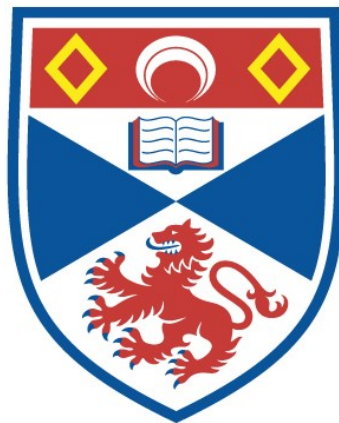


*AESTHESIS AND ASCESIS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
THE ARTS AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION*

James J. McCullough III

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



2013

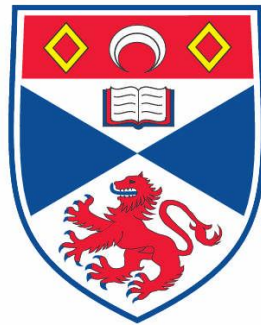
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*Aesthesis* and *Ascesis*: The Relationship Between  
the Arts and Spiritual Formation

James J. McCullough III



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## Abstract

The general claim of the thesis is that the exercise and development of skills and capacities related to *sensory perception* can contribute positively to the process commonly referred to as *spiritual formation*. The dynamics of *aesthesis* and *ascesis* can be perceived as existing in a symbiotic relationship, encouraging and reinforcing the potentials of the other toward the development of a vibrant, discerning Christian spirituality. The arts can help mediate this relationship, and in doing so can be said to *catalyze* these dynamics.

In order to maximize the catalytic potentials of the arts for lay formation, a definition of art is employed that identifies art as the result of a combination of craft, content and context. Accent is placed on the communicability and cognitive cogency of art in this analysis. In order to argue for the moral and spiritual efficacy of the arts, resources from aesthetics, ethics and human development theory as appropriated within practical theology are explored. A variant on virtue ethics that emphasizes the morally-formative potential of narrative is highlighted as the correlative to the claim that works of art can be seen as conveyers through which an 'inhabitable' sense of worldview, the truth-claims of which are insinuated effectively or ineffectively according to the relative strength of the artistic utterance. It is through the inhabitation or indwelling of the story so conveyed that art exerts its spiritually formative influence.

“Art is an antidote against any kind of superficiality, and perhaps against superficial  
spirituality most of all.”

David Baily Harned, *Theology and the Arts*

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## Foreword: Antecedents and Acknowledgements

This dissertation, the result of three years of study, research and writing under the auspices of the Institute of Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St Andrews, is antecedently related to several things in my life. I suppose its deepest roots lie in my own formative experiences with both Christian faith and exposure to the arts. For both I owe much to my mother, Joyce. It was she who encouraged involvement in church-related activities, and who purchased for me my first recording of classical music. Popular exerts from Beethoven, Rossini and Tchaikovsky initiated me into the realm of concert music. Exposure to Shakespeare in the seventh grade added to these early enthusiasms, which I always credited with raising the levels of my imagination and aspirations. It was at this same time the Christian witness of my maternal grandfather John Thompson, as well as the witness of the Absecon Methodist Church, which helped me associate the beauty and adventure of the arts which I was enjoying with the call of Christian discipleship. This close association continued as I went on to study music education at the College of New Jersey, while being very active in the campus ministry sponsored by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. InterVarsity, with its deep roots in British evangelicalism and its tradition of reflective faith development, enabled me to maintain the integration of faith and common life, a perspective I would further explore in terms of Public Theology to which I was exposed during my years of study at Princeton Theological Seminary.

It was during my years teaching at Somerset Christian College from 2001 to 2009, however, that I was afforded opportunities to formulate my nascent ideas about the relationship of the arts, theology and faith formation. Nothing advances one's learning so much as teaching, and nothing clarifies one's thoughts as writing, and the preparation for and delivery of lectures on such topics as worldview, ethics, and spiritual formation represented my first articulations of some of the issues addressed in this dissertation. My determination to provide a compelling classroom experience and my conviction that the arts effectively – perhaps superlatively – embodied or 'incarnated' the worldviews, ethics and spiritually formative features of life on which I lectured led me to work on ways to integrate the arts with my teaching. This I did increasingly during my last five years at Somerset, and I remain deeply grateful for the experience those years gave me.

I want to acknowledge the influence and help of mentors who contributed to my journey toward the PhD. I must begin first with my thesis supervisor, David Brown, Professor of Theology, Aesthetics and Culture and occupant of the Wardlaw chair at St Mary's College. Exposure to his classroom lectures, occasional presentations and his extensive writing expanded the scope of my own reflections on the arts and theology. His professionalism towards me in the course of the writing of this project contributed greatly to my ability to conclude this process in as timely a manner as I could have hoped for. As a husband and father of four, during the this process, this was a crucially important goal of mine, and I credit David with helping me reach it

with what is no doubt a far better dissertation than would have been otherwise without his availability, insight, and encouragement.

Max Stackhouse, professor emeritus of Ethics and Society at Princeton Seminary, provided material and a network of scholars which enabled me to take a passion for faith common life into a more carefully developed Public Theology. Max's own enthusiasm for the arts, manifest in his annual summer conference on religion and the arts in the Berkshires, further confirmed for me that the arts are a public good which contribute not only to personal piety but to virtues of citizenship as well. Having explored the practical theology of faith formation in this project, I hope to advance theological discourse on the arts as public theology in future research.

My days at Princeton were greatly enriched by my exposure to the teaching and scholarship of the late Diogenes Allen (1932-2013). His work particularly in spiritual theology introduced me to the history and dynamics of ascetical and contemplative streams in Christian thought. Professor Allen introduced me to sources of spiritual theology from both the Eastern and the Western Churches, and the influence of this latter-day imitator of his Hellenic namesake remains in my life and scholarship.

I also want to acknowledge the time and assistance of my dissertation readers, Prof. Jolyon Michell of the University of Edinburgh and Dr. Eric Stoddart of the University of St Andrews.

Aristotle listed friendship as a form of love and one of life's great achievements, and friendships have meant much to me throughout my life, perhaps none so much as during the past three years. Besides the opportunities for teaching and theorizing that my days at Somerset provided, just as important were the friendships formed there. Among these I think of David Stefan, Mark Meehan, Amy Huber, Jim Brix, Garland Pollard, and Barbara Charalambidis. Garland and Jim provided warm and deeply supportive pastoral support for me as well as friendship and banter. They believed in me in ways that I could not believe in myself. Barbara was a person to whom I could articulate (or be at times inarticulate) my deepest anxieties and concerns. She embodied God's grace toward during very difficult times. Several from my association with InterVarsity have remained close throughout this time, including Bob Grahmann, Kevin Bauder, and Carolyn Carney. Don and Sherie Zimmer, whom my wife and I met through my work with InterVarsity, provided wise counsel and warm support during our sojourn in Scotland.

I met many people during my time in St Andrews, as relatively brief as it was, who not only tolerated my American eccentricities but become deep friends as well. Among these would be members of the St Andrews Postgraduate Christian Forum. This fellowship, which I had the privilege of helping to establish while a postgraduate student myself, consists even now of scholar-saints from around the world. I'm particular appreciative of my time with Sara, Chera, Felix and Spencer. I think of Mark Rust, Gordon Methven, James and Lucy Cuthill and many other St Andrews locals who were consistently warm toward me and my family. Above all I think of Elaine Miller. The friendly face I so frequently saw behind the library help desk became

a voice of calm and reassurance for me during my final months at St Andrews. ‘Everything’s fine.’

Some friendships go beyond the familiar toward the familial. Among these are surely life-long friends Ed Davis and Ralph Bingham, and George (‘Tony’) and Debbie Harne, whom we met during our time in Princeton. Tony is a scholar and educational leader, and I have long appreciated his support and affirmation. Matthew and Denise Milliner have remained close to us, and provided support both morally and financially. Matthew and Tony endured many despairing emails from me but remained positive and resolved in their encouragement of my scholarly aspirations. Final acknowledgment along these lines must be made of Dylan and Lisa Serrano-Dodd. We met while neighbors at Princeton Seminary, and spent two years as neighbors again at Easter Kincapple Farm. Our lives were closely bound together around the life of their son, Carlos Luis Serrano-Dodd, whom Jill and I served as godparents. Lisa provided much needed friendship, counsel, and care for our children in the hurly-burly of the weekly schedule.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the members of my family, all of whom played a role in this story. My parents, James McCullough, Jr., my mother, Joyce Funk, and my step-mother Georgene McCullough were all remarkably confident in my pursuing the PhD and of going to Scotland to do so. My brothers George, Sonny and Sean and Chad were their own source of levity and encouragement for me. The circle of my family includes my own four children, Lydia, Patrick, Peter and Loryn, of whom I am so proud and so admiring of their courage, pluck and adaptability. They are real characters who have real character. And finally I want to acknowledge my wife, Jill, who suffered the most and sacrificed the most throughout this entire process. I appreciate her very much.



## Introduction

What is the place of art in the Christian life? Is art – especially the fine arts of painting and music – simply a way to bring in worldliness through the back door? We know that poetry may be used to praise God in, say, the psalms and maybe even in modern hymns. But what about sculpture or drama? Do these have any place in the Christian life? Shouldn't a Christian focus his gaze steadily on “religious things” alone and forget about art and culture?<sup>1</sup>

### I. Recent Reflections on the Arts and Christianity

The anxieties given expression in the passage above seem quaint now, even among those who identify with conservative forms of Christian faith. While concerns about worldliness remain, a more confident posture toward matters of art and culture have largely, although not entirely, replaced former feelings of insecurity and alienation. Among evangelicals in the English speaking world the arguments and anxieties have turned toward questions related to what kind of art is beneficial, how might art be effectively deployed for religious purposes, and how might the arts be more meaningfully engaged. But when influential American evangelical Francis Schaeffer wrote his tract *Art and the Bible* in 1973, such anxieties and misgivings were very much at the forefront.

Much has happened since Schaeffer in effect gave evangelicals permission to address matters of art and culture. Evangelicals, along with less socially conservative but no less orthodox Christians, have in the ensuing years produced a wealth of studies addressing the relationship between the arts and Christianity, theology, mission, and imagination. There seems to be no abatement of this trend. Just a few very recent examples might suffice to substantiate this claim.

Nancy Pearcey is a direct intellectual and theological descendent of Francis Schaeffer. In her 2010 book *Saving Leonardo: A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on Mind, Morals, and Meaning* (B & H, 2010), she extends Schaeffer's cautiously positive regard for the arts,

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<sup>1</sup> F. A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 7.

particularly as they serve as both signs and symptoms of trends within Western society. The book is a welcome contribution to otherwise familiar ‘worldview’ analyses of culture that tend to focus almost exclusively on human thinking as opposed to human doing, making, or feeling. Her reflections on the arts as forms of ‘language’ that project ideational content is a perspective shared in this project. But there are disappointing limitations to the scope of her analysis. Her approach to the arts is almost entirely predetermined along a rather narrow set of criteria, and the manner in which artworks are portrayed as one-dimensionally ‘true’ or ‘false’ in their orientations, as opposed to the possibility that a more generous and thoughtful engagement with art might uncover aspects which can be affirmed and critiqued, tends towards the sense of a lack of depth. A similar narrowness of theological and doctrinal orientation, where a basically neo-Reformed evangelicalism passes muster as the ‘Christianity’ against which all other forms or faiths are measured, adds to the narrowness of cultural engagement.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast Timothy J. Gorringer, a noted theologian who has written on a variety of topics relating theological perspective with contemporary issues, offers a quite different perspective. His contributions to a theological interpretation of the arts have been particularly important. His most recent is *Earthly Visions: Theology and the Challenges of Art* (Yale, 2011). Like Pearcey, Gorringer seeks to address the presence and meaning of the ‘secular’ in Western society. Unlike Pearcey, however, Gorringer does not locate changes in perception and orientation in a one-dimensional story of decline. Gorringer sees Western secularism as a logical outcome of Western Christianity, especially its Protestant variety. In its affirmation of the temporal and human, Western secularism still reflected its Christian orientation, and the Protestant Reformation further underscored this dynamic:

The new spirituality meant that Teresa of Avila found God in the kitchen and George Herbert elided divine and domestic service. Calvin’s hostility to images, it has been argued, led him to redefine what counted as religious. There is not simply iconoclasm, but also an iconpoiesis in the Reformation which understands that the world mirrors the divine in its banal, day-to-day reality. This, I shall argue, is one of the deepest sources of the rise of so-called secular painting, burgeoning forth in

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Siedell offers an excellent critique from an evangelical perspective of such facile analyses of art in *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

portraits, landscapes, still life, genre paintings, and finally the turn to abstraction. The turn to the secular, then, may not be a sign of Christianity losing its grip, but, on the contrary, of realizing its true implications...<sup>3</sup>

In support of this thesis, Gorringer refreshingly explores some of the less familiar works of the Dutch School, still life, portraiture, and abstraction. Employing an undeveloped metaphor from Karl Barth, Gorringer suggests that works such as these can be interpreted theologically as ‘secular parables.’ This is a compelling thesis, argued in a persuasive manner with the added virtue of introducing readers to aspects of Western art too often overlooked in such analyses.

Two questions remain in the wake of Gorringer’s analysis, however. One is how explicitly non-Christian or non-Western art might also serve as secular parables. The closest examples in Gorringer’s discussion are works by Mark Rothko and Francis Bacon. Rothko’s Judaism is not far removed from Gorringer’s Christianity, and the interpretation of his work is a helpful counterbalance to the too-often critical review his works receive from Christians like Pearcey. Gorringer’s application of the secular parable paradigm felt rather stretched when applied to Bacon, however. The second is the danger of reducing the experience of art to strictly Christian terms. The question of whether there is a way to interpret art that allows the recipient to encounter the work on its own terms is one pursued in this project.

The most impressive recent project of theology and the arts, in terms of sheer size and extent of engagement, is the three-volume series published by Oxford University Press of David Brown’s work.<sup>4</sup> Brown’s agenda for the entire series is to ‘widen the range of material thought relevant to constructive theology,’ particularly in the realms of cultivated nature, the arts and human activity.<sup>5</sup> Brown’s repeated admonition that Christians should first engage in careful ‘listening’ to such efforts rather than predetermining potentials ‘meanings’ is a helpful balance to what too often takes place.

This project responds to and seeks to expand on two of Brown’s contributions. One is his thesis on the sacramental potentials of art. Brown bases this thesis on the theological

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<sup>3</sup> T.J. Gorringer, *Earthly Visions: Theology and the Challenges of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> The three volumes are *God and the Enchantment of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), *God and Grace of Body* (2007), and *God and Mystery in Words* (2008). If linked with two previous volumes, *Tradition and Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and *Discipleship and Imagination* (2000), then a project of five volumes in length can be considered.

<sup>5</sup> Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, 1.

presupposition that God is ‘generous’ and desires to make himself accessible and available for human finding, and does so both within and from without the specifically Christian circle of influence. Brown’s recourse to the sacramental is grounded on the analogy of what God accomplishes in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus which is extended to being perceived as ‘a major, and perhaps even the primary, way of exploring God’s relationship to our world.’<sup>6</sup> Like Gorringer’s use of the parabolic, Brown’s analysis of the arts and human culture within a sacramental paradigm has the virtue of placing the ‘secular’ aspects of life within a ‘sacred’ scope of perception. They highlight the efforts of rendering genuinely theological analyses of these natural and human phenomena. My concern with the invocation of the sacramental in an analysis of art, however, is the degree that it implicates God in products of human endeavor, at least when the object under consideration is a work of art. Again, part of the effort of my project is to allow works of art to have their own integrity as human artifacts. Humans are traditionally understood to be made in God’s image, and operate within a context of God’s creating and redeeming purposes, and even their best and most original works are but derivative of God’s creative properties. But I wish to move slowly on the attribution of these works to God’s intentions.

Drawing on resources from theological aesthetics, ethics and human development theory from within practical theology, this project advances the paradigm of the *catalyst* as a way to understand the relationship between the arts and spirituality. The paradigm of the catalyst is less metaphysically fraught, less theologically loaded, and yet can address itself to the positive ways the arts might contribute to Christian spirituality. Even the most ‘secular,’ indeed works that on every other criteria of assessment might be deplorable in intention and disturbing in content, might serve to catalyze meaningful reflections on life with or apart from God, while making no particular claims on divine implication in the work.

Secondly, Brown’s project focuses on the experiential. Brown’s whole project centers on ‘reclaiming human experience’ for its theological significance. The thrust of my project seeks to explore one dimension of the *cumulative* effect of religiously significant experiences, namely those in relation to aesthetics. Such experiences should result in something yielding lasting effects. This project seeks to understand those effects in terms of *spiritual formation*.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 6.

## Art as Communication

Like the projects reviewed above, this one also rests on theological suppositions. It is assumed, on the basis of a certain reading of Scripture and the Christian tradition, that God's intentions in relation to us is for communion, a relationship analogous to friendship but closer to marriage, mystical in character, practical in output, and which, in the words of one theologian, 'requires and releases' capacities of character commensurate for such a relationship and shared mission in the world. A theology so centered on communion might be expected to raise the category of *communication* to a rather high level, and indeed this project does so. If 'In the beginning was the *Logos*,' it can be argued that this issues not only in words, but in intentions of communication ordered to *communio*, a communion Christian theology sees in the life of the Trinity, and one that extends from the Trinity to humanity. In this reading, man in God's image is *homo communicator*, man the communicator, and in this light 'true art' is that which 'speaks and receives the world in one integral movement of generosity and gratitude.'<sup>7</sup>

But not every human endeavor is to be identified as 'art.' Art as *poesis* is of course human making. But there are some forms of human making that transcend immediate and practical usage and becomes, and were intended to be, acts of communication; human doing becomes human saying. The exact liminal point wherein such making becomes saying cannot always be ascertained, but this project advances the thesis that art is best understood as a dynamic of *how* something is done (craft), *what* it renders (content) and *why* it was so conceived and executed (context). While serving a primarily heuristic purpose, the model of art that emerges from this project seeks to both demythologize and reprioritize art in human experience and specifically in relation to Christian spirituality.

Communication, then, lies at the heart of this project. It is in many ways a rhetorical analysis of the arts. While the arts are in this report communicative acts of making and performing with the immediate and/or cumulative effect of story, *mythos*, 'world-projection,' 'worldmaking,' worldview, art is latently a form of *persuasive communication*. To learn what this project calls the 'language' of a given work and break through to a meaningful connection with the artwork, the artist or tradition from which the artwork emerges is to encounter the story being projected in it, and it is the dynamic of story that insinuates a truth-claim upon the

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<sup>7</sup> Gorringer, *Earthly Vision*, 2, quoting D. B. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 270).



receiver, a truth-claim accepted, rejected, considered, or ‘indwelt’ by the receiver, and in so doing altering not only one’s moral vision of things but one’s very capacity to alter such vision.<sup>8</sup> *Eyesight* (standing here for any form of aesthetic encounter) becomes *insight*, and the arts, as argued in the following pages, are an effective catalyst for this dynamic process.<sup>9</sup>

The reader will note an emphasis on the ideational dimension of the arts in this project. The cognitive aspect of aesthetic experience is emphasized in part because of the way the arts are too often reduced to objects of mere emotional or sensual value. This project contributes to the claim that the arts represent alternate ways of *knowing*, and thereby afford opportunities to grow in *understanding*. The arts also provide opportunities to develop and hone skills analogous to *contemplation*. This project is replete with references to attentiveness, careful observation, open-mindedness, deferral of judgment, and the like, and such skills as these are categorized in this project as *virtues*. Capacities required to engage in and maintain a relationship with a work of art are analogous to and exist, as argued here, in dialectical relationship with those capacities required for progressive development in spirituality.

Taking advantage of the alliterative opportunity afforded by two Greek words, this project seeks to advance its reflections on the relationship between the arts and spiritual formation in terms of *aesthesis* and *ascesis*. *Aesthesis* refers to sensory perception and, by extension, its contribution to the development of the *imagination*. *Ascesis* (variably transliterated *askesis*) originated as an athletic term but was adopted for the disciplines associated with progressive

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<sup>8</sup> Karen E. Smith provides a helpful articulation of the way that story and formation inter-relate: Story has power not only to evoke memory, to unite, to give identity and purpose, but it may also have *the power to call us to a different way of being*. When we least expect it, we may find story breaking into the mundane and ordinary: to shape, to cleanse, to heal and to transform. Stories help us make sense out of life. They help us to shape our understanding of what is and what is not. They enable us to become. They speak to us of what we are and are not yet and in this way, they serve to remind us of an uncompleted present. (*Christian Spirituality* [London: SCM Press, 2007], 46. Emphasis added).

<sup>9</sup> M. R. Miles, *Image as Insight* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 2, citing Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 31. This project declines an in-depth consideration of beauty. For the purposes of this study I am content with an understanding of beauty as a ‘compelling presence,’ a ‘persuasive attraction’ that invites attention without coercing it. I am perfectly content with Arnheim’s terse definition: ‘Aesthetic beauty is the isomorphic correspondence between what is said and how it is said.’ (*Visual Thinking* [London: Faber and Faber, 1970], 255). Patrick Sherry discusses the ‘modern problem’ of beauty from a theological perspective and suggests that the definition of beauty be ‘loosened up’ in light of the wider connotations of the Greek *kalos*, and that the functions of art and the potential implication of the Holy Spirit’s presence in it be widened to consider matters of truth bearing, representation, symbolic capacities, and expressive qualities. (*Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [London: SCM Press, 2002], 21-27). See also E. Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

growth in spirituality.<sup>10</sup> This project is an exploration of how skills in sensory perception and imaginative engagement exists in dialectical relationship with those related to ascetical development or spiritual formation, and how this dialectic can be mediated and enhanced through encounters with the arts.

## II. Defining Spirituality and Spiritual Formation

Scholars seeking to define Christian spirituality typically make recourse to Biblical, doctrinal, theological, and more recently, psychological, philosophical, phenomenological, anthropological and sociological resources.<sup>11</sup> Stephen Pattison reviews the scope of such an enquiry from the perspective of a scholar of practical theology, itself a recently emergent discipline in academic theology. Comparing the proliferation of literature on spirituality with that of leadership studies, Pattison writes that ‘the language of spirituality denotes myriad diverse experiences, ideas and practices that may only be very loosely connected or correlated as vague categories, by some kind of partial family resemblance, or by (confusing) coincidence of verbal usage that belies a lack of coincidence of meaning.’<sup>12</sup> Pattison provisionally concludes, ‘Spirituality,’ then, seem to be as indefinable as it is ubiquitous and indispensable.’

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<sup>10</sup> I Corinthians 9:24-27. See D. Allen, *Spiritual Theology* (Boston: Cowley, 1997), 67; P. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* (London: SPCK, 1995), 52-56; M. Thornton, *English Spirituality* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1986), 35.

<sup>11</sup> Among the most learned, and widely cited in nearly all the subsequent scholarly literature on the concept of ‘spirituality’ and its subsequent re-emergence in Western theology in the mid-twentieth century, is W. Principe, ‘Toward Defining Spirituality,’ *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 12/2 (1983). Principe provides an extensive review of the relevant literature in English, French and German, followed by an exegesis of relevant terms in Latin and Greek (beginning in this case with the Latin *spiritualitas* and seeking its derivation in the cognates for ‘spirit’ and the Pauline word group stipulating distinctions between ‘spirit’ and ‘flesh’) and their subsequent usage in theological literature. See also W. Principe, ‘Theological Trends: Pluralism in Christian Spirituality,’ *The Way* 32 (1992): 54-61; J. A. Wiseman, *Spirituality and Mysticism: A Global View* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 1-20, which helpfully incorporates Principe’s scholarship within a framework of more recent research. See also L. S. Cunningham and K. J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 9-28; A. E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 1999), 1-7.

<sup>12</sup> S. Pattison, ‘Spirituality and Spiritual Care Made Simple: A Suggestive, Normative and Essentialist Approach,’ *Practical Theology*, 3/3 (2010): 352. Pattison narrates how he eventually came to adopt a normative understanding of spirituality drawn in part from psychoanalytic object relations and attachment theories [353-54]. Pattison then defines *spirituality* as ‘the experience and process of engaging with and managing significant relations and attachments with a variety of objects, including material, immaterial, psychological, social, living, dead, conscious, unconscious, and transcendent objects.’ He further defines *religious spirituality* similarly, adding that this dynamic takes place ‘within a particular established tradition or community of faith and action’ (353).

In a similar vein, Nelson Thayer writes, ‘‘Spirituality’ is a term whose meaning is at once evident and elusive.’<sup>13</sup> His study focuses on the development of a pastoral theology of spirituality, and in his review relies strongly on the contributions of the psychoanalytic tradition, exegetical studies of relevant Biblical terminology, and the phenomenology of religion as experienced by the subject. Drawing from definitions of spirituality in works of pastoral theology, Thayer notes the regulative occurrence of words and phrases such as ‘transcendent,’ ‘relationship towards,’ ‘integration,’ ‘context.’ In an attempt at a synthesis, Thayer issues his own working definition:

Spirituality is the specifically human capacity to experience, be conscious of, and relate to a dimension of power and meaning transcendent to the world of sensory reality expressed in the particularities of a given historical and social context, and leads towards action congruent with its meaning.<sup>14</sup>

In an article exploring recent studies on the relationship between spirituality and healthcare, Philip Sheldrake writes of what is typically described in the literature of the relationship between ‘spirituality’ and the subjective turn in Western popular consciousness and sensibilities. The net effect, according to Sheldrake, has been a ‘deconstruction’ of traditional connections between institutional religion and personal development.<sup>15</sup> Explicating the relevance of Christian spirituality to the dynamics of healthcare, Sheldrake notes that while he would not want to reduce spirituality to mere belief, nonetheless:

... ‘spirituality’ does imply a world-view, that is, a vision of the human spirit and what will assist it to achieve its full potential. So, in that sense, some kind of belief is implicit in all forms of spirituality even if it is largely unexamined.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> N.S.T. Thayer, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 55.

<sup>15</sup> P. Sheldrake, ‘Spirituality and Healthcare,’ *Practical Theology*, 3/3 (2010), 368. For a further study on the relationship between the postmodern condition and the concept of spirituality, see J. Corkery, ‘‘Contemporary Spirituality,’’ in P. Sheldrake, ed., *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, SCM Press, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 377. Examples of definitions could continue at great length.

These writers illustrate some of the difficulties of accurately pinpointing what is a somewhat elusive concept. Nevertheless, I find the word ‘spirituality’ helpful for getting at the intersecting dynamics of the cognitive, affective, and even psychomotor domains of religious life.<sup>17</sup> Because of its elasticity and open-endedness, let it suffice to say that I will use the phrase ‘spiritual formation’ in reference to the kind of progressive change in human existence described in Scripture, Christian tradition and contemporary research.

‘Spiritual formation’ is itself a metaphor for what might be called the assimilation of qualities and capacities necessary for participation in a life with God.<sup>18</sup> The phrase is useful both for its familiarity and its allusiveness within the Christian community for communicating a sense of goal-orientation in spirituality. Such language of formation in relation to Christianity finds validation in the text of the New Testament, particularly in Paul’s letters:

Galatians 4:19

My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed  
(*morphothé*) in you...

Romans 8:29

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed (*summórhous*) to the  
image of his Son...

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<sup>17</sup> I derive the language of these ‘domains’ from educational theory. A standard source in this regards is B.S. Bloom and D.R. Krathwohl, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals* (New York: David McKay, 1965). More recently see L. Suskie, *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide* (Bolton, MA: Anker, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> The language employed here is fairly standard e.g. J. Dalrymple, *Longest Journey: Notes on Christian Maturity* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), 14-20. In regards to my usage of ‘capacity’ in relation to spirituality, I see it as related to matters of both cognition and ability, as articulated in the following:

Intelligence is defined as a group of mental abilities. An ability (of any sort), in turn, is a characteristic of an individual when that individual can ‘successfully complete (i.e. obtain a specific, desired, outcome on) a task of defined difficulty, when testing conditions are favorable’ (Carroll, 1993, pp. 4-8)... From this perspective, mental ability is synonymous with mental *capacity*, similar to mental skill (which specifically connotes something learned), and similar to mental competence, which emphasizes the ability to meet a specific standard.

J.D. Mayer, P. Salovey, and D. R. Caruso, ‘Emotional Intelligence as Zeitgeist, as Personality, and as Mental Ability’ in R Bar-On and J.D.A. Parker, eds., *The Handbook of Emotional Intelligence*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000, 105. Emphasis added.

## Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed (*metamorphoûsthe*) by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...

## II Corinthians 3:18

And all of us... are being transformed (*metamorphoûmetha*) into the same image from one degree of glory to another...

All of these passages employ words based on the root *morphé* or 'form,' a term used principally in relation to a physical characteristic but which is here applied to human character and moral existence.

In the entry for 'Spiritual Formation' in a recently published dictionary of Christian spirituality, the article begins by recognizing that the phrase historically has been associated with the preparation of clergy. Spiritual or priestly formation refers to what developed as the period of training which involved religious disciplines and education in Biblical studies, preaching, and liturgical leadership. The tradition also developed distinctions between ascetical and mystical theologies, now generally subsumed together under the heading of Spiritual Theology. The article notes the increasing professionalization, socialization and psychologization of these processes over the past one hundred years. Towards the end the article addresses the subject matter in its more contemporary context in reference to practices such as retreats, sabbaticals and catechesis, and provides material for a working definition:

But religious belief cannot be divorced from the context of life experience. Through the power of desire and symbolic imagination, the thoughtful human being is always exercised by the gap between ordinary human capacity and what she or he may feel drawn to achieve. Spiritual formation becomes a strategy, within the religious impulse, for addressing this moral gap and achieving the radical transformation of the self. While the interior journey, in a secular sense, has self-awareness as its goal, the spiritual journey leads to self-awareness in relationship to God, and under the transformative power of grace. It is the regular practice of the spiritual life in prayer and the virtues, as well as education in the insights of the



human sciences, that constitute spiritual formation as the solid grounding for the following of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

This project explores how the arts might play a role in the cultivation of ‘the power of desire’ or affective orientation and ‘symbolic imagination’ in relation to spiritual formation.

In the latter 1980’s George Lindbeck observed the drift of theological education away from direct engagement with spirituality toward second-order reflection on such experience. Lindbeck argued for a reintegration as a ‘programmatic part of seminary life,’ although he expressed reserve for the way such ministerial formation may only further the gap between clergy and laity.<sup>20</sup> The declension that Lindbeck saw among (then) contemporary seminarians at mainline institutions led him to suspend that concern in favor of an enhanced integration of spirituality within theology. Lindbeck offered the following description:

Looked at non-theologically, spiritual formation may be described as the deep and personally committed appropriation of a comprehensive and coherent outlook on life and the world. From this perspective, those who are maturely humanistic or maturely Marxist, for example, are in their own way spiritually well-formed. The spiritually mature are not simply socialized into behaving under standard conditions as is expected of members of their group, but they have to a significant degree *developed the capacities and dispositions to think, feel, and act in accordance with their world view* no matter what the circumstances. They have, in Aristotelian language, the habits or virtues distinctively emphasised by the encompassing vision which is theirs. In the Christian case, these are traditionally named faith, hope and love, but other religions when internalized may involve quite a different set of virtues.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> G. Simmonds, ‘Spiritual Formation,’ *SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, 330. Diogenes Allen provides an account of how classical ascetical theology such as found in Evagrius and John Cassian provide contemporary guidelines for the assessment of spiritual progression and ‘strategies’ for formation; Allen, *Spiritual Theology*, 64-67.

<sup>20</sup> G. Lindbeck, ‘Spiritual Formation and Theological Education,’ *Theological Education*, 24, (1988), reprinted in J. Astley, et al, *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation* (Herefordshire: Gracewing, 1996), 301. Emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 287.

My own work in the relationship between the arts and spiritual formation lends itself toward an emphasis on sense perception and aesthetic sensitivity. Crucial, then, in this working understanding of formation is the injunction, occurring several times in the New Testament with adumbration in the Old, of having *eyes that see and ears that hear*.<sup>22</sup> My contention is that the relationship between *aesthesis* and *ascesis* as presented here finds sponsorship in such Biblical phraseology.<sup>23</sup>

### III. Building a Theoretical Framework

This project is primarily concerned with the construction of a theoretical account of how the arts can contribute to Christian spiritual formation. Its fundamental research question revolves around *how* the arts might effect profound change in people. It invests considerable space to the question of what constitutes the phenomenon of art, and how it might be more effectively brought to bear in people's lives. Its central claim is that the arts mediate the mutually-informing, dialectical dynamics of sensory perception and contemplative practices and thereby facilitate cumulative, meaningful change. Its argument draws on the inference of common discussion of the arts, on scholarly reflection on art and religion, and on anecdotal evidence culled from various sources. This is a project in theological aesthetics aimed toward engagement with practical theology, and the trajectory of its outline and development of its argument reflects this intention.

The method employed here, especially in the first two chapters, is one of interdisciplinary dialogue. It develops its argument by way of drawing on three relevant sources: aesthetics,

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<sup>22</sup> See Mark 8:17-18, Isaiah 6:9.

<sup>23</sup> One of my primary interlocutors in this project, James Loder, prefers the term 'transformation' for the kind of religious development focused on here. One of his students, now a scholar in practical theology in his own right, writes:

The term 'transformation' is quite popular in the field of adult education, for it serves to emphasize that the goal in adult learning is not merely *formation* (a dominant motif with children), but *transformation*; i.e. not simply the socialization into a particular culture's way of formulating meaning, but the facilitation of new critical reformulations. While we should avoid a forced dichotomy (for working with children involves transformation, and adults are also in formation), this is a valid distinction that points to the qualitatively different mental structures that emerge through the various stages of life. Ideally modes of learning continue to change throughout life's stages, moving toward complexification of meaning schemes that render intelligible the self-world nexus. (F.L. Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 64). I appreciate the description above, particularly of the 'facilitation of new critical reformulations.' I decline the primary use of 'transformation,' however, in favour of the more incremental, but nonetheless real, change that 'formation' suggests.

ethics, and practical theology especially in relation to education theory and human development. The theoretical dimension of this project builds on the work of three figures from each of these three disciplines. This theoretical construct gains torque, however, in its incorporation of concrete works of art and my own provisional experiments with and reflections on the facilitation of encounters with art by various audiences.

The project begins in the realm of aesthetics. As the title of the first chapter suggests, the goal here is the development of a ‘communicative hermeneutic’ of art. Much of the argument of this project lies on its author’s conviction that a major impediment to the facilitation of spiritual formation in relation to the arts lies in the lack of *connection* between laity and arts, especially with more sophisticated forms of art. A theory of art that can account for how it does, or sometimes fails, to reach or ‘speak’ to audiences is the burden of that chapter. The solutions proffered have both subjective and objective poles. On one hand, aesthetics provides insight into how the spectator might be better poised for a meaningful encounter with art. On the other hand, ways of conceiving what art is might help dispel unhelpful notions that block engagement with the arts. The work of Aidan Nichols, O.P., emerges as a primary interlocutor in relation to both of these poles. On one hand, Nichols articulates the view, gaining currency especially in theological circles, that art involves cognitive as well as affective or ‘emotional’ import. Nichols also provides insight incorporated into this project of the subjective or ‘aesthetic disposition’ conducive of meaningful encounters with art.

The second chapter advances this project with resources from ethics and practical theology. *How* do we become the persons we aspire to be, and for that matter, *who* are the kinds of persons we should aspire to be, find relevant fields of research in ethics and human development theory, especially perhaps as the latter is strongly inflected with insights from the human sciences. In relation to ethics, theological ethics more precisely, the work of David Baily Harned is the primary dialogue partner. Harned represents ethics as fashioned at Yale Divinity School over the past half century, and as such is a primary witness to the rise of narrative theology and its use within Christian ethics. Harned is relevant to this project also because of the early and pervasive preoccupation with the arts throughout his career. Harned’s doctoral dissertation was a study of the arts in relation to dogmatic theology.<sup>24</sup> Harned characterizes his larger project as ‘natural theology,’ though it clearly has a strongly ethical dimension and frequently makes forays back to

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<sup>24</sup> D. B. Harned, *Theology and the Arts* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966).

the aesthetic. His enduring emphasis throughout is that ‘seeing is the prius and foundation of moral life,’ and in his account the confluence of imagery and narrative create a source of morally-formative ‘seeing.’<sup>25</sup> Harned articulates this theme most extensively in *Faith and Virtue* (St Andrews Press, 1973). There he issues a proposition that deeply informs the trajectory of this entire project:

Our worldly ways reflect the world as we see it; we are free to act in some purposive fashion only within the world that we can see. Before our decisions, supporting our approach to moral life, distinguishing us from our neighbors, there is our way of seeing. But it is not easy to see, no easier than it is to listen, to hear not what we would like, not what we would expect, not only what the language means, but what intention and anguish and hope are veiled as well as disclosed by the recalcitrance of words. Seeing is never simply a reaction to what passes before our eyes; it is a matter of how well the eye is trained and provisioned to discern the richness and the terror, beauty and banality, of the worlds outside and within the self.<sup>26</sup>

Training the eye to discern truth about one’s self is one way of characterizing the relationship between *aesthesis* and *ascesis*. Harned associates such ‘vision’ with moral character, which he defines as a function of ‘the history and habits of the self, and ultimately of the stories that we have heard and with which we identify ourselves.’<sup>27</sup>

Harned’s Yale School narrative ethic is then matched with the evangelical Reformed tradition of cultural analysis and Biblical hermeneutics associated with the concept of *worldview*. This project inflects its usage of worldview with a strongly aesthetic reading, however, positing worldview as a *visual metaphor for a philosophical concept*. Usage of worldview in relation to narrative analysis finds a sophisticated exposition in the work of New Testament scholar N.T. Wright. Wright adopts the paradigm of ‘story’ within his context-situated, ‘critical-realist’ epistemological framework which he then applies in his exegesis of Scripture. In a similar way, I seek to ‘exegete’ works of art for the story embedded within them, and my critical-realist

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<sup>25</sup> D. B. Harned, *Strange Bedfellows: Growing Up with India* (Bangalore: Ultra Pub., 2010), 111.

<sup>26</sup> D. B. Harned, *Faith and Virtue* (Edinburgh: The St Andrews Press, 1973), 29.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 30.

framework seeks to explicate art as human phenomena that have cognitive as well as affectively significant content with moral and spiritual implications.<sup>28</sup>

In her recent book on evangelical ethics, Wendy Reuschling provides an iteration of themes sounded by Harned and his colleagues forty years earlier and taken up in this project:

Perception is our capacity to see *and* to interpret. The moral dimension of our seeing is the capacity to see rightly. It matters not just *that* we see, but what and how we see and interpret the meaning of our lives, since “perception is a function of character; it is not a morally neutral faculty but one that see only that which the person already values.” John McIntyre in *Faith, Theology and Imagination* also conveys the significance of imagination in Christian ethics. “Imagination asks us to suspend our loyalties to see a new way of looking at a situation” by reorienting our perspectives. Imagination, according to McIntyre, is not the same thing as wishful thinking but instead is looking *into* reality and seeing it with a different perspective, informed by the gospel, in order to perceive and strategize how life could be different. Imagination shakes us out of our familiarity with the gospel story, comfortable with how it goes, what seems to matter, and how it ends; freeing us from what we think is so ordinary, to envision new possibilities.<sup>29</sup>

While the second chapter of this project is concerned with ethics and moral character, it also seeks to situate the project within the context of church ministry and religious pedagogy. For this reason, the project culls on resources associated with the field of practical theology. One figure in particular from this field advanced notions of ‘convictional knowing’ and ‘transformative change’ intimately related to spirituality and applicable to this project. James Edwin Loder drew on his training in psychology and the human sciences to offer a critique and constructive alternatives to the philosophy of Christian education and pastoral counseling. In his work, Loder sought to apply a thorough-going theological method to the sciences of human

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<sup>28</sup> See N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), esp. chapters Two and Three. A rendition of his method and its theological implications for a wider audience is available in *Scripture and the Authority of God* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> W. C. Reuschling, *Reviving Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 99. Citations include W. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 86, and J. McIntyre, *Faith, Theology and Imagination* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1987), 34-35.

development and in particular to crisis moments of change or, as he preferred, ‘transformation.’ Dissatisfied with accounts of human development reduced to accounts of adaptation, Loder proposed that the human spirit was ‘the uninvited guest in every study conducted in the human sciences’ (and, it might be said, theological aesthetics), and that spiritual development involved commerce between God’s Spirit and human spirit.<sup>30</sup> His outline of how cognitive dissonance can initiate and lead toward transformative resolution is used as a paradigm of aesthetic experience, and his analysis of human existence that seeks to hold together in creative tension the personal and the social, the chthonic and the transcendent is adopted as one that does greater justice to the deeply textured and complex reality of human being.

This project, then, draws on the disciplines of aesthetics, ethics and the human sciences as pursued within theological frames of references. Aesthetics, Ethics and Practical Theology represent the categorical ‘houses’ under which this project is pursued. Ultimately, however, this is a project in theological aesthetics which, on one hand, hopes to advance theological discourse about the arts and religion but also, on the other, hopes to suggest ways to enhance the presence of the arts within doctrinal, pastoral and pedagogical functions of Christian ministry.

### **Application with Two Representative Artists**

The epigraph of this project is from David Harned’s book on theology and the arts: ‘Art is an antidote against any kind of superficiality, and perhaps against superficial spirituality most of all.’<sup>31</sup> Spiritual superficiality is often the result of a singular thrust of one’s religious orientation as opposed to the kind of dialectic envisioned by Harned. One thinks, for instance, of the dynamics of transcendence and immanence. For some, Christian spirituality is primarily if not normatively a transcendent pull, a movement in the spatial metaphors of *up* and *out*. For others the more kenotic movements of *in* and *down* predominate. It would seem that a holistic or, in Harned’s terms, *healthy dialectic*, could be maintained if aspects of both the transcendent and immanent were recognized and appreciated. Encounter with the arts might contribute to such a dialectic.

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<sup>30</sup> James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), xii.

<sup>31</sup> Harned, *Theology and the Arts*, 139.

Such considerations lend themselves to a focus on two contemporary artists whose work exhibits tendencies in these two affective directions. Peter Howson (b. 1958) is a Glasgow-based artist whose life and career has oscillated between periods of impressive achievement and tragic loss. Identified among the ‘New Glasgow Boys’ of the late 1980’s, his work represents a revival of figurative art in the midst of a contemporary art world given to abstraction and concept-based work. His work, often characterized as ‘social realism,’ provides what might be called a very gritty view of the gospel and of its meaning for human life.

On the other hand, the work of Makoto Fujimura (b. 1960), sometimes associated with ‘transcendental minimalism,’ exerts its pull in differing ways. A Japanese-American, his art is a conversation between techniques and motifs adopted from old traditions of Japanese painting and the techniques and motifs of American-style abstract art, especially of the mid-century Expressionist type. Both artists experienced adult conversions to forms of evangelical Christianity. Both find themselves occupying contested grounds in contemporary art discourse. Both have publically identified themselves and their work with religious agendas. Neither operates within strictly ecclesial or denominational contexts. Both are advocates for the practices their art represents, and both advance arguments for why their chosen style effectively communicates theological and aesthetic values. When brought into dialogue, their work effectively advances a conversation about the relative merits of different styles, approaches and subject matters for art in relation to spiritual formation.

### **Summary of the Project**

Much has been written on the theological implications of art, the aesthetic implications of theology, how the arts contribute to religious tradition and how the arts mediate encounter with the divine. Not enough, perhaps, has directly addressed the relationship between the arts and what this project has chosen to refer to as spiritual formation. The argument of this project can be summarized along the following points:

1. Spiritual formation is the result of cumulative religious experiences, including experiences mediated by or in encounter with the arts.

2. The metaphor of the catalyst is adopted as one way of identifying how the arts facilitate spiritual formation. The arts catalyze spiritual formation by mediating the dynamics associated with aesthetics and ascetics. Dispositions conducive to meaningful encounters with art are analogous to those associated with religious dispositions associated with progress in spirituality, and vice-versa.
3. An effective or meaningful encounter with art involves and perhaps requires an experience with art frequently characterized as ‘reading.’<sup>32</sup> This characterization underlines the claim that the arts are conveyers of cognitively valuable content. This project adopts this characterization and advances what it calls a ‘cognitive-communicative’ interpretation of art. Affirming the cognitive benefits of art, as well as its affective, emotional and psychomotor benefits, reinforces a more compelling argument for the place of art in Christian spirituality.
4. Associated with the metaphor of ‘reading’ is the analogy of the ‘languages’ of the arts. This project advances that familiar metaphor to that of an analogy, and argues that basic to the cognitive content of art is what this project calls its *story*, not in the sense of a plot line but in the sense of a mythic import or a worldview. This project could be thought of as involving a rhetorical analysis of art conducted along lines of a narrative theology, that is, how art can be a persuasive presentation of values and beliefs inherent within differing accounts of life. Such an analysis and theological framework is a means towards addressing the primary focus, which is how the mediation of *aesthesis* and *ascesis* through art might catalyze spiritual formation.

While highlighting the cognitive dimension of the arts, this project affirms the empathic potential of art to shape attitudes, understanding and affective orientations. It explores affective attraction and the widening of spheres of concern. It considers skills related to that of

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<sup>32</sup> Graham Howes articulates this characterization when he writes:

While many can, at least in theory, read scripture, relatively few can ‘read’ paintings or stained-glass windows, and most recent revivals of faith and devotion – for example, Liberation Theology or Charismatic Renewal movements – have tended to be grounded in words rather than pictures. Indeed among many cultural and ecclesiastical elites the presumption is usually that while religious art may have some didactic, even aesthetic, value, it has no cognitive function... Yet the central question remains. It is whether art is a way of seeing and knowing which is as truth-bearing in its way as philosophical and scientific method.

Howes answers his rhetorical question in the affirmative; *The Art of the Sacred* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 19.



*contemplation*, expressed frequently in terms of ‘indwelling’ the aesthetic or ascetic challenges of an artwork. It explores existential concerns with the ‘beauty and banality’ found within the self and the lived world, and with what is described as the ‘irreducibly spiritual’ dimension of God’s Spirit addressing and forming human spirit.

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The relationship of the realms of *ascesis* and *aesthesis* is the focus of this study. ‘Worldview’ serves as one reasonably definable shorthand expression for the cognitive dimension of this relationship. How these dynamics and concepts, existing in dialectical relationships, issue in spiritual formation is now the burden of this project to make, and here Francis Schaeffer is again of continuing influence for this author. In the same tract mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Schaeffer writes:

Art forms add strength to the world view which shows through, no matter what the world view is or whether the world view is true or false. Think, for example, of a side of beef hanging in a butcher shop. It just hangs there. But if you go to the Louvre and look at Rembrandt’s painting, “Side of Beef Hanging in a Butcher Shop,” it’s very different. It’s startling to come upon this particular work because it says a lot more than its title. Rembrandt’s art causes us to see the side of beef in a concentrated way, and, speaking for myself, after looking and looking at his picture, I have never been able to look a side of beef in a butcher shop with the superficiality I did before.<sup>33</sup>

Exploring how the arts cause one to see in a ‘concentrated way’ and how by ‘looking and looking’ at art one can break through ‘superficiality’ towards meaning and change of perspective (and perhaps of life) is the goal of this project. Breaking through superficiality involves, according to this project, experiences with the arts that are confirmatory *and* challenging, pleasurable *and* disturbing, beautiful *and* troubling. The arts function in human experience when, as is often said of preaching, they comfort the afflicted *and* afflict the comfortable. The virtues

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<sup>33</sup> Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*, 38. The painting is variously titled ‘The Slaughtered Ox,’ ‘The Flayed Ox,’ or ‘Carcass of Beef’ and dated between 1655 and 1657. It is now in the Louvre collection.

called for and the capacities required of such meaningful engagement within the realm of the aesthetic exist in a dialectical relationship with those called for and required for in a growing spirituality. The mutually-informative relationship of *aesthesis* and *ascesis*, as mediated through the arts, is the heart of this project.



Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Slaughtered Ox*, 1655, oil on canvas, 94 x 67 cm

## Chapter One

### A Cognitive-Communicative Model of Art

What we encounter in all works of art are meaningful forms – visual, verbal, or audible – that communicate some kind of promise, project, or proposition that calls for our response and has the potential to affect us.<sup>1</sup>

#### I. Introduction

In his book, *What Good Are the Arts?* Oxford professor of literature emeritus John Carey breaks down the title question into four separate points of enquiry: what is a work of art, why ‘high art’ is superior to ‘low art,’ whether art can make people morally better, and whether it can be a substitute for religion. While all four enquiries are relevant to this project, the first and third are central, and the differences between Carey’s and my own conclusions are illuminating.

Carey approaches these questions from an avowedly non-elitist and non-religious point of view. Given this, it perhaps is not surprising that, after a review of the history and relevant literature of the history of aesthetics, Carey would conclude regarding the question of what is art:

My answer to the question ‘What is a work of art?’ is ‘A work of art is anything that anyone has ever considered a work of art, though it may be a work of art only for that one person.’<sup>2</sup>

The merit of such an answer is its elasticity and democratic affinity. The problem is that it is really an expression of despair, a resignation of ever finding a categorical understanding of a significant human enterprise. And with regards to the matter of whether art can ever improve the human condition (and again, he thinks primarily in terms of the visual arts throughout), he is

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<sup>1</sup> K. J. Vanhoozer, ‘Praising in Song: Beauty and the Arts,’ in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. S. Hauerwas and S. Wells (Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 114.

<sup>2</sup> J. Carey, *What Good Are the Arts?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 29.

equally skeptical. Relying on examples drawn almost exclusively from the contemporary art world, particularly from the easily caricatured realm of conceptual art, Carey is by turns cynical and sarcastic in his dismissal of any claims of the ‘spirituality,’ ‘elevating’ or idea-laden potentialities of the arts, excepting, as his conclusion demonstrates, creative literature. His critique of the differences between high and low art focuses exclusively on the experiential differences noted by enthusiasts of either category. There is no consideration that the distinction might be based on relative differences of skill involved in different styles of art and that there might exist a basis to speak of ‘high’ and ‘low’ examples in all genre of art, including those identified as ‘popular.’ As to the question of the value or ‘spirituality’ of a given work of art, this question is dismissed as uselessly arcane.

Carey finds no evidence, scientific or otherwise, that the arts improve human morality and concludes with what appears to have been his premise, that the arts, especially the bogeyman of the ‘high arts,’ are mere apertures of social class distinction. In contrast, however, Carey maintains that literature ‘develops and enlarges the mind’ by virtue of what he finds to be its essential ‘indistinctness,’ that is, its open-endedness which allows the reader to exercise greater imaginative faculties, while at the same time literature, unlike other arts, is capable of self-critique, and therefore is neither indoctrinating nor contentless. Literature for Carey supplies the reader with something to think about as well as something to feel and engage with:

It is that literature gives you ideas to think with. It stocks your mind. It does not indoctrinate, because diversity, counter-argument, reappraisal and qualification are its essence. But it supplies material for thought. Also, because it is the only art capable of criticism, it encourages questioning, and self-questioning.<sup>3</sup>

Carey draws near to conclusion when he writes:

Poetic ideas do not tell you what the truth is, they make you feel what it would be like to know it. Because they make you feel as well as think, you can appropriate them, grow into them, adopt them as your own.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 208.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 246.

Because, in Carey's estimation, other forms of art suffer from 'distinctness' and a lack of ideational content, they cannot achieve this level of cognitive and ethical efficacy for the receiver. That Carey fails to recognize that such remarks might apply to other forms of art as well is regrettable and can only be attributed either to ignorance or the influence of prejudice. Carey's book, however, throws down a gauntlet to anyone setting out to provide an account for how art might somehow contribute to or facilitate the religious formation of lay members, in the case of this study, of the Christian community.

As to the question of what constitutes art, the inadequacy of Carey's answer is captured in another scholar's study of perhaps the equal in elusiveness in the contemporary world, the matter of spirituality. For this scholar, spirituality, even given a multivalence of perspectives, must be subject to definition because if a given subject matter has 'no conceptual limits, effectively it means nothing.'<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I want to counter definitions of art such as Carey's with an account that explains what I believe to be the phenomenon of art. Art is an act of human communication through practiced or embodied actions. Connecting with a work of art, and perhaps by extension with the artist, requires an understanding of what the art or artist is 'doing,' and that such an understanding constitutes an achievement in communication. It is not to suggest that works of art can or even worse should be reduced to detachable 'messages,' but that the arts do in fact convey meaningful content, content that issues from and results in meaningful communication. It is a common place that the arts express emotions. The arts, it is argued here, also express *ideas*, ideas, as it is sometimes said, that have consequences. That the arts have cognitive import, that they are means of understanding as well as of sensual delight, strengthens the claim that the arts can catalyze spiritual formation, and that the dialectic of *aesthesis* and *ascesis* which they mediate can assist people in their capacity to love God with more of their hearts, souls, and minds.

'Art is essentially a reality which opens out onto other realities while remaining permanently necessary for our grasp of those realities. The artwork is never surpassed as the altogether wonderful medium of the peculiar knowledge it grants us.'<sup>6</sup> That is a compelling statement, the perspective of which underlies how the arts can shape spiritual formation. This chapter seeks its own articulation of this perspective and how it can be meaningfully rendered for

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<sup>5</sup> P. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* (London: SPCK, 1995), 40.

<sup>6</sup> A. Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), 128.

practical consideration. The method followed in this chapter is one of interdisciplinary research toward the building of an argument. It draws on philosophical aesthetics but focuses on theological aesthetics for an account of art in light of Christian understandings of God and humanity. From theological aesthetics the search proceeds to aspects of hermeneutics, specifically speech-act theory and its application in Biblical studies. Here, resources are discovered that can help elucidate the arts as communicative phenomena. Finally, drawing particularly on music as a working template, I explore the notion of art as ‘social discourse’ as a way of illustrating an analogous relationship between artistic work and language. The goal is an analysis of art expressed in a heuristic model that can help non-specialists, specifically laypersons in church or Christian educational settings, better apprehend the phenomenon of art and develop a meaningful relationship with it.

## **II. Some Recent Developments in Philosophical Aesthetics**

A good working understanding of art that does justice to its complexity but can be articulated with simplicity would advance the cause of integrating art and practical theology. Clearing the definitional ground takes us to philosophical aesthetics, but defining art within this field has been a fraught business in recent times. Anxieties about the metaphysics of essentialist projects, despair of definitions that successfully navigate the heterogeneity of art forms, and doubt over the usefulness of definitions as such characterize much of the discussion in philosophical aesthetics. While the pull of anti-essentialist metaphysics remains strong, moves from within philosophical aesthetics towards definitions of art continue. Dennis Dutton’s concern, for example, is that contemporary theorizing about art (he highlights such figures as George Dickie and Arthur Danto as representative cases) has become so overly anxious about ‘hard cases,’ that a kind of intellectual paralysis has set in:

The obsession with accounting for art’s most problematic outliers, while both intellectually challenging and a good way for teachers of aesthetics to generate discussion, has left aesthetics ignoring the center of art and its values. What philosophy of art needs is an approach that begins by treating art as a field of

activities, objects, and experience given naturally in human life. We must first try to demarcate an uncontroversial center that gives outliers whatever interest they have.<sup>7</sup>

Dutton proceeds from this diagnosis to advance a case for what he terms a ‘naturalistic’ approach to art theory, based on the large, cross-culturally observable features of artistic phenomenon. To this end, Dutton presents what he terms ‘recognition criteria,’ based on what he perceives as ‘cross-culturally identified patterns of behaviour and discourse: the making, experiencing, and assessing of works of art.’<sup>8</sup> Dutton’s twelve criteria, then, are (1) direct pleasure, (2) skill or virtuosity, (3) style, (4) novelty or creativity, (5) criticism, (6) representation, (7) ‘special’ focus, (8) expressive individuality, (9) emotional saturation, (10) intellectual challenge, (11) art traditions and institutions, (12) imaginative experience. Dutton does not claim that all art manifest these criteria, or that the list is exhaustive or not subject to alteration. It does, he proposes, establish a common sense (my term) approach to art that might assist lay persons to attain better access and appreciation of art.<sup>9</sup>

While work such as Dutton’s helps clear space for understanding in practical ways the phenomenon of art, what remains to be addressed is it remains to be how the arts might advance influence on its receivers. Answering this would also advance a case for the *value* of art in human life, and that realm of enquiry places us within the sphere of normative theory, which would in turn advance the purpose of this project in its exploration of the relationship between the arts and spiritual formation.

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<sup>7</sup> D. Dutton, quoted in A. Meskin, ‘From Defining Art to Defining the Individual Arts: The Role of Theory in the Philosophies of Arts,’ in *New Waves in Aesthetics*, ed. K. Stock and K. Thompson-Jones (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 137. See also D. Dutton, ‘A Naturalistic Definition of Art,’ *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 64 (2006): 367-377.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 368.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 369-73.

## Normative Theory

There is more to the life of the human mind than conceptual thought; the activity of the senses is as much mental as that of intellectual reflection.<sup>10</sup>

Gordon Graham, trained in philosophy and now Professor of Philosophy and the Arts at Princeton Theological Seminary, identifies two fundamental enquires in philosophical aesthetics: definitions of art and evaluative theories of its ‘social importance (or lack of it).’<sup>11</sup> Graham critiques the tradition of philosophical aesthetics as being too overly focused on the first of these enquiries, and suggests that a reverse of order might prove a more fruitful approach to the matter. Graham surveys the tradition of aesthetics especially since Kant and concludes that the search for an ‘essential ‘Form’ or universal ‘Idea’ called ‘Art’ ends in inevitable frustration. He recommends, then, the construction of a normative theory of art that would facilitate the distinction of ‘art’ from ‘non-art’ and provide a way – simultaneously – of locating the relative value of art in a spectrum of legitimate values. For Graham, it is the cognitive value of art that represents its culminating value, and his argument for this position is worth considering.<sup>12</sup>

In an article published in 1995 entitled ‘Learning from Art,’ later incorporated into and expanded in his book *Philosophy of the Arts*, Graham argues for what he describes as a normative account of aesthetic cognitivism, as opposed to a descriptive one (i.e. an account of necessary and sufficient conditions of what can be considered art). Based on Nelson Goodman’s account of how the arts pertain to the dynamic of ‘worldmaking,’ Graham argues that art can advance understanding primarily in two ways: by directing the mind through progressions of thought and through expanded venues of perception of human experience.<sup>13</sup>

Graham’s article begins as a response to an earlier article by Douglas Morgan, who argued against cognitive theories of art on the basis that such theories traffic in false alternatives between art as mere diversion and decoration and empirical knowledge and the implied superiority of such a ‘scientific’ understanding of knowledge against which art is then held. Graham acknowledges the rightness of resisting such reductionistic views of art, but argues that

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<sup>10</sup> G. Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2005), 64.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 243-44.

<sup>13</sup> G. Graham, “Learning from Art,” *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 35 (1995): 26-37. Graham makes reference to Goodman’s *Ways of Worldmaking* (Edinburgh: The Harvester Press, 1978).



Morgan himself engages in a form of reductionism. According to Graham, Morgan's account of the cognitive potential of art is weakened by his equation of cognitive significance with propositional truth subject to falsification. John Carey is a latter-day exponent of a similarly reductionist perspective on cognition, and it affects his critique of the arts as well. Graham suggests that with the substitution of 'truth' with 'understanding,' a new way of perceiving the cognitive dimension of the arts is available:

Now while it may be true that works of art, even works of literature, do not direct abstract thought, it may none the less be true that they direct the mind, that is, direct the perception of the audience.<sup>14</sup>

Graham considers the knotty matter of the relationship between art and external reality. Graham cites a passage from Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943), who argued against a mere representational approach to art on the basis that very often the object of such representation no longer exists. For Collingwood, this supported his emotivist theory of art. But Graham suggests that Collingwood overlooks something about the relationship between art and 'reality' and suggests that, rather than assuming a movement from reality to art that one begins with art and then move toward corresponding reality. Graham writes:

To see how art can be a form of understanding, it is essential to grasp that it involves moving from art to experience, not from experience to art. It is true that the images by which we are confronted in art are always images of particulars, but as Aristotle points out in the case of drama, images and characters can be generalized. Bruegel's celebrated picture can be of a country wedding, and need not be of any particular country wedding. It will not alter its subject to discover that the faces and objects collected in it were never assembled together at any one time, or even that

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 32. In *Philosophy of the Arts*, Graham continues this line of thought:

In this sense we can speak of works of art 'directing the mind.' They do not do this by constructing proofs and assembling evidence or even the presentation of propositional truths, but there are many examples of the other ways in which they do it. Rhythm in poetry, for instance, is more than a linguistic counterpart to music. By determining how we hear the line, and where the emphasis falls, rhythm can determine what the sense is. Composers, conductors, and performers all determine how music is heard, which sound predominates over others both acoustically and harmonically. Architects determine the order in which shapes and materials are seen by those who walk through the buildings they construct. And so on. (65).

they ever never existed. Art may be imaginary through and through, but it can still enable us to look more sensitively at the people, circumstances and relationships in our own experience. The question to be asked of such a work is not, ‘Does this effectively capture the scene portrayed’ but ‘*Does this make us see this sort of occasion differently?*’<sup>15</sup>

One thinks, for example, of Francis Schaeffer’s experience with Rembrandt’s *Side of Beef*, how he claimed he could never see beef in a butcher shop in quite the same way after encountering Rembrandt’s painting. Now I would argue that normally and un-self consciously we move in an oscillation from art to reality and back again in corresponding movements of discovery and verification, in the long course of which an enriched understanding of life is forged. Graham nonetheless articulates a persuasive case for the cognitive value of art. Arts address more than feelings. They address ideas, values, and perceptions. Connecting these ‘domains’ to the realm of the spiritual involves the work of theological aesthetics. As this chapter progresses I will propose a *descriptive analysis* of art that aims at strengthening the kind of normative account that Graham develops of the value of art for human flourishing.

### **III. Recent Developments in Theological Aesthetics**

Whereas philosophical aesthetics provides conceptual clarity, as well as a history of the course of thought regarding art, beauty and aesthetic experience, theological (or religious) aesthetics provides conceptual clarification along with an intentional reflection of aesthetics in relation to God. The work of Frank Burch Brown is an example of one of the widest and most comprehensive advances in the field of theological or religious aesthetics in the past twenty years. Brown’s review of the development of aesthetics since the 18<sup>th</sup> century in particular and similar developments in Christian thought concurrently serves to both illuminate the subject matter as well as enable him to position his ‘neo-aesthetic’ agenda.<sup>16</sup> Brown’s contribution to this project lies in the example of his own working out of a definition of art. Taking place in the midst of the book’s third chapter, Brown tentatively proceeds toward his eventual announcement,

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<sup>15</sup> Graham, ‘Learning from Art,’ 35. Emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> F. B. Brown, *Religious Aesthetics* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 20.

hinting in the text how the task, ‘like so many others, is complex enough to require a degree of patience and fortitude.’<sup>17</sup> Brown stipulates that no definition can successfully encompass all one might wish to say about art, nor need it ‘rule out what it *leaves* out’ as he suggests many modern definitions do. For his own definition, Brown writes:

For our purposes art can best be defined as any and all of the creative skills, informed practices, and primary products manifest in the making of publicly recognizable aesthetica.<sup>18</sup>

Brown develops his theory of art, with reference to Kant, as enabling one to ‘think more’ than concepts themselves can contain. He continues:

Clearly we should add, however, that perhaps some art allows one not only to think more but also to feel more, and that in both of these ways together it manages to mean more, possibly even letting one be and become more.<sup>19</sup>

In such a way, Brown elucidates the phenomenon of art with reference to what in education philosophy are referred to as the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains.<sup>20</sup>

Frank Brown’s work emphasizes religious aesthetics within a recognizably Christian yet intentionally general theological framework. Jeremy Begbie on the other hand has pursued these questions from a more carefully defined Christian agenda reflecting a neo-Barthian or in his

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 86. Brown further elucidates this definition:

We will consider a work of art to be anything that is at least partially artificial in origin, that reflects creativity, skill, or knowledge, and that in large measure is, or could be, something appreciated by a public attentive to aesthetic factors such as form and style, and responsive to aesthetic effects such as those we regard as intrinsically interesting, expressive, or beautiful (88).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 92.

<sup>20</sup> The literature in this subject matter is considerable. The work of Benjamin Samuel Bloom (1913-1999) is considered fundamental; B.S. Bloom, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals*, New York: David McKay Co., 1965. A more recent summary of this literature and its applications is Linda Suskie, *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide* (Bolton, MA: Anker, 2000). The relationship between the affective and the cognitive has come in for increased recognition:

The affective domain is beginning to be more comprehensively studied because it involves constructs such as feelings, attitudes, values, beliefs, opinions, interests, and motivation, and it is increasingly apparent that success in the affective domain is associated with success in the cognitive domain. Alan Bolye, “The Affective Domain – Report on a Workshop at Carleton College,” *Planet* 18 (June 2007): 49.

words a more Christologically-determined set of theological convictions.<sup>21</sup> Begbie seeks to situate the arts in such a way that they can be seen to illuminate the purposes of God in creation and redemption. His agenda is to set out what he and others of similar theological perspective call a more *relational* account of the world and God, which for Begbie finds sponsorship in the theological doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Pauline affirmations of creation and redemption in Christ.<sup>22</sup>

In his review of Western aesthetics since the Enlightenment, Begbie finds undue stress either on the autonomy of art from any considerations of its wider implications or a Romantic tendency to relegate the arts to the subjective and emotional without any noetic potentials or epistemic status. His summary critique of Kant articulates this basic stance:

The overall logic of [Kant's] aesthetics, I would submit, is one which leads towards alienation – of art from knowledge, of art from action, of artists from the physical world, of artists from fellow artist, of artist from society.<sup>23</sup>

He continues:

The autonomy of art will best be safeguarded, I believe, not by wrenching it apart from knowledge, nor by equating it with conceptual or moral knowledge, but by seeing it as a distinctive, particular, but quite genuine means of knowing the world.<sup>24</sup>

In pursuing this counter-Kantian analysis of art, Begbie culls philosophical resources available in the writing of Hans-Georg Gadamer and his notion of a fundamentally ‘dialogical’ sense of human being, Michael Polanyi’s concept of ‘participatory knowing,’ and the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff who seeks to overcome the Kantian heritage of ‘disinterested

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<sup>21</sup> Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise*, 167.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 179f. Begbie is among Protestant theologians who, in light of Karl Barth’s influence, prioritized special revelation and with it an emphasis on Trinitarian doctrine. One outcome of this was an emphasis on the perichoretic implications of classic Trinitarianism, translated in terms of ‘relationality.’ See F. LeRon Shuts, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) for one account of this process.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 199.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 217.

contemplation’ and all that it implies of human-being-in the-world with a more ontologically relational context for the phenomenon of art:

In contrast to this...the Christian Gospel presents us with a picture of human existence as intrinsically relational, that we find our true being only in relationship, when we receive from, and give to, others.<sup>25</sup>

Begbie seeks to end this ‘alienation of art’ from lived experience by finding a way wherein art can be seen to participate in the reconciling purposes of God in Christ.<sup>26</sup> For Begbie, the arts enhance man’s priestly vocation, given to him in creation and re-affirmed in redemption, to ‘voice creation’s praise.’ His work theologically clarifies the similarly relationalist impulse found in Frank Burch Brown (who speaks of an ‘integralist’ approach) and recent Christian writing about the arts, and can be seen as furthering the discussion on the relationship between art and spiritual formation. Begbie’s work, as we see below, has many implications for the formulation of such a relationship, but the heart of his agenda is the development of a theology of the arts.

For Begbie, the arts largely direct the mind, and while this is commensurate with the trajectory of this project, I seek to connect aesthetical insights with ascetical practices. In order to pursue this matter further, I want to consider the contribution of Aidan Nichols, a Dominican scholar whose work over the years has done much to advance Balthasarian studies and theological aesthetics in general. In his first book, *The Art of God Incarnate*, Nichols argues that the dynamics of art – visual art in particular – can serve as a metaphor for the way that God is disclosed in the incarnate Life of Jesus of Nazareth. It is an image theology that Nichols seeks to revive and develop in the service of a refreshed expression of the Gospel centered on the Incarnation. As such, Nichols’ reflections on art are subsidiary to the development of this theology of images.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 220.

<sup>26</sup> Begbie approaches his proposal with the familiar caveat about the quest for a definition: Contemporary philosophers are on the whole not inclined to attempt a definition of art. Theologians are no less wary, and frequently raise more problems than they solve. Any very tight definition of art is probably bound to falter, for almost inevitably we exclude instances of what we normally describe as works of art. But we need, I think, some idea of why we would choose to refer to a particular object as a work of art. (233).

The sixth chapter of this book, 'The Shape of the Artwork,' however, presents an understanding of the arts that I wish to explore. Nichols opens the chapter noting the significance of the conceptual exploration of art that we have been exploring:

Firstly, false notions of what art is and where its significance lies may well hinder or prevent our receiving the disclosure which art-images make in its fullest scope. Secondly, any theological reflection on the way the artwork can be said to be revelatory... must be as weak as the account of art on which is draws.<sup>27</sup>

Like Begbie, Nichols refers appreciatively to Martin Heidegger as well as Gadamer for accounts of how objects themselves have their own integrity and yield themselves only as the viewer opens themselves up to their revelatory potentials. Nichols draws on phenomenology even more than Begbie, including the work of the French phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne (1910-1995). In Nichols' reading of these philosophers, the tendency toward subjectivist accounts of art's efficacy (read Romanticism) turns towards the integrity and autonomy of the art object itself.<sup>28</sup> This position in turn leads toward a consideration of the meaning of beauty in relationship to art. Nichols is critical of definitional accounts of beauty, seeing it as a 'dangerous' enterprise because 'All such definitions of the beautiful prove otiose because sooner or later they rule out of court artworks which speak powerfully to us while lacking the essential claimed for the beautiful.'<sup>29</sup> This does not mean for Nichols that talk of beauty is ruled out *tout court*. It means:

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<sup>27</sup> Nichols, *Art of God Incarnate*, 89-90.

<sup>28</sup> Nichols writes:

It is fortunate, therefore, that the resurgence of a visionary art with teaching to offer in the modern epoch has coincided with the rise of a school of aesthetics which takes artistic experience seriously as *a unique form of communication* not to be reduced to some more general category less than itself. This 'phenomenological' school works with the philosophical method of the same name whose keynote is the self-discipline of the knowing agent before the object. As Martin Heidegger, a pioneer of this method, wrote in his early *Being and Time*, the being in question must 'be seen as existing in its own self-disclosure.' This re-direction of interest towards the object conceived in its own autonomy of existence is the more welcome in aesthetics since a rampant subjectivism has reigned too long. (90, emphasis added).

<sup>29</sup> Nichols, *Art of God Incarnate*, 91.

First, we are recommending it as an object which meets the criterion of any aesthetic object, *the power to communicate with us through a configuration of matter*.<sup>30</sup>

And second,

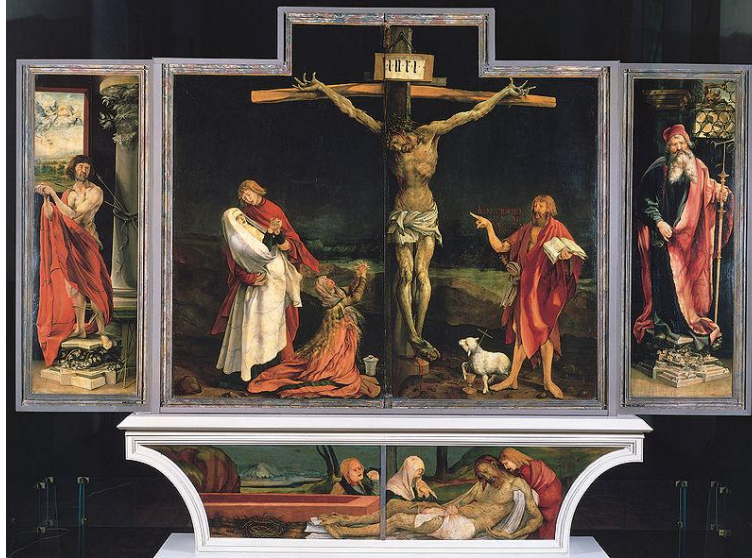
...in calling the artwork beautiful we describe it by echoing a judgment made ‘within’ the artwork, rather than by us. Meaning is not projected on to an arrangement of paints or of masses of stone. It is already embodied and communicated there through its creator’s handling of the sensuous. We can recognize beauty, therefore, without creating a theory of the beautiful. Indeed, there is no such theory to create. There is the stating of what aesthetic objects are, and to the degree that they are, they are beautiful.<sup>31</sup>

While Nichols declines from defining beauty, he nonetheless associates beauty with art almost synonymously. In Nichol’s neo-Thomist theology, art properly participates in beauty as a transcendental. All things are ordered toward their proper ends, all things that exist in some way participate in the True, the Good and the Beautiful, some things with greater transparency to one transcendental than another. With its insistence on the integrity of ‘made things’ and the communicative potentials such things have make for an impressive theory of the arts, it imposes certain limitations on the arts as well. Mathias Grünewald’s celebrated Crucifixion scene on the Isenheim altarpiece (c. 1512-1516), or Graham Sutherland’s twentieth-century echo in his *Crucifixion* for St Matthew’s Church in Northampton (1946) raises the question whether vivid realism or even intentional ugliness can also ‘speak’ of divine things. A conversation can be had, of course, as to whether art that includes the ugly can be ‘beautiful’ in light of its aesthetic integrity, but unless care is exercised systems like Nichol’s are often apt to pre-determine and even preclude works of art and their potential spiritual significance.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 92. Emphasis added.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 92.



Mathias Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece, central panels, c. 1510, oil on wood, 269 x 307 cm



Graham Sutherland, *Crucifixion*, 1946, oil on canvas, 2.75 x 2.62 m

In his invocation of notions of ‘communication,’ ‘embodiment’ and ‘sensuous form,’ however, we arrive at Nichols’ understanding of art:

The artwork is rightly judged beautiful or, otherwise expressed, itself, if it embodies the meaningful in the sensuous. The sensuous element is responsible for the artwork’s peculiar plentitude and its uniquely imposing form of presence. It



‘speaks to’ us or ‘strikes’ us through the glory of the sensuous realm to which it belongs. R.G. Collingwood was mistaken in thinking that the primary reality of the artwork was an idea in the mind of the artists, only secondarily extruded more or less successfully into some material medium. The ‘weight’ of the sensuous, rendered communicative by the artist’s creative talent, accounts for the ability of the artwork to take an initiative with us and to be experienced by us as a kind of address.<sup>32</sup>

Nichols’ theological orientation emerges in his insistence on the integrity and irreducibility of the ‘sensuous order,’ and imparts something of Jacques Maritain’s reflections on art:

The meaning embodied in the artwork is communicated, then, in a unique, *sui generis* manner. It is found in the very organization of the sensuous and lies in the spatial schemata of the canvas. This meaning defies translation into the clarity of prose, not because it is vacuous but because it is inexhaustible. Unlike other sorts of sign, the traffic-light, the flag of the nation, the linguistic signs of literal prose, we can set no limit to the plurality of readings that express the artwork. The multiple points of view spectators and critics find themselves taking up before a work of art, if they truly represent an effort to grasp its real character, testify to what Dufrenne would call the ‘depth’ of the aesthetic object. No artwork can be taken in at a single glance. It must be lived with, and in the living will show us a multitude of faces, and an unlimited power to illuminate our experience.<sup>33</sup>

As ‘embodiment[s] of meaning in the sensuous order,’ artworks for Nichols communicate through two essential means. The first of these is its participation in a system of iconology, ‘a pattern of images and motifs in an artist’s work or in a wider artistic tradition’ which Nichols describes as a ‘network of visual images [that form] in art a sign-system which is a kind of visual analogue to language.’ By this Nichols means the use and manipulation of conventions that become transformed into a unique address. ‘Just as a particular poet will rely on certain established metaphorical transformations of the literal in speech, so too an artist in his iconology

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<sup>32</sup> Nichols, *Art of God Incarnate*, 93. ‘Uniquely imposing form of presence’ is one way of characterizing beauty.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 93-94. Nichols allusion to art being ‘lived with’ in order for its depths to disclose themselves reminds one of Polanyi’s notion of ‘indwelling’ an object or text or problem in order to truly encounter its meaningfulness.

will presuppose a background of stylistic convention from which his own creative innovations stand out.<sup>34</sup> Nichols here notes that such conventions rely on particular cultural inheritances and contexts. These dynamics will be explored in two particular cases in chapters three and four.

The second is what Nichols calls the ‘affective quality’ of art, its ‘expressive’ dynamic. Sensitivity to this dimension of art requires what Nichols terms ‘appropriate dispositions.’ Nichols writes:

To allow the artwork to speak we must not muffle it by a barrage of our own prior feelings, memories and mental habits. When on achieving this suspension of egoism we succeed in seeing the artwork in the pregnant aesthetic sense of ‘to see’ we find that the feeling-quality of disinterestedness gives way to fresh and original feelings called forth by the artwork itself.<sup>35</sup>

Nichols continues:

Art requires and releases an *askesis* or discipline of vision so that we learn how to look with a purity of insight into the heart of human life. Such looking shifts our whole way of reading the significance of the world. In its wake we find our own existence reshaped from the experience of what we have seen.<sup>36</sup>

Both Grünewald and Sutherland contemporize the events of the Crucifixion in such a way that their contemporaries could re-imagine and re-appropriate the significance of Christ’s suffering for them. Both Grünewald’s and Sutherland’s paintings mentioned above were made in response to specific circumstances, Grünewald’s for a hospital, as we might now call it, for those suffering from a painful and disfiguring bacterial infection, and Sutherland’s in direct response to the suffering of the Second World War, particularly that of the concentration camps. And if Francis Schaeffer had pressed just a little further, he too might have seen in Rembrandt’s hanging beef an allusion to the Crucifixion and gained a larger corresponding sense, perhaps, of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 98. See also A. Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 23-33, and *No Bloodless Myth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 3-7.

<sup>36</sup> Nichols, *Art of God Incarnate*, 100.

the meaning of sacrifice and suffering (and even Eucharistic implications by so linking Christ to meat).

Nichols' unique combination of metaphysical (or perhaps better a transcendental) realism and a phenomenological approach to art provides a way of understanding art that can accommodate essentialist definitions of art while remaining radically open to the presentation and integrity of an art object. It is an approach to art that has fruitful implication for the relationship between art and spiritual formation. His insistent refrain of the communicative nature of art and the dispositional qualities characterized as ascetical that facilitate meaningful encounters with the arts are drawn together and given more systematic expression in this project.

Appreciative of the work of Frank Brown, Jeremy Begbie and Aidan Nichols in particular, this project seeks to advance what it considers a *critically realist* philosophy of art, that is, critically realist *ontologically* in maintaining that things have an objective existence and are related to one another by virtue of the doctrine of Creation and Redemption; critically realist *epistemologically* in maintaining that we have access to real knowledge but that is nonetheless culturally and historically situated; and a critically realist *hermeneutically* in its approach to art, explored further in the next section. The critical realism of this project places it on the Protestant side of theological metaphysics, but receptive of the relational ontology embedded in Nichol's and Begbie's work.

#### **IV. Dynamics of Aesthetic Communication**

Meaningful and formative encounters with art inevitably involve processes of *interpretation*. In this regard, some recent developments in Biblical hermeneutics offer ways of understanding the interplay between artists, their work and their audiences. The forge out of which these new insights are drawn is the interface between certain postmodernist approaches to textual interpretation and responses from more traditionalist Christian Biblical theologies, to wit, the battle between some radically indeterminist accounts of textual 'meaning' and strategies that seek to ground what might be called an 'open determinacy' of textual meaning. One strategy for such a 'hermeneutically realist' approach to Scripture (as well as ordinary human texts) is the traditionalist account of the existence of God as a communicative Being and of humans made in the image of this communicative Creator.

A prominent figure in the traditionalist camp is Kevin Vanhoozer. Taking cues from Anthony Thiselton's work, Vanhoozer articulates a hermeneutic of determinant meaning grounded in the existence of God as an intrinsically (within a Trinitarian theology) and extrinsically (within a prophetic-disclosure framework) communicative Being. The possibility of meaningful and meaning-full human discourse finds its grounding in such theological convictions. By way of its very title, *Is there a Meaning in This Text?* Vanhoozer issued a salvo across the bow of certain strands of literary criticism and its attendant postulates concerning human discourse. What is significant for the developing thesis of this project is Vanhoozer's recourse to speech-act theory for an account of human being and human meaning-making. Vanhoozer traces the rise of speech-act theory in the work of J.L. Austin and in particular John Searle. Both are grounded in the Ordinary Language philosophy that arose in British philosophical circles in the 1940's and 1950's. Austin analysed communication in terms of *locution* (the utterance itself), *illocution* (its intention), and *perlocution* (what the speech-act achieves). For Vanhoozer, it was Austin's stipulation of the illocutionary dimension that highlights (a) the existence of a speaker/author, who (b) is not only a speaker but a *doer*. In terms of the arts, one might suggest that speech-act theory reveals not only a doer but a *speaker/communicator*.<sup>37</sup>

A further articulation of this 'common sense hermeneutical realist' approach to Biblical interpretation is taken up by one of Vanhoozer's protégés who is herself a musician as well as a theologian.<sup>38</sup> Jeannine Brown advances the same interpretive strategies that Vanhoozer and others outline in her hermeneutical methodology. But it is in the course of some almost tangential comments that she provides grist for a theo-aesthetic mill. Like Vanhoozer, Brown argues for a hermeneutically realist reading of Scripture that is confident yet 'modest' in its claim of access to 'authorial intent' and acknowledges the location of the reader even as it resists 'radical contextualization.' In this regard, Brown reflects the work of others in suggesting the potential of narrative theology to interrogate the 'locations' of authors, texts and readers:

One way of attending to the biblical story envisioned by the biblical authors is to focus on what has been called "the world projected by the text." In fact, we may

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<sup>37</sup> K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009 [1988]), 208-09.

<sup>38</sup> J. K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007, p. 75.

speak of entering the world of the text as a way of allowing its normative story to shape us.<sup>39</sup>

Brown mirrors Vanhoozer in commending the deployment of speech-act theory, and provides a summary of its benefits for the interpretation of Scripture. Stated in my own words, one could say that Brown's analysis underscores dynamics of *intentionality*, *interpersonality*, and *integrity* in the process of receiving and 'reading' a text or other communicative acts. Speech-act theory suggests that with words humans do not merely say things but do things. Brown suggests the example of the wedding ceremony, where as celebrants say vows they effect a change in relationships.<sup>40</sup> Drawing on Austin's notions of the illocutionary dimension of human utterance, Brown suggests that speech-act theory highlights the often overlooked performative aspects of Scripture. Written texts do not merely project information; *they inculcate dispositions and insinuate responses*. Secondly, like Vanhoozer, speech-act theory for Brown 'reintroduces the author' into textual interpretation, albeit under a refined, modest appraisal of access to authorial intention. Thirdly, even as speech-act theory revives the notion of the author (or artist) as a 'responsible communicative agent,'<sup>41</sup> it underscores an ethic of dialogical encounter, with potential application for a hermeneutic of the arts:

My goal when participating in communication with a friend is not to master what is communicated, or the person communicating it for that matter. Instead, I want to really hear and thereby know the other person more fully. Analogously, our goal in textual interpretation involves, at its heart, listening in order to hear well. This listening is attentive to what is being communicated, without requiring the assurance that I can reach some sort of pure objectivity. Instead, listening seeks relationship.<sup>42</sup>

Drawing together features of Heidegger, Gadamer, speech-act theory, reader-response strategies and narrative theology, Brown reaches an account of meaningful interaction with a text that again has implications for interaction with art in general:

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 46.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>41</sup> Vanhoozer *Is There a Meaning*, 204.

<sup>42</sup> Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 73-74.

Repeated interaction with a text – particularly with the awareness of one’s own presuppositions, the otherness of the text, and the storied nature of the whole – can move one productively toward textual understanding. For Heidegger, this is the nature of the hermeneutical process: its circle. We might even expand the image to talk about a hermeneutical spiral, which moves toward greater and greater understanding. Yet this movement toward understanding must never be conceived in absolute terms, as if we can attain the perfect reading and then close the book. “Every time one goes around the spiral the lenses of the telescope have altered, but every time there are still lenses.” At its heart, the hermeneutical process is open-ended, never fully completed. Maybe this should not surprise us, since an interpersonal view of hermeneutics invites the analogy of relationship or friendship, whose goal is not completion for its own sake but continual longing to know and to be known.<sup>43</sup>

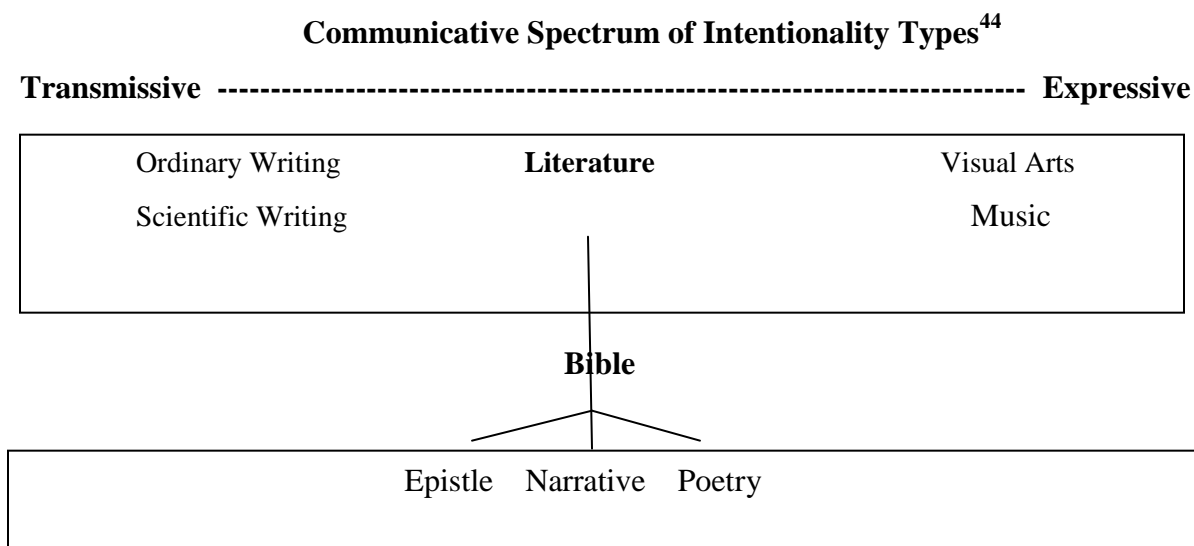
Several things are striking. It is common now in certain quarters that all aspects of human relationship are thought of as ‘texts,’ but this does have potential usefulness in considering artistic phenomena. By suggesting that art can be or needs to be ‘read,’ the metaphor mitigates against casual, somnambulistic encounters with art. Such a perspective would address several of John Carey’s criticisms of non-literary arts. Moreover, the analogy underlines the intentionality that generally sponsors works of art, and reiterates the fact that all art originates from and is received within contexts. It also underlines the interpersonality of the encounter between artists and auditor, and can inform a ‘hermeneutic of trust’ that the artist means what apparently the work is ‘doing.’

Brown’s articulation of the ‘relational’ dimension of interpretation as analogous to an open-ended friendship is interesting. But it is in her move to ‘take seriously the communicative nature of all texts without embracing a simplistic one-size-fits-all method of textual interpretation,’ that Brown advances a suggestive approach to communication theory. Brown suggests that one think of communication taking place within a spectrum that accounts for differing genre and intention, a spectrum consisting of, on one end *transmissive* forms and intentions, and on the other *expressive* forms and intentions. Toward the transmissive are speech-acts mostly in the first person directed to intended audiences for specific purposes. Letter writing

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 74.

and scientific writing are examples. On the expressive end the arts stand as prime examples of more open-ended, less determined forms of communication but forms of communication nonetheless. The Bible, in this analysis, exists within a dialectical relationship of these two poles of communicative intention, and any accurate reading of the Bible must attend to when the dynamics of this spectrum is in play:



Brown's diagram helpfully categorizes different acts of communication, as well as underlines the aesthetic dimension of Scripture, with the interpretive and experiential implications this suggests. It might be possible, however, to situate works of art at points all *across* this spectrum rather than relegate it to just one side. Considering degrees of transmissive or expressive intentions might illuminate new aspects of a given piece. Most importantly, just as speech-act theory highlights that with words humans not only say things but do things, likewise in art, human not only do things, but say things.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 75, adapted here with the kind permission of Baker Books.

## V. A Cognitive-Communicative Hermeneutic of Art

It is a commonplace to hear people reflect how a given work of art ‘spoke’ to them. In a passage we will consider later in this project, contemporary artist Makoto Fujimura writes of his first encounter with the work of modernist artist Arshile Gorky:

I remember going to the Arshile Gorky retrospective in the early eighties at the Guggenheim, and having the paintings *speak to me* in ways [Japanese artist Tōhaku Hasegawa’s *Pine Forest* screen panel] *speaks to me* today. In fact, I believe that experience convinced me that I should seek to pursue art. Gorky’s works probed the depth of essentiality. Gorky’s later works spoke in a *language* I could not comprehend but yet yearned for.<sup>45</sup>

Do arts ‘speak’? And if so, by what means? And if meaningful communication is taking place, then what implications does this have for the claim that the arts ‘speak’ to matters of spirituality and spiritual formation? The goal in this project is to develop a theory and a heuristic conception of the arts that can facilitate a more meaningful encounter with the arts for Christian laity. The assumption behind this project is that the arts are a powerful means of communication and a way that spiritual formation can be advanced except that lack of clarity about and intimidation before the arts inhibits this process.

The arts involve the deployment of physical gestures, sonic phenomena, rhetorical maneuvers, bodily movements, photographic assemblage, descriptive writing, plastic materials and coloured pigments in ways that can be categorized as ‘languages.’ This proposition finds numerous anecdotal support, casual concurrence, and occasional sustained argument. One thinks of Wassily Kandinsky’s chapter on ‘The Language of Form and Colour,’ in his celebrated *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*,<sup>46</sup> or of John Summerson’s popular text *The Classical Language of Architecture* with its chapters on ‘The Grammar of Antiquity’ and ‘The Rhetoric of the Baroque.’<sup>47</sup> Nelson Goodman advances his symbolic analysis of art under the rubric of the

<sup>45</sup> M. Fujimura, ‘That Final Dance,’ in *It was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God*, 2nd ed., ed. Ned Bustard (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2006), 300. Emphases added.

<sup>46</sup> W. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, ed., M.T.H. Sadler, (New York: Dover, 1977).

<sup>47</sup> J. Summerson, *The Classical Language of Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980).



*Languages of Art*.<sup>48</sup> His case for the cognitive value of art finds a new champion in the work of Gordon Graham whom we have already encountered.

Of particular interest to me, also a former music student, is the 1959 text by musicologist Deryck Cooke *The Language of Music*. His complaint at the time of writing was that members of the musical intelligentsia had for too long been concerned only with the formal dimensions of musical utterances and had neglected, or positively suppressed, the communicative content of music. His response was to reassert the communicative powers of music and the ways that composers manipulated the tonal and harmonic elements of Western music in order to say things:

When we try to assess the achievement of a great literary artist, one of the chief ways in which we approach his work is to examine it as a report on human experience. We feel that, in his art, he has said something significant in relation to life as it is lived; and that what he has said - whether we call this a 'criticism of life' or a *Weltanschauung* or something else - is as important as the purely formal aspects of his art - 'content' and 'form' - are realized to be ultimately inseparable: what he has said is inextricably bound up with how he has said it; and how he has said it clearly cannot be considered separately from what he has said.<sup>49</sup>

Cooke defines his usage of language in relation to music as that of an analogy as opposed to a metaphor, suggesting a much more direct relationship.<sup>50</sup> Cooke qualifies this analogy by limiting it to emotional expression, suggesting that 'intellectual statements' are outside the reach of music's expressive powers. This assertion, however, is strangely contradicted by Cooke's own impressive account of the 'meaning' he suggests is inherent in the very harmonic developments that took place within Western music:

It is clear, and needs no arguing, that the development of Western European music has gone hand in hand with the development of Western European man. Now, as has often been pointed out, the essential difference between Western European thought and that of other cultures is the concept of humanism: the belief in the

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<sup>48</sup> N. Goodman, *Languages of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>49</sup> D. Cooke, *The Language of Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), ix.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* 125.

individual's right to progress towards personal material happiness, which came to the fore at the Renaissance, and had its roots in still earlier times. The insistence on the 'rightness' of the sense of happiness has been accompanied by an insistence on the 'rightness' of the major third (see, for example, the finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, written at the height of the period of confidence). It was for this reason that the church wished from the beginning to keep the note right out of ecclesiastical music. The major triad (and the major scale) belonged to the popular, secular life founded on the desire for pleasure; and this always threatened to undermine the religious ideal of a humble, God-centered existence, in which the emphasis was on the acceptance of one's lot in 'this vale of tears', and to replace it by a concept of a proud, man-centered existence, in which the emphasis was on personal happiness. In fact, of course, this eventually happened: with the increasing secularization of life, from the Renaissance onwards, the modes with their lack of strong tensions, gave way more and more to the powerful tensions of the major and minor systems; eventually the centre of musical life moved from the church to the opera-house (seventeenth-century) and concert-hall (eighteenth-century), and an increasingly secular society expressed its sense of human pleasure and pain by means of the major and minor systems, regular rhythms, and four-bar periods – until the tide turned. Ever since about 1850 – since doubts have been cast, in intellectual circles, on the possibility, or even desirability, of basing one's life on the concept of personal happiness – chromaticism has brought more and more painful tensions into our art-music, and finally eroded the major system and with it the whole system of tonality.<sup>51</sup>

Several critics note that Cooke's project is over-determinative of the meaning of tonal progressions and harmonic relations.<sup>52</sup> I also decline the emotionalist theory that informs

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 53-54. Art as 'social discourse' is a feature of literary theory and is also associated with the more radical claims of members of the Frankfurt School. Scott Burnham explores the implications of Cooke's outline in a much more thorough way in *Beethoven Hero*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>52</sup> Victor Zuckerkandl appreciates Cooke's agenda, but critiques his method. Zuckerkandl feels that Cooke lays upon the art of music a theoretical superstructure that robs it of its necessary multivalence of expression. Zuckerkandl demonstrates the limitations of Cooke's otherwise impressive exemplifications with a series of equally impressive counter-examples. In spite of his criticisms, however, Zuckerkandl acknowledges the contribution Cooke makes toward a renewed appreciation for the 'foundation of our tonal language' and the analysis of the communicative

Cooke's analysis, as will be discussed below. What I appreciate, however, is Cooke's resistance to purely formalist analyses in favour of one that attends to content, meaning and communication. Western music is its own language, its rhetorical conventions, and by it tells a cultural 'story'. Access to such cultural or convictional stories or worldviews – that matrix of values and tastes – is one of the dynamics of the arts and one of the ways in which and they can shape perspectives, values and beliefs.

Some who otherwise agree with Cooke's thesis but take a different turn. The contemporary British composer John Tavener, for example, echoes Cooke's analysis of Western music in his emphatic rejection of its 'language' and ethos in his own compositions and writing about music. Beethoven in his account represents the 'fall' of Western music because of its implied humanism.<sup>53</sup> Princeton University musicologist Scott Burnham takes a less judgmental approach in his analysis of Beethoven's music largely in terms of its rhetorical potency. Burnham also notes the formalist orientation of much of modern music criticism, and while seeking, like Cooke, to expand the range of musical consideration, seeks to hold the insights of the formalist and critical approaches together.<sup>54</sup> Burnham does so by making frequent recourse to linguistic metaphors in describing the effect of Beethoven's music.<sup>55</sup> For Burnham, Beethoven's music propelled the ethos of the *Goethezeit* into the ensuing nineteenth century with its free-agent, heroic potential of the individual self, communicated in music characterized by 'thematic/motivic development, end-orientation and unequivocal closure, form as process, and the inexorable presence of line,'<sup>56</sup> which itself has come to shape Western music up to the present day, except where composers consciously defer from these procedures, as in the case of twentieth-century experimental music.

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properties of these 'tonal organisms.' Victor Zuckerkandl, 'Review: *The Language of Music*' *Journal of Music Theory*, 4 (1960): 109.

<sup>53</sup> See *The Music of Silence: A Composer's Testament* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 32-33. For a summary of his own musical technique see J. Tavener, 'Towards a Sacred Art' in *The Sense of the Sacramental*, ed. D. Brown and A. Loades (London: SPCK, 1995), 172-78.

<sup>54</sup> S. Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 27.

<sup>55</sup> Burnham speaks of the 'heart-stopping pauses, crashes, register shifts and startling harmonies' as examples of the 'dramatic rhetoric of Beethoven's heroic style' (29); of the 'rhetorical exposition' of the opening of the *Fifth Symphony* (32); of Beethoven's 'musical form and harmonic syntax' (8), how Beethoven's 'internalization of classical syntax and phraseology' can account for the stylistic stability that enabled him to build so great a musical edifices as the middle and late works (29); and how Beethoven 'transforms the syntactic into the semantic,' charging received musical forms and conventions into works able to convey 'the ethical heft of human significance' (49).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 110.

Burnham argues that part of the rhetorical force of Beethoven's music lies in his unique use of the sonata form. This lay at the base of much of Beethoven's output, particularly the symphonies by which his vision is so compellingly enacted. Burnham writes:

The Viennese classical style in general has been associated throughout its inception with an affirmative ethical worldview. Critics often describe the classical symphony as if it were a public oration, an appeal to the better nature of humanity. James Webster links the rhetorical power of the classical style to "deep ethical concerns" and attributes both rhetoric and ethos to the profound coherence of the style: "[Haydn's influence on Beethoven] also encompassed the art of projecting strong rhetorical impulses and deep ethical concerns (which Beethoven had from the beginning) in musical works which simultaneously exhibit the greatest craft and the profoundest coherence – which generate their rhetorical and their morality precisely by means of that coherence." The effect of the classical-style symphony on a large audience is perhaps analogous to that proposed by Schiller for the theater. In his essay "Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet" (1784) he regards theater as the most effective way to convey a moral education; the audience is united in sympathy, and something like universal brotherhood is felt. This would come to be particularly true for Beethoven's symphonic music, which, when understood as a moral force unmoored to a specific dramatic situation, seems an even more potent way to perfect a universal moral education: its lack of specificity coupled with the monumentality of its expression lend it the aura of universality. If the classical-style symphony registered originally and primarily as an ethical statement, Beethoven's symphonies were to make that statement unimpeachable.<sup>57</sup>

Western music (as especially manifest in its 'concert' music) reflects within its 'language' an ethos or value system of, as Cooke puts it, 'humanistic progressivism,' one that the Western Church recognized and sought at times to keep from its liturgical services. Burnham however persuasively argues that humanism reflects its Christian antecedents rather clearly, particularly in

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 151-52.

relation to Christian eschatology, its sense of history's progression toward God's redemptive purposes.<sup>58</sup> To listen to Western music in what became its primary tonal tradition is to enter into this ethos in one form or another.<sup>59</sup>

So the arts can be said to communicate in ways analogous to language, with the persuasive force of rhetoric, which in turn can persuasively shape a social ethos and all those living within it. If artistic expression, then, is analogous to language, how are these languages converted into unique forms of meaningful utterances?<sup>60</sup> I now begin to turn, then, toward a *descriptive account* of art – what art is – that I hope will clarify its relationship with the cognitive-communicative analysis that has been adopted here as a *normative account* of its value.

### Art Involves Craft

“It’s a little insulting to craftsmen, skillful craftsmen...” he told Marr. “I used to point out at art school, you can teach craft, it’s the poetry you can’t teach. Now, they try to teach the poetry and not the craft.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 114.

<sup>59</sup> Gordon Graham is among those who continues to find relevance in Cooke’s thesis and musical lexicography. Cooke’s work for Graham illustrates ‘that the importance of one type or piece of music over another seems most easily explained by reference to what each has to ‘say’ to us.’ Graham continues that Cooke’s examples ‘show that there is a recurrent tendency for musicians and critics to explain the importance of music in terms of what it communicates. And this implies that music *has* communicative power.’ (*Philosophy of the Arts*, 83-84). Aspects of Burnham’s kind of analysis of the arts – of the arts as *social discourse* - are related to the work of Frankfurt School scholars. Susan McClary advances this type of analysis of Bach in ‘The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During the Bach Year,’ in eds., R. Leppert and S. McClary, *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>60</sup> ‘Utterance’ is used as a technical term within speech-act scholarship, frequently in relation to non-verbal or language at its most embryonic. Jeannine Brown’s appropriation of speech-act theory for Biblical interpretation bears relevance for the language analogy being drawn here in relation to the arts. Brown suggests that there are three maxims to bear in mind about language:

1. “Communication occurs at the utterance level”; that is, context helps determine meaning, the locutionary and illocutionary dimensions together.
2. “Language is located in culture”; that is, language reflects culture and effective interpretation requires some immersion into the culture or origin, and,
3. “The use of language in utterance communication is highly flexible in nature”; that is, attention to particularity rather than over-reliance on generality pays dividends in the process of interpretation. (*Scripture as Communication*, 174-76).

<sup>61</sup> David Hockney, speaking to Andrew Marr in an article reviewing recent downturns in the popularity of contemporary concept art and particularly the work of Damien Hirst; Alastair Smart, ‘Has Shock Art Lost Its Bite?’, *Seven: The Sunday Telegraph Weekly Magazine*, 4 March 2012, p. 16.

My analysis of art and the development of a hermeneutical model of it is at several points indebted to the work of R.G. Collingwood. Among the claims stipulated of art in his 1938 *The Principles of Art* is the distinction he draws between art and craft. Crediting the origins of the ‘technical theory’ of art to the Greeks, Collingwood critiques it as insufficiently reducing art to means and ends. Such a theory would deny that the expressiveness of art is necessary spontaneity and integrity for Collingwood. According to Collingwood, when the artist is engaged in the process of artistry, dynamics of extemporization and exploration are in play for which, apparently, craft has little or no role. Collingwood acknowledges that ‘no work of art whatever can be produced without some degree of technical skill, and, other things being equal, the better the technique the better will be the work of art.’<sup>62</sup> He appreciates how the place of craft puts to rest ‘sentimental’ notions of art and serves to alert the amateur to the ‘vast amount of intelligence and purposeful labour, the painful and conscientious self-discipline’ that artistry requires. But such an analysis is insufficient for an account of art that centres, as I might summarize his theory, on the conscious expression of imaginative experience.<sup>63</sup> The means of such expression leads Collingwood to draw an analogy between art and language, because for Collingwood it is imperative that art be analyzed as an activity of the consciousness, which informs his moral concern for the ‘corruption of consciousness.’<sup>64</sup>

The problems endemic to expressivist theories of art involves the same challenges to all forms of essentialism as well as, in the case of expressivist theory, the psychological speculations that seem to inform the analyses. In Collingwood’s hypothetical situation the artist ‘has no idea that the experience is that which demands expression until he has expressed it.’<sup>65</sup> Collingwood’s account avoids some of these pitfalls, but only in becoming, as Gordon Graham notes, a kind of cognitivist theory in spite of itself.<sup>66</sup> In short, for Collingwood, it is not what is in his hands but

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<sup>62</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 26-27.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 273-75.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 336.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 29

<sup>66</sup> G. Graham, ‘Expressivism: Croce and Collingwood,’ in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., eds., B. Gaut and D. McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2002), 144. Graham suggests that Collingwood’s theory relies too strongly on romantic-types of artistic expression and can say little to art that is strongly formalistic in orientation, like Baroque music. Graham notes how as Collingwood’s progressively uses language of cognition to describe the effect of art, and writes:

To say that artists give voice to experience, then, is to say that artists are concerned with the imaginative presentation of immediate experience rather than the construction of abstract reflections upon experience. But this gives no special place to emotional experience and the sensuous. If, with Collingwood, we want to talk about a distinctive truth in art, we need to ask not how art stimulates emotion, but how it directs consciousness. This is

what is in his head that makes an artist. I would argue that it is both. But many subsequent theorists have appreciated Collingwood's articulation of the distinction between craft and art. Art requires craft, but craft exists as a necessary but insufficient dimension of art. I am arguing that art takes, translates and transcends the 'raw material' of craft and transforms it into a mode of communication. To employ a linguistic metaphor, the 'language' of a given art is largely developed in terms of its craft, and the skillful deployment of this language as a form of persuasive utterance - of *rhetoric* - takes place in art.

'Inspirational' notions of artistic activity fail to give due recognition to reliance on conventions, the rhetorical strategies, and the years of practice, trial and error that lies behind works of creativity. The matter of craft rescues art from over-precious interpretations and restores to it its vitality as forms of communication. 'Craft' of course is derived from the Greek *techné*, and refers to the actual process by which a 'made thing' (one recognized definition of art) is produced. Craftsmanship, therefore, is a disciplined, acquired skill that requires practice and is generally subject to the appraisal of those who know the craft: the 'guild.'

In addition, art communicates in a particular way unique to a given craft. Consequently, a large part of engaging with art is learning to understand the particular way an art work is communicating, whether through rhythm and rhyme, melody and timbre, movement and gesture, line and colour, or shape and form. Craft involves the effective usage and manipulation of these modes of communication. I suppose I could summarize my thesis here by saying that *crafts make things while arts say things*.

Under the rubric of communication, craft in art refers to the learned and practiced deployment of skills and 'grammar' to the end of meaningful communication. In this analysis, craft incorporates matters of 'form' in as much as they occur as conventional means of *formulating* such skills and grammar in a given work. Normally art is considered the effective union of form and content, and this truism holds, but the effect of that union will be considered as part of its content. The successful deployment of formal means implies the evidence of craft.

Highlighting the dimension of craft serves the following objectives:

1. Identifying craft as an essential dimension of art assists in establishing boundaries of what counts as art. Gordon Graham prefaces his analysis of art by identifying what makes

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to ask about art as a mode of understanding, and it shows that feeling or emotion, as ordinarily understood, has been left behind. (144).

art and what establishes its social value. His survey reveals that too little attention is given to the mere human excellence promoted by and attained in the pursuit of craft, and how its implication in the phenomenon of art would in itself validate the social value of art.<sup>67</sup> The arts are not indeterminate phenomena but modes of practice and expression, constituted by craft and subject to the assessment and adjudication of a guild of practitioners.

2. Focusing on craft provides a means to engage with art on the level of skill and style. This is not to jettison emotional, visceral, or subjective responses to art, but to insist that art communicates something *in a particular way with particular skills* to an audience.
3. Emphasizing craft enables us to adjudicate between the decorative-functional and the expressive-communicative. A work of art may revel in decorative gestures, but this does not preclude the presence of communication. This distinction may be blurred, but in general *art 'happens' when craft is transcended and a unique form of communication take place*.
4. Acknowledging the dimension of craft situates an artwork within a context of practice which constitutes part of the 'story' within which it participates and thereby introduces to its audience/receivers. Noël Carroll argues that artworks are best 'defined' according to the place they occupy within a genealogy of descent in a tradition of practice that can be articulated in narrative terms. This project opts for another line of definition, but Carroll's theory underlines the significance of the dimension of craft.<sup>68</sup>
5. Recognizing the role of learned craft provides a rationale for the existence of critical reviews of art and of a place for *informed opinion* about art, as opposed to mere personal preferences.

Craft, then, is the delivery system, as it were, of art. Of consequence now is the identity of its payload.

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<sup>67</sup> Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 1-3.

<sup>68</sup> N. Carroll, *Art in Three Dimensions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 27f.



## Art and Content

Content is that aspect of an artwork that recipients are generally first drawn toward, aware of, and wish to discuss. It is the text-music synthesis of song, the picture in a painting, the image created in a poem. Analysis of formal principles and organizing structures in a given artwork generally coincide with an analysis of what such principles and structures contain. Content in this light can be understood as *subject matter*. Given the almost inevitable use of conventions in any art-form, content identifies what individuates a given example. If a type of painting is considered the form, then content analysis might begin by simply identifying what kind of painting focuses viewers' attention upon. Or the analysis might be much more specific, even down to the work of a single artist who nonetheless, though a practitioner of a particular form/style of painting, painted different things. Content is about what these different things were. In contrast to Clive Bell, art in this analysis consists not only of 'significant form' but 'signifying content' united in a satisfying whole.<sup>69</sup>

The thesis of this project is that not only the peculiar content but the *gestalt* of the form-content embodiment in the context of a whole artistic oeuvre or of a cultural-historical location projects a perspective of life that issues in an invitation for the receiver to consider. The degree that one might 'surrender'<sup>70</sup> to the insinuations of a work of art is the degree to which we become susceptible to its 'invitation,' its 'witness.' Moreover, as we 'indwell' the artwork, live with it, lovingly attend to it, have 'dialogue' with it, it speaks to us and we perhaps begin to vicariously live through it and, to cite a medieval trope, 'we become what we behold.' But this is jumping ahead. I want to consider some models of this form-content relationship and what it may illuminate for a hermeneutic of the arts.

In their theological analyses of the arts, Jeremy Begbie and Anthony Monti (1960-2004) cite with approval the work of Michael Polanyi. Polanyi (1891-1976) was a scientist whose researches led him to question the prevailing epistemological positivism of the early and mid twentieth century. As Begbie himself summarizes it, Polanyi 'sees all human knowledge as a

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<sup>69</sup> My analysis relates formal elements of art to the spheres of both craft and content. Forms are the stock-in-trade conventions of craft that all artists have at their disposal, i.e. musical forms of the sonata, A-B-A songs, rondos, the sonnets, sestinas and cinquains of poetry or similar conventions identifiable in all the arts. Forms are also irreducibly united to the unique content of a given work, so that one cannot discuss the content of a given piece apart from its formal utterance.

<sup>70</sup> Begbie, *Voicing*, 226, 241.

fully self-involving ('participatory') activity, which employs all our faculties – sense, mind, reason.<sup>71</sup> Knowledge involves therefore what Polanyi called a dimension of 'tacit awareness,' that is a subsidiary or mediating awareness of things, i.e. while our minds are focused on a problem at hand, our bodies inform and even shape our ability or intention to so focus upon the problem. Polanyi's situates knowing within a larger frame of reference, and for religious believers, for example, he provides a philosophical language to explain their intuition that we, in Polanyi's phrase, 'know more than we can tell.'

This then is applied to the arts, and they turn to Polanyi's borrowing of I.A. Richard's notion of 'frame' and 'story.' 'Frame' refers to those conventions of presentation, related in part to the dimension of craft that sets apart a work of art and in effect 'announces' its status as art. The metaphor most obviously applied to framed visual art, but all art forms have their framing procedures; in fact, it can be said that all works of art are but framed aspects of human experience. 'Story' refers to the 'representative element' presented within the 'frame.' As Begbie writes:

In addition to the frame, there is another major subsidiary to take into account – broadly speaking, its representative element, what Polanyi calls its 'prose' content, or story. This story is logically incompatible with the frame: there is something unnatural and contradictory about frame and story being brought together. Yet our imagination fuses these two elements (of which we are subsidiarily aware) so that we can enjoy the meaning of the art work, in just the same way as we fuse tenor and vehicle in a metaphor. This relationship between frame and story, Polanyi continues, is not one of 'bearing on' or symbolization, but one of embodiment. The frame and the story embody each other, they speak in one voice as the subsidiaries of the poem's meaning.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 201.

<sup>72</sup> Begbie, 247. Begbie wonders aloud of how this concept of 'story' would apply to abstract art, of how harder it is 'to gain a purchase on what the 'story' might be.' It will be the part of the purpose of this project to address this matter in chapter three, but provisionally speaking the 'story' of any abstract work of art, as with representational or otherwise, lies in an awareness of its artistic language, genealogy of style, the 'gestalt' of titles, series and presentation, etc.

These subsidiary elements of frame and story are fused together into the focal awareness and intake of a work of art. In Begbie's and Monti's accounts, Polanyi limited his analysis to representational art, and both go on to consider the application of the 'frame/story' paradigm to abstract art.<sup>73</sup>

I employ the terms 'story' throughout this exploration in a multivalent manner, using it in reference at one point to the 'prose content story' of a given work and sometimes to the larger and often implicit network of values, myths and beliefs out of which guide artists to how they work in terms of craft and what they produce in terms of themes and subject matter. A Greek sculpts a female nude, a Zen Buddhist writes a minimalist haiku, a Muslim makes a calligraphic rendition of a Quranic verse. There is the 'prose content story' of the particular work in the Polanyian sense and the 'story' which it both (however implicitly) expresses and participates in as well as 'projects' and manifests.

Recalling Deryck Cooke's analysis of Western tonal music, let us consider a Beethoven symphony, the *Fifth*. The drive from tension to resolution inherited from the Western harmonic tradition carries within it a certain kind of teleology, a sense of moving forward in time toward an end. Beethoven takes this, and the dramatic possibilities latent in forms like the sonata and the dramatic potential of moving from a minor toward major key modality, and creates an even greater sense of momentum, from conflict and hardship toward resolution and victory. Beethoven's symphonic 'story' may be seen as culturally derivative from the Christian Story as distilled through Enlightenment progressivism. Beethoven's artistic narrative could be articulated as that of the victory of the human spirit over all obstacles. This implicit vision of the *Goethezeit*, this cultural Story, informs all of his music. As it is often observed of preachers, Beethoven has his basic sermon, preached with remarkable vitality, variety, industry, and inventiveness.

By identifying *story* as a basic feature of artistic content, we affirm that art is both emotionally evocative and intellectually informative. In terms of intellectual gain, art introduces one to potentially new forms of *language* through which meaningful utterance can be made. As Gordon Graham argues, it provides opportunities for new *understanding* as a form of cognitive gain. And the arts provide ways in which ideas can take affective hold and alter ones sense of

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<sup>73</sup> See Begbie, 243-44; Anthony Monti, *A Natural Theology of the Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 78-79.

value. As John Carey himself put it, ‘Because [poetic ideas] make you *feel as well as think*, you can appropriate them, grow into them, adopt them as your own.’<sup>74</sup>

Like any story, art engages the whole person, sometimes even eliciting a physical and moral response. To engage attentively to a Beethoven symphony, for example, may not only move someone emotionally, but may inspire this person toward aspirational achievement in spite of adversity. Some religious believers may find this particular ‘story’ a form of humanism they cannot endorse without qualification, but Beethoven’s work at least makes this vision of reality profoundly plausible.

### **Art in Context**

Much of the analysis above relied on an appeal to the cultural context of Beethoven’s music. So much of the so-called ‘postmodern turn’ in all realms of knowledge, including knowledge itself, focuses on the matter of situation or social location. This awareness of the situated nature of knowledge or any form of ‘discourse’ makes itself felt in emerging definitions of art. Stephen Davies, who has written much on definitions of art, writes of his colleague Arthur Danto’s minimalist definition as involving the necessity to be ‘one, about something, and two, to embody its meaning.’ Davies adds, however, that Danto ‘doubts that these necessary conditions are jointly sufficient.’<sup>75</sup> Davies then presents Noël Carroll’s summation of Danto’s general theory of art:

...something is a work of art if and only if, one, it has a subject, two, about which it projects some attitude or point of view (has a style), three, by means of rhetorical ellipsis (generally metaphorical), four, which ellipsis, in turn, engages audience participation in filling in what is missing (interpretation), and five, where the work in question and the interpretations thereof require an art-historical context.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Carey, p. 246. Emphasis added.

<sup>75</sup> S. Davies, “Definitions of Art,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed., eds., B. Gaut and D. M. Lopes, (London: Routledge, 2002), 235.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 235.

Context here means everything it would mean in any typical art appreciation course. It seeks to understand the situatedness of the artwork within contexts of the artists' oeuvre, within a school of practice, and within a social and cultural *milieu*. It seeks to uncover how the work is implicated in the dynamics of its time, how it expresses 'the deeper agenda of its age,'<sup>77</sup> and how it subsequently shapes the propagation, transmission and reception of that meaning. Here, insights drawn from strands of literary and cultural criticism – art as social discourse - can be illuminating. While there are strands within this tradition which are perhaps reductive or unnecessarily shrill in their analyses, the tradition highlights and performs a necessary task: uncovering ways that the arts participate in the 'story' told by and within communities of human discourse. In this sense, arts are *artifacts* of particular places and times and of the 'modes of discourse' within which it existed. Attending to matters related to context of origin provides means of access to better 'hear' the 'story' a given work of art is telling. This context is historical in as much as it involves time and place. It involves all those elements often alluded to under the catch-all notion of *worldview*. Seen from a certain perspective, arts are primary windows into worldviews; incarnations (or 'embodiments') not only of values and the answers people give to questions, but the source of the *questions themselves*. Worldviews, in this sense, signal what is important to people and what they find worthy of questioning.<sup>78</sup>

Artists do not create contexts; they work within them. Context is the web of complex circumstances in which artists work in relation to their physical environment, historical trends and traditions, social movements, cultural values, intellectual perspectives, personal commitments, and more. Likewise, art is received within a context of corresponding dynamics that shape meaning and interpretation. As such, context is an inescapable dimension of art in both its production and its reception and interpretation. Recognizing the context of art—both of its origin and reception—underlines the multivalent and open-ended character of interpretation.

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<sup>77</sup> Burnham, *Beethoven Hero*, 142.

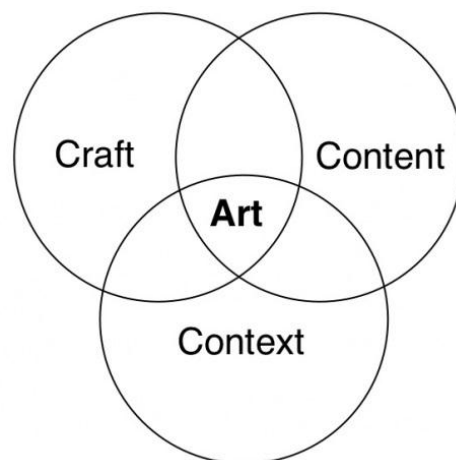
<sup>78</sup> The most extensive account of the rise and usage of worldview analysis is D. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). A related term, associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas and less frequently encountered, is *lifeworld*. S. R. Paeth writes:

The lifeworld for Habermas is the background context of our concrete life-situations. 'Communicative actors are always moving within the horizon of their lifeworld; they cannot step outside of it.' In modern society, it comprises the realms of culture, society, and the development of personality. (*Exodus Church and Civil Society* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008], 109-110, quoting J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, II: 122).

For example, the ‘meaning’ of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* will vary depending on whether we are referring to its première in 1824, or when Wilhelm Furtwängler conducted it at a celebration of Hitler’s birthday in Berlin in 1942, or when Leonard Bernstein conducted it before the newly opened Berlin Wall in 1989. Continuities and discontinuities of meaning abound, and a sensitive and informed engagement with a work of art will be cognizant of its originating context while continuing to interact with meanings forged in ever-changing contexts of reception. Moreover, highlighting the context of art allows one to relate, when possible, aspects of authorial intent in dynamic interplay with other contextually relevant interpretations in our own communicative encounters with art.

All these considerations reflect the influence of postmodernist approaches to interpretation. Origin and reception analysis underline how, like artists themselves, works of art are not pristinely ‘innocent,’ but implicated in their worlds. This of course may well lie beyond the grasp of the neophyte with art, but it should inform any theological aesthetic and can certainly be seen as one dimension of a maturing relationship with the arts, and the maturity involved in this level of sophistication becomes suggestive of the relationship between the arts and spiritual formation. Capacities for reflecting on the situatedness of art can in turn lead to similar reflections on the exegesis of Scripture as well as understanding one’s own style of worship and spirituality.

For heuristic purposes, then, the analysis of art outlined above can be modeled in the following manner:



The model intends to illustrate the complex dynamics involved in the phenomena of the arts, yet in a way that makes these dynamics manageable, meaningful, and accessible. It seeks to mitigate reductionistic accounts or approaches to the arts, and by doing so perhaps open space for their spiritually formative potential.

## **VI. Conclusion**

As relatively stable but multivalent examples of human utterances, artworks can be experienced and ‘read’ in such a way that meaning can be further accessed and its effect upon the receiver enhanced. Such a reading or exegesis of an artwork is best pursued along the lines of inductive reasoning, avoiding the imposition of a meaning before the particulars of the work is allowed its full impact. Situating a given work within the body of an artist’s output or an historic school can then serve as a guide or corrective against anachronistic or unduly idiosyncratic interpretations. Such an approach to the arts would presuppose:

1. That the arts involve ‘languages’ and what might be thought of as rhetorical conventions which may call for creative ways of introducing the arts by way of their craft. Sometimes students can just be thrown into an encounter with an unfamiliar form or style and be left to their own ends; at other times the need for preliminary introduction may be discerned. The point, however, is to as unobtrusively as possible facilitate the connection between art and auditor, in the hope that a certain ‘meeting’ can take place between the artwork and perhaps its maker and receiver.
2. The priority of an intensive engagement with the artwork on its own terms, its own particularity. Attention to craft is important here, as well as, when appropriate, the gestalt of titles, styles and presentations is warranted and prioritized. Simultaneously the receiver can allow the work to ‘do’ its intended effect upon the receiver, and the receiver can note this spontaneous effect.
3. Following attention to its unique ‘sensuous embodiment,’ a process of abstraction can commence, whereby thematic elements are identified and considered. Aspects of ‘rhetorical’ strategies of repletion, juxtaposition, perspective, and other manipulations

of the ‘language’ of the given artwork are seen as means by which the artist expresses a point of view through the work into its given content/subject matter.<sup>79</sup>

4. A process of situating the artwork with a series of contexts, the artist’s or school or period or social/cultural location can take place. It is here, combined with the evidences gathered in the first and second steps, that a sense of the foreground ‘story’ and background ‘Story’ or worldview projected by the artwork can be best accessed. Increased awareness of this dimension of art provides receivers with opportunities to assess and evaluate the lifestyle ‘fit’ of such a perspective on life.

While emphases on processes of intellection are reflected in the foregoing comments, the meaningfulness yielded in such a process often leads to enhanced personal meaningfulness. Artworks are windows into worldviews, means of storytelling that invite the receiver into these projected worlds and provide a means of vicariously ‘trying them out.’ As such, engagement with the arts entails a measure of risk; ‘indwelling’ an artist’s work can be likened to entering their home, the sphere of their unique influence. The effects cannot be pre-determined.

Jeremy Begbie speaks of art providing ‘genuine knowledge of reality.’ I would qualify that to say that the arts represent modes of human reflection issuing in human conceptions and perceptions of reality, some of which may be profoundly informed by a particular doctrine and experience. All art, regardless of its religious or intellectual background, provides access into ways of being-in-the-world and opportunities for ‘dialogue’ with such ways and the expansion of one’s orbit of experience and consideration.

My project began with an intuition of what art is, and how it appears to function in the lives of ordinary people, with the religious dimension of life in mind. A review of the literature revealed that while the definitional project is fraught with complications, it still goes on and warrants continued investigation. Moreover, a communication theory approach to art found reflection in statements made about art both directly and indirectly, and that speaking of art as a

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<sup>79</sup> As per Nelson Goodman:

...we have to read the painting as well as the poem, and that aesthetic experience is dynamic rather than static. It involves making delicate discriminations and discerning subtle relationships, identifying symbol systems and characters within these systems and what these characters denote and exemplify, interpreting works and reorganizing the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world. Much of our experience and many of our skills are brought to bear and may be transformed by the encounter. The aesthetic ‘attitude’ is restless, searching, testing – is less attitude than action: creation and re-creation. (*Languages of Art*, 241-42).



‘language’ is not as idiosyncratic as it might first appear. What I have tried to do here is to bring these disparate sources into dialogue and propose my own account of art.

While this chapter has emphasised the cognitive and communicative dynamics of art, this project concerns itself with an account of how the arts foment spiritual formation. Christian spirituality, however, involves more than just the vague enhancement of personal interiority but moral formation, personal maturation, and an expanded capacity to respond to religious matters; to have ‘ears that hear and eyes that see’ in such a way as to be pliable for transformation and service. Considering the contribution of ethics and human development studies would continue to fill-out an account of the relationship between the arts and spiritual formation, and to this we now turn.

## Chapter 2

### Theological Ethics and Practical Theology

The problem is to become as we see.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this project is to advance reflection on the relationship between the arts and spirituality. As reviewed in the Introduction, the relationship between the arts and religious experience, doctrine, and the imagination has been given considerable attention in recent years. This project seeks to build upon these insights and aims to develop an account of how the arts might participate in the process referred to as spiritual formation. This is not to suggest that the aforementioned dynamics of experience, doctrinal development and imagination are unrelated, but rather that the accent here falls upon the effects of both a cumulative formation and, in some cases, transformative crises. Likewise, while other studies advance hermeneutics of art in relation to religion in terms of embodiment, sacrament and parable capable of initiating illuminative insight, this study suggests that the arts function, at least additionally, as *catalysts* for spiritual formation.

In this chapter, I want to explore the resources of theological ethics and religious development theory as explored by exponents in ethics and practical theology. The one approaches ethics from within a larger project of natural theology, while the other conducts an integrative explorations in psychology and human development rooted in what the author calls the ‘irreducibly spiritual’ context of all proper understanding of the human.<sup>2</sup> Both scholars include aesthetics as an important dimension in their work, heightening the relevancy of their work to this project. Ethics and religious or human development theory as appropriated within practical theology provide ways of understanding and assessing spiritual formation beyond vague growth in interiority, and both provide ways of expanding this project into a practical theology of aesthetics and religious formation.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Hauerwas, ‘The Significance of Vision: Toward an Aesthetic Ethic,’ *Studies in Religion*, 2 (1972): 45.

<sup>2</sup> J. E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 121.

## I. David Baily Harned

David Harned's (b. 1932) *sotto voce* contribution to the discussion of theological ethics is evident in the frequent appearance of his work in footnotes and bibliographies. His 1966 doctoral thesis, published as *Theology and the Arts* serves as a 'report on recent Christian concern with the arts' as well as an anticipation of subsequent scholarship on the subject.<sup>3</sup> In both the general trajectory of his study as well as in his concern to correct previous interpretations of art with greater dogmatic rigour, Harned anticipates Jeremy Begbie's doctoral dissertation, published in 1991 as *Voicing Creation's Praise*. For Begbie, previous interpretations of the arts fail along theological lines, that is, for Begbie they fail to sufficiently situate Christ as the norm in God's creative and redemptive purposes for the world. Harned's concern is similar but focused on the doctrines of revelation and creation. Although trained in dogmatic theology, Harned has published only one volume specifically exploring the subject in depth.<sup>4</sup> This background does explain, however, why he subsumes his work on the arts as well as a three-volume project on ethics as projects in 'natural theology.' For Harned, natural theology is the dogmatic category under which human experience and existence is best explored. In his most recent work Harned explains again his insistence that the traditional ordering of natural theology as a prelude to revealed theology betrays a major flaw. For Harned, natural theology understood in Christian terms depends upon a revealed theology inasmuch as 'God's being is disclosed in God's acts, not the reverse,' as in the traditional establishment of God's existence followed by an exploration of His saving actions.<sup>5</sup> Why then Harned's recourse to natural theology?

From my perspective, its function is to demonstrate to people that Christian images and stories have limitless power to define and illuminate, to sort out and organize the ambiguities and confusions and opacities of our daily experience. This has nothing to do with proofs of God's existence or with empirical verification of

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<sup>3</sup> D. B. Harned, *Theology and the Arts* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), 9.

<sup>4</sup> D. B. Harned, *Creed and Personal Identity: The Meaning of the Apostles' Creed* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> D. B. Harned, *Strange Bedfellows: Growing Up with India* (Bangalore: Ultra Publications, 2010), 36.

Christian claims. It has to do with “empirical fit,” if you will, with expressive power that can capture this good earth and our ordinary commerce within it.<sup>6</sup>

This is the heart of Harned’s entire published project, the key to understanding his contribution to theological ethics and the role it will play in this project. Christian ‘images and stories’ illuminate life and provide the kind of ‘vision’ without which humans can only live mundane, pedestrian lives.<sup>7</sup> The arts contribute to this inasmuch as they advance, sometimes by way of correction, sometimes by way of obfuscation, sometimes by way of amplification, the potential of human language and of the purposes of God in creation and redemption, latent and hidden Harned believes, within all human cultures. Concern for the ‘common life’ of humanity on earth is a central subject of Harned’s, and his objective is to resist the many ways in which grace and that common life, nature and supernature, are unduly separated. His work reflects the recognition of distinctions between such realms, or their analytical constructs, but the apprehension of a fundamentally lordly and loving relationship between God and his world inflects all of Harned’s writings.

### **Theology and the Arts**

In his doctoral dissertation, Harned articulates his concerns for a reaffirmation of the centrality and meaning of creation within Christian dogmatics and the linkage of this with Christian ethics. The arts occupy a mediating position between the two inasmuch as they ‘make us rub up against the stubborn but ingratiating whatness of things’<sup>8</sup> and cause us who otherwise suffer from an ‘unwillingness to become acquainted with the depths of existence’ to experience an intensified exposure and relationship to things and an awareness of their impingement upon us.<sup>9</sup>

Harned adopts a cognitive interpretation of art and draws an analogy between art and language in ways that anticipate Nelson Goodman’s writing on the subject. He articulates something of a thesis statement when he writes:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 111.

<sup>8</sup> Harned *Theology and the Arts*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 34. See Also D. B. Harned, *Patience: How We Wait Upon the World* (Boston: Cowley Pub, 1997), 34.

...since language is intrinsically incapable of providing us with the more subtle and discriminating contact with the world, other persons, and our own inner lives which we require, we supplement it with more sophisticated forms of aesthetic activity. Some men make the artifacts that we call works of art. They are created for many of the same reasons effective in the development of language. They initiate us more fully to the particularity of the things and situations we confront and the emotions we feel. We must have such knowledge, but language alone does not provide it. The principal service of works of art lies in their compensation for the deficiencies of the linguistic process in clarifying the inner life of man and mapping his world.<sup>10</sup>

The arts are for Harned, ‘indispensible for our common life’ because they expand human aspirations for ‘apprehension, interpretation, expression and embodiment,’ functions of cognition as well as emotional engagement with life. The arts expose us to the results of ‘scrupulous attention’ to the world and provide a supplement to otherwise mundane awareness of the world. Ethically, Harned’s concern is that ‘if we do not find good ways to supplement our own vision, we will inevitably depend on bad ones,’ amongst which he cites the shallower aspects of popular culture, advertisement and reliance upon unexamined prejudices.<sup>11</sup> Harned’s advocacy for the arts, however, is weakened by this compensatory approach which privileges the ‘man of letters’ over the makers of sounds, pictures and buildings. Nonetheless, as a theologian approaching the arts, Harned was a progressive thinker in 1966 by affirming the intrinsic autonomy of the arts and their contribution to human flourishing and religious significance beyond the merely illustrative.

As indicated above, Harned’s training and primary concerns focused on the shape of Protestant dogmatics as he received it. It was in its theology of culture that Harned perceived, for the Protestant communion in particular, an absence of a theologically ‘thick’ account of creation and its implications. Harned felt that he had inherited too great a distinction between nature and supernature, an approach that emphasizes their distinction inevitably ‘ends with their divorce.’<sup>12</sup> It was to address this divorce and to proffer a means towards a more theologically sound and

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<sup>10</sup> Harned, *Theology and the Arts*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Harned, *Theology and the Arts*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 146.

ethically responsible engagement with the natural or the ‘common grace’ given in creation that Harned studied the arts.

Harned identified ‘three great themes’ in Christian theology that he found recurring in theologies of art and culture, namely those of creation, redemption in Christ, and eschatology, or as he put it, ‘creation, cross and consummation.’<sup>13</sup> With these three themes as criteria of assessment, Harned analysed three theological interpretations of the arts, that of Paul Tillich, Nicolas Berdyaev, and Jacques Maritain and the Neo-Thomist tradition, representing respectively Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic sources. Each interpretation is subjected to an assessment governed by the three themes, and each is found wanting in some regard, although appreciation is accorded to each of their unique contributions. Harned is appreciative of Tillich’s project ‘to interpret the contemporary spiritual temper through its cultural expressions and to criticize them in the light of the Christian message.’<sup>14</sup> According to Tillich’s theory of art in Harned’s reading the content of art was not where the religious significance of a piece was to be found, but rather in its *style*. For Tillich, ‘every style has an implicit religious reference,’ and every religious expression is subject to the effects and influences of prevailing socioeconomic conditions.<sup>15</sup> Harned acknowledges the suggestiveness of Tillich’s thesis, but finds it lacking in complete explanatory power. According to Tillich, all art is implicitly religious. What then, Harned asks, of explicitly religious art, if indeed content is of such secondary importance? Moreover, citing support from Jacques Maritain, the true character of the artistic venture is obscured, not illuminated, by ‘ideological systemization[s].’ Harned observes:

Painting is so much a matter of the discovery of new resources in its own particular medium, and of advances in technique or new combinations of older ones, that it neither expresses so directly nor is determined so decisively by the contemporary spiritual climate as Tillich alleges.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 19f.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 69. Harned outlines those styles as (1) the sacramental, (2) the impressionistic, (3) critically realistic, (4) idealistic, and (5) expressionistic, and notes Tillich’s preference for the expressionistic as that style which, especially in under the conditions of the modern consciousness, best expressed the kind of ‘self-transcendent naturalism’ translucent to the Ground of Being (68).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 77. I appreciate Harned’s concerns, but would argue for a dialect between the kind of independence of art that Harned articulates with the kind of contextual conditioning that Tillich advocates. A key to effective art interpretation is grasping, as Tillich puts it, that, ‘[i]t is the riddle and the depth of all expression that it both reveals and hides at the same time’ the artwork’s participation in ‘being-itself’ and the artist’s conception of that

Ultimately, however, it is a theological critique along Barthian lines that Harned brings to bear on Tillich, faulting his theology for being insufficiently concrete in its articulation of God's self-revelation as witnessed to in Scripture. The Cross functions in Tillich's theology merely as a symbol 'for the expression of an intuition antecedently and universally available.'<sup>17</sup> Associated with this, for Harned, is Tillich's insufficient account of creation itself 'as an act of God, a free and deliberate expression of divine love,' because such a claim for Tillich is both naively mythological and denigrates the absolutely 'unconditioned' nature of Ultimate Reality.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, Berdyaev's analysis of art reflects his 'esoteric Christianity' that so emphasizes a spiritualized eschatology that traditional doctrines of creation are denied and redemption in Christ rendered along Gnostic lines. Because Harned stipulates that all art exists along a dialectical spectrum that both affirms what is and protests against it<sup>19</sup> he is appreciative of the Berdyaev's emphasis on how art reflects man's spiritual aspirations towards a new mode of existence.<sup>20</sup> But for Harned, Berdyaev's understanding of man's self-transcending vocation is such that it effectively denies his creaturliness, as well as his need for actual redemption. Berdyaev's analysis focuses on the eschatological at the loss of the protological purposes of God. Because the things of the world are but veils to their supposed spiritual significance, human art can only operate on the symbolic level.<sup>21</sup> This of course raises Harned's realist hackles. Berdyaev's gnosticism removes the ground from under the 'one fundamental motivation for what the artist does. He creates in order to discover the detail of the fabric of existence....,' a conviction Harned derives from his reading of Collingwood.<sup>22</sup>

It is in Jacques Maritain and other members of Catholic Neo-Thomism that Harned finds his most congenial interlocutors. Harned cites Maritain's location of the arts within man's 'natural affairs,' that is, within the scope of autonomy given within the realm of human intellect and of practical reason. Art in Harned's reading of Maritain is an attempt to 'intensify our cognitive commerce with the things of this world because their physical properties have limitless

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participation. (P. Tillich, 'Art and Ultimate Reality,' in *Art and the Craftsman*, ed. J. Harned and N. Goodwin [Southern Illinois University Press, 1961], 186-87, in Harned, *Theology and the Arts*, 75).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 140.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 98-99.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 102; see also 31-32 and 93 for Harned's appeal to Collingwood.

capacity to delight us.’<sup>23</sup> Writing of Maritain’s thesis in a way that reflects a major theme in his own work, Harned notes how the arts ‘present man and the world in their mutual interpenetration and baffling entanglement.’<sup>24</sup> Harned explicates Maritain’s notion of ‘connaturality’ between the knower and the thing known and of ‘creative intuition’ issuing in poetic work (in the full sense of *poesis* or making) that unlocks the ‘intercommunication between the inner being of things and the inner being of the human Self which is a kind of divination.’<sup>25</sup>

While Maritain’s philosophy advanced Harned’s concerns about the re-appropriation of creation and God as Creator in (then) contemporary Protestant theology, he was nonetheless critical of Maritain’s seeming inability to acknowledge that art not only supplements man’s ‘commerce with creation’ but also expresses human alienation within creation. Maritain fails to fully acknowledge ‘the way an artist’s consent to the world and celebration of it is accompanied by a gesture of protest, a rejection of the present shape of things.’<sup>26</sup> Art for Harned is always ‘a dialectical affirmation and negation of things as they are.’<sup>27</sup> It is for this kind of analytical limitation of a given theory that Harned appeals to a more comprehensive approach to art that entails not only the theme of creation but also those of the Cross and eschatological consummation, as they provide a theological foundation for the kind of dialectical navigation of the world’s created goodness and its fall, of the necessary ‘yes’ and ‘no’ characteristic of Christian living.<sup>28</sup>

Concluding his review of theological interpretations of art, Harned stakes his claim on what he argues to be the proper priority of creation as the first step in the interpretation of ‘the artist’s venture.’ ‘It is a collaboration with nature that lives by its appeal to the sense,’ Harned continues:

... and discloses the importance of material causality. It is a search for wisdom that explores the inner dimensions of the finite and definite. It thrives on and acknowledges the significance of limits and law, of everything circumscribed and concrete. It contributes to our commerce with the world and with our feelings,

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 109.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 110.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 110, citing J. Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 116.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 139.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 117.



because the ingredients of experience cannot be known as well as they must apart from aesthetic activity.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps it should be noted that as helpful as Harned's approach to a theological interpretation of art is to the kind of widened lens that he seeks, a criteria of creation, cross and consummation would seem limited to analyses of Christian art. It is not clear how such an interpretive grid would work with non-Christian art, and indeed may end up imposing a grid upon art that needs to be encountered on other terms.<sup>30</sup>

What Harned develops is a theological interpretation of art as one trained in dogmatic theology and seeking to retrieve the implications of the doctrine of creation for constructive theology. His driving concern is to elucidate the ways in which the 'artist's venture' can redeem and renew human faith and action in light of creation as well as redemption. As an interpretation of the arts, Harned's beginning with the 'man of letters' as the standard image of the artist, and of visual and aural arts serving as means by which the limitations of human words are redeemed and corrected suggests the thoughts of one funded largely by a text-based orientation who perhaps does not fully engage in other arts mediums in their own right.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, the close association of the arts with human communication, the critique of purely emotivist interpretations of art, and the promotion of arts' 'cognitive penetration of reality' was and remains a welcome and still relevant interpretation of the arts.

Though direct engagement with the arts recedes into the background of the ensuing books that he published, Harned's subsequent work advances themes sounded in *Theology and the Arts* and provide further material for the construction of a theological ethic.

### **Grace and Common Life**

In a study of secularization that followed *Theology and the Arts* in 1968, Harned continued to reaffirm a realist, or perhaps better a *dialectical realist*, theological ethic. 'The incarnation

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 138.

<sup>30</sup> One frequent paradigm for theological analysis of art and culture is that of creation, fall and redemption, or how a given perspective addresses matters related to origins, conflicts and resolution. It has the virtue of being more open-ended and less prescriptive.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 30.

means that men are not called to flee from the world but to enter fully into it.<sup>32</sup> *Agape* simultaneously relativizes but also legitimates the impulse of *eros* towards the development of that which is true, good and beautiful. ‘Because *agape* means the disclosure of a transcendent source of whatever is good and beautiful, this love calls men to participate in cultural activity and to enter the gates of the secular city that *eros* has built.’<sup>33</sup> It is a conviction that Harned finds support for in a Catholic interlocutor, William Lynch, that ‘the way to the infinite lies through the finite and not away from it’ and the imagination is refreshed only in its depth encounter with ‘the real contours of being.’<sup>34</sup>

Harned articulates a theological justification for cultural activity in light of his account of *eros*. But what he finds within the sphere of human culture is characterized theologically as both good and fallen, and therefore charged with a pervading *ambiguity*, Harned’s most frequently used descriptor of the human experience. The arts, it will be remembered, are charged in Harned’s interpretation with the duty of addressing and expressing human experience in its ambiguity. A theological interpretation of culture, religion, and the Christian life likewise must, in Harned’s view, address this ambiguity, the ‘messy admixture’ of human loves and the ‘tangle of faiths’ which form the sense of duty, obligation, and values.<sup>35</sup>

Within the rubric of the ‘common life’ Harned sets out his resolution of the classic tension between grace and nature. Harned’s theology of the relationship between grace and nature now also points toward the kind of openness toward non-explicitly religious or Christian art that his ‘creation, cross, consummation’ paradigm had otherwise inhibited:

... grace is not the antithesis of nature but lies within it, it is the secret that lies at its heart, awarding distinctively human identity to organisms that otherwise could never achieve it for themselves. Grace is inescapable; without it, the animal cannot become a man. Furthermore, as James Gustafson has carefully argued in *Treasure in*

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<sup>32</sup> D. B. Harned, *The Ambiguity of Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 28.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 54.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 56, quoting W. Lynch, S.J., *Christ and Apollo* (Sheed and Ward, 1960), 12. Lynch’s text has been recently reissued by ISI Books.

<sup>35</sup> D. B. Harned, *Faith and Virtue* (Edinburgh: The St Andrew Press, 1973), 16-17. Further solidifying the centrality of ‘ambiguity’ in his interpretation of human experience, Harned notes:

Without a taste for the pervasive ambiguities of life, either we impose our perspectives upon the world without acknowledging their relativity or else we abandon perspective and surrender to factuality too soon, before imagining and interpretation have worked their magic on it. (76).

*Earthen Vessels*, the ways of that grace is mediated in and through the Christian tradition do not differ formally from the ways that it is mediated in and through other religious or “secular” communities.<sup>36</sup>

Two other features of his developing account of theological ethics remain to be considered. One is his insistence on a *dialectical accent* in a proper interpretation of ethics. Dialectic in Harned’s usage refers to a both/and holding of tensions together in the construction of an abiding unity of personal character. Harned traces the ‘provenance of the *daimon* gods’ to the loss of ‘the dialectical character of healthy faiths, hopes, and loves.’<sup>37</sup> The loss of such dialectic is the beginning of ideological reductionism and idolatry. The center of Harned’s interpretation of the human experience is that by virtue of creation and redemption, God both validates and relativizes the things of this world. That is the perspective he enjoins be applied to the living of life, living the tension of the Pauline ‘as if...as if not.’<sup>38</sup>

The other accent that characterizes Harned’s interpretation of ethics is the role of the *imagination*. The emphasis on imagination will inform his more explicit emphasis on vision in the formation of character, but even on the abstract level Harned’s account of the role of the imagination in the construction of a theological ethic is impressive. Harned argues for the ‘cruciality of the imagination’<sup>39</sup> when he diagnoses ‘the abiding malady of our time: an atrophy of imagination.’<sup>40</sup> Imagination funds the knowledge of God and the moral life and therefore ‘must not be relegated to some odd corner in the recesses of the self, as though it were a special faculty or something esoteric.’<sup>41</sup> On one hand, imagination determines one’s capacity to appropriate ‘the rich inheritance of images’ by which ‘the majesty and mystery of God’ is disclosed in the ‘irreducibly imagistic character of the Bible.’<sup>42</sup> In fact, Harned, in the midst of interfaith dialogue, suggests that rather than excessive claims for the unique experience within the reality of the church, grace in this case might be better understood ‘primarily as an

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<sup>36</sup> D. B. Harned, *Grace and Common Life* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1971), 128.

<sup>37</sup> Harned, *Faith and Virtue*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> D. B. Harned, *Images for Self-Recognition: The Christian as Player, Sufferer and Vandal* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), 190f.

<sup>39</sup> Harned, *Grace and Common Life*, xiii.

<sup>40</sup> Harned, *Images for Self-Recognition*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Harned, *Faith and Virtue*, 37.

<sup>42</sup> Harned, *Images for Self-Recognition*, xii-xiii.

enrichment of the imagination.<sup>43</sup> For this reason, Harned characterizes the task of theology as both an art and a science, involving as it does not only methodology but also one that recognizes ‘the aesthetic component of a self-disclosure in which substance and form cannot be disjoined.’<sup>44</sup>

*Imaginatio* denotes all that the self exercises in order to form proper images of its own nature and context. Because the self is a creature that imagines, and that imagines best when it relies upon the full range of its resources, all its senses become, in greater or lesser measure, contributors to vision. Because each sense has its own distinctive mode of operation and offers its own singular impressions of things, it illuminates a different aspect of the situation of the self within the world. So there is much we must learn to envision that is not filtered through the eye. Imagination is the bond of the senses, integrating the impressions they afford within a symbolic universe that humanizes and individualizes our commerce with others and with ourselves because of the particular images of the self that award it a distinctive character.<sup>45</sup>

Characterizing the imagination as the ‘bond of the senses’ reflects Harned’s reading of H. Richard Niebuhr’s work and his accent on the ‘unity of the Christian life’ as well as the Platonic tradition of the unity of the virtues, a tradition reflected in his appreciative drawing on writers such as Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Harned, *Grace and Common Life*, 72.

In a similar vein, James Loder described the difference between the imaginative and what Harned characterizes as ‘fantasy,’:

By *imaginative*, I do not mean *imaginary*. The imaginative thought, act, or word puts you into history; the imaginary takes you out. The imaginative links the private to the public world, the imaginary is hidden in privacy. God’s action in history can vindicate the imaginative vision; his action shatters the imaginary. The imaginative drives toward a transformation of the given; the imaginary arrests transformation. It is Saul’s imaginative leap to certainty that constitutes the key to events – convicting events, in particular – as a way of knowing truth. (J. E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 198], 18).

<sup>44</sup> Harned, *Images*, xiii.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>46</sup> Harned, *Faith and Virtue*, 36-37. Niebuhr, Weil and Iris Murdoch played important roles in the Yale School generation theologians.

## Virtue, Vision and Moral Formation

At the time that he produced his fourth book, *Faith and Virtue*, in 1973, Harned wrote:

The language of virtue is not fashionable now, either in common discourse or within the Christian community.<sup>47</sup>

That statement no longer applies to current circumstances within theological ethics. Harned's career coincided within a sea-change that took place within American theology, associated with Yale Divinity School where Harned did his postgraduate work and usually referred to under the label of 'Postliberalism.' Frequently associated with Stanley Hauerwas, the 'New Yale Theology' became a center of American Protestant re-appropriation of virtue ethics.<sup>48</sup>

Cognizant of the Protestant allergy towards the suggestion of achievement as opposed to gratuitous ascription that the virtue tradition bears, Harned relates again to his 'natural theology' of the common life and writes that:

...a satisfactory interpretation of the virtues says nothing more eloquently than that there is little we have that we have not received from others.<sup>49</sup>

Harned roots his embrace of the virtues along the lines outlined in his natural theology of human culture. The virtues, for Harned, place the experience of both nature and supernature within the realm of the 'real,' the actual lived experience, and not outside of it. That is, virtue finds its foundational sources in the 'common grace' of family, play, human society and, one might add, the arts. Moreover, Harned inverts the usual order of the virtues and suggests that the 'theological' virtues of faith, hope and love are presupposed in all of human experience, and are the necessary foundations for the 'natural' virtues of prudence, courage, and so forth.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>48</sup> For a comprehensive introduction to Postliberalism, see J. Fodor, 'Postliberal Theology,' in *The Modern Theologians*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., ed. David Ford (Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2005). See also M. I. Wallace, 'The New Yale Theology,' *Christian Scholar's Review*, 16:2 (1987), 154-170. Of the renewal of interest in virtue ethics, see J. Porter, 'Virtue,' *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. G. Meilaender and W. Werpehowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 206-219.

<sup>49</sup> Harned, *Faith and Virtue*, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 16.

At the heart of Harned's account of virtue, and particularly relevant for this project, is his association of virtue with *vision*. Harned's emphasis is reflective of the influence of one of his main teachers at Yale, Julian N. Hartt.<sup>51</sup> One account of Hartt's project reveals obvious points of contact with Harned's:

Hartt's work is replete with references to our "seeing" or "perceiving" God. For example, Hartt argues that "the primary goals of that theology called Christian is to amplify the power to see God in all things and this to participate in the superabundance of his being." In a passage that clearly identifies a central concern of Hartt's theology, he describes believing in God as a "construing belief," that is, as "a declaration of intention to both 'see' all things as belonging to God and actually so to construe them. Here, 'construe' is to more than a linguistic-intellectual activity. *It means an intention to relate to all things in ways appropriate to their belonging to God.*" Since seeing God is central to Christian faith, one of the primary tasks of theology is to expose the illusion, the false ways of seeing, that obscure our vision of God. This theological task is captured by Hartt's description of theology of culture as "interpretation of a system of values, creations, and attitudes in the light of and on the basis of the revelation of being and goodness in Jesus Christ."<sup>52</sup>

Likewise, Harned acknowledges the influence of Stanley Hauerwas.<sup>53</sup> In an article published at the same time that Harned's *Faith and Virtue* was issued, Hauerwas articulated the relationship between virtue and vision that illuminates Harned's work. In 'The Significance of Vision: Toward an Aesthetic Ethic,' Hauerwas brings the work of Iris Murdoch to bear in the redress of what Hauerwas found to be the undue volitionalism in both philosophical and Christian ethics. What he felt was insufficiently acknowledged was man's condition as 'finite, limited and sinful.'<sup>54</sup> Hauerwas found in Murdoch's adoption of the Platonic 'vision of the good'

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<sup>51</sup> 'For almost thirty years, [Julian N.] Hartt taught theology at Yale. During that time he influenced a number of colleagues and students, including James Gustafson, Gordon Kaufman, Ray Hart, David Baily Harned, Diogenes Allen, and Stanley Hauerwas.' (Jonathan R. Wilson, 'From Theology of Culture to Theological Ethics: The Hart-Hauerwas Connection,' *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 23 [1995]: 149.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 154.

<sup>53</sup> Hauerwas is acknowledged and thanked for his assistance in the prefaces of both *Faith and Virtue* and *Images for Self-Recognition*, and in both books Harned cites unpublished material by Hauerwas with his permission.

<sup>54</sup> S. Hauerwas, 'The Significance of Vision: Toward an Aesthetic Ethic,' *Studies in Religion*, 2 (1972): 36.

an important corrective ‘to the dominant image of ‘man the maker,’ for ethics has more to learn from art than from the more ‘willful’ aspects of our being.” He continues:

When we assess other people, we do not consider just their solutions to particular problems; we feel something much more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, ‘as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conceptions of their own lives, what they think attractive or praise worthy... in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation.’ Our morality is more than adherence to unversizable rules; it also encompasses our experiences, fables, beliefs, images, concepts, and inner monologues.<sup>55</sup>

Hauerwas identifies Murdoch’s ethic as ‘realist’ because of her thematic insistence that people fail to live in light of their limitations and choose to embrace ‘a naive faith in science with the assumption that we all have the possibility of being completely rational and free.’<sup>56</sup> Operating under a ‘guise of neutrality’ ethics is reduced to objective choice.<sup>57</sup> But for Murdoch, ‘the moral life cannot be divorced from the substance of the world,’ and therefore her ethics of vision is ‘the ethics of realism.’<sup>58</sup> Without a truly transcendent point of reference, men are reduced to having to create their own values, and try as they might, in this account, people typically fail to see the world as it really is, and in particular fail to recognize other people for who they truly are. For this reason, genuine encounters with the true, beautiful and good provide opportunities for ‘unselfings’ that give space for real apprehension of things and real space for love:

This understanding of love also explains the close connection between art and morals. For good art, unlike bad art or random occurrences, exists over against us in such a way that we must surrender to its authority. Both love and great art show us

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<sup>55</sup> Hauerwas, ‘Significance of Vision,’ 38, quoting I. Murdoch, ‘Vision and Choice in Morality,’ in *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. I. Ramsey (New York: Macmillan Co., 1966) 202. The ‘stylistic’ interpretation of human conduct implied by Hauerwas here is reminiscent of Tillich’s interpretation of human art and suggests comparison to it.

<sup>56</sup> Hauerwas, ‘Significance of Vision,’ 36-37.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 39.

our world with a clarity which startles us because we are not used to looking at the real world at all. Art, whether representational or not, reveals to us aspects of our world that we are usually too dependent on conventionality and fantasy to be able to see. Art shows us how difficult it is to be objective by showing us how different the world can look. Art can thus enlarge the consciousness and enliven the imagination of the consumer, calling him from his obsessive self-concern.<sup>59</sup>

For Hauerwas, the aesthetic provides a helpful metaphor for the actual experience of learning to see the world ‘under the mode of the divine,’ that is, in light of the truths of Christian conviction. This nonetheless has implications for this project, for it is here that Hauerwas highlights Murdoch’s theme of ‘attentiveness.’ Hauerwas notes Murdoch’s adaptation of this theme from Weil:

Attention is that aspect of our moral life which enables us to love the other as an equal through the accurate apprehension of his reality. Since we can only define choices within the world we can see, the proper development of attention is crucial; clear vision is the result of moral imagination and moral effort.<sup>60</sup>

In a similar manner, Harned speaks of the ‘involution of our moral and aesthetic lives’ that virtue ethics amplify and issues a statement central to the development of this entire project:

Our worldly ways reflect the world as we see it; we are free to act in some purposive fashion only within the world that we can see. Before our decisions, supporting our approach to moral life, distinguishing us from our neighbors, there is our way of seeing. But it is not easy to see, no easier than it is to listen, to hear not what we would like, not what we would expect, not only what the language means, but what intention and anguish and hope are veiled as well as disclosed by the recalcitrance of words. Seeing is never simply a reaction to what passes before our eyes; it is a matter of how well the eye is trained and provisioned to discern the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>60</sup> Hauerwas, ‘Significance of Vision,’ 42.



richness and the terror, beauty and banality, of the worlds outside and within the self.<sup>61</sup>

The emphasis on moral formation and sight, both literal and metaphorical, has an obvious correlation with a project focused on the relationship of the arts, particularly in this case the visual arts, and spiritual formation. As the ‘science of morality’ ethics identifies criteria by which moral formation can be perceived and assessed. In the work of Hauerwas and Harned, theological ethics can provide accounts of how formation and imagination are related and normatively inseparable. While not sharing the Postliberal orientation or feeling any compulsion to re-fight its battles, I am appreciative of it as a form of Protestantism that finds a ‘middle ground’ between liberal accommodationism and fundamentalist obscurantism. Recognizing the provenance of Harned’s thought, moreover, helps place it within a tradition of thought, and may even help highlight its unique contribution.

A final emphasis in Harned’s work that informs this project, one associated with Hauerwas and Postliberalism as well, is the role afforded to story and narrative within theology.<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Wilson reiterates the standard account of the rise of narrative thought at Yale in the work of H. Richard Niebuhr and Hans Frei. Julian Hartt was also instrumental in its development there as well. In Wilson’s account, for Hartt (and Hauerwas), narrative was embraced ‘less in terms of biblical hermeneutics and more in terms of Christian convictions about history and reality and how to make a case for those convictions.’<sup>63</sup> Harned’s work similarly reflects the ethical emphasis in the narrative retrieval, although he also applies it to the dogmatic articulation of Christian faith as well. In terms of a basic hermeneutical orientation, Harned can affirm that ‘...the Creed shares with the New Testament a form which is essentially narrative. Christianity is

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<sup>61</sup> Harned, *Faith and Virtue*, 29.

<sup>62</sup> Provisionally I distinguish story from narrative as that between substance and the process, framework and articulation.

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, ‘From Theology to Culture,’ 159. In ‘Story and Biblical Theology,’ authors Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen review the rise of narrative theology and its identification with three different ‘schools,’ namely Yale, Chicago and California. Bartholomew and Goheen represent yet another identifiable emphasis in narrative theology more closely involved with Biblical hermeneutics and with figures such as N.T. Wright. This might be thought of as a Biblicist/evangelical school of narrative interpretation of Christian faith and doctrine. (Article given as a paper presented at St Andrews and published as a chapter in C. Bartholomew et al., eds., *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004], 144-171). See also D. Lyall for an account of the relationship between story and pastoral care; *The Integrity of Pastoral Care* (London: SPCK, 2001), 44-62.

not first of all a world view but a story.’<sup>64</sup> He can then apply this principle to moral formation. ‘Decisions are shaped by vision, and the ways that we see are a function of our ‘character,’ of the history of the self, and ultimately of the stories that we have heard and with which we identify ourselves.’<sup>65</sup> The ‘principles’ and ‘rules’ that so often pervade one’s moral life are ultimately rooted in the stories that ‘inform our culture and constitute our heritage, and which have been told to us in a thousand forms since we were very small.’ In terms of religious formation, however:

Persons decide that they will act as Christians, in other words, because they find themselves grasped by and held within the narrative of Jesus Christ; their principles are signs, tokens, and reminiscences of this story and of their identification with it. Our different modes of conduct, then, finally are shaped by the different stories that have captured our different selves. These provide us with the worlds within which we can see, with the narratives that enable us to model the diversity of our lives into a narrative form that displays some coherence and consistency.<sup>66</sup>

It is the quest for the coherence and consistency constitutive of character that lies at the heart of most accounts of virtue ethics, the aim of becoming ‘one self instead of many, an agent and not merely a patient, a unity rather than an accident of our history.’<sup>67</sup> Dependent on its health and morality is the stories that one encounters and chooses to identify with, as well as the ‘master images’ which, for Harned, form the effectual bridge between narrative and principle, between story and rule of life. ‘Every significant narrative contains images many and various...’<sup>68</sup> True, but as I argue, every image contains or implies a narrative framework.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Harned, *Creed*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> Harned, *Faith and Virtue*, 29-30.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 159.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 159.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 160.

<sup>69</sup> Harned proposes the ‘master image’ of the player, beginning in *Theology and the Arts* and continuing through *Faith and Virtue* and *Images for Self-Recognition*. In the third of these volumes he further proposes the images of the vandal and the sufferer to encompass the human experience. Play is an important concept for Harned because in it he finds the dialectical relationship of freedom and law, seriousness and un-seriousness, as appropriate for life under a God who both validates and relatives all human activity.

David Harned's work opens a door toward a union of theological ethics and theological aesthetics. The trajectory of his work, especially in *Theology and the Arts* and *Faith and Virtue*, continues to be cited but under-appreciated.<sup>70</sup> His compelling translation of the Yale School's emphasis on the narrative character of human experience, the retrieval of virtue theory for ethics, and a renewal of Biblicism within Christian faith helps inform this project in the relationship between the arts and spiritual formation.

His work is not without its limitations. The general tendency of his cultural analysis is that of theology to culture, and insufficiently cognizant of the movement in the other direction, the way that culture informs theology. He illuminates expansively on the presence of 'common grace' within the categories usually associated with creation, but fails to pursue this insight into the categories associated with redemption. There, a more Barthian emphasis comes to the surface. This critique must be qualified with the observation that Harned identifies himself primarily as a dogmatic theologian whom through a series of circumstances found himself articulating the Gospel in the context of inter-religious dialogue. The result is what he characterizes as a 'natural theology' and what I find to function as a theological ethic. Nonetheless, apart from his most recent work, the overall impression of his books are of particular criteria being imposed on art works, and those art works typically drawn from a narrow range of Western art and literature.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, when he seeks 'master images' with which to fund a more substantial Christian ethic, he turns to rather secular images of the player, the sufferer and the vandal. These provide their insights, but seem weak when compared to images such as the saint, the child of God, pilgrim, or of Christ himself, as well as others. Perhaps he sought images he felt would be maximally universal. Here one perhaps encounters the residue of the 'liberalism' within the Postliberalism of his theological orientation.

Finally, there is little reference in Harned's work for the direct work of the Holy Spirit. As a theological ethic grounded in a 'natural theology' of human culture, it is perhaps understandable that the emphasis in Harned's work lies, as Hauerwas' put it, in the 'moral

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<sup>70</sup> See D. B. Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 146 and more recently in D. Hein and E. Henderson, *CS Lewis and Friends: Faith and the Power of Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 3-4.

<sup>71</sup> It should be noted, however, that Harned spends much of memoir, *Strange Bedfellows: Growing Up with India*, describing his experience in India with Hindu architecture and what he learned from it about the relationship between the divine and human realms.

imagination and moral effort.’<sup>72</sup> As such, Harned’s work provides compelling resources for the development of an account of the relationship between art and moral formation, namely in the way the arts convoke and provoke encounters with realities beyond ourselves. And while certainly related to spiritual formation, one might wonder what, besides particular convictions and confessions, is the difference between the moral formation of a Christian and the moral formation of anyone else. What is, then, the relationship between the arts, the human spirit and the Holy Spirit? How might nature and supernature find intelligible coherence in reference to the experience of the arts? Might a way be articulated to relate the arts to both a theological anthropology and to a Biblical pneumatology, and from theological ethics and aesthetics to applied or as it is now called practical theology? For these questions we turn to our next interlocutor.

## II. James E. Loder

...the experiences we want eventually to understand in *Christian* terms are precisely those that reopen the question of reality because the subject of the experience has been convicted by a Spiritual Presence far greater than the subject his or herself.<sup>73</sup>

This project is an investigation into the relationship of *aesthesis* and *ascesis*, between ‘sense perception’ broadly conceived and inclusive of all art forms, and disciplines ordered toward spiritual formation, which is related to but cannot be reduced to moral, psychological and cognitive formation. For an explication of the relationship between spiritual, moral and psychological formation I turn to the work of James E. Loder (1931-2001). Loder’s career was centered at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he held the Mary D. Synnott chair in the Philosophy of Christian Education within the department of Practical Theology from 1982 until his death. Loder sought to instill a ‘critical confessional vision’ into practical theology and Christian education, which in his view is always in danger of being reduced to the latest trends in educational practice, socialization theory, cognitive psychology and marketing with a spiritual

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<sup>72</sup> Hauerwas, ‘Significance of Vision,’ 42.

<sup>73</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 7.

‘X-factor’ added.<sup>74</sup> Loder found within the discipline of practical theology and Christian education what he felt to be a lack of a satisfactorily theological perspective. The heart of his project was to redress this tendency with a theological methodology grounded in Christology, out of which emerged his concept of a ‘grammar of transformation.’

Much of contemporary Christian education theory draws upon research in human development. Situating Loder alongside other developmental theorists, particularly James W. Fowler, places Loder’s work and this particular discussion within a larger academic framework. Fowler is Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University, and is closely associated with the development of the field of practical theology over the past forty years. His celebrated analysis of the stages of religious development, influenced as it is by the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget and others, follows an *epigenetic* account of human and religious development. That is, such development is genetically ‘pre-programmed’ and results in predictable, albeit subject to influence and shaping, patterns of staged development. Loder’s work in contrast could be characterized as a more *existential* account of human and religious development. Loder does not deny the value of research such as Fowler’s, but he is more interested in what happens in-between the proposed stages and how transition from one level of religious or spiritual maturity to another actually occurs. Moreover, Loder’s work casts critical light on the theological assumptions that inform the staged outline of Fowler’s work and its culminating religious universalism.<sup>75</sup>

It is Loder’s existential account of religious development, the place of choice, deliberation and even crisis within religious development and his situating an aesthetic dimension, like Harned, within his research that underlines the appeal of his research for this project. My own interest in Loder’s work lies also in his unique analysis of ‘convictional knowing’ as a sequential (though not necessarily linear) series of experiences generative of new and perhaps

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<sup>74</sup> D. R. Wright, in a *Festschrift* posthumously published for his former doctoral advisor, ‘Are You There? Comedic Interrogation in the Life and Witness of James E. Loder,’ in *Redemptive Transformation in Practical Theology*, ed. D. Wright and J. Kuentzel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1-40.

<sup>75</sup> For a summarized account of the background and content of Fowler’s theory, see G. Klappenecker, ‘The Development of Public Responsibility in James William Fowler’s Theology and Psychology,’ in *Developing a Public Faith: New Directions in Practical Theology*, ed. R. Osmer and F. Schweitzer (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 43-47. See also J.W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981). Loder articulates his basic critique of Fowler’s assumptions and methodology in *The Logic of the Spirit*, 255-59. ‘It seems to me that Fowler’s work is a sensitive, insightful study of the ego’s competence in structuring meaning, and it is only potentially but not necessarily related to faith in a biblical or theological sense’ (256). This summarizes the thrust of Loder’s critique of prevailing theories within contemporary practical theology.

transformative insights and capacities for further experiences. His analytical theory of religious transformation is adopted in this project as a heuristic model of meaningful aesthetic experience with ascetic implications.

### **Reopening the Question of Reality: Convictional Knowing**

Trained in interdisciplinary research in the relationship of mental health and religion, Loder sought to bring scientific criteria, philosophical enquiry, and theological study to bear in the area of human development theory and Christian education.<sup>76</sup> Loder drew on psychoanalytic theory, developmental theory, anthropology, existential thought (particularly that of Søren Kierkegaard), and epistemology such as found in Michael Polanyi's work among others in the development of his notion of a 'logic' or sometimes expressed as a 'grammar' of transformation. By this Loder meant an observable pattern by which profound change takes place within individuals, groups, cultures, and applies both to religious and non-religious transformation. Key to his thought was his attempt to find ways of clearly explicating the relationship of two differentiated realms, that of the divine and that of the human. In service of this objective Loder developed his thought along what he characterized as a Trinitarian and Chalcedonian-shaped theology.<sup>77</sup> For Loder, Christian doctrine taught of the ontological priority of grace but of its intimate connection with creation, something reflected in the relation of divinity and humanity in the Incarnation. One practical outcome of his research was an explication of creativity, again in terms of both divine and human types and how these are inter-related. The key to Loder's thought is his understanding of *spirit*. For Loder, the human spirit stood in an analogical relationship with the human self as the relationship between the Holy Spirit and God's

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<sup>76</sup> J. E. Loder, 'Transformation in Christian Education,' *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 3 (1980), reprinted in J. Astley et al, *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 270-27.

<sup>77</sup> See Wright, p. 21-23. Richard R. Osmer summarizes the content and methodological implications of Loder's Barthian or 'neo-Chalcedonian' method in *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 168-69. Key terms of the 'relationality' between divine and human Being posited as central to Loder's thought and methodology were *indissoluble differentiation*, *inseparable unity*, and *asymmetrical order* (that is, the divine has logical and ontological priority over the human).

Trinitarian Self.<sup>78</sup> When asked what he most hoped his students learned in his courses, he replied ‘To see themselves as spirit.’<sup>79</sup>

Loder’s approach to Christian education was determined by what could be termed his *epistemology of transformation*. This was informed by experiences from his own life as well as theoretical constructs and empirical evidence garnered in his practice of therapeutic counseling. Experiences of transformation were those which, in his words, ‘reopen the question of reality,’ situating fresh insights within existing frames of reference or changing those frames of reference altogether for individuals or societies. Reality for Loder was determined by the concept of *relationality*, a term he borrowed from philosophical, scientific and theological sources and refers to the manner in which all things ultimately find their origin, meaning and coherence in a personal and supernatural order of existence. The ‘assumptive worlds’ of late modernity was shaped by substance metaphysics borrowed from Greek thought tended to in effect ‘repress the reality questions’ with casual and unexamined references to what he called ‘popular realism bolstered by snippets of insight from the human sciences,’ or any philosophical or theological perspectives that stifled or avoided undeniable encounters with the supernatural.<sup>80</sup> For Loder, if

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<sup>78</sup> For this reason, I Corinthians 2.11, ‘For what person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man that is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God,’ was a central passage for Loder. It formed the basis of his *analogia spiritus*; see *Transforming Moment*, 92-93.

<sup>79</sup> R. Haitch, ‘A Summary of James E. Loder’s Theory of Christian Education,’ in Wright and Kuentzel, *Redemptive Transformation*, 306. See also J. E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); ‘...human spirit is to humanity what the Holy Spirit is to God (I Corinthians 2:10)’ (35), namely, the means of self-awareness and self-expression. Haitch articulates his teacher’s understanding of spirit in a manner relevant to this study:

What, then, is “spirit”? The human spirit is best characterized as *creativity*. In his survey of the human spirit in Western thought, G. Thomas finds that the spirit has been equated with reason, love, (particularly eros), personality, universality, freedom, and creativity. Loder chooses the last as the mode that includes the others and more. If we press further to ask, But what is creativity? Then I think we must come to Loder’s emphasis on *relationality*. Human creativity resides in the spirit’s inherent relationality. We are not only egocentric, self-relating, but also exocentric, relating to what is beyond us. Thus in *The Logic of the Spirit*, Loder suggests that “human spirit” is well characterized as “openness to the world and self-transcendence.” Meanwhile in *The Knight’s Move*, he says (“with a debt of gratitude to W. Pannenberg”) that the human spirit is “a dynamic tension between ‘centeredness’ and ‘openness.’” To define the spirit in words may be like trying to catch the wind in a net, so let the present congeries suffice: the human spirit has or is creativity, relationality, exocentricity, openness, self-transcendence. Now the further take-away idea here is that humanity, spirit, and transformation go together. The dynamics of transformation point to spirit, and spirit points back to the fact that transformation is even more definitive of what it means to be human than is socialization (306-07).

<sup>80</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 8.

the deepest source of existence is found to be relational in nature (i.e. the Trinity), then this grounds and explains the relational character of significant human development.<sup>81</sup>

In relation to this project, Loder's account of convictional experience is useful (1) to illuminate the relationship of God's Spirit with the human spirit and, (2) to situate the aesthetic dimension of life within a Christian account of religious development. Drawing on Kierkegaard within a basically Barthian theological framework (via the work of T.F. Torrance on which Loder drew strongly), Loder's thought relies on the strategic role of *crisis* to affect transformative change in a given situation. Loder's own life was itself changed in two dramatic episodes, and much of his work sought to provide theoretical framework and intellectual integrity to what he observed and maintained was a far more frequent phenomenon of human experience than traditional theories of Christian practice or education, for example, could account for or make use of.<sup>82</sup> Crisis in the sense of the need for critical judgment about something is related to the aesthetic-ascetic nexus that this project is focused on. I prefer to speak more of challenges and the 'facilitation of new critical reformulations'<sup>83</sup> of awareness and association occasioned by encounters with art. One thinks again of Rembrandt's 'The Slaughtered Ox.' For Francis Schaeffer it changed the way he looked at beef. For others, the painting occasions new ways of seeing the Crucifixion, or of the Eucharistic implications of Christ's Passion. Seeing the crucified Jesus as meat to consume might suggest new ways to directly related oneself to Jesus, or new ways of conceiving sacramental spirituality. It can also initiate the viewer into the cumulative narrative in Rembrandt's art of seeking God's presence within an emerging Protestant theological worldview, and whether such a worldview is sufficient for the task. Such are the 'crises' that encounters with art can bring about.

### **Transformative Experience: Five Steps**

Loder outlined his account of this logic of transformation, or 'steps' as he tentatively put it, as follows:

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<sup>81</sup> The social implications of Loder's work tend to be overlooked in favor of the individual. But in his appeal to transformational insights or revolutions in the realms of science, religion and the arts, Loder highlights the way convictional knowing in one person or group can have a profound impact on a whole society.

<sup>82</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 13. Both of the crisis episodes in Loder's life are discussed on pp. 1-6, 86-87.

<sup>83</sup> F.L. Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology*, 64.



1. A conflict is encountered or emerges from within a given context. This conflict, or challenge or ‘crisis’, is attended to, wrestled with; ‘the more one cares about the conflict the more powerful will be the knowing event.’<sup>84</sup>
2. An interlude for ‘scanning’ the conflict. ‘This is indwelling the conflicted situation with empathy for the problem and its parts,’ where Loder most obviously tips his hand to the work of Polanyi.<sup>85</sup>
3. The apprehensive/comprehensive moment, or what Loder calls ‘the *constructive act of the imagination*; an insight, intuition, or vision appears on the border between the conscious and unconscious, usually with convincing force, and conveys in a form readily available to consciousness, the essence of the resolution.’<sup>86</sup> This is sometimes referred to as a ‘hunch’ about the problem or challenge.
4. A nearly simultaneous experience of release and openness is achieved. ‘The opening of the knower to his or her context is the response of consciousness to being freed *from* an engrossing conflict and *for* a measure of self-transcendence.’ The ‘Aha!’ moment of personal discovery and the cathartic effect that can have in terms of new understanding.
5. The interpretive consideration of the new insight for ways it relates within a pattern of continuity with what was formerly known or believed and how it might be discontinuous with what was formerly known or believed. Such an interpretive enterprise could be related to modulation within a stage-theory religious formation, a widening of one’s breadth of concern or awareness or growth in one’s capacity to engage creatively with challenges to one’s previous understanding or experience.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 34. For an earlier articulation of his analysis, see Loder, ‘Transformation in Christian Education,’ in Astley, *Christian Formation*, 273.

I find in a similar articulation of Loder’s ‘logic’ by his last doctoral student, Lisa Hess, helpful in further connecting Loder’s thought to the trajectory of this project:

Loder’s transformational logic articulates a pathway for what he calls *convictional knowing*, and what I would describe as “knowing in your very bones,” or embodied knowledge. Five facets constitute the logic presented here in a linear fashion but by no means experienced in that order: *conflict-in-context*, and *interlude for scanning*, *insight* or a *constructive act of the imagination*, a *release of energy and openness of the knower*, and *interpretation* that operates both backwards for *congruence* and forward for *correspondence* with a consensual, communicative view of the world. (L. M. Hess, *Learning in a Musical Key* [Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011], 156).

Loder's passion, both professionally and avocationally, was exploring the intersections of theology, psychological therapy and the sciences, particularly physics. In order to illustrate the potential of his five-step schematic, Loder suggests its application in three areas of knowing, that of the scientific, the therapeutic, and, relevant for this project, the aesthetic. Transformation in this realm is about the power,

... to break the numbing spell of "everydayness," to renew and restore both the human spirit and the particulars of the world. Dynamically, the human spirit, whether it be the artist's or the audience's, is characterized by its power to break with the tyranny of the obvious and compose some aspect of the world, in its (the spirit's) own terms. The integrity of the human spirit, and the protection against random creativity of its transcendent relationship to the world, is preserved by the coherence of transformational logic.<sup>88</sup>

Loder presents his five-step outline in the language of problem solving, frequently illustrating it with such instantiations such as Michael Faraday's electromagnetic theory and Albert Einstein's relativity theory, solutions to scientific problems that involved conjunctions of creative intuition and trial and error processing. His analysis of aesthetic knowing begins with the experience of artistic creativity as *a knowing event* which is then related to the receiver's experience of the artwork as an aesthetic *knowing process*. Key to this analysis is the dynamics of metaphor, which for Loder effectively combines the intuitive and compositional 'problem solving' of creative work with the eventual symbolic expression of the work itself. Artists, in Loder's analysis, through indwelling the conflict or challenge of his or her creative intuition 'builds up the intuitive potential, following hunches, sensing directions, and moving toward that gratuitous internal coalescence that eventually takes on a life of its own.' The 'gratuitous internal coalescence' refers to the *aesthetic* logic of an artwork. The audience, on the other hand, 'must indwell the poet's symbolic expression, the work of art, with sufficient intensity to break the tyranny of surface meaning' which, one might say, attends mere casual encounters.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 51-52. His expectation of a 'restoration' following the crisis of encounter is itself perhaps too quickly assumed.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* 47.

‘Indwelling’ a symbolic expression with ‘sufficient intensity’ represents the *ascetic* dimension of this project.

Loder turns to a poem by Wallace Stevens to illustrate his proposition, ‘The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician’:

It comes about that the drifting of these curtains  
 Is full of long motions; as the ponderous  
 Deflations of distance; or as clouds  
 Inseparable from their afternoons;  
 Or the changing of light, the dropping  
 Of the silence, wide sleep and solitude  
 Of night, in which all motion  
 Is beyond us, as the firmament,  
 Up-rising and down-falling, bares  
 The last largeness, bold to see.

In his reflections on the poem, Loder perceives a metaphoric linkage between the ‘house’ and the universe and the metaphysician as one who finds a home in this house/universe:

As the scope of our attention changes from ‘these curtains’ to ‘the last largeness,’ our mode of consciousness is taken from descriptive awareness to metaphorical, and thence, to intuitive metaphysical. A metamorphosis is suggested as we move from seeing the “objective” reality of the curtains, open to any naked eye, into the final ‘see,’ which has a visionary quality that has clearly broken with “the tyranny of the naked eye,” as Stevens called it.<sup>90</sup>

For Loder, such a process facilitated by an artistic expression represents a change in our ‘mode of consciousness’ and if followed and pursued in the course of this and other poems by

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 49. Loder acknowledges the contribution of Arthur McGill to his analysis of Stevens; A. McGill, *Celebrations of the Flesh* (New York: Association Press, 1964).

Stevens himself or others, can lead toward new or renewed convictions about the nature of *reality* and of our commerce with it, as David Harned might put it.

Loder then goes on to relate the schematic to human knowing in an inclusive sense. Loder grounded his account of transformation in an oscillation of continuity and discontinuity with what was previously known or understood. Not all such discoveries or acts of creativity issue in revolutionary breaks with the past, but all forms of convictional change relate in some way to previous experience and thinking within schemes of established perspective:

From the creative unconscious on the one side comes a mediating image, insight, or vision that quickens self-transcendence on the other. The imaginative mediator liberates the “I,” impels the knower toward new explorations of his or her world and toward those choices that promise to exercise transcendence and hold open the future.<sup>91</sup>

It would seem that there is no reason to foreclose on the idea that the impetus for ‘creative unconscious’ could not come from the creativity of another, namely an artist, who inspires or initiates a similar dynamic of creativity on the part of the receiver. Moreover, Loder’s ‘sequence’ suggests one approach to understanding ‘transformative’ aesthetic experience; of an in-depth, sometimes elative, sometimes deeply troubling, encounter with an artwork or series of works and the ‘story’ it or they may embody. Let us consider this more carefully.

### *Conflict*

Conflict initiates the knowing response, and the more one cares about the conflict the more powerful will be the knowing event.<sup>92</sup>

The instantiation of creative conflict or ‘cognitive dissonance’ is one of the most effective ways that the arts contribute to spiritual formation, and Loder’s account of transformation provides a framework for understanding this. As we will consider in ensuing chapters, exposure

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<sup>91</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 36.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

to the art of Peter Howson or Makoto Fujimura potentially initiates such conflict. The violent and erotic dimensions of the one and the highly abstract approach of the other may constitute significant challenges to traditional notions of ‘religious’ art and its relationship with Christianity. A key in this regard is growth in the capacity to engage in such a conflict with the ‘persistence of intention’ which can, as Loder argues, yield significant new insights into things. To engage in this conflict also holds potential for growth in bearing with the conflicts that inevitably accompany all human relationships, dynamics in ministry, and love for people in general, certainly characteristic marks of a Christian ethic.

It should go without saying that encounters with the arts can also yield experiences of confirmation or elaboration of what is already believed or affirmed. Not everything is a crisis. But too often encounters with art is relegated or reduced to only that which is confirmatory or consoling, and therein lies the familiar problem of kitsch.<sup>93</sup>

### *Contemplative Scanning*

In an earlier address, Loder spoke of the second dimension of transformative knowing as the ‘interlude and scanning,’ but later as the ‘*interlude for scanning.*’ Loder makes explicit reference here to the leaps of insight in the sciences as well as in counseling sessions. It is the dynamic of ‘indwelling’ a problem or situation, borrowed from Polanyi’s work.<sup>94</sup> Loder employs the term ‘contemplation’ to describe the dynamic when the learner is ‘immersed in the exploration of connections and combinations of meanings for which both the basic problem and the redeeming conflict may still be obscure. He or she has only a hunch, or rather I should say, the hunch has him or her.’<sup>95</sup> Loder expands on this in application to educational theory that is suggestive still of guided encounters with art towards spiritual formation:

It is obviously a crucial part of transformational learning because without scanning, or in broader terms, with legitimations and support for contemplative

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<sup>93</sup> See R.C. Solomon, ‘On Kitsch and Sentimentality’ in *The Journal of Aesthetics And Arts Criticism*, Vol. 49, No.1, 1991, 1-14; T. Gorringer, ‘Kitsch and the Task of Theology, in *Theology Today*, Vol. 56, No. 2, 1999, 229-234.

<sup>94</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 18.

<sup>95</sup> Loder in Astley, *Christian Formation*, 282.

wondering, insights will be proportionally shallow and governed by expediency rather than satisfying the deeper longings behind contemplative wondering.<sup>96</sup>

In this experiential-analytical process that Loder proposes, while employing the language of problem solving, the dynamic invites application to aesthetic experiences. One approach to this pedagogically is a guided or facilitated consideration of a work of art that relies on inductive reasoning. Viewers/listeners are encouraged to attend to particular details of a given work with as open a mind as possible, leading to the perception, perhaps, of patterns leading towards the observation of larger orders, themes, or motifs. If a body of work of a given artist is under consideration, then such an approach can be harnessed to the observation and identification of themes, motifs and patterns that appear to inform and be communicated by the artist. Here in a particular way an audience can be equipped to identify the ‘story’ that a body of work participates in or expresses. In such a way can people be led not only toward more satisfying and enlightening aesthetic experiences, but be trained in skills – practices – of contemplative ‘wondering’ and indwelling that can be transferred to matters related directly to the reading of Scripture, prayer, or other forms of ascetical discipline.

### *Imaginative Reconstruction*

The third step, anticipated in the comments above, is the *constructive act of imagination*. Borrowing the term ‘bisociation’ from Arthur Koestler, Loder suggests that this often involves the uniquely new association of two previously unrelated truths or relationships. In this regard, one might immediately think of the composition and effect of many of Jesus’ parables, in as much as they bisociate the commonplace with the consecrated and elicit from those with ‘eyes to see and ears to hear’ new associations that illuminate and adumbrate new relationships and possibilities. Likewise, the insights born of new, previously unconsidered associations of things can be observed in the dynamics of the arts. One thinks again of the potential bisociation occasioned by Rembrandt’s side of beef. Loder writes:

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 282.

The range and depth of possibilities here is controlled by the contextual situation, the shape of the original conflict, and its implications as ferreted out in the preliminary scanning interlude. That is, the resolution is imaginative, as opposed to imaginary, depending on its power to deal comprehensively and parsimoniously with the elements of the conflict in its context. It is this third step, the construction of insight sensed with convicting force, that constitutes the turning point of the knowing event. It is by this central act that the elements of the ruptured situation are *transformed*, and a new perception, perspective, or world view is bestowed on the knower.<sup>97</sup>

### *Celebrative Release*

Loder describes the fourth dimension of the sequence as existing in two movements, ‘first by a *release* of the energy bound up in sustaining the conflict and second by an *opening* of the knower to him or herself and the contextual situation.’<sup>98</sup> This is colloquially known as the ‘aha moment,’ and area of neurobiology and psychology that has received renewed study in recent years.<sup>99</sup>

Directing this dimension to the construction of educational theory, Loder characterized this release and opening in an earlier statement as a *learning to celebrate*:

In this particular learning task there is an important corollary; namely, one tends to learn what one celebrates or whatever generates energy and enthusiasm. Hence, *what* order or *whose* order one celebrates is the all-important consideration

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<sup>97</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 33.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

<sup>99</sup> Part of this is reflective of Polanyi’s work, but more recently popularized by Malcolm Gladwell and Jonah Lehrer. Writing of Lehrer’s new book, *Imagine: How Creativity Works* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), journalist Paul Harris writes:

There is indeed a part of the brain associated with a sudden ‘aha moment’ of the type linked to key breakthroughs of luminaries such as Isaac Newton and Archimedes. It is called the anterior superior temporal gyrus and it is situated in the right hemisphere of the brain... Lehrer’s stock-in-trade is the boundary between science and the humanities. He strives to link art and neurology... (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2012/mar/25/jonah-lehrer-popular-science-profile> [accessed 28 March 2012]).

This type of research reflects what animated Loder’s work, into which he sought to bring a theological frame of reference.

since that is the order which will be learned and driven deeper into the learned with every repetition. In cryptic terms, you become what you celebrate.<sup>100</sup>

Many of course suffer various forms of inhibition toward such release, openness or celebration. The arts can catalyze the amelioration of such inhibitions or, in some cases, instantiate conflict wherein such inhibitions can be seen in a new light.

### *Interpretation and Integration*

‘The fifth step is *interpretation* of the imaginative solution into the behavioral and/or symbolically constructed world of the original context.’ Here Loder speaks of a double-sided dynamic where an internal congruence of the factors involved in the new insight and of a search for correspondence with what was previously known, making the congruence ‘public and a matter of consensus. Thus, the imaginative construct is examined for its correspondence to a consensual view of the world.’<sup>101</sup> Loder denies this requires conformity, as some new insights or knowledge simply may conflict with present consensual understandings. His favourite examples of this come from scientific discoveries, where imaginative leaps or unexpected connections yield new insight. When the two movements do coincide, however, for Loder that represents a true approximation of larger transformation of understanding.

### **Four-fold Analysis of Human Existence**

Loder’s complaint about therapeutic practice and educational theory even in Christian circles was that, cued by the ‘creeping-conformist’ tendencies of modern methodologies, only aspects of experience subject to empirical confirmation were focused on and validated.<sup>102</sup> In his account, human *being* involves four dimensions, leading to his insistence that authentically transformative change involves all four of these dimensions. Those dimensions of experience are

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<sup>100</sup> Loder in Astley, *Christian Formation*, 282. ‘Order’ is a frequently occurring word in Loder’s vocabulary, and indicates what in his thought is the underlying reality of things as divinely created and humanly intelligible, a reality ‘ordered’ toward reconciliation in Christ; see e.g. *Transforming Moment*, 61.

<sup>101</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 34.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 41.



(1) the lived world, (2) the self, (3) the void, and (4) the Holy. In Loder's critique, therapeutic practice and education theory, including religious education, addresses itself effectively only to the dimensions of the world and the self. Most human development theories address ego-development as the coping and transitioning capacities of the emerging self, some of which go according to perceivable patterns, some of which for various reasons 'get stuck' and require therapeutic mediation. Loder is appreciative of this research. But Loder, writing in implicit critique of Fowler's work, writes:

... faith is not fundamentally a developmental phenomenon. If faith is a human response to God's grace, it must be rooted in God and be grounded deeper in psychic bedrock than the developing ego's foundation in a favorable balance of trust over mistrust, all of which is primarily dependent on interaction with a human environment.<sup>103</sup>

'A theology of faith' for Loder needs to push the human sciences deeper than is typically the case in most theoretical accounts, 'without departing from human givens.'<sup>104</sup> Let us consider these four dimensions more closely.

### *The Lived World*

Drawing on psycho-developmental theory as well as anthropological studies, Loder advances a psycho-somatic understanding of one's lived 'world.' In terms of one's 'worldview':

Reality "out there," as we ordinarily speak of it, is an elaboration on, but not foundational of, the lived "world"; it is a reflective objectification of whatever lived "world" one may spontaneously compose. The lived "world" underlies and sustains what we ordinarily call "reality"; objective reality cannot sustain the lived "world."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Loder, *Logic of the Spirit*, 31.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

<sup>105</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 69.

For Loder, one's lived world is both 'fragile as it is flexible,'<sup>106</sup> composed of different 'worlds' ascribed with differing levels of significance (i.e. one's private lifestyle, public institutions and functions, the natural realm). Under the conditions of transformative knowing as outlined previously, it is one's 'world' that suffers rupture that initiates the transformative knowing event, and finally it is the 'world' that is recomposed to include the gain that is accomplished by transformation.' Loder invests much of the causal agency in this change to an imagination opened toward new horizons:

Although in much of day-to-day life the imagination serves established structures, in a transformational knowing event the very opposite priority appears. The structural egg is cracked, and a new, living "structure" inherent to the vitality and coherence of the imagination emerges. Thus, the imagination, either within or beyond given structures but never without them, becomes the *formative* power behind the lived "world."<sup>107</sup>

### *The Self*

The second quadrant involves the self. Loder's explication of the Self involves some of his more tortured discourse. Drawing on neuroscience, developmental theory and Kierkegaard, Loder analyses the Self in three terms: Self as *self-reflection*, Self as *self-relatedness*, and Self as *spirit*. One might be tempted to think that in what appears to be Loder's ascending analytical hierarchy these three dimensions might correspond to Kierkegaard's aesthetic, ethical and religious types. Self as spirit represents for Loder the Self open to and designed for self-transcendence and relationship with God.<sup>108</sup> It is here that Loder deploys his *analogia spiritus*, his analogy of the spirit, that is, how the human spirit is related analogously to the Holy Spirit within the Godhead, key to his account of how convictional knowledge translates into spiritual formation or, in his own preferred term, *transformation*, the realm wherein the human spirit is in

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 72.

<sup>108</sup> F. LeRon Shults, another of Loder's students, draws similarly on Kierkegaard and of 'the dialectical relation between the centripetal organizing capacities of a person's ego (the "I") and his or her centrifugal orientation toward the other. The human spirit is this relation's relating itself to itself as it relates itself to others.' (F. L. Shults and S. J. Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality: Integrating Theology and Psychology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006] 57).

active touch with, in one of Loder's former student's words, its inherent 'creativity, relationality, exocentricity, openness, self-transcendence.'<sup>109</sup> The arts can uniquely facilitate or catalyze this dynamic by occasioning new insights and calling upon new or under used skills of attentiveness, awareness, and openness to insinuation.

With the next and final dimensions, Loder introduces categories of experience that he found lacking in formal educational analyses.

### *The Void*

Loder continues his deployment of existentialist categories in his adoption of the concept of 'the void' to describe the human experience of limitation, anxiety, or profound mystery. For Loder, it is contact with the void, the threat of meaninglessness, with its rupture into the 'lived world' where a 'self' has perhaps been comfortably situated that transformational change takes place. Loder analyses the pathologies associated with the Western experience of *avoidance*; its achievement drives, addictions and distractions. Death is the ultimate reality and metaphor for the void; absolute nothingness. Authentic contact with the fourth dimension of human existence – the Holy - sets off crisis encounters with the void, but offers a way toward meaningful resolution. Loder's analysis of this dimension of human experience reminds one of what serves as the guiding theme of this project from David Harned:

... it is a matter of how well the eye is trained and provisioned to discern the richness and the terror, beauty and banality, of the worlds *outside and within the self*.<sup>110</sup>

### *The Holy*

Loder posits the presence of the Holy as a given, a *tacit dimension* of human experience, only concealed or suppressed in active human consciousness through a myriad of self-deceptions and distractions. But when the Holy graciously ruptures those strategies, human *being* is thrown

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<sup>109</sup> Haitch, 'A Summary' 306-07.

<sup>110</sup> Harned, *Faith and Virtue*, 29. Emphasis added.

into crises that afford opportunities to emerge into new being, that is, spiritual being. In this case even the experience of deprivation and the threat of death can be redemptive. ‘Kierkegaard repeatedly insisted with bewildering brilliance that the faces of the void become the faces of God.’<sup>111</sup>

Encounters with the Holy that involve the dynamics of convictional knowing and address the wholeness of human being (in its four dimensions) result in a transformation of human self toward human spirit:

If through the course of a lifetime one recognizes that the logic of the Spirit cuts across our typical, sequential, and chronological account of things and draws on powerful resources hidden both in creation and Creator to construct and reconstruct a lifetime, the ultimate resolution that negates death itself is no great surprise. Death shocks, depresses, or seemingly presents a definitive finality only for a locked-in, chronological mindset that has suppressed the continuous presence of the end of things under stage sequences, growth cycles, and adaptations to everything except its own termination. Those who have seen spiritual transformation in its wondrous and joyful intention to transcend linear expectations and repeatedly reconfigure life’s set patterns, yet without loss of continuity in selfhood, have little difficulty in recognizing and accepting the analogy between this and the rebirth of life after death according to God’s promise of resurrection and redemption for all creation beyond time and history.<sup>112</sup>

In Loder’s thought, it is when the dynamics of human development – both psychological and sociological – encounter the realms of the void and the holy, that the process of transformation is itself transformed. These are ‘new birth’ experiences. Nature in this sense encounters grace and, depending on one’s theological orientation, is converted or perfected, caught up into a ‘higher’ realm of significance and change.<sup>113</sup>

Loder’s methodology and terminology can sometimes obfuscate as much as illuminate his theory. But it is vindicated in its suggestive fecundity, as seen in the work of several of his

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<sup>111</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 84.

<sup>112</sup> Loder, *Logic of the Spirit*, 340-41.

<sup>113</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 61.

students and as used in this project. Loder's 'steps' can be seen as a helpful 'guide' in aesthetics by way of helping viewers interpret their experience with a work of art and how they might expand upon that experience. *It shows a way beyond casual encounters with art.* The four-dimensional model of human being can suggest how aesthetic experiences can be far more than merely entertaining, distracting or relaxing, but can address matters of great consequence.

Loder's models are based on the examples of crisis change and conversion. Heightened expectations can indeed facilitate more intense encounters with art that can lead to substantive change and personal growth. Perhaps however the model could be supplemented with the provision that most human change, including that of the spirit, follows a more ordinary, incremental trajectory. For this reason spiritual *formation* is the chosen metaphor.

### **III. Conclusion**

As sources for an account of the relationship between the arts and spiritual formation, David Harned and James Loder offer much with which to work. Perhaps one way to consider their contribution lies in a matter they address very little, and that is beauty. While not inimical to the subject, they are much more interested in the existential dimension of the encounter with the arts. Both of them are interested in the arts as means by which one can break through pedestrian 'everydayness,' how the arts rub one up against the stubborn 'whatness' of things, and how the arts instantiate truth not in abstractions but in the concrete manifestation of particulars. Both eschew preciousness towards the arts, as if the arts somehow hovered above ground. Theirs is what might be thought of as a 'realist' approach to the aesthetic. It is the potentially irruptive, disruptive, crisis-inducing aspects of the arts that attract their attention.

Their shared appropriation of this realist, existentialist approach to the arts and spirituality reflects both a common generational origin and a common indebtedness to Karl Barth's neo-orthodoxy, itself sometimes referred to as a 'theology of crisis' and the new paradigms of Protestant theology that it spawned. For Harned, Barth's theology influenced the rise of Yale School postliberalism, with its tendencies toward a non-foundationalist approach to theology, use of narrative, and the adoption of virtue ethics. For Loder, Barth's theology funded a turn from Protestant liberalism to a Protestant orthodoxy, with its emphasis on revelation, the Trinity, and the goal of re-establishing Christian practice on the basis of clear theological principles as

opposed to pragmatics or populism. Likewise in both cases, the theology of Barth was filtered through and read in light of the work of Thomas F. Torrance.<sup>114</sup> Remarkably for Harned, it meant not jettisoning natural theology but re-positioning it as a ‘moment within a confession of faith,’ critical for examining ‘the texture of our ordinary experience for its witness to the holy.’<sup>115</sup> For Loder, the encounter with T.F. Torrance’s work in theology and science provided the ‘paradigm shift’ from substance metaphysics toward ‘onto-relational’ metaphysics that explicates things in light of the inner life of the Trinity.<sup>116</sup> All of this is important for the development of what might be called Loder’s contemplative existentialism and his determination to provide an interpretation of human development along ‘irreducibly spiritual’ lines of thought.

The relational emphasis in Loder’s theology also opens suggestive ways of further interpreting the arts along communicative lines, not only as a point of assessment, whether a given work is successfully communicative, but as an interpretative paradigm, seeking to better perceive what the artists intended to ‘say’ by what was/is ‘done’ in a given piece or performance. In the hermeneutic adopted in this project, the arts ultimately communicate *story*, that is, a network of values within a framework of meaning. If relationality lies at the ‘origin, condition and goal’ of human existence,<sup>117</sup> then interpretations of the arts should reflect this theological anthropology by exploring ways that they issue from within and tend toward *the communication of meaning*. It is also the Barth-Torrance influence that accounts for the emphasis on a *dialectical* methodology in both of their work. The maintenance of tensive relationships between equal truths, the eschewal of the liberal *either* and the fundamentalist *or*, the holding together of the divine and human dimensions of human existence, pervade their theology. This dialectical approach might prove helpful when encountering art that involves seeming opposites such as transcendence *and* immanence, richness *and* terror, beauty *and* banality.

Related to the dialectic dynamic they find at the root of healthy faiths, hopes and loves is the role of the *imagination* in their work. At the time of their writing, both Harned and Loder

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<sup>114</sup> Harned refers to Torrance as ‘my first teacher of theology and he remains very much my teacher still,’ in the Preface to *Faith and Virtue* and continued to affirm that influence in conversation with the author, 29 June 2011. Likewise Loder wrote, ‘I will accept Torrance’s reinterpretation of Barth and argue in Barthian fashion that the relationship between the divine and the human as delineated in the Chalcedonian formula can provide the optimal way to relate theology and the human sciences. (*Logic of the Spirit*, 33).

<sup>115</sup> Harned, *Faith and Virtue*, 9.

<sup>116</sup> See G. Deddo, ‘T.F. Torrance: The Onto-Relational Frame of His Theology,’ *The Princeton Theological Review*, 14 (Fall 2008): 35-47; F. L. Shults, ‘The Philosophical Turn to Relationality and the Responsibility of Practical Theology,’ in *Redemptive Transformation*, 325-346.

<sup>117</sup> Shults, *Transforming Spirituality*, 39-66.

were early in what has become now a more common feature within theological reflection and formulation. In terms of the experience of *aesthesis*, both draw suggestively on contemplative resources in the work of Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch (Harned particularly) and Michael Polanyi (Loder particularly). Carefully *attending* to and intentional *indwelling* of problems, occasioned perhaps in the challenge of a particular artwork, and seeking for intimations of *tacit dimensions* made explicit or implicit, informs for them the excitement of aesthetic phenomena.

In terms of the *ascetic* dimension of arts and faith, Harned and Loder have clear differentiations. Both account for the sanctification of human existence. Harned pursues this along the lines of the virtues, of which he finds a basic unity.<sup>118</sup> Loder's project so emphasizes the role of the Spirit and passive faith that little attention is typically given to human participation or effort. The Spirit's in-breaking of the human condition, the unconditioned and unconditional character of God's relationship toward the world, and the emphasis on the 'Spirit-to-spirit' dynamic of faith development, tend against a thorough examination of human excellences. That theme, however, is taken up and developed by several of Loder's students.<sup>119</sup> True to the dialectical paradigm they promote, I wish to pursue the interplay of both in an understanding of the arts and spiritual formation.

The arts and aesthetic experience play an important if not central role in their overall theological projects. For Harned the arts afford opportunities to reflect on articles of faith such as creation and God as Creator, as well as for the development of the virtues of intentionality, attentiveness and patient regard for the world and of others within it. Loder on the other hand emphasizes the potentially epiphanic and transformative crisis afforded by aesthetic encounter.

My project synthesizes the insights of Nichols in chapter One, and Harned and Loder in this chapter and describes the relationship between art and spiritual formation in terms of a *catalytic dynamic*. The arts in this interpretation can facilitate spiritual formation in combination with other 'means of grace,' ordinary and extraordinary, natural and supernatural. The arts do so in many ways, but primarily by (1) mediating the mutually-informative dynamics of *aesthesis* and *ascesis*, and (2) by communicating in various and unique ways (or 'languages') some story

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<sup>118</sup> There is some contradiction in Harned's thought in the articulation of this principle. Sometimes he seems to argue that the virtues find their unity in the image of man as player, in the dynamic of moral vision, or more recently in the virtue of patience.

<sup>119</sup> Among these would be F. LeRon Shults, in his reflections on the classic transcendentals of goodness, truth and beauty in Shults and Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality*, 62f., and L. M. Hess, *Artisanal Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), and *Learning in a Musical Key*, the doctoral dissertation she wrote under Loder's supervision.

or storied-formed perspective of life. The arts in this way provide ways of vicariously or directly participating in such story-acts and can thereby indwell them at least for some period. In so doing, the arts afford opportunities to develop disciplines or virtues of careful observation, attentiveness, etc. as well as provide opportunities for surprising, delighting or disturbing aesthetic experiences that may result experiences of change. This catalytic paradigm can accommodate both a long-term process as well as a crisis-oriented interpretation of spiritual change and formation.

The task of the next two chapters is to explore how the dynamics considered largely in abstract terms in the preceding two chapters might find concrete exemplification in actual works of art. Matters of craft, content and context will be considered in a detailed examination of two contemporary artists, and how these elements converge in the construction of particular works and series of art and how such individual works and series form a cumulative narrative into which a viewer might enter and be changed by.



## Chapter 3

### Peter Howson: Harrowing Hell

I get a lot of letters from prisoners who love the work, there's something there that really means something to them.<sup>1</sup>

#### I. Aesthetics and Practice

Foundational motifs and styles of mature artists can often be perceived in germinal form in the work of their youth. At twelve years of age Peter Howson produced an oil painting of a Crucifix. Measuring 36 x 25 cm, it features a standard by nonetheless striking image of Christ on a cross, seemingly suspended in outer space, and an image of the Earth in the lower left hand corner with a large shadow of the Cross upon its surface. Howson biographer Robert Heller writes of this piece:

Crudely but accurately painted, with the livid flesh set off by a red loincloth, the agonized Christ is surrounded by swirling dark paint that seems to echo His agony. The shadow of the crucified figure at bottom left is an inspired and startling touch. By chance or by design (or both) this painting far transcends childishness.<sup>2</sup>

Heller proceeds to observe the 'slender but unbreakable thread' that connects the juvenile work with that of Howson's more recent *Stations of the Cross* series (2003), and how in both the child's and the adult's hands 'the weight of the suffering Christ can be felt...'<sup>3</sup> Not only is there a connective thread between the early *Crucifixion* and the *Stations* series, but a connective line lying implicitly beneath the early painting and a good many of Howson's works. Howson's art is that of the Man of Sorrows in many guises. In an interview with the actor and art collector

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Howson, Interview with Steven Berkoff, in *Peter Howson*, London: Flowers, 2006, 10.

<sup>2</sup> R. Heller, *Peter Howson*, London: Momentum, 2003, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 25.

Steven Berkoff, Howson speaks of a ‘strict religious upbringing’ and of a lonely childhood made pleasant by hours spent looking at artworks and making his own forays into the practice:

I think I was about four years old when my grandmother gave me a set of oil paints. I was interested mainly in Renaissance art, in Michelangelo, Leonardo, people like that. I was interested in violence even then – in fact I was obsessed by it. I used to do battle scenes – but they weren’t like childish drawings they were actually quite detailed... As I went on into teenage years, I became obsessive about things and I thought the world was going to end, apocalyptic even then. I was a recluse. I had few friends but I was very caught up in painting apocalyptic scenes. I looked at Dürer and Bosch, people like that...<sup>4</sup>

These strands of imaginative and artistic themes – apocalypse, violence, Last Judgment, swirling surrealism – find a kind of apotheosis in Howson’s 2007 *Harrowing of Hell*. If any single painting could be used as an introduction to Howson’s art and ‘story’ it might be this. A compositionally crowded canvas, with a spiraling design that leads the eye from the top right hand corner around to the top left hand corner and down along the left side, bottom, then back towards the right-hand center, to a stairway towards what appears to be an large open mouth, reminiscent of the entry to hell in several works of judgment day, cataclysm, and human loss. A river forms the floor of the painting upon which an over-crowded boat steered by an oarsman makes its way past pulsating crowds on shore: the Acheron theme that occupies a number of Howson’s works since 2005, the boatman ferrying lost souls across the River Styx. Howson and his daughter Lucie figure largely in several of these images, and they seem to be hinted at similarly in this work as well. An immediate setting of the picture seems to be the lower levels of a run-down part of an urban neighborhood; but this is a spiritual vision. From the top background the image of two men tied onto poles can be seen – a frequent motif of Howson’s work since his career began. Angelic figures, muscular and pugilistic - nothing like Raphael’s - fly about the top portions of the canvas, brandishing swords and appearing to be in conflict with the denizens of the lower parts of the painting, or guiding them toward their appointed places. Fear and despair characterize the visage of most of the participants in the painting. In the center of the canvas, in

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<sup>4</sup> Berkoff, *Peter Howson*, 6.

the vortex of this spiritual storm, is a depiction of a cruciform Jesus, suspended mid-air on an invisible Cross, while being pierced in the side by a Don Quixote figure, himself a recent addition to the Howsonian cast of characters, who along with the threateningly-masked figures, cap-wearing thugs, abandoned women, and forlorn daughters. Some are being rescued; some are headed for perdition. But they are all here: the angels and demons, the boxers and bullies, the threatened and vulnerable, all brought together around the figure of a crucified Christ in the center of apocalyptic maelstrom. Christ has descended into a hell-hole vision of Glasgow, which now serves as an image of the spiritual conflict that characterizes, for the artist, this present age.



*Harrowing of Hell*, 2007, oil on canvas, 198.5x244 cm

How would such a painting promote spiritual formation? What gospel message is found here? Who does it address? How might it function as a theological text? Reviews and commentary on Howson's art, critical or approving, usually include references to 'apocalypticism,' 'monumentalism,' male-oriented preoccupations, anxiety and violence. Social

realism and spiritual aspirations – the world under the shadow of the Cross – characterize Howson’s work from its very beginnings, and it is this dual orientation that seems necessary to make a fair assessment of his work.

This chapter considers Peter Howson’s art as a catalyst for spiritual formation. It will set an interpretive context for his work by tracing the trajectory of his career, and will consider some representative examples in greater detail. Reflections will be made along specifically theological lines in terms of the cumulative impact and ‘story’ expressed in his work, and how his emphases on conflict, suffering, and the presence of God might address different viewers.

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Peter Howson’s public career began as one of the ‘New Image Glasgow’ artists, the ‘New Glasgow Boys’ who were students of Alexander ‘Sandy’ Moffat at the Glasgow School of Art in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Moffat’s work and instruction is associated with a revival of figurative painting in European art. Much of this art tended toward social realism, and among Moffat’s fellow-travelers and students was seen as both a response to the predominantly abstract nature of contemporary art as well as the technique-oriented and domestic character of what they found in much of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Scottish art.<sup>5</sup>

The meaning of the medium of figurative art, for Moffat and those influenced by him, lies in the sense of its greater capacity for vitality, for narrative, for its dramatic rather than its decorative potentials, and born of, as is signal in Howson’s aesthetic, ‘a refreshing desire to communicate rather than from the more usual desire simply to be different.’<sup>6</sup> The New Image Glasgow exhibition of 1985 was seen as an opportunity to showcase some of the talent coming out of the Glasgow School as well as a protest against prevailing trends in ‘concept’ art and ‘Brit

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<sup>5</sup> See W. Hardie, *Scottish Painting: 1837 to the Present* (Glasgow: Waverly Books, 2010), 198-205. Hardie writes: Moffat describes the determination of the young friends [himself and John Bellany] to be artists of their own time, their questioning in late 1962 of the premise that modernity was synonymous with abstraction, and their search for a figurative mode capable of dealing with the realities of life in the twentieth century (202).

As Murdo MacDonald chronicles in his account of art in Scotland, Moffat, who taught painting at the Glasgow School from 1979 until his retirement in 2005:

...steered a generation of Glasgow figurative painters which included Steven Campbell (b. 1953), Adrian Wiszniewski (b. 1958), Peter Howson (b. 1958), Ken Currie (b. 1960), and Stephen Conroy (b. 1964). These painters became an identifiable Glasgow aspect of the New Image painting that was attracting so many artists both north and south of the Border during the early 1980’s. (*Scottish Art*, London [Thames & Hudson, 2005], 209-10).

<sup>6</sup> Hardie, *Scottish Painting*, 206.

Art' as it was coming to be known. The rivalry, at least from the figurative side, between these two schools can be vituperative. Howson's own pronouncements about contemporaries like Damien Hirst and Tracy Emin can sometimes be wince-inducing in its lack of charity or careful consideration. His contempt underscores the non-elitist, unpretentious approach to art that he wants to at least project.<sup>7</sup>

Howson's art mirrors the narrative arc of his life to a remarkable degree, and while the following is not an attempt to write a complete biographical account of his life, any meaningful reading of his work requires some awareness of the lived experiences in which they are implicated.

### **Youthful Preoccupations and Painful Experiences**

Howson's account of his youthful imagination reflects a typically boyish preoccupation with epic clash of arms and conflict. Howson himself uses the term 'apocalyptic' to describe some of his drawings, and attests to a morbid sense of the impending end of things. Raised in family with ties to but only sporadic involvement in the Baptist denomination, one can appreciate the sort of millennial accounts of the end of the world that he absorbed. The account of a sensitive childhood is darkened in early adolescence by the threat of violence at school and a pre-mature sexual encounter. Howson was subject to the kind of bullying culture associated with adolescent boys, and witnessed, as described differently in varying accounts, the tying up onto a pole of a young man on a beach near his Ayrshire home. The sexual encounter occurred when Howson was about 13 and involved an older female transient who temporarily roomed in the family home and who apparently in some way seduced the boy. Heller writes that 'Howson feels that his whole emotional development came to a jolting stop,' and besides multiplying conflicted feelings about the opposite sex and his own sexuality, further propelled Howson toward a solitary existence and alcohol abuse.<sup>8</sup>

Howson's experience at the Glasgow School of Art divides into two periods, the first and unsuccessful one when he was accepted at the age of 17, and a second and much more successful

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<sup>7</sup> See S. MacDonald, "Peter Howson Brands Brit Art "Garbage," *The Sunday Times*, 26 October 2008; [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/scotland/article5014357.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/scotland/article5014357.ece) (accessed 21/02/11).

<sup>8</sup> Heller, *Peter Howson* (2003), 10-11.

one when he returned two years later. Between these two periods lies the brief episode in the British military which, were it not for the presence – again – of socialized male bravado and brutality, would be comedic. Once again, however, in Howson's case suffering and shock led to insight and art. Indeed, it would be the drawings and pastels dating from the army experience that gained Howson re-admittance into the Glasgow School, but the attention of the tutor who would have a profound influence on the shape of Howson's subsequent career.

Impressed with the sketches drawn directly from Howson's experiences in the military, Moffat invited Howson to resume his studies, and became an important personal influence. Moffat curated the 1985 exhibition 'New Image Glasgow' which effectively launched Howson's career. From this point, Howson's public profile increased throughout the 1980's and 1990's, with successful exhibitions, remarkable sales and celebrity associations. For Howson himself, however, this period was characterized by a contrast 'between the undisciplined personal life and the disciplined act of artistic creation.'<sup>9</sup> In Alan Jackson's account of Howson's life, Howson reached a point of personal malaise and lack of direction by the early 1990's when the opportunity to serve as an artist commissioned by the Imperial War Museum arose in the midst of the Bosnian Civil War.<sup>10</sup>

### **Social Realism: 1980-1992**

Draughtsmanship and vivid characterization lie at the root of Howson's craft. Of the 'New Image Glasgow' aesthetic one reviewer wrote, 'Their style of strong drawing is combined with a fertile imagination and a generally extrovert approach.'<sup>11</sup> Labels such as 'Social Realist,' 'Neo-Expressionist,' 'Scottish Surrealist' identify aspects of Howson's complex body of work. His major oil paintings feature two techniques: a heavy impasto of distinctly Expressionistic affect, and a more highly finished, heavily glazed technique that renders paintings in a smooth, gauzy appearance.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> A. Jackson, *A Different Man: Peter Howson's Art from Bosnia and Beyond*, Mainstream Publishing, 1997

<sup>11</sup> "New Glasgow Boys at the Fleming Collection," accompanying brochure (London: The Fleming-Wyfold Art Foundation, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Heller records Howson's turn toward this glazing technique in the late 1980's. He writes, A particular area of new discovery came through exploring the full effects of glazing techniques, used to darken paintings down. He would draw out the figures, paint them in, add a strong glaze and then work into the figures again, adding another strong, transparent glaze, reworking once more, then adding yet another

Howson's work also features hundreds of quickly rendered works in pastel, crayon, ink and pencil. Many of the major oil paintings are preceded by dozens of workings of the basic motif or theme in pencil, ink or pastel. One example of this from his recent work is that of the *Stations of the Cross* (2003). Howson first produced a series of drawings intended to be translated into oil. Instead, he kept the drawing and produced another distinct series in oil.<sup>13</sup> Howson acknowledges the influence of Michelangelo, among others from the Italian Renaissance. One can see this in his characteristic muscularity of nearly all of his figures, including women,<sup>14</sup> as well as in the flowing, baroque busyness of his canvases. Howson's technique and style produce images of nervous, pent-up energy. In an interview with Steven Berkoff, Howson reflects on the origins of the cast of characters featured so prominently in his early work:

Berkoff: Where did you get the idea to not only describe the muscularity of the figures, but to give a dynamic rendering of the sub-class, the down-and-outs, the hobos?

Howson: Something happened to me in the Army, I think. I was never that interested before. I was interested in apocalyptic things before, maybe, but never in the Underclass so much. Certainly in the Army something happened to me. When I moved to work in Gallowgate as well, because that's where all the down-and-outs

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strong, transparent glaze, and again reworking to build up the impasto. Sometimes the paintings were done thinly, but the artist nearly always built up a thick layer of paint, coupled with the use of strong glazes. This is a method that Howson especially likes for its power to enrich a painting. (R. Heller, *Peter Howson*, London: Mainstream Publishing, 1993], 33).

Heller further elaborates:

He shifts technically between painting thick and painting thin. Sometimes he uses many glazes, sometimes no glazes at all. He can paint spontaneously or paint with studious care, taking a very long time over a painting. The choice between a 'spontaneous impasto' or the very thick impasto is simply a matter of taste. But there's nothing uncontrolled about the execution, 'because every painting I do is controlled', with the objective of achieving 'a compositional rhythmic quality.'

From time to time, Howson uses another technique of oil painting: a milky glaze which is a mixture of white and a transparent lake – alizarin lake, or transparent lake, or a brown pink lake, or an Indian yellow mixed in with white. The semi-transparent glaze tends to tone down the background and to smoother over, say, an excess of sharp, jagged edges. Used in the background, it creates a feeling of mistiness, as in the long painting, *Age of Apathy* (1992), where the mistiness creates a pointed contrast with the halogen intensity of the foreground figures. (Heller, *Howson*, (1993), p. 71).

In the case of *Just Another Bloody Saturday*, the glazing effect achieves the opposite effect: to tone down the foreground figures of the stadium crowd and highlight the background figures of the football players and the stadium lights.

<sup>13</sup> Heller, *Howson* (2003), 227.

<sup>14</sup> See for example his *Madonna* series (2002) as well as the rarely seen and controversial *Crucifixion* (1999) featuring Howson's female model Elaine Johnson nude in an explicit pose on a cross.



are in Glasgow, and the prostitutes and the drug addicts and all that. You get bad things happen there...

Berkoff: ...and they always have the most interesting...

Howson: ...it's brilliant, yeah, it's great. I mean: these people are real people, that's the thing. I met some brilliant people there, that's where I discovered you could make something heroic out of it. Gallowgate in Glasgow is an amazing place really. I enjoyed working with... I got interested in... football hooligans! There's something about the way that they dance and the way that they fight.

Berkoff: Well, that's working class energy, there's a...

Howson: ...a creativity...

Berkoff: ...it is, whether it's boxing or whether it's football, there's a certain dynamic.

Howson: people don't understand it, you see a lot of people don't have a clue. They don't know why that is. They just think of these people as being scum basically and they can be so wrong about them. There is that tremendous energy.<sup>15</sup>



*The Heroic Dosser*, 1987, oil on canvas, 213.5 x 213.5 cm

<sup>15</sup> Berkoff, *Peter Howson*, 7-8.



Howson's basic subject matter in the early works is that of the underclass character, but with something disturbing or poignant lurking beneath the surface. Among the most prominent is that of the 'dossier,' the benign but watchful homeless transient who himself poses no threat, but is sometimes the object of victimization in some of the paintings. His grandest statement of this early motif is *The Heroic Dossier*. Another is that of the Boxer. Big and buff, he is depicted more often in poses of lonely training or in larger settings where he lumbers carelessly but calmly through a macabre scene. Glaswegian pub culture and the people who populate it also figures highly in Howson's early work. The Saracen Head Inn, reputedly the oldest pub in Glasgow and located in the depressed Gallowgate district, forms the backdrop of a series of anonymous portraits and intimate encounters. Art critic Waldemar Januszczak situates these works within a tradition and the artistic influences behind them:

Scenes of lowlife have traditionally served a moralizing purpose in art. In the Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century inn interiors of Steen or Teniers the carousing peasants were shown drunk and in *flagrante delicto* as a warning to the audience of the dangers of moral turpitude. Howson's art clearly has no such Calvinistic ambitions. Nor is it, like the German café art of the Thirties, a radical political attack on the morals of the bourgeois. His deliberate use of caricature and heightened expression may be compared to the painterly exaggerations of Dix or Grosz but his iconographic ambitions are entirely different.

Howson's heroes, his arm-wrestlers, dossiers and boxers are victims of the system but also victims of their own families and of their own troubled psyches. They are existential heroes of modern life tormented by sexual and religious difficulties, bad dreams, failed hopes. The nervous backward glances and haunted, inward-looking eyes that fill his portraiture are expressions of sucking nameless urban fears.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Waldemar Januszczak, Introduction for *Saracen Heads – Peter Howson* (London: Angela Flowers Gallery, 1987), 4-5. Januszczak's observation that 'However low they might have slipped down the social ladder, Howson's subjects are never left without dignity' (5) is true but perhaps applies to the male subjects almost exclusively. Women in this period of his work function as objects and are far less individualized as characters than are the male subjects.

Besides the backdrops of pubs, clubs and bedrooms is the omnipresence of Glasgow itself. Howson's renderings of Glasgow are of a recognizable but generalized nature. The banks of the Clyde are frequently featured, as well as the bridges and the tall, seemingly lifeless buildings, which appear like abandoned social housing units. A frequent motif is that of the indistinct church building with a singular window out of which light protrudes, like an electric torch.



*Blind Leading the Blind VIII*, 1991, oil on canvas,  
244 x 183 cm

Where dossers, boxers and occupants of bars seem to represent the benign “Everyman” in Howson’s pantheon, more menacing are the figures of the ‘Patriots,’ so-called because of Howson’s avowed hatred of mindless nationalism. Blank-eyed, idiotic-looking hulks with characteristic white caps on their heads with arms outstretched in grotesque, fascist-type gestures. These are the bully-types that occupy so many of Howson’s paintings even up to the present. Where the bullies are, the victims are not far off. The characteristic victim in many of Howson’s early works is that of male figures tied onto poles. These victims are always adults, always male, but depicted variously as muscular men stripped to the waist to the more helpless dossier-type. The invitation to a psychological analysis of this image seems unavoidable, but it is

apparently rooted in the childhood incident that Howson witnessed while he was growing up in Ayrshire. It can also be seen as a transmogrified vision of the Crucifixion, and seems to function as such in the many paintings and drawings in which it occurs between the 1980's and early 1990's.<sup>17</sup>

In Howson's 1989 piece *Death of Innocence* the focus is that of a dosser-figure, tied upon a large pole and being raised with ropes by a thronging gang of the patriot-type thugs, arms outstretched in mocking salute to the helpless victim. Prostitutes appear to be watching from an arched wall in the background. Figures armed with clubs jostle and nearly fall off the high embankment that forms the top of the canvas. A mysterious lone hooded figure, holding what appears to be a small Cross, sits at the foot of the pole, perhaps the next victim of this melee, perhaps simply a sign of sympathy and identification. A basically two-level composition, it nonetheless in its size and effect anticipates the *Harrowing of Hell* panorama with its victim surrounded by in this case evil triumphant.

A work like this invites the viewer to think about where they might be in such a scene; or how they are implicated in such events. Some viewers from a certain time and background may easily be able to identify the antagonists in this canvas, having known of such gang culture in other places. Many may not directly identify with the image of the older victim or with the particulars of his plight, but the painting could raise questions and lead into a discussion about ostracization, bullying, or of scapegoating.

This image also reflects Howson's absorption of Max Beckmann (1884-1950), whose work in its colours, violence and relinquishment of careful detail aims at emotional effect. One example of this in Beckmann's early work is *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*. Here, Christ defends a kneeling woman from a threatening, accusatory crowd. Hand and arm gestures suggest emotional and moral standpoints; fists versus open palms, pointing fingers versus imploring hands.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Of the source of this image, see Heller, *Howson* (1993), 10; Jackson, *Different Man*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> R. Spieler, *Max Beckmann* (Cologne: Taschen, 2011), 33. 'The Deposition and Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery... are strikingly re-interpreted as generalised metaphors of guilt, suffering and cruelty.'



Max Beckmann, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1917, oil on canvas, 150 x 128 cm

Perhaps Howson's greatest achievement from this period also reflects Beckmann's influence. The ten paintings that make-up the series *Blind Leading the Blind* (1991, oil on canvas, 244 x 183 cm) invites comparison to Beckmann's series of ten drawings entitled *Hell* (1919, prints, variously sized). Depicting various tableaux from postwar urban settings, Beckmann captured the social turmoil of post-war Germany.



Max Beckmann, *Das Martyrium* (*Hell* series, Plate 3), 1919, 54.5 x 75 cm

Writing of Beckmann's *Hell* series, Reinhard Spieler provides insight applicable to Howson's work in the *Blind* series in terms of treatment of subject matter and artistic lineage:

Although Beckmann pays detailed attention to current social and economic factors and even to the crucial political events of the day... yet in their totality these prints create a timeless picture of human society. They show the insanity of a society in which each human being has become the other's hell, with an intensity unmatched by previous artists unless it be by Francisco de Goya in his *Desastres de la Guerra*. It is the universal validity of the message that distinguishes Beckmann's cycle from the graphic works of other artists at that time, such as [German Expressionist George] Grosz, whose message was more tightly bound to events and politics of the day.<sup>19</sup>

The final painting in the *Blind* series is, like *Harrowing of Hell*, a culminating work featuring a final confrontation of all the characters. In this case, positioned in the center and drawing one's attention is the figure of a woman, skimpily-dressed and perched atop a narrow brickwork, looking passively upon the waxing mob of bully-automatons as they variously accuse, demand, and denounce the female figure, which appears to be defended by the dossier and preacher types of the previous paintings in the series. From the top right hand corner of the canvas a church-like building is set, with its characteristic singularly round window out of which a strange light emits. A nearly exact replication of this tableau but more dramatic and harrowing in its affect is the *Age of Apathy*. This painting features rows of pinioned men on poles, surrounded by the same deluded mob of bullies.

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<sup>19</sup> Spieler, *Beckmann*, 44.



*Age of Apathy*, 1992, oil on canvas 91.5 x 242 cm

The men tied to poles invite association with Christ. The image of the sexualized female in the center of the compositions, who seem to simply tempt the wanton proclivities of the benighted mob, adds to the ethically ambiguous atmosphere of the painting. What is clear is that the world in these paintings is a dark, fraught place lit, especially in the *Age of Apathy*, only by the jaundiced light from the church-like building. The 1992 work and its title do manage to highlight one consistent vice denounced by Howson throughout his career: apathy. As he revealed in one interview, ‘I live and work for reaction, whether it’s good or bad. I hate apathy.’<sup>20</sup> Perhaps this is a clue toward responding to this and many of Howson’s paintings: to respond in some way, any way, to assume some standpoint when a particular rendition of the world denies an easy answers for one. In so doing Howson confronts the viewer with an aspect of the void that James Loder speaks of especially in its social dimension. Responding to such social void might represent a significant challenge to spiritual formation.

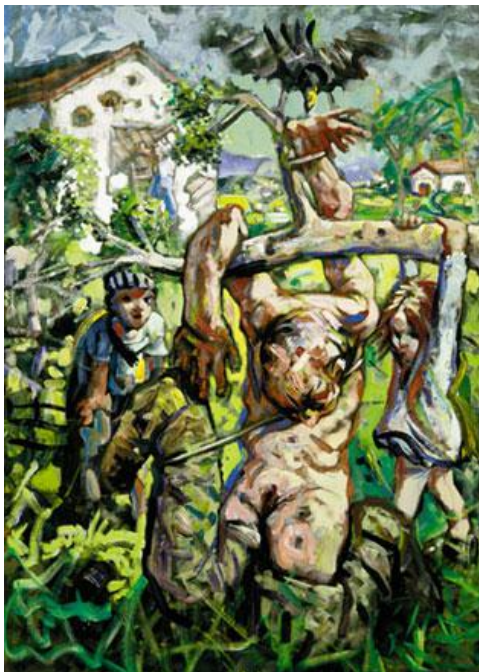
### **Bosnian Turning Point: mid-90’s to 2002**

Howson’s art in the mid-nineties is dominated by his work commissioned by the Imperial War Museum as part of its documentation of the Bosnian civil-war (1992-95). The Bosnian episode in many ways simply intensified the pessimistic, bully-haunted world that Howson already knew and painted. The style in many of the Bosnian paintings and pastels become even

<sup>20</sup> E. Schulte, interview with Peter Howson, *Famine*, exhibition book (Glasgow: St Mungo Museum, 2009), 7.



more like late Van Gogh, the Van Gogh of the *Roots and Tree Trunks* (1890), intensely expressionistic. *Plum Grove*, for example, depicts a man strung up in a contorted way on a tree, stripped to the waist, apparently the victim of castration and dismemberment. Two children gawk at the figure, while a crow, perched atop to utmost limb, appears to prepare for a meal. The painting effectively accomplishes at least two affects. One is the depiction of the ugly reality of wartime atrocity. The Bosnian conflict was particularly characterized by a human-obliterating dimension of ethnic hatred. On the other hand, the painting has powerful allusions that transcend its immediate and important subject. The suggestion of a cruciform allusion is difficult to miss. Contemporization of the crucifixion theme haunts much of Howson's oeuvre. This particular painting underscores the passive victimhood of the central figure, that is, his being reduced to that of an object of uncomprehending gaze, and the reduction of his body to carrion flesh. This is the fate Jesus subjected Himself to, and avoided only because of the circumstances surrounding a religious festival, the fugitive kindness of followers and friends who provided temporary interment, and of course the vindication of being raised. But this fate is an important and often overlooked dimension of the experience of crucifixion. Often the theme is mitigated or the viewer's distress assuaged with allusions to the Resurrection, a move that has some theological merit and validity. But in this picture Howson confronts the viewer with the stark and simple reality of lynching, a fate suffered by many people throughout history and not unrelated to the experience of Jesus.



*Plum Grove*, 1994, oil on canvas, 215 x 152.5

Also included in the Bosnian series is *Hound*, a study in brightly contrasting colours showing a dog hung by the neck, and two scenes of rape, *Serb and Muslim*, and *Croatian and Muslim*, the latter bearing a striking similarity to the composition of the earlier military series showing the humiliation of a new recruit. As in the earlier drawing, the victim in *Croatian* is being raped from behind while being held down over an open toilet. In a subtly suggestive compositional move in the latter work, the accomplice in the assault has one hand upon the woman's head, and another partially covering what appears to be a family portrait hung on the wall, as if to signal the violation of a whole family and not just an individual.<sup>21</sup>



*Croatian and Muslim*, 1994, oil on canvas, 213 x 152.5 cm

Alan Jackson documents Howson's entire Bosnian experience, and in that account Howson's experience is depicted as having been personally cathartic and clarifying, especially after a return tour of Bosnia. Howson indicates that the experience further stirred his latent Christian faith, although a more complete re-conversion still waited. What seems to be an

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<sup>21</sup> Admittedly Howson did not witness the scenes he depicts, but justifies them on the basis of their testimonial evidence. He seems to be clearly referencing whatever he saw in his army days to what he supposes took place in Bosnia. The psychological connections suggested by the similarities are intriguing. See R. Crampton, "Facing Fear: Peter Howson in Bosnia," in *Peter Howson: Bosnia* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1994), 14.



intentional allusion to Golgotha occurs in a pastel and chalk picture entitled *Ustazi*. A lone Croat soldier walks down a small road, casually passing what appear to be three women impaled on stakes.



*Ustazi*, 1994, pastel and chalk on paper, 70 x 83 cm

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Self-portraiture figures regularly in Howson's work. From the mid-nineties there appears to be an increase and intensification of this motif. One is a double self-portrait that was filmed during its creation. Originally entitled simple *Self Portrait*, Howson renamed it *Jekyll and Hyde*. There is no clear distinction, moral or otherwise, between the two portraits except for angle. One assumes that for Howson it somehow signifies two aspects of his personality in conflict. More self-excoriating is the 1995 series *The Rake's Progress*, where Howson presents himself in the guise of Tom Rake in his road to perdition, led on by the tempting Nick Shadow.

Motifs and themes from the mid to late nineties included such self-portraits, along with the familiar tableaux of Glasgow and the haunted cast of Howsonian regulars, including the boxer motif. A new and frequently present image from this point is that of his daughter, Lucie, diagnosed, as he is, with Asperger's Syndrome. Paintings with more obviously explicit Christian imagery and reference increase, including an image of Christ close-up on the Cross (*In Terra Pax*), a contemporized setting of *The Last Supper* and, more controversially *The Crucifixion*

featuring a very frankly positioned nude female model tied upon a cross. The direct juxtaposition of religious and sexual imagery is clear, but the point of the composition remains vague.

Perhaps the most successful of this spiritual-sexual motif is that of *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. Paintings of the temptations of St Anthony the desert hermit have a long tradition. The portrait of Anthony in Howson's rendition is retrieved from the familiar heroic dossier stock of caricatures. Holding forth a cross in his hand, he makes his way not among the tradition demons of the eight deadly thoughts but rather through a writhing labyrinth of nude and semi-nude temptresses. Erotically-stylized postures and positions inform the iconography of this painting that takes its place among a tradition of such portraits of Anthony battling the distractions from ascetical resolve. The presence of such erotized females continues another familiar dimension of Howson's art of this whole period.



*Temptation of St Anthony*, 1998, oil on canvas, 244 x 183 cm

One aspect of this St Anthony painting (Howson has executed a number of them in various media) is the new determination of facial expression found on the central figure. Anthony is not

lost or bewildered, as are so many of Howson's characters. Anthony here appears to know where he is going and what he is about. Here is a saint, and as Rowan Williams helpfully suggests:

Some of our problems certainly arise from a very shallow idea of what freedom means, as if it were first and foremost a matter of consumer choice, being faced with a range of possibilities with no pressure to choose one rather than another. But we have to reckon with the freedom that comes in not being distracted from what we determine to do. Saints are often recognised by this freedom from distraction. They may not be – subjectively – eager to do what they are going to do, but they have a mature and direct discernment of what ‘must’ be done if they are to be faithful to the truth they acknowledge.<sup>22</sup>

This is an image relatively rare in Howson's work up to this point (with the exception of the some of the boxer and dossier motifs). Here in St Anthony is a model of holy wisdom, an icon of the male pilgrimage toward wisdom. Such an image can speak to men in the midst of their temptations, but such a discussion would invite some qualification. Women are not the male problem, as if one could or should in some way remove or punish them. Such reflections would need to be brought to bear in a full-orbed and mature consideration of this painting.

### **Current Motifs and Themes: 2002 to Present**

In the arc of Howson's biography, the year 2000 marks a significant turning point. In a life characterized by personal low points, that year was marked by complete collapse. Alcohol and drug abuse had taken a toll on his life. In Robert Heller's telling only love for his daughter provided motivation to go on in life. The vulnerability his inebriation placed her in – one evening she walked out of his Glasgow apartment into the night alone for several hours – served to

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<sup>22</sup> R. Williams, “Making Moral Choices,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed., R. Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5.

indicate to Howson that he needed to address his addictions and lifestyle in a through-going manner.<sup>23</sup>

The art produced in that year is also characterized by a frenetic energy and what appears to be heightened usage of symbolic motifs. This would include a series featuring tigers. The central work in this series, *Hotel Imperial – The Last Tigers* (2000), is reminiscent of a Roman era frieze of battling gladiators or soldiers. One cannot help thinking about Howson's juvenile works of vast battle scenes. But here a cast of naked and semi-naked men engage in various forms of to-the-death conflict with tigers. The men and tigers fill the foreground of the work, but the entire tableaux is replete with imagery reminiscent of earlier works: a fiery-red factory which seem to consume human figures on the far left hand side, balanced by what appears to be a brothel scene in the upper right, including voluptuous nude temptresses and a squalid table scene with what appears to be perhaps the sale of a child taking place. The tigers invite a symbolic reading of human conflict and chaos – within and without – made more poignant with the accompanying moral comment of what appears to be the sleeping, useless father figure and his vulnerable daughter threatened with being engulfed in the chaos.

*The Beggar's Road* (2000) is another crowd-scene tableau, this one introducing the motif of the strong, tall father figure carrying on his shoulders the Lucie/daughter figure. Set in the outskirts of a stylized Glasgow background, with nude and semi-nude figures writhing, vomiting, fighting, crawling, and otherwise making their way out from a pub and towards some unknown or unclear destination, except that it is away from the pub and the sordid convolutions of those still emerging from its environs. In the deep background is what appears to be a clear reminiscence of the three stakes featured in the 1994 *Ustazi* composition – allusive indications perhaps of a Christian point of destination.

*Beggar's Road* serves as a general prologue to the series exhibited under the title *The Third Step* (2002), the title derived from the Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, which Howson joined while in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation clinic. Perhaps the most compositionally striking and symbolically convincing work is *The First Step* (2000). Several motifs inform this work. Here on a large canvas is featured the image of a bald, nude man making his way over broken bottles and beer cans toward a destination with a look of hope and

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<sup>23</sup> Heller, *Howson* (2003), 154-55. See also 'Howson Steps in With Twelve Paintings to Help Alcoholics beat the Bottle,' [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4156/is\\_20030518/ai\\_n12582592/pg\\_2/?tag=content:coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4156/is_20030518/ai_n12582592/pg_2/?tag=content:coll) (accessed 28/02/2011).

determination and a young girl on his shoulders (clearly Lucie again), in spite of being burdened by tempting and demonic figures literally on his back, grappling his flesh with hooks and rope. The painting signals a narrative of movement from darkness to light, and is rendered in Howson's more highly finished, heavily glazed style.<sup>24</sup> In a similarly rendered painting entitled *The Third Step* (2001), a single figure of a nude male, scarred in like manner and with the same facial features as in *First Step*, is crawling with a sense of determination toward a church building upon which hangs a large Crucifix, with a shaft of light from the opening clouds above illuminating it. The symbolic statement seems clear, helped by its title. In the A.A. program, the Third Step is the point of acknowledging absolute dependence upon a 'higher power.' Christian theme and symbolism are merged in a more explicit manner.

These two oil paintings, whose imagery and titles so clearly allude to an addiction recovery program, might be effective texts' for those in recovery programs, in need of recovery, or studying recovery. They are vivid depictions of the experience of recovery, of what it might feel like to begin the struggle up out of addiction and dependency. Compositionally *The First Step* is more effective, invoking again the St Antony fighting the demons theme. Here that theme is made more poignant and perhaps closer to the experience of many people in recovery with the allusion to the father and daughter relationship. This is not a solitary saint resisting temptation; this is a parent, beset with the associations of his past, rescuing not only himself but his little girl. Like the earlier St Anthony painting, the central character has eyes set ahead and is unwavering.

The image in *The Third Step* of the recovering addict prostrate before a Cross is striking (and one worked out in several drawing and pastels), but how many people would identify being naked and crawling toward a church is more questionable. Perhaps the figure could have been dressed and leaning weakly upon the wall, gazing toward the church with its prominent Crucifix, or in a room naked and prostrate, gazing up at a Crucifix on the wall. But the point of the painting is clear, that Christ is the Higher Power and whatever it takes the addict must avail themselves of His agency which, the painting implies, is obtained by gazing upon Him. Looking at or seeing Jesus as an expression of faith is strong a Johannine theme in the New Testament and perhaps for the less aesthetically inclined its blunt statement of self-abandonment and spiritual power would prove more effective than greater subtlety of composition.

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<sup>24</sup> The motif of a male figure carrying a girl, in the familiar image of his daughter Lucie, occurs in several paintings, drawing and pastels from the 2000-2001. She remains a frequent motif to the present.



*The First Step*



*The Third Step*

Themes of sexuality do not by any means disappear from Howson's oeuvre, however. The most outstanding example of this is the controversial *Madonna* series which featured the image of the popular singer drawn not from life but from, as Howson put it, from 'my imagination, my seedy mind.'<sup>25</sup> In this series, sexuality and spirituality are once again placed in close juxtaposition. The image of Madonna – it can hardly be said to capture a naturalistic depiction of the singer herself but more of a generalization - takes on the guise of a totemic temptress – at least for heterosexual men.

The motifs of human chaos, down-and-outs struggling to move up-and-out, nude females, fathers and daughters and, increasingly center-stage, Christ Himself, culminate in a series exhibited in 2008 under the title *Harrowing of Hell*. Two of the main canvases of this series, the terrestrial *Everlasting Man* and the sub-terrestrial *Harrowing of Hell*, center on a crucified Christ. The first reflects the standard format of Crucifixion scenes, but here rendered outside of contemporary Glasgow, within the familiar Howson derelict urban landscape populated with the typical Howson crowd scene. The painting is made compositionally interesting with the suggestion that the entire scene is surrounded with a Crown of Thorns.

As suggested earlier, the *Harrowing of Hell* along with *The Everlasting Man* represents culminating works in the body of Howson's art. Here the inner logic of so much of Howson's art is made explicit. The men on poles finally become the Man on the Cross. The outskirts of Glasgow become the new Golgotha, where Jesus is crucified outside the city. Both are executed

<sup>25</sup> E. Mahoney, "It's Only My Seedy Mind," <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2002/apr/11> (accessed 24/02.2011).



in Howson's social realist mode, not the highly expressionistic one of *Plum Grove* or the individualized realism of his portraits, but the mode of the *Blind Leading the Blind* series, the *Death of Innocence*, the *Age of Apathy*. Such a mode invites observation of its detailed complexity as opposed to simple statement or identifiable accuracy.

How might such paintings catalyze spiritual formation? Taken on their own, such paintings promote a vivid, imaginative engagement with their subject matter. Seen within the context of Howson's career, they seem to epitomize the trajectory of artistic agenda. Consider *The Everlasting Man* (its title presumably drawn from Chesterton's popular text). What would the Crucifixion have looked like had it taken place somewhere today? What is the symbolic significance of Jesus having been executed "outside the city?" What would the crowds have looked like?

One impressive achievement of *The Everlasting Man* and others of similar subject matter is the way Howson incorporates fairly traditional images of Jesus and even of the women at the foot of the Cross within a contemporary setting without any jarring or disconnected juxtaposition. They form integrated compositions. The thieves are naked, Jesus wears the tattered remains of undergarments, and even Mary in her body-length robe could be passed over simply as a woman covering herself from the Scottish elements. Howson obviously aims at contemporizing the Gospel story, perhaps to satisfy some desire on his part to 'see' the biblical scene in his own day, or to help his viewers to do so. Doing so may highlight the 'social realist' implications of the biblical narrative and by doing so enable viewers to more existentially identify with the material.

On the other hand, the exact reason for Jesus' being killed, and who the culprits are, is not made clear. It would almost seem that whatever transpired, most of the crowd is too *apathetic*, that Howsonian original sin, to have done anything to prevent it. They gawk and gaze, but do nothing. One thug with a club in his hand seems sufficient to keep them all at bay. The only exceptions to this are the four figures positioned at the foot of Jesus, bemoaning His plight and standing with Him, and the crouching figure of Lucie, back to the viewers, facing the Cross. In this case the painting is more of a *social* rather than a *political* commentary on the Passion. There is *theological* commentary; in the lower right hand corner, a dark, bearded figure, the only one looking at the viewer, appears to be holding a rod around which a snake is coiled. Is it the brazen serpent, the Mosaic intimation of the raised object upon which one looks and is forgiven (John

3:14)? If this is so, this strengthens the impression of a basically Johannine orientation in Howson's theology, with its characteristic antitheses of light and darkness, life and death, sight and blindness.<sup>26</sup> When further associated with the Book of Revelation, with the world as the locus of rebellion against God, this Johannine connection becomes even stronger.

The *Harrowing* takes us with Christ into the underworld, that is, the underworld of Glasgow, somewhere in its lower canal or sewage region. A single standard Howson street lamp illuminates the center of the painting. Florescent light emerges from within the cavern in the background, while the headlamps of an ill-defined automobile point in the direction of the viewer. Christ appears *in mortis*, His salvific potency again found, it would appear, in gazing toward Him, with the longing and hope that such gazing implies. Perhaps this is how such art can catalyze spiritual formation, by being dramatic, apathy-challenging objects for *visio divina*, divine seeing, contemplative consideration of the world from an apocalyptic perspective.<sup>27</sup>



*The Everlasting Man*, 2008, oil on canvas, 198.5 x 244 cm

<sup>26</sup> See Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. ed., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 526, 532-539.

<sup>27</sup> According to Michael Christensen, the phrase, from the Latin meaning 'sacred seeing' and deliberately echoing the more familiar practice of *lectio divina* or 'sacred reading,' appears on several websites devoted to arts and spirituality. Christensen writes:

The postmodern practice of *visio divina*, combined with the ancient practice of *lectio divina*, provides an integrative, sensory, spiritual approach to connecting with divine creativity and presence in sacred word and image. (H. Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*, ed. M. J. Christensen and R. J. Laird [London: SPCK, 2011], 139).



## II. Critical Review and Reception

The value of critical reviews of an artist's work lies in access to *informed opinion* which can serve to provide the theologically trained viewer with aspects of a given work's technical dimensions, its place within a tradition or canon, and as a check against unwarranted or misleading readings of an artwork or *oeuvre*. It is not difficult to find critical reviews of Howson's work. What is challenging is to locate balanced reviews that are neither preening nor hysterical. Many are mixed, and perhaps this is what Howson's type of work, both its style and its subject matter, will always generate. At the very least, Howson's work inspires response.

A sympathetic survey of his work and style accompanied Howson's 2010 *The Night of the Soul* exhibit at Flowers Gallery in London. The accompanying catalog contains the following description:

Peter Howson is an artist of disarming visual honesty. His work, which at different stages in his career has celebrated allegory and allegorised celebrity, depicting the landscapes of modern war and internal struggle with Goyaesque brilliance, is testament to an obsessive occupation with the dark recesses of existence, a drive that he has channeled, in recent years, into a robust faith and spiritualism. Howson is a compelling storyteller, adept at both casting a light on the disenfranchised peripheries and embodying the universal Everyman. The new works shown here – an arresting group of portraits inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy* – make flesh the artist's journey out of alcoholism, drug addiction and compulsive behaviour and his ongoing search for redemption. Like Dante, whose portrait here strikingly mirrors the artist's own, Howson's intimate experience of the maverick and excessive, sinful and strange (whether pictured as a teeming urban underbelly or an epic allegorical underworld) inform and animate his artistic and existential campaign.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Artslant, 'Peter Howson – The Night of the Soul,' <http://www.artslant.com/lon/events/show/123183-the-night-of-the-soul> (accessed 1/03/2011).

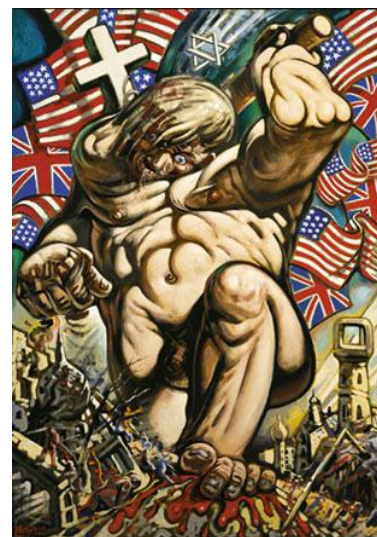
One artist and weblog journalist situates Howson's work within a highly expressionistic figurative tradition:

The paintings belong to the most powerful images of contemporary figurative art. They depict women being raped, castrated men, hanged animals, ragged refugees and above all – anonymous faces, formidable, unforgettable physiognomies of those who went through hell. These works have the drama, fantasy, emotional intensity and visionary quality of [William] Blake's and [Hieronymus] Bosch's paintings. They were born from sincerity and an authentic spiritual pain, from passion and courage, from a sinful fascination by the evil side of the human nature and a heroic struggle against it. It has to be said that the contemporary art world seems to be nothing like that...<sup>29</sup>

Neil Cameron's review of Howson's *Madonna* exhibit in 2002 produced this overview:

The other Madonna painting shows her as a less-than-ideal odalisque somewhat after the style of Tamara de Lempika, while the drawings fall between soft-porn and portrait sketches not dissimilar to the kind done for a few Euros outside the Louvre. In the same room is *Crusader*, a painting of cartoon-like crudity showing a bloodthirsty figure representing Britain, the US and Israel bludgeoning Islamic culture to destruction. This particular work would not look out of place in a teenage art class.

But despite many works seeming to be indicative of an almost adolescent mind-set, it would be utterly wrong to castigate the whole exhibition. Howson is at his best when he depicts what he himself has experienced or knows. His series of drawings of downtrodden, exhausted figures in churchyards are emotionally charged



<sup>29</sup>K. Skonieczna, 'Peter Howson – An 'Extreme' Painter,' <http://skonieczna.wordpress.com/2007/11/02/peter-howson-an-extreme-painter> (accessed 1.03.2011).

and humane, and his pastel *The Fifth Step* is a bravura exercise in gestural drawing. Why then does he invite ridicule with his weedy copies after such artistic giants as Callot and Velasquez? Rarely have I seen an exhibition including work of such variable quality by one artist.<sup>30</sup>

An even more jaundiced but nonetheless insightful perspective appeared in *The Socialist Worker*. Reviewing Howson's *Andrew: Portrait of a Saint* exhibit in Edinburgh in 2007, Neil Davidson's survey of Howson's style and review deserves extended citation:

Howson was one of the so-called New Glasgow Boys, a group of mainly figurative artists that emerged in the mid-1980's and included Ken Currie and Stephen Campbell. Howson's representations of the human form are monumental, grotesquely muscular and – regardless of the supposed gender involved – invariably masculine.

The style is at any rate distinctive, whatever one thinks of it. So too is his subject matter, a Scotland populated by down-and-outs, drunks, prostitutes and men either on the edge of violence or actually engaged in it.

As an antidote to both shallow boosterism about the 'New Scotland' and the moral vacuity of most 'Brit-art,' this has some attractions. But the pleasures of negative critique apart, Howson's work is problematic in terms of both form and content.

Monstrous though Howson's figures are, his approach is highly conventional. And having established a style, Howson works it to death, repeating but never developing.

The current exhibit has one central work, *The Crucifixion of St. Andrew*, but much of the rest is taken up with preparatory studies and sketches, which are often more interesting than the paintings – some of the pen and ink 'studies for Saint Andrew,' for example recall Picasso's later work.

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<sup>30</sup> N. Cameron, 'Enfant Terrible? Peter Howson and The Third Step,' <http://news.scotsman.com/topstories/Enfant-terrible-Peter-Howson-The.2318724.jp> (accessed 28 Jan. 2011).



The most convincing works here are the handful of paintings of the faces of his main protagonists. These show Howson at his best, not least because they exclude the portentous clutter of the major canvases.

Taken in the context of his work as a whole, *The Crucifixion* itself resembles the latest installment of a plotless graphic novel about the aftermath of the apocalypse – although this apocalypse is a spiritual absence, a moral wilderness, rather than the result of war or environmental collapse.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, from the very Brit Art guild that Howson so regularly depreciates comes this brief dispatch from Howson’s 2008 *Harrowing of Hell* exhibit:

The thing is, I’m never going to like Peter Howson unless he stops being Peter Howson, so let’s just think about what’s here. Huge brown paintings of men of angled muscly flesh falling into a writhing pit of human bodies and climbing over each other in order to survive. Having come out the other end of a difficult drug-addiction period, Howson, it follows, populates his world with some pure bodily suffering, including some major fetishising of Jesus Christ and the Passion. It’s

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<sup>31</sup> N. Davidson, “Peter Howson: Andrew, Portrait of a Saint,” <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=10434> (accessed 21/02/2011).

classic rivers-of-blood-and-shit stuff, but what bothers me is that, for a man of so much experience, the aesthetics of these visions look like the imaginings of a Gothic, war-fascinated teenager who reads a lot of Terry Pratchett.<sup>32</sup>

Positive assessment of Howson's work is found in the exhibit catalogs and, of course, in the several book-length considerations of his life and work. Such reviews praise Howson's combination of arresting subject matter executed in an equally arresting manner. They tend to be more forgiving of the repeated motifs and ideas and see in them reflections of the artist's present life experience.

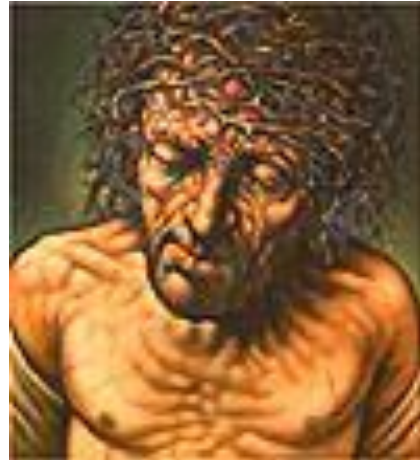
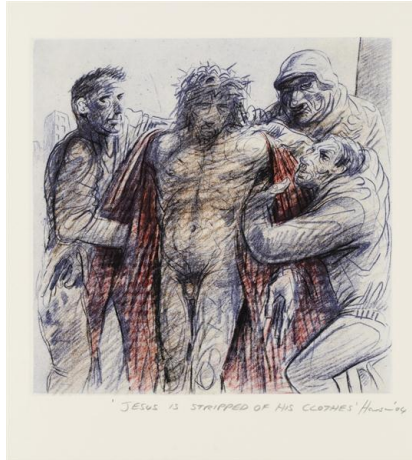
The unevenness in Howson's output, acknowledged even by sympathetic reviewers such as Robert Heller, can be accounted for because of an over-reliance upon imagination, as opposed to careful observation. Perhaps part of the power of the *Stations of the Cross* series is the dynamic of an exchange between free imagination and the control of an accepted tradition. The parameters and iconic strictures that Howson accepted in his rendering of the series forced him to new depths of imaginative engagement with the subject matter, as opposed to a more free-floating, undisciplined gamut of imaginative impulses.<sup>33</sup> What perhaps needs to be borne in mind when critiquing Howson is his commitment to arresting effect over illustrative accuracy, and his challenge he seeks to make to moral, political and spiritual apathy.

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<sup>32</sup> J.J. Charlesworth, "Peter Howson: Harrowing of Hell, Flowers East," *Art Review*, 29 (Jan-Feb. 2009), 76.

<sup>33</sup> Heller writes,

The unevenness of his output has been noted by some critics, and is something he wouldn't deny. There is also much, sometimes over-much repetition of motifs (such as the single, heroic striding, bemused man) and of images (the dog, the staring window, etc). (*Howson* [2003] 232).



*Jesus is Stripped of His Garments*

Lithograph

Oil on board

In his own analysis of Howson's work, Heller situates Howson within what he calls the 'Grand Traditionalists' in contradistinction to more conceptually-based artists. As both Howson and Heller are at pains to point out, all art requires 'concept'; what they feel many 'concept artists' lack is artistic craft and technique. In the interview with Steven Berkoff, Howson articulated what appears to be the theory behind his practice:

Berkoff: So you admired someone like Dürer or Bosch as craftsmen or for the content, the savagery of the work?

Howson: For me the art has always been about getting this mix between technique and idea and content. I've always been interested in this trilogy of the things that must work for art. It was only really explained to me a few months ago: the trilogy of Idea (as the main thing), then Technique and then Message. If you don't have those three things there's something lacking in the piece basically.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Berkoff, *Howson*, 6. In spite of Howson's avowed insistence on the generative power of 'idea,' Heller notes in passing that sometimes Howson 'may start drawing with no clear idea of what will emerge, and whose work develops under its own impetus' (Heller, *Howson* [2003], 216). An example of this might be Glasgow Cathedral commission for a portrait of John Ogilvie. Apart from the 'idea' of portraying the Scottish Catholic martyr, the documented development of this commission seems to illustrate Howson's unplanned, intuitive method of work; see 'The Madness of Peter Howson' BBC Television 4. It seems that, without some external controls or guidance such as a commission or an historical subject matter, much of Howson's work is an exploration of a set of themes and pre-occupations that for his own worldview, such as alienation, the struggle with addiction, the brink of existence, and a pessimistic regard toward the world that almost seems to relish its consuming judgment by God.

Howson does not expand on this theory beyond this description of it. It would seem that for him, the ‘idea’ refers to the content of a given work, or what Renaissance artists would have called the ‘invention.’ ‘Message’ would seem to refer to the committed emotional point of view with which the work is executed and aimed at influencing the viewer’s experience of the subject matter. Howson’s frequent criticisms of contemporary art, particularly ‘Concept Art,’ while usually expressed in terms of apathy and pandering to trendy art guild audiences, can be better understood against the backdrop of this aesthetic trilogy of values. As previously noted, Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin are frequent objects of his criticism. Others receive less caustic but similar criticism, including the late Lucien Freud:

To me, Lucien Freud is still just an academic painter who doesn’t actually have imagination. Artists have to have imagination. Lucien Freud can’t paint anything that he doesn’t see in front of him. I think he’s a great technician and all that, a great academic artist, but when you see his portraits of people, there’s a kind of emptiness, there’s no heart there. The way I paint is instinctive a lot of the time. It is also full in-yer-face which modern critics can’t stand, they can’t write twaddle about in-yer-face paintings.<sup>35</sup>

Situating Howson’s work within a spectrum of work such as Bosch, Grünewald, the Dutch genre tradition, Goya’s war series, Van Gogh, and the German Expressionists, especially someone like Beckmann, one begins to see the resemblances among these works that place emotional effect above articulated attention to detail. One can still decline the invitation to enter into a meaningful conversation with the work, but it might explain the method of the craft behind the finished products. At the heart of Howson’s work stands that of the human figure situated within some compositional narrative. And though situated in very spatial and temporal specific settings (i.e. Glasgow of the 1980’s, Bosnia during the war), the themes he explores, the ‘allegories’ he sets out, transcend their settings and can speak to more universal human experiences, particularly from or seen through the lens of the adult male experience. Howson’s art explores themes of conflict, despair, heroic struggle and, more recently redemption, in

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<sup>35</sup> Berkoff, *Howson*, 9.

settings from the insignificant to the cosmic. In this he finds a place within Heller's 'Grand Tradition.'

### III. Peter Howson's Work in Relation to Spiritual Formation

Peter Howson's work is at its best I believe, when it illustrates the process of redemption through suffering.<sup>36</sup>

In a comprehensive survey of Peter Howson's work several themes can be discerned. One is a sympathetic regard for individuals, especially the vulnerable, the beat-up, and the marginalized. From the denizens of the Saracen Head Pub in Glasgow, to refugees in Bosnia, to victims of mob violence culminating in the images of Jesus, Howson's work casts upon them a sympathetic, sometimes ennobling light. But his sympathy does not preclude honesty. Individuals in the Howson pantheon contain the light and shadow, properties of life and death. They are conflicted souls. Perhaps this can be illustrated in no better examples than those of his self-portraits. One indeed is entitled *Jekyll and Hyde* (1995). Howson understands people from an addict's perspective, and some viewers will struggle to engage with such a perspective. It is disturbing. Work such as Howson's calls forth in the viewer the virtue of a sympathetically frank regard for this easily overlooked, often forgotten side of the human family.

Howson likes interesting individuals. Likewise bullies whom he views, however, from the perspective of a victim. This leads toward Howson's view of human society. He seems highly distrustful and critical of groups. Almost every grouping is a portrait of conspiracy, chaos, and madness. Howson's social realism is a social pessimism. A foundational example of this is Howson's 1987 masterpiece *Just Another Bloody Saturday*. In this superb example of Scottish social realism Howson juxtaposes the football players in the light against the tumultuous fans in the shadows. The knowing viewer would recognize the context: the Glasgow rivalry between the Protestant Rangers and the Catholic Celtic. But Howson adds to it fascist salutes and clenched fists denoting mindless nationalisms, hatreds, and violence.

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<sup>36</sup> M. Conti, *Famine* exhibition catalog.





*Just Another Bloody Saturday*, 1987, oil on canvas, 274 x 211 cm

Perhaps at this point a consideration should be made of Howson's predecessors and sources for his portrayals of human society and its religious import. Allusion has been made already to the art of the seventeenth-century Dutch artist Jan Steen (1625-79). Steen, along with his contemporaries like Gerrit Dou (1613-75), Adriaen van Ostade (1610-85) and Gerard Terborch (1617-81), is associated with the 'genre' painting, sometimes further specified as the *vanitas* genre, a somewhat derisive term used at the time for paintings which contrasted with the more highly valued and exalted status of the history painting. The subject matter of the history painting was the high and the mighty; genre paintings were of the peasants and their questionable morality in the eyes of their social superiors. Such is the origins of the genre painting, especially in the work of Pieter Bruegel (1525-69) and before him Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516). Connections from their work to that of Howson's can be made along stylistic and subject matters. Compared with Steen's however, one can also highlight differences. Steen is a master of the subtle ploy, the inside joke, the ironic glance.<sup>37</sup> As suggested above, Howson's art in contrast tends toward a greater bluntness of statement. Steen's generation was of course much more

<sup>37</sup> See E. de Jongh, "Jan Steen, So Near and Yet So Far," in *Jan Steen: Painter and Storyteller*, H. Perry Chapman et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 25-29, and W. Kloek, *Jan Steen* (Amsterdam: Waanders Publishers, 2005).

attentive to observable detail in contrast to Howson's more expressionistic gestures. But perhaps the greatest contrast between Steen's and Howson's paintings is their emotional affect. Steen's work invites one to laugh at or along with his characters, including himself who he inserts in many of his paintings, often chortling along with his crowd. Howson's images have a more anxious, tragic air about them. There is little laughter in Howson's work. We know that Howson is a depressive and has been from his youth, and his art reflects this perspective of life. Howson can engage in subtlety of expression, as we saw in several works, but subtlety is not his preoccupation. Force of statement is.

This is why one finds much closer parallels between Howson's work and that of the German Max Beckmann. At a critical time in his own development, Beckmann spent six months in Paris in order to absorb the latest currents of modernism. Reinhard Spieler writes:

One outcome of his encounter with French art was "a very powerful antipathy towards the abundant flood of Impressionist imitators in Paris at the time." What displeased him was the formalism of the works that reproduced distinctive characteristics at the expense of any real engagement with life: "My heart responds more to raw vulgarity, to an art that does not live in a fairytale dreamland but instead grants access to life's dreadfulness, its baseness, its magnificence, its commonplace grotesque banality. An art that remains with us in the vital moments of real life."<sup>38</sup>

The denigration of formalism in favour of engagement with 'real life' echoes Howson's own artistic credo. In an interview published in 2003, Howson spoke of his exposure to Beckmann's work during his days as a student in Glasgow. A trip to the Whitechapel Gallery with Sandy Moffat cemented Howson's enthusiasm for Beckmann's work:

'It just made me completely enamoured of Beckmann's work. The subject matter really, really interested me. I love his ideas. He was able to paint fantastic allegorical scene out of his imagination.

The violence in his work also attracts me, because I'm attracted by dark images. These are paintings from the 1920's which are like dreams of Nazism,

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<sup>38</sup> Spieler, *Beckmann*, 15-16.

premonitions. He was able almost to foresee things. His work is full of personal symbolism, but often it isn't clear what he is getting at.

*The Argonauts* – his very last painting – is one of my favourites. The great thing about Beckmann is that you can't altogether decipher the paintings. That's part of the beauty of them, and expresses his own personal trauma. But that beauty is often created out of violence and horror and it is mixed with hope. I don't completely understand what *The Argonauts* is about, but it's a hopeful image. It seems to be full of longing for something that is not of this world.<sup>39</sup>

Discovering beauty – or at least force of artistic statement – ‘created out of violence and horror and mixed with hope’ is potentially one way of describing the overall impact of Howson's art upon viewers. Some are attracted to this dynamic, and some are repelled by it. He succeeds in accommodating few middle-ground opinions. It is in light of this style and set of preoccupations that Howson's art may prove an effective source for a *visio divina* for men, especially when brought to bear on religious terms. It has been noted already that the primary subject of Howson's work is that of the male. *Bloody Saturday* exemplifies this pattern in its corporate dimension. The painting exhibits both admiration and disdain for different aspects of the male experience. There is admiration for athletic competence, the beauty of performance, and the validity of rule-based competition. But by casting the crowd so clearly in the shadows, Howson, renders his judgment. Howson's work suggests a strong antipathy towards the collective or the regimented. In this sense the painting is an excellent example of the use of lighting to make a value statement.

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<sup>39</sup> M. Gayford, “Premonitions of a Brilliant Misfit,” *The Telegraph*, 8 February 2003  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3589599/Premonitions-of-a-brilliant-misfit.html> (accessed 28 Feb. 2011).



Untitled, c. 1980

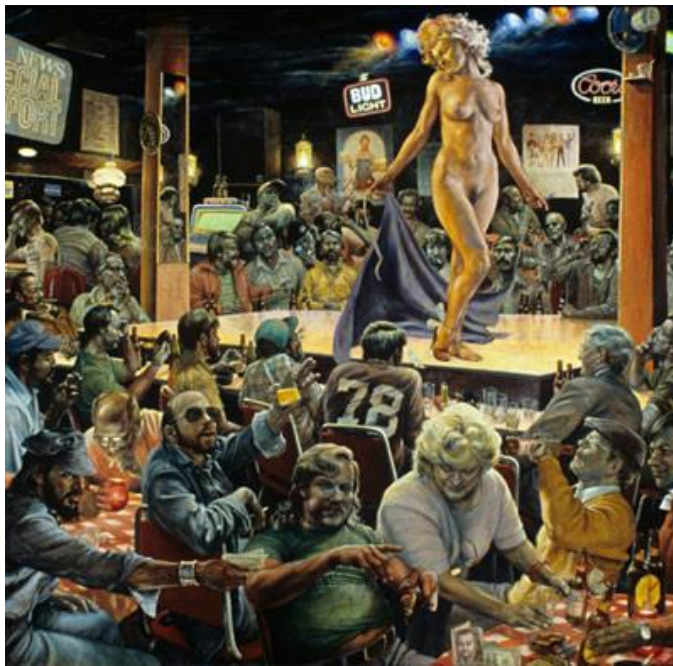


*Veronica Wipes Jesus' Face*, 2003

The presentation of women remains a troubling aspect of Howson's work. The imagery seems to operate as a purging of demons inside of Howson's own male journey, and will be imagery that many men would be able to identify as forces in their own inner worlds. The drawing entitled *The Creation of Eve* (2008) is particularly illuminating and disturbing in this regard. Multiple Eves, voluptuous in form and mindless in countenance, appear to be emerging from the side of a regretful, anguished Adam. Behind the emerging female figures appears to be that of Satan, flinging before them an apple toward which they both seem to strive. Temptation appears to be inherently linked to the very nature and existence of the female, as if their appearance itself is the Fall of Man. This aspect of the male regard for women deserves to be documented, but there is an insufficient critique of it within Howson's work. Some resolution of this tendency may be discerned in the recent images of Jesus with his mother and the other women in the *Stations* series. Here, at last, we see male and female figures interacting with one another in a gentle and considerate manner.

Along these lines, Howson's work invites comparison with that of another contemporary and self-identifying Christian artist, the American Fred Folsom (b. 1945). Like Howson, Folsom's works are figurative but in an entirely naturalistic illustrative style. Like Howson, Folsom's work includes images and subjects drawn from personal experience in working class conditions and alcohol abuse. His magnum opus to date is *Last Call (at the Shepherd Park Go-Go Club)* [1983-88, oil on linen, 6.5 x 6.5 feet each], a work on three panels totaling some 127 feet. A sprawling painting which includes some ninety highly individualized figures, the central

one being a female stripper on a raised dais. Given the atmosphere depicted in the painting, the woman has an ethereal beauty, Hellenic in proportion and poise. A story of various encounters and experiences are suggested throughout the work, but in the central panel, directly beneath the nude female figure, is that of a club client, looking directly at the viewer and pointing a finger in the direction of the far right hand bottom corner. One's attention in this direction is further confirmed in the twisting attention of another client toward the same place. In that far right bottom corner appears to be a hand, with what appears to be a bandage on it, holding a glass of red wine. It turns out that the pointing figure in the central panel is a self-portrait of the artist.



Fred Folsom, *Last Call*, 1983-88, central panel

In a commentary on Folsom's work, Gregory Wolfe also draws attention to the parallels between Folsom's art and that of Jan Steen. Drawing the comparison of subject matter toward a contrast of intention between Folsom and Steen, Wolfe writes:

Folsom's go-go bar paintings appropriate many of the conventions employed by Steen, but their tragic, compassionate spirit is alien to the comic moralism of the seventeenth century. However, Folsom has painted a large number of works that are best understood in terms of the *vanitas* genre: they are among the most ingenious and



disturbing things he has done. He has called these paintings “wide-open Rorschachs” and “raw material for prejudice.” In one sense the analogy is apt, because Folsom’s Rorschachs are so enigmatic and unsettling that they force the viewer to reveal his or her emotional reactions to various forms of ugliness, violence, and squalor.<sup>40</sup>

Comparison between Folsom’s painting and the crowd-scenes of Howson’s recent work, such as *Beggar’s Road* or *Harrowing of Hell*, highlight the potential advantages and disadvantages of different emphases in a common genre. Folsom’s style is highly detailed and particularized. Every face in *Last Call* seems to reflect some particular individual. Howson’s is of a more generic stylization. His work seems populated by a recurring cast of characters rooted in observation and now stored and generalized in memory. Folsom’s art strikes with the force of illustration. Howson’s with the force of statement. Folsom’s style results in the satisfaction of a solved puzzle. Howson’s art is of a more cathartic effect. While I argue that all art reflects and expresses some sense of Story, Folsom’s painting clearly exemplifies an unambiguous narrative orientation, whereas Howson’s is of a more ambiguous, visionary tendency.

It is also interesting to note the placement of female figures, especially nudes, in both Howson’s and Folsom’s work. They appear in places one might expect to find the figure of Christ. Wolfe reports how, in his early training, it was suggested to Folsom by a sympathetic instructor that in regards to figurative art ‘the nude is everything.’<sup>41</sup> Subsequently, the female nude appears in many of Folsom’s work. However, their placement and attitude is suggestive of grace rather than mere gratification. This is apparent in the central figure of *Last Call*. Beautiful, vulnerable, an object of gazing but retaining her self-presence, Wolfe also notes how her posture ‘in the process of lifting up to an outstretched position,’ becomes an ‘implicit crucifixion.’<sup>42</sup> Likewise, the barely clothed female figures in *Blind Leading the Blind X* and its similarly composed successor *Age of Apathy* are placed in the very location that the Christ figure will occupy in *Harrowing of Hell*.

The confrontation with ugliness, violence and squalor, especially if a context of ‘religious’ intention is suggested, will for many force to the surface of consciousness new questions about

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<sup>40</sup> G. Wolfe, *Beauty Will Save the World* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011), 181. On Steen and genre painting see also R.H. Fuchs, *Dutch Painting* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), 36-54. For a contemporary critique of genre painting see T.J. Gorringer, *Earthly Visions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 47-71.

<sup>41</sup> Wolfe, *Beauty Will Save*, 178.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 190.

the nature of, to employ Loder's quadrant, the self, the world, the void and the Holy. In whatever ways these may be scrupulously sealed off from each other, works such as those of Howson and Folsom point toward ways that they are interrelated, interdependent, and experienced beyond casual, superficial encounter. What Wolfe writes about Folsom's work can be applied to the best of Howson's:

Folsom is primarily a realist, but this does not mean that his paintings are photographic reproductions that can be viewed passively. Nearly all of his works contain submerged allegories, obscure symbols, surrealistic images from the regions above and below our rational minds. They are dynamic rather than static; they demand that the viewer participate in a process of discernment and interpretation. Folsom's paintings are constantly provoking us to reveals our innermost selves, to peel back the layers of pride and prejudice that isolate us from others.<sup>43</sup>

### **Narrative Implications of Howson's Art**

If we employ James Loder's four-dimensional analysis of human experience beginning with the Self, Howson's art projects (1) a male sense of self and (2) an often deeply conflicted sense of self, a Jekyll and Hyde sense of self, a self in need of rehabilitation. In this regards his work fulfills the mandate of art for David Harned, that it should facilitate the discernment of 'the richness and terror, beauty and banality' within the self. But the sympathetically honest portrayal of individual selves gives way to almost unremittingly critical portrayals of corporate dynamics. For Howson, the group descends easily into the mob. There are to my reckoning no positive portrayals of corporate activity apart from the players in *Bloody Saturday*, which lends weight to the sense that the World, the second dimension of Loder's analytic scheme, is for Howson 'just another bloody Saturday.' Considered theologically, Howson's art portrays the redemption of individuals but the damnation of the world. The world as such is not an object of God's redemptive purposes. This may reflect a fundamentalistic religious upbringing that continues to inform Howson's understanding of Christian teaching.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 176.

As was suggested earlier, Howson's art can be seen as stark and unsettling portrayals of the Loderian Void into which many of his characters stare. This dehumanizing emptiness is the result, so Howson's pictures suggest, of the Johannine counter-trinity of the world, the flesh and the devil (i.e. I John 2:15-17). Indeed, the Devil himself makes more frequent appearances in some of Howson's works of recent and largely lesser quality. It is Howson's depiction of the void, and the death and perdition to which it tends, that makes him both a compelling and for many a disturbing artist of religious themes and subject matters.



*Machine Magician*, 2010 (detail)

The Holy can be perceived in Howson's work in the guise of the suffering and the marginalized, the doers and victimized, and perhaps even in the erotic beauty of the female figure. The paintings this description alludes to have of course their own narrative and aesthetic integrity, and need to be respected as such. However, they also seem to be implicit presences of the Holy made explicit in the later images of the Man of Sorrows and of the determination that He inspires (*St Anthony*), the tenderness He affords (several of the *Stations* images), the redemption He offers (*Third Step*), and the judgment he renders on human apathy (*Everlasting Man*). Such expressions of the self, the world, the void and the Holy will represent for some viewers a conceptual conflict in the Loderian sense, one that a process of indwelling and creatively re-imagining and imaginative re-integration may or may not resolve. Speaking of his work up to that point in 1996, Howson spoke of his attraction to sleaze 'because I believe that you can still find God amid the decadence and decay.'<sup>44</sup> Many viewers, particularly of a conservative religious orientation, do not expect to find God amid decadence and decay, and often resist art that asks them to explore such terrain as a potential source of religious insight.

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<sup>44</sup> Jackson, *A Different Man*, 111.



Addressing this tendency, and exploring whether the divine may be found encountered where not expected is one potential way that Howson's art can facilitate spiritual maturity and formation.

A narrative analysis of the cumulative impression of Howson's work, however it may be construed, is probably going to revolve around 'violence and horror mixed with hope.' The image of the conflicted individual will probably emerge to the forefront, with a 'process of redemption through suffering' as its resolution. Immersion in a story such as this through art like Howson's might give rise to an ethos centered on virtues of self-honesty, courage, a willingness to gaze into the Void in order to more appreciate one's redemption from it. It may inspire a relinquishment of sensitive scruples in favour of a willingness to go beyond one's sphere of familiarity and comfort in order to understand the distressing experience of others. Howson's art can provide, to borrow from the title of one of Harned's book, 'images for self-recognition' for some viewers, and compassion toward such individuals for others.

Mention has already been made of Howson's championing of an assertive 'in-yer-face' style of art. As is the case with assertive styles of preaching, it will reach some in ways that it cannot reach others. Anecdotal observation suggests that both Howson's style and subject matter appeal more to male than female viewers, and those with broadly experienced and deeply informed opinions of art may find themselves distracted by the unevenness of Howson's output. But the very unevenness of the works, born of an apparently sincere self-disclosure and faith and the intuitive, passionate execution evident in many of them may provide important points of contact with of similar background and temperament as Howson. Such art could be spiritually formative, even transformative in the Loderian sense, for those who perhaps for the first time encounter not only a vivid expression of their lived experience or feelings about things, but also a compelling association of that experience with Christian subject matter. For many this is the very source of conflict with Howson's work, but for others it may be revelatory.

It has been suggested above that Howson's art could be seen to correlate with a Johannine theological outlook, with its strong antithetical rhetoric, its emphasis on the descent of Christ into the world, and of course its apocalypticism which characterises not only the last book of the New Testament but can be discerned in thematic emphases of the First Epistle as well as the Gospel. It is this dynamic that explains why John's Gospel is often used in evangelistic gatherings while perceived as being among the most profound documents of the New Testament. Its bluntness of statement gives way to a more searching expression of faith. Johannine theology also coordinates

a characteristically ‘high’ Christology with a strong depiction of the ‘fleshiness’ of the Incarnation. This may be a dialectical dynamic that viewers of Howson’s work will discover themselves, or may be a helpful suggestion for those struggling to make sense of it as religiously-informed art.

As suggested above, the dynamics of Howson’s art may appeal in a particular way to a male audience, perhaps especially to a younger male crowd. The sense of the male experience being validated as a worthy subject matter for art even if critiqued in it; the vivid, action-oriented narrative style of his work; the ‘either/or’ quality of the explicitly religious paintings; the sense of ‘redemption through suffering’ which, as depicted in Howson’s work, suggests an active as opposed to a passive appropriation of redemption; and indeed the mayhem and the eroticism of the art. All of this suggests ways in which Howson’s art makes a special appeal to men, however unintentionally. If the *Stations* series and other recent projects are any indication, however, then Howson himself may be on what one male spirituality writer refers to as the ‘Male Spiritual Journey’ at the mid-life point.<sup>45</sup>

But this project is predicated on the argument that art catalyzes spiritual formation not only by comforting but by cajoling, by telling stories people sometimes don’t care to hear about but find themselves compellingly drawn toward and immersed. While the prisoners who Howson receives correspondence from need his art, so do church ladies. They need to understand something of the male experience, to see it identified and validated in art and brought into direct dialogue with religious themes and questions.

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Art can be thought of as a framing device, wherein some aspect of life, some subject matter, is focused upon so as to render it more available for close consideration. What a particular artist chooses to frame in one piece, then another, then another, eventuates in a ‘moving picture’ of cumulative frames that communicate a story. If the analysis above is at all

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<sup>45</sup> See R. Rohr, *From Wild Man to Wise Man: Reflections on Male Spirituality* (Cincinnati, OH: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2005). Other recent books in a similar vein include R. Bly, *Iron John: Men and Masculinity* (London: Rider, 1990); R. Moore and D. Gillette, *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991); J. Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) and *The Way of the Wild Heart: A Map for the Masculine Journey* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006).

accurate, then there is a discernible story inhering in and secreting through Howson's art. It is a story that seems centred on human wreckage and its rehabilitation effected ultimately by the presence of the divine amidst that human wreckage. It is a narrative rooted in and expressive of, as suggested above, an antithetically-driven theology, and as such has its strengths and limitations. The strength lies in the potency of its direct personal address in its spirituality and art. Its weakness lies in its limited imagination of what might lie beyond repentance both for the individual and (his) society.

#### IV. Conclusion

Howson's sprawling canvas of 2008 entitled *Harrowing of Hell* captures, as has been suggested, the theological thrust of his work. The Harrowing of Hell is a doctrine derived from the New Testament, reinforced in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus and enshrined confessionally in the Apostles Creed.<sup>46</sup> It is the iconographic symbol of the Resurrection in Eastern Orthodoxy. It summarizes the account of Christ's salvific work during Holy Saturday, in which He invaded the realm of the dead – Hell itself – and defeated Satan and let loose a captive humanity. It is the final and in a sense the supreme act of descent of the Son of God, going down into the depths of man's damnation. Howson's work has long been about this captivity – particularly the male captivity – to passions, violence and environmental temptation. Man's redemption from his wreckage has been implied only in light of the inherent dignity that Howson's work endows his subjects with in spite of their circumstances. It is that persistent sense of hope, of some openness to another way that pervades his work as a whole. But in the works of the past decade now, Howson's work makes that hope and in the possibility of human redemption more explicit in reference to Christ.

A theologically interpretative lens through which to consider Howson's art would be that of God's relationship with the world referred to as *immanence*. Howson's art invites one to 'find God amid the decadence and decay.' Howson's recent works like the *Stations of the Cross*

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<sup>46</sup> Acts 2:21-31 and I Peter 3:19; see J. Baggley, *Doors of Perception* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 134.

(particularly the drawings) and those presented in the *Harrowing of Hell* exhibit portray, in David Brown's words, 'the divine embroilment in the messiness of our world.'<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> D. Brown, 'In the Beginning was the Image,' unpublished paper delivered at the Society for the Study of Theology, Manchester, England, 2010, 5.

## Chapter 4

### Makoto Fujimura: Sublimated Grace

A painter does not merely reproduce what is thought to be seen by the eye; an artist's task is to train the eye first to truly see, and then to disregard what we have been taught, to throw away imposed categories – those easy preconceived notions that lure us to think that we are seeing when we are not, but merely looking. An artist's task is to see through the eye into the eternal, into the invisible.<sup>1</sup>

#### I. Introduction

Makoto Fujimura is an unusually prolific and public spokesperson on behalf of his own art and of the arts in general. He has gained considerable stature among evangelical Christians in the United States, both by virtue of his art as well as his organizational capabilities, notably in the International Arts Movement (IAM) that he founded and over which he presides, headquartered in New York City. Through writing, conferences, exhibitions and various addresses, Fujimura has gained the trust and admiration of a traditionally conservative constituency (in spite of the highly abstract nature of his work) which nonetheless shows a growing desire for progress in the realm of cultural criticism as well as 'culture making.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. Fujimura, *Letter to North American Christians*, <http://www.makotofujimura.com/writings/a-letter-to-north-american-churches/>. For a similar description of artistic 'seeing' and how this is communicated in artistic work, see C. Harrison, *Introduction to Art* (Yale University Press, 2009), 118-119. Of the artist's name, the following is of passing interest:

*makoto* is the taste-word which defines the spirit of the culture of the Nara period (eighth century), its art, its architecture, its sculpture, as well as its literature and particularly its poetry. The literal meaning of the word *makoto* – still in use today – is 'sincerity', taken in the sense of *naïveté*, an artless effusion of pure, sensuous feeling and, often, of bustling vitality. G. Bownas and A. Thwaite, *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse* (London: Penguin, 2009), 268.

<sup>2</sup> Recent evidence of this includes A. Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), as well as W. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), and the growing list of books published by Baker under the auspices of its Cultural Exegesis line.

In a graduation address to students and faculty at Belhaven University, a Christian liberal arts institution in Mississippi, Fujimura articulated some of the ideological and theological convictions that animate his art and its public presentation:

True Art does not chase after novelty – it is a sensory quest for the new order of what God is creating, toward fully realized humanity. Using our sense, Art poses deeper questions rather than giving easy answers. To be truly human in a liquid reality, we must resist the culture of fear and cynicism. The World That Ought To Be is not utopia, an unrealizable fantasy; it is instead created out of sacrificial love. To love is to quest for the World That Ought to Be. Love is enduring, and love uses all our senses. Love is generative, and will create the stage for the New to appear. The role of the artist in a liquid reality is to awaken all of our senses through creativity and love. Our quest will be to live more fully in the luminal zone between heaven and earth, the old and the new.<sup>3</sup>

Salient features of Fujimura's thought include his critique of art that aspires to what he characterizes as 'novelty'; the emphasis on the sensory dimension of aesthetic experience; the role of art in effectively raising questions that it does not necessarily answer; and an idealist and eschatological thrust that seems to inform so much of his work. 'The World That Ought to Be' is invoked in more than one of Fujimura's public statements as an indication of the aim toward which his art strives to intimate in the midst of a fraught present.

One word that Fujimura often chooses to describe the visual effect of his work is *refraction*. It occurs throughout his writings, is the title of his weblog as well as the title of his most recent book. Refraction refers to the bending of light due to its passing through a medium which changes the frequency of its wavelength. This is precisely what occurs with the passing of light onto and through mineral and natural pigments in their water-based binders that Fujimura uses. The word serves for him both as a way of describing the visual effect of his use of watercolour-based pigment painting as well as a metaphor for the expression of his thought in his writings. It finally coalesces as a metaphor for the human experience. As the passage above

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<sup>3</sup> M. Fujimura, 'The Aroma of the New,' [www.booksandculture.com/articles/2011/julaug/aromanew.html](http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2011/julaug/aromanew.html) (accessed 25 July 2011). 'Liquid reality' is derived from Zygmunt Bauman's characterization of fragmented, unstructured 'fluid modernity.'

suggests, humans imperfectly mediate the image of God in their lives, but though the Light in them is refracted (as opposed to perfectly reflected) it is nonetheless still capable of producing beauty in the world.

Another word Fujimura frequently employs in reference to his art is *essentiation*, which means for him the way art reduces to or expresses back something of the essence of a subject matter, which in turn means something of its transcendent nature. Although this is an evocative term to use of his art, this chapter will suggest that a potentially more substantive metaphor is *sublimation*. Although derived from chemistry, sublimation as conceived of here is an intentional change of appearance by which reality is perceived under a different form. In its popular Freudian association sublimation means subconscious alteration of basic drives, but I employ it here in a more conscious manner; change in order to reveal or perceive essence.<sup>4</sup>

However it is metaphorically characterized, Fujimura's art is of a uniquely hybrid nature which requires a heightened use of constructive imagination and sensitivity in order to be effectively engaged with. The *aesthesis* of Fujimura's work calls for an *ascesis* of patience, careful observation, an engagement with the subtleties of creation, and a willingness to cross boundaries of cultures and styles. His work advances Western Christianity distilled, as it were, *changed* into Eastern cultural and aesthetic values. For Western Christians long nurtured on ideologies of the progressive permanency of cultural edifices, Fujimura's art embodies a less assertive but no less confident proposal for the ephemeral and impermanent dimensions of life.

Because of the eclectic nature and non-Western provenance of Fujimura's art, a careful review of his artistic sources will be an important part of this analysis. As in the case of Peter Howson, we will review Fujimura's oeuvre, critical reception of his work, propose an interpretation and analysis of select pieces, and assess the theological import of his work and the manner in which it might contribute to the development of a theology of spiritual formation.

## II. Artistic Lineages: The Japanese Inheritance

...the most important feature of Japanese art lies in its unique conception of the decorative, one which enables the artist to thoroughly sublimate the subject

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche is generally credited for being the first to employ the term sublimation in relation to human psychology. See *Human, All Too Human*, trans. M. Faber and S. Lehmann, (London: Penguin, 2004), 13-14 [I.1].

matter so as to express only the purest of those essences that result from the process itself.<sup>5</sup>

Makoto Fujimura is the son of Osamu and Yoko Fujimura, who came to the United States from Japan. Fujimura's father was an acoustic scientist for Bell Laboratories. Makoto was born in Boston. The family returned to Japan, but moved back to New Jersey. He grew to be effectively bi-lingual, although his earliest memories of schooling reflect his struggle to master English.<sup>6</sup>

Fujimura began formal training in art as an undergraduate at Bucknell University. He was then accepted for study at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, studying in the masters program from 1989 to 1991, working under the tutelage of Matazō Kayama. Fujimura's thesis project, entitled *Twin Rivers*, was selected for an award prize, and Fujimura was accepted to work further with Kayama in a post-MFA program, something Fujimura describes as 'an arts doctorate program, an extension of lineage that has been in existence since fourteenth-century Japan.'<sup>7</sup>

The direct roots of Makoto Fujimura's craft lie in developments that took place in Japanese art in the late eighth through the twelfth centuries of the Common Era. This period is typically referred to as the Heian Period. The previous centuries had already seen the importation of the Chinese script that would serve as the basis of Japanese script, the arrival of Buddhism from Korea (via China and India) that will inevitably interact with the native animistic Shinto, as well as artifacts and artistic motifs found in early Japanese culture that suggests origins from Persia and Siberia, brought to Japan from Korea. Confucianism later introduced Chinese models of statecraft and ethics. Portuguese and Dutch influences, both cultural and religious and brought into Japan through its highly attenuated trade with outside entities, introduced still more innovations. The uniquely Japanese capability to absorb and transform outside influences into its culture has long been noted.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> M. Kayama, quoted in 'Kayama Matazō,' by B. Jordan and H. Nara in E. P. Conant (et al), *Nihonga, Transcending the Past: Japanese-Style Painting, 1868-1968* (The Saint Louis Art Museum, 1995), 307.

<sup>6</sup> See M. Fujimura, *River Grace* (Image Journal, 2007), 13.

<sup>7</sup> M. Fujimura, *Refractions* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009), 19-20.

<sup>8</sup> See J. Stanley-Baker, *Japanese Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 24ff. Christianity was suppressed in Japan during the rise of the Tokugawa shōgunate rule in 1543. Fujimura reflects on the ironic relationship between Christianity, especially between the Eucharist and the Way of Tea, so integral to Japanese aesthetics; see Fujimura, *Refractions*, 52-53. See Also C. Guth, *Art of Edo Japan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 10.



The Heian Period is demarcated by the establishment of Heian-Kyo ('Capital of Peace and Tranquility'), present day Kyoto, situated near Mount Hiei. The peace and stability afforded by the rule emanating from the new capital gave rise to much that still characterizes Japanese art and culture. Among these influences is the establishment of Buddhism, giving rise to artistic themes and motifs that remain part of Japanese art. The syncretistic tendency of Japanese culture allowed it to assimilate Buddhism into its native Shinto as well as influences of Confucianism and Taoism. These all contribute to aesthetic values of the natural, the spontaneous, and of *aware*, the fleetingness of life that is perhaps the great insight of Buddhism.

It is the 'courtly aesthetic' of the Heian Period, however, that characterizes its secular art:

In the secular arts, although Heian courtiers enjoyed Chinese poetry and painting, the arts, even when in the Chinese manner, increasingly showed Japanese qualities. In 894, as the much admired Chinese Tang dynasty was disintegrating and voyages to China were fraught with danger, the Japanese court decided to stop diplomatic missions altogether. This isolation served to trigger an unparalleled outpouring of Japanese splendours from deep within the native psyche.<sup>9</sup>

It is during the Heian Period that Japanese art becomes, as it were, self-conscious of itself, distinguishing *Kara-e* or Chinese painting from *Yamato-e* or Japanese painting, in terms of styles and themes.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to the more realistic tendencies of Chinese art, Joan Stanley-Baker writes of the art of late Heian:

The culmination of japanization may be seen in the 1053 Byōdōin Phoenix Hall murals. *Yamato-e* landscape paintings were greatly influenced by the highly developed Japanese literature of the time, that is, poems on the four seasons, on famous scenic spots, on *mono no aware* (the pathos, literally the 'ah-ness', of things). Departing from Chinese aesthetic preferences, for example, indigenous new poems

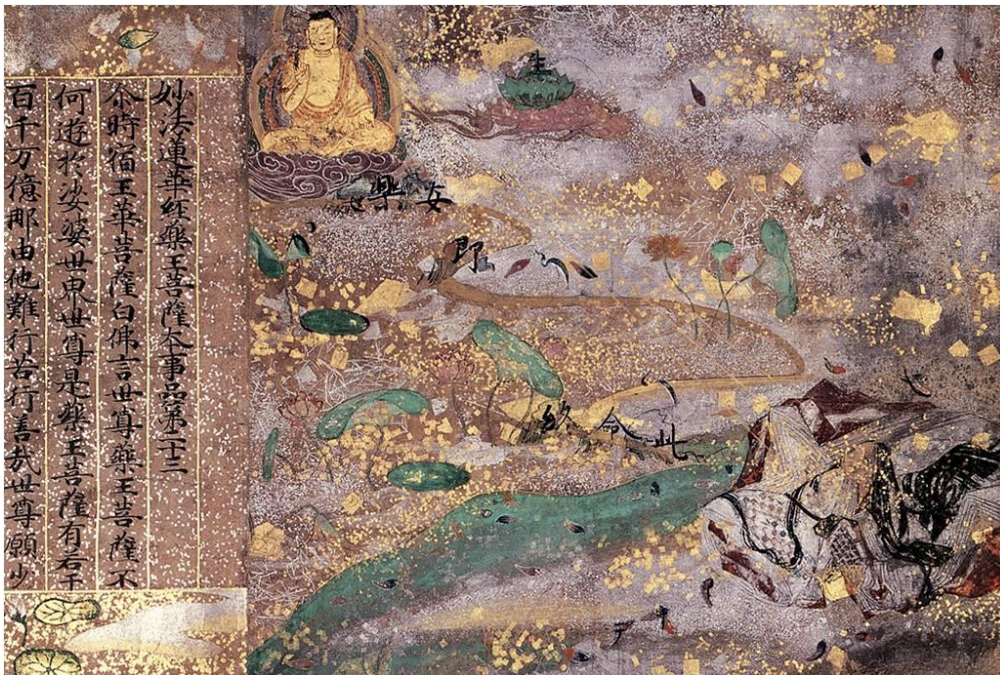
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<sup>9</sup> Stanley-Baker, 76. She goes on to describe this 11<sup>th</sup> century panel in a manner perhaps apt for Fujimura's work, how the 'tenderness, poignancy and vulnerability becomes the emotional hallmark of so many later coloured screens. To perceive them as merely decorative would be to blind us to the emotive impact or the quintessence of Japanese art. Decorative art is passive and static, with visual elements evenly disbursed; this scene is vibrantly alive and invites an emotional response from the spectator' [78].

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 79.

on Spring replace the snow prunus with cherry blossoms, majestic mountains with cosy paddy fields. The world of Japanese imagery shimmered with wisteria, the seashore, spring rains, spring moon and spring mists, in poetry and painting alike.<sup>11</sup>

Another distinction originating in this period is that between *onna-e* and *otoko-e* styles of painting. *Onna-e*, or feminine painting, conotates art expressive of inner feelings, in contrast the extroverted, stereotypically masculine style of *otoko-e*. The differences can be overstated, but it could be argued that the relatively strong presence of women in the Heian court gave rise to decorative motifs and techniques that will influence the style of *Nihonga* that Fujimura inherits, among these the greater use of symbolic gestures rather than explicit representation, and the innovative use of gold foil or *kirigane*.<sup>12</sup>



Bosatsu Yakuō, Front piece to the 23<sup>rd</sup> scroll of the *Heike Nōgyō*, c. 1164, ink colours with kirigane decoration on paper

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 84-87.



*Heike Nōgyō* (detail; note the use of square gold foil)

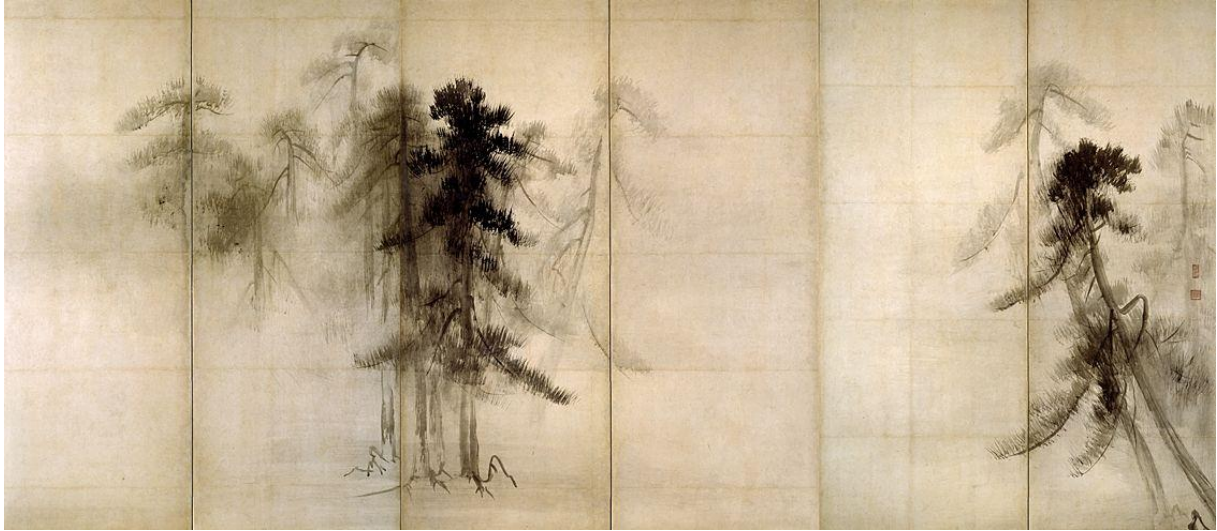
Tracing the artistic lineage to which Fujimura belongs requires an awareness of the rise of particular schools of art. Two of the prominent of these is the Kano school centered in Kyoto, and the Tosa School, centered in Edo (later Tokyo) which served as the political capital of the shōgunate rulers. Kyoto remained the royal seat of the largely figure-head monarch.<sup>13</sup> Both schools in their own ways represent continuity and innovation within a growing tradition of Japanese art.

Kano artists served the requirements of the court, so their art was characterized by the ‘courtly aesthetic,’ which included the skillful adaptation of Chinese-style landscape, bird-and-flower themes or *kachō-ga*, figuration, ink-based painting, and especially imposing large-scale screen works and screen doors (*fusuma*). Tosa artists served the newly emerging aristocratic and mercantile classes, and they exploited the possibilities of the classic Heian *Yamato-e* tradition: seasonal themes, pine trees, reeds, seascapes, sun and moon screens and evocative landscapes. Both schools made further innovative use of mineral pigments, gold foil and gold wash and evocative use of blank, open space.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Guth, *Art of Edo Japan*, 55.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley-Baker, *Art of Japan*, 141-46; Guth, *Art of Edo Japan*, 55-59.



Tōhaku Hasegawa, *Pine Forest (Shorinzu Byobu)*, ink on paper, three right side panels

Given the nature-based aesthetic of Japanese art, one begins to see how it might contribute toward a creation-based ascetical emphasis, one that increases the capacity to perceive among other things the relationship between the world of nature and its larger cosmic framework. In addition, Fujimura places great intrinsic value in the materials that he uses, and proposes that that the combination of these materials along with the forms he makes highlights the divine origin intrinsic in creation.

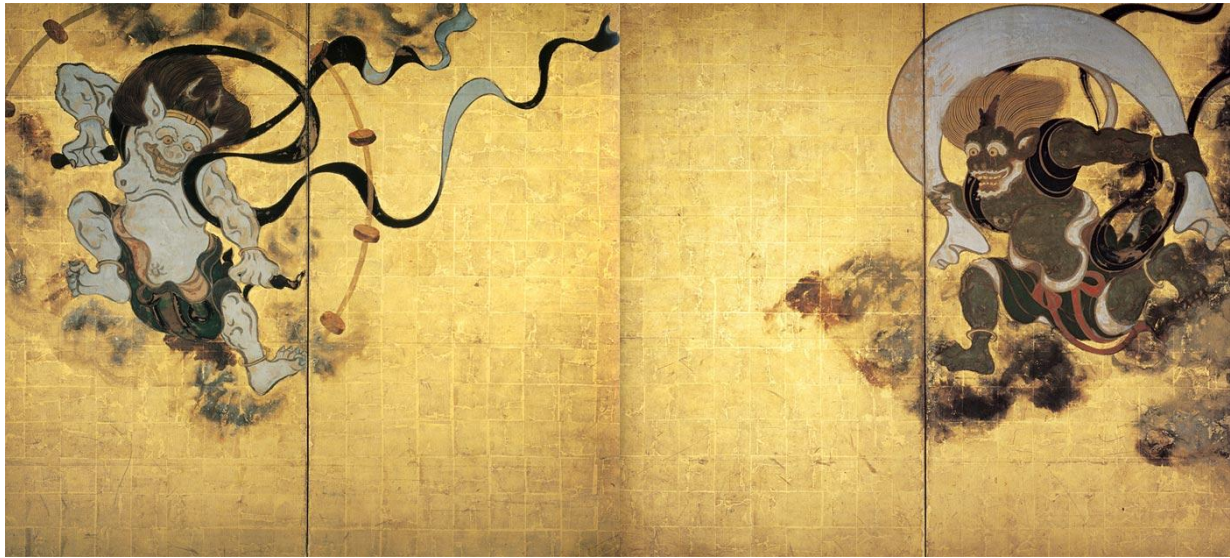
Something of a cultural renaissance took place in Kyoto following the political stabilization achieved by the shōgun Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1582. Prominent artists of this period belonged neither to the Kano nor Tosa schools but a freer guild of artists whose work was aimed at Kyoto's affluent inhabitants. Names from this period that frequent Fujimura's writings about his work include that of Kōetsu Hon'ami, Sōtatsu Tawaraya, the brothers Kenzen and Kōrin Ogata, Tōhaku Hasegawa, and Ōkyo Maruyama.<sup>15</sup> The work of Sōtatsu Tawaraya, for example, impresses modern viewers with similarities with Orthodox icons in the impressive use of gold, simple but effective gesture, vivid colourization, and patterning approaching abstraction. Discussing a collaborative effort with Kōetsu, Stanley-Baker writes of Sōtatsu's technique:

Sōtatsu, with a brush dipped alternatively in gold and silver, has painted flowers and grasses of the four seasons in sequence. The ancient Chinese method of

<sup>15</sup> Japanese names are rendered in the body of this text in Western order of first and surname.



‘boneless’ painting (without ink outlines) was given a new sense of liveliness by Sōtatsu who combined it with a pooling device called *tarashikomi*. This method of dropping ink or colour pigment on to still-wet areas of the painting surface may well have been invented by Sōtatsu. Here the silver flowers and golden leaves appear in different intensities, seeming to emerge from dense mists.<sup>16</sup>



Sōtatsu Tawaraya, *Wind God and Thunder God screen*



Sōtatsu Tawaraya, *Pine Island at Matsushima*, ink and colours on six screen (left side panels)

<sup>16</sup> Stanley-Baker, *Art of Japan*, 165.

One might note in the first example the gold square-grid background as well as the indefinite forms the ink pools are allowed to create. These are among the important influences found in Fujimura's work which are derived from these artists and translated variously as *Rinpa* or more frequently *Rimpa*. The term itself was derived from the last syllable of Kōrin's Ogata name and 'pa' meaning faction or school, and as such flourished in Japanese art circles in the nineteenth century. But the foundations of these practices were laid by these 17<sup>th</sup> century Kyoto-based artists.<sup>17</sup> We will see how Fujimura incorporates these elements in his work. What is important to understand now is how these practices were revived and reinvigorated in 19<sup>th</sup> century Japanese art.

### **The Rise of *Nihonga* and the Tokyo School of Fine Arts**

The first major distinction in Japanese art was that between Chinese art or *Kara-e* and Japanese art or *Yamoto-e*. Japan's long ambiguity between openness and resistance toward the outside world came to a decisive end with the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry and the opening of trade with the West. The shock and thrust into modernity this contact initiated led to the fall of the shōgunate rule and the re-establishment of the monarchy. It is during this Meiji Restoration and the era by which it is named (1868-1912) that the distinction between Western art and Japanese art is demarcated and labeled. The identification and naming process associated with *Nihonga* is associated with the presence of the American aesthete Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908) and his Japanese counterpart Tenshin Okakura (1862-1913). Ellen Conant summarizes the origins of the term and its resonances:

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 166. See also Conant, 18, and Fujimura, *Refractions*, 21. 'The stereotypical standard painting in the *Rimpa* style involves simple natural subjects such as birds, plants and flowers, with the background filled in with gold leaf. Emphasis on refined design and technique became more pronounced as the *Rimpa* style developed,' [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rimpa\\_school](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rimpa_school) (accessed 22/07/2010). See also examples of and commentary on *Rimpa* School works in *Masterpieces of Chinese and Japanese Art*, Freer Gallery of Art Handbook, (Washington: Smithsonian Institute, 1976), which characterizes the *Rimpa* style by its 'strong, arresting designs in all mediums' which serve to epitomize 'abstract developments of Japanese art' (78). See also Y. Toshinobu, 'Rimpa: Still Stimulating Our Decorative Sense,' in *Rimpa: Decorative Japanese Painting* (Tokyo: PIE Books, 2011) 15-23. Toshinobu similarly describes the *Rimpa* tradition as characterized by the use of silver, gold and mica, the water-based diffusion of materials (*tarashikomi*), and of the 'generous sense of space,' all characteristics of Fujimura's technique.

...*Nihonga* is assumed to encompass all Japanese painting dating from the Meiji era executed, however loosely, in traditional media and formats. The term literally means “Japanese painting” and appears to have been adopted during the 1880’s as a means of distinguishing the evolving forms of traditional painting from an increasing body of works employing Western media, format, and modes of representation. The latter works had originally been more neutrally identified as *abura-e* (oil painting), as opposed to *shoga* (calligraphy and painting) or *suiboku-ga* (ink painting) in the native tradition, but later acquired the politically fraught designation of *yōga* (literally, Western painting).<sup>18</sup>

The rush towards modernity, as well as the newly perceived rivalry between traditional Japanese art and Western art provides impetus for the establishment of schools of art developed along Western university lines. Between 1868 and 1900, a number of government-sponsored art and technical schools opened, among which was the Tokyo School of Fine Art (1889). Under the leadership of Tenshin Okakura, the school advanced a version of *Nihonga*, encouraged by Fenollosa that synthesized elements of traditional and Western painting within the sphere of *Nihonga* styles and practices. The propagation of *Nihonga* found a more conservative alternative in the privately-run art schools advocated by the Japan Art Association.<sup>19</sup>

The Tokyo School, later renamed the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music<sup>20</sup>, remains today a primary institute for the propagation of *Nihonga*. At the time of his own enrollment there, Fujimura would cite that the university had on its faculty two of the ‘three pillars’ of contemporary *Nihonga*, Ikuo Hirayama, and Matazō Kayama. Fujimura remembers Kayama with affection, referring to him with the honorific ‘Kayama-sensei’:

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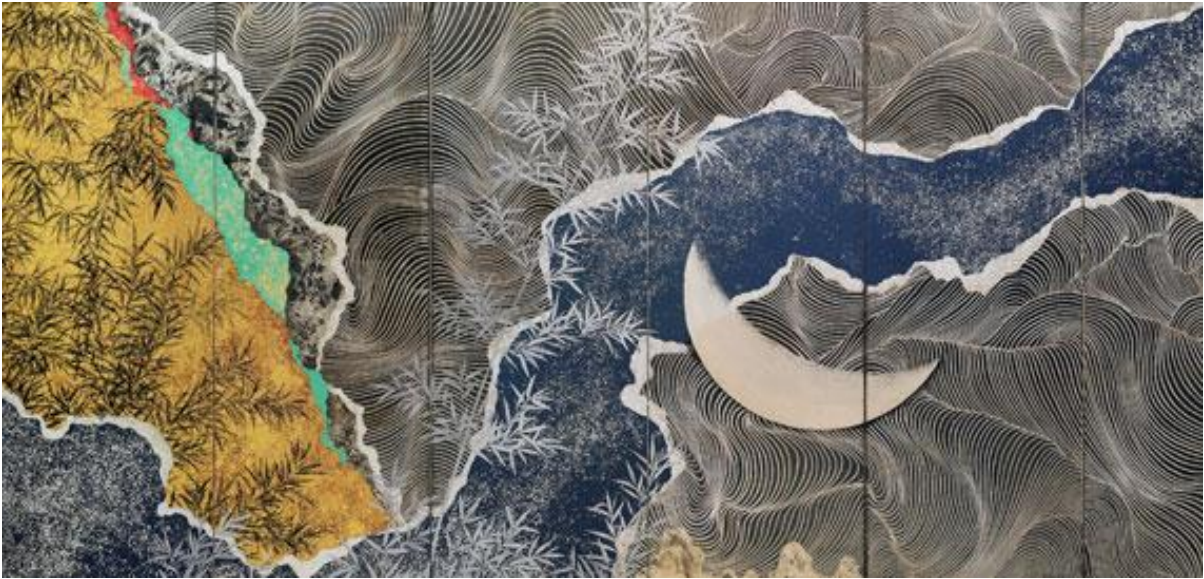
<sup>18</sup> Ellen Conant, ‘Introduction,’ in Conant, *Nihonga*, 14. In Fujimura’s own definition of *Nihonga*, he remarks that the term was created to ‘protect’ traditional Japanese painting methods from Western-influenced art; Fujimura, *River Grace*, 18. Ernest Fenollosa is perhaps best remembered for his translations of Chinese and Japanese poetry later adapted by Ezra Pound.

<sup>19</sup> E. Conant, ‘Tradition in Transition, 1868-1890,’ in Conant, 21-24.

<sup>20</sup> See Y. Chizuko, ‘The Tokyo School of Fine Arts,’ in Conant, 87. On the place of Fenollosa and the rise of the School, see also Martin Collcutt, ‘The Image of Kannon as Compassionate Mother in Meiji Art and Culture,’ in *Challenging Past and Present: The Metamorphosis of Nineteenth-Century Japanese Art*, E. P. Conant, ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006), 204-208.



For Kayama-sensei to take on a student outside of the traditionally closed inner circle [Fujimura was not a Japanese national], and one who was now identifying himself with Christ when the tradition was so closely tied to Buddhist and Shinto roots, must have been a radical decision; but he himself was a radical artist who found contemporary expression in the tradition of materials and visual language of seventeenth-century Japan.<sup>21</sup>



Matazō Kayama, *Star Festival (Tanabata no hi)*, 1968, six-panel screen, colour, ink, gold and silver on silk, 166.3x368.4 cm

Owing to copyright restrictions, the electronic version of this thesis does not contain this image.

Matazo Kayama, *Art Car (BMW)*, 1990, colour, *kirigane* (gold) and *arare* (foil printing)

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<sup>21</sup> Fujimura, *Refractions*, p. 20.



Matazō Kayama (1927-2004) was the son of a clothing designer and a graduate of the Tokyo School, earning his masters in 1949. Kayama was seen as an innovator, reinvigorating late twentieth-century *Nihonga* by introducing bold designs and subject matters (including nudes) with decorative gestures and motifs derived from seventeenth-century practices associated with the *Rinpa*. Among these techniques is the use of ink and ink stains, cut gold leaf, as well as the inherently abstract nature of certain classical pictorial representation. Decorative gestures became in Kayama's hands signifying motifs, and become a pronounced presence in much of Fujimura's work. Kayama's remarks about his own views of Japanese art reflect an aesthetic that is evident in Fujimura's work as well:

Kayama's attraction to such stylization [referring to the techniques derived from the classical tradition], the artist says, is related to the fact that "the most important feature of Japanese art lies in its unique conception of the decorative, one which enables the artist to thoroughly sublimate the subject matter so to express only the purest of those essences that result from the process itself."<sup>22</sup>

Brenda Jordan and Hiroshi Nara further write:

Although he has taken advantage of certain modern Western techniques such as modeling, Kayama nevertheless has felt that there is a certain freedom in Japanese painting, "the freedom of viewing things from infinity." This enigmatic remark has been interpreted to refer to such elements as the free shifting of viewpoints, the use of blank space, and the symbolic and decorative aspects (design, color, pattern, and so forth) of traditional Japanese painting.<sup>23</sup>

An art that attempts to portray things from the perspective of infinity will tend to relativize their status and significance. The finitude of things emerges under such an aegis, a finitude that can still affirm genuine value but of a qualified sort. Fujimura makes reference to this in his frequent reference to the value of the *ephemeral*. People raised in the West have inherited a sense

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<sup>22</sup> B. Jordan and H. Nara, 'Kayama Matazo,' *Nihonga*, 307.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 307.

of the value of the permanent and the assertive. Finally, Kayama's commendation of the Japanese tradition as enabling artists to 'thoroughly sublimate the subject matter so to express only the purest of those essences that result from the process itself' is, as will be evident, a signal aspect of Fujimura's aesthetic and philosophy of art.

### ***Nihonga* in the work of Fujimura**

*Nihonga*, as indicated above, was a late nineteenth-century neologism designated to identify a set of practices, materials and motifs that stood in continuity with Japanese arts and crafts from across the preceding millennium. As a method of painting, it can be most succinctly described as one that emphasizes gestural brushwork, colours derived from various natural pigment sources and whose medium is animal-based glue tempered with water. The use of gold, silver or platinum, various ink and techniques of ink wash form part of a constellation of practices used by various artists within the *Nihonga* tradition. As encouraged by Fenollosa and Okakura, *Nihonga* artists emphasized classic Japanese narratives and themes, whereas today there is no particular distinction between the subject matters of *Nihonga* and *Yoga* artists.<sup>24</sup>

Fujimura's own description of his technique connects it with his theological purposes:

Courser mineral pigments, being literally sand, create ripples of color when allowed to cascade down. I stand the painting against the wall, and using broader strokes with abundant water, let the pigments cover the painting. When displayed in a gallery, the pigments will reflect the light and shimmer like stars. Finer pigments and earth colors, including sumi ink made from pine tar, can be used to create water stains. Tawaraya Sotatsu of the 17<sup>th</sup> century used this technique, called *tarashikomi*, well. For this, I lay the painting down on the floor, and let the water create pools. The

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<sup>24</sup> Characteristic features of *Nihonga* art are generally summarized as follows:

*Nihonga* is a type of painting rendered with *iwaenogu* (mineral pigments) and *gofun* (shell white), mixed in a *nikawa* (animal glue) medium. The primary materials for supports are silk and paper, but wooden boards and lined are occasionally used. A view of *Nihonga* painting under magnification shows the relatively coarse mineral-pigment particles enveloped in a thin layer of medium solution, attached to the support. The materials allows light to travel through a thinner medium than that of Western oil painting; it is somewhat similar in structure to Western watercolour. For this reason, *Nihonga* appears to be softer in colour. (M. Koyano, 'Nihonga Materials and Techniques,' Conant, *Nihonga*, 110).

paper buckles, and drips finely ground pigments into the pools, letting the color spread.

Thus, the rhythmic creation of stain marks acts visually to freeze the movement; the more fluid, vertical movement allows the pigments to fall naturally. Depending on the weather, and the season, how much glue is used varies. If the glue is too strong, the pigments will be dull; if it is too weak, they will not stick to the surface. The slow evolution of an image, with each layer adding a passage of memory-traces, leaves behind a residue of the process of painting itself.

These memory-traces are built up in semi-opaque layers that become their own “space.” I want the gold and silver to look transparent, to trap the layers of pigments and metal leaf and allow the layers to become their own ambiguous space, creating their own quality of light. In watercolor, the light is reflected from the paper beneath. In oil and acrylic, light is basically reflected from the surface of the paint. But the *Nihonga* materials allow both, as they are semi-opaque and uniquely suited for ambiguity and depth. Renaissance painters created space with perspective. Japanese painters create space by the use of *yohaku*, or empty areas. I am interested in creating an ambivalent visual space in between the two. An art historian friend coined the term “grace arena” for this ambiguity of space. Grace, it shall be grace that exists between the immanent reality of earth and the transcendent reality of heaven.<sup>25</sup>

An art that traffics in the ‘ambiguous’ and the ‘ambivalent’ and that seeks to portray the relationship between ‘immanent reality of earth and the transcendent reality of heaven’ is an art that is involved in *mystery*. Gabriel Marcel spoke of the difference between a problem-solving rationalism and the opened-ended nature of mystery, and how one challenge before Western Christianity was to learn again how to live comfortably with mystery.<sup>26</sup> Art such as Fujimura’s confronts its viewers with a certain degree of mystery that will either attract or repel, depending on the orientation and curiosity of the viewer.

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<sup>25</sup> Fujimura, *River Grace*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> See D. Allen and E. Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 196.

In addition to these dynamics, Fujimura frequently refers to the significance of gold and silver leaf. The dominance of these materials reflects the influence of his mentor, which in turn reflects his adaptation of techniques associated with *Rimpa*.



Kawabata Ryūshi (1885-1966), *Dream*, colour on paper 151.5 x 242.4 cm; note use of gold square motif

What is important to note is that for Fujimura, gold has symbolic significance besides its natural sheen and allure. Fujimura writes of the fascination inspired by his teacher's introduction to the use of the gold leaf unique in Japan for its transparency; 'he showed us that the most pure gold is nearly transparent as it casts a bluish light and halo.' On this introduction to the use of gold leaf Fujimura further writes:

In my mind, Kayama-sensei's vision for earthly materials began to tap into the greater reality of what Revelation passages describe: "The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass" (21:12). In other words, "the third color" [reference to Kayama's characterization of the effects of gold and silver in painting] would be based on transparencies of purity, layering of time and space that can be captured only with gold.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fujimura, *River Grace*, 22-23.

In Fujimura's writings and commentaries, gold represents for him both purgation and purification in the earthly life and heavenly transcendence in the afterlife. Gold also serves to connect his work with the Japanese tradition as noted, as well as with the Western religious art tradition, particularly with works such as by the early Renaissance artist Guido di Piero ('Fra Angelico') and in Orthodox iconography.

### Early Works

Two early pieces by Fujimura demonstrate aspects of his artistic lineage and aesthetic ambitions. One is *Aijo* (five panels, 180 x 190 cm each, mineral pigments on paper). Painted while still a student in 1987, it features two herons attached at their backs on the central panels, cleverly forming a heart-shaped image, accompanied by two dark colour field panels on either side. The painting reflects the traditional bird-and-flower genre in painting (*kachō-ga*), and the composition itself reflects a Japanese myth of the first male and female attached at the backs until they request separation. The story is an etiology of the perennial search for one's other half.<sup>28</sup>



Because of its representational 'anchor' from which one might then consider the effectiveness of his technique, its associations with features of Japanese art and the unthreatening presence of the abstract outer panels, *Aijo* might represent an apt place to introduce Fujimura's work to new viewers.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 6-7. References to *kumohada* are to a canvas-like paper unique to Japan, favoured by Nihonga artists like Fujimura. The paper is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain.

The second work is *Twin Rivers of Tamagawa (Futako-Tamagawaen)*. Painted in 1989 as his master's thesis project, this work features aspects of what will become standard in Fujimura's subsequent work. Gestural flamboyance and fugitive representational images of the two bridges and trees are perhaps first observed. A single-point perspective is encouraged by the use of lines and colour, leading the eye towards the top left-hand corner of the large painting. The slightly irregular geometric pattern of the background of the painting is echoed by the square dimension of the framed work, and the graduated increase beginning in the bottom left hand corner towards the top right hand corner of off-silver towards more brilliant gold creates a counter-point to the effect of the lines of the concrete blocks on the left hand side.



*Twin Rivers of Tamagawa*, 1989, mineral pigments and gold on kumohada, 227 x 227 cm

The use of the gold-square background pattern is reminiscent of works by Sansetsu Kano, such as his four-panel work *The Old Plum Tree*. This prominently features a gold geometric pattern highlighting dark trees rendered in a nearly abstract manner.





Sansetsu Kano, *The Old Plum Tree* c. 1647, ink, pigments, gold on paper, 1.7 x 4.8 m

Another is Kōrin Ogata's *Red and White Plums*. The work features abstractly rendered river winding between two plum trees, set against a vividly gold geometric patterned background.



Kōrin Ogata, *Red and White Plums* early 18<sup>th</sup> century, four screens 1.6 x 1.7 m each

Considering these two works from the Japanese tradition, one is impressed by how short a leap it is for Fujimura to embrace an abstractionist style.

### III. Artistic Lineages: The Western Inheritance

I describe my work to others as a “hybrid of Fra Angelico and [Mark] Rothko.” In that sense, I am trying to bring Fra Angelico’s weighty beauty and Rothko’s profound meditations into this century.<sup>29</sup>

Fujimura was exposed to the possibilities of abstraction early in his studies. The abstract properties of Japanese art and the experimental movements of twentieth-century Western art reinforced Fujimura’s own emerging style. Arshile Gorky was one such early influence in this regards. His reflections on encountering Gorky’s art are illuminating:

I remember going to the Arshile Gorky retrospective in the early eighties at the Guggenheim, and having the paintings speak to me in ways the *Shorinzu Byobu* [Hasegawa’s Pine Forest screen] speaks to me today. In fact, I believe that experience convinced me that I should seek to pursue art. Gorky’s works probed the depth of essentiation. Gorky’s later works spoke in a language I could not comprehend but yet yearned for. His exquisite lines opened space and closed them at the same time. His colors, both delectable with their focused intensity like that of the stamen of a lily, remained in my memory and affect my vision today. And this is not to speak of the influence of Rothko and Diebenkorn. The language of abstraction both eastern and western came to me early, and stayed with me.<sup>30</sup>

Encounters with the work of Georges Rouault later in Japan further introduced Fujimura both to the possibilities of colourist space, the illusion of light, and a modern-informed resistance to the reductionisms of materialism and rationalism, and to a sincerity of expression he could respect and feel drawn towards.<sup>31</sup> Fujimura considers himself a ‘semi-abstract’<sup>32</sup> painter who,

<sup>29</sup> M. Fujimura, correspondence with the author, 17 June 2010.

<sup>30</sup> M. Fujimura, ‘That Final Dance,’ in *It was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God*, 2nd ed., Ned Bustard, ed. (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2006), 300.

<sup>31</sup> M. Fujimura, ‘Georges Rouault: The First Twenty-First Century Artist,’ in T. Hibbs, *Rouault/Fujimura: Soliloquies*, (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2009), 54-55.

<sup>32</sup> Fujimura, *Refractions*, 168.



like some other abstractionists, resisted the notion that their work lacked any representational significance and was subject only to a Greenbergian analysis of mere formal considerations.<sup>33</sup>

Fujimura makes frequent reference to Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935) in his writings and interviews. What is interesting to note is Fujimura's association of abstraction with the conveyance of *transcendence*. Here he draws connections not only with the work of Malevich, but also with the work and theories of Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian. In an awkwardly conducted but personally revealing interview published in an on-line journal, Fujimura is asked to speak to the distinctions between icons and idols and how these dynamics manifest themselves in contemporary art. Fujimura begins his reflections:

Although Icon writing is specific for the purpose of worship, there's much overlap [with the intentions of art in general]. Take for instance the work of Kazimir Malevich, considered the father of modern abstraction. He was painting abstract, white images partly because creating Icons was forbidden in the Stalin/Lenin era in Russia. In this case, he positioned abstraction as a way to convey transcendence when Christianity was banned.<sup>34</sup>

Fujimura's reading of Malevich finds validation in a recent article on Malevich's *Black Square* (1923-30) by Charles Pickstone.<sup>35</sup> Pickstone situates Malevich's 'icon' within the tradition of Russian iconography and speculates on the political implications of the belief that

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 168. Of Fujimura's hesitancy towards the abstractionist label, Hibbs writes:

Fujimura worries about the tendency of abstraction toward a gnosticism or Platonism that would render physical reality at best a shadow and at worst an illusion: "I want my work to be a stripping off the unnecessary while it accentuates the physicality of... the textures, colors and materials of the natural world." (29-30).

<sup>34</sup> Stewart Lundy, 'The Gospel According to Makoto Fujimura,'

<http://www.patrolmag.com/2010/01/25/sklundy/makoto-fujimura-interview/> (accessed 12/03/11). Although art historians might challenge Fujimura's designation of Malevich as 'the father' of modern abstraction, his statement helpfully re-affirms the fundamentally spiritual aspirations found at the root of Western abstract art. Julian Bell's characterization of Malevich's art and Suprematist program echoes values related earlier to Eastern art:

In 1915 Kazimir Malevich exhibited a plain black square painted on a plain white background, proclaiming that in its darkness pure feeling shone forth supreme – liberated from the distracting world of objects. (*Mirror of the World*, [London: Thames and Hudson, 2007], 383).

See also E. Bernard, *Modern Art, 1905-1945* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 2004), 54-69.

<sup>35</sup> C. Pickstone, 'Art's Last Icon: Malevich's *Black Square* Revisited,' in *Visual Theology: Forming and Transforming the Community Through the Arts*, R. M. Jenson and K. J. Vrudny, eds., (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), 7. The *Black Square* of 1923-30 should not be confused with the one referred to above by Bell.

icons provide access to the very presence and power of God. While emphasizing the social-historical aspects of Malevich's work, Pickstone then notes:

At a deeper level, however, it might be argued that Malevich's *Black Square* forms part of the great apophatic tradition of spirituality that strips away the dross and the second-rate in religion and returns it to its very foundations, finding God in silence, in darkness, and in absence of speech. If the function of the icon is to depict the ineffable in an artistic medium, it is readily apparent that this black square is both closely linked to the Russian icon tradition and also moves the tradition forward.<sup>36</sup>

It is the apophatic dimension of Malevich's work, or the apophatic implications of it, that seem to form for Fujimura a key to their inner meaning. Apophatic theology draws attention toward the transcendence of God. Apophaticism functions in Christian spirituality in Pickstone's suggestive phraseology to '[strip] away the dross and the second-rate in religion' in terms of conceptions and speech about God that obscures or denies God's mysterious 'otherness.' This stands in some contrast or tension with Fujimura's expressed admiration for Rouault, whose works tends to affirm the immanence and nearness of God. Both Malevich and Rouault, however, represent forms of a 'holy minimalism' in Western art, and Fujimura seems to admire Rouault's manipulation of colour as much as the figurative and representational aspects of the work. Such minimalism in art tends to reinforce the experience of mystery in art. An aesthetic of minimalism can also be seen to call forth a certain ascetical diminishment of ego-centrism both in the art and in its viewer, a lessened expectation of being 'spoon-fed' as it were and challenged to embrace the mysterious on its own terms.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 7.

## Abstract Expressionism

The term Abstract Expressionism refers more to a process than a style. The point is to express feeling through the act of painting itself, the process, without fixating on the actual product of that act, the artwork.<sup>37</sup>

While Fujimura's admiration for and reflections on Malevich are frequent, no other modern artist figures so prominently in Fujimura's writings and self-interpretation than that of Mark Rothko (1903-1970). Fujimura associates his work with what he refers to as Rothko's 'profound meditations' and it is both the aesthetic and religious connotations of Rothko's work that seems to capture Fujimura's sympathies and emulation, as well as a common problematizing of the concept of abstract painting.

Analyses of Rothko's subject matter and 'meaning' typically make reference to his immersion in tragic drama, particularly Greek tragedy, the writings of Nietzsche, particularly *The Birth of Tragedy*, and mythology. Analyses of his technique usually refer to his use of colour, formal abstraction, size of canvas, stipulations for the correct presentation of his paintings, and the desired relationship between the canvas and the viewer. Most commentators note the explicitly spiritual impulses lying behind Rothko's work and acknowledge that his art communicates a religious message, for those able to attend to it. The connection between this artistic impulse and Rothko's Judaism is rarely explored in any deep manner. However 'secularized' and culturally assimilated Marcus Rothkowitz may have been in his adult life, behind his artistic vision and philosophical perspective is the worldview-forming influence of religion. Understanding Rothko as a Jew in a frequently oppressive world opens up new means of assessing his art, and highlights the connections between Rothko and Fujimura.

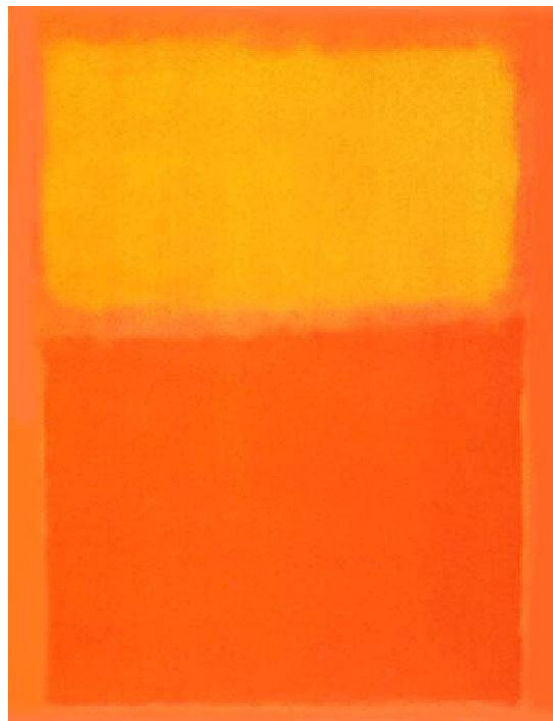
One connection is what can be interpreted as the implicit apophaticism of their art. Rothko proclaimed along with Adolph Gottlieb that his art was for flat forms 'because they destroy illusion and reveal truth'<sup>38</sup> and that the 'familiar identity of things have to be pulverized in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society increasingly enshrouds every aspects of

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<sup>37</sup> J. Baal-Teshuva, *Rothko* (Cologne: Taschen, 2003), 10.

<sup>38</sup> M. Rothko and A. Gottlieb, Letter to the Editor, *The New York Times*, 7 June 1943, in M. Rothko, *Writings on Art*, ed. M. López-Remiro, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 36.

our environment.<sup>39</sup> There is something of an iconoclastic impulse implied in this language in the service of a higher transcendence and intensification of experience.<sup>40</sup> Both of their work can be commended for the avoidance of racial biases that inflect figurative representations of the Scriptural story or human experience. Fujimura speak of stripping away non-essentials rather than destroying previous representations, but the effects are similar. Both affirm the capacity of abstraction as means of creating a transcendent art form, as well as the capacity of colours to achieve this effect, which accounts for a shared admiration for the work of Fra Angelico.<sup>41</sup> From Rothko, moreover, Fujimura derives his sense of the ‘communion’ between a painting and its viewer, the necessary act of engagement with it wherein the viewer ‘completes’ the work through their own imaginative engagement and emotional connection. Rothko, along with the Japanese screen tradition, encouraged Fujimura toward large-scale works which facilitate such engagement by way of enveloping the viewer into its space and physical presence.<sup>42</sup>



Mark Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956, 231.1 x 180.3 cm

<sup>39</sup> M. Rothko, ‘The Romantics Were Prompted,’ in *Writings on Art*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Although used only once in a metaphorical passing, Anfam writes of Rothko’s contemporary and competitor Bartlett Newman’s *Stations of the Cross* as exhibiting ‘an iconoclasm indicative of last things’ (*Abstract Expressionism*, 184).

<sup>41</sup> Fujimura records his own encounter with Fra Angelico’s work in *Refractions*, 141-45.

<sup>42</sup> Baal-Teshuva, 46.

Fujimura appreciates the pathos that informs Rothko's work, and finds connection with it in terms of themes of suffering derived from Biblical as well as Japanese cultural sources. One can interpret a hiddenness or absence of God in Rothko's late works. One thinks of the Houston Chapel in particular. The open-ended theology behind Rothko's work finds parallels in Fujimura's work; the ambiguous, empty space, trust in the affective potential of colour itself, gestural utterance, the evocation of joy and sorrow. At the same time, however, Fujimura's work and its accompanying titles and themes suggest a more world-affirming and hopeful message. Rothko's extreme apophaticism finds a cataphatic echo in Fujimura's work, necessitated in part by Fujimura's commitment to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. The Incarnation introduces a dialectical relationship of apophatic and cataphatic dynamics, a dialectic one can perceive in the work of Fujimura, such as in his use of 'empty' space yet filled with gold and interpreted along the lines of the titles.<sup>43</sup>

#### IV. Fujimura's Maturing Style: Works 1996-2006

The combination of the *Nihonga*-based techniques of the ink-running effect, the use of gold leaf, open space and an unfinished affect and the 'action-type' aesthetic of the New York School is displayed in *Grace Foretold*. A contrapuntal effect is achieved as the gold squares, signifying for Fujimura something of the transcendent the presence of God, draws the eye upward, while the running effect of the blue and black pigments suggests a downward movement, and the unfinished bottom portion of the painting might suggest something unfinished, a grace foretold but still coming. Gestures, then, signify meaning, some of which derive from the Japanese inheritance. Among the meanings, for example, associated with the indistinct, running effects and other gestures is Fujimura's notion of the 'ephemeral':

The Japanese realized a long time ago that nothing is permanent. Therefore, it is better to respect the aging process, to value the ephemeral over apparent permanence of materials. The age-old concept of *wabi* (poverty) and *sabi* (rusting away) insists that what is truly beautiful is not the permanence of things but the impermanence of things, that a

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<sup>43</sup> One could argue that a similar apophatic-cataphatic dynamic exists within traditional Judaism by virtue of its commitment to a revealed Torah. Rothko did not practice the orthodoxy of his forebears.

culture is not just the product of culture but the knowledge of a craft that is passed down from generation to generation.<sup>44</sup>



*Grace Foretold*, 1996, mineral pigments and gold on kumohada, 157 x 122 cm

As discussed above, to instantiate the ‘impermanence’ of things can be related to aspects of Christian teaching; St Paul speaks of living as those who possess and yet possess not and that ‘the present form of this world is passing away’ (I Corinthians 7:31). Yet Fujimura frequently bemoans the ‘embezzlement’ of celebrity artists who emphasize ‘novelty’ and fail to consider what he calls the ‘five-hundred year question’ of art that stands the test of time. The seeming tension between the Japanese insight and the question of long-term value associated with human making could be an interesting point of departure for discussing Fujimura’s project.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Fujimura, *Refractions*, 100.

<sup>45</sup> Fujimura, ‘Fra Angelico and the Five-Hundred-Year Question,’ in *Refractions*, 141-45.

The following year Fujimura produced *Grace Psalm*. Against a variegated light blue background given texture by the ink pooling *tarashikomi* effect, the gentle hint of a flower emerges into the foreground. In both this work and *Grace Foretold*, the size of the works contribute to the overall effect. Fujimura's major works tend to be on large-scale dimensions. Again, one can see the inheritance both of the Japanese screen door tradition as well as the large-scale works of the Abstract Expressionists, Rothko in particular. Art historian James Elkins attributes the use of such size to a desire to express sublimity.<sup>46</sup>



*Grace Psalm*, 1997, mineral pigments, gold, silver on kumohada, 89 x 66 cm

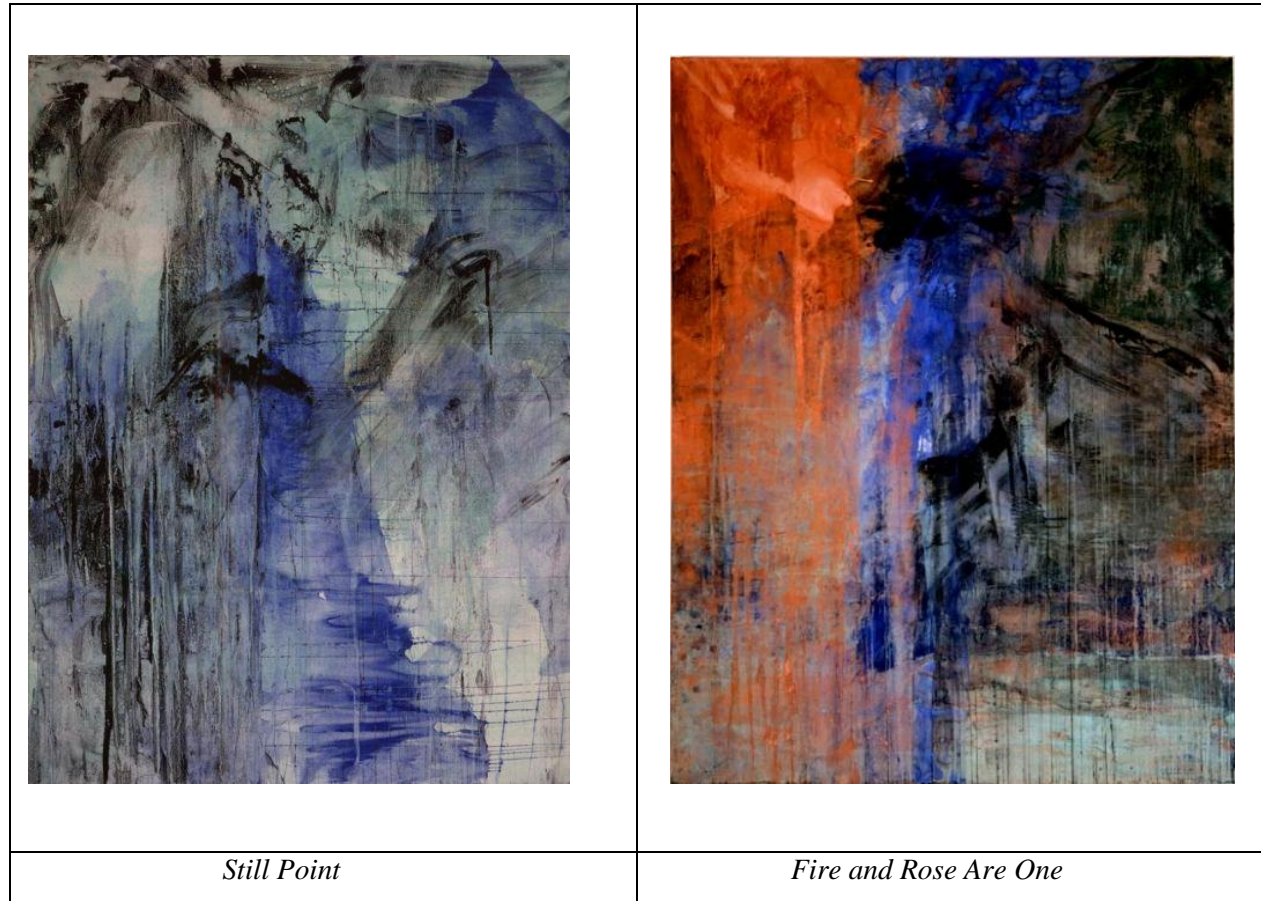
The events of September 2001 marked a profound change in Fujimura's work. Living not far from the World Trade Center, he was deeply disturbed by the events of that day. The effects of this can be seen in the dark, turbulent gestures of *Still Point* (2003, mineral pigment, gold powder, 89 x 66 cm), as well as *Fire and Rose are One* (2003, mineral pigments on Kumohada, 89 x 66 cm). These paintings and their titles reflect Fujimura's meditations on T.S. Eliot's *Four*

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<sup>46</sup> J. Elkins, 'On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art,' lecture at the 2008 Biola University Art Symposium, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U88POHX1Jo4> (accessed 1 November 2011).



*Quartets*, which, along with *The Divine Comedy*, he found to be a source of theological perspective on 9/11.



In *Water Flames – Vermillion*, Fujimura reaches close proximity to the late works of Rothko. A near colour field, but with an undulating movement suggested by the brush work and light, ‘breathing’ effect of the pigments on the porous Kumohada paper. The title is suggestive of paradox – *Water Flames*. Both water and flames, for Fujimura, are suggestive of cleansing, of catharsis. Since September 2001 Fujimura’s writings evidence a preoccupation with purgation and the renewal that follows:

The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> T.S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding,’ in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 207.





*Water Flames – Vermillion*, 2006, two panels, mineral pigments on kumohada, 89 x 132 in.

In a work not related to the events of September 11th, Fujimura paid homage to his recently deceased mentor Matazō Kayama. In *Splendor for Kayama*, Fujimura creates a dark, brooding work, with a free application of several pigments on the paintings, applied in the pooling, dripping effect, which in this case becomes suggestive of weeping. Three gold leaf squares appear to be floating in the midst of the unfinished storm, a clear reference to Fujimura's appreciation for the training in the use of this uniquely Japanese-manufactured thin leaf. Such usage again harkens back to the roots of *Nihonga*, as in Bosatsu Yakuō's *Heike Nōgyō* (c. 1164) which features the same gold leaf squares giving visual texture the gold-shaded background of this narrative painting. In Fujimura's work, the gold squares seem suggestive both of the deceased master and of Fujimura's hope for after-life. Much of the lower left-hand corner is unpainted, apart from the presence of the dripping effect. This is an example of the 'unfinished' aspect of many of Fujimura's works. Symbolically, it perhaps speaks here of an unfinished life or of an on-going legacy. Some viewers need to be given permission to make such observations of Fujimura's work, being otherwise embarrassed from making an ignorant statement or unable to recognize the effect for what it is.



*Splendor for Kayama*, 2004, mineral pigments and gold on Kumohada, 66 x 89 in.

## V. Critical Review and Reception

As in the case of Peter Howson, critical reception and review provides other points of view and access to informed opinion on an artist's work. Fujimura has received largely positive reviews from generally sympathetic reviewers. Most reviews typically include descriptions of Fujimura's technique since it represents for many an unfamiliar approach to art. Descriptions of the effects are generally included, accompanied by usually positive assessments. Many reviewers acknowledge and appreciate Fujimura's religious content, and in several reviews Fujimura's work is brought into service of cultural and political agendas, a move encouraged by the artist's activities and associations.<sup>48</sup>

In a review which appeared in 2006, the reviewer provides a typical description of Fujimura's technique:

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<sup>48</sup> Fujimura served on President George W. Bush's National Council on the Arts from 2003-2008, and self-identifies as a Republican; see *Refractions*, 61.

A form of watercolor painting dating back to medieval Japan, *Nihonga* is popular among contemporary Japanese artists attentive to the beauty of the materials. Organic rock pigments are washed onto handmade papers. Pigments are ground from natural minerals, shells, corals, and even semiprecious stones. Applied with glue, *Nihonga* has properties similar to casein, one of the first binders used by man.<sup>49</sup>

The description is followed by a generally appreciative assessment, concluding that the main works in the exhibit ‘fulfill Mr. Fujimura’s stated desire – similar to that of an icon painter – to convey a sense of transcendence by means of color and light.’

In a review written in 2002, critic Richard Tobin places Fujimura’s work in the context of abstract art, describing the need for ‘something else’ to be present if abstraction is to avoid cliché. With references to colour field, gesture and illusion of depth, Tobin provides a helpful language with which to describe the effect of Fujimura’s technique:

The seven abstract paintings of Makoto Fujimura on view last month at Belles Artes have that “something else.” Fujimura builds horizontal, monochromatic fields of intense atmospheric blue or red through layered applications of native-ore pigments suspended in an animal-hide glue medium. The crystalline particles of azurite and cinnabar refract through the brushed layers of paint to imbue the surface with the lustrous sheen and intimations of alternatively fluid or marble-like depths. In several works the artist animates the color field with a central gestural form drawn by repeated calligraphic brushstrokes, evoking the cryptic narrative of an ink painting or a classical landscape scroll. Fujimura’s description of his work aptly captures the visual effect: “As light becomes trapped within pigments, a ‘grace arena’ is created, as the light is broken, and trapped in refraction. Yet my gestures are limited, contained, and gravity pulls the pigments like a kind friend.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> M. Mullarkey, “Makoto Fujimura: Golden Fire,” [www.nysun.com/arts/arts-in-brief-2006-12-07/44746](http://www.nysun.com/arts/arts-in-brief-2006-12-07/44746), (accessed 4/01/11). *The New York Sun* identified its editorial posture as ‘right of center’ and ceased its print publication in 2008; it now runs as an on-line publication.

<sup>50</sup> R. Tobin, ‘Makoto Fujimura at Belles Artes Gallery – Gravity and Grace,’ *Times Higher Education Magazine*, September 2002.

Writing for the mainstream art journal *Art in America*, Robert Kushner registers two aspects of Fujimura's agenda, the bi-cultural conversation he seeks to engender as well as a responsibly articulated religious agenda:

Fujimura's work, although using [*Nihonga*] materials and techniques, yields a bittersweet, contemplative moodiness and a more complex psychological journey. He directs us to the ethereal beauty of misty river bottoms, bridges and trees, evoking both Japanese rivers and the marred natural beauty of New Jersey wetlands near which he lives. Pigment is applied in pools of color, and there are calligraphic indications from which landscape begins to coalesce. Upon these sweeping vistas Biblical quotes are inscribed in smudged gold ink – messages of hope amid despair. It is mildly startling to find someone today referring to Isaiah's "crown of beauty... and garment of praise" and meaning it. In combination with the somber landscapes, the effect is emotionally explosive. Our thoughts cease as we gaze into the velvety midnight blue, or the gray-green spring mist, yearning to share Fujimura's confidence in redemption. It is an act of artistic courage to place these tender meditations so candidly before the Philistines.<sup>51</sup>

Some of the most extensive reviews of Fujimura's work are by David Gelernter. Writing for the politically conservative American magazine *The Weekly Standard*, Gelernter posits Fujimura as a light in an otherwise dark contemporary art world, and enlists Fujimura's work into the debate between conservative and decadently liberalizing forces at work in America. As a practicing Jew, Gelernter is able to appreciatively situate Fujimura's religious commitments within his artistic practice without apology or awkwardness.

Writing of Fujimura's work as a 'redemption of abstract expressionism,' Gelernter writes how, while using the traditional methods of Japanese art, Fujimura's paintings:

...point not to the past but to the future, in which art is raised gently and lovingly from the gutter and reinstated at the center of modern life. For thirty years, abstract expressionism has been neglected by the American art establishment in favor

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<sup>51</sup> R. Kushner, 'Hiroshi Senju and Makoto Fujimura at Dillon,' *Art in America*, November 1995.

of the toothless tedium of Installation Art, Conceptual Art, Computer Art, Porno Art, Excrement Art, Dead-Animal Art.<sup>52</sup>

Gelernter's reviews, however, are not exclusively positive:

He doesn't always hit the mark. Some of his paintings ramble. Occasionally his crushed-mineral pigments seem lifeless – in some of the sparser paintings, where colors have less opportunity to heighten and play off one another.<sup>53</sup>

Writing of Fujimura's 'color-chords,' his use of large canvases, his employment of 'gestural abstraction' within the confines of a régime of strict rules associated with a tradition of painting, Gelernter characterizes Fujimura as a 'major artist.'<sup>54</sup> Not so for Chicago School of Art professor of art history and criticism James Elkins. Speaking before an audience at a conference sponsored by Biola University, an evangelical Christian institution, Elkins suggested that while Fujimura's work was impressive it wasn't 'great.' Elkins, as noted above, suggested that Fujimura's use of large canvases struck at attempt towards the achievement of 'sublimity' in his work that masked a weakness of technique.<sup>55</sup> Elkins invocation of sublimity unintentionally highlights the connections between Fujimura's and Rothko's work. The critical light of Elkins' comments raises the fact that some viewers are dispositionally critical of religious connotation and 'sublimity' in art.<sup>56</sup> Elkins' descriptive analysis and Gelernter's prescriptive critique of the

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<sup>52</sup> D. Gelernter, 'A Faithful Art: Makoto Fujimura and the Redemption of Abstract Expressionism,' *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 10 No. 23, March 7, 2005, 20.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 32-34.

<sup>55</sup> J. Elkins, Address at the Biola Conference on Art Symposium.

<sup>56</sup> In a memoranda following his comments at the Biola symposium, Elkins elaborates on his critique of Fujimura's work:

Fujimura makes use of large, dark spaces; he draws on what is called the "analytic of the sublime"; he constructs simple, nearly abstract objects; he explains his work with titles and texts that are serious, philosophic, and poetic. In those four respects his art is very close, incrementally close, to art made by artists who are internationally celebrated as avant-garde: especially Hiroshi Sugimoto and Tacita Dean. In my book, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, I propose that such work—Dean's and Sugimoto's—effectively uses the sublime and allied concepts as a way to speak about religious concepts without being explicitly religious. The sublime has long functioned that way in the secular humanities. Work like Sugimoto's makes no secret of its sublimity, but it makes a "secret" of its religious dimensions: "secret" in quotation marks not because it cannot be said, but because religion, as I argue in the book, is simply not part of the discourse on contemporary art.

Fujimura is not a central player in the art world, although he does have an international career. I would like to suggest, politely and without any polemical purpose, that if he did not present himself and his work as

contemporary art world reflect the conflicted situation into which Fujimura seeks to project his work.

Several aspects of Fujimura's work emerge and are echoed in these various reviews. Comparisons between Fujimura's work and Orthodox iconography occur with some frequency, and this comparison will shape the theological assessment of Fujimura's work. Two things are worth noticing. On one hand, Fujimura's manner of painting produces effects both of inverse perspective and of depth. The traditions of both Japanese art and Western Modernism eschew the illusions of depth achieved through chiaroscuro, sfumato, and so forth. The flattening of the picture plane was a primary theory that informed much of twentieth century Modernism. Fujimura's art reflects both of the sources. The visual clues and gestural abstraction of Fujimura's paintings make it difficult to discuss his work in terms of lines of perspective. But what is achieved is an effect not unlike what is referred to as 'inverse perspective' associated with icons.<sup>57</sup> This effect of inverse perspective in part by the use of gold leafing. The gold reflects the light directly back from the image, and so draws the eye toward the front surface of the painting. The use of gold of course represents another connection between Fujimura's art and that of icons, and the effect reflects a similar theological orientation:

Gold-leaf was an important element of Byzantine art and its international allure. Gold is a matter and yet, it transports us beyond matter, seeming to give out a richer light than it receives: witness Ravenna's glittering mosaics. The highlights in the Monreale image [of Christ pulling Peter from the sea (c. 1180)] and the icon of the Virgin [*Virgin of Vladimir*, 1131] send the eyes on similar journeys from darkness to transcendent radiance.<sup>58</sup>

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Christian, he might well be exhibited in different circles. The art is the same (I mean, of course, effectively similar) but the ideology is unacceptable. Work by artists that is explicitly religious, including some other work in this show, would be even less likely to be accepted ['A Brief Note on the Exhibition,' undated].

<sup>57</sup> See J. Baggeley, *Doors of Perception: Icons and Their Spiritual Significance* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1988), 80-81. Art historian Clemena Antonova prefers the term 'reverse perspective' and provides a more elaborate account of it in *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God* (Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>58</sup> Bell, *Mirror of the World*, 119.



At the same time, however, many comment on the effect of depth perceived in Fujimura's work. This effect is particularly evident in such paintings as *Olana – Matthew Six*, where dark paint lies behind the gold leaf squares.



*Olana – Matthew Six*, 2007-09

The play of light is perhaps the most commented-on feature of Fujimura's work. Light therefore plays both a literal visual effect of his work as well as a primary metaphor by which the aesthetic effect of his work is assessed. In a recent review of Fujimura's *Four Holy Gospels* project (2011), Bruce Herman writes:

The particular virtue of *Nihonga* technique is the lovely manner in which the pulverized mineral fragments refract ambient light, giving a crystalline glow to the colors, to the surface of the painting, and to the very space the art occupies.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> B. Herman, 'Review of Makoto Fujimura, 'The Four Holy Gospels,' in *Themelios*, Vol. 36, No. 2, July 2011, 359.

Herman, a professor of art at an American Christian liberal arts college, writes of what he perceives as a Japanese artistic sensibility attuned to the contemplative dimensions of space, time and nature, ‘and a particular reticence with regards to human interventions therein.’ Referring then to the American aspect of his work, Herman suggests that, like those artists of the 1940’s and ‘50’s, ‘Fujimura believes the act of painting itself has significance, and the art object that results is, in a very real sense, a fossil of that free act.’ Herman finds great theological potential in Fujimura’s combination of the Eastern and Western aesthetics, not merely in terms of cultural diversity, but because such blending ‘has much to offer by way of trusting in the Holy Spirit’s leading in both art and in speech. Real Conversation can emerge only when those involved refuse to over-determine outcomes and each listens responsively to the other. The Eastern reticence to intervene forcefully is a great boon in correcting our own overly ‘chatty’ dispositions with regard to the mystery of the Word made flesh.’ Herman congratulates Fujimura who, in his refusal to ‘define or delimit in his imagery communicates what is fitting for the holy subject he attempts to evoke.’<sup>60</sup>

## **VI. Makoto Fujimura’s Work in Relation to Spiritual Formation**

My art...is catalytic, and should work to facilitate the viewers’ journeys to wrestle deeper in their faith, art and life.<sup>61</sup>

Makoto Fujimura’s art invites a sophisticated level of aesthetic and ascetic engagement for several reasons. As we have seen, his work is cross-cultural, a product of syntheses of the techniques and materials of traditional Japanese art with the techniques and convictions of American-style abstraction. His aesthetic invests meaning in the creative act itself, having executed several paintings during live events involving music, expressing his belief that ‘art should be redefined to consider the relational acts as much as the products we produce to communicate.’<sup>62</sup> The unfinished, ambiguous aspect of his pieces potentiates misunderstanding, and the reliance on the intrinsic properties of materials and their application is a challenge to

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 359.

<sup>61</sup> M. Fujimura, correspondence with the author, 17 June 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Fujimura, *Refractions*, 54.



audiences largely dependent on identifiable references. Anecdotal evidence suggests that viewers often seek out some identifiable ‘anchor’ within a piece in order to build an interpretation around it.

If ‘refraction’ is the way in which Fujimura characterizes the visual effect of his paintings, his writings are also replete with references to what he calls ‘essentiation,’ by which he means ‘capturing the inner essence of an object, rather than drawing the outline of its form.’<sup>63</sup> This is an insightful point that he makes about his work. Fujimura’s mentor Matazō Kayama, however, commended the Japanese conception of the decorative as one which ‘enables the artist to thoroughly sublimate the subject matter so as to express only the purest of those essences that result from the process itself.’<sup>64</sup> As noted above, sublimation refers in the first place to a process in chemistry whereby a substance passes from its solid to gaseous state directly. Such diffusion renders the reality of something less tangible, more hidden and implicit. One approach perhaps to Fujimura’s art is to imagine a standard Orthodox icon of Christos Pantocrator or the form of Holy Wisdom, and to imagine the image being slowly abstracted, the colours diffused against the standard gold backgrounds of the icons. The identifiable references disappear, but the colours, now streaked, pooling, or running down the board, remain. In so doing, one could ask whether Christ remains present in the icon nonetheless. One could answer in the affirmative, that He is no longer present in facial features and Gospel book but in the colours and perhaps some of the forms by which he was represented. He remains present in a *sublimated* way. Thus the transcendent ‘pull’ of the gold and the aesthetic properties of the colours and the materials of which they are composed continue to effect their power on the viewer.

Such a thought experiment might account for the sense of ‘holiness’ which viewers of Fujimura’s works find but often cannot explain. Fujimura’s whole aesthetic is based on the conviction that the inner reality – the concealed dynamic - rather than the outward form constitutes the real subject matter of his work. For Fujimura, the inner reality of Christ is divine grace, a grace that draws the conditions of creation up toward itself.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Fujimura, ‘That Final Dance’ 298. Fujimura writes that his process of essentiation involves ‘stripping off the unnecessary while it accentuates the physicality of Creation’s textures, colors, and materials. I suspect that it is this essentiation that Japanese poets and painters of the past viewed as so central to their depiction of nature and life’ (298).

<sup>64</sup> Jordan and Nara, in *Nihonga*, ed. Conant, 307.

<sup>65</sup> Fujimura expresses the trajectory of his evangelical faith when, in an elaboration about worship, he says: By “proper worship,” I mean a distinctively Christological way of looking at God, the world and ourselves that is driven by understanding and experiencing God’s grace. I am not merely speaking of liturgical

Another interpretive approach to Fujimura's work is the invitation to 'dialogue' with it. His reticence to 'define and delimit' his subject matter invites this heightened degree of imaginative engagement, which can challenge those accustomed to more easily accessible and confirmatory artworks. His art, drawing on traditions found both in the Japanese and American abstract, invites viewers to suspend expectations and engage with a work of art in a different manner:

For [Iwasaki Yoshikazu], the chief characteristic of Western painting and, by extension, Japanese Western-style *yōga* lies in the fact that post-Renaissance tradition in Western art has been focused on the observation of visual realities. On the other hand, the classical Chinese and Japanese traditions have concentrated on an "essentialization," which moves beyond any surface reality in order to locate the essence, most often felt to be a metaphysical essence, of the subject being rendered. By this logic, a Western painter might show us the way a tree looks. A traditional Japanese painter would select elements in the configuration of a real tree in order to show the essence of tree-ness that perforce lies below, beyond the surface reality. Therefore, Iwasaki emphasizes, Western (and Western-style Japanese) painters concentrate on *seeing*, while *Nihonga* artists focus on *feeling*. Intuition, rather than observation, this remains in his view the authentic central concern for painters in the *Nihonga* tradition.<sup>66</sup>

Comments such as these underline the potential for an *ascesis* involving penetrative experiences of *aesthesis*. As suggested before, encountering works like Fujimura's requires an

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elements, denominations, or traditions. If you follow Tim Keller's reasoning in *Prodigal God*, you see that Christ saw the world in grace-filled and extravagantly compassionate ways.

What is pertinent to note is the way Fujimura seeks to hold together the themes of redemption and creation towards a broader eschatological conception of God's intentions; Stewart Lundy "The Gospel According to Makoto Fujimura." The Rev. Tim Keller is senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, a large and prominent branch of the Presbyterian Church of America in New York City where Fujimura currently worships.

<sup>66</sup> J. T. Rimer, 'Some Final Observations,' in Conant, 74. Julian Bell speaks in a similar way of the theory of abstraction in early twentieth-century Western art, with particular reference to Kandinsky's work:

The visible world had not simply evaporated in this new art. Rather, its essences had been distilled and newly set free, as formulas with which one could build a new pictorial universe. They were none other than those things the eye loves to do: to pick out contrasts, to discern edges and closed shapes, to wander, to zoom and wriggle, to dwell deep in colour intensities, to hurtle and leap sideways. (*Mirror of the World*, 378).

David Brown writes of the religious meaning of abstraction for artists such as Kandinsky as a 'preoccupation with form and colour as means of highlighting the underlying divine reality of the world'; *God and Enchantment of Place*, 136. See also W. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M.T.H. Sadler (London, 1914; New York: Dover, 1977).

exertion of imaginative effort, patient interplay, and humility before an unfamiliar mode of expression in order to receive its full impact. This is a *visio divina* that requires work, but can yield increased capacities for engagement and of communion with art and artists, indeed even of a suffering with artwork not only of the highly allusive character of Fujimura's but with art in general, and by extension with life in general.

### **Narrative Implications of Fujimura's Art**

It is finally important to consider what one might call the 'gestalt' of Fujimura's work, that is, the inclusive totality of his art in terms of its titles and the titles of series, the context of presentation, and his own writings on art and faith, which he identifies as part of his artistic activity. Such an approach best reveals the narrative *implications* of the work. Abstract art is often identified as a uniquely 'non-narrative' genre of art. In his account of Abstract Expressionism, David Anfam challenges this common perception. Writing of the realism present in the early works of its exponents, Anfam suggests that they put this 'to unusual ends,' and writes:

One might go further still and remark upon a constant that almost defines the origins of Abstract Expressionism. It amounts to a puzzling quality of narrative suppressed or made secret. What we see is sufficiently occult to indicate a larger life outside the frame, or events and climaxes either just past or about to happen.<sup>67</sup>

I suggest that narrative implications remain under the surface of the American artists even in their most abstract work. In Fujimura's case one encounters not so much narrative suppressed but rather, as suggested above, narrative sublimated, reduced to its 'essence' and 'refracted' back into pure forms and colours. Like Rothko, Fujimura invites his viewers to commune with and thereby 'complete' his paintings, and he provides what he proposes is pictorial space to do so. While his artistry does not insist on any one particular interpretative outcome, an interpretative framework is provided by way of titles, contexts and associations. To appreciatively engage with

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<sup>67</sup> Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism*, 43-45.

Fujimura's work is to enter into a coded framework – curated primarily by means of the titles - of grace and purgation, Christ and Hiroshima, of the possibility of human reconciliation symbolized in inherently cross-cultural artworks, of the Way of Tea and the 'hope for a world that ought to be.' This drama of redemption is reflected in the dramatic gestures and imagery that fill Fujimura's work. As such, Fujimura's paintings can be seen as explicit manifestations of a *worldview* as defined earlier in this project: as visual metaphors for philosophical or, in this case more so, theological concepts which revolve around a particular understanding of divine grace in dramatic encounter with human experience. Fujimura's art communicates what can be articulated as the pathos of divine grace as interpreted in traditional Christian terms but distilled, as it were, into distinctly Japanese cultural values:

I began to wonder if Japanese culture intrinsically longs for the true message of Christmas even more than our American culture. Less than 1 percent of the Japanese claim to be Christian. But the Japanese traditional culture affirms vulnerability and loss. Japanese poems and paintings from the Heian period (794-1185) are full of sorrow and sadness, and their poetic tradition of *mono no aware* can be literally translated "beauty in the pathos of things." The Japanese already recognize that, on this side of eternity, we must see the beauty in an empty cup.<sup>68</sup>

It is into this set of values and its uniquely hybrid narrative framework that Fujimura invites his viewers into.

The thesis informing this project is that art communicates not only an artist's explicit or intended subject matter but also the presuppositional framework that leads the artist to identify something worth identifying, framing and communicating, something that the artist may have varying levels of consciousness of. Moreover, artworks pick up, as it were, the residual accumulation of meanings through time. All of this constitutes what I refer to as the 'story' an artwork presents to viewers and in effect invites them to 'inhabit,' however briefly, the implications of this story through the effectiveness of a chosen craft. Fujimura happens to be an example of an artist conscious to an unusual degree of the historical and theoretical

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<sup>68</sup> Fujimura, *Refractions*, 76.

presuppositions lying behind his work and of the communicative properties of his craft, making his work particularly well-suited for a study such as this one.

### **Applying Harned and Loder**

I have been drawing on the work of David Harned and James Loder, representing the resources of ethics and human development theory within theological frameworks, for a template with which to analyze and assess the effectiveness of two artists for the contribution their work might make to a practical theology of spiritual formation. The burden of Loder's work is that spiritually transformative knowledge and change involves a certain order or 'logic,' one that can be identified, analyzed, not used in any predictive or prescriptive way but as a pattern of encounter that 'reopen[s] the question of reality' for the person involved.<sup>69</sup> While Loder cites examples of what might be called conversion experiences as well as powerfully liberative experiences from false understandings of God or self, his work is also applicable to less dramatic but no less significant experiences of personal change, alteration of perspective, or strengthened resolve toward some aspect of religious life. These are aspects of what in this project is referred to as 'spiritual formation.'

Loder's 'logic of transformation' situates the knowing experience within some context, and he characterizes this context in terms of *conflict*. For Loder, the deeper the conflict and the more persistent the engagement with it, the possibility of greater yield in terms of a transformative 'knowing event.' Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is such conflict that many viewers experience when they first encounter Fujimura's art. The typical encounter begins with what is often a frustrating or disappointing goal of locating within his work an identifiable representation or 'anchor.' Failing that, the next move typically is finding in what way[s] there might exist a connection between the title and the piece itself.

As Bruce Herman suggested, in dealing with his sacred subject matter Fujimura declines to 'define and delimit' visual representations of God's workings. His aesthetic centers on capturing an essence rather than outlining a form. This leaves many viewers, particularly those new to the visual arts, in various states of disorientation or even alienation. The conflict here is often

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<sup>69</sup> J. E. Loder, *Transforming Moment* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981) 6.

articulated as one of *meaning*, but I might suggest it is really one of *seeing* and of access to a unique pictorial language which is unfamiliar. David Harned suggests some of the dynamics involved in this conflict:

Art presents us with aspects of the world and dimensions of human experience as they have been grasped by a person who has discriminating and creative talent. He has worked to clarify his vision of things. He has contributed more to his commerce with them and so he has derived more from them. When we read a novel or look at a painting, our experience is particularly intense and rewarding because in some measure it is a repetition of that of the artist himself. Much antipathy toward contemporary fiction and expressionist painting derives simply from our unwillingness to become acquainted with the depths of existence. We prefer to walk on the surfaces and shutter our eyes.<sup>70</sup>

A person newly approaching abstract art in general and Fujimura in particular must of course suspend their expectations and encounter the art on a different set of terms. Many people approach art expecting a finished, self-contained *product*. Fujimura's art stipulates the significance of *process*, both in terms of his own creativity and the imaginative 'completion' that viewers are invited to provide.<sup>71</sup> Representational art typically subsumes its technique behind the presentation of its subject matter. For Fujimura, the technique *is* part of the subject matter. Fujimura invites viewers to consider the 'Splendor of the Medium.'<sup>72</sup> For viewers not accustomed or presuppositionally disinclined toward twentieth-century modernism, all of this represents a different set of assumptions in regards to art. Many of Fujimura's Christian audiences, however, are 'primed' toward appreciation by the approval his works receive from esteemed sources of informed opinion. Fujimura's work functions for many such viewers as an

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<sup>70</sup> D. B. Harned, *Theology and the Arts* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 34.

<sup>71</sup> Fujimura draws on the Japanese tea ceremony tradition, as developed in the sixteenth-century, as an analogy for his aesthetic and practice:

In China, tea was a form of celebration during banquets, but in Japan, Sen no Rikyu and others refined tea as a form of communication, and the teahouse as a minimal conceptual space... To me, Rikyu redefined art as process-driven, integrated with life and peacemaking. To him, art played a significant role in everyday life for ordinary people; it challenged conventionality and the illusions of power. [*Refractions*, p. 52.]

Fujimura claims that Rikyu, whose wife was a convert to Christianity, was influenced by the Christian Eucharist service. With the rise of the shōgunate during Rikyu's later years, Christianity was officially suppressed in Japan.

<sup>72</sup> Title of a 2004 exhibit.

introduction to abstract religious art. In this way Fujimura's art represents an opportunity to practice *indwelling* or of *scanning* a conflicted or puzzling situation, the second 'step' in Loder analysis of convictional knowing. This represents the most explicitly ethical dimension of the process, as it calls upon the viewer to actively engage with the 'problem' the artwork represents. Loder identifies this ethical dimension when he writes:

Scanning is not only a search for answers outside the problem; it is also scanning and differentiating the terms of the problem and playing possible solutions against various interpretations of the ruptured situation. Note that it takes an investment of caring energy to hold the problem, partial solutions, and the whole state of irresolution together. It is this step in the formation of the knowing event that leads into fuller or more comprehensive implications of the conflict and accordingly searches out a solution in the most universal terms. This is the step of waiting, wondering, following hunches, and exhausting possibilities.<sup>73</sup>

Scanning or indwelling Fujimura's work will probably include an oscillation between the suggestiveness of the title and the actual painting, looking for clues in gesture and colour, considering the date of the work and its place in a given series (2001 represents a liminal moment in Fujimura's career in relation to the events of 9/11), and so forth.

The third step is what Loder calls the 'constructive act of the imagination,' which sometimes involves the 'bisociation' of two previously unconnected together 'to compose a meaningful unity.' This involves the manner in which Fujimura asks his viewers to consider an intrinsic relationship between materials, gestures, and theological truths. He asks audiences to dispense with outer forms and consider inner essences, and in doing so for a considerable amount of trust. Fujimura asks viewers to believe that a gold leaf might signify something of the reality of heaven, that streaked pools of blue and green may just be the image of Christ, that Mark's Gospel might feel like a vermilion colour field, and that undefined space in painting might be what God seeks in an individual life in order to communicate grace. In this sense Fujimura's art is a lesson in the familiar adage that art is a matter of showing, not telling. Fujimura adopts the

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<sup>73</sup> J. E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, 32.

daring step of positively inviting active viewer participation in the creative process, a move derived from both twentieth-century *Nihonga* as well as Rothko:

Togyu Okamura, a great *Nihonga* painter, once commented, “What matters is not how finished the work looks, but how unfinished it remains.” Such understanding gives the “completed” form space to breathe and live. Ultimately, a type of faith is required to release forms to be driven by content. This faith, a shadow of the faith God gives, allows the artist to trust another to complete the vision.<sup>74</sup>

And here, Fujimura makes a direct connection between his aesthetic and the asceticism of Christian life:

This transaction is not unlike the Christian’s journey to lose his or her life in Christ: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” The *form* of a Christian is Christ himself; the only way to attain this *form* is by dying to his calling. Christ gives all artists a vision of the transition from death to life, by the Spirit that turns our “wailing into dancing” (Psalm 30).<sup>75</sup>

How a viewer ‘completes’ a painting is an open-ended matter and rather subjective. For Fujimura, as with Rothko, the ‘completion’ involves a ‘communion’ with the object of communication before them. Some awareness of what Fujimura is doing in his work might assist this process, particularly an understanding that Fujimura’s art is based not on what a subject matter *looks* like but what it *feels* like; not its *surface configuration* but something of its *inner ontology*. This involves a sophisticated as well as an imaginative hermeneutic, but it may result in the kind of ‘Aha’-moment *release* of energy that Loder speaks of regarding the fourth movement of the knowing process, where a person becomes much more genuinely open to new understanding and perspective. A measure of self-transcendence is achieved and effected, as Loder would say. David Harned might respond:

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<sup>74</sup> Fujimura, “That Final Dance,” 306.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 306.



Joseph Albers defined the content of painting as the “visual formulation of our reaction to life.” A painter offers us not only something to see but also a particular way of seeing. Our vision of things gains new dimension and grows more intense. This new way of seeing is a distinctly human way; it is laden with a freight of emotional significance. Visual form has emotional import. Sometimes that form tells of the springtime of the world, sometimes of the winter of our discontent. De Chirico gave his paintings such names as *Melancholy and Mystery of a Street*, *Nostalgia of the Infinite*, *Melancholia*, *Anguish of Departure*. The titles are unnecessary. The power to evoke a haunted and threatening world lies in the composition of the paintings themselves, the strange and distorted forms that present the world in its terrible otherness from man.<sup>76</sup>

For his own part, Fujimura writes of this “terrible otherness”:

Like [Andy] Goldsworthy, we must recover the language of nature, of the ephemeral, of the rhythm of shepherds and the cotton fields, of the river rock and boulders of tidal rivers teeming with salmon. But I also contend that this careful negotiation requires a more direct look at the cities of ashes, the void that exists in the ground zeroes of the world, because the hell of the artistic imagination, one might argue, is the only real point of departure to create today.<sup>77</sup>

Fujimura invokes the concept of ‘void’ and claims that his art encompasses this metaphor of death and disintegration. This of course hearkens back to Loder’s proposition that genuinely transformative ‘knowledge’ addresses the knower in the full range of their humanity, which for Loder means the self, the lived world, the void and the Holy. Delving in the existential ‘void’ as Loder speaks of it came to the surface for Fujimura in the aftermath of 9/11. Prior to this, and still the predominant mode of Fujimura’s address to the tragic dimension of human existence, is the Japanese taste concept of *mono no aware*. Tracing the etymology of the Japanese ideogram

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<sup>76</sup> Harned, *Theology and the Arts*, 134. Recall that the ‘intensification’ of Christian experience and virtue was the chosen manner in which LeRon Shults describes spiritual formation; see *Transforming Spirituality*, 62-64.

<sup>77</sup> Fujimura, *Refractions*, 125.

for ‘beauty’ in two different Chinese characters related to sacrifice, as well as in the hospitable Way of Tea encouraged by Rikyu, Japanese aesthetics became ‘refined and abstract’:

*Mono no aware*, a Japanese expression that captures the sentiment of sorrow (literally “sorrow of things”), points to the notion of beauty as sacrifice. In order for people to enjoy the feast at a banquet, a sheep must be sacrificed. Autumn leaves are most beautiful and bright as they are distressed with their impending death. The minerals I use in my paintings must be pulverized to bring out their true beauty. Art serves this kind of sacrificial beauty, and art should be redefined to consider the relational acts as much as products we produce to communicate.<sup>78</sup>

Fujimura expresses the hope that his art takes viewers into these depths, but only, it would seem, as a ‘point of departure’ toward an encounter with a transcending note of hope and grace. A sincere sense of life grounded in and drawn towards a holy grace:

I can only continue, step by step, in obedience to the call, to evoke God’s grace and beauty both with my art and my life.<sup>79</sup>

Artistically, Fujimura achieves this ideal by means of the light-refracting properties of the materials he works with, the gentleness of his technique, the non-aggressive motifs with which he works, and the frequent use of gold.

Fujimura’s art and the manner with which he speaks of it seems to counterbalance the sometimes judgment-oriented approach of his adoptive Reformed theology with a sense of the divine Yes that precedes and even predominates whatever No is required as a result of sin. ‘Grace, it shall be grace that exists between the immanent reality of earth and the transcendent reality of heaven.’ For some Christian viewers, this might drive them to reconsider their doctrine of Creation not as a mere prelude to redemption, but as an intrinsic and enduring expression of divine grace. This was David Harned’s primary theological agenda in *Theology and the Arts*. For

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 54

<sup>79</sup> Fujimura, *River Grace*, 15.

some from a different background, Fujimura's grace-oriented art might serve as an antidote to the prevailing cynicism and insouciance that often characterizes the contemporary art scene.<sup>80</sup>

In Loder's analysis of transformative change, the final step involves interpretation, that is, a process of discerning the continuities and the discontinuities implicated in new insight and new frameworks of value and meaning.<sup>81</sup> Fujimura's art calls upon a sense of self capable of such an interpretative encounter with works of art. In this sense, Fujimura might concur with Loder's goal of helping people see themselves as 'spirit,' that is, as capable of self-transcending encounter with the Holy not only in crisis experiences, but as a moment to moment experience in life.

## VII. Conclusion

My art reaches for the heavenly reality via earthly materials.<sup>82</sup>

It is well documented that major figures in the development of Western abstraction, such as Kandinsky and Mondrian, were attracted to the tenets of theosophy and its pantheistic orientation. An art-form so invested in inner essences beyond or behind outer forms would find philosophical justification that suggests that things relate to outer forms along more accidental than substantial lines. Likewise in Buddhism and especially Zen doctrine, outer form represents a realm of distraction and even illusion. Wisdom seeks the reality behind the multiplicity of appearances.

So certain, and potentially creative, tensions remain between Fujimura's art and his apparent theological commitments. He identifies himself with Reformed Presbyterianism in all its rational, decent and orderly instincts. Art of an historical-narrative or descriptive type still

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<sup>80</sup> This certainly echoes part of Fujimura's critique of an response to the decadence he perceives in much of the contemporary art world:

The main cause of this corruption, or the pollution in the aesthetic rive of culture, is self-aggrandizement and a type of embezzlement made in the name of advancing the creative arts... We pollute the cultural landscape with irresponsible expressions in the name of progress and call them freedom of speech. Thus, our cultural landscape is increasingly uninhabitable. If we cannot dwell inside the imaginative landscape of what is offered, then what is the purpose of creativity? [Fujimura, quoted in Hibbs, p. 11-12].

<sup>81</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 34.

<sup>82</sup> Fujimura, *Refractions* 28.

seems more commensurate with this theo-aesthetic, such as the Dutch School.<sup>83</sup> Fujimura operates within a very different style of expression. Gesture, material, and a calculated ‘chance result’ represent his language of communication. Fujimura asks viewers to consider the beauty of the medium itself as a conveyor of creative and redemptive purposes, and in doing so issues a unique form of spiritually-formative challenge: to attend imaginatively to the actual material world and allow it, as part of God’s universe, to have its way with you.

Another potential tension is the genre within which he operates and the theological weight it is asked to bear. As we have seen, his craft descends from a tradition of decorative art. If one were to approach his work at face-value, without the prompting of titles and context, it would probably be evaluated for its decorative value. A question can therefore be formulated: Can a decorative art manifest theological vision? In response, it can be recalled that non-other than the uncompromising Vincent van Gogh championed the decorative potential of art, and dreamed of filling homes with art of spiritual value. So there is no necessary contradiction between decorative function and religious significance.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, art historian Joan Stanley-Baker suggests that the decorative intention of *Rimpa* art is typically misread:

This mode has often mistakenly been called decorative. If ‘decorative’ means ‘serving to decorate’ or ‘purely ornamental’, then we must say that there is hardly anything decorative in Japanese art at all, at least since Shōsōin [pre-Heian] days. Japanese artists seem incapable of static, purely visual, patternistic decoration. Be it lyrical, contemplative, dramatic or aggressive, nearly all Japanese art is united in one essence: emotion. It may be more appropriate to call the *Rimpa* style evocative.<sup>85</sup>

So if Japanese art is understood as one of an emotionally evocative essentialization or sublimation as I have suggested, then perhaps it is best to seek in Fujimura’s art the

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<sup>83</sup> Charles Harrison expresses such an aesthetic when, in discussing a 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch still life painting by Louise Moillon, he writes how it is, ‘...marked by the clarity of its composition, by its assiduous and confident decorum and by an evident trust in what can be made straightforwardly visible to the spectator.’ (*An Introduction to Art*, [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009], 120). A description not unlike this could be aptly applied to the general style of Protestant preaching and liturgical practice.

<sup>84</sup> See S. Schama, *The Power of Art* (London: The Bodley Head, 2009), 300; see also V. Van Gogh, *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, ed., R. De Leeuw and A. Pomerans (London: Penguin, 1997), 394 [Letter 531, 3 September 1888].

<sup>85</sup> Stanley-Baker, *Art of Japan*, 166.

communication of a particular *feeling* of a subject matter. As has been suggested above, such art is not what something representationally look like but what it feels like. If Fujimura is sublimating his subject matters it is so that they can be experienced in new ways. If these reflections are at all accurate of Fujimura's work, then new viewers may need to be helped to see his art as a language of emotion. With Nelson Goodman and Gordon Graham, it can be affirmed that emotional connection with a work of art requires and effectively feeds back into a cognitively discerning encounter with it as well.

While for some viewers, the formal ambiguities and allusive titles will fail to move or convince, for others Makoto Fujimura's art widens visual frames of reference for art in general and for Christian art in particular. His art represents a potentially persuasive account of how something – or Someone – can be present in an artwork in a disguised or sublimated manner. Fujimura asks viewers to attend simultaneously to the ephemera as well as the essence of things and to thereby gain new insight into God's relationship with the world, that is, a redemption that involves the dialectic of both the divine Yes and the No, of surface and of depth, of both the fleeting and the everlasting. Abstraction is an art of trust, of trust from viewers that the artist is not just playing games with them but sincerely intends what he or she seeks to communicate by means of media and technique.

## Chapter Five

### The Ascesis of Aesthesis

Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn.<sup>1</sup>

#### I. Summary of the Argument

It is a profoundly difficult thing to de-center one's self, to still the hum of self-preoccupation, and open one's self to something new and unfamiliar, something challenging, perhaps even threatening or familiar and reassuring for a fresh consideration. The capacity to do so requires of many people a kind of training to resist distraction, to focus concentration, to suspend judgment and to give oneself over to someone else or something else in order to receive communication, perspective or point of view. Borne over a long-term course of practice, people growing into such capacities are characterized by their poise, their attentiveness, their ability to be fully present with another person or object of study. They bear the characteristics of the contemplative. They have qualities which we might attribute in some circumstances to a *saint*.

David Benner, a practicing Christian therapist, writes:

...I suggested that the essential dynamic of the human spirit is a radical drive for self-transcendence: a longing to be more than we are, to be all we can be. At some deep level we seem to recognize this 'more' is not simply more of the same but that it demands deep transformation. It involves a reorganization of the self so radical that our old self must be released before our new and larger self can unfold. We must, as Jesus taught, be prepared to lose our life if we wish to truly gain it.

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<sup>1</sup> Matsuo Bashō, quoted in N. Yuasa, 'Introduction' in M. Bashō, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches* (London: Penguin Classics, 1966), 33.

Transformation always involves a continuing series of surrenders of the smaller selves to which we attach ourselves as we become larger and more authentic. These acts of letting go form the transitional moments on the journey – the moments where our response to the inner call of self-transcendence results in the quantum shifts in our center of gravity that I have described as the movement from one level of consciousness to another.<sup>2</sup>

This project argues that Benner’s notion of a ‘continuing series of surrenders’ can be facilitated, among other ways, with meaningful encounters with art. Art, which Aidan Nichols relates to rhetoric when he writes of it as ‘a kind of address,’<sup>3</sup> has been analysed in this project as a communicative phenomenon embodied in the form of the various ‘languages’ of learned crafts and practices, the significance of which is identified as the nexus of its form-and-content, which is both implicated and received within historical and situational contexts that bear upon the ‘reading’ of or encounter with the artwork. Artworks instantiate themselves within a matrix of values and perspectives analysed here as what is called here its ‘story,’ its ‘world-projection,’ the truth-claims of which are insinuated in showing the implications of its claims as opposed to a mere broadcasting of them. The encounter with art as described here can be enhanced by, and sometimes requires, a kind of tutorial in its language and historical context. But when encountered in meaningful ways – that is, ways in which the artwork’s ‘world-projection’ is encountered - artworks can alter the understanding of things and experience of the world. David Harned as we have seen accents the ethical dimension of this dynamic:

Some men make the artifacts that we call works of art. They are created for many of the same reasons effective in the development of language. They initiate us more fully to the particularity of things and situations we confront and the emotions we feel.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> D. G. Benner, *Spirituality and the Awakening Self* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), 191. Benner delineates four levels of consciousness and identifies them as body, mind, soul and spirit. Spirit represents for Benner the ‘essential self’ most deeply and self-consciously in touch with the divine and therefore the largest sphere of one’s self-understanding.

<sup>3</sup> A. Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), 93.

<sup>4</sup> D. Harned, *Theology and the Arts* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), 30.

Such a confrontation Harned claims can address the superficiality we otherwise might live in, even in regards to matters related to faith and ultimate things.<sup>5</sup>

Moving from superficiality towards significance is identified by James Loder as involving ‘convictional knowing,’ knowing that forms and can transform one’s understanding of life and experience with its deepest sources in the divine. This project has argued that the arts can initiate receivers into the stories of which they are a part of or a composer of, and as such invite their viewers/receivers to consider the truth-claims for themselves should they have the wit and the will to indwell them as ‘embodiment[s] of meaning in the sensuous order.’<sup>6</sup> All of this has been summarized in this project as the catalytic potential of art to mediate the relationship between *aesthesis* and *ascesis*, sensory apprehension and spiritual discipline, the bringing together of which I’ve argued develops capacities for both heightened aesthetic experience and a further opening to that ‘larger self’ that scholars like Benner and Loder identify as the goal of personal transformation or what I have preferred to speak of as spiritual formation.

My argument has progressed, firstly, through the development of a theoretical framework for bringing aesthetic experience to bear on spiritual formation through a dialogue with scholars in aesthetics, ethics, and practical theology. Two aspects from theological aesthetics have been highlighted. One is the analysis of art itself. The assumption running throughout Aidan Nichols’s writings, for example, is that the arts participate in the transcendental of Beauty which, when read or appropriated with openness and sympathy, can shed light on transcendent or universal Beauty that finds its ultimate ground in the Being of God. This project declines the type of in-depth consideration of beauty and transcendental metaphysics central to certain strands of theological aesthetics because it is well-worn territory and because it often begins to prejudice discussions in favour of certain kinds of artworks, where this project has sought to maintain a maximally open-ended approach to the arts.

A second contribution from theological aesthetics involves an analysis of what Nichols called the aesthetic disposition, a posture of openness toward art that best facilitates meaningful encounter with it. In one brief passage Nichols employs the term *askesis* to identify what art ‘requires and releases’ in the receiving subject that hones a ‘purity of insight’ into the meaning of

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<sup>5</sup> ‘If we do not find good ways to supplement our own vision, we will inevitably depend on bad ones...’ Harned, *Theology and the Arts*, 39. My thesis does not argue that in order to avoid superficiality Christians must make recourse solely to ‘good art,’ but rather to ways of encountering art that goes beyond casual encounter and into ways that ‘requires and releases’ skills that might assist in going beyond casual encounters with the Divine itself.

<sup>6</sup> Nichols, *Art of God Incarnate*, 94.



an artwork and its relation to human existence.<sup>7</sup> Nichols explicates the dynamics of this disposition around themes of surrender, self-oblation, openness and self-transcendence. He describes it as:

The ‘disinterested’ looking in which a man temporarily suspends the systematically interpretive function of his own presuppositions and convictions, tastes, and interests in order to let the artwork stand forth in its own integrity releases, through the affective intensity of the inner ‘world’ of the artwork, a new set of feelings.<sup>8</sup>

The communicative emphasis articulated here finds a supportive echo in certain applications of speech-act theory especially as it has been recently appropriated in Biblical hermeneutics. Here, arguments for the ‘open determinacy’ of texts are applied to the ‘reading’ of artworks, giving rise to what I have referred to as a critically realist interpretation of art that goes beyond art meaning whatever it means to an individual spectator (a la John Carey) towards strategies that take artworks seriously as works of meaningful, albeit open ended, communication.

Theological ethics in relation to aesthetics has also been a central dimension of this project. Where Nichols roots his aesthetics in Neo-Thomist terms, David Harned roots his in a theological ethics or what he prefers, with qualification, to call a natural theology. His natural theology is functionally a theological analysis of the ‘common life,’ of its witness to the holy and of the ‘grace’ of the common goods of human society, family and virtues that shape people.<sup>9</sup> Harned’s analysis of the virtues extends along existentialist lines and a preference for the dialectical, that is, how virtues becomes vices if not constantly negotiated alongside counterbalancing truths and affirmations. Moreover, Harned prefers to think of the ‘theological virtues’ as grounding the ‘natural virtues’ rather than crowing them; the ‘common life’ of all people in his analysis depends on faiths, hopes and loves in order to subsist. In Christ, however, these virtues or graces take on greater clarity, gratuity, and depth. Clarity, gratuity and depth are

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 112. References to the ‘integrity’ of the object before the observing subject reflect the influence of Hans-Georg Gadamer and phenomenology in Nichols’ work.

<sup>9</sup> The differences between Nichol’s and Harned’s approaches are subtle. As was noted in Chapter Two, Harned draws appreciatively on the Neo-Scholastic tradition. But Harned remains more Barthian in assigning the potentials of ‘witness’ to the elements of the ‘common life’ as opposed to a sense of direct sacramental potential in things by virtue of a natural order of Being.

what the arts, in turn, illuminate about the human experience. ‘Art is an antidote against any kind of superficiality, and perhaps against spiritual superficiality most of all.’<sup>10</sup> Art accomplishes this antidotal function in a number of ways but none so much for Harned as an enhancement of *vision*, a term fraught with moral and religious significance in Harned’s writing. In his most recent book, Harned captures the dialectic he perceives between supernatural revelation and the refraction of that revealed light in the achievement of effective ‘seeing’:

Revelation means a gift of sight, something we cannot give or will to ourselves. It is conferred on us from we know not where. Revelation means an extension and enhancement of our vision so that we can capture and learn to love aspects of reality that have long been present with us but which have been unrecognized or dismissed or thought of little value. There is a circularity in this: revelation affords us a store of new imagery and the new imagery further sharpens our vision and perhaps inspires a new love. Seeing is the prius and foundation of moral life, the indispensable prelude to action, as I have written so often. Everything depends upon the health and acuity of our sight and imagination, both literally and figuratively understood.<sup>11</sup>

Resources in theological aesthetics and ethics deploy ‘seeing’ as a metaphor for moral formation and highlight the inner dispositions that best facilitate such development. But how do we account for the dynamics of actual perception, literally as well as metaphorically? The discipline of art psychology provides resources. Names here include those of Ernst Gombrich and Rudolf Arnheim. Developmental psychology is another resource for tracking the dynamics of change and what stimulates and what impedes such growth, and here the work of James Loder is joined. Loder, working within the context of practical theology, sought an account of human development and significant change explicated along the lines of spiritual formation in dialectical commerce between human experience and divine reality. Loder found within such commerce the potential for what he termed ‘convictional knowing.’ Such change Loder found across all areas of human experience, including the aesthetic, where transformative encounters

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<sup>10</sup> Harned, 139.

<sup>11</sup> D. B. Harned, *Strange Bedfellows* (Bangalore: Ultra Publications, 2010), 111.

with the arts held the power to ‘break the numbing spell of ‘everydayness,’ and restore to human awareness the particulars of the world and their witness to God’s actions therein.<sup>12</sup>

The inclusion of James Loder in this project signals its intention of bringing the resources of theological aesthetics to bear in practical theology. Loder’s contribution to this project consists primarily of a heuristic analysis he produced of the process of gaining ‘convictional knowledge’ of things and his model of human existence as involving the spheres of the self, the lived world, the ‘void’ or the threat of extinction and the holy or the sacred. The intent of Loder’s model was to advance practical theology and its ancillary psychological and educational resources from mere epigenetic accounts of creature adaptation towards a more thoroughly theological account of human development. As suggested previously, Loder’s work provides a potentially fruitful model of how meaningful encounters with art can effect significant change. This project synthesizes these insights into its analysis of the ways in which the arts facilitate the exercise and development of skills and capacities related to *sensory perception* which can contribute positively to the process referred to as *spiritual formation*. Within a religion such as Christianity which both inherited and transmits the priority of ‘eyes that see and ears that hear,’ the dynamics of *aesthesis* and *ascesis* can be perceived as existing in a kind of symbiotic relationship, that is, skills related to one can contribute to the development of the other.

On one hand this project has been theoretical, rooted in honing the insights of several scholars from different disciplines into a coherent argument for why, contra John Carey, the arts might be good and good for us. On the other hand this project has engaged with actual art and artistic practice in a study of two contemporary, self-identifying Christian artists. The choice of the work of these two artists is commended by a series of similarities and differences. Both are of the same generation, and both underwent adult conversion or re-commitment to Protestant Christianity. Both are explicit in their deployment of Christian themes, titles and presentation venues, even as they aspire for and have achieved recognition within the art-world at large. Their artistic ‘languages’ however are quite different; they draw upon different lineages and implicate the presence of the divine within their art in different ways. The juxtaposition of their work in this study affords an opportunity to observe how implicating divine immanence and transcendence can potentially affect the dynamic of *aesthesis* and *ascesis* and how this might shape spirituality in differing ways.

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<sup>12</sup> J. E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 51.

In this chapter I would like to continue the movement from the theoretical toward the practical through a consideration of two recent series from Howson's and Fujimura's work, in light of how they might be used, as individual series or in tandem, for the purposes of a programme of spiritual formation and submitting them to an analysis utilizing the terms and resources garnered from the exploration of aesthetics, ethics and practical theology.

## II. Peter Howson: Fourteen Stations of the Cross (2003)

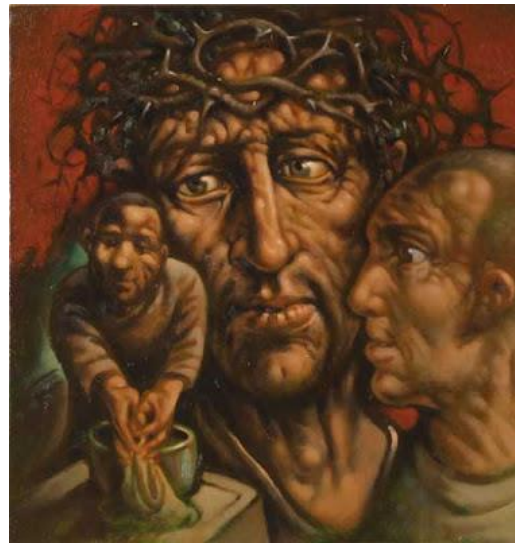
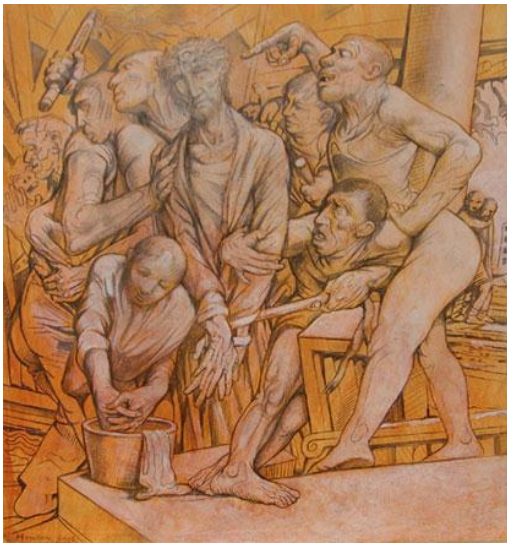
In the early 2000's Peter Howson received a commission for a rendering of the Stations of the Cross, which are currently in display at St Andrews Roman Catholic Cathedral in Glasgow.<sup>13</sup> Howson's study of this penitential theme eventually resulted in three distinct series in the mediums of lithograph, pencil and oil paint. The lithographs and pencil drawings set the Stations within a contemporary urban context; the backgrounds are of the familiar Howsonian Glasgow-type settings. Jesus is situated amidst a crowd in most. Within the various settings are repetitions of familiar character-types and circumstances: the bullies, the arm gestures, scared women holding children, violence directed upon a solitary figure. In one of the series the outline of a swastika appears in the background, reflecting Howson's obsession with fascist symbolizations suggestive of the mob-mentality he appears to detest. In contrast the fourteen oil paintings, with three exceptions, are close-ups of Jesus' face in postures or expressions corresponding to the given Station. In the first of this series Jesus' close-up is positioned between what appears to be two representations of Pilate. The other two feature close-ups of Jesus and Mary. Howson's intention in so rendering the Stations in this manner appears to be in order to focus the viewer's attention solely on the imagined experience of Jesus.

The three series can of course stand apart on their own merits, but if brought into combination the effect may result in an intensification of them all. For the purposes of a programmatic presentation the twenty-one images of these three series could be presented in various pairings, individually or in trio formation. Especially in the case of the close-up oil paintings, a viewer might be hard-pressed to know which of the Stations they were looking at were it not for the accompanying titles. Placed together, however, the imagery of the three sets

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<sup>13</sup> R. Heller, *Peter Howson* (London: Momentum, 2003), 226.

might mutually illuminate each other and provide a unique opportunity for viewers to reflect of the experience of the Fourteen Stations.



*Jesus is Condemned to Death* (lithograph, pencil and oil)

For some an experience with a traditionally Roman Catholic form of religious piety will be new, while for others one with which they had already had meaningful encounters. For some, the depiction of an otherwise traditional image of Jesus set within a recognizably contemporary (and for some perhaps local) context may attract particular attention. Howson's 'social realism' and expressionistic style applied to this classic theme for some may be illuminating, for others disturbing or inappropriate. Howson's repeated close-ups of Jesus' face may be uncomfortably intimate or reassuringly personal. Whether evaluated positively or critically, most viewers would

be impressed with Howson's force of statement and, as suggested above, may be a form of religious art with which lay male congregants may feel an unusual ability to identify.



*Jesus is Taken Down from the Cross* (pencil)

A compelling presentation or effective liturgical usage of Howson's work might yield to a Loderian process of conflict and re-evaluation. Because of the subject matter, because of associations with forms of faith that are foreign or alienating, and because of the style or contemporizing idiom, remaining with Howson as he conducts the viewer along the Stations may be challenging. But it may yield new insights born of careful observation, the noticing of details, repeated patterns, identifying with a particular image, character, or situation. How a viewer might, in Loder's terms, imaginatively construct new associations, insights, or patterns of perception while or as a result of viewing Howson's *Stations* is impossible to predict, but as Aidan Nichols writes:

Our feeling-response to the contours, colours, and painterly techniques of Van Gogh's canvases, for example, *is* our reading of the tragic world he portrays in his paintings. [Mikel] Dufrenne goes so far as to call such feeling a kind of knowledge rather than a kind of emotion. By means of it the painting reveals a world to us, an experience comparable to the 'Got it!' of knowing.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate*, 98.

Nichols here captures both the cognitive dimension of aesthetic experience that this project has sought to highlight and the thrust of Loder's notion of the release of energy, the 'opening of the knower to his or her context...the response of consciousness to being freed *from* an engrossing conflict and *for* a measure of self-transcendence.'<sup>15</sup> The resultant integration of this experience within a previously existing or newly forming theological horizon will again be varied. If however the experience is to yield significant spiritual transformation, according to Loder it will involve intersecting dynamics involving the Self, World, Void and the Holy. Howson's work may address new 'bisociations' of the world and the Holy, particularly in the Stations series. The contemporary world, not a far-off 'Biblical' world, becomes here the stage for an encounter with divine suffering and human redemption.

### III. Makoto Fujimura: *The Four Holy Gospels* (2011)

In 2009 Fujimura received a commission by an evangelical American publishing company to produce an illuminated edition of the text of the four canonical Gospels in celebration of the six hundredth anniversary of the Authorized Version of the English Bible. Besides extensive marginalia, the project includes five plates, one for each Gospel and one for the front cover, which can stand as works of art in their own right, individually or as a grouping. They represent the latest products of Fujimura's work, and contain in them much of the arsenal of his style and preoccupations. *The Four Holy Gospels* volume as a whole effectively catalogs Fujimura's techniques, themes and motifs.

The five plates in order of presentation are *Charis-Kairos (The Tears of Christ)*, the front cover plate; *Consider the Lilies* (The Gospel According to Matthew); *Water Flames* (The Gospel According to Mark); *The Prodigal God* (The Gospel According to Luke); *In the Beginning* (The Gospel According to John).

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<sup>15</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 33.





*Charis-Kairos (The Tears of Christ)*

I suggested in the last chapter that a challenge encountered in Fujimura's works for many viewers may simply be the unfamiliar visual language he employs. Viewers are required to consider meaning not in identifiable representations but in gestural effects, colours, shapes and suggestions. They have to trust that the artist sincerely expresses his apprehension of some aspect of each Gospel, and of the gospel itself in the *Charis-Kairos* piece, in these works. That said, many might find the plate accompanying Matthew's Gospel most accessible.





*The Gospel According to Matthew – Consider the Lilies*

At the center of the piece is the faint image of a lily. Derived from a saying of Jesus unique to Matthew's Gospel,<sup>16</sup> its appearance here connects Fujimura's previous usage of flower motifs in other works, which in turn reflects a standard Rimpa-School decorative motif, with an aspect of the Gospels identified solely with Matthew. The evanescent glory of the flower, which Jesus seems to compare ironically to Solomon's regal glory as a monarch, stands also in relation to the idea of beauty which exemplifies the melancholy sense of the impermanence of things (*mono no aware*) that characterizes Japanese sensitivity towards life. Such a visual 'anchor' here may also serve as a welcomed presence in an otherwise challenging journey into unfamiliar straits. Other first-time viewers, however, report being charmed and attracted to what they perceive as the simple beauty of these created things. They find an inherent beauty in the materials, colours and effects of Fujimura's work. Viewers like these can often associate Fujimura's art with abstract art with which they are already familiar, but find that Fujimura's exudes a religious

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<sup>16</sup> 'And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these' (Matthew 6:28-29).

sensitivity, perhaps even a theological acumen, that perhaps they intuit but now are challenged to more fully engage.<sup>17</sup>

Indwelling Fujimura's work may be what many viewers find most challenging, and yet it is most necessary for the absorption of the effect of his work. Joan Stanley-Baker writes of one such encounter with the work of an early twentieth-century *Nihonga* artist:

A distinguished New York art critic confessed he found *Nihonga* lifeless and dull and wondered why the Japanese love it so. This is because he was waiting for the work to arouse him. Instead, he should have 'entered' the painting quietly and receptively. Then the dramatic tension of [Kobayashi] Kokei's *Fruit* which electrifies the still-life and charges the air, the subtle depiction of the fruit's colour, the quivering emotive space, would have transported him to the world of Japanese sensibilities which have quickened screen and scrolls for a thousand years.<sup>18</sup>



Kokei Kobayashi, *Fruit*, early 20<sup>th</sup> century, hanging scroll, mineral pigments on paper

<sup>17</sup> Fujimura's explanatory note accompanying the painting underscores both the artistic practice and theological perspective brought to bear in his work. Note should be made of the eschatological emphasis:

*Consider the Lilies* is done with over sixty layers of finely pulverized precious materials (azurite and malachite), oyster shell white, and painted with sumi ink that has been cured for over a century, as well as gold and platinum powders, and mixed hide glue, to adhere the materials onto the hand-pulled Japanese paper [kumohada]. The painting depicts Easter lilies, with triumvirate flowers opening up, but with the suggestion that even these common lilies are transformed into a post-Resurrection, generative reality. M. Fujimura, 'Author's Introduction,' *The Four Holy Gospels* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011), ix.

<sup>18</sup> J. Stanley-Baker, *Japanese Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 97.

‘Entering’ the painting ‘quietly and receptively’ is of course an aspect of the ‘aesthetic disposition’ argued for here as part of the symbiotic relationship between *aesthesis* and *ascesis*. The plate associated with Mark’s Gospel entitled *Water Flames* may prove particularly challenging. *Water Flames* is a theme linked with a series of paintings Fujimura made immediately following 9/11. His adoption of this theme in relation to Mark’s Gospel could be understood on the basis of the way it opens with Jesus’ baptism by John, who relativizes his own ministry of water baptism before the One who will baptize with the Spirit (sometimes associated with fire; see Mark 1:6-8). Commenting on this plate Fujimura writes how he ‘desire to depict the way in which flames not only consume but ultimately sanctify,’ a paradox he draws about physical properties and spiritual perspectives with frequency in his writings.<sup>19</sup>



*The Gospel According to Mark – Water Flames*

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<sup>19</sup> M. Fujimura, ‘Artist’s Introduction,’ *The Four Holy Gospels* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011), xi. Fujimura’s use of the flame motif and the redemption-purgation theme seems also related to his use of T.S. Eliot’s poem *Four Quartets* on which Fujimura drew for a number of post-9/11 paintings between 2003 and 2006.

*The Prodigal God* which prefaces Luke's Gospel evokes the usage of the 'Golden Mean,' the renaissance method of 3/8 to 5/8 proportionality in a composition, suggestive of perfection. Oriented horizontally, the colours more of earth tones than the rest of the series, the perceptive viewer will find the faint presence of script across the top half of the painting, and an even fainter outline of a human profile.<sup>20</sup> The title of the piece associated it with the similarly named parable found in Luke's Gospel. How is God's prodigality portrayed in this painting? Fujimura, adopting the perspective of his church pastor that 'prodigality' means 'recklessly spendthrift,' seems to want to portray a lavishness of colour and design in this plate.<sup>21</sup> The text of the eponymous parable, nearly indecipherable, runs from the top of the plate to about 5/8 down. A light brown base freckled with ink marks rises from the bottom, joined 5/8 the way up by a blue and green section shot across with swathes of shell-white and coal-black.



*The Gospel According to Luke – The Prodigal God*

<sup>20</sup> Fujimura's subtle inclusion of words in the painting may reflect another dimension of Japanese art. Joan Stanley-Baker notes how the technique of such 'hidden writing' or *ashide* was often used in Japanese art, particularly in the feminine or *onna-e* style which is directly associated with the Rimpa tradition which so influenced Matazo Kayama, Fujimura's post-Master of Fine Arts supervisor; *Japanese Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 86.

<sup>21</sup> Fujimura, *The Four Holy Gospels*, x.

The attentiveness and self-forgetfulness ‘required and released’ for a meaningful encounter with art such as Fujimura’s may or may not result in ‘aha’ moments of discovery. It may, as already suggested, confirm prior prejudices against abstract art. But it may also inform a new humility before works of unfamiliar provenance and style, and a greater sense of self-openness towards different languages of artistic communication.

When Loder speaks of the fifth step as the *interpretation* ‘of the imaginative solution into the behavioral and /or symbolically constructed world of the original context,’<sup>22</sup> one possibility for many viewers of Fujimura’s work is the genuine discovery that after a lifetime perhaps of essentially looking ‘through’ paintings in the manner of windows, they need to learn how to look *at* paintings. This is of course the classic definition of modernist painting:

Reversing the principles of perspective inherited from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Cézanne took up Maurice Denis’s description of a painting as a ‘flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order,’ but invested it with a fundamental coherence – using a complex system of colour modulation based on the elimination of outline and flat colour – that was closer to reality... To the problem of depth, Cézanne strove to find a solution based on the modulation of tones. Preparing the way for contemporary painters, he relied on the intrinsic qualities of colour as a tool. For him, line and form were closely linked, with colour determining the fullness of form through a fusion of the form-colour and outline functions, and to this the artist added his knowledge of simultaneous contrast. This allowed him to create a sense of depth through the highly skilful interplay of hard and soft outlines between his touches of colour.<sup>23</sup>

Clement Greenberg’s mid-twentieth century formalist analysis of modern art that emphasized the surface dimension of painting served as a persuasive definition of modern art for several generations. Fujimura contends that his work exists in a creative tension with that received tradition and, as we have seen, invests his paintings with symbolic significance of the

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<sup>22</sup> Loder, *Transforming Moment*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> E. Bernard, *Modern Art: 1905-1945* (Paris: Chambers, 2004), 9. David Brown addresses Cezanne’s achievement and the effects it had on subsequent pointing in *God and Enchantment of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 129-130.

effect of both surface and depth. For many viewers Fujimura's work will be their first attempt at a sympathetic engagement with 'modern' art or abstraction. The religious 'safe space' where his work takes place and the associations between them and recognizable theological and Biblical themes may serve as a doorway toward a whole new perspective of visual art. When joined with his reflections on art and theology in various print forms, his entire project can serve as a pedagogy in theological aesthetics. Indeed, this is what seems to be happening among the American evangelicals exposed to his work and activities.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV. Art as Spiritual Catalyst

This project advances the claim that the arts are human utterances<sup>25</sup> that explicitly (by means of standard narrative devices) or implicitly (by means of their participation in the assumptions of their craft, subject matter and context) communicate storied-shaped perspectives on life. *Arts tell stories*. This phrase is shorthand for a complex set of dynamics this project has sought to explicate. Lisa Hess who teaches practical theology at United Theological Seminary in Ohio defines formation, spiritual or otherwise, as referring to the '*shaping-and-being-shaped* experienced by real people living their lives within intimate and broader socio-cultural environments,' stories being one of the environmental influences.<sup>26</sup> I argue that the arts have a place within this matrix. So central is narrative for Hess in her account of formation that she creates new participles in speaking of 'storying and being storied' in the process of formation.<sup>27</sup>

The arts have been analyzed in this project along a heuristic model introduced in the first chapter:

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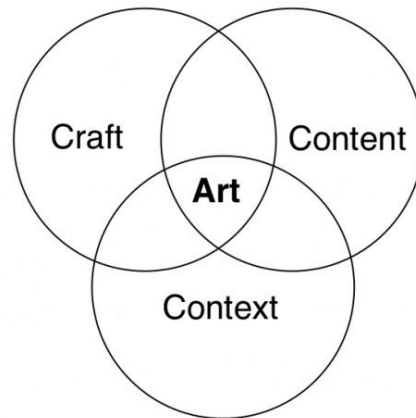
<sup>24</sup> Fujimura was featured on the front cover of the influential American evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* in its 9 September 2008 issue; see <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/september/13.31.html>.

<sup>25</sup> 'Utterance' it may be recalled is used in a technical way to identify meaningful communication in non-verbal ways. It is associated with speech-act theory and the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). See J. A. Herrick, *The History and Theory of Rhetoric* (Boston: A & B, 2005), 240-241.

<sup>26</sup> L. M. Hess, *Artisanal Theology* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 42.





A narrative interpretation of the work of each of the artists featured in this project could be conducted along the axis of each of the three dimensions illustrated here. There are implicit commitments lying behind the crafts of both artists and both serve as persuasive advocates of their styles and techniques.<sup>28</sup> Howson sees in the renaissance of figurative art a revival of art as meaningful statement, a blast against what he sees as a prevalent apathy overtaking the art-world, manifest in the usual suspects of concept art. Howson's critique of concept art is of course debatable, but his validation of figurative art can be traced along a trajectory of his fellow students who studied under Alexander Moffett in Glasgow through his heroes of the German Expressionist movement, back through Géricault, Goya, to the painters of Northern Europe. Howson situates himself within this lineage and validates his work within it. Similarly as we have seen, Fujimura is an enthusiastic advocate for both the tradition of Japanese-style painting and Abstract Expressionism and the synthesis of the two he pursues in his art. A narrative analysis of his craft immerses the viewer in aspects of both the Japanese and Western inheritances and their relationship to *Nihonga*. Fujimura's work further 'complicates the plot' with his synthesis of Nihonga and Abstract Expressionism, resulting in a heightened drama of cross-cultural currents, both aesthetically and theologically.

Likewise there is the matter of the content and subject matter, the choice of which is perhaps an artist's most revealing decision. Here there exists something of a dialectical

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<sup>28</sup> Noël Carroll promotes such a narrative analysis of styles of art in lieu of more traditional definitions in *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 27-30. For a now classic articulation of narrative analysis see S. Crites, 'The Narrative Quality of Experience,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 39, No 3, 1971, 291-311, reprinted in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed., S. Hauerwas and L. G. Jones (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 65-88.

relationship between the story expressed in a particular work or series and the story or worldview in which a particular subject matter or its treatment participates. Much of this was explored in previous chapters. But let us consider the two series treated in this chapter. Howson's *Stations* series obviously narrates the traditional Passion story. A compelling plot-line as well as a whole theology of redemption lies inherent in the form of the Stations theme itself. Howson, however, draws the viewer into the story in two different ways. The pencil and lithograph drawings set the Passion within a vividly rendered contemporary tableau. Here the Son of Man is set upon by one's contemporaries; perhaps given where a person may live, by one's very neighbors. The poignancy of the rendition is potentially enhanced when the *Stations* series is interpreted against the backdrop of Howson's other works. Now one begins to perceive how so many of Howson's cast of characters populate the stage. Where once the bullies and winos and forlorn stragglers combated amongst themselves they now focus all their animal energies against the Son of God. There has always been a spiritual angst in Howson's art, but in these recent works it becomes more focused, more concretely theologized.

In the oil renderings, on the other hand, Howson draws the viewer more directly into relationship with Jesus himself. He does so by means of the close-ups of Jesus' face. I am not aware of any other rendering of the Stations theme that chooses this approach, and the effectiveness of this choice can be debated. Howson seems by doing so to want to facilitate as direct an encounter with the suffering Jesus as possible. It is an almost cinematic approach to the problem of how to render this classic theme in contemporary ways, and some may find this cinematic move compelling or unconvincing and difficult to place a image within the sequence of the series without the assistance of titles.





*Jesus Dies on the Cross*



*Jesus is Placed in the Tomb*

In the *Holy Gospels* project, Fujimura seeks to illuminate the canonical accounts of Jesus. So there exists the inherent narrative thrust of the Gospel stories underlining Fujimura's imagery and into which he seeks to guide the viewer. Fujimura's is an art, as I have suggested, of *sublimation*, or as he prefers *essentiation*, where something of the inner, spiritual *logos* of a theme or subject is sublimated into precious materials and gestures which are then deployed and explored in new ways.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Fujimura makes repeated references to his desire for the viewer to finish his work, to bring it to their own existential completion. The hoped for dialogue between the object of his artwork and the subject of his viewer becomes in its self a kind of narrative.

Fujimura's work also represents a synthesis of aesthetic and theological styles. His art distills evangelical Christianity through Asian sensitivities. *Mono no aware*, the awareness of the fragile ephemera of things, and counter-cultural values of the periphery, are projected through Fujimura's art. His work is not narrative in the same sense that Howson's is, but the difference here may be that of the implicit and the explicit. Whether he is illuminating the Bible, reflecting on 9/11, remembering a deceased teacher, or exploring the meaning of fire, Fujimura instantiates a theology of grace, purification, redemptive suffering, the intrinsic value of creation and its

<sup>29</sup> However it is metaphorically explicated, the basic conviction underlying much of abstract theory is a 'preoccupation with form and colour as a means of highlighting the underlying divine reality of the world,' and this certainly applies to Fujimura's work; D Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place*, 136.

transcendent origin and end in God. Postulating the significance of process as much as product, of the intrinsic significance of materials as much as their configured results and of gestural suggestion as much as traditional representation, Fujimura's art asks viewers to suspend their familiar expectations of paintings. He risks art-world opprobrium by signaling religious intentions with titles and projects of explicit reference, and so like Howson he seeks to work with integrity within a commercial art-world as an artist who is also a Christian.

Finally, I have suggested that there is a story latent in the context of art. Howson's work is inexplicable apart from a consideration of Thatcher-era Glasgow and the social realities that lie before and after it. To sympathetically read his art is to enter into this story. And of course there is the personal context which has been explored, a story an odd-man out, addiction, triumphs and tragedies, an experience of war and experiences of grace. All of these find a place in Howson's work. Fujimura's context envelopes both Japanese and American cultures, and an interpretation of the Gospel as both a minority voice within a Japanese context and as a gentle intrusion of transcendent grace within an often assertive American culture. Fujimura's is an interpretation of grace as the presence of beauty in a shard of glass; of God within the sorrow of things. Unlike Rothko's deferral of divine presence especially in the late works, however, Fujimura is able to find the presence of God in the world, and his art celebrates this presence and grace.

### **Art as Theology**

I wish now to bring the otherwise separate analyses of Howson's and Fujimura's work into a more direct dialogue in reference to theology. My choice of these two artists was never to consider who the better or more religiously valid artist was but rather as an opportunity to consider how two very different styles of art might differently implicate the divine presence in the world and how difference in *aesthesis* might affect a different *ascesis*. One aspect of this dialogue would be to analyze the works in terms of divine immanence and transcendence. As discussed in an earlier chapter, Howson's art implicates God's presence in the world by way of his social realism. There is a strongly *kenotic* thrust in Howson's Christology; divine self-emptying in the sufferings of the Galilean among the Glaswegians. However, by way of countenance, clothing and deportment, Jesus still stands out. He identifies with, but is not identical to the cast of characters surrounding him. And throughout Howson's career has stood

the ambiguously symbolic church window with its emitting light. Something not of this world, something transcendent, has entered into this world, and from the conflict that ensues a new hope is born. The Divine in Jesus enters into the world and is found among the lost and reprobate.

The religious dimension of Howson's art, however, seems focused primarily on the question of how God comes to meet us or is present immanently in often disturbing human circumstances. In the St Anthony pieces and the *Third Step* series, Howson's answer to this question comes through images suggestive of how man seeks after God. Like Jesus, it is a *Via Crucis*, a way of redemptive but sometime violent suffering, and so Jesus epitomizes the way by which men – and again I think the specific gender is appropriate – can find their way back to God.<sup>30</sup>

As we have seen, Fujimura invests transcendent significance in both the materials and techniques of his work. The natural effect of gold and his association of it with the heavenly, the notion of essentiation, all conspire to give the viewer a sense of hovering on the periphery of a new world. He even goes so far as to deny that his work is abstract but rather fully representational, 'a representational depiction of God's Space.'<sup>31</sup> Yet, like Howson, there is not just one imaginative direction that Fujimura's work pulls in. Fujimura speaks of the grace that exists 'between the immanent reality of earth and the transcendent reality of heaven.'<sup>32</sup> One could explore how, for both Fujimura and the viewer, something of God's presence is suggested in the very materials that he uses, as suggested in one of Fujimura's favourite passages from William Blake:

To see a World in a grain of Sand  
 And Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
 And Eternity in an hour.

Commenting directly on this poem and applying it to his work, Fujimura writes:

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<sup>30</sup> In this regard certain parallels can be discerned between the films of directors such as Martin Scorsese and Mel Gibson and Howson's art, all three of whom make usage of Christian iconography in films typically centered on male characters and characterized by vividly violent sequences. Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980) and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), and Gibson's *Braveheart* (1996), *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and *Apocalypto* (2006) epitomize this characterization.

<sup>31</sup> Fujimura, *River Grace*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 3.

Crushed minerals are literally “Grains of Sand,” symbolizing a gift both from heaven and earth. The process of painting, then, mirrors my deeper struggle to return the gifts back to the Creator. Precious minerals carry with them a symbolic weight; there is a Biblical symbolism of God’s spiritual gifts to people, and the glories of the Saints.<sup>33</sup>

So a dialectical potential is available also in Fujimura’s art. That the work of both has their identifiable centers of gravity and yet a capacity to facilitate or *catalyze* an experience of the divine in more than one way is a positive attribute. Such a dynamic within an artist’s oeuvre reflects a capaciousness of artistry, perception, and theology.

How might Christian lay people respond to these complex artistic utterances? A common response to Howson’s work is to find it initially and perhaps fundamentally disturbing and Fujimura’s comforting albeit puzzling. I have suggested that the social realism and thematic content of Howson’s art might appeal more to a male audience and might effectively bridge a Christian perspective to those otherwise out-of-touch by what might be perceived as the highly domesticated or effeminate nature of church society. This finds reflection in Howson’s reporting of the positive feedback received from (presumably male) prisoners.<sup>34</sup>

But while Fujimura’s art is easier to look at emotionally it is harder to understand at first glance. Howson’s more traditionally representative art produces jarring images that have at least a surface accessibility to the initiate, although in many of his works enough artistry to sustain repeated viewings with new discoveries. Fujimura’s lacks traditional representation, although replete with references and motifs drawn from an art-historical context, is not familiar to most Western viewers. The comparison of the two artists’ work affords opportunities to consider the relative potentials of differing crafts to effectively address theological subject matters. In what ways is figurative art better able to address immanence or transcendence? In what ways is abstract art? In what ways are Western versus Asian traditions of painting, and the sub-categories of these broad generalizations, suited to the task of facilitating religious perception? How does the adoption of a particular craft influence the subsequent subject matters one might address?

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Steven Berkoff, *Peter Howson* (London: Flowers Galleries, 2006), 10.

Such could be some of the points of discussion and exploration in a joint presentation of these two series by Howson and Fujimura. Each of the particular works of these artists can, of course, also stand alone on its own merits or deficits. But new levels of depth and significance may accrue when individual works or series are situated within larger body of work. It is then that an artist's 'story' begins to more clearly emerge: the characteristic themes worked out in a variety of settings, conflicts and resolutions. As these themes are perceived these in turn participate in even more fundamental, however openly acknowledged or dissembled, patterns of meaning and valuation; behind the stories lies the 'Story,' the *Weltanschauung*, the functionally religious set of assumptions addressing the origins, purposes and destiny of human life. To 'read' a work of art and to 'see' meaning is to enter into a narrative interrogation of its craft, content and context. In order to do so it becomes necessary at times to learn its unique 'language,' and with greater fluency in it one becomes better able to so engage with a work or genre of works. They begin to yield their stories. This I take to be the spiritually formative *aesthetic* journey a person can embark upon. This is not the way of the aesthete but of the explorer of worlds, delving deep into his or her own chosen or inherited world but also taking risky steps of encountering other worlds and their potentials. The capacities for such grounding and exploration involve *ascetical* qualities spoken of in these pages, capacities of attentiveness, imagination, openness, and self-transcendence. These are the qualities of the aesthetic explorer, qualities which can promote spirituality and for which spirituality is often a pre-requisite.

This project has conducted its own exploration of the arts in light of David Harned's reflections on the 'richness and the terror, beauty and banality, of the worlds outside and within the self.' Such a line of enquiry highlights the potential merits of both Howson's and Fujimura's work as examples of the potential for art to facilitate religious experience and spiritual formation. In an unusually persistent manner he excavates the ambiguities of the human subject, and in his latest work places this exploration in direct dialogue with traditional Christian themes and imagery.

Fujimura's work highlights another dimension of the aesthetic disposition, that of 'surrendering' before the *authority* of an artwork. Such surrender, a posture of trust and genuine self-openness, can reinforce or initiate the basic posture one takes in classical forms of Christian spirituality. Here also the dynamics of 'conversation,' 'communion,' and 'dialogue' discussed in relation to aesthetic experience and speech-act hermeneutics correspond to the experience of

encounters with the divine. For many, the encounter with Fujimura's art requires that they slow down, look for clues, interpret signs and their signification, engage imaginatively, and trust an artist's employment of a process. Such dynamics are not at all unlike those associated with classic spiritual disciplines.<sup>35</sup> The initial mystery, lack of anchorage, disorienting qualities of Fujimura's work for the average viewer can create the kind of cognitive dissonance or crisis that for James Loder can initiate – *catalyze* – alteration in human perception and experience, even to the perception and experience of God. Perhaps there is more potential for cognitive dissonance in the encounter with God than is often discussed in contemporary church circles. The subsequent dynamics of the aesthetic disposition or of Loder's work has the merit of linking a theory of human learning and knowledge directly to spiritual formation. "The human spirit makes all acts of human intelligence self-transcendent and self-relational. When God acts, Spirit-to-spirit, then human intelligence is transformed into a 'faith seeking understanding' of God's self-revelation..."<sup>36</sup> Strong claims are being made in contemporary theological discourse in this regard, where the arts and culture become a means by which 'God can be encountered, and encountered often.'<sup>37</sup> The unique 'sensuous embodiment' of artistic expression in its union of form and content carrying within it the DNA, as it were, of its cultural significance creates the potential of epiphany. Whether understood metaphorically or literally, the arts manifest an 'affective perspective' which can change viewers' affections through the effective inhabitation of the world created in the art.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, what does this study conclude about *how a person gains spiritual formation from encounters with art*? The answer lies mostly in accumulated experience. The assistance of instruction, guidance and facilitation can make a great deal of difference. As has been suggested, many people are initially put-off or intimidated by works of art that are complex or unfamiliar. This study has adopted the analogy of language to describe how the arts 'speak' to people, and in some cases what is needed is some 'translation' to take place, a 'decoding' of sorts so that meaningful contact between the art object and its receiver can be made. Then, over time,

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<sup>35</sup> The literature on this topic is immense. See Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation* (London: SPCK, 2011), 18.

<sup>36</sup> J. E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 12.

<sup>37</sup> D. Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> This project throughout has drawn on the phenomenological tradition and in particular Aidan Nichols' employment of it in his theological aesthetic, such as when he writes:

...in the artwork the configured materials of the object as it leaves the artist's hands are certainly fact, yet the artwork is only constitutive of the aesthetic experience when the perceiver approaches it with the sympathy which allows him to 'read' its affective world. A. Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate*, 112.

ascetical virtues of openness, submissiveness and self-transcendence can begin to engage within aesthetic experiences, and a person with greater ‘eyes that see and ears that hear’ begins to emerge.

## V. Epilogue

Neophyte scholars find solace in the confirmation of their ideas and intuitions from approved elders. Such was my experience when, during the post *viva voce* revision of this manuscript, the festschrift *Art as Spiritual Perception* appeared. Written in honour of E. John Walford at the time of his retirement from the Art History department at Wheaton College, the volume is a collection of art critical essays, each of which reflects a methodology of art criticism learned from Walford by his former students and colleagues. That methodology is described variously as a ‘content-oriented method of perception’<sup>1</sup> or a ‘meaning-directed method’ in which art interpretation ‘involves an ordered process of exploring themes, iconography, and context to bring to light the possible spiritual meaning.’<sup>2</sup> Walford inherited the kind of ‘worldview’ analysis of culture associated with Reformed or Neo-Calvinist Christianity from his teacher Hans Rookmaaker. Describing how such a method challenged prevailing formalist orientations, James Romaine writes:

Walford’s approach recognizes the work of art as a visual realization, through motif and method, of inherent meaning. This has consequences for understanding the role of the scholar, or viewer, who seeks to understand and critically engage that meaning. It would follow that Walford’s method of meaning-oriented seeing would require a selection of subject, observational study of that object’s visual elements, and commentary, informed by contextual knowledge gained through research. Sensitive to the dangers of subjective personal interpretations, Walford describes this ‘attempting to grasp, where possible, how such pictures were perceived in their own time’ as a ‘control of our reading.’ A content-oriented method of art history is not an open license to

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<sup>1</sup> James Romaine, ‘You Will See Greater Things than These: John Walford’s Content-oriented Method of Art History,’ in J. Romaine, ed., *Art as Spiritual Perception: Essays in Honor of E. John Walford* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 23.

<sup>2</sup> W. Dyrness, ‘The Perception of Spirituality: Hans Holbein’s *The French Ambassadors*,’ in Romaine, 123.

speculation. These readings must be grounded in the evidence of the art object and the product of research.<sup>3</sup>

In this project I have attempted to articulate a coherent and heuristically-ordered account of the kind of art-critical method described here. We encounter here again the analogy of ‘reading’ art and the cognitive dynamic which this implies which has been emphasized in this project as a counterbalance to emotionally-focused interpretations of aesthetic experience and to underline the narrative worldview interpretation of art argued for. We see the value of ‘informed opinion’ in facilitating encounters with art, and with references to ‘motif and method,’ content and context, we find an intimation of the tripartite overlapping ring diagram of craft, content and context I have presented to illustrate the complex dynamics that constitute the phenomenon of art. I have sought to argue how the spiritual perception potentially available in art can also be a spiritually formative potential as a ‘story-shaping’ phenomenon and an occasion for the development of skills and capacities applicable to religious development in general. I have interpreted art as a mediation of the dynamics of *aesthesis* and *ascesis*, and that in mediating these dynamics art can be an ‘antidote against any kind of superficiality, and perhaps against spiritual superficiality most of all.’

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<sup>3</sup> Romaine, in Romaine, 31, quoting E. J. Walford, *Jacob van Ruisdael and the Perception of Landscape* (New Haven: Yale, 1991), 13.



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