to say something of how this ambition may be realised. I will argue, against Leo Tolstoy, that Christian art – as art in general – is not a matter of the communication of emotions, but indeed of the real; and I will seek to show how the significant form, as well

as the thing-ness, of the Christian artwork can be seen to manifest the presence of the divine realities.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.3.1 Communicating the real

Leo Tolstoy, in *What is Art?*, champions an understanding of art as governed by the communication of good emotions, understood in a utilitarian way. Though Tolstoy pursues his account under his own conception of what constitutes a Christian life and Christian art, his understanding of art – as indeed of Christianity – is fundamentally at odds with the vision of this thesis.

Tolstoy (1995) argues that “In order to define art precisely, one must first of all cease looking at it as a means of pleasure and consider it as one of the conditions of human life. Considering art in this way, we cannot fail to see that art is a means of communication among people” (p.37). A problem of this approach is that Tolstoy still perceives art as a means; but if art is a ‘means’ of communication, in what respects may it be said to be an end? Granting that art does communicate, it is vital to emphasise that every artwork is primarily an end and realisation, as a significant form and a thing in itself, offering a unique experience not accessible by other means.

Moreover, we should ask what it is we communicate by the particular means of art that can’t be communicated by other means, such as letters, if not, ultimately, our experience of form and beauty? Tolstoy’s view, that art communicates ‘emotion’, is not satisfactory. In this respect I think Bell is much closer to the mark. For art should be the end of an experience that demands artistic realisation, because only the ‘means’ of significant form can adequately manifest a way of experiencing, a way of seeing, which has significant form itself – and beauty itself – as its object. Through art, then, we seek to express or communicate our experience of a reality which discloses itself through form

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<sup>6</sup> Though beauty is properly the topic of our next chapter, I will note here that the criterion of beauty is vital for the Christian artwork’s ontological ambitions; for, as the next chapter shall argue, beauty is *real* (not ‘subjective’) and the beautiful artwork *really* gives us the beauty of God.

and beauty; to communicate both what this reality is like, and what it is like to encounter or apprehend it. This is not what Tolstoy means by emotion.

Tolstoy is better at recognising the mutual and communal aspect of art than he is at understanding the nature, implication or purpose of this experience. For Bell, as well as Blake, Eliot, Jones and others, can agree with Tolstoy that “Every work of art results in the one who receives it entering into a certain kind of communion with the one who produced or is producing the art, and with all those who, simultaneously with him, before him, or after him, have received or will receive the same artistic impression” (Tolstoy 1995, p.38).

What we would have to say, however, is that what is shared is a relation, not only to the artwork, but to the real: we come to stand in the same attitude towards the real, in experiencing the same significant forms and the same beauty. We are not simply joined together in fellow feeling, in some kind of cosy inter-subjectivity, but find ourselves confronted with the same objective qualities. If Tolstoy construes the art-experience very much as a telling of fables in a circle around the campfire, I would rather suggest that it is a matter of standing, shoulder to shoulder, looking at the constellations in the sky.

It is vital, as we discuss Christian art, to see that the visions that are captured in line and colour, in image, metaphor or melody, while they are personally experienced by the artist, are neither self-derived nor self-circumscribed, but ultimately communal in character. Though much Christian art is intensely personal – and though, as Yannaras (2007) argues, only personal relations may disclose the personal truths of the world and of God – the aim and interest of the artwork is not the experience of the artist, but that reality which he or she is a witness, and of which we readers and viewers are invited to partake.

Far from suggesting a radical difference from ‘secular’ artistic experience, however, this should rather serve to alert us to the fact that all art is conducted, not only within an institution, but also as part of a community and a lineage – in short, a tradition, both as regards the acquisition of skill and the articulation of meaning. As Florensky explains, the true artist “wants not his own (at any cost) truth but rather the objectively beautiful and artistically incarnate *truth of things* – and he cares nothing at all about pride’s mean-spirited question whether he is the first or the hundredth to speak this truth.

If the work is true, then it establishes its own value” (Florensky 1996, pp.79-80). This stress on art’s ambition and ability to disclose ‘the truth of things’ is of great importance, declaring as it does that the significance of art – certainly of Christian art – is not limited to the ‘aesthetic’ alone, but also involves what we may call the metaphysical or ontological.

No one reading the *Divine Comedy* would for a moment imagine that the meanings of that work are exhausted in what the person of Dante may say to the person of the reader; or that what is expressed in the work is simply a matter of subjective experience, on the one hand, and subjective interpretation or reception on the other. Rather, a work of that calibre seems to ask – to compel, with imperative authority – that we recognise the objective value of the forms there encountered; before which reality, and of which plenitude of meanings, the persons of reader and writer alike are partial partakers at best.

Another invaluable testimony to this ambition is the work of St Ephrem the Syrian. Ephrem, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, employed the medium of poetry – a poetry of symbol and paradox – to discern and disclose the truths of God’s relation to man; as in this example he evokes God’s self-emptying love in the Incarnation:

Your mother is a cause for wonder: the Lord entered her  
and became a servant; He who is the Word entered  
– and became silent within her; thunder entered her  
– and made no sound; there entered the Shepherd of all,  
and in her He became the Lamb, bleating as He came forth

(Brock 1985, p.25).

This is theology inseparable from poetry; and all subsequent Christian art, in some manner and in some measure, harbour the same hopes of theological elucidation and the communication of divine realities.

Thus Dante, through his art, aspires to manifest – by grace, no less than craft – the true forms of God’s design that he has witnessed and experienced; to reveal that “order [which] is the form that makes the universe like God” (Dante 1995, p.382). This is a



daunting task, to be sure, and Dante often voices his own fears that he will fail; in the knowledge that the religious and the aesthetic failure would be one and the same. Blake, meanwhile, expresses his ambition, as a Christian artist, like this:

I rest not from my great task;  
To Open the Eternal Worlds. to open the immortal Eyes  
Of Man inwards [...] into Eternity  
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God (Blake 2000, p.302).

Tolstoy is hardly attuned to the aims of Christian art, then, when he insists that “Art is not, as the metaphysicians say, the manifestation of some mysterious idea, beauty, God” (Tolstoy 1995, p.40). Christian art, certainly, has this ambition of ontological disclosure; and thus seeks, for example, not simply to convey a feeling for the Mother of God, but to reveal what she is really like, and her likeness to God; and to do this by means of really manifesting the significant form and beauty of her person.

Interestingly, Tolstoy identifies as “the chief feature of every true work of art – wholeness, organicness, when the least change in form disturbs the meaning of the entire work” (p.102) – what we might call, with Maritain, ‘integrity,’ and which comes close indeed to what Bell means by significant form. The difference, just to reiterate, is that Tolstoy takes this formal wholeness to constitute the (means of) emotional expression of the artist, whereas I – with Bell – see it rather as the aesthetic manifestation (the imaginative apprehension and creative re-presentation) of a spiritual reality. We do not only ask for ‘real emotions’, but ‘emotions’ – visions and experiences – of *the real*. It was the preoccupation of R. S. Thomas too to “‘have conversations or linguistic confrontations with ultimate reality’” (Phillips 1986, p.xv). The challenge of Thomas, and others with him – Eliot, certainly, is eloquent about the limitations of language – is to speak of and speak with a God whose

resistance

is endless at the frontier of the great poem (Thomas 1993, p.291).

We understand this from the discussion above, in the poems' ambition to lead us to the very threshold of conceptual thought, there to encounter God in the absence of our justifications. Yet in making this resistance felt, in bringing it to bear on our perceptions and articulations, this resistance becomes a form of presence, and we thus encounter God *as* resistance; but also, at times, as generosity, gratuity, grace, when he lowers his guard and lets his defences down to meet us in peace – in, between, and through the words we offer. Crucially, we also encounter God in the beauty of the poems.

It is the ambition of R. S. Thomas to reveal a hidden God, a *deus absconditus*, not only beyond but “in the language we use” (Phillips, p.127). Thus Thomas, in his way – as David Jones in his way – seeks to make *anathemata* of the language he uses; to do with word and metaphor what, for example, John Tavener does with music, Andrei Tarkovsky does with film, and what František Bilek does with wood or metal; namely, to make the world over to God, and to render God present under the forms of our making.

Blake voices a similar sense of the challenge involved in speaking of and for God, when language itself as well as the artist's weakness are the obstacles; but he also expresses his faith that such communication is indeed possible, with divine sanction and assistance. His words, then, may speak for many Christian artists:

O how can I with my gross tongue that cleaveth the dust.  
Tell of the Four-fold Man. in starry numbers fitly orderd  
Or how can I with my cold hand of clay! But thou. O Lord  
Do with me as thou wilt! for I am nothing, and vanity:  
If thou chuse to elect a worm, it shall remove the mountains (Blake 2000, p.266).

### **1.3.2 Form and presence**

Bell makes the move from the aesthetic to the metaphysical realm by claiming that to see a thing or an artwork as “an end in itself” is to see the “thing in itself; ultimate reality” (Bell 1914, pp.52-54). Indeed, to express (his apprehension of) reality is the very task of

the artist, and “this emotion can be expressed only in pure form” (p.54); as Eliot testifies in “Burnt Norton”,

Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.  
Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,  
Not that only, but the co-existence,  
Or say that the end precedes the beginning,  
And the end and the beginning were always there  
Before the beginning and after the end (Eliot 1944, p.8).

Through the manipulation – what amounts to transfiguration – of matter and of time, art may manifest the spiritual and the eternal; this is the clear aim of Christian art, and it is the reward both of beauty and significant form.

We do not need to subscribe to Bell’s curious amalgamation of Plato and Kant, to appreciate the tendency of his thought; on the contrary, we can adopt it, for Christian art, to say that to see its uniqueness and integrity is to see each thing as God gives it. This was the position of Gerard Manley Hopkins, as he sought to justify the religious validity of the aesthetic attitude and the practice of art; and a similar understanding is manifest in Blake’s famous lines,

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour (Blake 1974, p150).

These intuitions certainly have much in common with Bell’s thesis, for he rhapsodises as follows, claiming that as we perceive or experience the pure form of a thing, “we become aware of its essential reality, of the God in everything, of the universal

in the particular [...] the ultimate reality” (Bell 1914, pp.69-70). This claim, I think, is only as bold as it is right, and it is supported by Christian art.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the poet and Jesuit, coined the term ‘inscape’ to speak of the form of things, whether of artifice or nature, as these appear within the intentional and gratuitous fabric of God’s world. He said of his own poetic efforts that, “as air, melody, is what strikes me most of all in music and design in painting, so design, pattern or what I am in the habit of calling ‘inscape’ is what I above all aim at in poetry” (Hopkins 1961, p.xxii). What we discover here is a belief in the artwork’s ability to communicate the real; not only by re-presenting the particulars, the things and forms of the world, but by constituting such a particular, such a thing and such a form itself.

Martin Heidegger (1978) reasons similarly when, for example, in *The Origin of the work of Art*, he claims that “Van Gogh’s painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of shoes, is in truth” (p.102). Crucially, Heidegger is as emphatically dismissive of representational or imitation-theories of art as are Clive Bell and David Jones; thus: “is it our opinion that this painting by Van Gogh depicts a pair of peasant shoes somewhere at hand, and is a work of art because it does so successfully? [...] By no means” (p.103). It is rather as a unique thing in itself that the artwork may open onto truth – as indeed onto Being – and not by being the impression of something else. Here, albeit in his own singular idiom, Heidegger may be seen to pursue a way of thinking closely akin to the Christian artists here under discussion.

Returning to the example of Hopkins, then; as James Reeves (1961) explains, by ‘inscape’ “Hopkins meant simply the outer form of all things, animate and inanimate, as it expressed their inner soul [...] Perhaps by ‘inscape’ he meant much as the same as Roger Fry meant by the once fashionable term ‘significant form’; the difference being that Fry never made it clear what his idea of form was significant *of*; Hopkins had no such doubt – he was confident that the form or inscape was significant of God’s presence in all things” (p.xxii-xxiii).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bell, perhaps unlike Fry, did at least try to make it clear what his idea of form was significant of – namely, the Real; nonetheless, Hopkins’ inscape provides just the contribution or corrective Bell’s metaphysical thesis that a philosophy of Christian art needs, for it situates the artwork both phenomenally and ontologically in a world that, when rightly perceived, speaks of the presence of God in all things. We can therefore argue that ‘significant form’ is significant because it can be a revelation of God’s will and image. This is to reaffirm the thesis that the Christian artwork aspires to *likeness* to God.

We find further theological corroboration of these or similar intuitions in the work of Christos Yannaras, a thinker deeply indebted to (though not uncritical of) Heidegger's work. "In our personal relation to the world," writes Yannaras, informed by the energies-essence distinction of Orthodox theology, "beings as 'things' reveal the existence of a personal God" (Yannaras 2007, p.68). Interestingly, such an understanding can reveal the links between such apparently different poetical and theological temperaments as Hopkins' and R. S. Thomas', while also elucidating the theological import of the *thingness* of the work of art, which is so vital also for David Jones. Yannaras uses the example of art to explain the manifestation of God's energies through the particulars of this world. A painting by van Gogh, he writes, "is a *thing*, a *pragma*, a personal act. It testifies to the person of van Gogh. It *is* van Gogh [...] But although the presence of 'things' witnesses to the person, it does not interpret the person except as absence" (pp. 36-37).

We may perhaps approach the poems of R. S. Thomas again in this light; to see how his evocations of God's absence are integrated into the hope of still rendering God a presence in the poems, in the forms that constitute the poem as a 'thing'. Thus "Tidal" and "Migrants", from *Mass for Hard Times*, are two 'negative icons' using the very language of absence, negation and withdrawal, offering no positive content or proclamation; yet in giving voice to the aspiration, the yearning and faith of the speakers – and in the implicit affirmation of the objective reality of that towards which the poem's form and meaning tends – they do ultimately offer a testimony to the sense, the more than possibility, of divine presence. Thus we read in "Tidal":

The waves run up the shore  
and fall back. I run  
up the approaches of God  
and fall back [...]

Let despair be known  
as my ebb-tide; but let prayer  
have its springs, too, brimming,  
disarming him (Thomas 1992, p. 43).

We may say with Yannaras that “The absence is always experience of the privation of a personal immediacy, which presupposes the reality or the possibility of the relation” (Yannaras 2007, p.68). Thus in “Migrants”:

He is that great void  
we must enter [...]  
    What matter  
if we should never arrive  
to breed or to winter  
in the climate of our conception?

Enough we have been given wings  
and a needle in the mind  
to respond to his bleak North.  
There are times even at the Pole  
when he, too, pauses in his withdrawal (Thomas 1992, p.80).

The hope of the apophatic seeker after God, like Eliot or R. S. Thomas, is also that articulated by Blake in *Jerusalem*, where Jerusalem, who has come to feel herself “an outcast from the Divine Presence” (Blake 2000, p.375), finds herself addressed directly by Jesus:

    tho thou seest me not a season  
Even a long season & a hard journey & a howling wilderness [...]  
Only believe & trust in me. Lo. I am always with thee (p.359).

Further to these ideas of presence, David Jones’ pronouncements on representation and reality are of great importance. We shall look more closely at his sacramental understanding of art in a later chapter, but it’s important to note already here that Jones suggests that the activities and the signs instigated at the Last Supper and in the Upper Room at Emmaus “envisaged an abstract art *par excellence*; for nothing could be less ‘representational’ or more re-presentative or further from ‘realism’ or more near

reality [for here] sign and thing signified are regarded as having a true identity” (Jones 2008, p.170). Here, then, we find yet another affirmation of the understanding of form as presence, and can see here the theological foundations of an understanding of art as essentially implicated in the communication, and the making present, of divine realities.

We may understand Jones’ position as holding that a sign is not *merely* a sign, or symbol merely symbol, but that these things are laden with substance, instantiate and make present the thing symbolised. This is an understanding deeply enshrined in the theology of icons, and may be seen as pervading all Christian art.

It is a vital aspect of the philosophy of icons that the painted image not simply represents but rather re-presents the particular saint; that the line and colour, the form and beauty of the image makes the saint *really* present to the perceiver. This at first startling claim not only underlies the reverence paid to icons, but indeed arises from the practice of greeting, kissing, thanking and turning to these images in the course of liturgy and prayer. This is not to say that the wood, paint and gold ‘become’ the saint, but is more like saying, with analogical and metaphorical licence, that these materials and mediums are rendered transparent, like a window, to the real form of the person there figured. Just as David Jones can say that the painted image *is* mountain, so Pavel Florensky wants to say that the painted saint *is* the saint. To Florensky, “icon-painting is the metaphysics of existence – but a concrete, not an abstract, metaphysics [because] the icon makes visually manifest the metaphysical essence of the event or the person it depicts” (Florensky 1996, p.113). In this way, for example, in John Tavener’s “Icon of Light” we are invited to experience the music itself as the divine light under the form of sound; just as, in the “Protecting Veil”, we are to experience the protecting veil of the Mother of God in and through the music.

Heidegger, again, on like ontological grounds, thinks towards very similar affirmations; as when here – in *The Origin of the Work of Art* – meditating on the meaning of a Greek votive statue: “It is not a portrait whose purpose is to make it easier to realize how the god looks; rather, it is a work that lets the god himself be present and thus *is* the god himself” (Heidegger 1978, p.107).

Florensky, in his way, expresses with great consistency the understanding that reality is (more than expressed in) appearance, as life is (more than expressed in) form.

For him, this truth is best exemplified by what he calls *the iconic face*; for reality is not only appearance, but rather *countenance* – meaning an appearance which communicates personality, life and light – as opposed to the mere *mask* of unreality, which prevents appearance” (p.155) and consequently also obscures the disclosure and obstructs the presence of the real.

It is Florensky’s position that “the countenance of a thing manifests its ontological reality” (p.51). We may see this as taking seriously the implications of some of our most fondly held intuitions, such as the eyes being the windows to the soul, or that the face of a person is where his personality resides and where it is truly presented to the world.<sup>8</sup> Of course, Florensky’s understanding of countenance is also derived from the Biblical concepts of *image* and *likeness*, which also underpin the tradition of icons. This understanding of image and likeness is, I would maintain, not only the fundamental belief of Christianity, but also the essential principle of Christian art.

We are created in the image of God in order that we may attain to his likeness. As Florensky relates, “the *image of God* must be understood as the ontologically actual gift of God, as the spiritual ground of each created person; whereas the *likeness of God* must be understood as the potentiality to attain spiritual perfection [...] to incarnate in the flesh of our personality the hidden inheritance of our sacred likeness to God: and to reveal this incarnation in our face” (p.51). This is the vocation and ultimate hope of our form-making lives; it is also the immediate task of the icon-painter, who seeks to render in line and colour the spiritual form of the figured saint, that his likeness to God may be manifest in his body and shine forth in his true or transfigured face. Florensky describes the culmination of this process – as it is testified to in the art of icon-painting – as follows, suggesting that everything inessential or accidental to our face “is swept away by an energy like a strong fountain of water breaking through a thick material husk, the energy of the image of God: and our *face* becomes a *countenance*” (p.51). The line of reasoning followed by Florensky can, I think, feed into our own.

Thus, adding Florensky’s contribution to the previous discussion, we can say that the *significant form* of a thing is its *countenance*, the open face in which its reality is

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<sup>8</sup> In a somewhat more soberly Anglo-Saxon manner, Roger Scruton also takes such notions seriously in *The Face of God*.



manifested. Importantly, for Florensky, the reality unveiled or manifested by the countenance of a thing is not only always spiritual but is, moreover, always *beautiful*.

This combined formulation – of significant form as countenance – has the benefit, I feel, of granting an essential quality of personality to the notion of significant form, something which well accords with the ambitions of Christian art. If Clive Bell’s notion of the real may seem somewhat abstract and impersonal, the practitioner and philosopher of Christian art must redress this deficiency by stressing that all significant forms, in disclosing the real, are also revelatory of a *personal* power and presence.

It is important that we stress that there is a particular vision of God and his world which gives rise to the particular practice and vision of Christian art. The history of icons and the iconoclast controversy should be sufficient proof of this; as the theological conflict is resolved at the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council, we find theology stipulating, not only that a vision of the face of God may be re-presented in line and colour, but that matter itself may be transfigured so as to partake of the likeness of God. God is not represented, but revealed, not pointed to, but made present; this was the bold proclamation of the iconodules, and this is the lasting experience of the Christian imagination. When Bell dismisses the entire controversy with the claim that, “The history of that hundred years’ war [...] does not concern us” (Bell 1914, p.134), this shows his insensitivity towards the theological import and grounding of Christian art.

We should see, instead, how the whole Byzantine project (and Bell happens to be a great fan of the Byzantine visual imagination) seeks to render the world a witness to Christ – not simply by painting pictures of what Jesus may have looked like, but by making the very fabric of the material world conform to the figures, patterns and forms that reveal the presence and power of the Logos and Lord and of the Trinity. Christian art is thus entirely complicit in this vision and revision of the world – an active agent, and not a coincidental by-product, of what David Bentley Hart would call the ‘Christian revolution’ – which through socio-cultural and philosophical upheavals has taught us to see the material world as an object of love and a revelation of divine form. Ultimately, this is the only understanding of *the real* that Christian art, as Christian theology, proclaims and discloses.

## CHAPTER 2: THE BEAUTY OF CHRISTIAN ART

This account of beauty is intended to build on the account of form just given; to complement and take further the understanding of Christian art as engaged in the revelation of divine realities. Indeed, beauty bears on all the central claims of the previous chapter: this chapter will bear out how beauty attends upon, but is not synonymous with or reducible to, significant form; how beauty, like form, is contextually discerned, while a right desire for beauty is cultivated in the course of a Christian life; and how beauty manifests the real, for the real – as that which of God – is beautiful.

The ascription of beauty to God – indeed, the affirmation of beauty as a valid ‘name’ of God – is deeply enshrined in Christian theology; I do not need to reiterate the various grounds for such positions here, but will engage major representatives of Orthodox and Catholic traditions in what follows. Beauty, on these conceptions, is of God – like, and no less than, being, life and grace are of God. Hence Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks of ‘the glory of the Lord’, while David Bentley Hart recommends an understanding of beauty as “the handing over and return of the riches of being” (Hart 2003, p.18). This theological underpinning provides the validation for the model of understanding Christian art that I am proposing.

Art, as on both Bell’s and Heidegger’s conceptions, is engaged bringing forth and bringing to light Being and the Real. On the Christian model, this means the revelation and re-presentation of that which is of God. For the tradition of Christian art, as the body of Christian theological aesthetics, this entails the manifestation of divine beauty. Thus beauty has always been integral to the icon, in seeking to disclose the transfigured form and person of the saint; for the saint is beautiful in and with the divine likeness. In seeking to offer an aesthetic and artistic experience that is also, indivisibly, a religious experience, the Christian artwork aims for – hopes for – the manifestation of beauty, a beauty which is of God. Thus, if both Bell and Heidegger, in broad terms, wish art to offer an epiphany of the real presence of Being, Christian art aims to offer a theophany of God’s glory.

Importantly, there is art that is not beautiful, and there is beautiful art which is not Christian<sup>9</sup>, but Christian art seeks to be beautiful with and in the beauty of God. It is also important to stress, however, that the disclosure of God's beauty does not necessarily translate into an obviously or conventionally attractive or pleasing artwork; indeed, the revelation of divine beauty may sometimes challenge and unsettle conventional aesthetic values, and may demand much of a viewer's, reader's or listener's discernment – which may need to be theologically, not less than aesthetically, literate. There are Christian artworks where the beauty is 'hidden', as in the poetry of R. S. Thomas, and there are Christian artworks where any trace of divine beauty seems banished, as in certain renditions of the suffering Christ.

It is not my intention here to give a theological account of the beauty of the Christian God. My account of the beauty of Christian art, however, will seek to position the beautiful artwork, and the experience of it, within a comprehensive and intelligible theological picture; both so as to validate the perhaps bold claims I have to make about the beauty of Christian art, and to draw out the implications – for art as well as theology – of the encounter with such beauty. I hope to provide a case for a conception of beauty that is congruent both with Christian art and Christian theology; a conception which shows how the experience of such beauty, even in the man-made particulars of a painting or a poem, may be allocated a central place in Christian experience and Christian life.

The argument in this chapter is an argument both from and for the *gratuity* of the beautiful. It takes its departure from the intuition that beauty, as we encounter it in the particulars of this world, has something generous, excessive and fortuitous about it. Beauty as encountered in the Christian work of art, as a real but ineffable quality, irreducible to the formal or aesthetic properties of the artwork, is understood as a gift. Indeed, an account of the Christian engagement with beauty must be the story of the grateful reception of this gift, of the lived response to a promise of participation in divine delight and love. The beautiful Christian artwork partakes of the abundant and freely

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<sup>9</sup> This is crucial to note; that while on the Christian model here proposed all beauty is of God, this does not mean that every beautiful thing – nor, of course, every beautiful landscape or beautiful person – is (or should be designated) Christian. While such things may still offer religious experiences to the Christian believer, it would be wrong to seek to appropriate non-Christian works (whether they belong to another culture or whether they are avowedly critical of Christianity) to a Christian aesthetic and a Christian order of meanings and value.

bestowed beauty of God. To achieve this condition, I hold, is the aim of the Christian artistic endeavour.

I have three main points to argue: that beauty, as it appears in the Christian work of art, is an invitation to delight and gratitude; that beauty, as we encounter it in the Christian work of art, asks of us both the deepening of discernment and the cultivation of desire; and that beauty, as it is manifested in the Christian work of art, is not created by the artist but is bestowed as a gift of the Trinitarian God.

## 2.1 DELIGHT AND GRATITUDE

“The beautiful,” says Jacques Maritain, “is essentially delightful” (Maritain 1943, p.27).

This must be our point of departure. We will get nowhere, will not pronounce a single meaningful word on beauty if we attempt to ignore, deny or obfuscate this very simple and inescapable fact – whether we do so in the name of a higher aesthetics or with pretensions to religious sobriety. If we shy away from the joy beauty gives, or resist the desire it kindles, the beautiful will forever elude us.

Thus Robert Bridges (1934) begins his testament to beauty by recalling how, walking the South-downs one day,

a glow of childlike wonder enthral'd me, as if my sense  
had come to a new birth purified, my mind enrapt  
re-awakening to a fresh initiation of life (pp.1-2).

This is illustrative of beauty's beginnings in us, as it were; of beauty's first address to us, and our first stirrings of responsiveness to its promise. To grow in this responsiveness, the realisation of the new life that beauty offers, is the prerogative of our desire – and the end is love.

### 2.1.1 The pleasure given

To argue that beauty is delightful is to concede that beauty is in a sense pleasurable. It is *not*, however, to define beauty *as* pleasure. Nor, as we shall see, is delight all that beauty gives, or the full import of the gift. This is a crucial issue, which gives me cause to engage with Leo Tolstoy's position in *What is Art?*

It is often, perhaps chiefly, the element of the pleasurable which breeds distrust in beauty's detractors; it is also this aspect of beauty which leads to most mistaken definitions, not least along subjectivist and relativist lines. Thus, in Tolstoy's case beauty becomes a worldly and decadent thing, instead of a spur to spiritual commitment; for he

adopts the definition of beauty as pleasure. It is this mistaken attribution or definition which causes him to bar beauty from true religion, just as it causes Clive Bell to ban it also from the work of art. My own account is set squarely against both prohibitions – and so affirms the place of the beautiful artwork at the very heart of Christian experience. The pleasure that beauty gives is not, as Bell would complain, a cheap and sugary sensation, the sentimentality of simpletons, but is rather the salt and sustenance of saints; for as Richard Viladesau (2013) argues, “the apprehension of beauty reveals as its ultimate horizon an absolute act of joy, of delectation in being” (p.149), and so allows us to commune with God, the giver of life.

Tolstoy’s argument in *What is Art?* suffers from a series of misinformed distinctions and misapplied prescriptions. Insofar as beauty *is* defined, in some theories, as pleasure, Tolstoy is right to be critical; but he should be critical of the definition, not of beauty. His great failure is to persist in his critique, based on that erroneous definition, without providing an alternative account of beauty. In this way he proves himself as blind as those he berates, unable to recognise beauty as beyond and other than pleasure. Importantly, however, a defence of beauty along the lines of my thesis does not need to endorse any of the theories criticised by Tolstoy.

According to Tolstoy, all the relevant “aesthetic definitions of beauty come down to two fundamental views: one, that beauty is something existing in itself [...] the other, that beauty is a certain pleasure we experience, which does not have personal advantage as its aim” (Tolstoy 1995, p.31). Tolstoy’s take on this apparent dichotomy, between the objective and subjective accounts, is to dissolve it; for, he argues, “the objective definition is nothing but the subjective differently expressed. In fact, both notions of beauty come down to a certain sort of pleasure that we receive, meaning that we recognise as beauty that which pleases us without awakening our lust” (p.32). He is mistaken, to my mind, both in his conflation of the objective and subjective accounts, and in his identification of the ‘sort of pleasure’ involved in the appreciation of beauty.

It is wrong to assume that the objective or metaphysical account of beauty can be collapsed into, replaced with or paraphrased as, a subjective or sensuous one. For one, it does not follow that any objectively real beauty must either be recognised by, or yield itself as, a pleasurable sensation; nor would it follow, even if this objective beauty was so

apprehended, giving us occasion for pleasure, that this beauty thereby would forfeit its objectivity and simply end up a matter of personal taste or predilection. Above all, Tolstoy is wrong to think that beauty's ability to offer any kind of personal pleasure precludes that beauty is also objectively real.

On my model, on the contrary, it is delight itself which leads us to recognise beauty's objectivity.

The delight which beauty gives is 'a kind of pleasure', but not the kind of pleasure that Tolstoy has in mind; for it is precisely a pleasure in the *gratuity* of beauty. It is a delight in beauty's simply being there, at large in all kinds of objects and situations, without it *having to* be there; it is delight, not in a perceived necessity, or even harmony, but in something at once mysterious and generous. In the words of David Bentley Hart (2003), "Beauty is there, abroad in the order of things, given again and again in a way that defies description and denial with equal impertinence" (p.16). On this picture, I delight in the beautiful thing for what *it gives*, not for what I receive; for the qualities it possesses – and of which I may partake – not for the effect it has on me. We delight because beauty strikes us, and overwhelms us, as something extra-utile, granted by freedom and good will, as a kind of abundance for the sake of it. Roger Scruton (2012b) testifies to the same experience when he writes that "In the experience of the beautiful [...] we savour the world, as something given, and not just as something received" (p.131).

Gratitude, which follows or ought to follow from this kind of pleasure, owes far more to our moral faculties than to our sensory ones; for gratitude entails the recognition of beauty *as* gift, and of our own role as recipients thereof, and thereby entails the acknowledgement both of a quality and *reality* to beauty exterior to our senses and faculties as well as suggesting a *giver* wholly other than ourselves.

Beauty quickens our erotic energies, on a conception of *eros*, central to theology as well as Platonic philosophy, as our self-transcending drive and longing for communion with others and with other, objective, goods. "Erotic 'wonder' in the presence of the uniqueness of a physical beauty," writes Christos Yannaras, "is always an invitation to communion and relation [...] the satisfaction of the existential desire for communion"; an

“attraction which is not always tied to human bodily beauty” but which may also be generated by “the physical beauty of a place or a work of art” (Yannaras 2007, p.83). Bridges expresses some of this succinctly in verse:

This ken we truly, that as wonder to intellect,  
So for the soul desire of beauty is mover and spring (Bridges 1934, p.115).

The tragedy, as Yannaras observes, is that all too often the self-centred individual “receives the call of beauty as an invitation to seek its own pleasure” (Yannaras 2007, p.83) instead of responding to the “essential ‘goal’” of beauty’s invitation: “To succeed in a fulfilling communion and relation with the world’s personal principle or logos” (p.83). Hence, what I will call the cultivation of desire is necessary for a right responsiveness to, and engagement with, beauty’s call and bestowal; to turn desire away from self-gratification and towards the love of beauty as revelatory of God.

### **2.1.2 The acceptance of the gift**

Beauty calls us to grow through delight in beautiful particulars to the love of the Beauty of God. Thus the maker and lover of Christian art feels, with Bridges,

How Natur (as Plato saith) teacheth man by beauty,  
And by the lure of sense leadeth him ever upward  
To heav’nly things, and how the mere sensible forms  
Which first arrest him take-on ever more and more  
Spiritual aspect, – yet discard not nor disown  
Their sensuous beauty, since that is eternal and sure,  
The essence thereof being the reverent joy of life (Bridges 1934, p.100).

It is crucial, to a Christian understanding, that we are not called to aspire away from beautiful particulars, but rather to deepen our perception and love of God’s beauty



in the things of this world. Love of God and the beauty of God, therefore, returns the Christian to the visible world with gratitude and ardour; to give thanks, as St Francis does, for the beauty, solace and splendour of the Sun, the Moon and those things of Earth and our earthly existence that manifest God's resplendent presence:

Praised be my Lord,  
by means of all Your creatures,  
and most especially by Sir Brother Sun,  
Who makes the day, and illumines us by his light:  
For he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour;  
And is a symbol of You, God most High.  
Praised be my Lord,  
by means of Sister Moon and all the stars:  
For in Heaven you have placed them,  
clear, precious and fair (Francis of Assisi 2007, p.21).

Thus the Christian gives thanks and praise for the essential goodness of Creation; and the Christian artistic effort constitutes an effort to contribute to God's creation – and to help repair it, insofar as it is broken or tarnished by human ill-use – by fashioning works of beauty.

Tolstoy is not sensitive to the validity of either this delight or this gratitude. As regards gratitude, Tolstoy is not aware, as is Roger Scruton, that beauty engages our moral *responsibilities* as well as our aesthetic *responses*. Having barred beauty altogether, along with pleasure, from access to the moral, from any inclusion in considerations of the good, Tolstoy has shut himself off from any such mature engagements with beauty.

For beauty does not only delight, does not only *give*, but also – as gift – *makes a claim upon us*. This is understood by Scruton, and his intuition can be amplified by the experience of Christian art.

In Scruton's account, this 'claim' amounts to our responsibility to treat the beautiful thing as an end in itself, not a mere means for our gratification.<sup>10</sup> This certainly reaffirms the difference between delight and pleasure, and it anchors this difference in our conscious attitude and volition, revealing a kind of 'ethical' dimension to the immediately aesthetic. Ultimately, for Scruton, beauty finds its place on the threshold of the sacred; it witnesses and lights the way to a whole spiritual order, a kingdom of ends, which most compellingly confronts us in the embodied human person, but which also meets us in great works of art. This stipulation of an 'end' is philosophically compelling, and comes with a respectable pedigree. However, to my mind, the more fittingly Christian account of the claim would be this: that we treat the beautiful thing as a *gift*.

Thus, instead of the ethical injunction of respect towards the object, we postulate *gratitude* as the appropriate Christian response to beauty. We can say that gratitude is respect in a Christian key, directed towards that which is personal and divine in kind. We can also speak of reverence and veneration as varieties of this gratitude.

Concisely, we could say that if delight is the right response to the *gratuitousness* of beauty, then gratitude is the right attitude to the *gift* (and, through this, to the giver). We all know the delight of receiving, and excitedly unwrapping, a gift; and we know how this delight is transmuted into gratitude once the thing has been revealed, and how our gaze is lifted from the object to the giver.

I do not, therefore, propose a theory of 'disinterested interest', or 'disinterested pleasure'. However helpful such terms might be, initially, in deflecting notions of beauty as subjective pleasure alone, they are based on quite a different understanding of beauty, metaphysically speaking, than the one under which I am working; and they suggest a relation of reserve which is quite foreign to both the desire and the delight that I identify as, respectively, the fundamental motive and the immediate response to beauty.

For the beautiful work of art, on my understanding, while stipulating a kind of distance between the object and the perceiver, simultaneously issues an invitation to us to

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<sup>10</sup> I should stress that non-Christians and Christians experience the same beauty, and all may take great delight in it; but not all who perceive this beauty feels or acknowledges its claim; and of those who do, not all (not even Scruton) will conceive of this claim in Christian terms and so attribute this beauty to God. A further theological point is crucial here: that beauty is given freely and abundantly by God (to believers and non-believers alike); it *invites*, but does *not insist* upon, being recognised as divine.

seek out ever more of the beautiful. Thus beauty as manifested in the particular thing or artwork raises our vision, and directs our desires, towards what we may call, with Hart, the beauty of the infinite. For this reason, I do not only allow our delight and gratitude to encompass the attitude of reverence, but I also hold that, ultimately, the beautiful object should so train and transform our desire so as to become an object of *love*. This is the topic of the section that follows.

By way of bringing this section towards its conclusion, then, this pointed passage of Maritain's, on the purity of art, may be invoked as a reaffirmation of my position and as a rebuttal of Tolstoy: "Art has to be on its guard," says Maritain, against such "foreign elements which threaten its purity. For example, the beauty to which it tends produces a delight, but the high delight of the spirit, the absolutely contrary to what is called pleasure, or the agreeable tickling of the sensibility; and if art seeks to *please*, it commits a betrayal and tells a lie" (Maritain 1943, p.65).

That is, Christian art does not seek 'to please', but it does aim to give *delight* – just as it aims to be an occasion for gratitude and, as we shall see, a spur to the cultivation of desire. To be able to offer the right kind of pleasure, so to speak, is therefore not a concession to lesser faculties and pedestrian tastes, but is in truth an achievement with metaphysical implications.

For the experience of beauty is nothing other than a metaphysical experience; as Viladesau affirms, 'the apprehension of beauty is already an ontological event' (Viladesau 2013, p.152). hence, to stop at pleasure as a sensation is not to experience beauty as what it is; to stop at pleasure as a concept is not to explain beauty but to explain it away, to erect a great wall between the perceiver's self and the reality of beauty. This is to forfeit the great opportunity that beauty offers; namely, the chance to cultivate our desires and direct our lives towards the beauty of God.

The perception of beauty – and our delight in its gift – is also an invitation to spiritual growth, to the tutoring and transfiguration of our desires. Thus, while we bend in gratitude for the things of this world, we yearn to ascend – not from, but through the things of beauty, in growing responsiveness and, indeed, likeness – to partake of the

infinite Beauty of God. Bridges, I think, is sensitive to this balance, as he affirms our ultimate desire and its implications:

I see the emotion of saints, lovers and poets all  
To be the kindling of some Personality  
By an eternizing passion; and that God's worshipper  
Looking on any beauty falleth straightaway in love;  
And thatt love is a fire in whose devouring flames  
All earthly ills are consumed, and at least flash of it,  
Be it only a faint radiancy, the freed soul glimpseth,  
Nay ev'n may think to have felt, some initiat foretaste  
Of thatt mystic rapture, the consummation of which  
Is the absorption of Selfhood in the Being of God (Bridges 1934, pp.76-77)<sup>11</sup>

Christian art can certainly support, I believe, the weight of Bridges' suggestion that the encounter with beauty in this world prefigures the Beatific Vision; indeed, it is to this consummate experience all Christian art, by seeking to manifest the form and beauty of God, wishes to spur and to guide us.

For you are the true desire and the inexpressible joy of those who love you, Christ our God, and all creation hymns you to the ages. Amen.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I would substitute, in the last line, Personhood for Selfhood, and construe our consummation in terms, not of absorption, but of communion with the Trinitarian God.

<sup>12</sup> From the Orthodox prayers of thanksgiving after communion.

## 2.2 DISCERNMENT & DESIRE

This second section will have two points to make: one, that our encounter with the beautiful is embedded in the material and cultural world; the other, that we ourselves must embody a real receptiveness to beauty – by becoming beautiful ourselves; not, of course, in the sense of becoming pretty or attractive, but rather more like becoming good. As I hope to make clear, however, the acquisition of beauty is not the same as the acquisition of virtue or goodness.

Beauty certainly makes claims upon us, both in the sense of us giving an appropriate response to beauty and its objects, but also – and here we must go further than Scruton – as regards our nature and growth as persons created in the image of God.

Scruton argues, compellingly, that the experience of beauty should be placed at the very centre of our lives. This is not for the sake of making our everyday lives more pleasurable, but to challenge us to grow as the rational creatures that we are; for, Scruton writes, “for a free being, there is right feeling, right experience and right enjoyment just as much as right action. The judgement of beauty orders the emotions and desires of those who make it” (Scruton 2009, p.197). The claims here are founded, I believe, on two firm intuitions, regarding two aspects and implications of the experience of beauty.

The first of these two demands of beauty, as we may call them, is the need for informed perception and judgement on our part, in order to achieve a full experience of beauty’s disclosure and beauty’s value. The second demand speaks more deeply still to the potentials of our nature, as creatures capable of directing our will, no less than our perception and intellect, towards the highest realities and ideals.

In what follows, I will speak of these two aspects of beauty as the cultivation, respectively, of *discernment* and *desire*. The same two demands can also be identified, I believe, as the governing concerns of a Christian response to beauty – lifted from Scruton’s largely psychological-anthropological discourse into the context of theological aesthetics. Thus David Bentley Hart, articulating an understanding not dissimilar to Scruton’s about the ordering of our desires, claims that “The beautiful is not a fiction of desire, nor is its nature exhausted by a phenomenology of pleasure; it can be recognised in despite of desire, or as that toward which desire must be cultivated” (Hart 2003, p.17).

### 2.2.1 The trained and luminous eye

Much is involved in the full perception of beauty. Thus, without diminishing or detracting from its essentially ineffable character, it is my understanding that beauty – as we encounter it in particular works and objects – is also, in a sense, a cultural and contextual phenomenon, *embedded* in human practices and values. The perception of beauty demands a discerning effort of understanding the forms and meanings where beauty is found.

To be clear, Beauty itself remains a transcendental, but the *beautiful* is indissolubly part of actuality, and part of a contextual fabric. Our experience of beauty is an experience of a beautiful particular, and a particular manifestation of beauty. I experience beauty in *this* sonnet or *this* sonata, through *this* process of discernment. I glimpse infinity through *this* finite thing.

We need to understand what Eliot says of time, history, and renunciation – or what Dostoevsky says of love, will and repentance – in order to pronounce the *Four Quartets* a beautiful poem or *Crime and Punishment* a beautiful novel. These works need to play on our affections, intellects, memories and imaginations; and the realisation of beauty, if beauty is there, emerges as we engage with and submit to these significant forms. I cannot find beauty in Eliot until I begin to grasp the spiritual resolutions to which his words and images tend – and this begs of me, not only the complementary reading of other poetry and theology, but also a lived familiarity with experiences of loss, regret and regeneration.

It is not true, as Tolstoy says, that “Great works of art are great only because they are accessible and comprehensible to everyone” (Tolstoy 1995, p.81). Art demands of us that we come prepared to make the effort of discernment and participation. It is no easy thing to get the better of such vast and intricate creations as the *The Divine Comedy* or Canterbury Cathedral: a full imaginative engagement is asked of us, with all that this entails.

At the same time, that which is real and beautiful in these works certainly gives itself to all who draw near, who have eyes to see, who surrender self and go forward in

the readiness to be inspired and to offer reverence in return. To be prepared and equipped for such an engagement, however, may very well mean having undergone certain experiences, either in 'life' or through other works of art; it may mean that certain ways of reading have been practiced, a certain literacy acquired, and perhaps even that certain values and beliefs about the world must be acknowledged as, at least potentially, valid.

Sometimes, therefore, we are simply unable – from lack of experience or imaginative maturity – to understand or engage with some great works; but instead of blaming the work for its elitism, obfuscation, or some such perceived wrong, we should hold out and see if, at some later stage – after life has its way with us, after we have become exposed, willingly or not, to such things of art and experience that eluded us the first time around – the work is suddenly not only intelligible to us, but even meaningful, even a source of revelation and regeneration.

This is not to say something so crude as that the greatest works of art are also the most intractable and inaccessible, but rather that the greatest art may sometimes make the greatest claims upon us, ask the most of us in return for its qualities, its meanings, its realities – while at the same time it may also, importantly, be the most *generous* (for we mustn't forget that vital ingredient of gratuity); thus we find that many of the greatest works of Christian art are such as strike us, already at first glance, sometimes even despite our own dimness or reluctance, with their astonishing and indisputable beauty. Indeed, the beauty of Christian art may provide a non-Christian person with the first impulses towards conversion. This is no small aspect of beauty's role and importance.

Tolstoy's next suggestion is more fruitful, raising as it does the issue of a more than aesthetic discernment, befitting the artwork's more than artistic demands. Certainly, when we speak of Christian art, we must not forget the Christian aspect of the object and the experience; nor, however, must we forget the artistic aspect. Tolstoy is right, to a degree, in his point that what renders a good religious work inaccessible to some is not a lack of refinement or specialist education, but rather a shortage of religious consciousness and what we might call, perhaps naively or presumptively, a simple human responsiveness to genuine truths about life. "I know people, for example," he writes, "who consider themselves most refined, and who say that they do not understand the poetry of love for one's neighbour and of self-denial, or the poetry of chastity" (p.82).

This is an important observation; however, we must make certain amendments to its implications and applications. As we cannot accept Tolstoy's identification of art with the communication of feeling, but must instead stress the importance of the artwork's qualities as art, and as art of a particular kind, we must also maintain that, however virtuous or sincere our character, even a formally or stylistically straightforward poem or painting might elude us if we do not possess the requisite sensitivity to the artform in question. We can certainly imagine someone saying, in response to Tolstoy, that they 'know people, for example, who are considered paragons of neighbourliness and charity, but who fail entirely to get to the end of *The Brothers Karamazov* or who turn away in utter perplexity at the sight of David Jones' *Vexilla Regis*'. We should not presume, as Tolstoy does, that the good man "can see everything perfectly well" (p.83). Instead we can state as a kind of axiom, that to experience good art we do not have to be 'good people', but we have to be *good at* experiencing art. As it happens, good art itself is the best educator in this respect, and if only we do not shy away from its gifts and demands, we may grow in receptiveness and responsiveness to what it has to show us.

At the same time, crucially, our discernment of the truth and beauty of Christian revelation – in art, as in other aspects of the religious life – requires that we are in a fit state to receive it. We must be full of light, the Gospel tells us, to see and receive the light. The theological poetry of St Ephrem the Syrian articulates this same truth, as in this example:

It is through the eye  
that the body, with its members,  
is light in its different parts [...]

Through the eye that was darkened  
the whole world has darkened [...]  
but when it was illumined by the other eye,  
and the heavenly light  
that resided in its midst,  
then humanity became reconciled once again (Brock 1992, pp72-73).



Sebastian Brock informs us that St Ephrem's choice of word for 'light', when speaking of the 'luminous eye' needed for the faithful, can also mean 'beautiful'. Ephrem, moreover, calls Christ 'the Luminous One' and tells us that we need a luminous mouth in order to praise him:

For it is only the mouth that is lure and luminous  
and which resembles You, Lord, that shall sing to You  
– the luminous to the Luminous One, the pure to the Pure one (p.74).

The same applies to the reading of Scripture. As I have suggested above, discernment is needed to grasp the significant forms of Scripture, as of all Christian art, but beyond this a luminous eye is needed to receive the divine light and revelation; not for the sake of understanding alone, but to properly receive the beauty of Scripture, which manifests the beauty of God. Ephrem writes, "the Gospel is but a figure of the beauty that is above which does not fade and at which all the sins of the created word are rebuked" (p.77).

Our task, then, is not only to train our perceptions, but also to purify our hearts – our whole persons – in receptiveness to the divine light. It is vital to recognise that beauty is not automatically disclosed; that what we see as beautiful, and what we see of beauty, is not all the beauty there is, and is not all there is to beauty. This emphasises the metaphysical depths of beauty's demands, and the depths within ourselves (the depth of change in ourselves) in which our discernment must be grounded. Importantly, there is more to beauty, and more beauty to be had, because there is also *more to us* – and beauty asks this more *of us*, if it is to give of itself more fully. Our attitudes and responses to beauty must be embodied, must become part of our character. This is something that is acquired through the cultivation of desire.

### 2.2.2 Becoming what we see

Nicolas Berdyaev (2009b) claims that “One must be initiated into the mystery of beauty and without this initiation beauty cannot be truly known. To know beauty, one must live within it” (p.246). This is a key Christian thought. We understand perfectly well, I presume, the idea – as developed by Robert Adams, for example – that in loving the Good we do and should grow in goodness. Analogously, this is how to understand my claim that in loving Beauty, we should grow more beautiful ourselves. This is not, however, a matter of simply transposing the ethical model into an aesthetic mode; it is also to recognise that we are, in dealing with beautiful things, dealing with something that is visibly manifested. Conformity to this manifestation – to something that is *seen* – entails, I think, not only that a change is wrought in our ways of *seeing*, but that this change can also be *seen* to have been wrought in us. Thus we acquire the likeness of that beauty which inspires and instructs us. Pavel Florensky, in this respect, claims that the saints are not ‘good’ persons but *beautiful* ones; where to be beautiful means to be spirit-bearing and radiant with the light of God.<sup>13</sup>

We may speak of ‘spiritual’ as contrasted with ‘physical’ beauty, by way of clarifying that Christian art enjoins us to grow, not in sexual or aesthetic attractiveness, but in a quality rooted in our personality. However, on my model, this dichotomy is false; for I believe that there is only one kind of beauty, and that whereas this beauty is certainly not a matter of appearances alone, it *is* manifested to sight and vision. Beauty is sensory and perceivable, as well as truly of the spirit; it is both inner and outer. Though beauty is by no means synonymous with an attractive appearance, it is true that a beautiful person is *seen* as beautiful; it may also be true that to see this beauty takes a great deal of discernment, for it is no easy thing to perceive the true nature or quality of a person. But a beautiful person is *manifestly* so; for those who have eyes to see, the beauty of such a person will shine through, however dirty or deformed his physical features.

One way to recognise a beautiful person is by that person’s own responsiveness to beauty; for it is a real openness to beauty’s gifts and beauty’s claims which renders a person beautiful. The concurrent claim is that someone who is deficient in such openness

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<sup>13</sup> “‘And indeed asceticism creates not a ‘good’ man, but a *beautiful* one’” (Pevear 1995, p.xx).

– or, what’s worse, someone who is defiant against it – will become a person devoid of beauty and, at the same time, will become insensitive to it. There are many ways for a person to render himself blind to both appearances and essentials, and so to render himself dull and opaque. The calling of Christian art is for us to reverse this tendency, to be converted, to realise the opposite possibility of being partakers of beauty’s reality and radiance. This conversion entails the abandonment of a self-centred and subjective attitude to beauty, in the adoption of a self-annihilating relation of mutual love.

Christos Yannaras can therefore speak of “Ascetic self-transcendence as a presupposition for knowledge of the truth of the world’s beauty” (Yannaras 2007, p.84); for the *personal* gift and relation that is beauty asks that we step outside of our selves, that we are open ec-statically, not only to the recognition of an objective goodness, but also to personal communion. We must cultivate *philokalia*, the theological love of beauty as the personal gift and disclosure of God. “Thus,” writes Yannaras, “the world, from being an object of the senses, an objective ‘phenomenon’ and subjective impression, is transformed into the second term of a personal relationship” (p.86).

Scruton’s contribution, of a moral responsibility towards the beautiful, must thus be amplified, within the context of a Christian aesthetic, to mean a wholesale reorientation of our vision as well as our volition towards the infinite beauty of God. “Thus,” writes David Bentley Hart, “to come to see the world as beauty is the moral education of desire, the redemption of vision [...] In learning to see the world as beauty, [...] one’s vision of the world [...] is deepened toward that infinity of beauty that comprises it” (Hart 2003, p.256). Importantly, on my adaptation of this view, the beautiful work of art remains a concrete source of such an experience, a touchstone of vision and desire; for each particular work of art provides a unique manifestation of that same infinite beauty which is God’s.

One work which may be seen to bear out – in the substance of its poetry as well as in the philosophy we may extrapolate from it (and which informed it) – the model of discernment and desire that I am proposing, is Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

Dante, all too aware of the great demands placed on him in the telling of his journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, is fully aware also of the powers required by the reader who wishes to follow him; he even cautions the unprepared to turn back:

do not  
attempt to sail the seas I sail; you may,  
by losing sight of me, be left astray (Dante 1995, p.384).

He who wishes to understand Dante's work, and who hopes to take it to heart, must be open to the kind of experiences the poet-voyager himself undergoes: the horrors of the diabolical descent, no less than the hopes of heavenly ascent. Even on a directly textual level, with all its allusions and references to classical and contemporaneous sources, Dante's poem asks a fair deal of the erudition of its reader. No less vital, to render the poem intelligible, is a share of that spiritual ardour which fuels both the journey and its telling. The readers that Dante invites to follow him are

those few who [have] turned [their] minds in time  
unto the bread of angels;

that is, those lovers of wisdom and beauty who are motivated by the

thirst which is innate and everlasting –  
thirst for the godly realm (p.384).

The suggestion here – that the ideal reader should come equipped, not only with prerequisite learning and literacy, but with a particular kind and quality of *love* – chimes very well with our model of Christian art.

Further, Dante first encounters eternal beauty as embodied and personified in Beatrice. It is she that inspires his love of beauty, and it is she that demands of him that his love, in turn, becomes embodied in a life made pure through repentance and directed heaven-wards. Beatrice – by heavenly grace and with the assistance of Virgil – is the

cultivator of Dante's desire. Moreover, Beatrice herself is as beautiful as she is because of the great strength of her own vision of that Beauty which is God's, and of which she thereby partakes; if, she explains to Dante, she appears so radiant to him that "I overcome your vision's force [...] I am so because of my perfected vision – as I grasp the good, so I approach the good in act" (p.398). This reinforces the point, I believe, that to see the beautiful is to become beautiful.

Blake claims that "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is. Infinite" (Blake 2000, p.120); and to see the infinite, for Blake as for Hart, is to see God. Yannaras, similarly, writes how we see the "true [and] personal" "beauty of the world in proportion to the measure of the purification of our individual sense organs"; in the words of Basil the Great, "The beauty which is true and most beloved can only be contemplated by one whose mind has been purified" (Yannaras 2007, p.89).

We find the same core idea, variously articulated, in a host of Christian philosophers and theologians, Hans Urs von Balthasar among them. I have already argued below how the notion of the 'disinterested' is unfitting for the Christian understanding of, and response to, beauty. von Balthasar reinforces this, claiming that "Christian contemplation is the opposite of distanced consideration of an image: as Paul says, it is in the metamorphosis of the beholder into the image he beholds (2 Cor 3.18)." This entails, among other things, the acknowledgement of the real qualities of what is beheld; "it is possible only by giving up one's own standards and being assimilated to the dimensions of the image" (von Balthasar 1982, p.485). Beyond this, more importantly, it entails our committed conformity to this reality. Thus beauty itself asks of us that, in order that we may see it more fully, we become like it. The appropriate response to the beautiful is therefore to grow, through love, ever more receptive and ever nearer to it. Love and vision, in this way, mutually nurture and inspire each other.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Albion before Christ" – as plate 76 of Blake's *Jerusalem the emanation of the giant Albion* is commonly called – may be taken as a potent illustration of this crucial theological point; the illumination shows Albion, with arms outstretched in a cruciform posture, before Christ nailed to a large oak tree; and shows Albion partaking of the light that streams from the transfigured form of the redeemer. It is one of Blake's most unambiguously Christian visual statements, calling the believer to an imitation of Christ understood as growth in the divine likeness.

This understanding should be absolutely central to both the production and reception of Christian art. It is my belief that just such an attitude is enshrined – always implicit, on occasion pronounced – in the tradition which leads from icon-painting though the frescoes of Fra Angelico and the poetry of Dante, right up to the music of Arvo Pärt and the words of R. S. Thomas. It follows that also the *artist* needs to cultivate his responsiveness to beauty as well as a real skill in his craft. The Christian artist, we may add, pursues his craft within the greater cultivation of a Christian life. Thus the artist, like the lover of beauty, must conform fully to the end he hopes to realise. “The artist,” argues Maritain, “must be in love with *what he is doing*, so that his virtue becomes in truth, in St. Augustine’s phrase, *ordo amoris*” (Maritain 1943, p.48). Indeed, it is through the love and beauty manifested in Christian works of art – from Rublev to Tavener – that we recognise them as Christian, as belonging to that tradition.

Importantly, as shall be argued in our final chapter, as Christian works of art are themselves labours of love, they are therefore appropriate objects of our love. In the very act of reading, seeing or listening – in reflecting upon, and returning again to the work – we must seek to practice that same love which inspired the work’s making. The Christian artist and the Christian lover of art, for whom the artwork is a form of prayer and praise, will both say with Ephrem the Syrian:

Let our prayer be a mirror, Lord, placed before your face;  
then Your fair beauty will be imprinted on its luminous surface.  
O Lord, let not the Evil One, who is ugly, gaze on it, lest his ugliness be  
impressed upon it (Brock 1992, p.75).

These words are exemplary, as we strive to grow in the likeness of God’s beauty, by cultivating beauty in our lives, in our prayers, and in our creative works.

The model of discernment and desire here proposed may not only be elucidating as regards our responses to works of unquestionably Christian merit and ambition; it may also, so I hope, let us know which artworks really are Christian in the first place. It may help us to answer a question that, perhaps, persists in the reader’s mind; namely, does

Christian art really have to aim for beauty? My claim that, yes, it does, is likely to invite queries and counter-examples. What do I say, for example, to the numerous evocations of hell, judgement and damnation that fill the churches and museums throughout the Christian world? Surely these are not beautiful? But surely they are still Christian works of art, capable of granting very powerful religious experiences?

I make three crucial points in response to such apprehensions; firstly, these objects may not be artworks at all; secondly, even if they are works of art, they may not be Christian, though they seem to be; and thirdly, these works may indeed be beautiful, though at first sight they appear not to be. We must bear in mind, as regards this third point, that God's beauty may be revealed, and perceived, under challenging modes and forms.

We should therefore ask, first of all, whether these paintings of fire and brimstone are artworks at all, or whether they are pieces of polemics, didactics or dogmatics executed in line and colour. If we think they really are art, we should then ask if they are Christian art – for as we have argued above, the inclusion of ostensibly Christian imagery does not guarantee this. If the work in question shows us a punishing deity, from whose torment-inflicting antics we are made to turn away in repulsion, the chances are that it is not Christian at all.

If we still maintain that the work is Christian, we should return to it with more consideration to ask – is it not beautiful, after all? If it is genuinely a Christian work of art, yielding an experience of the form and presence of God, we will find that it is indeed beautiful. If, on the other hand, we do not find any beauty there, then we must conclude that it isn't a Christian work of art, that it remains opaque to God.

There are renditions of Christ and the Christian story which are either subversive of the artistic and religious tradition, unsettling in their depiction of the potential depravity of human nature, as well as the decay of the human body; artworks, therefore, which may seem to offer no respite – let alone positive inspiration – for the vision of divine likeness. As examples of such works, which nevertheless may ultimately be Christian and offer profound Christian experiences, may be mentioned Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, certain *Crucifixion* paintings by Grünewald or the works of Hieronymus Bosch.

If, in these cases – beyond the renditions of intense human suffering, of decay, or even of depravity and perversion; the very negations of natural forms and divine will – there is no beauty, no vision of God’s light and love, then the work is not Christian. But if, beyond the initial responses of shock, sadness or revulsion, we do indeed discover a revelation of, and an invitation to, God’s beauty and love – then, yes, it is. The experience of beauty – though ultimately an invitation to delight, gratitude and reverence – may certainly be accompanied by negative feelings, such as remorse, repentance and even fear; indeed, we might experience these emotions precisely because the invitation to delight and participation so indicts our own lack of purity, our own tarnished beauty.<sup>15</sup>

Discernment is vital here, for we must be attuned to the religious and theological meaning of that which is shown, in order to respond appropriately. Faced with a dead Christ, for example – whether on the cross or in the tomb – it may only be by knowing what happens next in the story, so to speak, that we may be able to find solace and source of celebration, even in and through our responses of sorrow and despair.

Richard Viladesau’s reflections on aesthetics in the perspective of the cross, resonant with several themes of my own thesis, are entirely apposite here, and may serve to conclude this brief discussion:

The cross is not beautiful or good in itself: it is beautiful only insofar as it represents Christ’s ultimate faithfulness and self-gift to God, even to the point of death, and insofar as this act given eternal validity by God overcoming death itself. That is, the cross only has beauty as the expression of an act of love; and love is “beautiful”, theologically speaking, precisely because it is not finally defeated, but victorious (Viladesau 2013, p.197).

At this point, it is worth briefly rehearsing the claims made above, before embarking on the next stage of the argument. It is our understanding that beauty, while offering delight, also demands of us a culturally and spiritually literate discernment, and that a full and proper response to beauty’s gifts and claims is consequent upon our cultivation of desire and our growth, through love, into beauty’s likeness.

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<sup>15</sup> We should recall here the discussion of ‘negative icons’ in Chapter 1.



The implication, throughout all this, is that beauty is truly of God. Thus Hart, following von Balthasar, adopts an aesthetically charged vocabulary to speak of our conversion and conformity to Christ. “In this way one’s grammar is converted, one enters ever more into divine rhetoric and divine music: one is conformed to Christ by assuming, and being assumed by, the language of God’s revelation” (Hart 2003, p.315). This is a process in which art joins forces with liturgy, ritual and sacrament to re-fashion the entire person according to that which he beholds. Conversion, on this model, is validly conceived as an aesthetic practice, the cultivation both of discernment and desire.

As I see it, this also has a further implication for Christian art. For if the beauty encountered in works of art is of such a kind as to encourage, not just the direction of our desire, but the growth of our entire personhood towards the likeness of God, then, it seems sensible to suggest, this beauty really cannot have its true origin in the works of man. This is indeed my next argument: though beauty makes its appearance – though it is manifestly present – in made-made objects, it does so and is so as a gift of God.

## 2.3 THE GIFT NOT MADE BY HANDS

The understanding of beauty as gift has underpinned the account given in this chapter; if the first section, on delight and gratitude, dealt with the phenomenological aspects of this claim, the present section will seek to articulate its ontological foundation. We may take as the guiding theme or principle of this section, the understanding, here voiced by Hart, that “The Christian use of the word ‘beauty’ refers most properly to a relationship of donation and transfiguration, a handing over and return of the riches of being” (Hart 2003, p.18).

Three crucial points will here be argued: firstly, that beauty is not made by the artist; secondly, that things (works, objects, persons) are beautiful that are in the image of God. Thirdly, a more strictly theological point will also be made, which will support the model of bestowal; namely, that Beauty, on a Trinitarian model, is best identified with the Spirit, and not, as is common in Scholastic thought, with the Son. I here follow the lead of Sergius Bulgakov and others from a predominantly Orthodox perspective.

### 2.3.1 Beauty’s gratuity

My account is grounded in the conviction that beauty really is of God, and thus that it is a valid thing to say that God is Beauty. “Beauty is a name of God,” Aidan Nichols affirms (Nichols 2007, p.136); while Maritain argues that “God is beautiful [...] by Himself and in Himself, absolutely beautiful [...] He is beauty itself, because he imparts beauty to all created beings, according to the peculiar nature of each” (Maritain 1943, p.31).

As we shall see, I will come to differ in important respects from the Thomistic account of Maritain; but this may be invoked, initially, to give credence to my assertion that the beauty of an artwork does not have its source in that artwork, nor in the hands of its artist, but belongs to it by the gracious gift of the fount of all beauty, who is God. I agree with Maritain that “the production of beauty belongs to God alone” (p.35); man’s task, meanwhile, as artist and maker, is the formal perfection of the particular work at hand – to which beauty may, God permitting, be added.

Thus the Christian artist works in the hope and vision of beauty; but beauty is not of his provenance. It comes by another dispensation. Nor, importantly, is there anything necessary about beauty's manifestation; it is not a particular shape the artwork can fit, nor does it appear, time and time again, at the same conditioned signal. No, its appearance and realisation will remain mysterious, unique, and *gratuitous*. In this, Maritain, following Aquinas, is less emphatic and consistent than I would wish; for the Scholastic account suggests something very fixed and law-like about the conditions that govern beauty's bestowal. On this count, my model and my language must differ crucially from theirs.

Here, then, is the Scholastic centre of Maritain's idea of beauty, about which I have some reservations: "If beauty delights the mind, it is because beauty is essentially a certain excellence or perfection in the proportion of things to the mind. Hence the three conditions assigned to it by St. Thomas: integrity, because the mind likes being; proportion, because the mind likes order and likes unity; lastly and above all brightness or clarity, because the mind likes light and intelligibility" (Maritain 1943, p.24). My own understanding differs firstly, and markedly, in seeing as common but not necessary conditions of beauty's *manifestation* what Maritain affirms as essential aspects of beauty's *nature*. Integrity, proportion and clarity are three important and pervasive excellences in artworks, but they are not necessary for beauty's appearance and they *are not* beauty. The reality of beauty is not reducible to, or divisible into, these terms. Beauty, for all its fondness for these properties, is something quite other.

Most importantly, this otherness of beauty is to be found in its *gratuity*, which – unlike these other qualities – may appropriately be identified as an aspect of beauty's nature. In the final analysis, such formal excellences as clarity and proportion are incidental – neither integral, nor even instrumental – to beauty and beauty's appearance. Not all things that achieve these properties, or that satisfy these criteria, are beautiful – nor do all beautiful things fulfil these criteria, or possess these properties.

This non-formal understanding of beauty provides a peculiarly Christian approach to the beautiful, in contrast to classical attitudes and ambitions. For Berdyaev, formal beauty is a pagan concept and ambition; Christian beauty, on the other hand, always opens to the transcendent, so breaking through a merely worldly order. "In the art of the

Christian world, there is not, nor can there be, a classic finality of form, immanent perfection”, he writes; “In this world only a striving towards the beauty of another world is possible, only the longing for that beauty. The Christian world permits of no closing-in, no finality in this world [and so] The thirst for the redemption of the sins of this world, and the thirst for communion with another world, are imprinted on the ideals of Christian art” (Berdyaeu 2009b, p.229). Thus Christian art is importantly ‘open-ended’; something Williams (2011) has stressed with reference to Dostoevsky’s fictions, and something we also find in the poetry of R.S. Thomas. I will discuss this open-endedness further in chapter 5.

Crucially, beauty is not predictable or law-governed, because it is personal and reveals the person of God. Yannaras uses the example of an artwork, where the “dissimilar and unrepeatable character of artistic expression is not the exactness of a programmed uniqueness [...] but the universal ec-static energy which is always revelatory of the creative person” to claim that “the beauty of the entire reality of the universe does not refer to the arranged exactness of a mechanical orderliness, but is [...] the beauty of the revelation of a person” (Yannaras 2007, p.82).

If harmony and proportion are not necessary for beauty, it is essential to beauty that it is a gift. The gratuity of beauty is vital – and we like gifts; we like the startling, the spontaneous and the free, for all these are signs of *life*; and we like that beauty is not predictable, not reducible to the three conditions of Aquinas. We like that it testifies to another order, manifests a reality higher still than the proportions, integrities and clarities of the philosophers’ universe; we like that it manifests *personality*.

All beauty, for the Christian, is revelatory of God; as Yannaras writes, “the beauty of the world [...] shows beings to be the products and principles of the divine creative presence” (p.82). Being personal, God’s self-revelation, it is therefore God’s gracious gift of himself. Thus “We call *grace (charis)* the fact that God *gives himself (charizetai)* in his erotic ecstatic self-offering” (p.67).

It is a danger of the Scholastic definition, I believe, that by neglecting beauty’s gratuity it also misrepresents its divinity. We like beauty because we recognise, not only that it is other than us, but also that we are privileged to receive and partake of it, and so we recognise that it speaks to and reveals the best in us; we like how it confirms that we

too are of more than a natural or necessary order, that we share in beauty's otherness, and so that we are, ultimately, in a vital sense *like* beauty. It is this experience which is expressed in delight and gratitude, for these are proper responses to the surprising and generous. It is also this kind of experience which makes us recognise in beauty and its bestowal the image in which we are made, the likeness to which we are called.

### **2.3.2 In the likeness of God**

It is my understanding that for something to be beautiful means for that thing to be in the likeness of God. To develop this model, I propose that while beauty is gift and a giving, it is also a kind of given or 'givenness'. Importantly, I do not intend for beauty to be something given and added to art *after* the artwork's completion. There is no such temporal division involved. For though beauty is, in significant ways, conditional upon the artwork's accomplishment, it is also, crucially, *always already there*. For it is under the influence and inspiration of beauty that we as makers awaken to our task. "What is revealed to me in the experience of beauty", writes Scruton, "is a fundamental truth about being – the truth that being is a gift, and receiving it is a task" (Scruton 2012b, pp.151-152). It is in response to beauty's original gifts that we want to produce something worthy of being a beautiful gift in return. Thus Bridges writes of man that

Beauty is the prime motiv of all his excellence,  
his aim and peaceful purpose (Bridges 1934, p.6).

We may understand this in ethical or religious terms, but also in practical terms, as applied to our artistic making. Thus we seek to make beautiful things in grateful response to the beauty given to us – to the abundant given beauty of the world. Bridges (here identifying Beauty with Wisdom) further imagines our creative responsiveness to the gift in these terms:

So she herself, the essential Beauty of Holiness,

pass'd her creativ joy into the creature's heart,  
to take back from his hand her Adoration robes  
and royal crown of his imagination and Love.  
And when she had made of men lovers and worshippers,  
these vied to enshrine her godhead in enduring fanes  
and architectur of stone, that high her persiv towers  
might hallow their throng'd cities and, transfeaturing  
nature's wilding landscape to the impress of her Mind,  
comfort man's mortality with immortal grace (p.28).

We achieve culture, no less than cultivate character, in response to beauty's promptings and calls. We sense here in Bridges' poem how our creative service to beauty has implications – as shall be further discussed in subsequent chapters – for our conception of the good, of ontology, and of love.

Beauty provides the fundamental motivation and inspiration behind the Christian artistic effort, which is an effort at God-likeness. In saying that an object may attain to such a likeness, that it may partake of the beauty of God, we may say that it exists within the light of God's radiance, and even - recalling the claims and ambitions of the previous chapter – that it manifests the *presence* of God.

Let my metaphor be this: A glass figurine is created, in conditions of lamplight, and created with great care so as to hold and reflect that light in a particularly striking and all-suffusing way. The figurine is fashioned by the artist, who manipulates his medium of glass to achieve a particular form, while the light which suffuses that form is not itself created with it, but rather resides there as a gift. The figurine partakes of the light, manifests that light in a particular way, unique to this artwork. The light is really and objectively present there in the figurine, and it is the same as that of the lamp.

Recalling the previous chapter, we may learn from the poetry of R. S. Thomas that God's beauty is not to be conquered by force, does not let itself be coerced into presence, but comes as a gift - to the one who waits. We recall the patience exhibited in and by Thomas' poems, when the waiting entails taking up one's position in the absence and the darkness; and we recall that a prerequisite of receiving the gift of presence is that

we renounce our own selves' claim to completion and instead open ourselves in the hope of receiving fulfilment from God. Thus, in lines from "The Bright Field" not quoted above, we read:

I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl  
of great price, the one field that had  
the treasure in it. I realize now  
that I must give all that I have  
to possess it (Thomas 1993, p.302).

Here again, then, is an echo of Eliot's call to go by the way of dispossession; this is indeed the way whereby and whereon we may be rewarded with beauty. We learn from Thomas, as from many others, that God's beauty cannot be of our making, cannot be a thing created, because it is a bestowal of grace.

It is my meaning – in saying that beauty is a gift, and that to possess beauty is to be in the likeness of God – that beauty is *uncreated*. That is, artworks, nature, persons may be created *and* beautiful – indeed, they may be created beautiful – but their beauty is not created; it is not a 'created beauty' of which they partake and which they manifest. The beautiful thing or person is created, but its relation and *likeness* to God is not; which is tantamount to saying that, insofar as something is in the image of God, a share of that thing is uncreated, and that thing has a share in the uncreated.

### **2.3.3 A Trinitarian model**

Now, in arguing that the beautiful object is beautiful in the image and likeness of God, and that beauty is manifested in such an object by the gift of God, we must attempt to articulate – albeit in a cursory, concise manner – how it is that beauty should be properly

attributed to God. It is hoped that my take on this theological problem is consistent with my model, as developed so far, of beauty as gratuity, and consistent with the experience of this beauty in Christian works of art.

Here, while acknowledging their contributions, I must contend again with the particulars of Maritain's and Aquinas' positions. We are in agreement in generally ascribing beauty to God, in naming God beautiful and the fount of all beauty. It is in the details that my model diverges from the Scholastic account; namely, in the question of precisely how beauty belongs to God.

Firstly, I would lay a different, and perhaps a greater, emphasis on beauty's Trinitarian character. God is Beauty, and beauty belongs to God, eminently and above all as Trinity; *not* because of the 'integrity', 'proportion' or 'harmony' of the triune God, so much as for the mutuality of the three Persons, their dynamic *perichoresis* of love, delight and radiant glory. This is to invoke the language of Hart, Bulgakov and others (of a predominantly Orthodox tradition) over the customary terminology of Latin and Anglo-Saxon thought.<sup>16</sup> Thus Didymus the Blind calls beauty the "'triadic adornment of creation'", and Yannaras comments that "the beauty of created things is [...] the disclosure of the single and at the same time triadic mode of the divine energy" (Yannaras 2007, p.90).

Beauty, on this view, does not strictly 'subsist' or 'inhere' in any 'part' of God, nor does it belong to the 'totality' of God, but is rather that abundant outpouring of glory which, though internal to God, also reveals and communicates God to the world. Thus Hart claims that beauty "is being itself, the moment of being's disclosure, the eloquence by which everything, properly and charitably regarded, says infinitely more than itself" (Hart 2003, p.146). As Beauty, then, and in beauty's bestowal, God gives (beyond) Himself – *not* as a *formal* manifestation, but as something over and above form.

I am not in agreement, therefore, with Aquinas' way, endorsed by Maritain, of allocating beauty to the second Person on the Trinity. "In the Trinity," Aquinas holds, and Maritain with him, "the title Beauty is specially appropriated to the Son" (Maritain

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<sup>16</sup> John Navone, similarly, holds "that God (especially as triune) is the instance of primary beauty, and that this beauty is not merely proportion. What it is, however, is 'Gods eternal delight', which itself is the delightfulness of all creation" (Farley 2001, pp.76-77).



1943, p.32). This is a reasonable position, as the Son is said to be the visible image and form of the invisible God. Still, this identification of beauty with the formal aspect of God is to the detriment of the element of gratuity and, I believe, to a properly Trinitarian understanding of beauty.

Preferably, I would refrain from such specific attributions altogether; but if it comes to assigning beauty to one of the three persons, I would follow Sergius Bulgakov in giving that name to the Holy Spirit. This, to my mind, ensures a dynamically Trinitarian model of beauty; it also helps to safeguard, and to make sense of, beauty's nature as *gift*.

When Maritain claims that God “is beauty itself, because he imparts beauty to all created beings, according to the peculiar nature of each” (Maritain 1943, p.31), this to me evokes the Spirit's gracious descent on each person at Pentecost. Indeed, the Spirit is the Person in God who is most fittingly credited with transmitting God's glory to that which is not of God – to creation, to human beings. In the Creed, it is the Spirit we address as the ‘Giver of life’. Thus, that “eternal Beauty” which, in Balthasar's words, “always pours itself out in a superabundant irradiation that is beyond every demand and expectation” (von Balthasar 1982, p.417) is best identified, I believe, with the Spirit.

Importantly, this is to speak of God in such a way as to allow the action of the Spirit to properly complement the action of the Son. For the account of artistic creation given above, in the metaphor of the glass figurine, is applicable also to the creation of God. We may want to say, with the scholastics, that God's creation has integrity, proportion and clarity; but I must emphasise that beauty is again something added to this. By this I do not mean, of course, that beauty has its origin outside God, but that the *beauty* of creation, relative to its *form*, has its source in another person of the Trinity. In short, to the perfect creation carried out by the Father through the Son, the Spirit bestows the extra quality of beauty. In the words of St. Irenaeus, “the Father makes beautiful by means of the Spirit what he creates by means of the Son” (Nichols 2007, p.74). Thus we have something as astonishing as an added gratuity to an act already infinitely free and generous – making more glorious still what is already stamped with the genius and grandeur of God.

This is absolutely not to suggest a temporal sequence between the action of the Son and the action of the Spirit, anymore than it is to suggest a division between two ‘autonomous’ agents; it is simply to elucidate the manifold simultaneity of God’s creation, for which *formation* does not exhaust the description, and for which *beautification* is a valid – indeed, a crucial – complementary term.

Christ is, foremost, the *form* of the Father; definite, delineated, making the invisible visible, making God materially and physically present. As Basil the Great articulates it, “‘the Person of the Son becomes as it were the form and face of the knowledge of the Father, and the person of the Father is known in the form of the Son’” (Nichols 2007, p.21). Thus Christian experience and theology, directed towards Christ and through him towards God, is foremost a matter, as Balthasar shows, of ‘seeing the form’ of God and God’s glory. Yet, I would argue that no one can see Christ – as no one can address or confess Christ – but in the Holy Spirit; for the special form of Christ is only discernible *as* Christ (and not, for example, as an ‘historical Jesus’) in the light and beauty of the Spirit. The apprehension of the form of Christ is indivisible from, impossible without, the apprehension of that Beauty in which the form abides. Thus the full and dynamic manifestation of the Christ-form and its Beauty is truly a Trinitarian event.

For Aquinas, “The Son is beauty as the Father’s perfect Image, proportioned to him, resplendent with expressivity as his word” (Nichols 2007, p.11). Yet here is an account which leaves out the Spirit: say rather, the Son is *beautiful* as the Father’s perfect image and visible form, resplendent with the beauty bestowed by the Spirit – for this is a Trinitarian account. The idea of ‘proportion’ here marks a difference between my model and the scholastic understanding of beauty; I have already argued how proportion is neither essential to beauty’s nature, nor a necessary criterion of its manifestation. The qualities of mutual delight, mutual freedom and love are abundant in the Trinity; these are not just ‘proportionate’ to the Trinity’s form or nature, they are *disproportionate*, gratuitously overflowing – and it is the Spirit we hold responsible for this excess. Thus I think it more appropriate to speak of beauty in terms of *glory*, not harmony or proportion. My model finds support in Bulgakov, for whom glory is identified particularly with the Holy Spirit, while ‘kingdom’ and ‘power’ are identified, respectively, with the Father and

Son. For Bulgakov, “beauty is a palpable manifestation of the Holy Spirit” (Bulgakov 2012, p.105).

To conclude this tentative Trinitarian defence of my model of beauty, then, I may join Bulgakov in naming the Holy Spirit “the hypostasis of Beauty” (Nichols 2007, p.76), in the hope that this is supportive of and consistent with the experience of beauty as granted by Christian art. That is, I ground my account of beauty as a gift *of* God by suggesting that beauty is already a gift even *in* God, in the relations of the Trinity.

Now I wish to conclude this chapter by invoking another work of Christian art. In Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “Pied Beauty” we have, I believe, both a poetic-philosophical defence of the model of beauty I have championed and, more importantly, an exemplary instance of a delightful, beautiful work of Christian art.

Hopkins, himself influenced by scholastic thought, does justice to the best strands of that theological thinking on beauty; for he illustrates truly Maritain’s realisation that “this very brilliance of form, the essence of beauty, shines on matter” – I would say, is *manifested* in matter – “in an infinite variety of ways” and that “Beauty therefore does not consist in conformity to a certain ideal and unchanging type” (Maritain 1943, pp.28-29). Yet the achievement of Hopkins, and the vision his poem enables, should incline us further, I believe, to my own model; for it is certainly the *gratuity* of beauty which is here given due, and duly exultant, recognition. For here, I believe, beauty is evoked, not as a matter of proportion and harmony, but as an ineffable quality, charitably given to all manner of idiosyncratic particulars – “all things counter and strange” – on account of the unique and uniquely significant form of each. Each in its own form, and its own inimitable way, manifests the glory and bounteous beauty of God, and so each “dappled thing” can be seen within His likeness, and His likeness can be seen in each.

For the marvel of it all, so elegantly captured by Hopkins’ dazzling poetics, is that this beauty of particular and peculiar things, not only has its source in the beauty of God, but is the *same* as that infinite, inexhaustible beauty; so that all the beauty we encounter in this changeable world, “He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change.” Fittingly, then, we are enjoined to “Praise him.”

In conclusion, the poem itself is an exquisite giving of praise. Born of delight and gratitude, it is a perfectly appropriate response to Beauty's gratuity; it shows us how to direct our vision and our desire to and through the particulars of creation, and how to participate, creatively and charitably, in the Trinitarian glory which graces this world.

*Pied Beauty*

Glory be to God for dappled things -

For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;

Landscape plotted and pieced - fold, fallow, and plough;

And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)

With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:

Praise him.

(Hopkins 1961, p.24)

## CHAPTER 3: THE GOOD OF CHRISTIAN ART

Building on the models of form and beauty already given, this chapter offers an account of the good of Christian art, which also anticipates the subsequent discussions of ontology and of love.

It is chiefly my understanding of Godlikeness in terms of the manifestation of beauty which forms the basis of my account of the good of Christian art, as indeed it forms the basis of my understanding of the Good. I am proposing what I call an *iconic* model of the Good; whereby that is good which partakes of and manifests the Good, where this Good is Beautiful. I am, but I am not only, arguing that beauty is the relevant and decisive good of Christian art; I am also grounding this stipulation in a model which holds that the Beauty of God is the good above others towards which our lives should be oriented.

Thus it is my intention here to subsume some familiar dichotomies of aesthetic discourse under a concern for what transfigures the world and manifests divine realities. One such is the contrast between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ goods, the ‘good *for*’ and the ‘good in itself,’ of an artwork; Christian art resists such polarities and affirms a commitment to both kinds of value. Another dichotomy – that between being ‘good *as*’ a work of art, and being *good* pure and simple – is also problematic when it comes to Christian art. For it may be that it is through (the good of) an artwork that we have access to a good which transcends it; and it may be that the particular artwork is only properly pronounced good by virtue of its participation in that transcendent Good.

The need to be wary of these apparent dichotomies is further motivated by the critical importance of *beauty* to the work of Christian art. My account of beauty, given in the previous chapter, implies that we may not consider a work of Christian art good – in any of the senses here hinted at – if it is not also beautiful.

### 3.1 ENDS AND INSTRUMENTS OF THE GOOD

We should always take care to approach an artwork as, in some relevant sense, an end in itself; our judgements of a work's goodness should be concerned primarily with its artistic and aesthetic qualities, and not with any didactic or other external values. In general terms, then, priority should always be given to what we call the 'intrinsic' values of an artwork; however, in line with everything I have argued above about the discernment of form and beauty, these qualities and values are relational and only possessed by the work as fully and properly *contextual*.

At the same time, a concern for the so-called 'instrumental' values – better construed as the artwork's being good *for* something else – may be difficult to escape. After all, an intuition that (attending to) the artwork is at least, in some minimal sense, good for *us* – even is only as a source of diversion, comfort or laughter – is surely part of our motivation to engage with art in the first place. As regards the Christian work of art, this sense of the experience being good for us has more gravity; for a proper encounter with works by Fra Angelico, say, may be understood to be good for our Christian life and our relation to God. Thus the value of the artwork 'in itself' and its being good for something other or greater than itself are virtually inseparable.

This is not to say that the instrumental trumps or supplants the intrinsic. It may be true to say that art, simply by being what it is, is always *for* human perceivers; if so, then the relevant goods of such artworks may also be taken to be dependent upon the relation between work and audience. However, the case of Christian art, on my model, suggests that a work may be good without any reference to a reader or a viewer; for as an object manifesting the beauty of God, a fresco by Fra Angelico is good, in itself, even when there is no one around to see it<sup>17</sup>. The divine beauty of which it partakes is really there in the work, and really renders the work good, even as it waits for a human to appreciate it.

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<sup>17</sup> At the same time, of course, on a theological conception, we humans are disposed to recognise and indeed to strive for the beautiful. Beauty does not come into being by our powers of perception, by the eyes of its beholders; on the contrary, it is already there for us to discern, and there to guide our perceptions and dispositions to God.

### 3.1.1 Good ‘in itself’ and good *for*

“So soon as we begin to consider a work as anything other than an end in itself,” writes Clive Bell, “we leave the world of art” (Bell 1914, p.102). This is true, as far as it goes. It does not preclude, however, that we must also be attentive to the relations between several works, all of which are original ends in themselves, which together may mean something greater than a single work in isolation; nor should it preclude that the ends of art also constitute significant moments within a life that is, on the whole, directed at a more all-encompassing end. Fra Angelico’s frescoes in the monastery of San Marco may serve to illustrate this; for here is a family of artworks which – and in this they are perfectly symbolic of the monastic situation itself – together constitute a vision of the Christian life which is infinitely richer than the view offered by the piece in any one cell; and which, moreover, are executed for the sake of furnishing the religious life with appropriately inspiring images of appreciation, contemplation, and love. The value of these artworks, of this composite artwork, lies in the ability of the painted images to exemplify and enhance the life lived for God – as well as to glorify God by their forms and their beauty. This is what these frescoes are *for*, and good for, but this is also, crucially, what these works *are* ‘in themselves’; there is no way, in a case like this, to separate the aesthetic or artistic values of the works from their Christian value.

Of course, we must always be careful not to speak of works of art solely as ‘means’ to other ends, even if this appears in some respects inescapable. Even Bell seems unable to escape the tension, and the potential contradiction, for he insists upon the artwork’s status as end even as he claims that “all art is moral because [...] works of art are immediate means to good” (p.20). Similarly, the Christian work of art must be treated as an end, as an object of loving and imaginative attention, not to be appropriated for other purposes than the appreciation of its integral qualities and the experience it offers; at the same time we must recognise that every such work of art *does* open beyond itself and does invite the perceiver to look *through* it as much as at it. If we allow that works of art may grant us uniquely inspiring, ecstatic or reflective experiences, we should be able to grant that they contribute to enhance the Christian life without being characterised as mere ‘means’ to that end.

This, then, should allow us to acknowledge as valid the question of what Christian art is good *for*. Importantly, however, neither the question nor the answer should be taken to imply a functional order of values, but rather to refer to a greater end. It is one thing to suggest that the San Marco frescoes are good for preventing mould and cracks in the stonework – or that *The Brothers Karamazov* is good for curing insomnia and killing mice – and quite another to claim, as I am doing, that it is good for the cultivation of desire; that is, that the very experience of the artwork may aid the viewer or reader in seeing all things in the light of the love of God.

I am not saying that art is good because it teaches or proclaims Christianity, either through representation, exposition or didactics, but that it is good because of the experience it offers, as an artistic and aesthetic object, and because the beauty it manifests renders the world more in the likeness of God.

We must amend Bell's assumption that the highest good is a good state of mind. On Bell's view, "to seek any other moral justification for art, to seek in art a means to anything less than good states of mind, is an act of wrong-headedness to be committed only by a fool or a man of genius" (Bell 1914, p.114). We may say – as Robert Adams might – that a good state of mind is one which, in some sense, resembles God; or, less, confusingly, that a good state of mind is oriented towards, responsive to and reflective of, the Good of God. We may also say, trivially, that such states of mind are indeed the most desirable and the highest states of mind we may achieve. But this, of course, is already to affirm a good which is both irreducibly other and infinitely greater than the state of mind which, in some manner and some measure, partakes of it. Crucially, this good is not only mental or immaterial, but may indeed be manifested and given us in material form, under the form of paint and wood of Christian works of art, or under the form of bread and wine.

Moreover, in speaking of our orientation towards God, we must take care to speak not simply of states of mind, but of the whole embodied personality; for it is this which is in the image of God. It is this whole person – not the mind alone, but also the senses and the will, our memories and desires, as indeed our bodies – which is engaged in the experience of great and beautiful works of art. Sometimes, even physical exertion is



asked of us in the proper engagement with a work of art; often our experience entails patience and perseverance through time, as when listening (and more than listening) to Rachmaninov's *All-Night Vigil*, for example, or when climbing the domes and towers of great cathedrals.

I am sympathetic, in general, to Robert Adams' prioritising 'excellence' over 'well-being' (or what is good *for* a person). As I shall show, however, 'excellence' on my model is not synonymous with either beauty or goodness, nor is it a criterion of either. A Christian work of art is good by virtue of its beauty; it does not also have to be excellent, but may be flawed or damaged.

By excellence, Adams (1999) means "the type of goodness exemplified by the beauty of a sunset, a painting, or a mathematical proof, or by the greatness of a novel, the nobility of an unselfish deed, or the quality of an athletic or philosophical performance" (p.83). We may speak of this kind of goodness as a goodness of the thing in itself, without reference to external or instrumental values. It is good that a thing is so (noble, great, harmonious); it is good that it *is*, pure and simple. Crucially, this "is the goodness of that which is worthy of love or admiration, honour or worship" (p.83). Here we seem to enter into a territory or mode of appreciation which emphatically surpasses any appeals to what is merely pleasurable, or good for me, or good for the moment. That is, we seem to come up here against a kind of objective goodness which asks to be recognised as such and duly responded to. This chimes well with our experiences of good works of art; moreover, the suggestion here of a register of response which may include such attitudes as worship and reverence is certainly congenial to the case of Christian art.

The priority of excellence over well-being, however, does not preclude that what is good in itself is also good *for* something else. What relevantly concerns us here is the possibility that something that is good in itself, such as a work of art, can also be fruitfully understood as being good for the persons who have a relation to it – both the artist and the viewer – and even for the world which it inhabits.

What follows, I believe, from the prioritisation of excellence, is that any sensible account of what is good *for* us should be derived from the goodness of the thing in itself;

for it is good *for us* to encounter, to study, to love the beautiful and the excellent.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, we must first ask if the artwork is good in itself – that is, if it is a good artwork – before we can ask if it is good for the Christian life in which it is embedded; for any version of the ‘good for’ which fails to first consider the aesthetic and artistic qualities of the work in question threatens to misappropriate that work as a means for purely didactic ends.

In keeping with the general dictum that an artwork should be appreciated and judged for the qualities it possesses ‘intrinsically’, I would affirm that non-Christian art may be good ‘in itself’ without having to acknowledge a greater sphere or end of value, without being good for – indeed, without being *for* – anything beyond itself and the experience it engenders. Christian art, however, is always committed to a Good beyond itself, and thus to being good *for* something other than itself.

It may be entirely inappropriate to ask whether a novel – be it a modern bestseller like *The Da Vinci Code* or a timeless classic like *Pride and Prejudice* – is good or not for the instilling of principles or the acquisition of virtue; for, arguably, these are not the kinds of ends or values which are relevant to the experience, enjoyment and appreciation of a work of literary fiction. But we are *not* wrong to ask – indeed, it would be wrong of us *not to* ask – that the frescos at San Marco should be good, in some sense, *for* the greater Christian life, for our growth in the love of God. If they are not, it would suggest that they do not manifest the forms and the beauty of God; and this, crucially, would not only be detrimental to the frescos’ ‘good for’ but also their ‘good in itself’ – for without that beauty they are not Christian works of art at all.

To clarify: the ‘good for,’ as I construe it, does not entail a simply extrinsic or instrumental good and relation. The work of Christian art is such that, ‘in itself’, it is

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<sup>18</sup> Indeed, to love the excellent and the beautiful – which may, vitally, include the poor, the broken, the dying – is not only good but, I would argue, is in a sense to *do* good, and to *be* good; on my thesis, if such things are done in the image of God, for the love of God’s likeness in other things and persons, it may also mean that to do so, to be so, is to be *beautiful*.

good for the greater glory of God; it is part of that greater glory, as it in itself (but of course not *of* itself, as its beauty is a gift of God) constitutes a manifestation of that glory.

We must remember that the engagement with the work of Christian art entails an encounter with the Beauty of God – an intrinsically valuable, not to say *invaluable*, experience. It should be entirely unproblematic to say that it is *good* to experience the Beauty of God, while each Christian artwork, as a unique manifestation of that beauty, is a lovable end in itself.

The critic of art will be concerned first and foremost with the qualities of the work itself. This should also be the focus of attention for the Christian who approaches a Christian work of art; but, being Christian, he will also (he cannot help but) evaluate the work, and the experience it offers, for the contribution it can make to his cultivation of love for the Good and the Beauty of God.

We may say, then, that the work of Christian art *could not* be good ‘in itself’ without also being ‘good for’. Similarly, we shall see below how the Christian artwork cannot be good *as* a Christian artwork without also being *good* in the greater sense of partaking of or manifesting the Good.

### **3.1.2 Doing and making good**

We must not forget, when dealing with art, that we are dealing with a human activity, and that the *work* of art entails a process of labour no less than a product. It is important, therefore, to consider the good of the making as well as the good of the thing made.

This can be explored by considering Jacques Maritain’s contribution to the question of what good or goods pertain to works of art. Maritain, working under Scholastic categories, is concerned with the issue of the divergence or convergence of two different orders of value, two different kinds of good – namely, those of *Ars* and *Prudentia*, the practical and speculative or moral orders, respectively.

Prudence is concerned with human good – the good *for* man, we might say – and good in relation to God; the concern of Art, meanwhile, “is for the work in question to be good in itself [...] and it relates to the peculiar good or perfection not of the man making,

but of the work made” (Maritain 1943, p.7). But we must note, immediately, that the good of the work might indeed have its roots in the good of the man; in the skill, the virtue, and the mind of the maker. Such a skill is a good and valuable thing to possess – a kind of excellence, on Adams’ model – and as such is good also for the man. It may, furthermore, be the case that the good of the work – the good work – is good *for* all who encounter it, as an object and occasion for a valuable experience; in the case of Christian art, a Christian experience.

To my mind, then, Maritain’s categories are effective only up to a point. I suspect, at least, that while the above classification or division may be suitable for understanding art and morals in general, it is not suitable to the particular phenomenon of Christian art. For if my model, as a whole, is fitting, then Christian art finds itself at the very centre of a human destiny that, in its holistic nature and final end, does not allow for such neat distinctions between art and prudence, making and morals, but which is concerned only with the dedication to transfiguration – which recognises only the iconic good of likeness to God.

Maritain’s thoughts on these matters, however, revolve less around the issue of the practical and moral orders, and more around a second dichotomy that he discerns within *Ars* itself; namely, the difference between making and action, where art finds its place in the former category.

As Maritain’s own musings make clear, there are subtle overlaps between making and action; for while art, “remains outside the line of human conduct, with an end, rules, and values, which are not those of the man, but of the work to be produced,” it is nevertheless essentially entwined with the human processes and values of its making; thus even “if art is not human in the end which it pursues, it is human, essentially human, in its method of working. It involves the making of a man’s work, stamped with the character of man” (Maritain 1943, p.7). Thus we come to speak of a *virtue* of art in the artisan.

It is important to stress, as Maritain himself does, that this virtue of art does not translate into a moral virtue; for the “actions [of the artist] often runs contrary to his art” (p.12). That is, someone who *makes* good works doesn’t always *do* good deeds. We can

say, succinctly, that the artist is *good at art*, without this meaning that he is by any means an ethically exemplary person.

I do think, however, that a *work* of art is very much an *action*, and one that demands a great deal of character and personality. Indeed, it demands the embodiment of the *virtue* of art, as Maritain tells us, not simply mechanical skill. This is not to say that this places the artwork, or the making of it, within the moral order, but to say that something more than the good of a ‘thing’ is involved in the good of the *work*; and it is to suggest that *to make* something good is itself a good thing *to do*.<sup>19</sup>

Dostoevsky does not have to be a ‘good man’ in order to write his books, but the iconic good of his novels also, I suggest, attaches to the man (however flawed or sinful) who produced such things as *The Brothers Karamazov*. There is something exemplary, something *iconic*, not perhaps about the private individual, in isolation from his labours and his works, but precisely about the man in his making, his dedication, his achievement.

Richard Viladesau, paraphrasing Thomas Aquinas, writes that “Like an artist, God creates for the sake of beauty. All things are made, therefore, to be beautiful, so that they imitate in various degrees their exemplary cause” (Viladesau 2013, p.115). Also the artist, I would argue, imitates God; so that the artist, whatever his other qualities, is iconic in his creation of beautiful things.

Maritain suggests that such a man must be torn between the very different demands of two kinds of good; “as the artist is first a man and then an artist, it is easy to see what conflicts will rage in his heart between Art and Prudence, his character as Maker and his character as Man” (Maritain 1943, p.15). Perhaps this is true; in any case, it probably would be true if the artist subscribed to this dichotomy, if he recognised two such valid but competing claims on his person and his activities. I would suggest, however, that the two goods are more conflated than Maritain understands them, and that they may find joint and mutual fruition.

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<sup>19</sup> This is emphatically so when we come to consider the ethical and eschatological implications of Christian art; indeed, we may even find an imperative which tells us that ‘to make something good’ is something we *should do* – for the good of our calling, for the good of mankind, for the good of God.

The account of man as essentially an artist, a maker of signs and a maker of things, which I shall pursue in the following chapter, should go some way towards appeasing this apparent conflict of values. David Jones, with his idea of ‘man-the-maker,’ makes a crucial contribution to Maritain’s model. Under Jones’ tutelage, we can affirm that to ‘make good’ is no less vital – to man, to our relation to God – than to ‘do good’. This, I believe, is also Blake’s conviction. It can be supported, moreover, by voices from theology and theological aesthetics. Indeed, as we live in a fallen world that needs regeneration, our making – our making new, making beautiful anew – may be seen as our divinely appointed task and vocation above all. Thus there may be no place for Prudence as a separate category of value, as it is not a separate aspect of our lives, but is rather assimilated into the regenerative task.

The conflict that Maritain posits is this: on the one hand, the “artistic habit [or virtue] is concerned only with the work to be done [and the] sole end of art is the work itself and its beauty”; while on the other hand, “for the man working, the work to be done of itself comes into the line of morality and so is merely a means [...] It is therefore absolutely necessary for the artist, *qua* man, to work for something other than his work, something better beloved.” And “God,” Maritain claims, “is infinitely more lovable than Art” (p.74).

Insofar as there is a problem here, I suggest that my own model is more capable than Maritain’s of solving it. There need not be an irreconcilable antinomy between the ‘good in itself’ of the artistic effort and the ‘good for’ of the artist as man. For Christian art, as I conceive it, the end of the art-work is subsumed within, and also contributes to, the greater end of a more perfect vision and practice of love. The artwork is an object of love within a greater love; the artistic labour is carried out within a greater labour of love. Such must be the priorities governing Christian art. Perhaps the best way to appease or conflate the two spheres of making and action, then, is to conceive of both as two aspects of our works of love; for love is the end of both creativity and morals. Furthermore, love is both beautiful and good.

Blake’s case is illustrative here, of an artist who is well aware of his personal flaws of virtue, but who conceives of his artistic labour as an act of devotion and a

sustained effort at revealing the goods of God. Thus Blake confesses at the beginning of *Jerusalem*:

I am perhaps the most sinful of men; I pretend not to holiness: yet I pretend to love. to see. to converse with daily. as man with man: & the more to have an interest in the Friend of Sinners (Blake 2000, p.300).

He ‘pretends’, crucially, to inspiration, and to use his creative powers entirely in the service of glorifying Christ. To do good for him, as I propose for the Christian artist in general, is to *make* good; and the question of how to *be* good – for the artist, whose life is dedicated to this making – is answered (in the only way possible for the artist) by his dedication to this creative, regenerative task. Thus, as we have already seen Blake proclaim,

I rest not from my great task;  
To Open the Eternal Worlds. to open the immortal Eyes  
Of Man inwards [...] into Eternity  
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God (p.302).

### 3.2 PARTICULAR AND TRANSCENDENT GOODS

Whatever is the case for other art, Christian art is at least implicitly committed to (a belief in) an objective and transcendent good, which is in some sense identified as the Good of God. The Christian artwork, therefore, should be posited in relation to this good, and apprehended and appreciated accordingly.

In general, as critics or lovers of art, we should direct our attention and our judgements towards the artwork *as* artwork – the novel *as* novel, the poem *as* poem – quite irrespective of its bearing on other issues. When appreciating and assessing the value of a particular poem, that is, we are first and foremost to engage with and address its poetic qualities; and not, for example, its merits as an ethical or political statement.

As we saw above, however, such theoretically distinct spheres of value are difficult to entirely keep apart; thus, in a similar fashion to the admissible conflation of the good ‘in itself’ and the ‘good *for*’, the concern for the ‘good *as*’ of an artwork may legitimately open out to accommodate questions of the artwork being *good*, pure and simple, in a moral or religious sense – where the criterion of the work’s goodness is no longer simply the categorical framework of values that governs the making and reception of poems *as* poems, but indeed a supreme and transcendent Good.

However keen we may be to safeguard to the greatest possible extent the artwork’s so-called autonomy from moralistic incursions of the Tolstoyan variety, I do believe that our assessment of an artwork – indeed, the very act of reading or perceiving – is inescapably informed by our faculties of moral judgement. The reading of a great novel, such as *War and Peace*, indisputably involves a holistic and composite engagement, where a real grasp on the significant forms of the novel – our understanding of characters, themes, narrative structures – demands of us a moral no less than an artistic literacy.

Still, it is important, I believe – in keeping with the way many of us *do* speak about art – to maintain a distinction between two different discourses of the good; one of which concerns itself with the goods pertaining to particular things, disciplines or situations; another which maintains that all our judgements (and indeed our every use of the very word) of the *good* invokes a transcendent Good. The former way of



understanding the good – as the good of a particular thing, according to the criteria particular to its kind – is prevalent in aesthetic and artistic discourse, and perhaps justifiably so; for it does make sense to enquire if *Ulysses* is good as a novel in much the same way that we speak of the good of a car *as* a car, a fork *as* a fork, where the relevant criteria will be unique to each kind of object or phenomenon.

We say that something is good *as* a work of art without meaning that it is also good in the stronger sense of disclosing and partaking of the Good, or the Good of God. Certainly, not every good artwork – however indisputably excellent *as* a play or a pop song – manifests the form and beauty of God.

The *Christian* work of art, however, is characterised by this very ambition and achievement; and this commits it to a different understanding of the good from that which pertains to non-Christian art. It need not trouble the atheist or secular artist that their works are only ‘good *as*’ without also partaking of some transcendent, let alone divine or theistic, Good; but the Christian artist must aim to satisfy both conditions. Indeed, Christian art, even in order to be good *as* Christian art, needs to be *good* in the sense of partaking of and manifesting the Good of God.

Now, beauty is needed to ensure that the Christian artwork is good (in both senses currently under discussion); for beauty is a criterion of what makes a hymn or an altarpiece good *as* a Christian work of art, and it is also beauty which manifest God and thus makes the work in question *good*.<sup>20</sup> But beauty is not present in all paintings or novels that we call good works of art; it may even be an inappropriate element in some artworks, contrary to the governing ideas of the school or genre, as in the case of much post-modern and conceptual art. Beauty is therefore not always a criterion of the work being good *as*. Works may be great art without being good in the iconic sense of disclosing the Good and Beauty of God. Importantly, just as beauty is not a criterion of all art, though it is the chief criterion of Christian art, so we do not say that all good works of art need to be Christian; only that all Christian works of art need to be *good*.

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<sup>20</sup> I must reiterate here, lest we forget, that beauty is neither synonymous with, nor dependent upon, the achievements of harmony and proportion; nor, though every beautiful work is exemplary by virtue of its beauty, does the beautiful work need to be ‘excellent’ in the sense of flawlessness or perfection.

### 3.2.1 The good and the real

It is useful, in developing this model of the good of Christian art, to engage again with Leo Tolstoy; indeed, our differing understandings really come to a head as regards the questions of the relation between the good and the beautiful.

Good art, so Tolstoy's argument goes, is that which conveys good feelings and experiences of the good. Thus it is Tolstoy's understanding that "art is a human activity the aim of which is to convey to others the loftiest and best feelings people have attained to in life" (Tolstoy 1995, p.53). I have already taken issue with this emphasis on feelings in my first chapter. Recalling the aspiration of the forms of Christian art to disclose 'the real', I also hold that the good of Christian art pertains to the reality which is disclosed by the work, and not to the feelings which may or may not attend it. To be good, Christian art has to manifest a good reality – indeed, to manifest the reality of the Good – and, moreover, a good way of seeing, and a good way of living in relation to, that reality.

On my conception, crucially, that good reality which Christian art seeks to manifest is *beautiful*. Tolstoy, however, sets the beautiful and the good up as diametrically opposed concepts. For him, "The good is the eternal, the highest aim of our life," while "the beautiful [...] is nothing other than what is pleasing to us" (p.52). Much of Tolstoy's attack on beauty, with which we have already engaged, follows from his defence of a particular understanding of the good. His critique of beauty, we have seen, is really a critique of the pleasurable sensation of beauty; and this stance, importantly, is consistently founded on a fear of any conflation of the pleasurable and the good. Tolstoy, identifying trends within the history of aesthetics to make beauty synonymous with either the pleasurable or the good, compounds these into an account which renders the good solely a matter of sensory, subjective and momentary pleasure. Whether this accurately reflects any actually held theories or not, nothing could be more offensive to Tolstoy's own philosophy, with its strenuous practical ethics, and its markedly puritanical and instrumental conception of the good. Thus beauty, seen as the catalyst of the above conflation, is set up in Tolstoy's own dialectic as the very opposite and negation of the good.

The Christian response is firstly to defend a so-called hedonistic aspect of the good – to affirm that ‘pleasurable’ experiences of delight, for example, are not alien but native to the realm of the good – and secondly to show, as I have sought to do, that beauty is not a matter of subjective pleasure but of participation in an objective goodness which is bestowed by God.

Importantly, since the good on his understanding cannot accommodate either that which is pleasing or that which is an object of desire or *eros*, as beauty is, Tolstoy holds that “The more we give ourselves to beauty, the more removed we are from the good” (p.52). Thus we end up with a kind of inverse of my own thesis, which works within the belief that to give ourselves to the beautiful *is* to approach the good, or more precisely, that the pursuit of the good is most truly realised in giving ourselves to the love of beauty.

“No matter how we understand the good,” says Tolstoy, “our life is nothing else than a striving towards the good – that is, towards God” (p.52). But the striving that he mentions may not be the yearning and reaching out that Gregory of Nyssa has in mind when speaking of *epektasis*. Indeed, it is hard to see how the kind of effort advertised by Tolstoy could ever bring us closer to a God which is – and asks to be approached as – the inexhaustible giver of infinite beauty; for it is Tolstoy’s conviction that “The concept of beauty not only does not coincide with the good, but is rather the opposite of it, because the good for the most part coincides with a triumph over our predilections, while beauty is the basis of all our predilections” (p.52).

Nothing could be further from the idea of the good and the beautiful – indeed, from the idea of our human nature and vocation – under which I am working. For on the account that I inherit from Gregory and others, it is affirmed that a longing for the good *and* the beautiful is the aboriginal condition of man as created in the image of God. The good does not simply entail a triumph of will over our base nature, nor does the experience of beauty entail simply a concession to our faults and weaknesses; rather, the reaching out for the good and beautiful entail the realisation of our good desires and dispositions. In the words of David Bentley Hart, “As that which moves, becomes, is reborn or repeated, human nature’s perfection is nothing but this endless desire for beauty and more beauty, this hunger for God” (Hart 2004, p.190). It is this kind of understanding of man, of our desires and dispositions, and our relation to the good, the beautiful and to

God, which must inform our account. Thus what makes Christian art good is not its inculcation of sound moral principles, but its manifestation of the beauty of God. This marks my irreconcilable disagreement with Tolstoy.

For Tolstoy, “Christian art is that alone which unites all people without exception” in fellow-feeling and a recognition of their equal relation to God, or the good, or, what amounts to the same thing, “the brotherhood of man” (Tolstoy 1995, p.130). “This effect,” he says, “is produced equally by art that conveys the feelings of the love of God and one’s neighbour and by everyday art that conveys the simplest feelings common to all people” (p.131).

Quite apart from the problematic way of conceiving art in terms of the cause and effects of emotions, there is a danger attending this kind of levelling, in my mind, which entails both downplaying the demands an artwork can make on us and, significantly, ignoring the special revelation of Christianity where this may be at odds with common sense and conventional emotions.

Tolstoy’s criterion of universality cannot be accepted as a criterion of art any more than a criterion of Christianity. Contrary to Tolstoy’s ideal and assumption, there is no such thing as “universal art” (p.132); all art is culturally, contextually and institutionally embedded. Aspects of any artwork may ‘transcend’ such frameworks, but the full meaning, the full experience, the full significance of its forms, are only to be had if the work is engaged with on its own terms. Similarly, the Christian conception of the Good is indissolubly interlaced with specific traditions of doctrine and worship, and with the particular Christian experience of a personal, Incarnate and Trinitarian God.

Christianity, of course, accommodates a variety of traditions; and each such contextual framework, it must be stressed, may open onto a reality, truth and beauty which is neither particular to nor constricted by that framework. Thus a Christian will access what he takes to be real and true (regardless of circumstance or perspective) through the familiar forms of his particular tradition, where the invitations to the real, and the interpretations of it, are given in a manner and style pertaining to a certain practice. For the Orthodox believer, the solemn Liturgy he knows and loves might do it, while a Protestant Evangelist manner of worship might not.

Importantly, we may experience the beauty of God through the fiction of Dostoevsky or the music of Arvo Pärt, but for this we must read the former *as* Dostoevsky and listen to the latter *as* Pärt, with all the requisite attention to genre, style and allusion that this entails. Moreover, we must recognise that these works are good *as* works of fiction or music, before we may receive the reality which they manifest, for it is *as works of art* that these pieces may manifest the Good and the Beautiful. We cannot see or partake of that goodness unless we know *how* to; that is, unless we know the rules of engagement, the ways of seeing, appropriate to novels, paintings or musical pieces.

A kind of Christian fellow-feeling, along Tolstoyan lines, may well be an effect of experiencing such art, but it is not a necessary one, nor always a desired one, and it is certainly not a criterion of the work's art-ness, Christian-ness or goodness.

### **3.2.2 Integrity and openness**

Robert Adams argues that it is not “the presence of something qualitatively identical in all good things that constitute their goodness” but that “things are good by virtue of relation to some one supreme Good” (Adams 1999, p.39). My own account, insofar as beauty remains the chief criterion for the goodness of the Christian work of art, differs in this crucial respect; that the same divine beauty is indeed said to be present in each and every such artwork, albeit in a unique way. At the same time, the goodness of a thing, its likeness to God, is indeed grounded in an attitude and a *relation* – an openness, a reaching out towards God – and in the reciprocal attitude of God towards the thing in question; where God commends and embraces this thing precisely for its openness and its reaching out.

Adams, to his credit, recognises how intimations of the infinite call to us in works of art; how art may both awaken and satisfy a dynamic hunger for transcendence. He observes that “the fracturing of the finite, as in the paintings of Van Gogh, seems to many to put us in touch with something even more wonderful than the more perfect finite things represented in, for example, the art of Raphael” (p.53). This observation follows upon a favourable invocation of Nietzsche's insistence that we shoot the arrow of longing

beyond man, and his claim that “one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star” (p.53). The Christian version – a correction, and amplification – of this attitude is best exemplified, I believe, by Gregory’s and Hart’s *epektasis*; and this can effectively account for the role of art, our making and experience of it, within our reaching out for God’s glory.

Richard Viladesau, similarly, suggests that “there is at the heart of every deep aesthetic experience – and perhaps particularly in music – an intense feeling of striving toward something beyond the moment” (Viladesau 2013, p.149); a feeling which he identifies with the longing for more beauty than the finite thing can contain. Viladesau also reminds us, as does Hart and Yannaras, that to be a good person – to *become* good – must be understood in terms of *metanoia*, repentance and conversion, and in terms of ecstasis and *epektasis*; that is, in terms of our perpetual re-orientation towards, and self-transcendence within, the infinite glory of God. To be good – to be in a state of becoming good, becoming Godlike – means to be open-ended and open to divine inspiration.

This has implications for how we perceive the integrity, consonance and completeness of the work of art. For we want a work of art to be, in a sense, internally complete; and we call it good, *as art*, if it excels within the framework of the medium, means and materials used, of the ideas and aims which are integral to it, and of the tradition to which it belongs. At the same time, something that is entirely self-contained and self-sufficient will not delight, evoke and inspire in the same way as something which invites the perceiver’s imaginative curiosity and commitment, and which rewards his own exploration of those sources of meaning and illumination which the work invokes. Thus we ask of an artwork that it is open to re-readings and re-visions, and that it is rich enough to strike us, on each subsequent encounter, as ever new; while, at the same time, retaining its enduring values.

Something that is, persistently, formally and thematically, opaque to the human imagination and to human experience is not likely to be deemed a great work of art. Such works, much like a person who is entirely self-enclosed and thinks himself a self-sustaining monad, is not likely to be seen as beautiful, whatever his other qualities. Crucially, such things, and such persons, do not invite *love*; there is nothing there which

suggests the need, and thus engenders the desire, for that mutual transfiguration which should also characterise our encounter with real art and objects of beauty.

I must stress this aspect of love as absolutely central to my model of the Good. Adams suggests that the good with which he is concerned is “the goodness of that which is worthy of love or admiration” (Adams 1999, p.13). It is entirely right that the infinite Good should be construed as an object of love, as this tells us that a growth in goodness, and a growing responsiveness to good things, should entail a growth in love. However, in so far as Adams wants to retain, as an important aspect of his account, the element of *admiration* for a great variety of finite goods, our models diverge. For, to my mind, admiration falls short of a full and proper response to the Good. We can admire something that is ‘good *as*’, but the ultimate Good – also being the Beauty of God – should not only be admired, but loved.

Adams, who thinks of beauty as one among many other goods, claims that “to say that an object is beautiful is to imply that it is good to admire it” (p.21). I would go further, arguing that to say that an object is beautiful is to say that it is good in such a way that we should *love* it; and moreover – in line with my account of desire and Godlikeness – that we should become beautiful in loving it.

Thus I suggest that its so-called ‘open-endedness’ is as crucial an aspect of good art as is its ‘integrity’. Importantly, the open-endedness of an artwork should be understood, not as complementary to, but as synonymous with its integrity, as that which consolidates it as the thing that it is. Thus a work of art, even to be good *as* a work of art, needs a quality of openness to the world – at the very least, to the world of its audience, under whose discerning gaze it truly comes alive to yield the significance of its forms and meanings.

A Christian work of art must also comply with this condition, to be good *as* a work of art; but further, be good as a *Christian* work of art, its openness must tend in the direction of God. That is, a Christian work of art, unlike a non-Christian work, in order to be ‘good as’, must also be open to – and partake of – the Good of God. Moreover, a Christian artwork, which longs for and which requires God’s beautifying gift, is ‘good *as*’ – and, at the same time, is truly *good* – only when it manifest the Beauty of God. In this, my model differs in crucial respects, not only from Tolstoy’s, but also from Adams’.

### 3.3 THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL

In departing from Robert Adams' model, an account of the Good more congenial to my own thesis is that found in Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*.

Insofar as this, technically speaking, is a kind of theistic Platonism, Gregory's account is compatible with that of Adams; there are, however, important differences. While Gregory and Adams agree that the Good is infinite, for Gregory, emphatically, the Good is also infinite Beauty. The following claims by Thomas Aquinas, here in Aidan Nichols' paraphrase, are closer to Gregory than Adams: "All things are turned toward the Beautiful and Good, desiring God as their end [...] Everything aspires towards the beautiful, then, just as everything is constructed by reference to it" (Nichols 2007, p.13). If Adams' approach can be described as analytic, Gregory's may be better characterised as mystical – as the revelations it seeks to communicate are such as are to be most properly received, and embodied, within a deep experience of God's infinite generosity.

Gregory, like Adams, begins his treatise upon the assumption of a transcendent and infinite Good which is (of) God. "The Divine One is himself the Good," writes Gregory, "and since the Divine does not admit of an opposite, we hold the divine nature to be unlimited and infinite" (Gregory 1978, p.31). From this metaphysical point follows immediately the central thesis of Gregory's treatise; his very interesting 'mystical ethics' as we might call it, which develops into a kind of theological aesthetics: "Certainly, whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God, because he is himself absolute virtue. Since, then [...] this good has no limit, the participant's desire itself necessarily has no stopping place but stretches out with the limitless" (p.31). This limitlessness is what Hart comes to call 'the Trinitarian distance,' within which all human desire and love for the beautiful is enacted. "It is therefore undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection," Gregory claims, but for this very reason "the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness" (p.31). This growth is a growing likeness to the Trinitarian God, in whom our desire for the good and the beautiful seeks its consummation; in whom we recognise the infinite perfection of which, by grace, we may become finite participants.



Significantly, the concept or name of Beauty is introduced by Gregory as, inspired by Moses' insatiable desire for participating in God, he articulates the very essence of his treatise:

Such an experience [of *epektasis*, of progress from glory to glory] seems to me to belong to the soul which loves what is beautiful. Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived. Therefore, the ardent lover of beauty, although receiving what is always visible as an image of what he desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of the archetype. And the bold request which goes up the mountain of desire asks this: to enjoy the Beauty not in mirrors and reflections, but face to face (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, pp.114-115).

Though God is also named the Good, at this point of Gregory's treatise – at the peak of it – the 'moral name' and the language of virtue yields to the 'aesthetic name' and the language of vision and desire. This seems more appropriately to evoke and characterise the longing to behold and participate in the abundant glory and radiant love of God. The 'aesthetic' account more precisely and more powerfully articulates the kind of *experience* we are concerned with; indeed, the emphasis on experience itself invites the aesthetic, rather than the moral, characterisation – for we are not speaking of a conceptualisation, or evaluation, of God, but of a full embodied experience and vision of God's glory, and while this is not intelligibly construed as a 'moral experience,' it may fruitfully be described as an aesthetic one.

It is within the kind of story told by Gregory of Nyssa, I believe, that the practice, experience and evaluation of Christian art ought to be positioned. For the Christian artist aims for beauty in his art as in his life, as also Robert Bridges affirms:

our true compass in art as our comfort in faith,  
our daily bread of pleasur [...] thus I deem  
of Beauty among Goddes best gifts, and even above  
the pleasur of Virtue accord it honour of men (Bridges 1934, p.95).

### 3.3.1 Resemblance and likeness

My model of the good differs from Adams' primarily over our different understanding of Godlikeness. A thing is good, says Adams, insofar as it resembles God in some respect. A thing is only truly good, and in the likeness of God, I say, if it manifests the beauty of God. Thus when Adams says that "other things are excellent insofar as they resemble or imitate God" (Adams 1999, p.29), I react here to the inclusion of 'imitation'; if this is synonymous to resemblance, this provides a reason for me to speak instead of *likeness*, and to understand this likeness not in the sense of mimesis but *manifestation*. Indeed, I do not think that God can be imitated – or that it means a great deal to speak of imitating God – but that he can be ever-variously invoked and manifested; just as he does not repeat himself, in the sense of a copy or reproduction, but rather, in the sense of a musical variation, ever expresses his eternal glory anew.

Rather than suggesting that any 'worldly' instance of the good will necessarily be a 'radically imperfect' likeness of God, I prefer to say that any such instance does not exhaust the Goodness of God; not because God is holding anything back, but because his generosity is endless, and because the thing – or the artwork – is finite. More importantly, our vision and our capacity for love are imperfect: we behold as much of God's beauty in each beautiful thing as we are capable of – and the more such things we properly discern, and rightly desire, the more we grow in capacity to receive what God gives, for our path towards him, our growth in Godlikeness, consists precisely in the cultivation of our responsiveness to that goodness, beauty and glory which he unceasingly bestows.

My model has the advantage, over Adams', that the God-likeness of a thing does not have to be located in or identified with a particular internal property of that thing; it is rather a quality of possessing something over and above itself. As such, likeness has its source in gratuity, in the generosity of God himself. Which is to say that we manifest goodness and beauty precisely when we love, create and give beyond ourselves, when we open onto, and reach out toward, others – and to the energies and the glory of God.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This model may be further defended with reference to Christos Yannaras' understanding of the *ek-static* nature of personhood (*Person and Eros* 2007).

Adams, on the other hand, who seeks to locate the resemblance to God more empirically in the thing itself, in a particular excellence of that thing, and to identify a corresponding or analogous property in God, often has to labour his point; as when he suggests that one's cooking might manifest a resemblance to God's creativity (Adams 1999, p.30) or when, as a counter example, he has to concede that a three-leafed clover, though it shares the three-in-oneness of the Trinity, is not thereby better than a four-leafed clover (p.32). It is better, I think, to speak of Godlikeness in terms of manifested beauty; where the ineffable nature of this manifestation has its source, not in some torturously defined property of the thing, but in the sheer generosity of God.

Adams, when he speaks directly of beauty, which is but briefly, includes it as one of many excellences, and one of many ways of resembling God. On my theory, on the other hand, beauty is *the* way, above any other resemblance, in which a thing manifests likeness to God.

For example, justice, unless it is beautiful justice, is not iconic, does not manifest Godlikeness; nor is creativity iconic, unless it are beautiful. For all such things may, conceivably, in being done for the wrong end – a tyrant's summary 'justice', a murderer's 'ingenuity' – tend away from God, be closed or opposed to God; and, as such, may be the gravest examples of ugliness, opacity and distortion of God's image. Nor, by the same reasoning, is the harmony of a painting, the eloquence of a novel, or the sublime majesty of a symphony enough to render these artwork in the likeness of God; for if they do not, in their significant forms, *as* the artworks they are, in their 'integral open-endedness' reach out for God's gift, then however good they may be – *as* paintings, novels or musical compositions – they will not be *good* in the iconic sense of manifesting the Beauty of God.

### **3.3.2 God as co-appreciator and co-creator**

It is implied, by my account of the beauty of an artwork as a divine gift, that God is implicated in the artwork's completion or perfection. This beauty being what makes the

artwork truly good, it would seem to follow that this artwork is good, not simply by its relation to the Good of God, but indeed by God having a hand in its making.

Here, I am committed to stronger claims than those made by Adams in his model of resemblance to God. Adams is to be saluted for his bold move of taking God's appreciation and judgement into consideration of what we do, and should, appreciate and judge as good. My own model, however, will suggest a different way in which God's affirmation of finite and created goods should figure in our experience and understanding of, in particular, beautiful works of Christian art.

On Adams' theory, "we can say that what God appreciates is indeed good" (Adams 1999, p.35), as God is the best judge of what resembles God. On my own theory, we can say that what God beholds as good is indeed beautiful. For I wish to say that that is graced with beauty which receives God's aesthetic affirmation; which pleases him, when seen, to adopt Aquinas' definition of beauty, and to which he – in his very act of affirmative appreciation – bestows his own beauty. At the same time, importantly – as I have argued in the previous chapter – it is to the infinite generosity of God that the Christian artwork is offered as a gift in return. Thus we say that certain works of art are in the likeness of God, not simply because they have found favour with God and so have received a share of his beauty, but very much because the forms they achieved were such as to embody a right responsiveness and attitude towards God, his forms and his beauty.

Our works are good when God sees that they are good; as, in the Genesis account, "God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31), so we should recognise the God-favoured, God-affirmed work as beautiful, as bearing the beauty of God. We may say that that is most like God which God likes the most. Indeed, as I believe the quote from Genesis suggests, God's appreciation and approval of his own creation is primarily aesthetic, not a matter of moral judgement. Hart, in this vein, speaks of God creating and appraising the world as 'good' at an aesthetic distance: "and this goodness is perfectly aesthetic" (Hart 2004, p.272).

On my theory, then, we do not have to say that God only appreciates that which already resembles him; rather, these things become more properly like him, more fully conformed to his likeness, when he, by his generous appreciation and love, manifests his own beauty in their forms. Pertinent here is the observation of Dionysius the Areopagite,

invoked by Maritain, that God's "love causes the beauty of what He loves, whereas our love is caused by the beauty of what we love" (Maritain 1943, p.27).

Importantly, there are many beautiful things which are not much good *as* anything, which are perhaps perfectly useless, broken and obsolete; but as God loves the poor, the heartbroken, and the suffering – as he loves even the sinners – so he may appreciate also such ruins, fragments and botched attempts which reach out to his generous Spirit for repair or fruition. On this understanding, it is perhaps easier for me than for Adams to claim that something can be beautiful and good which is not 'excellent' in any obvious sense; as my theory, unlike Adams', is not committed to excellence, it is less problematic for me to affirm the divine beautification of our half-successes and failings.

Just like our own engagement with beautiful works of art, God's involvement in our creative efforts is no mere 'disinterested interest'. Indeed, we may say that this distance of appreciation is 'reduced' to the point of becoming a *presence*. Now, not only is this presence of God's beauty that which renders an artwork *good*; it is also this which commends the work as a proper object of *love*.

### 3.3.3 Love of the good

In drawing this chapter to its conclusion, it is important to address again the kind of response the object of goodness and beauty calls for and calls forth. My pronouncements here will again recall as well as resume my account of the cultivation of desire. One term to seize on, in this regard, is that of *eros*. This finds a central place in Gregory of Nyssa's treatment of our love for the beautiful and the good, where *eros* is also used to mean an intense form of *agape* (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, p.186). Gregory's picture of God as a valid object of *eros* is also defended, in slightly different terms, in Adams.<sup>22</sup> Both Adams and Gregory consistently conceive of the Good as an object of love.

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<sup>22</sup> For a modern account more closely akin to Gregory's, Yannaras' *Person and Eros* is again an exemplary work.

Adams uses the term *eros* to characterise our pursuit, desire and love for good particulars, and for the intrinsic value of an object. This, as he presents it, is a pursuit arising from admiration and, importantly, from *recognition* of the qualities of the object. Adams is right to stress the element of recognition. For, on my model, the iconic good is not ‘judged’ as such by moral deliberation, according to a predetermined set of ethical (or aesthetic) criteria, but is rather recognised as such by vision and imaginative engagement. Not only does this chime with our experience and appreciation of Christian art; the visionary or imaginative mode also characterises, much better than our posture of moral adjudication, our relationship to God. For it is not for us to judge or assess God, but to see and to love him: in loving, to see him; in seeing, to love him. God, as he is Beauty and beautiful, is apprehended aesthetically.<sup>23</sup>

Adams recognises that “beauty, in persons or impersonal objects, seems particularly apt to inspire Eros” (Adams 1999, p.146). For Adams, beauty is an excellence and the eros it kindles, as a more than self-regarding love for an object for its own sake, is also a kind of excellence. Of course, it is right to distinguish between good and bad desires, where this goodness or badness (tending to fruition or perversion) is conditional upon the orientation and the object of the desire; but, rather than as a relation of one excellence to another, I would construe the movement of eros towards beauty in terms of the mutual open-endedness of the desire and the object of that desire, where the desiring person is incomplete and the beauty of the object is inexhaustible. As such, our love of particular works of beauty may be positioned within the greater movement towards the beauty of God which characterises our state of *epektasis*.

That works of art may be appropriate objects of a right desire is of course a crucial element of my model of Christian art; Adams’ theory may serve to support such a model, for he suggests that “the possible objects of an excellent Eros” includes “particular artistic creation” (p.147). More interestingly, Adams also holds that eros can be “appropriately ascribed to God” (p.147) and he allows for the possibility of describing God as a lover of art. This is a great benefit of Adams’ commendable approach of making

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<sup>23</sup> If that term may generously be expanded to include even the beatific vision, this could have the very interesting implication, for theology, that the aesthetic also characterises our mode of seeing and being after death.

sense of the good, and the lovable, in terms of what is loved and held as good by God. Adams holds that God may love – indeed, that it is a part of God’s own excellence that he does love – excellent works of art. Again, I would not characterise this relation in terms of excellence, but Adams’ picture does, I believe, corroborate my own synergetic model of God’s active and loving participation in our works of beauty; where, crucially, the awareness of God’s love should serve to motivate our own labours of, and engagements with, Christian art.

The story told by Christian art is that, indeed, we flourish as persons in love of the good, but that this should be construed as love of God’s Beauty. It is desire for God’s beauty which defines our epektasis and governs our efforts at Godlikeness. Thus, writes Bridges,

man growth to find  
his Will in Goddes pleasur, his pleasur in Goddes Will;  
drawn to thatt happiness by the irresistible  
predominant attraction, which worketh secure’  
in mankind’s Love of Beauty and in the Beauty of Truth (Bridges 1934, p.126).

We can turn, in closing, to the poetry of Dante for an exemplary instance, as well as a theoretical corroboration, of this account of the good of Christian art. I have previously invoked the treatment of beauty in the Divine Comedy; and the vision of beauty, I believe, is integral to Dante’s conception of the Good. Not unlike Adams and Gregory, Dante presents the Good as an object of love and also the intensifier of love, just as growth in goodness, towards the Good, is growth in love:

for  
the good, once it is understood as such,  
enkindles love; and in accord with more  
goodness comes greater love (Dante 1995, p.505).

Significantly, Dante's poem is most beautiful when it is at its best; both in the sense of being good *as* poetry, and in the sense of being open to the Good. At its consummation, the fulfilment of its poetic form coincides with the culmination of the spiritual journey the work offers us. Indeed, the poem is perhaps most beautiful in the final canto, which tells precisely of Dante's highest attainment of love and vision; his epiphany of the Trinity through the aid of the Mother of God, and his epiphany of the Incarnation, which experiences are inseparable from his own transfiguration in the divine light, his union with divine Love. Nor is it a coincidence, I think, that the poem's beauty is greatest when it tells of Dante's *experience* – not his theological or philosophical explanation – of divine light, grace, and love; for here, as he attains his greatest likeness to God, so does his poetry.

It is important to note that Dante's work, and Dante's journey, can be understood in terms of Gregory of Nyssa's; for Dante's voyage-narrative is one of the expansion and intensification of longing, expectancy and reaching out for divine love and beauty – of *epektasis*. Dante's eyes and his heart alike grow increasingly 'enkindled' as the poem unfurls:

And I, who now was nearing Him who is  
the end of all desires, as I ought,  
lifted my longing to its ardent limit (p.538).

God, here at the culmination of the poem, is variously addressed and named as "Infinite Goodness" (p.539), "Eternal Light", and finally as "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (p.541).

When, in the consolidating and concluding passages of *The Life of Moses*, Gregory seems to abandon his invocations of Beauty to again speak of God in terms of the Good, this is not simply a case of reverting to 'moral language', but rather of assimilating the discourse of virtue to the 'aesthetic language' of desire and vision; thus enhancing the meaning of 'Good', charging it with a genuine sense of God's manifested glory. Thus "every desire for the Good which is attracted to that ascent constantly



expands as one progresses in pressing on to the Good. This is truly the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him” (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, p.116).

It is important also that Gregory does not fail to call God “the divine Giver” (p.116), lest we forget the *gratuity* of the Beauty and Goodness that inspires us; and lest we forget that this toward which we strain in insatiable love is not a static and abstract something, but a personal, living God, whose love for us is inexhaustible in turn – his generosity even exceeding our desire. This Dante too realises, for he tells us how

That Good, ineffable and infinite  
which is above, directs Itself toward love  
as light directs Itself to polished bodies.  
Where ardour is, that Good gives of Itself;  
and where more love is, there that Good confers  
a greater measure of eternal worth (Dante 1995, p.285).

Adams argues that “Each of us is called to love the good (and thus to love God, if my theistic account of the good is correct). This is our most comprehensive task for the whole of our life” (Adams 1999, p.302). To say, as I want, that we are called to love the beautiful, is not, I think, a less comprehensive task; for beauty is of God, and God is Beauty. The love of beauty does cast the idea of vocation in a different light, and it may thereby emphasise different aspects of the way we engage with the world.

Adams’ “suggestion is that vocation is primarily a matter of what goods are given to us to love, and thus of our part in God’s all-embracing and perfect love” (p.302). The vocation of the Christian artist is to manifest this love in newly formed particulars; to see this love in the particulars of the world and to transform that vision into works, into new objects of vision and love. The vocation proclaimed by Christian art, therefore, is in a sense more constructive and transformative than the vocation proposed by Adams; for Christian art emphatically enjoins that the world should be re-fashioned in the love and likeness of God, that our task is one of regeneration and glorification.

## CHAPTER 4: THE ONTOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN ART

Christian art, as should already have become clear, is art with a profound sense of purpose. The calling, the prerogative, and the labour of Christian art are deeply implicated in a consummate regenerative vision of human life. This chapter will address the ontological implications of the Christian artistic project, articulating more fully the Christian artwork's ambition of really transforming the world into the likeness of God.

I will argue here that a consistent engagement with Christian art demands that the artwork is positioned firmly in the context of what I call a Christian ontological narrative; without which the work remains unintelligible and inaccessible, *as* the Christian art and Christian creative labour it is.

A discussion of the ontological status of, and the experience thereby offered by, Christian art, should be pursued with constant reference to (or at least vigilant mindfulness of) three crucial questions: what kind of change is wrought by the artwork, for what kind of being, in what kind of world? The radical divergence of Christian and non-Christian thought on these questions gives two incommensurate approaches to Christian art; indeed the Christian and the non-Christian will be seen to be talking, not only about two completely different things, but two different (possible) worlds.

The Christian answers to these questions yield a comprehensive, theological and anthropological, vision of the Christian artwork as a sacramental object deeply implicated in the regeneration of the world. On this model, the Christian artwork is a radically new object in the world, differently understood – indeed, in a world differently understood – than in accounts from analytic philosophy. The newness of the Christian artwork is a newness *in* the world but not *of* the world, manifesting the uncreated beauty and glory of God; the change wrought by the work is not only cultural, but also cosmic. This artwork is made by and for man, who is essentially 'man the artist' and microcosm, called to be the steward and transformer of creation, a co-worker with God. Crucially, the work enters a world created by God, where man may commune with his maker through material works, but also a fallen world yearning for transfiguration, where the Christian artwork finds its true meaning as contributing to a redeemed and regenerated cosmos.

## 4.1 CHRISTIAN ART FOR THE CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

An initially fruitful foil for the development of a distinctly Christian ontology of Christian art is Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley's paper, "Religious music for godless ears" (2010). This is a piece which, I believe, fails to engage with Christian art on its own terms, and thereby provides a method for experiencing art which, if adhered to, has the effect of alienating us from works of inestimable value and from the vision of God enshrined in these works.

The paper, on my reading, does not have a particularly developed or sophisticated account of what it would mean for something to be a specifically Christian work of art; or how this would be significantly different from a non-Christian work. Nor do Neill and Ridley sufficiently account for – or even try to account for – the way in which the *world* into which the artwork enters is differently apprehended by a Christian and by an atheist of the kind postulated in the paper.

On my account, however, an artwork is a Christian artwork precisely by asking to be seen – to be an object of vision, as well as of appreciation, as indeed of love – within a Christian apprehension of the world. The Christian artwork wants to disclose the Christ-form; it wants to manifest the beauty of God; and it wants to be loved – as my next chapter will argue – within a love for God.

In a view or version of the world in which such vision and such love is counted as an impossibility, an insidious illusion or a sinisterly harmful delusion – in the world of Neill and Ridley's 'militant atheist', that is – the work of Christian art must be unintelligible, and so remain invisible as what it is or aspires to be. Christian art requires a Christian response. Godless ears, by my reasoning, are tone-deaf as regards the (divine tones of a) Christian musical work.

### 4.1.1 Ontological Context

As I sought to establish already in the first chapter, my discussion of art is premised on the assumption that the artwork is a relational object which is always contextually

embedded and so asks to be contextually discerned, in line with certain appropriate conditions and conceptions. It should be maintained therefore that the Christian artwork, as any other artwork, is dependent for certain contextual phenomena and certain modes of perception for its very existence as the kind of work that it is. In the case of Christian art, there is a question, of course, as to which context is the decisive one: what we may call the artworld or artistic culture at large, or the culture of Christianity.

On my understanding, all art is implicated in cultural practices that extend beyond the narrow confines of the artworld, inescapably caught up with value judgements which appeal to wider practices and beliefs, aesthetic as well as moral and religious. Christian art, therefore, cannot be disentangled from Christian practices and meanings. Yet it is not the cultural context that is the decisive one, but what I like to call the *ontological* context.

Others will argue, however, that only or chiefly the artworld is the relevant context. If we hold such a view, then we may convince ourselves that we have appropriately experienced the so-called Christian artwork without having to make a great effort at understanding, let alone sharing, the faith behind the artwork. It is easy then to dismiss any specifically Christian associations or values as non-essential to the experience and to the work; as extrinsic, incidental, or instrumental.

If we subscribe to the first alternative, thinking that the work belongs at least as much to Christian culture as to the artworld, we may or may not want to say that an observer shares in the Christian faith in order to correctly apprehend the work of art, but we would at least ask that he gives serious consideration to the forms, meanings, and values of the Christian imagination.

Neill and Ridley seem happy to follow a light version of this second alternative; that is, while they acknowledge the need for a real awareness of the Christian context when engaging with the work, they deny that it *requires* a Christian *response*. They deny that a Christian perception and experience of the work is necessary in order to appropriately experience it. It is possible, they think, to fully appreciate the work without being a Christian believer. Indeed, they propose a model in which the atheist may get most out of the Christian artwork by actively rejecting its Christian premises and meanings.

Neill and Riley put forth an ambitious thesis, where they hold that the sheer artistic qualities of a work – in their example, the musical qualities of Bach’s *Mass in B minor* – manifest a creative spirit more powerful than any creeds or opinions it may be associated with or used to express.

Importantly, Neill and Ridley begin with some very sound observations. Thus they affirm, at one point, that the idea “that the B minor Mass is not essentially a religious work at all [is] sufficiently outlandish to warrant a certain scepticism, if not outright disbelief”; and thus propose to “take the *religious* character of religious music rather more seriously” (Neill and Ridley 2010, p.1003). They put aside several approaches to Christian music that do not fulfil this basic criteria; while they themselves offer to give an account that allows an atheist to properly experience the Christian artwork “for the sake of what it and nothing else *is*” (p.1008). To a limited extent, they succeed, by showing how an atheist (of a moderate kind) may, for example, appreciate the artwork’s formal properties and its beauty; but they concede, emphatically, that “the forms of engagement envisioned here fail to take seriously enough the essentially religious character of the musical works at issue”, and thus entails “a manner of engagement of the works that falls well short of experiencing and valuing them ‘for their own sakes’, for the sake of what they are actually” (p.1010). I agree with this – and I extend the same criticism to Neill and Ridley’s own more radical proposal, which they go on to develop.

Leaving the so-called “room-temperature atheist” behind, Neill and Ridley instead focus on the much more interesting case of the “militant atheist” (p.1016). In suggesting, ultimately, that such a militant atheist may still – “against what would strongly appear to be the odds” (p.1016) – have a real engagement with Christian art as what it really is, I believe Neill and Ridley are mistaken, and indeed fail to answer to what the Christian artwork really is. For all their subtle reasoning around issues of aesthetic and religious value, they fail to address the ontological presuppositions underlying the Christian making and Christian perception of the Christian artwork. Of course the militant atheist can focus his attention on isolated aspects of the Christian work, and so enjoy, for example, the technical mastery or the emotional intensity of the piece, while he may at the same reject much of what the piece ‘presupposes’ or ‘propagates’. This is noted by

Neill and Ridley, but they want to make a much more radical point; namely, that he is able to appreciate the work *as* the kind of work that it is, in its integral entirety, even while rejecting its Christian foundations; and that he may do so, not despite, but *because* of the work's religious qualities.

“The *Mass*,” they argue, is the “unfolding of its creator's profoundly distinctive understanding of and commitment to a particular vision of the world. And that makes the *Mass* a triumph not merely of human ingenuity, brilliance, or even mastery, but of the human spirit itself. For in articulating the vision embodied in the *Mass* [...] Bach shows us what is noblest in us: the capacity to invest life with meaning, with beauty, with dignity, and so to make life not merely worth living, but to illuminate it with the highest value” (p.1019).

We may wonder if this is not, however sincere and generous an assessment, also somewhat patronising; for on the Christian model, human life has indeed already been endowed with beauty, dignity, and meaning, as with freedom, creativity, and love. The project of Christian art lies very much in re-articulating this, which is not to invent or to invest life with these qualities but to respond to a gift. These qualities are not merely the end, but also the inspiration of our labours – and to conceive of them as being sufficiently ennobling and of the highest value without reference to their divine origin and end is, I believe, to negate rather than affirm the Christian project.

While the militant atheist may very well recognise the primacy of freedom, dignity, and beauty, on a psychological or anthropological level, he will conceive of these values – as he will conceive of man himself, no less than his art – under a completely different ontological conception from that of the Christian artist or viewer: this, in my view, may amount to *not* seeing these things at all (as what they are). What, for example, may the militant atheist fruitfully mean by ‘the human spirit’ that remotely resembles a religious understanding of the God-given spirit that sustains and animates humankind? It is the latter which Christian artworks, such as Bach's *Mass*, is committed to manifesting.

That said, Neill and Ridley continue by asserting that here, in the above model of response, there is something substantial for the atheist to hold on to. “So, for example, if his view is that the perniciousness of religion lies in the fact that it is a tissue of superstitious falsehoods [...] then he can reflect that *even* in the service of a vision that is

flawed in these ways the human spirit is still capable of shining through [and then] he is surely taking comfort in the work *because* of, and not just despite, what it is” (p.1020). But what, on this view, *is* the work of art? Is this the same thing, or the same kind of thing, that the Christian artist and listener take it to be? I really do not think so.

We must wonder about the model of creativity that is suggested here; whereby the purest art forms are the most abstract, non-conceptual, non-referential ones, free from the history of human thought and belief. This model is implausible already for musical works, but supposedly Neill and Ridley would wish to be able to say the same about painting or literature; and it is more contentious still to suggest that we can appreciate a Fra Angelico, not despite but because of its religious nature, if we find the triumph of human spirit and artistry only in the application of line and colour, while simultaneously considering the Christian forms and figures of the frescos, not the work’s fruition, but rather pernicious obstacles to it. How would we even go about looking at such art in such a way, refusing to be moved by the values expressed by the forms and the figurative content – where these forms and figures explicitly seek to reveal something about the spiritual import of human life – but praising the work as a triumphant achievement of something called the ‘human spirit’?

This line of thought, however, is carried on as follows; and here we reach the central conceit of Neill and Ridley’s argument: “But perhaps his [the militant atheist’s] view is a rather deeper one. Perhaps his view is that religion is pernicious, not because of any merely cognitive or practical failings, but because it betrays and devalues the human spirit” (p.1020), in using notions of sin to negate our healthy animal instincts, for example; thus “it cultivates a rejection of the self as the site of any possible value (*except* in so far as the self rejects itself)” (p.1020). If Bach’s *Mass* is exemplary of precisely such a rejection of the human spirit, it would seem to be insurmountably objectionable to the atheist; but, so the argument goes, even despite this, indeed because of it, that very human spirit reasserts itself in the music, in the commitment to a vision that gives meaning to the world.

Here again I must pause to ask: if the ‘spirit’ seeks to give meaning in *such* a way, to *such* a world, as is expressed or embodied in *that* piece (not just in the tones, but in the

words, in the whole plethora of association and invocation of meanings) – how is this spirit still something that can be set against that very vision it so triumphantly proclaims?

In the words of Neill and Ridley, a triumph of this sort is “possible only when that spirit turns against itself in a peculiarly powerful and uncompromising way” (p.1020). But if the spirit of man is best exemplified by the commitment to a vision that ‘gives meaning’ – while that meaning itself can be scoffed at – then it would seem that the human spirit can manifest itself most gloriously, not only in the follies of Christian art, but even in the aberrations of Nazi art; for if the creative spirit is always at odds with the values it serves to proclaim, then the nature of those values is irrelevant – or rather, it would seem, the worse the values, the better, for the worse the values, the more forcefully the spirit may manifest itself in contradicting them.

This does lead, to say the least, to an odd view of artistic creation, of art history, and of the traditions and transmissions of human values.

Let us return our attention to the issue of ontology – of what the artwork is and what it is to see it as such – for it is really here that my model diverges absolutely from Neill and Ridley’s, and it is by considering the artwork’s ontology that we can see how widely their approach misses the mark when it comes to the special status of Christian works of art. While it is true, on one level, that what makes an artwork Christian is its embeddedness within a Christian culture, Christian art is committed to a much wider regenerative project, where the particular transformation of the artwork must not only be apprehended within, but also receives its full value from, the greater transfiguration of the world as a whole. Neill and Ridley treat these wider ontological commitments of the Christian artwork itself as, at best, incidental to the work’s art-qualities and work-qualities; as something that can be dispensed with without this entailing a mistreatment of the work. But such an approach is precisely a misapprehension of the Christian artwork.

I must emphasise that the Christian nature of the work is to be located, from the very first, in the realm of ontology – in the ambition of its forms and its beauty to manifest the real – not, as appears to be assumed in Neill and Ridley’s paper, in content, in pedagogy, and in the evocation of religious emotional or psychological states. On my understanding, it is precisely the ontological commitments of the Christian artwork which



rescues it from any need to be elucidating, didactic or devotional in any sentimental, platitudinous or pragmatic sense. The artwork does not have to tell of regeneration and redemption in order to be Christian – though many great Christian artworks do – for it is itself a regenerative work, a redeemed part of creation. It is not the artwork’s capacity to provide comforting narratives that ensures its Christian status, but its place in a lived narrative of deification, and its manifestation of a divine order.

Recalling the arguments in our first chapter, we may understand the ontological context of the Christian artwork as that Christ-form in relation to which – and within the contribution to which – the art achieves its form and meaning. Further, taking our cue from David Bentley Hart, and gathering the fruits of our account of beauty, we can see the ontological context of Christian art as being, not only the form of Christ, but the self-revelation of the Trinity; and so we may see the whole project of Christian art – as indeed the whole of Christian life – as unfurling within the ‘Trinitarian distance’, as Hart calls it, the ceaseless unfurling and inexhaustible gift of the mutual delight and love of the Three Persons.

Real art, says Hart, “repeats the gesture of creation”; that is, it responds in grateful creativity to God’s original gift, and so *participates* in creation, creating the ever new. Art does this, not simply by virtue of its formal configuration or its manipulation of matter, but rather through its nature as gratuitous variation on what we may call ‘the Trinitarian theme’. For, says Hart, “As God is Trinity, in whom all difference is possessed as perfect peace and unity, the divine life might be described as infinite music, and creation too might be described as a music whose intervals, transitions, and phrases are embraced within God’s eternal, triune polyphony” (Hart 2003, p.274).<sup>24</sup> This provides an understanding of Christian art radically at odds with that of Neill and Ridley, because rooted in a radically different conception of the ontology of artworks and of ontology at large.

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<sup>24</sup> Hence Hart is able to argue that Bach, with his wondrous variations, is “the most inspired witness to the *ordo amoris* in the fabric of being [because] no one as compellingly demonstrates that the infinite is beauty and that beauty is infinite” (Hart, pp.282-283). Bach’s music is iconic of God’s kenotic self-revelation, of his inexhaustible generosity; it is, in Hart’s view, “the ultimate Christian music; it reflects as no other human artefact ever has or could the Christian vision of creation” (p.83).

#### 4.1.2 Beliefs in and about the work

The attitude we may ascribe to a kind of atheist observer (which more or less fits Neill and Ridley's characterisation) would say that nothing more is asked of me, the perceiver, in engaging with Christian art than when I deal with art in general; that there is nothing about the work itself which asks of me that I revise my view of the world. A key assumption at work here is that Christian religious beliefs only pertain to what lies outside the work, to what is referenced or professed by the work, but not to anything as integral to the very existence of the work as to render the work itself inaccessible or unintelligible to a non-believer.

The crucial point I want to make – and what Neill and Ridley do not sufficiently address – is this; that the beliefs to be found *in* the work are to a great extent beliefs *about* the work, about what kind of thing this work *is*. We should not be so preoccupied with what the artwork may have to say about theology, but rather what the theological picture says about the artwork – and thus in what manner it may be appropriate to engage with it. The problem is that the atheist does not acknowledge the Christian artwork's ontological aspirations. He understands the work as something which may be used to project or profess certain beliefs, much like a sermon or a treatise does – but he doesn't think that there is anything about the work which demands a radically different kind of engagement. He certainly doesn't think that the work is capable of revealing the Christian God.

This, however, happens to be the ambition of the work, and only if we are able to perceive the artwork in line with this assumption, can we be said to perceive the artwork as what it is – in the light of the relevant context, namely the ontological narrative of Christianity.

It is true for Christian art as for any art that, as Peter Lamarque writes, “There have to be appropriate beliefs, attitudes, modes of appreciation, and expectations for works to come into, and be sustained in, existence” (Lamarque 2010, p.54). This puts a sharp ontological point to the Sartrean intuition that without the requisite imaginative effort, the work does not appear at all, properly speaking. Sartre's view, paraphrased by Lamarque, is that “works (of art) per se do not even exist, strictly speaking, but are

projections of the imagination [...] and thus their identity as pictures [or other] requires an act of imaginative consciousness, a ‘radical change’ and ‘negation’ that shifts consciousness from perception to imagination” (p.52).<sup>25</sup>

Adding to Lamarque’s thesis, what needs to be taken into account in the case of Christian art is precisely what Christian beliefs say about the world into which the artwork is introduced. If this world is not perceived as one of objects among objects in a purposeless space, such as the atheist may take himself to arbitrarily inhabit, but a dynamic and ordered creation sustained by the grace of God, the impact of a new created work, freely created for the love of God, will be seen to be quite different from the kind of object stipulated by the militant atheist.

The atheist, unable to adopt the Christian view of the world, will subject the Christian artwork to categorical and conceptual imprisonment. He may find ways to appropriate the work to his own world, and ways to justify this appropriation, Neill and Ridley’s paper being a case in point, but until he is able rather to approach the world of the work, to appreciate the work on its own terms, he will remain in a world apart and the ontological status – indeed, the very *existence* – of the work, not simply its values, will elude him.

Adopting this line of thought, I think it is perfectly permissible to suggest that, contrary to the assumption of Neill and Ridley, the militant atheist really does not engage with the Christian work of art at all. It is not only the difference in value-system that keeps him at a distance, for this distance may very well be traversed by methods such as those suggested by Neill and Ridley, by changing the priorities of the kinds of value inherent in the work, placing the aesthetic or artistic achievement above the moral or doctrinal content, for example. It is rather that the militant atheist’s inability to inhabit the

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<sup>25</sup> While Sartre emphasises the ‘imaginative effort’ needed to bring a work into existence, his contribution, however perceptive, is insufficient for the case of Christian art – which requires, rather, the kind of imaginative engagement encapsulated in Blake’s understanding of the Imagination; whereby the Imagination is a way of seeing the divine image in all things, seeing all things related to the central illuminating form of Christ – to see, in effect, with and in Christ. von Balthasar, incidentally, points to the sense in Blake’s theory when he claims that “the theological imagination (Einbildungskraft = ‘power to shape an image’) lies with Christ, who is at once the image (Bild) and the power (Kraft) of God” (von Balthasar 1982, p.490). For the Christian, then, the Imagination is a way of seeing the real, that which beyond the contingent and figurative partakes and allows us to partake of the grace and glory of God. This is a line of thought that Sartre’s philosophical commitments – just like Neill and Ridley’s – cannot allow.

ontological narrative and the ontological culture of the artwork, which we may construe as an imaginative failure, means that this work does not exist for him.<sup>26</sup>

In short, since the Christian work is embedded not just in another worldly practice but in *another conception of the world*, any attempt to explain or access the work's existence without acknowledging that ontological narrative will not satisfy either the Christian artist or the Christian audience.

David Jones, in the "Preface" to *The Anathemata*, voices his apprehensions about the religious meanings of his work being unintelligible to a readership weaned off the traditions which he invokes; with the further implication that – if the requisite cultural contexts, and the requisite discernment, are missing – the work may fail to come into existence. Jones (1952) writes: "It may be that the kind of thing I have been trying to make is no longer makeable in the kind of way in which I have tried to make it" (p.15). He fears a condition in which the specifically Christian nature and meaning of his work – partly as regards 'content', but more significantly as regards its form and its ontological foundations – will not be recognised.

R. S. Thomas' body of work can stand as a witness to a more contemporary, and so perhaps a yet more critical, version of the same condition. Thomas, certainly, was intensely and consistently pained by a culture whose language, craft, science and technology recede ever further from their sacramental potentials. As D. Z. Phillips writes, "In a culture in which the greatest respect is accorded to truths which admit of factual verification, is there any way of talking about God without being irrational?" (Phillips, p.142); and Thomas himself:

Is there no way  
not to be the sport  
of reason?  
[...]  
I return with messages  
I cannot decipher, garrulous

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<sup>26</sup> The situation might not be dissimilar to that of the non-baptised who may not partake of the Eucharist.

about them, worrying the ear  
of the passer-by, hot on his way  
to the marriage of plain fact with plain fact (Thomas 1993, p.388).

Thomas', as Jones', is a fear about cultural conditions, in which religious referents have been weeded from the common language, and so become void of sense, but it is also an apprehension of the nature of language itself, and its inability to ever contain and communicate our intuitions about God.

While these apprehensions rest on a clear understanding of the Christian artwork as culturally embedded, Jones – more emphatically than Thomas – also works under a conception of the artwork as in a very real sense a *sacramental* work and object. Therefore, in failing to engage with such a work in the requisite manner, we are not simply alienated from a cultural discourse and tradition, but are indeed robbed of an opportunity to experience the presence and transformative power of God. For the artwork, on a Christian understanding, is implicated in the sacramental and regenerative history of the world: it plays an integral part in our calling to restore the world to its intended beauty.

Jones sees all human artefacture, all our making of signs and significant forms, as culminating in the Eucharist and the Mass. Similarly, for William Blake, every artwork is a brick towards the building of the New Jerusalem; while for the icon-painters, every icon is an instantiation of spiritualised and redeemed matter, one part of a transfigured cosmos. *This* is the relevant context in which the Christian artwork begs to be apprehended, in which it yields its full significance, and in which our experience of it may truly be an invaluable one. And this is the context that the atheist does not acknowledge – and does not act upon. He may acknowledge that there is a cultural context of Christianity, without having to commit to any beliefs, but he cannot acknowledge as true the ontological narrative that the Christian professes – and hence he fails to gain access to the Christian artwork, fails to experience it as what it is.

The experience of Christian art entails seeing the artwork as a whole in the light of a Christian ontological conception of the world and its objects; just as it involves seeing the beauty of the object as indeed partaking of the beauty of God. We should thus

understand atheism in this case, not as a refusal to hold certain propositional statements as true, but rather as an unwillingness to undergo such an experience, and to see in such a way, where the claims or demands made by the artwork are not demands of consent but of attention and attentiveness; not of rational deliberation, but of a wholesale reorientation of desire and imagination, will and vision.

It must be stressed that a kind of personal effort at imagining ‘what it would be like’ is not at all sufficient, nor what is asked for by Christian art. The atheist *may* – but I doubt even this – be able to apprehend the artwork *as if* he were a Christian, by some imaginative effort; but he cannot apprehend it *as* a Christian. Similarly, the atheist *may* – though I doubt it – perceive Christ *as if* he was the Son of God, but cannot see him *as* the Son of God. There is a crucial difference between these two. Moreover, even if the atheist were able to achieve the ‘*as if*’, this is something that he wouldn’t want to do – and which he doesn’t think necessary, on Neill and Ridley’s model, in order to apprehend the work.

Ultimately, what is rejected by the atheist is not a certain point the Christian artwork is trying to make, as a kind of artistic complement to doctrinal formulation, but rather an invitation to enter into a Christian universe: where to see at all is to see in the light of God’s revelation, where to exist at all is to exist always and only in a relation to God.

#### **4.1.3 Psychological and ontological transformation**

In line with the above reflections, it is possible to conceive of one and the same work, under two different ontological models, as being a radically different kind of thing. If my intuitions are correct, it should matter for the very appreciation of the work, as well as for our conceptions of what kind of thing the work is, whether we decide to perceive it through Christian or non-Christian eyes. That is, two different readings do not simply yield two sets of meaning, but indeed two different works; where only one of these is the right and appropriate one for the Christian artwork.

A good case study for these tensions would be Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*; where two different readings, one governed by Christian and the other by atheist or even agnostic

ontological presuppositions, would not only lead us to conceive of the work in distinct and irreconcilable ways, but where this ontological divergence would also inform our apprehension and interpretation of the work's meanings, of the pronouncements made within the fabric of the work.

Rilke's poem, rife as it is with metaphysical speculation and musings on the import of artistic creation, and of art's transformative power, is a work occupying the very fault lines between Christian and materialist interpretations of art and reality. As such, the *Elegies* may help us make the transition between, on the one hand, analytic and secular models of transformation, and on the other hand, a theologically informed perception of Christian artworks as implicated in the sacramental and the eschatological. The *Elegies* may appear to offer an understanding of transformation congenial to Christian art, but ultimately they will be seen to fall short of offering – and requiring – a Christian reading.

Central to the poem is the poet's belief that the outer world is transfigured through human consciousness and creativity. Thus:

The world is nowhere, my love, if not within.  
Our life passes in transformation. The external world  
is forever dwindling to nothing (Rilke 2008, p.57);

while it rises instead 'within', as memory and potentially language.

We may see how this suggestion could chime with the visions of Jones, Blake and others, but we should also see, already, the problems Rilke's 'ontological thesis' poses for a properly Christian understanding of the aims and prerogatives of our creative works. In short – and I will spell this out as I proceed – Rilke's stress on the 'inner' and 'invisible' is at odds with the Christian ambition to manifest God's form and beauty in material works.

Karen Leeder tells us that the *Elegies* enact "the struggle for humankind to accept its ultimate task – that of unifying transformation. The task of humankind is to sing, to praise the world, and thereby immortalise it, by translating visible things into invisible

objects of language, the imagination and spirit” (Leeder 2008, p.10). We may perhaps understand this idea of transformation by saying, with Lamarque, that mere objects of the world are transformed into works, through and for the engagement of language and the imagination. By subjecting the world to artistic re-formation, we address the world to a different set of faculties and judgements, inviting a different kind of experience. The fact of such a transformed relation to the things of the world seems to be empirically and experientially true: this is something that art perennially achieves, whether ancient or modern, representative or conceptual.

The really interesting questions arise when we consider if this altered relationship occurs only on the level of psychology, phenomenology and epistemology, affecting only our knowledge and experience of the world, or if it entails also an ontological alteration of the very fabric of the world. We may ask of Leeder if the ‘unifying transformation’ and the ‘immortalisation’ of which she speaks denote only psychological or cultural phenomena, or if the poem is making a more metaphysical claim.

Rilke’s project – as interpreted by Leeder in these succinct comments – does indeed stand on the threshold of the more radical, because more theologically charged, understanding of a genuine ontological reorganisation of the cosmos. Should we take Leeder’s pronouncements literally, as having a metaphysical content, we may find ourselves but a hair’s breadth from the kind of formulations found in Christian art and theological aesthetics.

The experience of simultaneously wishing to praise the world and feeling called upon to change it, suggests a twofold understanding of the world which is deeply integral to Christian thought; on this understanding, the created world is first and foremost a *gift*, but it is also – as a gift imperfectly received, cultivated and realised – a *fallen* world. This twofold attitude is strongly suggested by Rilke’s poems; certainly if we accept as metaphysically sincere Leeder’s reading of the *Elegies*. Leeder herself, however, wants to pre-empt such a reading; for “Above all,” she claims, with surprising insistence, Rilke’s “is a godless poem: rejecting the transcendent and reiterating the uniqueness of the here and now despite – indeed precisely because of – its fragility” (p.12). This does strike me as a contentious, albeit not an entirely unwarranted, assertion.



I would note, initially, that the fragility of the particular moment and the (one assumes) stability of the transcendent are by no means necessarily mutually exclusive. After all, it is simply not the case that Christian theology and practice are unconcerned with the uniqueness and transience of each created thing – as Blake and Hopkins, for example, summarily testify – or with the frailty of each human person. An insistence upon and caring attention to the here and now by no means preclude either belief in, or indeed the existence of, a transcendent God.

Nor is it by any means clear to me how the other themes outlined above – the transformative love of creation, the reverence for customs and artefacts, the humble acknowledgement of death – would so obviously be practices conducted in a godless universe; if anything, these all seem to invite the opposite assumption. That is, either these attitudes are the appropriate responses to the real, or they are simply the arbitrary reactions to the absurd. The tone of Rilke's poems, not to mention Leeder's introduction – in its lack of irony, its impassioned sense of vocation – does indeed tend to favour the first of these alternatives; which alternative, in turn, seems to render the mission and the metaphysics of the *Elegies* more intelligible, however incomplete. This seems to be the poems' motivating force: to attempt to articulate what is true, not simply contingently or subjectively, but really at the root of things. Rilke supposedly wants to launch a serious critique of the world as well as offer real consolation, both of which are most successfully achieved in the light of a belief in the divine.

This said, we must grant that the *Elegies* are by no means explicitly Christian either in intention or in meaning; though they may be fruitfully read as tending in such a direction – and so allowed to engage in a dialogue with texts and works of a more firmly religious character – they do stop (or fall) short of committing themselves to manifesting the Christ-form and the beauty of God.

In particular, it is the sacramental ambitions of Christian art, and its stress on manifestation, which constitute a real difference to Rilke's model of transformation. For there are strong idealistic tendencies in the *Elegies*, and a real risk of its model slipping into a kind of solipsism that is woefully at odds with the Christian vision.

Martyn Crucefix observes that “whether divinity exists or not is hardly the issue here: the fact is there is no help in our existential dilemma from either angels or other

people” (Crucefix 2008, p.83). This is a bleak assessment, to be sure. However, Crucefix does diagnose correctly that the poem presents us with a bitter and difficult situation; our condition is, typically, one of alienation, both psychological and ontological, and this condition must be faced up to. Thus, at the same time, “Rilke urges us to reverse this invasive sense of ‘emptiness’ so that we might re-inhabit the world about it” (p.83). This, indeed, is our mission; and the interesting suggestion is that this is not simply a mission to be carried out for our own sake, but also for the sake of the world, which seems to expand the accomplishment from the psychological plane to also encompass the ontological.

What we may call Rilke’s ontological thesis, is most explicitly expressed in the ninth elegy:

Earth, is it not this you want: to arise  
in our invisible sphere? [...]  
What is your urgent command, if it is not for  
transformation? (Rilke 2008, p.73)

Here, so it seems, the end of our task is not merely an experience of epiphany or catharsis, but a genuine transformation of the state of nature. Thus our own sense of consolation corresponds, as it were, to an actual renewal of the world; there is a fit and mutuality between us and the rest of creation, which is realised in this process of regeneration. From a Christian perspective, however, the reservation about the ‘invisible sphere’ remains; for the hope of the Christian artist, as indeed of the Christian priest and the Christian communicant, is premised on the possibility – indeed, of the goodness – of experiencing God under the material forms of man-made and man-handled *things*.

For this reason, we may have to settle – albeit reluctantly – for what we may call an ‘existential’ reading of the *Elegies* over the ‘ontological’. Such a reading is offered by Crucefix, who suggests that “Fundamentally [our task] is to seek for a more heightened perception and responsiveness to the world about us” (Crucefix 2008, p.83). If this is all the poems may offer, this is rather unsatisfying; because Crucefix does not address the crucial question if this heightened perception establishes the *right* relation to the world, or

if it is simply something that is poetically possible and so emotionally rewarding. I believe I am correct in noting this distinction, between a perfectly effective, but nevertheless arbitrary attitude to the world, and a responsiveness which is genuinely that – an attunement to the *real*.

Crucefix observes that the mutuality of the earth's desire to be transformed, and our transformative creativity, "culminates in the refiguring of death from its earlier negative aspect [...] to being our 'holiest inspiration' [...] The inevitability of death becomes the motivating force behind the human desire to transform the world about us" (p.100). Here, the claim is more clearly a psychological rather than a metaphysical one: there is no sincere suggestion here that death itself is somehow undone, merely its stultifying effects on human consciousness.

Insofar as Crucefix hits the right note in his reading of the *Elegies*, Rilke's anthropological mission, one feels, stops short of being properly eschatological; perhaps we must look to others to push the implications of creative transformation further. There is the possibility, of course, that Rilke did indeed go further than his commentators have recognised or acknowledged; there is certainly stuff in the *Elegies* which permits a far more metaphysically ambitious thesis than that proposed by Crucefix and Leeder. That said, however, rather than letting Rilke's vision or mission stand on its own, it will be more fruitful to treat his eschatological intimations pointing the way to the more consistently and consciously Christian works of others – the likes of Jones and Blake.

Rowan Williams discerns in Jones, and in Maritain before him, the "idea that the world's reality is always asymptotically approaching its fullness by means of the response of imagination – the assumption of an 'ideal' fullness of perception in which things reach their destiny" (Williams 2010, p.154). Something like this is at work in Rilke, certainly, but only finds its properly ontological articulation in Christian artists; for Blake's Imagination and Jones' sacramental history deliver what Rilke's poetics can only intimate, namely a vision of the fruition and transfiguration of all things in significant language – in 'anathemata' and 'visionary forms dramatic' – resplendent with divinity.

There are aspects of Rilke's vision that chime with both Blake and Jones. There are, for example, suggestive gestures towards the sacramental in the *Elegies*. Kallistos Ware cites this as "the distinctive feature of a sacrament: the sacraments, like the Church,

are both visible and invisible; in every sacrament there is the combination of an outward visible sign with an inward spiritual grace” (Ware 1963, p.281). While this certainly echoes Rilke’s central thesis, of the visible becoming invisible through conscious human agency, the Christian understanding does not denigrate the material and visible, but affirms its equal partnership with the spiritual. In beauty, moreover, God’s spiritual gift is made manifest. We may also ask if Rilke knowingly invokes the sacramental as the binding principle between man and his world, and to what end; we may assume Rilke’s understanding of the concept he is playing with, but it is hard to tell to what degree his use is subversive of theological models, and to what degree reverential.

Nicolas Berdyaev writes that “Every creative act is a partial transfiguration of life” (Berdyaev 2009b, p.225). Such a statement may be read to fall, like Rilke’s work, somewhere between the secular and sacred. Berdyaev’s intentions, however, become much less ambiguous; for he holds, as perhaps Rilke fails to hold, that “artistic creativity is ontological rather than psychological in its nature” (p.225). It is this latter claim which qualifies Berdyaev as a spokesperson for Christian art.

In the end, on balance, Rilke’s words may carry more potency if their focus is seen as psychological rather than metaphysical; we may find much that is incisive and evocative in his account of our felt relation to transience and death, but less substance in his speculations on the divine. Crucially, Rilke’s work and artistic ambitions remain intelligible on a secular reading – intelligible even to Neill and Ridley’s militant atheist, who may find much to admire in the Elegies – while the works and visions of Blake and Jones, as of Rublev and Dante, do not; these Christian works require an engagement within a Christian ontology.

Analytic thought may prompt us to say that, regardless of the values enshrined or expressed by the Christian and the non-Christian work, these are still objects of the same kind, are still apprehended under the same concept of ‘work of art’. Thus, to see the work as what it *is* simply means being sensitive to its work-character; while a full appreciation of this work may or may not demand a degree of sympathy to the particular values there found.

On a Christian understanding, however – on the kind of understanding Christian art requires – it is not simply the case that a Christian artwork is an artwork like any other, which just happens to be embedded within a religious culture and so a source or touchstone for religious values. Rather, the creation of a Christian work of art entails not simply an assumption into a culture but the achievement of an actual alteration of the world; which world is not merely the world of object and works, but a world which must be seen in the light of its relation to God. We must ask, then, what impact the work has on this kind of world.

We need to say that the Christian work is not only a cultural work, but also implicated in the spiritual regeneration of the material world; it is not a different object in the same old world, but a new object in a world which, thanks to this novelty, has been made at least a little bit newer, and so rendered more in the likeness of God.

## 4.2 MAKING OTHER AND MAKING NEW

As their final position makes clear, despite their avowed commitment to the indivisibility of the ‘religious’ and the ‘music’ in the artwork, for Neill and Ridley there is something inherent in the very music of works like Bach’s *Mass* that utterly resists any assimilation to a body of ideas, of whatever kind, so that a Christian artwork – entirely irrespective of both artistic intention and contextual embeddedness – becomes something *impossible*. There is no kind of artwork, on this conception, that so relies on a Christian perspective as to fail to come into existence in the absence of it.

I believe Neill and Ridley’s argument to be misguided, as it fails to engage with the ontological presuppositions of Christian art. The argument remains on the level of cultural discourse, and even psychology, where brute artistic force clashes with ethical or other conceptions; it does not address the way in which the artwork is an ontologically altered object, a new object in the world. It fails to address, moreover, what such newness means – what it means to the Christian – and, indeed, what kind of world the artwork enters and alters.

Christianity, of course, has something to say about the kind of world we inhabit, and the kind of transformations it may accommodate or undergo. Ultimately, on the Christian understanding, the kind of transformation the work is capable of is only intelligible – indeed, is only possible – in a world in which God may become man and wine may become blood. The Christian artwork begs to be seen in that light, as implicated in that kind of transfiguration, as really altering the world to become more assimilated to God, more conformed to his likeness. Crucially, this transformative ambition can be seen to be integral to the nature of man as well as to the nature of his artistic making.

### 4.2.1 Man the artist

More than invoking the confluence of ‘the aesthetic and the sacred,’ Christian art impels us to present a picture of man as a free being whose practices and projects of making new

and making other are inextricably entwined with his reaching beyond the world of matter and his pursuit of communion with the divine.

Thus Jones speaks of man as “man-the-artist” and “the sign-maker”. These activities define us. Man, says Jones, “has, somehow or other, to lift up valid signs: that is his specific task” (Jones 1959, p.119) – a task fully accepted by the tradition of Christian art. Further, “Man is the only artist and only artists are men” (p.94); suggesting that a lack of (commitment to the) creative life makes us somehow deficient as men. In other words, that both our personality and our human nature finds its flourishing through creative labour, whether the child’s delighted doodling, or the building of cathedrals, but most properly in the kind of works that are responsive to God’s call. Blake, similarly, asserts that every genuine Christian is an artist:

A Poet a Painter a Musician an Architect: the Man

Or Woman who is not one of these is not a Christian (Blake 2000, p.403).

Jones, meanwhile, gives us the very Blakean line, “No artefacture no Christian religion” (Jones 1959, p.19). He is thinking here of our nature as thing-makers, sign-makers and makers of sacrament; a nature elucidated by – and in turn reaffirming – the image of man and his relation to God presented by Christianity. He is also thinking of how absolutely integral to the collective and private practice, to the ritual, liturgy and prayer of the Christian life, are the use of artefacts, symbols and aesthetic ornamentation.

It is clear, to Jones as to Blake, that what we are doing, when we make our artworks, is being engaged in a regenerative, transformative work, trying to make the stuff of this world radiate with divine light – to manifest the form and beauty of Christ. It is clear, moreover, that this is what we should be doing, that this is essentially who we are and what we are about.

The claim that man is essentially a maker already has implications for an appropriate appreciation of Christian art; for these works, Bach’s *Mass* among them, are not made simply by way of a cultural pastime, but is essentially how we work out our existence, our destiny. To fail to accord the work these credentials, this ontological

gravity – whatever the levity of the work in question, whether plaything or altarpiece – is to misapprehend and misuse it, as do Neill and Ridley.

We are artists because God has fashioned us and called us to be artists. The Christian believer and the Christian artist proclaim, with Berdyaev, that “God the Creator [...] created man – His own image and likeness, a being free and gifted with creative power, called to be lord of creation” (Berdyaev 2009b, p.100). Moreover, the world is the kind of world it is because God is the kind of God that he is. As Williams writes, reflecting on Jones, “God makes himself other; the world is a world in which things make themselves other or are made other (they are more than they are and give more than they have)” (Williams 2010, p.82). In such a world, to be a man is to be at heart an artistic being. There are parallels here to the thought of Jean-Dominique Robert; as Richard Viladesau explains, Robert holds that “if the world can be ‘translated’ into art, if it can be ‘recreated’, it is because the world is intrinsically suited to such operations” (Viladesau, p.118). Crucially, I would add, if we humans are capable of such translating and such re-creation, this is because these operations lie at the very heart of our nature.

As Williams notes, the uniquely human propensity for art – and all ‘intransitive’ making and doing – has, for Jones, “something to do with the fact that, for Christian theology, God’s act of creation is utterly gratuitous, describable as a kind of play” (Williams 2010, p.86). In Jones’ own words, “there is a sense in which this gratuitousness in the operations of the Creator is reflected in the art of the creature” (Jones 2008, p.153); and it is “the intransitivity and gratuitousness in man’s art that is the sign of man’s uniqueness” (p.149), of his exalted place in creation. Gratuity here means, of course, not that our making is superfluous and inconsequential, but that it is essentially expressive of our freedom to respond creatively, spontaneously, generously, to the gracious gifts and creations of God.

It is important, for an account which is both theologically and artistically attuned, that we do not think of man as simply an observer of the world, or as simply an individual component of it, but that we characterise man as a *microcosm* – containing within himself, and mediating between, the world of matter and spirit. This lies at the very heart of Christian theology and experience. “Man,” writes Berdyaev, “is not a functional part



of the universe, a fragment of it, but a whole small universe including in himself all the qualities of the great universe, imprinting himself upon it and receiving its imprint upon himself” (Berdyayev 2009b, p.63). As such, we are co-creators with God and our calling is the work of restoring the fallen world to its intended form and beauty. “True creativeness,” therefore, to follow Berdyayev, “is theurgy, God-activity, activity together with God” (p.126).

We find such an image of man consistently expressed and explored in Blake’s work, whose understanding of what it means for man to be created in the image of God centre on his account of man as an essentially *artistic* being.<sup>27</sup> Blake’s poetic expressions resonate strongly with theological conceptions; notably with an Orthodox understanding of man. Thus we have Bulgakov’s arguments to the effect that man is essentially involved in the visionary transfiguration of the world. “Man,” Bulgakov claims, “is a being who sees images, *zôon eikonikon*, and who also creates them, *zôon poiêtikon*” (Bulgakov 2012, p.43). Precisely this dual activity is at the heart of Blake’s work: he consistently shows how we are called, firstly, to see the image of God in all things, and secondly to use our creative faculties to make images capable of manifesting the truth and glory of God. As such, as Bulgakov also concludes, “man is an artistic being” (p.43). Blake, based on this same understanding, also stresses the close affinity between our creative, visionary nature and what it means to be a Christian; for to be a Christian, on Blake’s view, is precisely to realise fully the artistic task to which we are called by God.

For Blake, then, it is most important to stress that humans are beings of *imagination*, not simply that we are *rational* creatures. The elevation of Reason, so paramount in Western accounts of humankind’s singularity, does not satisfy Blake any more than it satisfies Christos Yannaras. Indeed, Blake consistently warns against the potentially restrictive role of reason when this is divorced from inspiration and imagination. The characters of Urizen and the Spectre are cautionary examples of the principles of division and delimitation, blind to the calling of man’s expansive, creative and transformative nature. Blake has a fuller conception of man’s place and role in creation. The language of man as a *microcosm*, key to Orthodox thinkers, is therefore

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<sup>27</sup> I will engage in more detail with Blake’s work in the section on Golgonooza; I ask here that the reader, for a sense of Blake’s pronouncements, also refers back to quotes already given.

very congenial to Blake. “Man,” as Kallistos Ware explains, “stands at the heart of God’s creation. Participating as he does in both the noetic and the material realms, he is an image or mirror of the whole creation, *imago mundi*, a ‘little universe’ or microcosm. All created things have their meeting place in him” (Ware 1995, p.49).

Similarly Bulgakov claims that “Man is a contracted world, the anthropocosmos” (Bulgakov 2012, p.50). Further, developing the claims just quoted above, Bulgakov writes that “Man actively participates in the iconisation of being [...] *In and through himself* he finds the icons of things, for he himself is in this sense the *pan-icon* of the world” (p.43). This pan-iconic nature of man means that we are that in which all of creation finds its synthesis and fulfilment, and through which all creation can become properly responsive to God.

This conception of man, I would argue, is perfectly illustrated in Blake’s work: especially in the figure of Albion and in the powerful metaphor of the building of Golgonooza. Albion is collective man, but his fate is also inseparable from that of the natural (and indeed spiritual) world; thus Los’ labours, in building Golgonooza, entail both the regeneration of Albion and the artistic transformation of the material world.

Yannaras, drawing chiefly on Maximus the Confessor, succinctly sets out the implications of man’s microcosmic character and calling – in what can stand, I believe, as a paraphrase of Albion’s destiny in Blake’s work:

The human being, as a natural structure, summarizes the elements of the world as a whole, but these elements, after the Fall, humanity’s “unnatural” estrangement, are found both within humanity and without in the outside world in a state of division and separation. But since the human being remains a personal existence even after the Fall [...] it retains the power to realize the world dynamically in its person, to recapitulate the *logos* of the world in a personal response to God’s invitation to communion and relation between the created and the uncreated – to disclose the universal *logos* of the world as a personal *logos* of praise of the creature for the Creator (Yannaras 2007, pp.92-93).

Also Berdyaev's account of the microcosmic condition can be perfectly applied to Blake's poetic narrative; for "The all-man is inseparable from the cosmos and its fate. The liberation and creative upsurge of the all-man is the liberation and creation of the cosmos" (Berdyaev 2009b, p.72) as an icon and manifestation of all that is divine is us. Our artistic and creative works are absolutely integral to this process of revelation and regeneration. Blake understands that this task is inescapably ours, by virtue of who and what we are. "Being a microcosm," Ware continues, "man is also mediator. It is his God-given task to reconcile and harmonize the noetic and material realms [...] to spiritualize the material, and to render manifest all the latent capacities of the created order" (Ware 1995, p.50). While Blake illuminatingly re-enacts this destiny in the character of Albion, this understanding stands – I believe – as a model and motivation for all Christian art.

Art and imagination, then, no less than reason, interests, rights, etc., seem absolutely integral to an understanding, and a definition, of the nature of man. It is certainly integral to the nature of man as conceived by Christianity – free, created and creative, responsive and responsible to its creator, a microcosm and mediator between matter and spirit, made in love and encouraged in turn to grow in love, to hold up the world as *anathemata*, remade as a sign of love and a gift to its original maker.

Man and his art shares a double nature and our extra-material end; so that "man is a creature whose end is extra-mundane and whose nature is to make things and that the things made are not only things of mundane requirement but are of necessity signs of something other" (Jones 1959, p.150). *Sign*, as understood by Jones, has thus become necessarily part of a definition of art if art is to be understood as uniquely the making of man and as implicated in the very nature of man, and vice-versa. This is entirely in keeping with the notion that art is iconic, and translucent to the real – to the grace, gratuity and glory, of Christ and the Triune God.

Williams, reflecting on Jones, writes: "As the union of material being and meaningful imagination, humanity alone has the gift of sign-making, and humanity alone cannot avoid sign-making"; with the implication that "sacramental action is the supreme illumination of what and who we are, and art fails to understand itself without

sacramental reference” (Williams 2010, p.78). In just this way, we fail to understand Christian art, in particular, without this reference.

It is Jones’ meaning that our sign-making is implicated in, and so vindicated by, the sacramental history of Christ’s incarnation, resurrection, and enduring presence in the Eucharist. Indeed, for Jones, the Eucharist is the consummation of all human making, past, present, and future.

#### **4.2.2 Art and Sacrament**

We already and first of all discern him making this thing other. His groping syntax, if we attend, already shapes... (Jones 1952, p.49).

So begins *The Anathemata*, invoking the Prayer of Consecration from the Roman Mass; and so all that unfurls in the poem, which is hardly less than a whole history of man the maker, is seen in the perspective of – indeed, unfurls within the scope of – the Mass itself. All human creativity and artefacture is understood in relation to the ‘making other’ of the Eucharistic sacrament.

Jones’ own art, certainly, exists entirely in relation to that most central of Christian practices. For Jones, our artistic nature follows from, is proven by, the fact that the Incarnate Christ initiated the material sacrament of the Eucharist. For, he reasons, “unless man is of his essential nature a *poeta*, one who makes things that are signs of something, then the central act of the Christian religion is totally without meaning. How can there be a manual act that makes anamnesis unless man is man-the-maker, and thus poiesis his native and authentic mode of apperception and in the end his only mode?” (Jones 1959, p.13). He says further, of the Supper and the Upper Room, that “What was done would have been neither necessary nor possible unless man is man-the-artist [and Christ a man with us]” (p.167).

On the opening paragraph of *The Anathemata*, René Hague comments: “We could paraphrase the poet’s words in this paragraph by saying that so soon as man makes that which is significant, which is a sign of something other and greater, we can already see

that his act is of the same nature as the transubstantiation effected in the Mass by a representation of what was done at the Last Supper” (Hague 1977, p.12). Thus Jones holds that “man is unavoidably a sacramentalist and that his works are sacramental in character” (Jones 1959, p.155). Already the roughest or most elementary of Neanderthal ‘cup-markings’ or burial-stones support this thesis, says Jones, for here “we would appear already to be in the domain of sign (sacrament), of anamnesis, of anathemata” (p.156).

His poem, therefore, traces the practice of man’s making from the very dawn of our history; in “Rite and Fore-time” recalling the

Twenty millennia (and what millennia more?)

Since he became

Man master-of-plastic (Jones 1952, p.59).

On the following page of the poem, the cave drawings in “the vaults of Lascaux” are invoked, and recommended to us in terms recalling the Eucharist; for the paintings give us reality “under the species of worked lime-rock [...] under the forms of brown haematite and black manganese” (p.60), just as the body and blood of Christ are offered under the species or form of bread and wine.

Jones here performs his typical feat of understanding history, even pre-history, in terms of what comes after, according significance retroactively while also allowing the distant past to prefigure, even prepare, what follows. History on Jones’ conception has a Christian telos, even in pre-Christian times – indeed even in times predating conscious, let alone human, life, for the very geology of our planet as it were yearns and travails (recalling both St Paul’s proclamation and Rilke’s idea of the earth’s longing) for fulfilment in the transfiguration and transubstantiation achieved by Christ. Thus fore-time culminates in rite-time, in the rite of the Eucharist: as Hague affirms, “all the fore-times lead up to the daily re-enactment of the Christian mystery” (Hague 1977, p.82).

The ‘extra-utile’ reaching out that artefacture and sign-making entails, already from the first marks on flint and stone, reveal man to have a stake in the extra-mundane. For Jones, therefore, “properly speaking and at the root of the matter, *Ars* knows only a sacred

activity” (Jones 1959, p.157). “A sign,” says Jones, “must be significant of something, hence of some ‘reality’, so of something ‘good’, so of something that is ‘sacred’. That is why I think that the notion of sign implies the sacred” (p.157). The reasoning here – which admittedly makes something of a leap of faith – relies on an understanding of the symbolic in which the symbol does not only invoke but indeed instantiates the thing symbolised. We find such an understanding expressed, for example, in the works of Pavel Florensky, for whom it is a crucial underpinning – and implication – of the theology of icons. Also von Balthasar gives voice to such a conception of the symbol, in language elucidating its sacramental function: “The appearance of the form, as revelation of the depths, is an indissoluble union of two things. It is the real presence of the depths, of the whole of reality, *and* it is a real pointing beyond itself to those depths” (von Balthasar 1982, p.118). He argues further, in a discussion of the works and signs of Christ, that the symbol is “understood in the full sense of a sacramental reality which corporeally contains the spiritual truth in the sensible image and likeness” (p.669).

This understanding of form and symbol, then, is wholly informed by the fact and mystery of the Incarnation. It is imperative that Christian art be engaged with, practiced and received within, such a context (both actual and conceptual). Indeed, Jones feels that our immemorial traditions of artistic practices must be, from the outset, connected with what is realised in the life of Christ and in the life of the Church; that our creative human nature itself is vindicated and raised up by Christ’s assumption of our sign-making, and that the ‘art’ of the Eucharistic sacrament is the culmination of – not a break with – all preceding efforts at making matter speak (of) God.

Thus Williams, also commenting on the first part of *The Anathemata*, notes rightly that “The constant refrain of these pages is the question ‘How else?’ Without this human history [of making signs] how could there be a priest at the altar re-presenting in another form an act [...] that supremely communicates to the world the transformative liberty of God” (p.78). How else, Jones is asking – how else, if all our cultivation is not ultimately implicated in the sacramental practices and indeed the salvific history of our kind, in which Christ himself becomes incarnate and participates –

should his barlies grow

who said

I am your Bread? (Jones 1952, p.82)

This understanding allows Jones to boldly suggest a difference only of degree between the spinning-tops embellished and used by playing boys and the things constituting the materials of the Eucharist, as both being things and signs made by man-the-artist and man-the-sacramentalist as gifts to the muses and to God (pp.125-126); and, again, he further discusses the common denominators of all Arts, from horticulture and boot-making to the Sacred Mysteries (p.153). Such an approach, crucially, provides a forceful complement and supplement to other, analytic and non-Christian accounts of the ontology of artworks. On the Christian perspective, our making and making other is always and already implicated in our relation to God; our labours, and the things made, must be accorded ontological import – not as works of culture alone, but as creative responses of the creature, man, to his Creator, with the intention of transforming the matter of this world into the divine likeness – as indeed was done by God at the Incarnation.<sup>28</sup>

In a more analytic register Lamarque asks the crucial and very stimulating question: “what kind of change is wrought upon the world when the artist’s work is completed?” He suggests, by way of response, that “An initial, if no doubt over-simple, description of what artists do in bringing a work into existence is that they are ‘making something out of something.’ In every case there seem to be ‘materials’ worked on, even if the materials take very different forms in different cases” (Lamarque 2010, p.39).

This is indeed a cautious description, and one that will not be sufficient for Christian art; Lamarque, to his credit, does not rest at this explanation either, but pursues an understanding that grants much more to the real newness of the thing created. This is

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<sup>28</sup> We may perhaps helpfully see Jones’ Eucharistic vision in the light of Yannaras’ understanding of the mutually ec-static communion of God and man: “the reality of the transformation of the world into the flesh of the God-Logos and the transformation of humanity into a partaker of the divine nature, presupposes a reciprocal ec-stasy, a self-transcendence not only of the human but also of the divine nature [which] finds its “final” realization in the Church’s Eucharist” (p.151).

important. While Lamarque's position, in the end, may still fall short of satisfying the demands of Christian art, it helpfully points us in the right direction.

The move Lamarque makes is to say that the new work which comes into existence "must broadly be a 'cultural' or 'institutional' entity of some sort" (p.53). While I think he is right, and while I think it may aid us in properly appreciating Christian works of art as belonging to a specific culture of meanings and values, I do wonder if this thesis satisfactorily answers or corresponds to the kind of ontological claims made by, say, the icon – which, while certainly an institutionally embedded work, also purports to alter the material world in a much more 'objective' or 'actual' manner. Nor can this institutional ontology account for the artwork's sacramental nature.

While the new work, on Lamarque's view is a cultural, not a sacramental object, he is nevertheless willing to accord powers to man, and a degree of malleability to the world, which might well raise a few materialistic eyebrows. This, I should think, is a welcome direction for Christian art. We should, therefore, before seeking to amplify or amend Lamarque's account, endorse the gist of his position: "We should conclude, then, that to bring a work into existence is indeed to bring a new entity into the world, not just to reorder what is there already. The conclusion is important, if hard won, because it means that whenever a work is completed there has been genuine creation. All too often in the ontology of art that simple conclusion has been denied" (Lamarque 2010, p.55).

For making it possible to salvage a substantial meaning of *creation*, Lamarque should certainly be commended. What needs to be understood and articulated now is the nature and value of that creation in the light of an ontological picture which posits the world itself as created, as fallen, and in need of genuine regeneration. This is to address the problem of the ontology of Christian art within the language of Christianity itself. While it is right to contrast the 'making other' of our artistic works with the ex-nihilo action of God, our activity too is a kind of 'creation', and not just a re-organisation of objects or materials. Though the Christian artist must accept the constraints of his materials, he works in the hope of making new, and of making the world more like unto God.

For Jones, certainly, the understanding of the sacramental implication of our artistic labours is indivisible from a real sense of the sheer ontological *newness* of the



works we accomplish, for it is the human capacity to make new which affirms our role and nature as ‘sacramentalists’. Thus Jones – in words rather like Lamarque’s – claims that “In so far as form is brought into being there is reality. ‘Something’ not ‘nothing’, moreover a new ‘something’, has come into existence’ (Jones 1959, p.159).

Blake and Berdyaev, moreover, push the concept of artistic creation to extremes not recognised by non-Christians who do not even allow the one divine instance of ex-nihilo creation and therefore cannot conceive, cannot convincingly argue for, creation of anything but the reorganisation of materials. “In the materialistic universe,” Berdyaev argues, “nothing is created – everything is merely rearranged and passes from one state to another” (Berdyaev 2009b, p.133); not so in the Christian cosmos, where radical newness must be possible.

A Christian understanding of creativity presupposes God’s creation out of nothing; for as Berdyaev puts it, “If there had not been a divine creative act, in which something that had never been before was created, then the creative act in our world would be quite impossible” (p.128). For Berdyaev, therefore, it is essential that human creativity arises out of our freedom, and that this freedom, as it is not bound by the causalities of this world, partakes of that same ‘nothingness’ out of which God created the world; that is, that our freedom has its source in God’s freedom, in the uncreated, not in the created. “Freedom and creativity,” claims Berdyaev, “tell us that man is not only a natural, but a supernatural being” (p.146).

Jones, similarly, writes that “With regard to the gratuitous quality which is said to adhere to *Ars* it is well to remember that theologians say that the creation of the world was not a necessary, but a gratuitous act. There is a sense in which this gratuitousness in the operation of the Creator is reflected in the art of the creature” (Jones 2008, p.153). This same freedom and creativity, properly understood, should thus alert us to the supernatural import and end of their use – of our free creative acts, for the regeneration of the word and for the glory of God.

The kind of world that Jones takes himself and his fellow humans to inhabit is a world of signs, bursting at the seams with meaning; it is, in the words of Williams, “a universe that is inextricably both material and significative, where things matter intensely, but matter in ways that breach boundaries and carry significance beyond what

they tangibly are. [In such a world] words are material communication, things are material words” (Williams 2010, p.75). In such a world, in other words, artefacture and artistic expression almost inescapably implicate its makers and users in the transcendental. Indeed, such a world suggests that our artistic efforts should – because they could – approach the sacramental. The Christian artist, therefore, may be seen to respond, not just to a personal or human calling, but to the telos or prerogative of art itself.

At the heart of the poetic theology of Ephrem the Syrian is the understanding that God, in his condescendence, has not only allowed himself to be handled under the form of bread and wine, but also to be addressed, invoked – and indeed encountered – in human language. “He clothed Himself in our language, so that He might clothe us in His mode of life,” writes Ephrem:

Blessed is He who has appeared to our human race under so many metaphors  
(Brock 1992, p.60).

This does not only provide Ephrem with a validation of his theological method, it also has the implication of rendering language – its symbols, its metaphors – something with sacramental potentials. So much more than speaking *about* God, our symbols and metaphors may be occasions for God’s real presence. To render language sacramental is also what St Ephrem aims to do with his own poetry, as in lines like these:

The fire of compassion descended  
and took up residence in the Bread

and

In Your Wine there resides  
the Fire that is not drunk (p.112).

More than providing a commentary on the Eucharistic sacrament, these words aim to disclose something of God's mystery that cannot be conveyed by explanatory discourse, nor contained in rational thought or definition, and so aim to offer us an experience of God. In response to God's descent into the forms of our language and making, Ephrem's poetry seek to raise language up as a gift – and a mode of communion – to God. This is also the ambition of St John of the Cross, as of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and other Christian poets with them.

Similar understandings can be seen to inform also the poetic labours of David Jones. Absolutely central to Jones' vision is Maurice de la Taille's saying, about Christ, that "He placed himself in the order of signs" (Jones 1959, p.179). Rowan Williams, reflecting on Jones' invocation of de la Taille, writes: "that human life [of Christ] that is most supremely charged with significance (because it speaks for the maker of all things) becomes a sign, a material word, lets itself be taken into the world of sign-making and communication by means of the institution of the Mass; and so to take your stand in the context of the Mass [as Jones does, as he invites us all to do; as all Christian artists do, in some way or other] is to be where sign-making is grounded or vindicated" (Williams 2010, p.82).

This would mean, for Jones, that we may look for the presence of Christ, not only in the wine and the bread, but indeed in the image and the word. Thus Jones' poetic labours, I believe, should be seen as an attempt to render language itself sacramental. Hague notes Jones' recurring "dwelling on a structure made by man that, in shape, material and purpose, was for him of more than earthly significance" (Hague 1977, p.243), such as apses, wattled fences, boats – and perhaps chief among them, I would venture to suggest, the structure of our language; which in Jones' hands, under his inspired dedication to etymology as well as his ingenious capacity for neologism, comes to yield meanings of startling richness and variety.

Indeed, though Jones' poem pays perhaps unparalleled tribute to the import and sanctity of simple human craft, thing-making, culture-building, of a material kind, it is the 'abstract' object of our language that is the most immediate object of Jones' loving attentions; and, in his own work, it is the English language (leavened by generous doses of Latin, Welsh, and other influences) which achieves that sacramental significance that

Jones himself observes in other, more physical, feats of human artefacture and sign-making. We too may perceive, through Jones' pointing to it, the significance of such things; but, more immediately and commandingly, more wondrously, we are also able to experience – be inspired, transformed by – the *anathemata* achieved by Jones himself.

Jones shares with Blake an ability to make language as it were tactile; by drawing attention to the thing-ness of individual words; by exegeses of etymological meanings; by visual representation and the use of capitals and italics; by startling turns of grammar and syntax.

It is crucial to note this; that while Jones and Blake provide models for how to apprehend Christian artworks, and artworks in general under a Christian conception and experience of the world, their own works also aspire to such significance. The models suggested in and by their works thus have implications for how these very works may be understood – both as regards the kind of world in which they exist, and as regards the kinds of things that they are; this is something that I took Neill and Ridley to task for not properly acknowledging.

In Jones' case, therefore, we must be open to see his own *Anathemata* as one instance of the anathemata that we, as man-the-maker of signs and significant forms, offer to Him who made us; and as making a contribution within that ontological history of rendering the cultural as well as the material world a sacrament. In the case of Blake, similarly, we are asked to see his own work as instantiating the labour of Golgonooza, as constituting a building block of that city.

As *The Anathemata* ends, Williams comments: “The Mass reaches its climax, the words are spoken and the bread lifted up, a material sign of a material sign, a sacrament of the ultimately sacramental humanity of Christ” (Williams 2010, pp.80-81). The poem ends thus:

What did he do other  
recumbent at the garnished supper?  
What did he do yet other  
riding the Axile Tree? (Jones 1952, p.243)

This is a poetic moment or movement in itself pregnant with that transformative presence; not only bringing the many currents of the work together, but also, at this cross-section of significance, palpably invoking the power and presence of ‘he’ who makes all poetic realisation possible by himself being the source and fruition of all truly transformative works.

### 4.2.3 Golgonooza

Jones’ account of the transformative nature of art is primarily sacramental, but it also opens onto a vision of the transfiguration of the cosmos – something which is more comprehensively developed in Blake through his elaborate metaphor of Golgonooza. Jones speaks on several instances of a “will to form” as characterising human life (Jones 1959, p.104). This “will to form” has ontological as well as eschatological implications, for it is Creation itself we form and re-form by our signs, things and traditions.

One of the crucial lessons of Christian art is that the world around us, while it is an inexhaustible gift, is also very much of our making and our vision: it is a malleable world, infinitely responsive to our active presence, to our creative and perceptive powers. Thus, while the world is given us to inhabit, we are also called to reconfigure and regenerate it; this is a prerogative, and also a real power, of ours.

The city of Golgonooza, while an elusive and intricate metaphor, deeply embedded in Blake’s later poetic works, is perhaps the most audaciously ambitious and ultimately most compelling account of how humankind’s artistic labours seek their fruition in a communal, cross-temporal work of art which constitute the eternal city and true home for our creative and divinely inspired natures.<sup>29</sup> In *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, the

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<sup>29</sup> Blake’s credentials as a Christian artist may be contested, but I believe there are ample grounds for seeing Blake as profoundly Christian in his commitments; indeed, his dedication to Christ as the fount of the human imagination directly informs the particulars of his creative labours, visual and poetic. I hope the use of Blake in this thesis helps to bear this out; this and the following chapter will give much scope to Blake’s unique contribution, but I must also recall the reader to Chapter 2, where Blake’s work was seen as vitally supporting the Christian understanding of our call to grow in the divine likeness. It is perhaps this affirmation of our divine potentials – our calling to *theosis* – which most emphatically aligns Blake with traditional (indeed Patristic) Christian theology. Of tremendous importance is also his conception of love and mutual transformation – to be discussed at length in Chapter 5 – and of course his vision of our regenerative creative works, currently under discussion. I have written at greater length about Blake’s

central task of the building of Golgonooza entails the making of the whole world into a collective work of art, redeeming matter from the contingencies of the natural world, forming it, beautifying it, and rendering it a prototype – more than a prototype – of the New Jerusalem. This is a perpetual labour, to redeem time itself and restore each moment to eternity; thus,

They Builded Great Golgonooza Times on Times Ages on Ages

(Blake 2000, p.248).

Blake takes seriously the intuition that there is something eternal, something ineffable, inviolate and imperishable, in every great work of work. Golgonooza is emphatically a vision of art's consolidating and lasting power; in this city, therefore, not a single creative work and not a moment of regenerated time is lost:

all that has existed in the space of six thousand years:

Permanent. & not lost not lost nor vanished. & every little act.

Word. work. & wish. that has existed. all remaining still

[...]

For everything exists & not one sigh nor smile nor tear

One hair nor particle of dust. not one can pass away (pp.310-11).

What Golgonooza suggests is that all things (if good and beautiful, if iconic of Christ), once created, will not pass away, but will forever abide, even as time itself passes away, in the eternal city which is the eternal body of the Imagination, the Great Humanity Divine. Similarly, Jones repeatedly affirms in *The Anathemata* that 'he would lose none' of the artefacts made, held up as signs and handed over as gifts to God. All anathemata remain in the care of the God who receives them, who takes them to himself.

The master builder of this stupendous work, the city of Golgonooza, is Los, described by Northrop Frye as "the blacksmith, the divine artificer, the spiritual form of

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relations to specifically Orthodox theology elsewhere (see my publications in *Sobornost* and in *Language. Literature. Culture.*)

time, the Holy Spirit which spoke by the Prophets” (Frye 1969, p.251). On one level, Los’ labour is “To Create a world of Generation from the world of Death”; to sustain a living form in the face of chaos and dissolution, “delivering Form out of confusion” (Blake 2000, p.355). At the same time, from the perspective of the world of generation, which we all inhabit, Los is also the active agent of regenerative works, working to conform – transform – our world to the divine vision; for each form in this world is made to manifest – to be revelatory of, and find its fruition in – the image of God. For Blake, all genuine creative labour tends and aims Godwards, for the realisation of the divine likeness<sup>30</sup>; and for the overcoming of the laws of generation, the self-righteousness of ‘vegetative man’. Thus,

within the Furnaces the Divine Vision appeared  
On Albions Hills: often walking from the Furnaces in clouds  
And flames among the Druid Temples & Starry Wheels (p.357),

where these temples and wheels constitute the moral and material universe of Bacon, Newton and Locke, of Rousseau and Voltaire. It is this context we should understand Blake’s famous lyric:

I will not cease from Mental Fight.  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:  
Till we have built Jerusalem.  
In Englands green & pleasant Land (p.295).

The image of a New Jerusalem, as the fulfilment of human history and human making, provides an archetype and ultimate hope for all Christian artistic striving. As a guiding metaphor, the idea is invoked, implicitly or explicitly, throughout the long history of Christian artifice and culture-building, and it can be taken as giving theological

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<sup>30</sup> Indeed, only works which tend towards God may be called truly creative; all those that tend away from, obscures or negates God, are ultimately destructive of the divine image, of man and of the world in its right relation to God.

validation to these material and conceptual activities. Pervasive in Byzantine art and architecture, the idea of a New Jerusalem has perhaps been most forcefully put to use in modern times by Blake; in whose vision it must be understood as the transfigured material world and – in the words of Northrop Frye – as “the spiritualized church of the imaginative, the liberty of the sons of God united in brotherhood” (Frye 1969, p.128).

The promise of a new heaven and a new earth lends both joy and gravity to the labours of every Christian artist. Blake, perhaps more comprehensively than others, is able to see this work in progress as the central project of humanity; it is crucial, for him, for an understanding of what it means to be and to exist as a creature fundamentally creative in nature, blessed with divine potential and tasked with stewardship of the world.

This vision is inseparable, then, from the understanding of man as a microcosm; and so in Blake’s work we find that the building of Golgonooza is entirely simultaneous, even synonymous, with the regeneration of Albion. Frye, therefore, may succinctly characterise the central idea and impetus of Blake’s greatest work like this: “The construction of a character or identity out of life is part of the attempt of Albion to emerge from time into eternity as one Man who is also a City of God. Thus the imagination exists immortally not only as a person but as part of a growing and consolidating city, the Golgonooza which when complete will be the emanation or total created achievement of Albion, Jerusalem” (p.248).

Blake’s vision is a total and transformative one; he calls us to communal, collective, and indeed cosmic labours of regeneration. As Blake’s work – as all genuine Christian art – again and again testifies, Christianity is about *manifestation* and *transfiguration*. Blake saw and professed, with fiery fervour, the artistic potentials – indeed, the artistic nature – of Christianity; how this religion of incarnation and glorification lends itself so well to be realised in works of art and beauty. As Frye affirms, “The central form of Christianity is its vision of the humanity of God and the divinity of risen Man, and this, in varying ways, is what all great Christian artists have attempted to recreate” (p.120).

Even among Christian artists, Blake makes one of the most compelling cases for Christianity’s essentially all-encompassing and all-changing claims on each person and on humankind as a whole. Blake’s model of human life is Los, “with many tears



labouring” (Blake 2000, p.388), passionately building Golgonooza and battling the Spectre, for love of the sons and daughters of men, for Jesus and Jerusalem.

In this ontological, even eschatological conception of art, Blake expresses an understanding that finds its closest parallel, I think, in the Orthodox vision of the ‘iconisation’ of the world. The deepest, most ambitious implications of this vision are explained by Nicolas Zernov, who tells us that icons “were, for the Russians [...] manifestations of man’s spiritual power to redeem creation through beauty and art. The [ikons] were pledges of the coming victory of a redeemed creation over the fallen one. [Consequently,] for the Russians the artistic perfection of an ikon was not only a reflection of the celestial glory – it was a concrete example of matter restored to its original harmony and beauty, and serving as a vehicle of the Spirit. The ikons were part of the transfigured cosmos” (Zernov 1978, pp.105-106).

In a differently accented way, we find this eschatological, transformative perspective also in Jones. According to Hague, the second paragraph of page 106 of *The Anathemata* constitute “an unequivocal statement of the core of [Jones’] thought, as manifested in all his writing” (Hague 1977, p.124). In this paragraph, then, we read:

You that shall spread your hands over the things offered  
make memento of us  
and where the gloss reads *jungit manus* count us among his argonauts  
whose argosy you plead, under the sign of the  
things you offer (Jones 1952, p.106).

The accompanying note informs us that “what is pleaded in the Mass is precisely the argosy or voyage of the Redeemer [...] on behalf of us Argonauts and of the whole argosy of mankind” (p.106).

This journey is not merely historical, temporal, but indeed ontological; not a matter only of a transportation from then to now, from here to there, but indeed a matter of transfiguration, from this to that, from old to new, from death to life. It is thus a voyage not necessarily best recounted – or indeed effected – in narrative form, but rather

in the multi-layered simultaneity of poetry; where ‘is’ and ‘was’ may co-inhabit the same metaphor, the same mystery; where, for Eliot, history is now and England, or, with Blake, we may see the world in a grain of sand, or where Jones may unearth seemingly endless strata of etymological meaning in the words which constitute the material in which we commune with each other and with God.

Jones’ concern is always with the point where artefact is inseparable from sacrament, culture inseparable from worship. Hague, apropos of “the argonaut theme”, therefore importantly stresses that “the voyages in *The Anathemata* stand for much more than an expansion of culture and civilisation” (Hague 1977, p.129); that, I would add, they ultimately signify – and so serve to actualise – sacralisation, spiritualization, divinisation.

We gather the full import of this voyage in the section titled “Keel, Ram, Stauros”, where Jones builds upon, and builds with, the many maritime and timber-related metaphors of the cross and the Church. As Hague explains, the stauros or cross “is seen as the mainmast of the vessel which is a symbol of the Church and of man’s voyage to his appointed end under the guidance of the vine-juice skipper (Christ) and his vicar” (p.191).

We find similar metaphors put to profound use also by St Ephrem:

Noah’s Ark marked out by its course the sign of its Preserver,  
the Cross of its Steersman and the Wood of its Sailor  
who has come to fashion for us a Church in the waters of baptism  
(Brock 1992, p.58).

Importantly, the vessel which Jones invokes – and the same is true of Ephrem – sails both inside and outside time, present in history yet not contained by – rather, containing – it. Ontologically, the ship is a kind of ‘substance’ beyond the ‘accidents’ of time; it belongs to a sacramental order, at the intersection of the timeless with time, and it may symbolise and embody the ultimate purpose of man-the-maker’s labours at significant form. This vessel, like Blake’s Golgonooza, is the salvaging and consummation of all our art.

Blake's and Jones' commitment to the actual and visible manifestation of God, I believe, safeguards the central affirmations of Christian eschatology and theological aesthetics. Blake's vision and project – as does Jones' account of sacramental history – accords well with von Balthasar's claim that “theological aesthetics culminates in the Christological form (taking this word seriously) of salvation-history, in so far as here, upon the medium of man's historical existence, God inscribes his authentic sign with his own hand” (von Balthasar 1982, p.646).

We may say that in the imaginative construction of Golgonooza, we achieve a realisation of the Christ-form. There is no higher form for Blake than Christ risen; the eschatology of his works culminate in the very concrete form of the great Humanity Divine, not in anything formless or abstract: the consummation at the end of *Jerusalem* is a concrete form of transformative and transfigured love. All Christian art, so my thesis holds, should conform to or take its cue from this model. Here, then, is Blake's call to all Christians, all real artists:

Let every Christian as much as in him lies engage himself openly & publicly before all the World in some Mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem (Blake 2000, p.374).

Drawing on the claims made in our chapter on beauty, the New Jerusalem may be seen as the consummation of creativity in its marriage to the uncreated. While all strictly human achievement may only prefigure such a state – and will always be conditional upon the response of God – we may also see our accomplishments as ‘the point of intersection of the timeless with time,’ the place where we may encounter the presence of God and be granted real access to his Kingdom. Crucially, the New Jerusalem is a place inhabited; indeed, its existence as a city is dependent upon the existence of its inhabitants. The building on this city therefore entails a twofold and mutual transfiguration of the world and humankind. This transfiguration is the prerogative of all our making other, but also the promise inherent in the gift of beauty. Its prerequisite and necessary condition is the cultivation of *love*.

## CHAPTER 5: THE LOVE OF CHRISTIAN ART

Love pertains to and permeates all that has previously been argued in this thesis. Indeed, the previous accounts of form, beauty, goodness and ontology would be incomplete without reference to – without being placed in the light of – the love that Christian art above all seeks to cultivate. It is not only that we are invited to love the form of the Christian artwork, to love its beauty, its goodness, and what it accomplishes through its sacramental and regenerative powers; we may also say that the form, beauty, goodness and ontological status of the Christian artwork may only be discerned in an attitude and engagement of love. Indeed, unless we apprehend the Christian artwork as an invitation to love, we can be said not to have seen or engaged with it at all. Fundamentally, also the making of the Christian artwork should be seen as a labour of love, in line with Berdyaev's claim that "God calls men to creative activity and to a creative answer to His love. Our creativeness should be the expression of our love toward God" (Berdyaev 2009b, p.9).

For the Christian artist, whatever is true of other art, love must be realised – at least, attempted – in the very making of the artwork. As Rowan Williams observes, inspired by David Jones and others, "Central to 'making other' is dispossession, disinterested love" (Williams 2010, p.61); a love that lets what is created be, without imprisoning the work in self-interest, so that it may stand as a gift to others, inviting and rewarding their free imaginative engagement, their own second-person explorations of love.

I agree with von Balthasar's argument that, as "the meaning of the Christ-form is manifested as the love of God for the world and as man's perfect love for God and his brother," "any particular form (such as sacramental and hierarchical structure, ecclesiastical discipline, the life of the councils, and so on" – here I would add the tradition of Christian art – "is Christian only in so far and as long as it makes Christian love concrete and visible" (von Balthasar 1982, p.600). An artwork, therefore, is not Christian art if it does not engender love – for the artwork, and, through the artwork, for the beauty of God.

The first part of this chapter explores the conditions of love governing the creation, reception and experience of Christian art, in the light of an understanding of Christian faith which holds that love is requisite for the vision and knowledge of God, and that the life of faith takes the form of a loving second-person relation between the believer and God. The second part applies the experience of Christian art to consider our loving prerogatives more widely, as creative beings entrusted – not only with the making and keeping of art – but indeed with stewardship of the world.

## 5.1 WORKS OF LOVE

Love is a requisite condition of the experience of Christian art; this understanding is anchored both in the nature of the artwork, understood as dialogic and second-personal, and in Christian life and theology at large, where any knowledge and experience of God take the form of an encounter with, and in, love.

The claim that love is a necessary condition for a proper engagement with the Christian artwork can be defended against the background of the central claims of Christianity, where, in Newman's words, 'we believe because we love', and where love is also a prerequisite for – indeed, where love is a mode of – our knowledge of God. "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John, 4:8); "Love – indeed, love that partakes in God's love – is the warrant of objective knowledge in the realm of Trinitarian revelation" (von Balthasar 1982, p.618); "And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him" (I Corinthians 8:2-3).

The Christian artwork seeks to inspire, and to exercise, a love for God; and it does so by being an object of love itself, receptive to a second-person engagement, in which the perceiver may encounter and lovingly respond to the presence of God. Thus, for example, love is both the subject and the 'aim' of Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, the ultimate meaning of which – insofar as such exists – is perhaps best encapsulated in two lines from "The Little Black Boy":

And we are put on Earth a little space,  
That we may learn to bear the beams of love (Blake 2000, p.51).

This meaning is shared by all Christian artworks. Crucially, however, beyond proclaiming or telling us about the mutual love of God and man, the Christian artwork seeks to be an actual occasion for such love.

### 5.1.1 We love therefore we see

It is essential to theology, understood as the second-person knowledge *of* God (and not as knowledge *about* God) that truth is unattainable without love – because the truth of God *is* love – as St Ephrem writes:

Truth and love are wings that cannot be separated,  
for Truth without Love is unable to fly,  
so too Love without Truth is unable to soar up:  
their yoke is one of harmony (Brock 1992, p.45).

Insofar as the Christian artwork has theological ambitions, to disclose things real and true of God, it needs to offer itself as an object of love; it needs to invite, occasion and engender the cultivation of love for God, and to offer – through its forms, its beauty, its sacramental nature – an experience (intimation, presence) of God's love.

It is a crucial theological point that love is integral to right perception and right belief. We need love to also inform our perception and experience of Christian art; as the 'object' or 'purpose' of this art is to bring us closer to God. Love informs, and perfects, both the Christian's way of seeing – for, as Metropolitan Anthony writes, "it is only to the extent to which we become capable of loving that we become capable of seeing and perceiving" (Metropolitan 1971, p.115) – and the context in which the artwork is apprehended, namely the complex of communal relations that constitute the Christian life. This means, therefore, that as the artwork invites us to see in a new way, it also invites us to love.

Christos Yannaras writes that "The knowledge of God does not refer to the realm of our objective enquiries. It refers to our inward, personal discovery and certainty that God's erotic ecstasy (the gift of life) is directed exclusively towards us, that we are *known* and loved by God and consequently all we have to do is to respond positively to this erotic invitation, with the aim of 'knowing' the Person of our Bridegroom and Lover" (Yannaras 2007, pp.67-68). It is this 'erotic invitation' of God's that Christian artworks aim to reveal and re-issue in ever new ways; by inviting us also to love the

artwork – to love it for ‘its own sake’ but also for the way that it manifests God; to love God in the work, and to love God in loving the work. We want to say, then, that the experience of Christian art entails a new mode, not only of vision, but of love as well; for the Christian artwork is, and asked to be seen as, an object of love – an instance of the love of and for God.

As Viladesau succinctly explains, with reference to Robert and St Thomas, “Great works of art bring the viewer or hearer to a feeling of joy, praise and loss of self in love of Something: an ineffable reality that is manifest in the experience of beauty”, and so brings us to a state or disposition in which “we already implicitly know [...] the supremely adorable Reality of God” (Viladesau 2013, p.119). Here we see how the ambition of Christian art, identified in chapter 1, to give us the real – the Reality of God – can only be realised in love.

Love, therefore, is integral to both the production and the reception of Christian art; and we may see this attitude enshrined, in more or less explicit terms, throughout the tradition of Christian art, from St Ephrem, through St John of the Cross, to Tracey Emin’s *For You*. Thus we have seen, in a previous chapter, how Dante calls for his readers to partake of that same love which spurs and sustains the poet.

Dante’s work, which ultimately proclaims “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars” (Dante 1995, p.541), is itself a work of love for God’s goodness and beauty. Importantly, the work instantiates that love in two senses: it is a labour and expression of the love which motivates its author; and it is an object of love and inspiration for us readers. Thus the love that is proclaimed in the poem is the same love that we, in engaging with Dante’s vision, may learn and be inspired to emulate.

Metropolitan Anthony claims that we may know God in two ways – as Jesus and as Love: Jesus, “to whom I can speak personally and who reveals to me therefore that God is a person because only a person can become one with a person, and reveal a person”, and Love, which is “not simply in Biblical terminology a feeling multiplied by infinity, but is the fullness of life that is beyond insecurity, has conquered death, and can give itself as an offering of life and death without fear” (Metropolitan Anthony 1971, p.73).



This is the love that the Christian artwork seeks to manifest and to guide us towards, through the second-person experience of the artwork.

Without love – without a loving second-person approach – the Christian artwork will elude us. In the case of Neill and Ridley, therefore, the most serious flaw of their approach is that they fail to apprehend the Christian work as an object of *love*. This is not simply an ethical, but an ontological failing on Neill and Ridley’s approach. In failing to observe the first and final imperative of Christian art, that it be fashioned and received in love, they fail – and fail in their own ambition – to apprehend it as what it is. They do not see that the artwork is recommended to us an occasion for an expansive love, which is given to the work itself but also spreads far wider. The work is not presented to us as a proposition requiring rational consent or agreement on the level of ideas, but is rather commended to our imaginative care.

In line with the approach here suggested, the Christian artwork does not seek to tell us *about* God; it offers a religious experience, and so addresses itself, not to philosophers of religion, but to believers. We want to say that this God of the believers may be encountered, not only in Scripture or Mass, but indeed in the second-person experience of the Christian artwork. It is crucial that the artwork is taken to manifest God, not just to serve as a series of propositional statements or arguments. It does not seek to give us knowledge about God, but to give us an experience *of* God, to give us God.

Previous chapters have given us models for understanding God’s presence in the Christian artwork, eminently in the artwork’s beauty. Thus suffused, as it were, with the personality of God, we may see why this artwork should offer itself as a second-person encounter, and we see why it should ultimately be seen as an object of love.

Beauty, crucially, quickens our erotic energies, our self-transcending longing for communion with others. “Erotic ‘wonder’ in the presence of the uniqueness of a physical beauty,” writes Christos Yannaras, “is always an invitation to communion and relation [...] the satisfaction of the existential desire for communion”; an “attraction which is not always tied to human bodily beauty” but which may also be generated by “the physical beauty of a place or a work of art” (Yannaras 2007, p.83). Yannaras, as we have already noted in chapter 2, can therefore speak of “Ascetic self-transcendence as a presupposition

for knowledge of the truth of the world's beauty" (p.84); for the *personal* gift and relation that is beauty asks that we open ourselves to personal communion. It is that the "the world, from being an object of the senses, an objective 'phenomenon' and subjective impression, is transformed into the second term of a personal relationship" (p.86).

St Ephrem's work is, again, illuminating here. Ephrem's theological approach, as Sebastian Brock explains, is not that of domination or dispassionate detachment, but "that of engagement, an engagement above all of love and wonder"; this approach, crucially, "is a two-way affair, involving a continual interaction [between the theologian and his subject.] Only by means of such an interaction of love can human knowledge of divine truth grow" (Brock 1992, pp.43-44). God gives and reveals himself to him who approaches in the openness and readiness of love. Thus Ephrem writes,

Your fountain, Lord, is hidden  
from the person who does not thirst for You;  
Your treasury seems empty  
to the person who rejects You.  
Love is the treasurer  
of Your heavenly treasure store (p.44).

It may seem, from what is argued here and in previous chapters about the requisite conditions for the experience of Christian art, that this art may only be fully experienced by those 'on the inside', those already confirmed as believers. However, it is just as crucial to stress that the experience of Christian art also can be – and partly has the ambition, not to say function, to so be – a 'way in' for persons previously outside the community of believers. That is, Christian art possesses great potential to inspire and engender conversions.

Such a conversion, arguably, entails precisely the commencement of a second-person relation. We may find ourselves, in the course of our experience of Christian art, moving from an observer's third-person vantage point to a recognition of being addressed directly, and invited to respond in kind; as may happen when, for example, reading the Bible – and suddenly feeling Christ's words directed, with startling precision, to *me* (and

no longer to an abstract, hypothetical or ideal reader). Something similar occurs in the recognition that beauty is not simply there to dazzle or please, but indeed makes a claim upon me, the observer, in ways that engages me – and makes me answerable – as a moral and spiritual agent; indeed, I discover that beauty asks to be apprehended in a posture of love.

The experience of Christian art, and the experience of beauty (in the Christian artwork or elsewhere), may thus act as a kind of initiation into the (mysteries of the) faith: it may give first-hand, second-personal knowledge of what faith is and is like. Christian artworks both inspire and reward belief, by inviting a loving second-person response that relies on seeing the artwork as what it is, namely, as a sacramental object implicated in rendering the world more in the likeness of God, and as an occasion for a transformative communion with God.

### **5.1.2 Dialogue and *metanoia***

A crucial way of understanding the second-person relation is to stress that this relation entails, not just seeing, but also being seen by another; not just addressing, but also being addressed by another.

A believer before the Christian artwork wholly accepts a reciprocity, the mutuality of gift and response, between himself and the work. This isn't true only of the engagement with icons; for also when entering the York Minster or reading the poems of R.S. Thomas, the Christian accepts that he stands before the eyes of God. We are thus *answerable* to the work, as we are to another person (as perhaps to any member of the kingdom of ends). The non-believer, however, cannot accept this reciprocity, does not hold himself answerable, and his experience consequently remains one-sided, a mere first-person or third-person affair.

Atheism can be seen to consist precisely in the rejection of a second-person relation with God; and it is this same attitude which disqualifies an atheist from a proper engagement with Christian art. One who does not acknowledge the work's address, its claims upon us, and its invitation to a mutually enriching and transformative dialogue –

one who does not feel answerable to the work, or to God, and who is not willing to change his life in responsiveness to the work's meanings – does not really experience the work at all as what it is.

A second-person account of faith chimes well with the understanding of artworks – particularly Christian artworks – as *dialogic*. Rowan Williams has explored the fiction of Dostoevsky (one of the most powerful, problematic and rewarding of Christian artists) in such terms, with great benefits for the understanding of both literary practice and the religious life. Though Williams' emphasis is on freedom, I believe his approach is illuminating also for an understanding of dialogic love. Williams argues:

Faith and fiction are deeply related [...] because both are *gratuitous* linguistic practices standing over against a functional scheme of things. The gratuity of faith arises from its character as response to the freedom of the creator as unexpectedly encountered in the fabric of the world. The gratuity of fiction arises from the conviction that no kind of truth can be told if we speak or act as if history is over, as if the description of what contingently *is* becomes the sole possible account of language. A fiction like Dostoevsky's which tries to show what faith might mean in practice is bound to be both inconclusive in all sorts of ways, and also something that aspires to a realism that is more than descriptive (Williams 2011, p.46).

Fiction (as all art) takes the form of, a free response to God's gift of the world. Art is the exercise of gratitude and generosity, as also argued, in different ways, by David Jones and David Bentley Hart. Crucially, in its appeal to freedom, art does not purport to say the final word about the world, about man or God, but rather encourages and engenders ever more *dialogue* and expression. No paraphrase may replace the richness of the actual experience of the work, and the need to revisit and re-engage with this work – as well as the need to re-imagine the world and ourselves.

This inexhaustibility of the work – which has much in common with the dynamic nature of personhood – allows for art to be of great importance to our orientation in the

world and to the life of faith. We may understand from Williams that fiction is not so much an analogy of faith, but one of the ways in which faith is exercised, one of the ways in which the world becomes intelligible to the eyes of faith.

Williams notes, perceptively, that Dostoevsky's treatment of freedom is intimately bound up with, or embodied in, his narrative method. Thus "it is crucial to [Dostoevsky's] understanding of what he is doing that he sees language itself as the indisputable marker of freedom: confronted with what seeks to close down exchange or conflict, we discover we can always say more" (p.11). This is all borne out in the novels themselves, certainly, but we can see how this understanding is applicable also to the reading of them.

Not only the characters, but we too, when grappling with the often irresolute fabric of the novels, discover that the only path to a fuller understanding, to a more fruitful engagement with the themes and truths of the work in question, is the pursuit of dialogue – pursued at the risk of discord, in dependence on the words of others. To risk this path is itself an act of freedom, a promise of responsiveness and an acceptance of responsibility. It is a process, moreover, through which we may not only reach a fuller imaginative understanding of the characters in the novels, but also of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

As Williams emphatically and correctly points out, this possibility of gaining in understanding, which entails, and which demands of us, an open-ended exercise of freedom, rests precisely on the fact that any need of ours for premature certainty and closure will be frustrated. For these reasons, it is Williams' understanding that Dostoevsky's fiction is

an exercise in resisting the demonic and rescuing language. It does this by insisting on freedom – the freedom of characters within the novel to go on answering each other, even when this wholly upsets and disappoints any hopes we may have for resolutions and good endings, and therefore also the freedom of the reader to reply, having digested this text in the continuing process of a reflective life (p.12).

Here, then, we find an explicit suggestion that the fictional work indeed opens out onto, or cuts a path into, the life of the reader, helping to form, inform and reform this life. Thus our relationship with the Christian artwork may become the mode – not only the place or occasion, but indeed the manner and form – of our relationship with God.

We may stress here that, not only freedom, but also love, is integral to a fruitful dialogue of this kind, to life lived as a dialogue; not least in the form of that trust needed to sustain the condition of mutual vulnerability that the openness to another entails. Freedom and love are intimately wedded; for we freely allow the love of and for God to enter into our lives, as indeed into our engagement with the work of art. Moreover, the aim of our freedom – even of the freedom exercised in the dialogic reading of Dostoevsky – should always be a deeper communion in love. Crucially, it is only when we learn to apprehend the artwork as an object of love – be it *Crime and Punishment* or Rublev's *Trinity* icon – that we may enter into a truly transformative dialogue with it.

It is through a lived and loving dialogue that the work fully begins to yield its meanings to us. It is in this dialogic nature of the artwork, then, that we should expect to discover the full implications of its capacity for *iconicity*; its manifestation of the form and beauty of God. We stand before an icon, after all, in a posture or a situation of reciprocity, which does not cease at the level of the exchange of information, but which rather aspires to a condition of mutual transfiguration.

Insofar as a narrative of fiction can indeed be *iconic*, it is *our* conversion, no less than that of its characters, which is ultimately invited and desired by the work. If *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* are iconic, the implication is that we readers are called upon to be, not only observers, but fellow pilgrims with their characters. These works would ask of us, not simply that we appreciate how the conversions of Raskolnikov and Mitya are 'true' internally, so to speak, in the context of the narrative, but that we also acknowledge that they do indeed reveal something true about the world – and so provide a true model for the reorientation of the human self and the proper relationship between man and God. Again, this iconicity relies not only on freedom, but above all on love; as love is the force that impels both Mitya and Raskolnikov to renounce their old selves for the sake of others. Crucially, it is the love of others – of Sonya, of Alyosha and others – which enable Raskolnikov and Mitya to enter

into dialogue in the first place, by breaking down their self-enclosures; it is love that calls them away from their solipsistic conceptions, their pride and self-righteousness, to accept their second-personal relations, not only to their families and friends, but also to the objective goods of God.

In the light of such an understanding, Christian art asks of us that we keep talking to it; that we keep rediscovering it, while at the same time interrogating and revitalizing our own lives, and so rediscovering in ourselves that divine image and likeness to (and towards) which all Christian art seeks to alert us.

We should gather from the above discussion how our engagement with art, especially in the case of Christian art, has implications for how we live our lives. Indeed, the re-orientation of vision and disposition is the central aim of Christian art. Christian art does not only aspire to reveal divine realities, but crucially invites an engagement in which reading (or viewing, or listening) is inseparable from repentance, *metanoia*, understood as our endeavour to reform our lives in the light and likeness of God.

This transformation of our perceptions and persons is not only the aim, but also the governing theme, of the work of William Blake. For Blake, the key term is Imagination, which in his conceptual vocabulary denotes our ability to see the divine and the eternal in the things of this world. Art arises as the expressive and creative exercise of this imagination, and the role of art is to reveal the divine image in all things – foremost in the faces of our fellow men – by inviting and enabling a perspective of imaginative sympathy and transformative love. Blake’s idiosyncratic terminology should in no way distract us from his ability to phrase what we may take to be the core understanding of many other religious artists, Dostoevsky among them.

Blake’s dialogue with childhood in the *Songs of Innocence* may be seen as exemplary of the *metanoia* involved in our engagement with Christian artworks. The *Songs of Innocence* are not sentimental or platitudinous, but both invite and reward a simplicity of attitude that, for the adult ensconced in the world of Experience, demands a radical change of perspective. The challenge of these songs is not unlike the challenge posed by Orthodox icons, with their two-dimensional presentation, to one habituated to

the naturalistic perspectives of Western painting<sup>31</sup>; and just as the icon requires a shift from ‘natural’ to ‘spiritual’ modes of apprehension, so Blake’s work asks that we cast aside the trappings of our ‘fallen’ perceptions and reclaim (a measure of) the clarity of Innocence; above all, that we experience the work with, and in, the Imagination.

Childhood, to Blake, is not something to outgrow and then remember, but rather something to perpetually re-assimilate into our personality and our sense of personhood. This is a crucial aspect of our dialogic and dynamic personality; and it is one that speaks of our need to be, as it were, perpetually re-born. Significantly, it is part of spiritual maturity to realise our relation to God the *Father*; even the oldest and most venerable of believers never cease to be the children of God.

On a first view, we are prone to misconceive the poems of *Innocence* because we see them only with the adult’s mind, mired in Experience. In Yannaras’ terms, we may say that these ‘innocent’ poems confront us with two different kinds or modes of knowledge, one objectifying and one relational; Yannaras sets out the difference between the two approaches (intended, in his example, to characterise the difference between Orthodox and Western theological approaches) as follows:

On the one side, life is based on truth as *relation* and as existential experience; truth is actualized as life’s social dynamics and life is justified as the identification of being true with being in communion. On the other side, truth is identified with intellectual definitions; it is objectified and subordinated to usefulness [and as such] it comes to be translated into technological hype, into the tormenting and alienation of humanity (Yannaras 2007, p.23).

It is clear in Blake’s case that we are asked, for a full appreciation of the poems and their meanings, as well as for the flourishing of our imaginations and personalities, to adopt the latter approach. It takes a cognitive leap – an epistemic transformation – to be

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<sup>31</sup> This *metanoia* is needed, not only in our experience of icons, but in art-historical theory and criticism as well; where, as Slobodan Ćurčić notes, Western scholarship has long laboured under false apprehensions. Thus, for example, Ćurčić points out that what has commonly been denoted ‘inverted perspective’ by Western art-historians “is neither inverted nor perspective in the Western sense [but rather amounts to] a totally different manner of conceptualising form and space” (Ćurčić 2010, p.6).



able to put ourselves in the child's position, but insofar as we manage this imaginative identification we are rewarded with a real 'injection' – not simply recollection – of innocence.

As in *metanoia*, we are required by these poems to undergo a change of seeing, even indeed a change of heart. When successful, these poems can achieve the miraculous in returning us to the world with new eyes, able to see God, not as an abstract entity, but as a caring and ever-present Father. Blake's art may help us therefore – may show us how, and provide us with opportunities – to 'become as a little child'; not by reverting to childhood, but by reorienting our perceptions and dispositions to achieve a real responsiveness, and a real *relation*, to God.

What is granted to the Christian believer is *a new mode of vision*; a mode of vision like what Blake means by Imagination: a seeing in the light of Christ, which allows us to see the divine image in all things, and all things in relation to God. Crucially, this is mode of vision which is embodied, lived, and which makes perpetual demands upon us that we live up to what we see. We have already seen how Hart and Balthasar characterise the Christian calling to a transformative conformity to the image and beauty of God; we find the same understanding in the work of Blake. The acquisition and cultivation of right vision, therefore, is absolutely integral to the redemption and regeneration of Albion, who has turned away from the Divine Vision and Similitude. In order to change who we are, who we've become through alienation from the love of God and the love of neighbour (as Albion has been divided from Jerusalem), we need to change our way of seeing.

It is noteworthy that Albion's fall may be understood as a lapse from second-person engagements to an abstracting and impersonal third-person perspective, epitomised in the figure of the Spectre; a figure embodying a complex of meanings and associations, but crucially representative of scepticism, materialism and a dehumanising system of law and industry insensitive to human creativity and imagination. The restoration of right *vision*, therefore, is also the restoration of a right *relationship*. This follows also from the fact that what we are enjoined to see, and to love, is *personal*.

### 5.1.3 Union and communion

Blake is adamant that as we exercise our Imagination, we are not just seeing Christ but indeed seeing *with* and *in* Christ, thus by a labour of perception becoming members of his Body. The Imagination, for Blake, is nothing less than “the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus” (Blake 2000, p.302). For Blake, then, as for all Christians, the aim is *union* with God; a consummate second-person experience in which

I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine (p.301).

The Christian artwork needs this kind of seeing – and this relation – to fully come into existence as what it is; a right apprehension of the Christian artwork is dependent, at least, upon our effort at such a relation.

The experience of union is emphatically the ambition of the poetry of St John of the Cross. As Willis Barnstone notes, “San Juan was a mystical poet because in a formal sense his poems were written, he himself states, as a result of *mystical knowledge*, and in his commentaries he endeavours to explain the poems, in great detail, *as steps toward the mystical union*” (Barnstone 1972, pp.24-25). John’s poetry conceives this union, borrowing licence from the Song of Songs, as the mutual erotic consummation of two earthly lovers; as in “Dark Night”:

O night, my guide!

O night more friendly than the dawn!

O tender night that tied

lover and the loved one,

loved one in the lover fused as one! (John of the Cross 1972, p.39).

The Christian artwork wants us to experience the ‘living flame of love’ that is the presence of God. This is intensely experienced and communicated by St John:

O living flame of love,

how tenderly you wound  
my soul in her profoundest core! (p.57);

We also see this flame enfolding Albion and Jerusalem at the consummate point of their reunion; and its all-demanding, all-refining power is witnessed to by T. S. Eliot, for whom

Love is the unfamiliar Name  
Behind the hands that wove  
The intolerable shirt of flame  
Which human power cannot remove (Eliot 1944, p.42).

This flame is a purifier of vision, desire and disposition, inviting and preparing us for the transformational union with God.

In *Jerusalem*, the labours for the regeneration of Albion find their consummation, not only in Albion's union with Jerusalem, but also in Albion's second-personal encounter with Jesus Christ; as rendered in image and words on plates 76 and 96 respectively. Blake's work culminates, thus, with an encounter – a dialogue, a loving communion – between man and the Person of God, in which Jesus directly affirms the reality of mutual, self-forsaking love at the heart of the divine life and of God's dealings with men. It is a communion which we as readers are not simply enjoined to observe at a critical distance, but which we are invited to wholeheartedly participate in.

Blake's work at this point is a triumph, not only of Christian art, but of Christian theology; and his affirmations are resonant with the theological thought invoked in this thesis. Thus, on plate 96 of the work, we read how

Jesus appeared standing by Albion as the Good Shepherd  
[...]  
& they conversed with as Man with Man. in Ages of Eternity (Blake 2000, p.393)

This shows God's personal address to us, and our personal response to him, at the very heart of our being. Importantly, a dialogic love of this kind entails mutual *kenotic* sacrifice; for Jesus, revealing God as truly a self-emptying God of love, tells Albion:

Wouldest thou love one who never died  
For thee or ever die for one who had not died for thee  
And if God dieth not for Man & giveth himself  
Eternally for Man Man could not exist. For Man is Love:  
As God is Love: every kindness to another is a little Death  
In the Divine Image nor can Man exist but by Brotherhood (p.393).

Albion is inspired by this affirmation to act; he resolves to wholly reorient his life in response to the divine address, by throwing "himself into the Furnaces of affliction," whereby his whole personality is transfigured; as "the Furnaces became / Fountains of Living Waters flowing from the Humanity Divine" (p.393). Thus the fulfilment of Albion's personality is realised as he stands

before Jesus in the Clouds  
Of Heaven Fourfold among the Visions of God in Eternity (p.393).

As such Blake envisions our inspired and enraptured communion in eternity: an infinite creative life of imagination and mutual delight. It is the aim of Christian art – beautifully realised in Blake, as in Dante – of offering intimations and manifestations of such a state. The invitation to us, as readers or viewers of Christian art, is to follow Albion's example and dedicate our lives to this divine communal love.

In these passages Blake gives a wonderfully succinct artistic expression to the very heart of Christian thought and life: it reaffirms the self-emptying God envisioned by R. S. Thomas, but also shows the revelation and realisation of love to be the ultimate aim, not only of his own work, but of all Christian art.

It is fitting and fruitful to suggest that the Christian artwork – further to the need for a second-person experience – should also be engaged with in the first-person plural; that is, not just as addressed to me the believer but to *we* of the faithful community, as we perceive and experience with the eyes, mind and heart of the Church.

There are several reasons to suggest the move – the expansion – from a second-person to a communal engagement. After all, the Christian artwork is a shared object of love; not an object for me to love alone, for something that only I can see in it and relate to for reasons of my own, but indeed an object whose real qualities recommend it to all men. As such, it is appropriate to suggest that, in loving the artwork *with* others, I should also seek to cultivate a love *for* these others; not least as the love manifested and re-presented in the Christian artwork – in the Christian story – not only calls us to the love of God, but indeed enjoins us to love our neighbour. It is in loving, in manifesting the Trinitarian mutuality of persons, that we become like God.

Thus Christian art invites, engenders, and demands, not just an I-you relation, but a we-you relation, where the *we* does not only constitute the collective receivers of the work, but also the real context in which the work is fully revealed and apprehended; for the meanings of the work are most properly disclosed within the frames of this communal body of shared values, practices, and beliefs.

It should be emphasised that this first-person plural is not simply a plurality of first-person perspectives, but rather a singular and integral mode of perception and reception in itself. Blake illustrates this identity in Albion, whose fall into fragmentation and alienation, whose conversion to Christ, and whose final consummation with Jerusalem are all experiences of communal man. We may speak of the group or community as constituting something over and above the sum of its individuals; more pertinently, we speak of the Church as one body of which each believer is an integral member, but which also possesses an organic dynamism and an ontological status of its own. The Church is a transfigured community, and it is precisely membership of this body which transforms the individual believer.

If the icon is one paradigm of Christian art, the church is another. In many respects, the church building itself is the culmination of all symbolic and sacramental artifice, the crowning achievement of spiritual culture, the place where all religious art

receives its ultimate justification. As Kathleen E. McVey has observed with regard to the Byzantine context, churches and other religious buildings “became, in effect, sacramental. Not only the rites performed [...] but also the architectural elements and the structures in their entirety assumed the task of mediating between the everyday and the sacred, the finite and the infinite” (McVey 2010, p.39). Here is a Christian work which comes into existence only as a collective creative act and a communal experience, which is indivisibly second-person and first-personal plural; and which offers a more commanding and consummate experience of the presence of God than any other individual artwork may. Indeed, we may consider the church – which incorporates icons, painting and sculpture, poetry, hymns and liturgical music, as well as the architectural work of the building itself – as the fruition of all Christian arts come together. Thus, as McVey affirms, “Architecture, liturgy, and hymnody, as well as vestments and liturgical furnishings, processions, icons, relics, and reliquaries were created to echo and amplify one another as palpable fountains of holiness so that worshippers might fully enter into a holy realm” (p.39). We may, I believe, see the church as a microcosm, iconic not only of the whole believing community, but of the whole world in its right relation to God – the loving, committed and transformative, second-person relation of the Bride to its Groom.

## 5.2 IMAGINATIVE CUSTODIANS

This final part of my thesis will offer an approach to the love of art more generally, not Christian art alone, drawing upon and departing from the arguments above, but will also further explore the implications of the love that Christian art cultivates; I will show how this love may be directed through and beyond the artwork to the world, the *cosmos*, at large, and to the beauty of God. In particular, the models here proposed will provide a fuller application of Christian art's ontological prerogatives. For, as microcosms, we humans are the custodians of the created world, tasked with its imaginative care and transformation. The love of art and particular artworks may intelligibly be placed, and find its purposes, within such a picture.

I propose a model for the love of art, therefore, which is other-regarding, outward-reaching and culturally embedded, attentive to worldly particulars and attuned to transcendent goods. Just as it is in the nature of a work of art to accommodate an almost infinite variety of perspectives and associations, so too the love of the artwork will both draw on other attachments and open out to embrace other values. The love of the *particular* that is the work of art may thus fruitfully be exercised within, informed by and contributing to, more *general* ends of love.

I identify two such kinds of love: *oikophilia* and *philokalia*. The former denotes a cultural love of home; the latter a theological love of beauty. *Oikophilia* is a concept used to great effect by Roger Scruton in seeking to characterise and motivate a proper care for the natural and human environment; and it is a concept that I think wonderfully suited to embrace our love of art. On this view, the work of art, as a thing fashioned and sustained by both craft and care, and as a focal point of affections and associations, is loved for its capacity to render the world emotionally and spiritually our home, a place of culture, shaped by human hands and enduring human values. This can be a real Christian sentiment, but we shall also see how the Christian commitment to *philokalia* creates tensions to home-love.

Adopted and adapted from the Orthodox Christian monastic and theological tradition, the concept of *philokalia* is here used to denote a love of beauty, where this beauty is seen as in some sense an attribute or gift of God; as on the account of beauty

given in chapter 2. Such a theological account of beauty is not only, to my mind, the most metaphysically compelling, it also gives the most commanding reasons to see beauty as an object of love.

### **5.2.1 Art and oikophilia**

In his *Green Philosophy* (2012), Roger Scruton sets out to identify, and to articulate, the motives that engender, and that may reliably be appealed to in order to sustain, a deep and urgent concern for our human and natural habitats. “I describe this motive (or rather, family of motives),” he writes, “as oikophilia, the love and feeling for home” (Scruton 2012a, p.3). These are motives and feelings which are not addressed to the natural environment alone, but which underpin our cultural efforts as well; indeed, they are integral to the making, appreciation, and preservation of art.

It is important for Scruton that the *oikos* “means not only the home but the people contained in it [...] the place that is not just mine and yours but ours” (p.227). I would say immediately that works of art possess this extraordinary quality: that they do not only speak of or describe such a place, but that they indeed help to establish and furnish such a place – of commonly held ideas, of shared experiences, and of shared objects of love. I stress from the outset, therefore, the communal character of both art and the love of art.

Though we may easily conceive of a kind of connoisseurship or love of ‘art for art’s sake’, there are several reasons for not advancing such a model – as it would fail to account for the reach and richness of the affections and commitments that artworks invite and engender.

For one, a love of art for art’s sake would seem to rest on presuppositions of so-called aesthetic autonomy that I cannot condone. On my understanding, art is not only embedded in a culture or institution of (however implicitly) recognised standards of value, but is also implicated in cultural practices that extend beyond the narrow confines of the artworld. I argued extensively for such an understanding of art and Christian art in chapter 1. Thus, pregnant with meanings, artworks are inescapably caught up with value judgements which appeal to wider practices and beliefs, aesthetic as well as moral and



religious. The love of art, for this reason, will be similarly multifaceted, and what affection is concentrated on the particular artwork will draw on many sources and will in turn reflect back on those other aspects of life.

Further, a love of art for art's sake, where no considerations are given to the shared environment in which the artwork is situated, and where *we* (with an emphasis on the first-person plural) encounter it, may all too easily amount to, or degenerate into, a kind of love of self – a love of *my* taste, of my expertise, of my collection. It is right, I believe, to ask of the love of art – as of all love – that it is directed outwards, away from self and subjectivity, towards other and objective goods. The lovable artwork is situated in, and shared among, a community – indeed, an *oikos* – of lovers.

For this reason, it is also crucial to emphasise that, if the love of *beauty* should be considered as a valid candidate for a greater arena of the love of art, this must entail a 'high' conception of beauty. If we submit, as many do, that beauty is nothing but a subjective sensation of pleasure, this would risk resulting only in a solipsistic and decadent love of pleasure for its own sake. On my model, of course, beauty is not only objective or transcendental, but indeed the beauty of God.

Scruton, significantly, invokes some of the enduring masterpieces of Western art – from Homer's *Odyssey* to Reitz's *Heimat* – as one kind of empirical evidence for the attitude of home-love that animates our human efforts at settling, and that pervades our cultural accomplishments. While it is quite right to note this emphatic artistic testimony to *oikophilia*, the further point I want to make is this; that while on one level these great artworks illustrate, and instruct us in, this love of the *oikos* which exists in some measure independently of their contribution, even more crucially these very poems and paintings contribute to build the *oikos*, and are in important respects the enduring bricks and mortar of our deepest affections and most fully developed concepts and desires. We are, as persons of culture, *at home in* these artworks.

In an English context, the paintings of Turner and others furnish us with ideas (and ideals) of landscape, but they also constitute the landscape of our ideas. These artworks are home to our ways of seeing, and thus our ways of relating to, our environment and our neighbours who inhabit it with us. These works inform our habits of perception and conception, so that it is hard for us not to see England – *as* England, with

all the cultural associations accompanying this name – through the lens of Wordsworth, Constable, Vaughan Williams, and the like<sup>32</sup>; through their renditions and re-creations of landscape, the landscape becomes articulate as much more than mere nature, and so acquires new modes of meaning, even new ways of being – of being ‘for us’, of being *ours*. In this way, art of this kind is indissolubly linked to *oikophilia*. Indeed, landscape as it addresses us through the form of art invites a loving response and renders the landscape (as a human landscape, as our landscape) an object of love. The perceptions that inform, and are formed by, *oikophilia*, are those that allow to us to see – with Bridges – how

man’s skill had made  
a fair-order’d husbandry of that native pleasaunce (Bridges 1934, p.2).

Heidegger, whose thinking may be seen to profoundly underpin Scruton’s, makes similar claims – albeit in a different idiom – for the artwork’s integral role in the forging (and unfolding) of a cultural home and ‘world’. Thus, in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, regarding the Greek temple, “It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death [...] acquire the shape of destiny for human being. The all-governing example of this open relational context is the world of this historical people” (Heidegger 1978, p.106).

Of great significance, in this context, is Scruton’s (as indeed Heidegger’s) consistently Burkean stress on the importance of the unborn and the dead in our sense of identity and belonging. Art, I maintain, ensures such a bond, by communicating, across generations, ways of experiencing the world; moreover, art enshrines important ways of relating, by allowing us to tap into the emotions and beliefs of others, dead or distant, with sometimes startling poignancy and precision.

I would say that art bequeaths to us a *language* – a repertoire of attitudes and articulations, concepts and emotions – without which we cannot relate to each other, let alone our ancestors and descendants, with the kind of depth and clarity that we both deserve and desire. For such successful transmissions of meaning and value, community

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<sup>32</sup> Of course there are other possible versions of, and other ways of feeling at home in, England. The same goes for any country or culture.

is needed; at the same time, it is such transmissions which form and confirm a community, or an *oikos*.<sup>33</sup> The custodianship of art has much in common, therefore, not only with environmental stewardship, but also with religious tradition.

Importantly, it is part of a tradition of values to also pass on the perception of beauty; this is evocatively proposed in poetic form by Bridges, suggesting that the

birds not only act and enjoy  
[their wonderful] music, but to their offspring teach it with care,  
Handing on those small folk-songs from father to son  
In such faithful tradition that they are familiar  
Unchanging to the changeful generations of men [...]  
The same notes that woke poetic eloquence  
Alike in Sophocles and the sick heart of Keats  
– see then how deeply seated is the urgency whereto  
Bach and Mozart obey'd (p.5).

Love, arguably, is the motivating force for all such successful transmission of cultural capital; it is a necessary precondition, while it is also the ultimate end of our mutual works.

It remains important that we love, just as we judge, art *as* art – poem *as* poem, portrait *as* portrait – and not simply as means to something else; however good that other cause, and however efficient a means the artwork may be to it. Hence, if a poetic work – say, Eliot's *Four Quartets* – serves to inspire or affirm wider affiliations (to England, to Anglicanism, or to something else) it is important that we see that it does so as the poem that it is, and that the values it champions are integrally tied to its poetic qualities; so that the poem does not only espouse the love of home, culture, or creed, but so that in loving

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<sup>33</sup> For Heidegger, “language is at once the house of Being and the home of human beings” (Heidegger 1978, p.179); building on what has been said, therefore, we may say that language does not merely speak ‘about’ our home, and our condition, but indeed constitutes both a mode and a place of our habitation. As such – going further, anticipating some of the discussion ahead – our task of home-preservation and home-transfiguration (not least through our works of art, literature and poetry) may be understood in terms of our calling – as Heidegger sees it in *The Letter on Humanism* and elsewhere – ‘to bring Being to language’ (p.179).

*this* poem we practice at the same time these wider loves. In this way, the artwork may not only encourage practices of love which are in some sense external to it, but itself becomes an instantiation of such loves. Such is the case, I propose, with an artwork's relation to both *oikophilia* and *philokalia*. At the same time, and just as importantly, we may bring our existing love for home and beauty to bear on a proper and full appreciation of such works, where this experiential, second-personal knowledge is called for.

On this model, then, we may say: I love the painting because it *is* beautiful; and I love beauty in it and through it. I love the painting because it *is* home (to my values, dispositions, visions), and I love my home in and through it.

### **5.2.2 Conservation and transfiguration**

For Scruton, a right response to the environment, and to its current crisis, is allied with a kind of cultural conservatism, where “The goal is to pass on to future generations, and meanwhile to maintain and enhance, the order of which we are the temporary trustees” (Scruton 2012a, pp.9-10). His *oikophilia*, thus understood, is eminently suited to the attitudes and practices of our love of art; for the kind of care that Scruton calls for extends to embrace also the conservation of cultural artefacts – to protect our sources of enduring value and ever-new inspiration from the harm inflicted upon them, and the values which these objects house and nurture, from the forces of social and spiritual entropy.

The concept of entropy is important here. Scruton's *oikophilia*, by his own admission, may be judged a vain “attempt to escape the Second Law of Thermodynamics” (p.10); but this, he argues, is not a reason to consider the effort at consolidation inherently futile, nor does it detract from the moral import of the response. “Moreover,” he writes, “as thermodynamics also teaches us, entropy can be contained indefinitely at the local level by injecting energy and exporting randomness” (p.10). This is what we should do in caring for our social capital, our customs, and our civic and cultural accomplishments. The love of art, I would argue, is not only engaged in this struggle, but is indeed one of its most valuable weapons.

The making of a work of art is itself an affront to entropy; taking, as it does, indefinite matter to fashion a determinate and significant form and to imbue this with vital meaning. The transformation of material or object into a work is an accomplishment of *metaphysical* implications – as explored, in analytical terms, by Peter Lamarque in his *Work and Object* (2012), and as expressed in a theological key by writers on icon painting, from John of Damascus in the 8<sup>th</sup> century to Lossky and Bulgakov in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Further, the artwork entrenches its resistance to entropy as long as it is held in existence, as an object of regard, by informed readers, viewers or listeners; and so, crucially, it also serves to inspire new works of transformation.

With some reservations, we find a credible, commendable vision of custodianship in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, poised somewhere between Scruton's cultural conservatism and the vision of transformation embodied in Christian art, as epitomised in Blake's Golgonooza. Rilke's seventh elegy, in particular, may be seen to issue a forceful call to a celebration of our cultural and artistic achievements, the monuments of our fragile victory over time's attrition. Thus Leeder argues that, "if the *Elegies* attack the world of functionalism and mass production, it is to plead for a world where we act as custodians of a living continuity, valuing the forms that we know, the ones that have withstood change" (Leeder 2008, p.11).

Rilke suggests that our feats of art and civilisation must be repeatedly urged upon us, entrusted to our care and consciousness, lest they fade entirely from collective memory and practice, as from the natural world. A failure of perception and receptiveness, therefore, entails also a failure of care, to the detriment of our own flourishing as well as that of our culture:

Many no longer see it, so they miss the chance  
to build it again, to build *within* themselves  
the pillars and the statues, yet greater still (Rilke 2008, p.59).

Rilke's call, in response to such a condition of forgetfulness, is that we should not be numbered among "those disinherited ones who do not possess their past, / nor yet what

is to come,” that “*we* should not become / confused by this, rather strengthened in preserving / the still-recognisable form” (p.59). We may gather from this the understanding that we are the custodians of our cultural capital; that gratitude is our proper response and continued care our task. This, to be sure, chimes with the call to custodianship that I discern in Christian art and theology.

However, my apprehensions about Rilke’s approach, as put forward in the previous chapter, apply also here; for the emphasis on a transformation that takes place ‘within’ risks, I believe, undervaluing the need we have for the actual things that consolidate our attachments, our sense of history and community.<sup>34</sup> Hence my own approach puts emphasis on our need for *shared objects of love*, not simply ideals and reminiscences – which may so easily become internalised, invisible, and self-contained. While the *Elegies* do suggest that ‘we’ may find solace for our alienation in past achievements and cultural precedence, there is not a sufficient emphasis on the communal nature of either our predicament, nor on the need for our regenerative efforts to be directed to making new by making actual things – not artefacts alone, to nurse our nostalgia and hold the powers of entropy at bay, but *anathemata* to God, to restore the world to the divine likeness.

With these reservations in mind, the *Elegies* may still inspire our works of home-love and transfiguration. When Rilke writes that

we have not, after all  
failed to make use of these generous spaces,  
these spaces of *ours* (p.59),

we may read this as celebrating a right and fitting response to creation, the right use and cultivation of the talents given and materials allotted to us.

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<sup>34</sup> It should also be clear that there can be no entirely ‘inner’ language; not only on Wittgenstein’s model, but also on Jones’ and St Ephrem’s understanding of language as *sacramental*. Not only is language shared, open and outward, but it is also *material* – it has significant form – and so may re-present and manifest divine realities. Rilke, being a poet, would of course be aware of this, but the *Elegies* themselves provide suggestions which may undermine this understanding.

The elegy ends on a note of wistfulness, aware of the passing of all old monuments – “For my call is always full of leaving” (p.61) – and it is right to remind that our task should be informed by the fact of loss, not over-infused with a false optimism. At the same time, this should not preclude joy – for “Just being here is glorious!” (p.57) – and the awareness of the perpetual threat of cultural entropy should serve to spur us to more committed custodianship and creative effort. Such is Scruton’s message, and – in more fiery tones – such is Blake’s.

In the work and vision of Blake, we must not forget that Albion is a country, too, and so a home; indeed, as a communal and collective man, he is a living *oikos*. On Blake’s model, the only real way of regenerating the land and home that is Albion is by turning, communally, to Christ. This goes further than Scruton’s *oikophilia*, but it is entirely in keeping with *philokalia*. From a Christian perspective, Blake’s response to Albion’s fall may be seen as exemplary of the kind of motives and actions needed for a home and community to flourish in the face of dissolution. Blake’s is a call to imaginative custodianship.

On Blake’s model, our home-building is ultimately exemplified by the building of Golgonooza, which is built to resist and reverse the laws of entropy; indeed, to spiritualise and redeem the entire material world in which entropy proliferates. Golgonooza is the home we make for ourselves, not only here and now, but also after death; the place of enduring art and beauty that we inhabit after all earthly homes have passed away.

With its eschatological dimension, Blake’s work, as all Christian art – and, in some measure, Rilke’s *Elegies* as well – alerts us to a tension between the need to conserve and the urge to transfigure; a tension which is less pronounced, though not absent, from Scruton’s *oikophilia*.

Scruton invokes T.S. Eliot’s reflections on time in *Four Quartets*, to argue that “oikophilia leans naturally in the direction of history and the conservation of the past: not from nostalgia, but from a desire to live as enduring consciousness among things that endure [...] To exist fully in time is to be aware of loss and to work always to repair it” (Scruton 2012a, pp.233-234). This is indeed something that Eliot seeks to do through his

poetry; not simply in the experiences and sentiments he seeks to conjure, but in the very crafting of the poetic work, putting word to word in pursuit of a lasting structure of significant forms, capable of containing a rich inheritance of meanings. Moreover, it is through great works of art, of Eliot's kind, that most of us are able to develop an admiration for past accomplishments, for enduring feats of artefacture and for timeless insights into our condition. Through works of such quality, we come to be at home in world of abstract concepts as well as concrete things.

*Four Quartets* is a work that testifies to, and moreover makes possible, a love of place and a love of a particular cultural history: not by refuting the timeless or transcendent, but by affirming its particular and definite manifestation, and by stressing the need for – and the validity of – our tireless, and so timeless, love for the here and now. In some of the poem's most powerful and resounding lines, we are enjoined “to kneel / where prayer has been valid” (Eliot 1944, p.36) and is valid still; we are asked to partake in a practice recommended by precedence, at a particular place pregnant with historical significance, and so a place where both hope and thanksgiving may be concentrated. It is Eliot's profound *oikophilia* that allows him to write that “History is now and England” (p.43).

The work is thus a testimony to *oikophilia*, but as a Christian artwork it also always reaches out towards *philokalia* – not least in its invocation of Dante, Julian of Norwich and others – and it proclaims, through the contingencies of cultural crises, the unchangeable glory of God as the ultimate object of our love – even of our love of here, of now, of home. As Eliot strives always to voice that which takes place at “The point of intersection of the timeless / With time” (p.30), so the poem's resolution is not only cultural, but theological in tone and import; it seeks the transfiguration of things historical in the light of the eternal verities of God's revelation, where ultimately

the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one (p.43).



This transcendental and even eschatological tendency in Eliot can serve to bear pressure on our conception of *oikophilia*. It is right to stress the conservative element of our love of home, but I believe that the tendency towards conservation is only one aspect of this love; just as significantly, it leans in the direction of, and lends its motivational power to, *transfiguration*. Here, in its transformative aspects, is also where *oikophilia* most clearly leads towards the love of beauty. For beauty transfigures, redeems, glorifies. Though one crucial task of conservation is to safeguard the beauty of old things, it is fundamental to beauty's power that it *makes new*. A beautiful thing always addresses us with the delight of new life.

Scruton's *oikophilia* does, I believe, have much in common with the understanding of stewardship enshrined in Christian theology, and thus, by extension, with the cultivation of *philokalia*. "Oikophilia", says Scruton, "tells us to love, and not to use; to respect, and not to exploit. It invites us to look on things in our 'homescape' as we look on persons, not as means only, but as ends in themselves" (Scruton 2012a, p.253). As such, it absorbs and accommodates also our "love of beauty and respect for the sacred" (p.253), which for Scruton – as for Burke, Schiller, Heidegger and others – are intimately connected. These sentiments and conceptions are developed, in a theological key, by Kallistos Ware, who writes that man's 'vocation is not to dominate and exploit nature, but to transfigure and hallow it' (Ware 1995, p.54). On Ware's theological model, our stewardship is inseparable from our calling to also beautify the world through works of art; and the motivations of *oikophilia* thus find themselves informed by, and transmuted into, our cultivation of *philokalia*.

We may say that to be a custodian, a steward – a shepherd of sorts – *is* our mode of being at home (as far as we can ever be at home) in the world; as on Heidegger's understanding (in *The Letter on Humanism*) "Man is the shepherd of Being" (Heidegger 1978, p.167). This role of ours, then, entails not only the stewardship of a particular place and a (de)limited cultural capital, but indeed constitutes an ontological predicament and prerogative. To care for and to create things of beauty is, I argue, no small part of this task.

To propose *philokalia* as a motive to environmental stewardship is not, as some may fear, to 'aestheticise' our care for the natural world; for beauty, on this

understanding, is revelatory of the intrinsic value of nature, not simply an ornamental aspect of it. Bridges makes the point,

since there is beauty in nature, mankind's love of life  
apart from love of beauty is a tale of no count (Bridges 1934, p.113).

Love of the natural environment may be embraced within and draw upon the love of beauty, not simply because nature may happen to be picturesque or sublime, but because *philokalia* sees in a beautiful world the intended glory of creation. The desire to beautify, therefore, is not simply a wish to make the natural world pleasing, to satisfy human hedonism and comfort, but a real response – a calling, a felt responsibility – towards its perceived dignity and divine potential; and to love the beauty of the natural world is to see it as beautiful in itself, not simply for our sakes.

When Berdyaev claims that “Art must become a new, transfigured nature” (Berdyaev 2009b, p.249), this is not only for the sake of the internal purposes of art, but for the fruition of the world's yearning for transfiguration, as also proposed by Rilke. Beauty is integral to the restorative and regenerative aims, not only of art, but of our stewardship of the world; “For,” as Berdyaev affirms, “beauty is a great force and it will save the world” (p.250).

Heidegger – through a characteristic etymological exegesis – tells us in *Building Dwelling Thinking* that ‘dwelling’ should be considered no less than our mode of being in the world, and that this entails, essentially, care and cultivation. “The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *buan*, dwelling. To be a human [...] means to dwell [and] *also* means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for” (Heidegger 1978, p.245). On such an understanding, *oikophilia* can indeed be said to be (a) defining (motive) of humanity. But the Christian wants to say that also *philokalia* is constitutive of humankind. In this respect, Christos Yannaras' departure from Heidegger is fruitful.

We may learn from Christos Yannaras that the world – understood as the divinely fashioned *cosmos* – is not simply an empirical object but personal and relational in

nature. “Cosmos,” Yannaras explains, “is the appearance of the personal universality of Being, of the mode by which beings are as disclosures of a personal uniqueness and decorum, as presences of beauty” (Yannaras 2007, p.81). On this understanding, the cultivation of beauty is integral to stewardship because the world *as cosmos* is by definition an ordered, beautiful and personally related thing; it is not given in the value-neutral gaze of empirical enquiry, but demands a personal relation. All this recalls the second-person engagement necessary for Christian art, argued for above, and places that engagement in its right context and perspective. Stewardship, on Yannaras’ conception, entails caring for the world, and for the *oikos*, as for another person, responsive to its divine potentials; to care for it as a thing and revelation of beauty, and to respond in love to its unique disclosure of personal energy.

In Blake’s work, importantly, Los creates the world of form on such a conception. Los, we should understand, creates the world as a home for us – a merciful shelter from dissolution and chaos – but also as the place where we are to encounter the Divine Vision and Similitude and commune with Jesus. The world is the ‘imaginative home’ for us as creatures of imagination; and we, on Los’ example, are its stewards. To create art is therefore to re-imagine, to re-energize the *oikos*, to make it manifest and partake of the divine.

The world, in the tradition Yannaras represents, “is the second term and *logos* of a dialogue (*dia-logos*), a personal *relation* directed towards the realisation and disclosure [...] of Being” (p.96); within which dialogue our role as microcosm and steward is exercised and fulfilled in responsive, loving and creative transformation of our own and the world’s mutual potentials, not in a one-sided exploitation of the world’s resources for its ‘usefulness’ and our winnings. Our task, as artists and custodians, is to respond to the “personal logos of ‘things’, to disclose the personal dimension of the world” (p.149).

Yannaras argues that we recognise the world as *cosmos* only insofar as we recognise its beauty and its personal relational mode of being. Hence to see the world as a home is to see it as beautiful; indeed, the world is a home to us only insofar as it is beautiful.

### 5.2.3 Love against the machine

Love of home and love of beauty will always have a common foe in practices that disrupt the ‘human scale’ and the interpersonal rhythms of settled life. Hence Scruton writes in scathing terms about our modern ‘technophilia’, while Christian art provides emphatic support for critiques of the impersonal and de-humanising, as well as ecologically harmful, implications of mechanisation and industrialisation.

René Hague observes that what we may call sin is, for David Jones, “the application of man’s faculties to purely technical achievement, directed to profit and power, at the expense of that culture which is both creation and worship” (Hague 1977, p.2). Thus Jones bemoans the “utile infiltration” (Jones 1952, p.50) of the modern age. We find a similar indictment of technocracy, perhaps more impassioned still, in Blake, illustrated in Los’ perpetual battle against the Spectre.

We may see a real affinity here with Scruton’s lamentations on the functionalism that pervades modern culture; but of course Blake’s and Jones’ apprehensions and indictments run deeper still – for what they lament is the neglect and misuse of our divine potential and our essential nature as beings called to render the things of this world *anathemata* to God: “the things lifted up and the venerated trinkets” (Jones 1952, p.50).

Jones, as no doubt Blake, would fully endorse Eric Gill’s contention (as here articulated by Rowan Williams) that “the bulk of post-Renaissance art is a disaster”, precisely because it has misunderstood or neglected the fundamental ontological prerogative of art and has “encouraged us to think of painting not as sharing in the creative labour of God for the world’s eventual fulfilment but as the record of a particular individual sensibility looking at the world from outside” (Williams 2010, pp.47-48). This entails a misunderstanding, not only of the potentials and prerogatives of art, but indeed of the nature of man and of the world we inhabit.

Man the artist is also man the labourer; this is true in Jones, in Blake and, in more tersely realistic terms, in R. S. Thomas. For all these poets, a concern for the nature of language and creative expression goes hand in hand with a concern for the realities and

implications of human craft and manual work, and the threats posed by the technocratic age are seen as directed against the dignity of language and labour alike.

Thomas' persistent critique of 'the Machine' evokes the threat such 'technophilia' constitutes to our religious conceptions, practices and language, how it encroaches upon our waiting on God, supplanting the personal and sacramental with abstract and sterile means of communication; for example, in "The Tree":

We have set one up, but  
of steel and so leafless that  
    he has taken himself  
off out of the reach  
of our transmitted prayers (Thomas 1993, p.417).

Thus Thomas speaks of the devastating fact of language's decline and the concurrent lapse of our spiritual perceptions and conceptions; language, in Thomas' perspective, has become the language of the Machine, and so a source of alienation and destruction. We see this yet more clearly in "Brother":

It addressed  
objects, preferred its vocabulary  
to their own [...]  
    forged  
for itself wings, missiles (p.428).

The lament and critique of these poems rest on an understanding of language and human making as inherently, potentially, divine in purpose and nature; and so the misuse of these powers constitute, not just an affront or attack directed at the human world and the language users, but indeed a perversion or negation, ultimately, of divine communication.

It may seem that technology itself poses an inherent threat to art and poetry; because technology, as Heidegger points out in *The Question Concerning Technology*, “is a means to an end” (Heidegger 1978, p.218); and, as Jones and others assert, the instrumental, the utile, the functional – not just its objects and instruments, but its view and way of life – is inimical to the gratuitous and sacramental realities of our ‘making other’. Insofar as ‘the essence of technology’ is instrumentality, then, this would indeed seem to be negating the aims of art, and perhaps of Christian art in particular.

Yet if, as Heidegger’s complex thesis suggests, both art and technology have their essence in a bringing forth and disclosure – if “Technology is therefore no mere means [but] a way of revealing” (p.222) – then it would be premature to posit a fundamental rift between the two. We should be cautious here; in keeping also with David Jones’ celebration of all our making – including craft and manufacture – as potentially revelatory of our relation to God. Insofar as a conflict remains, therefore, this should be diagnosed in terms, not of categorical or essential differences, but of practice and application; where technology may be understood as revealing directed towards instrumental ends, and art as revealing dedicated to gratuity – and where technology may therefore bear with it a risk, though by no means a guarantee, of falling into a purely functional order.

Heidegger is aware of this risk, and he sees it realised in what he calls ‘modern technology’; for “the revealing that holds sway throughout modern technology does not unfold into a bringing-forth in the sense of *poiēsis* [but is rather] a challenging” directed at the earth; such technology does not cultivate but rather “sets upon nature [...] in the sense of challenging it” (pp.223-224). It is this incarnation of technology that we may recognise as ‘the machine’ in R.S. Thomas poetics, as the menace of the strictly utile in Jones’, and as the target of Blake’s fiery indictment of the spectre of ‘industry’.

Christos Yannaras, building on Heidegger’s analysis also criticises the technology of today on ontological grounds (seeing this modern condition as an inheritance of the western philosophical tradition), calling it “the most radical undermining of the personal truth of the person and of the world”, due to its proliferation of “goods”, as opposed to “things” (such as artefacts and artworks), ‘which does not aim at relation but only at the subjection of the world [...] to impersonal individualistic need and desire’ (Yannaras

2007, p.37). This is in contrast to art, craft and labour, which express, manifest and realise personhood, and which also – this, I believe, is implicit in Yannaras’ argument – are iconic of God’s creation of humanity and the world, stamped with his image. The machine, the technological condition, negates this personal aspect, and so renders the world opaque also to God.

Yannaras argues that “The whole phenomenon of modern technology is founded very clearly on [the] attitude” (p.79) of treating the world as an autonomous object for the human will and intellect. By objectifying the world, and also objectifying God, we banish God as a personal presence from the world, leaving the world to be exploited for self-serving human purposes. Thus Yannaras cites the modern environmental crisis as a sure symptom of “some fault in humanity’s relation with the world” (p.103), brought about by a false idea of the world no less than by a wrong use of it.

We may understand Blake’s Golgonooza as the attempt to reverse this trend; and we can see how the building of Golgonooza is symbiotic with the flourishing of personality and the personal nature of humanity and the world. The accomplishment of this entails creatively overcoming the inner pains as well as the outward obstacles of our broken condition, as Los himself testifies:

I took the sighs & tears & bitter groans:  
I lifted them into my Furnaces; to form the spiritual sword.  
That lays open the hidden heart: I drew forth the pang  
Of sorrow red hot: I worked it on my resolute anvil (Blake 2000, p.306).

Blake laments the decline of craft, the rise of mechanisation and, with it, the militarization of industry and manufacture, in the strongest terms: “And all the Arts of Life. They changed into Arts of Death in Albion” (p.362). The change, which may seem a social and material one, to Blake has the profoundest spiritual implications. It has dire consequences for our apprehension of reality, rendering opaque the divine vision, making us look only to the world of empirical ratio and utility; and moreover making it easier to commit wrongs against the divine image on a collective scale.

It is worth quoting a long excerpt from *Jerusalem*, for Blake's devastating and penetrating assessment of the new order; an assessment closely apposite, I believe, to both R. S. Thomas' and David Jones' own diagnoses and apprehensions:

Then left the Sons of Urizen the plow & harrow, the loom  
The hammer & the chisel [...] & the water wheel  
That raises water into cisterns broken & burnd with fire:  
Because its workmanship. was like the workmanship of the shepherd.  
And in their stead, intricate wheels invented, wheel without wheel:  
To perplex youth in their outgoing. & to bind to labours in Albion  
Of day & night the myriads of eternity that they may grind  
And polish brass & iron hour after hour [...]  
  that they may spend the days of wisdom  
In sorrowful drudgery, to obtain a scanty pittance of bread:  
In ignorance to view a small portion & think that all (p.362).

This state of affairs is a mockery and negation of human potentials, of creativity, of art and craft, and of our regenerative calling.

If we identify the real danger of technology as that so-called 'enframing' proposed by Heidegger, we can see how this tendency – which is both objectification and ordering, both conceptual entrapment and practical delimiting of possibilities – does constitute a real threat to the gratuitous and sacramental. For all its revelatory potentials, therefore, Heidegger suggests that technology as (and under the sway of) enframing “blocks *poiēsis*” (Heidegger 1978, p.234). Heidegger may be seen to echo the apprehensions of Jones, Blake and Thomas, therefore, when he claims that “enframing, is the extreme danger, not only for man's essential unfolding, but for all revealing as such” (p.235).

Yet, crucially, Heidegger's analysis, significantly, opens onto a cautious affirmation of the redemptive potentials of technology; as he acknowledges that “the essential unfolding of technology harbours in itself what we least suspect, the possible rise of the saving power” (p.235). Still, this saving power, so-called, is to be understood



in terms of *poiēsis*, and so is to be sought and cultivated above all in the arts. It is, ultimately, to art – poetry chief among them – that Heidegger enjoins us to look for “the revealing of essential unfolding into the beautiful” (p.237). In this assessment, I feel, he is joined by the poets here discussed; who also affirm that technology may be a mode of regeneration, insofar as it aligns with the aims of art and poetry for the bringing forth of beautiful things.

For a nuanced response to technology, we may look to Robert Bridges. Bridges, also apprehensive of the machine’s incursions into our labour-communion with the earth, suggests that agriculture by its new methods “hath lost as much of beauty as it hath saved in toil” (Bridges 1934, p.97). But he also affirms that there is occasional beauty – even grace – in our mechanised labour:

Or what man feeleth not a new poetry of toil,  
whenas on frosty evenings neath its clouding smoke  
the engin hath huddled-up its clumsy threshing-coach  
against the ricks, wherefrom labourers standing aloft  
toss the sheaves on its tongue; while the grain runneth out,  
and in the whirr of its multitudinous hurry  
it hummeth like the bee, a warm industrious boom  
that comforteth the farm, and spreadeth far afield  
with throbbing power; as when in a cathedral awhile  
the great diapason speaketh, and the painted saints  
feel their glass canopies flutter in the heav’ward prayer (p.97).

Love of home and love of beauty both enable this way of seeing, which is forgiving of the machine’s disruption or variation of the old natural rhythms, and perceptive to its sacramental and regenerative potential if used with right care for the right ends. Thus we can see how also new technologies may be recruited for the building of Golgonooza, and how – as David Jones was aware – we may encounter the presence of God ‘at the turn of a civilisation’; the challenge also faced, and deeply felt, by R. S. Thomas.

#### 5.2.4 The challenges of love

Not only the claims on behalf of art's redemptive power that we find in Christian art and theological aesthetics, but also Scruton's appeals to a love of home, may, I grant, seem problematic in the face of much modern art and of modern understandings of both the artworld and the world itself. Very few works and artists may seem to conform to these kinds of conceptions.

But the model I am proposing does not want to ignore works of a difficult or even disturbing nature; works which conceptually, formally or on the level of content pose a challenge to ideas of settlement, transcendent values and the aim of beauty. Indeed, as many of our greatest works may seem to issue some such challenge to our settled conceptions, no serious account of art can afford to ignore these aspects.

To the question, how *oikophilia* may adapt as we move from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the comforting to the critical, from the likes of Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral* and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" to the likes of Paul Nash's *We Are Making a New World* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* – in short, from the somewhat idyllic or poignant to works which cannot, or refuse to, offer a safe image of home – three kinds of response can be given.

Firstly, we may observe that even works that manifest or give voice to a real sense of alienation, often derive their power from – and often appeals to – precisely that longing for home which most, if not all of us, inescapably harbour. There is Houseman's *A Shropshire Lad*, for example, which derives its enduring poignancy from precisely these tensions; where homely rhymes envelop meditations on mortality and lost youth, where the resilience of local loyalties is hard-won in the face of experiences of displacement and despondency, and where the repeated affirmations of home-love always threatens to be undone by the pessimism that pervades many of the poems.

Secondly, we may stress the crucial point made earlier, that while our artworks may offer images of a home external to the works, it is more interesting to consider these works themselves as constituting a home for our conceptions and values; and for this to successfully and significantly be the case, arguably, the engagement with matters – and the exploration of artistic forms – that pose a threat to our home-building may seem

something of a necessary condition. We do not want to be too settled in our conceptions, as it were; as creative and enquiring beings, we want an art that is responsive to the often critical conditions of the world we inhabit. *The Waste Land* is a particularly apt illustration of this point, on the level of formal structure no less than the level of content.

Thirdly, we may emphasise again that it is not home, but beauty, that has the final claim on our efforts and desires – and beauty of a transcendental, even divine order; and we should make it clear that this beauty may be manifested in artworks, as in real places and situations, that offer no consoling idylls and no earthly shelter.

As a fourth option, of course, we may simply concede that not all artworks are engaged in the cultivation of either *oikophilia* or *philokalia*. The model I am here pursuing does not seek to be all-inclusive, and indeed would not wish to accommodate certain works that seem rather to be in the business of subversion, negation and desecration – or, for that matter, those that seek simply to divert or entertain.

With these responses in mind, then, we may briefly consider some works that seem paradigmatically to manifest the challenges *of* – not necessarily *to* – the love of home and beauty.

Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for one, testifies to our deeply engrained, often inescapable, anxiety and fretfulness, and to the fractured character of our lives and the world we so often fail to comfortably inhabit. At the same time, however, it is precisely the tensions between the home and the exile, the *oikos* and the desert, the assurance of meaning and the sense of desolation, that provide the strongest motives for, and that offer the most powerful experiences of, our great works of art. If we were indifferent to home and beauty, even works that pitilessly illustrate the difficulties of attaining those objects of love would have no appeal, would lose their hold on us.

Thus, on one level, Eliot's poem stands as a testimony to us not being at home in the world, and shows that our alienation is a real source of spiritual turmoil and dissatisfaction; while on another level, the poem's exposure of alienation draws implicit attention to, and draws great pathos from, our enduring search for a sense of home. This striving is Eliot's own pursuit also beyond the bounds of the waste land. In *The Waste Land*, the best Eliot can offer is a gathering of fragments, shored against the ruins of what was once, or maybe never was, a real *oikos*; but by the end of the *Four Quartets*, which

in many ways is a consummation of the longings explored in the earlier poem, he is – as we have seen – in a position to affirm something far more substantial.

Paul Nash is a fascinating case from the visual arts; for his avowed inspiration from such lovers of home and beauty as Samuel Palmer and William Blake may be discerned even in the searing renditions of the battlefields of the Great War. The uncommon beauty of these works, in contrast to their pitiless subject matter, offers a commanding challenge to our conceptions and commitments. Nostalgia may figure in the response to Nash's landscapes – nostalgia for what is no longer there, what is absent in the landscape – but more appropriately attuned to the works' unflinching gaze – which is unclouded by naiveté, and which gives us the world as it now is – would be a sombre and urgent sense of the need for both lament and regeneration. These are works which call for, and which call forth, a love that remembers, a love that restores, and a love that transforms.

I would also single out Marc Chagall as an artist whose work is exemplary for its palpable quality of love. Chagall was by his own proclamation motivated by love alone, and he does seem to be in love with every inch of his paintings. A great *oikophile*, Chagall never tired of re-imagining and re-creating his native town of Vitebsk, even during his long years abroad, and his love is palpably manifested in the very brushwork of the paintings, in the generosity of their colours, and the attentiveness to particulars, where even non-human creatures and inanimate things become radiant with personality, as for example in *I and the Village* (1911). Nor did Chagall shy away from evocations of suffering, cruelty and destruction; in his late painting *War* (1964-66), the strength of his love of place and people is evident in the tenderness with which he renders these figures who find themselves in the very throes of terror and loss. Undoubtedly we have here also a lover of beauty; of the beauty which animates the imagination and the heart alike, in moments of joy as in times of trial and tribulation.

It is crucial to bear in mind that we want to be at home, not simply in the human world, but with the idea of being human. This will involve, on any mature conception, a lived familiarity with doubt, death and destruction. Some artworks may be more difficult to love than others, and this may partly be because these works remind us how difficult it is to love; and such challenging works may in time secure a place as the most enduringly and deeply rewarding objects of love – of a love hard-won in the face of all that assail it.

It is a value of art, I believe, that it may help us – through exposure to such issues and through imaginative involvement with real and fictional characters and situations – not only to achieve this familiarity, but also to conceptualise, to come to terms with, even perhaps to overcome some of the suffering, desolation and dissatisfaction that will, in the course of a lifetime, befall us. Hence, arguably, the enduring appeal of tragedy, of thrillers, of *memento mori* in its various forms; and hence art may often rise to its summits of perfection and beauty in works dealing with human suffering or even marking the occasion of death – as exemplified, for example, by the Requiems of Mozart and Fauré.

Another exemplar in this respect is Rembrandt's famous portrait of his mother. This is a painting, interestingly, to which Scruton appeals in his account of the significance of the human face as the revelation of self and personhood, and one which he suggests contains "one of the greatest smiles in all painting" (Scruton 2012b, p.82). The smile, and the portrait at large, is remarkable for its ability to transform an ostensibly gloomy subject into a source of genuine light. Bearing all the marks of advanced age, Rembrandt's mother is by no means a conventional beauty, and the portrait could be construed, at first glance, as rather sad and disturbing – for its dark tones, the partial obscurity of the face, and the unmistakable signs of physical decay. Yet the evident mutual tenderness and understanding between the painter and the sitter, rendered with all the master's skill, turns this painting into a triumph of human love. As much other great art, here is a work which reminds us that death is not only the greatest challenge of art, but indeed the greatest test of love. In *The Artist's Mother*, Rembrandt, I believe, proves himself victorious on both counts; and the mark, the prize, of that victory – is the work's beauty.

As a parallel case, explicitly Christian in its commitment, we may look to El Greco's half-length figure of *Christ Blessing* (*'The Saviour of the World'*) (ca. 1600), currently in the National Gallery in Edinburgh. This painting shares with Rembrandt's a subject and sitter that may, at first glance, deflect the viewer's gaze away from the face and eyes that meet him. For there is no conventional comeliness about El Greco's Christ; on the contrary, as is to be expected from the artist, there is something unearthly, potentially uncanny, about the sallow features of the figure. However, if we are prepared

to place ourselves in a relation to the subject that, in some measure, partakes of the experience of the painter, we may become acutely and intensely aware of the real qualities of the person before us. Indeed, as in Rembrandt's case, it seems clear that the painting is rendered in, and for, a deep mutual love between the artist and the person represented there.

There is something piercingly arresting, and profoundly moving, about El Greco's Christ; of a person whose power is not subverted by, but precisely resides in, the weakness of his physical form, and whose seemingly feeble gesture is charged with grace. Recalling the God of R. S. Thomas, this Christ is no coercive presence, but a *kenotic* one; incapable of commanding submission, his power is synonymous with his self-offering in love, and he invites a freely loving gift of self in return. This is the aim of the artwork: to realise a mutually transforming second-personal relation. We, the viewers, are invited to partake of this communion with Christ, present under the form and beauty of the painting. The fact that this invitation calls us, ultimately, beyond the borders of this world, is reflected in the gaze of Christ, whose eyes glance off past the viewer instead of confronting us full-on.

Further, in the case of Christian art, there are many images – of the Crucifixion, for example – which are stark reminders, to viewers attuned to this tradition, that this world, with all its error, cruelty and injustice, is *not* our real or final home; and so – while they bring out the tensions between *oikophilia* and *philokalia* – they may serve to quicken a different kind of home-sickness in us. More interestingly, these paintings are objects of love, on many levels; and if this is difficult to comprehend or to accommodate within our customary notions of love, this is entirely appropriate – for these images may be said to both manifest and invite the most difficult and demanding kind of love there is – a love defeating death.

We may have to concede that not all art needs to be beautiful; that beauty is not a criterion of some kinds of artwork. At least, so contemporary art practice, aesthetics and critical theory tell us. The Christian artist, however, will rather affirm Berdyaev's claim that "There can be no art without an impulse to beauty" (Berdyaev 2009b, p.238). To my mind, beauty's capacity to engender wider affiliations speaks for re-instating beauty as a

core value and aim of art. It may be said of art that does not aspire to beauty that it does not seek to be an object of love. If, by neglecting beauty in art, we lose an opportunity to learn how to love art and to love beyond art, then this would be a catastrophic loss.

If beauty is dismissed or dispensed with, so is the appeal to the aspiration of our better nature towards transcendent goods. Art that sets itself up *against* beauty, as some modern art does, does not seek to engender or accommodate our love, either for beauty or the *oikos* – indeed, it may be directed against the very idea of a shared habitat of enduring values. In such cases, not even the particular artwork is offered as an object of love, but rather as a sensory assault, a conceptual riddle, or an intellectual challenge. The kind of model I am here proposing is set squarely against such tendencies.

For Scruton and for many writers on theological aesthetics, the denial or destruction of beauty amount to nothing less than an act or attitude of desecration; while in Blake's work this denial can be identified with the fall of Albion and his division from Jerusalem:

I saw the limbs form'd for exercise. contemn'd: & the beauty of  
Eternity. look'd upon as deformity & loveliness as a dry tree (Blake 2000, p.306).

On the theologically committed understanding of beauty which informs *philokalia*, beauty is a quality of God's self-revelation and a manifestation of the mutual love and delight of the Trinity; and the beauty that we encounter in the world may be seen as a gift bestowed by God. The beauty of each beautiful thing, partaking of God's infinite beauty, is therefore appropriately seen as a source of delight and gratitude, solace and inspiration. It is easy to see why this would make the beautiful artwork *lovable*, an appropriate object of love – the love of art, of beauty, and indeed of God.

It must be emphasised, however, that there are great demands involved in this engagement with, and love of, beauty. As I have previously argued, we are asked, not only to respond with due gratitude to beauty's bestowal, but to reorient our dispositions and desires in recognition of its objective value. Indeed, we are asked to conform to the reality that beauty reveals – by becoming beautiful ourselves. The appropriate response to the beautiful is therefore to grow, through love, ever more receptive and nearer to it.

On my model, the beautiful artwork is a touchstone for such experiences, and may thus claim a central place in the deepening and developing of our spiritual life. Importantly, as regards the beautiful artwork, we do *not* simply love the beauty of the work, but indeed the *beautiful artwork* itself; we love it for giving particular form to, and being a unique manifestation of, a beauty which is divine. Moreover, we love it for being a *lasting* witness to that beauty, in the face of so much entropy, ugliness, and desecration. Thus the artwork is not just an object of the love of beauty, as one instance of beauty's manifestation; rather, our love of art – our love of a particular work of art – is elevated to, and accommodated by, a love that is directed towards the glory of God.

It follows from the claims of beauty upon us – and indeed from the claims of the *oikos* – that the lover must conform fully to the end he hopes to realise. Thus we have seen Maritain argue that “The artist must be in love with *what he is doing*, so that his virtue becomes in truth, in St. Augustine's phrase, *ordo amoris*” (Maritain 1943, p.48). We may add that he must also be in love with what he is doing *for* – with art, of course, but beyond that with the human home and with the beauty of God. We must accept that this love is not easy either to acquire or sustain; yet for the lover of art, as for the artist himself, it is a prize well worthy of our greatest effort and commitment.

### **5.2.5 A home in but not of the world**

Some works in the vast treasury of art may be singled out as speaking more resolutely than others of such love, and manifesting such love more clearly. There are, for example, the paintings of Fra Angelico and the music of Bach; and there is Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Dante's narrative, of course, is one of pilgrimage, and one born of the poet's own exile from his hometown of Florence. It can be seen, simultaneously, as an attempt to reclaim that home and as charting a search for a homecoming of a different order. It isn't only the order and grandeur of a human settlement that is the spur and object of Dante's desire, but rather “Divine Love” (Dante 1995, p.60), the glory of God, and those beloved persons, Beatrice and the Saints, that live, move and have their being in His



presence. It is to this divine love, not only to the love of our earthly home, that Dante's beautiful work of art wishes to guide us.

Christian art, for this reason, may not rest content with affirmations of home-love. While Roger Scruton acknowledges the tensions within *oikophilia*, therefore, my model also points to another tension – between the love of home and the love of beauty – which may take us beyond the limits of the *oikos* into the practice of *philokalia*. Indeed, the experience of beauty on my understanding already contains this tension, by kindling a desire that calls us beyond our earthly home; for, as Berdyaev observes, “The beauty which is born in the creative act is already a transition from ‘this world’ into the cosmos, into another form of being” (Berdyaev 2009b, p.165).

For all the emphasis on dwelling, belonging, and homecoming, Scruton too is aware also of the restlessness and homesickness of us humans, in our search for shelter or salvation. He takes seriously, I believe, Heidegger's claim that “Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world” (Heidegger 1978, p.165)<sup>35</sup>; and he favourably quotes the words of Augustine: “Our hearts are restless, until they rest in You” (Scruton 2012a, p.238).

This tension is central to Heidegger, who stresses – in *Building Dwelling Thinking* – that to dwell “‘on the earth’ already means ‘under the sky’” (Heidegger 1978, p.246). Heidegger, importantly, conceives of homecoming and the home (this time in *The Letter on Humanism*) as “nearness to Being” (p.164), thus locating our predicament in the realm of ontology (more emphatically and consistently than does Scruton), and not in a socio-cultural context alone. Indeed, it may be that no such worldly context may satisfy or appease our homesickness; that it may even be wrong to look for such belong among temporal things and beings at all, as it is Being itself we thirst for. Consequently, what we suffer from is “a homelessness in which not only man but the essence of man stumbles about” (p.164). Christian art and theology, of course, suggests that this condition may only be assuaged beyond this world, and that our true home must be understood as nearness, not to abstract Being, but to God.

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<sup>35</sup> This is taken from *The Letter on Humanism*. Scruton's treatment of this topic may also be seen to draw on Heidegger's analysis of the *unheimlich* in *Being and Time* (§40 and elsewhere); his diagnosis of Dasein's “fallenness” into a state of being “not-at-home” (Heidegger 1962, pp.233). This is a condition also recognised by Christian theology, as my discussion will bear out.

From the Christian perspective, Heidegger's approach is commendable in that it encourage us to view our homesickness, as well as our home-building, in more than psychological and pragmatic terms – indeed, in more than terrestrial terms – as something that tends to Being itself, and thus cannot primarily aim at or, nor ultimately be satisfied by, a particular *oikos* or *heimat*; even though the nearness of Being (as indeed the presence of God) may indeed be felt and effected in and through such local and finite belonging. Scruton can be seen to heed this tendency in Heidegger's thought, in his commitment to the category of the sacred; but, as neither Scruton nor Heidegger allow for seeing the sacred in explicitly Christian terms as being-for and being-with God, their diagnoses can only take us thus far in understanding the 'apophatic love of home', so called, that underpin Christian art and theology.

We can relate this discussion back to the apophatic method of R. S. Thomas, pertinently epitomised in the metaphor of 'Abercuawg'; as a place (non-existent in time and space), the presence of which cannot be sought in the way we usually seek to locate a particular site or answer, but which, as D. Z. Phillips observes, "can only be grasped in the form of absence" (Phillips 1986, p.92). Thomas writes:

An absence is how we become surer  
of what we want. Abercuawg  
is not here, but there. [...]  
I am a seeker  
in time for that which is  
beyond time, that is everywhere  
and nowhere; no more before  
than after, yet always  
about to be (Thomas 1993, pp.340-341).

Significantly, Abercuawg points to the levels of analogy involved in all our searching – and making, and building – for God; the conditionality of all our efforts and accomplishments, which are always made other by and in God, and the real fruition or

consummation of which is always other than what is realised here on earth, or what is made by human hands.

Reaffirming the tensions between *oikophilia* and *philokalia*, the Christian faith proclaims that, while the earth is entrusted to our care, and in need of our loving regenerative efforts, we have no abiding home in this world, but are perennially pilgrims for God's glory, as St Paul proclaims: "For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come" (Hebrews 13: 14).

Gregory of Nyssa enables us to see this in terms of our dynamic reaching out, and our insatiable hunger, for God's inexhaustible *beauty*. Indeed, as we have seen, Gregory says that our homesickness, as we may call it, "belong[s] to the soul which loves what is beautiful. Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond, always kindles the desire for the hidden through what is constantly perceived" (Gregory of Nyssa 1978, pp.114-115). Scruton, of course, does seek to connect *oikophilia* with his enduring concern for beauty. However, he calls the love of beauty a "subsidiary motive" (Scruton 2012a, p.253) to our more encompassing need for home. On the theological understanding of beauty, however, no motive could be stronger than our calling to commune with the beauty of God; and God's beauty, on this model, is also our one true home.

If, for Scruton, *oikophilia* incorporates the love of beauty, on my understanding *philokalia* encompasses the love of home. We are at home in this world, arguably, only insofar as it is beautiful; for we are native to beauty, and beauty's withdrawal or banishment from the world only serves to render this world alien to us, and us exiles on its barren surface. Such is the feeling of Christian art and of the theology it both expresses and inspires.

While Scruton emphasises the inestimably beneficial role that the love of beauty has played in conservation movements around the world, he also draws attention to beauty's force as a consolidator of community; since a shared love of beauty, and collective aesthetic agreements on behalf of the common good, help to render settlements enduring places of culture: the examples of Florence, Prague and Salzburg feature in Scruton's account, as does the traditional English village, as models for how an acknowledgement

of beauty's objective value, as a check on short-term plans and commercial interests, is an essential element in any right approach to culture-building.

We may transpose this model – under the influence, not only of the theologians already invoked, but also of such uncompromisingly visionary artists as Dante and Blake – to consider our stewardship and beautification of the world at large. For I think this is precisely the ambition of the Christian tradition of art to which the likes of Dante, Blake and Eliot belong. The Christian artist is committed, not only to a local habitat and home, but to creation as a whole; and the visionary care they enjoin us to cultivate pertains not only to the conservation of cultural artefacts, customs and communities, but to the glorification of the material, mental and spiritual world in which we humans live, as creatures called to grow in the image and likeness of God. When Zernov claims that icons are “part of the transfigured cosmos” (Zernov 1978, pp.105), he gives voice to a worldview in which we are all called to the practice of *philokalia*.

It would seem that *philokalia* makes the kinds of claims upon our desires and commitments that will tear us from our local affections and allegiances; but it may also return us to the *heimat* and the *oikos* with more ardour and a yet greater sense of responsibility. Indeed, *philokalia* may serve to add greater urgency to local cares; for the local is resonant and radiant with the sacred, and truly invaluable – even for the exile – for its unique embodiment or imaging of the transcendent and eternal. We may construe *philokalia* as a kind of love exercised chiefly by pilgrims, and not by patriots, but these two need not be in opposition, as long as the local home, the point of origin (and not seldom also the point of return, as Eliot reminds us in *Four Quartets*) is loved for its particular manifestations of God's glory and for being the familiar ‘arena’ within which a more than local love is learned and nurtured. For the love of God may not only be exercised through love of neighbour and family, but may indeed be learned through homely practices of care and sacrifice, as well as from the artworks and artistic traditions that constitute such a vital part of the home.

Insofar as a degree of irreconcilability remains between *oikophilia* and *philokalia*, this may be explained partly by Scruton's idea of the sacred, which plays a crucial role in his thinking and which underpins his account of home-love. The sacred, on Scruton's model, is really an anthropological, not a theological category; it is by definition

identified with local customs and communal beliefs, while it also remains theologically non-committal, even though Scruton works within broadly Christian conceptions.

*Philokalia*, on the contrary, makes definite ontological commitments; it confesses the Trinitarian God of Christianity, and it is cultivated in response to the manifestation – both rapturous and sometimes rupturing – of a beauty not of this world.

The concept of *philokalia* should invite us to consider the *iconicity* of our works of home-building as well as our artworks. Golgonooza is illustrative here, as constituting a kind of ‘culture-building’, the aim of which is not simply an earthly establishment of practices and values, but rather the manifestation of divine realities. As such, Golgonooza prefigures a realisation and reality which is always beyond and other than the cultural accomplishment – but which nevertheless is really present there, manifested here and now.

At the grandest scale, a whole society may be taken to embody such iconicity; and we have a historical example of such a project in the empire of Byzantium. Thus Kallistos Ware identifies “the great vision by which the Byzantines were inspired: to establish here on earth a living icon of God’s government in heaven” (Ware 1963, p.50). This culture-building was carried out on the same theological assumptions about the spiritual use and redemption of matter that underpinned the defence of icons. Thus Ćurčić incisively suggests that re-presentations of architecture in Byzantine art “enjoyed a meaning and status equivalent to those of the saints depicted on icons as primary objects of religious veneration” (Ćurčić 2010, p.3). For all its failings, then, notably the temptation to confuse the temporal and earthly kingdom with the eternal one, Ware argues that “Byzantium in fact was nothing less than an attempt to accept and to apply the full implications of the Incarnation” (Ware 1963, p.50). In some way and some measure, this is the defining ambition that animates all Christian making.

What Christian art and Christian cultural accomplishments more widely seeks to achieve is a cultural condition where God is encountered and the new world is both prefigured and actually instantiated; not a static culture, but a dynamic, sacramental, and regenerative one. Crucially, it is foremost to the new, not the preserved, that our love is owed and directed. In this light, this emphasis on transfiguration over conservation,

Berdyaeu offers the startling and significant insight that “In the strict sense of the word [...] Christian culture is impossible”; for the Christian creative task is the transformation of “culture into being, science and art into a new heaven and a new earth” (Berdyaeu 2009b, p.126).

*Oikophilia* tells us that art ought to remake the world in the image of man; to help make, from the raw materials of nature, a settled and cultured world imbued with human values, and to speak of all that is enduringly ennobling in our nature – of dignity, sacrifice, love of home. An artwork, on this understanding, thus serves as a *model of care*; of a care which is owed to the world as to our natural, cultural and spiritual home. The artwork shows us how such a love is possible, not least by itself being an object of love.

For the Christian, of course, and for Christian art, ‘the image of man’ is intelligible only as a divine image. Our dwelling, no less than our making, must be pursued and understood with reference to God; and the home we are enjoined to build and care for must be conceived as the home of man-the-artist and man the microcosm.

Thus *philokalia*, going one step further than *oikophilia*, asks of art that it remakes the world in the image of God; that it becomes iconic of God’s glory. The beauty of the particular artwork should serve to kindle in us a thirst for more and more of beauty’s bestowal and manifestation; loving the beautiful object, we may learn to direct our desires towards the infinite beauty of God, as the ultimate object of our love.

The beautiful work of art, therefore, stands at the very intersection of home-love and love of beauty, and may simultaneously be an instance of and inspiration for both practices; at times harmonising these two, at other times serving to awaken us to their diverging claims. In the case of Christian art, its ultimate allegiance is with the practice of *philokalia* above that of *oikophilia*.

Prompted by the experience of Christian art, then, we can issue the call for art to restore its dedication to beauty; not simply because we want our *oikos* to be beautiful, but because beauty is our true and abiding home – as imaginative custodians, entrusted with transformative stewardship of creation, called to attain the likeness of God.

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