

Roger Fry as a Protestant Art Critic

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A thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Philosophy and Art History

University of Essex

April 2017

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the assistance given to me as a post-graduate student by the staff of Essex University's Art History department. In particular I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr. Sarah Symmons-Goubert, for her constant support and encouragement over the whole period of my research work.

Abstract

This thesis argues that Roger Fry should, in part at least, be placed within a tradition of British, Protestant, art criticism. To this end I compare his work with that of the leading nineteenth-century British art critic John Ruskin. I discuss the problems both men had in engaging with a predominately Catholic art form, and place their work within a wider British tradition. I consider their personal histories and how they gave a similar interpretation of art history. I explore the work of both men on Venetian art and artists with particular references to Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* and Fry's writings on Bellini and Giotto. I examine how Fry sought to distance artworks from the culture that produced them and how this affected his view on art history. I compare Fry's aesthetic ideas with the Theocentric theory of art advanced by Ruskin in the second volume of *Modern Painters*. Here I compare their respective formalist ideas. I discuss how Fry's formalism led him to reject Impressionism and champion the Post-Impressionists. I examine the controversy surrounding the 1910 and 1912 Post-Impressionist exhibitions and how they raised the question of the moral value and use of art. I end with a discussion of Ruskin's concept of the Theoretic faculty and contend that Fry held a similar concept. Overall I argue for the presence of continuity between Fry's early and later ideas on art criticism and history that can partly be explained by his religious background.

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Introduction

In Roger Fry's posthumously published *Last Lectures* his friend and fellow art historian, Kenneth Clark noted that:

When, in 1933, Roger Fry was elected to the post of Slade Professor at Cambridge University, he was sixty seven years of age and had been known as the best living English writer on art. Though he had never been as widely read as Ruskin, his influence on taste and on the theory of art had spread to quarters where his name was barely known. A large, confused section of the public, dimly desiring to appreciate works of art, had begun to prefer coloured reproductions of Cézanne and Van Gogh to the meagre, respectable etchings which had furnished houses of a previous generation and many of Fry's theories had been assimilated by those who had never read a word of his writings. In so far as taste can be changed by one man it was changed by Roger Fry. ¹

This passage both acknowledges the influence of Fry and also suggests a conflict between his own ideas on art and those of his Victorian predecessor, John Ruskin. It was Ruskin who, as the most influential English art critic of the nineteenth century, played a vital role in establishing and defining a popular taste in art that was bound up with questions of religious and social morality. By contrast, Fry's modernist criticism was advanced as a means whereby an artwork could be evaluated for its formal qualities alone, free from consideration of any "associated ideas". In his concluding chapter to his 1920 collection of essays *Vision and Design*, Fry had described Whistler's "Ten o'clock" lecture as an attempt to "...sweep away the ethical questions, distorted by aesthetic prejudices, which Ruskin's exuberant and ill-regulated mind had spun for the British public".²

The same could, and has, been said with regard to Fry's own formalist theory. This thesis however argues that such a clear distinction between the aesthetic theories of John Ruskin and Roger Fry should not be assumed. Instead it argues that Fry should, in part at least, be regarded as

¹ Kenneth Clark, Introduction to *'Last Lectures of Roger Fry'* (Cambridge University Press 1939)

² Roger Fry, 'Retrospect' from *'Vision and Design'* (Penguin Books Ltd, London 1937, p232)

following in a tradition of Protestant and British art history and criticism, and that his work echoes in many respects the example set by Ruskin. In drawing a comparison between the writings of Ruskin and those of Fry I have concentrated on those early works of Ruskin most directly influenced by his evangelical Protestant faith. More specifically, I draw on *Modern Painters*, Volume II (1846) and the three volumes of *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3). It is in *Modern Painters*, Volume II that Ruskin most directly expresses his theocentric theory of aesthetics, while in *The Stones of Venice* he gives a particularly Protestant interpretation of both that city's art and its history. With Fry I draw on writings that encompass most of his life and career, from letters sent as an undergraduate at Cambridge University in the 1880s, to his reflections on his role as an art historian and theorist, published in the 1930s. There are two reasons for this approach. From the late 1850s Ruskin was to undergo a crisis of faith, thereafter losing the religious certainties that underpin the aforementioned books. While his output was to remain prodigious over the following three decades the nature of his criticism would change. He no longer felt the need to relate questions of aesthetics directly to questions of theology. In claiming a religious aspect to Fry's own approach to history and criticism, it is therefore appropriate to compare his work with examples of early Ruskin. In contrast, by including a much broader chronological span of Fry's writing I argue that in many respects there was a much closer sense of continuity between his early and later writings than was the case with Ruskin.

I have divided this thesis into a number of chapters, with each chapter dealing with certain aspects of the work of Ruskin and Fry. I begin by providing a brief outline of the contemporary ideas about the nature of the Renaissance against which Ruskin's work first appeared. I then move on to the specifically British context, most notably anti-Catholicism, that helped shape his work. As I am directly comparing the work of Ruskin with that of Fry, this background information also provides a broad understanding of the intellectual context within which the work of the latter

appeared. Next I examine the work of both men as historians. Here I compare Ruskin's attempt in *The Stones of Venice* to claim Venice as a Protestant republic during its period of greatness, with a similar strategy used by Fry, in his monograph on Giovanni Bellini. Likewise I compare the manner in which Ruskin gave a Protestant reading of St. Mark's Cathedral, Venice with Fry's interpretation of Giotto's frescoes in the Arena chapel, Padua. For Fry, the distancing of works of art from their historical context was a process that would continue throughout his career. I examine how this affected both his purchasing and display decisions while he was a curator at the Metropolitan Museum, New York. Next I look at Fry's 1917 essay "Art and Life", where he directly addresses the question of the connection, if any, between the art and the society that produced it.

From here I move onto the aesthetic theories of Ruskin and Fry. I discuss how each sought to define the innate properties a work of art should possess, and how these properties should be perceived. With Ruskin this involves an examination of his theocentric aesthetic theory, as advanced most clearly in the second volume of *Modern Painters*. I discuss how he defined beauty and how he equated both the production and appreciation of art with morality. I discuss Ruskin's own formalism, as contained in his theory of Typical Beauty, and how the ideas expressed here can be compared to Fry's own formalism. This focus on Fry's formalism leads in turn to a discussion of the reasons why he was to reject Impressionism and instead champion the works of the Post-Impressionists. Reactions to the two London Post-Impressionist exhibitions therefore play a significant part in this thesis. I examine the controversy surrounding the first Post-Impressionist exhibition and how this controversy revealed that Fry should not be placed alongside Whistler, as one who followed the credo of "art for art's sake", but always believed art could not be separated from all aspects of life. I end with an examination of Ruskin's concept of the Theoretical faculty, and how that faculty determined an individual's instinctive response to a work of art. This was a concept deeply shaped by Ruskin's religious beliefs. I argue that Fry developed his own version of

this faculty that was in turn, even subconsciously, shaped by beliefs drawn from his own Quaker upbringing.

I should state here that comparisons between Ruskin and Fry have been made before. Three of the most complete examples are *Roger Fry and the Beginnings of Formalist Art Criticism* (1973) by Jacqueline Falkenheim; *The Impact of Modernism 1900-1920* (1988) by Stella Tillyard and *The Renaissance, English Cultural Nationalism, and Modernism, 1860-1920* (2009) by Lynne Walhout Hinojosa. I will address the main arguments each makes for such a connection here, and how my thesis differs from them.

I have broken down the passage in *Roger Fry and the Beginnings of Formalist Art* where Falkenheim addresses the relationship between Fry and Ruskin into a series of numbered paragraphs, in order to answer the separate points more clearly. Falkenheim writes that:

(1) It was his native England that offered Fry the principal guidance in his development as an art critic. And in nineteenth-century England John Ruskin was the key figure in his heritage. The relationship between Ruskin and Fry is a complicated one. Fry acknowledged having read Ruskin, but later rejected him because the older writer's judgements were apparently too blatantly determined by moral concerns. Fry could not abide Ruskin's belief that artistic activity is not unique and independent, but a function of everyday life and could therefore serve a utilitarian function.³

(2) For the moment, however, we must overrule Fry's objections and consider briefly what general ideas he might have learned from his elder. First of all, Fry could have derived his sense of commitment to an ideal from Ruskin... a like ethical consciousness seems to bind Ruskin and Fry together. Both men elevated the visual image to the powerful position of an idea capable of imparting knowledge of the natural world. Likewise, they insisted that a heightening of the visual sensibilities in an artist and viewer is necessary to attain to the production and intelligibility of the meaningful visual statement.⁴

(3) Fry would not believe as strongly as did Ruskin in the cause and effect relationship between clarified vision resulting in the satisfying visual image on the one hand and healthy

³ Jacqueline V Falkenheim 'Roger Fry and the beginnings of formalist art criticism' (UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, 1973, p52)

⁴ Ibid p52 - 53

moral action on the other. But he did grant that clear thinking and seeing and ethical purpose are required to produce good art. Fry and Ruskin also agreed that the creation of beauty, which is the artist's response to his visual perceptions, results in a satisfying emotional order.⁵

(4) Now we can account for the surprisingly similar types of praise offered to Giotto by both critics (for Fry, early in his career). Ruskin speaks of religion generally, and Fry talks about the teachings of St. Francis, but each writer considers the strength of the formal design in Giotto's frescoes to be immediately determined by the artist's religious and ethical values.⁶

Beginning with Falkenheim's first point, I agree about the early influence of Ruskin on Fry but, as can be seen in the main text, argue that it was deeper and longer lasting than is here suggested. It seems that Falkenheim is here comparing the writings of Fry with the later writing of Ruskin, where social rather than religious concerns most influenced his work. Certainly, as I will show when discussing Ruskin's aesthetic ideas set out in *Modern Painters*, Volume II (and in contradiction to Falkenheim's view stated here), Fry's belief that artistic activity should be separated from utilitarian function was originally expressed by Ruskin.

The points made by Falkenheim in the second paragraph seem too generalised to carry much significance. A great many artists and critics of that, or any given period, could be said to have shared a "commitment to an ideal"⁷ or a "like ethical consciousness"⁸. Similarly few people interested in the pictorial and sculptural arts would not seek to elevate the visual image or seek "a heightening of the visual sensibilities"⁹.

Turning to the third paragraph, some of the terms used by Falkenheim, such as "clear thinking and seeing"¹⁰ are again too generalised to have much meaning. However, the statement

⁵ Ibid p53

⁶ Ibid p53

⁷ Ibid p52 - 53

⁸ Ibid p52 - 53

⁹ Ibid p52 - 53

¹⁰ Ibid p52 - 53

that Fry believed an “ethical purpose”¹¹ was required to produce art is particularly contentious. As I argue in my thesis, for Fry the motivation behind the production of a work of art and the moral stance of the person producing it was of secondary importance. Rather it was how the work was received by the viewer that determined its worth. Falkenheim is correct in stating that for both men the creation, and hence by implication the perception, of beauty creates a satisfying emotional order and, as the main text shows, this is an idea I develop further.

With regard to the fourth paragraph Falkenheim is correct in drawing attention to a similarity in approach between the art history writing of Ruskin and Fry. Falkenheim refers to the example of Fry’s essay on Giotto and the Arena Chapel and Ruskin’s writing on the same subject. Ruskin made his comments on Giotto in a series of explanatory notes, produced between 1853-60, to accompany the production of thirty-eight large woodcuts by the Arundel Society, depicting frescoes in the Arena Chapel. As such, they are more concerned with explaining the iconography of the images to his audience rather than providing a formal and historical analysis of the original frescoes. Therefore, while in the main text I also refer to Fry’s writing on the Arena Chapel, I believe a more productive comparison can be made with other examples of Ruskin’s work, in particular the latter’s descriptions of St. Mark’s Cathedral, Venice, contained in *The Stones of Venice*.

As well as the similarities between Fry and Ruskin, Falkenheim lists a number of supposed differences. These include Ruskin’s attitude to High Renaissance art and the question of what value each man gave to the role of emotion and intellect in producing and evaluating art. I refer to these in the main text and explain why I believe there is a greater correlation between the views of Ruskin and Fry than Falkenheim allows.

¹¹ Ibid p53

Stella Tillyard's book, *The Impact of Modernism 1900-20*, deals directly with the Post-Impressionist exhibitions of 1910-12, and the role played in both promoting and explaining this brand of Modernism in England. She seeks to understand both why Fry became the dominant figure within English Modernism and to account for the ultimate success of Post-Impressionism with the general public. Her book argues that the brand of Modernism promoted by Fry and his associates triumphed over other potential rivals by drawing on the language and audience for the Arts and Crafts movement that had flourished in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. As Tillyard writes:

The similarity in tenor between the Arts and Crafts movement, early Modernism in general and Post-Impressionism in particular provides an invaluable key to their success. Both movements were "religious", fervent, and crusading. They both used similar religious language and their supporters were also "converts" who joined a "cause" ...this religious language recalled the language of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the religiosity was also the religiosity of the early socialist organisations of the 1880s and early 1890's.¹²

It is clear from this that Tillyard's book covers some of the same subjects and themes discussed in this thesis. In her work, Tillyard also draws certain comparisons between Fry and Ruskin. It is necessary therefore to explain where our arguments overlap and, more importantly, where they diverge.

I will begin with a subject, not covered in my thesis, which forms a significant part of Tillyard's book. This is the relationship between the Arts and Craft movement of the last decades of the nineteenth century and Fry's own Omega Workshops. In this thesis I attempt to draw parallels between Ruskin and Fry. It is with Fry's establishment of the Omega Workshops, in 1913, that this parallel is perhaps most immediately obvious. As Tillyard and others have argued there is a close similarity between Fry's company and various commercial enterprises associated with the Arts and Crafts movement, most particularly with the foundation of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and

¹² S.K Tillyard 'The Impact of Modernism' Routledge, New York, London 1988 Introduction xvii - xviii

Company in 1861, a moment that Tillyard identifies as the launching of the Arts and Crafts movement. The inspiration behind this company was the prolific artist, writer, craftsman and politician William Morris. Morris had himself been deeply influenced by the ideas of Ruskin, particularly by the chapter in *The Stones of Venice* entitled “On the Nature of the Gothic”.

There are distinct similarities between Fry’s Omega Workshops and Morris’s own company. As I explain in the main text, Fry grew up under the influence of the Arts and Crafts movement with one of its leading advocates, Charles Ashbee, being a close friend at Cambridge. The aim of both Morris, with his company, and Fry, with his Omega workshops, was to produce objects for everyday life hand crafted by a group of like-minded artists. As such they would provide an alternative to the cheap and abundant, but as they saw it depersonalised, production of machine-made goods. Both projects therefore sought custom chiefly amongst the moneyed upper-middle classes. One of the philosophies linking both groups was a nostalgia for the pre-industrial age.

It is precisely because this connection between Fry and the preceding Arts and Crafts movement, (and hence its inspiration in the works of Ruskin), has already been extensively covered that I have not mentioned it in the main text. I feel there would be little original to add. It is also however because it would be somewhat off topic. There was a significant difference between the underlying vision of the Arts and Crafts movement and Fry’s purpose in establishing the Omega Workshops. As Tillyard has said, Morris, like Ruskin, saw an intimate connection between the state of a nation’s art and its social organisation. As a social reformer, he believed that to alter the production of the former was to make a contribution toward altering the structure of the latter. Many of those that participated in the Arts and Crafts movement were inspired by various forms of Christian Idealism, including various forms of Christian Socialism. The disparate branches of the early socialist movement were also well represented, particularly those adherents of various forms of Guild socialism. The discussion of the Arts and Crafts movement therefore inevitably also

becomes concerned with its wider social context, rather than more narrowly focused on aesthetic ideas alone. In contrast to many of the leading figures in the Arts and Crafts movement, Fry had few ambitions of widespread social reform. He also drew a greater distinction between the “applied” arts and “high” art than was the case with many of those involved with the Arts and Crafts movement. Therefore while his aim was for the Omega Workshops to produce high quality and expressive objects for everyday use, one of its more practical purposes was to provide promising young artists with a regular source of income. In this way they would be free to follow their own artistic vision without the need to compromise to the tastes of any potential patron.

Returning to Tillyard’s main thesis, she discusses the use of language in advancing the cause of Post-Impressionism. As mentioned, social utopianism and religiosity played a large part in the Arts and Crafts movement, and consequently in the language associated with it. It is Tillyard’s argument that in borrowing the language connected with the Arts and Crafts movement to discuss Post-Impressionism, Fry therefore also incorporated the language of religiosity and utopianism into the discussion and evaluation of Post-Impressionism. It was this synthesis of the new art with a familiar vocabulary that helps explain the eventual dominance of Post-Impressionism within British Modernism. As Tillyard writes:

Post-Impressionism’s supporters were drawn towards the paintings and encouraged to interpret them in these sort of ways because the language Fry and McCarthy used to describe Post-Impressionism had a plethora of moral and social overtones, associations with sincerity, with purity, with simplicity. These in turn were paradigmatic of a vision of society and the hope for a certain way. It was these overtones which prompted talk of the life-giving qualities of Post-Impressionism which ran so counter to Fry’s incipient formalism.¹³

There are a number of points to discuss here. The first is to make clear the distinction between the aims of Tillyard’s book and my own thesis. Tillyard seeks to explain why, amongst a number of possible competitors, Post-Impressionism became the dominant force in British Modernism. As

such she is primarily concerned with the audience reaction to the work, and why initial hostility turned to acceptance. My thesis seeks to explain why Fry himself was attracted to the work of a particular group of artists and examines continuities between his championing of Post-Impressionism and his earlier career. As such it is more concerned with Fry's surprise at the initial hostility to the first Post-Impressionist exhibition than that movement's assimilation into the accepted canon of art. There are two other points to be made here. Tillyard writes of the language used by both Fry and his supporters to describe Post-Impressionism, pointing to its moral and social overtones. It is worth noting here that Fry was not responsible for the language of his supporters; most notably, in this context, Clive Bell. As this thesis notes, Fry was certainly close to Bell and to help explain his formalist theory was to take from and later use Bell's term "significant form". This term was invented by Bell in his book *Art* (1914). In this work Bell had denoted "significant form" as "the one quality common to all works of art".¹⁴ Despite their intellectual and social closeness, however, Bell made claims for art to be regarded as, or indeed to replace, established religion. This went well beyond anything proposed by Fry. Secondly, as Tillyard herself notes, the language of purity, moral purpose and transcendence was in common use by many artistic movements during this period. More importantly however is Tillyard's contention that the use of such language was at variance with Fry's own formalism. In my thesis I argue that religious feeling played a significant part in determining Fry's aesthetic development, first as a result of his hostility to Roman Catholicism and later when he drew on aspects of the theology of his early Quakerism when defining his formalist theory. In this regard he held a distinctly personal set of ideas about the creation and interpretation of art.

The Renaissance, English Cultural Nationalism, And Modernism 1860-1920 (2009) by

¹³ S.K Tillyard *The Impact of Modernism* Routledge, New York, London 1988 p124

¹⁴ Clive Bell, *Art* Chatto & Windus 194 p8

Lynne Walhout Hinojosa examines the interplay between differing cultural histories of the Renaissance and how these various interpretations in turn had an effect on both the English national identity and the rise of English Modernism. As with Stella Tillyard's work it, therefore covers some of the same ground as this thesis, most significantly in Chapter 6 titled: "The Modernist Rejection of the Renaissance: Fry, Bell, Hulme".¹⁵ Again here I will deal with the section on Fry. There are points of agreement between Hinojosa's opinions and my own. She notes that Fry and Ruskin shared an antipathy towards the mimetic accomplishments of the artists of the High Renaissance, both believing that this skill had come at the cost of a certain sincerity of expression. This sincerity, Fry believed, could be regained through a rejection of a directly naturalistic means of expression.

There are however points on which I believe Hinojosa is mistaken. In Chapter 4 of her work, Hinojosa states that the Italian critic and art historian Giovanni Morelli had an early influence on the writing of Fry. In noting this she is correct. However I believe she is somewhat mistaken on the nature of this influence. She writes: "Reacting against the scientific and material methods of connoisseurship dominant in their day, Morelli...developed a "spiritual" approach to art history and new "spiritual" methods to determine art's origins".¹⁶ While this acknowledges that there was indeed what might be termed a "spiritual" (or perhaps instinctive) side to Morelli's connoisseurship, Morelli can still be regarded as the founder of the "scientific" method of criticism, seeking to attribute a painting's artist through the systematic study of anatomical and technical details. It was this methodology that would have a lasting influence on Fry throughout his career.

Hinojosa also writes that "...for a time in the 1910s, Fry denigrated Renaissance humanism and mimetic art...This reaction against the Renaissance had everything to do with Fry's promotion

¹⁵ Lynne Walhout Hinojosa *The Renaissance of English Cultural Nationalism and Modernism 1860 – 1920* Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, New York pp114 - 137

¹⁶ Ibid p113

of the post-impressionists and modern art”.¹⁷ This is to put the cart before the horse. Rather than being the calculated act here suggested, Fry’s rejection of mimetic art preceded his promotion of the Post-Impressionist exhibitions of the 1910s. It was because Fry believed the works chosen for the exhibitions displayed those qualities he had long prized in pre-Renaissance art that he was to become the enthusiastic champion of Post-Impressionism. On a more general level Hinojosa notes that “...Fry rejected Ruskin’s attachment of art to Christianity and ethics”¹⁸. The argument put forward in this thesis is that it is a mistake to draw such a clear distinction between the two men, both as art historians and critics.

¹⁷ Ibid p114

¹⁸ Ibid p119

Chapter 1

Ruskin in Context: Forming an idea of the Renaissance in the Nineteenth Century

In drawing comparisons between the work of Ruskin and Fry, the similarity of their respective approaches to the Renaissance and its effect on the creative process is central. As J. B. Bullen argues in *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing*: “The Renaissance was introduced into English in the context of architectural writing...Initially it appeared as a synonym for the the cinquecento or “revived Italian” style of building but it rapidly assumed the status of a larger cultural phenomenon”.¹ He credits Ruskin with being the figure responsible for solidifying the concept of the Renaissance as a distinctive and central event in the development of European culture. As Bullen writes:

...he [Ruskin] simultaneously breathed into the Renaissance a life, a potency, and a vitality that it had never had before. Previously it had existed as a fragile and undefined myth which had crept slowly and uncertainly out of the shadow of the Middle Ages. Ruskin unwittingly armed that myth and gave it a secure position in European history.²

In writing about the effects of the Renaissance with such passion and influence, Ruskin was also participating in a wider debate as to the lasting, political and spiritual consequence of this historic intellectual event. This debate was in turn deeply influenced by attitudes towards contemporary political and religious conflict and anxieties. Ruskin was to develop his interpretation of the Renaissance as a defining cultural event through an interplay between his personal and emotional reaction to specific styles of art, his religious beliefs and his nationality. I argue that Ruskin’s own distinctive interpretation of the Renaissance was to find an echo in the later work of Roger Fry. For

¹ J. B. Bullen, *The Myth of the Renaissance in Nineteenth-Century Writing*, (Oxford University Press, 1995) p123

² Ibid

both men their intensely felt emotional connection to the works of pre-Renaissance artists clashed with respective ideological positions that were also deeply held. This was therefore to influence both men, as critics and art historians. In the following chapter, I will examine how both men produced work against a particular British, Protestant, interpretation of art history. First I would like to end this introduction by discussing how Ruskin's early art history, particularly *The Stones of Venice*, can be placed within a wider European context. More specifically, I seek to explore how his views can be compared with contemporary French debates regarding the nature of the Renaissance and its ongoing influence on extant religious and political questions.

The first thing to note here is that when Ruskin began his work the concept of the Renaissance as “a collective intellectual and artistic movement”³ was still new. It was during the early nineteenth century that the term makes its first appearance in the specific context of art history. This was with the publication of the six volumes of *Historie de l'art par les monumens, depuis sa décadence au IVe siècle jusqu'à son renouvellement au XVIe* by the French historian Jean-Baptiste Seroux d'Agincourt. The first volume was published in 1810, with the last volume being posthumously published in 1823. Influenced by Edward Gibbon, Voltaire and the naturalist Georges Buffon, d'Agincourt devised a methodology that, in turn, took a long view of both historical narrative and cultural context that placed works of art into three distinctive chronological periods. The first period covers the beginning of art in antiquity leading to its Classical period and subsequent decadence. The third period covers the renewal of art in the sixteenth century up to d'Agincourt's own day. It was from this categorisation that the concept of a cultural period called the Renaissance emerges. It was the long years of the middle period, described by d'Agincourt as “depuis sa décadence jusqu'à son renouvellement”⁴, that would prove more difficult to define.

³ Ibid pp9 - 10

⁴ Ibid p28

Throughout the eighteenth century this period had been variously named “le bas-empire”, “les siècles de décadence” and “le Moyen Âge”.⁵ It was this latter nomenclature that was to prove most enduring. This points to a wider truth. Concomitant with the Renaissance becoming recognised as a distinctive intellectual and artistic period, so also were the Middle Ages. D’Agincourt had himself divided the long years between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance in to further, more coherent, sub-divisions. In the subsequent decades, the Renaissance and The Middle Ages were to find their champions and detractors amongst writers for whom each period exemplified those spiritual and cultural traits they most admired or deplored.

Some of the terms of this debate had been set earlier. In 1796, the English historian, collector and philanthropist William Roscoe had published his *Life of Lorenzo de’ Medici*. Here he presented a somewhat mythologized view of fifteenth-century Florence. For Roscoe it is a city of liberal humanism, reasonable government and individual self-improvement, all guided by the astute paternalism of Lorenzo de’ Medici.⁶ Roscoe was answered by the Swiss historian J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi in *Histoire des républiques italiennes au Moyen Âge*, published in sixteen volumes (1807-1818). Sismondi does not share Roscoe’s view that the Renaissance was necessarily progressive in nature. Instead he argues that political freedoms present in the Middle Ages declined under the Medici, whose domination was marked by corruption, violence and the usurpation of power from civil administration. As Bullen⁷ has noted, both historians appealed to the same primary sources, relating to the same place and period in order to make opposing arguments. That their resulting conclusions were to be so contradictory can be explained by their different initial approach to the subject. Roscoe was presenting a view of the Renaissance that was in accord with ideals he advocated in his own age. Like Lorenzo, Roscoe was both a politician and a patron and collector of

⁵ Ibid p32

⁶ See Bullen 1995 pp39 – 40

the arts. He shared the Whig interpretation of history as a battle between progressives and reactionaries, in which the forces of progress would win and bring in the modern world. The art in the foreground of his history was used as evidence that Civilization could be advanced through education, innovation, and the wise leadership of outstanding individuals. Sismondi's history was more directly political in nature. The arts were viewed as an adjunct to his story of lost political liberty. When they could not be fitted into this schemata, they were discarded.

With his greater use of historical detail and access to documentation, it was Sismondi who initially seemed to present the more compelling case. As the century progressed, however, it was Roscoe's view of the Renaissance that was to become dominant. As Bullen argues:

Sismondi's work was a mine of detailed information on Italian history, but it was a history in which the group took precedence over the individual...the early mythographers of the Renaissance were content with the impersonal reading of the Renaissance, both in France and in England, but as time went by the Renaissance was perceived more and more as a period of strong and diverse personalities.⁸

That the belief of the Renaissance as a great, progressive and liberating movement in European history came to dominant intellectual opinion as the century advanced owes a great deal to the work of two French historians, Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet. Originally a committed medievalist, Michelet had begun the first of his seventeen-volume *Histoire de France* in 1833. It was in the seventh volume of this work, titled *Histoire de France: La Renaissance* that Michelet gave an idealistic version of the Renaissance as a time of "the advent of a new kind of art and the free play of the imagination...it is the revival of the study of antiquity...it represents the light which begins to dawn on the discordant "chaos" of our old customs."⁹ As his career progressed Michelet was to harden his view of the Renaissance as a defining, and indeed necessary, break from the medieval

⁷ See Bullen 1995 p50 - 51

⁸ Ibid p58

⁹ Ibid p156.

world view. It became the period in which mankind could liberate itself from religious authority and control. Michelet's embrace of Renaissance humanism was intimately connected with his wider social concerns. He was a secularist and political radical engaged in fierce debate as to the role of the Catholic Church in contemporary French society.

Unlike Michelet, his friend and colleague Edgar Quinet was to remain a Christian. He was, however, also a committed secularist and social reformer. His 1849 work *Les Révolutions d'Italie* was a celebration of Renaissance humanism. In the visual arts he saw the period as marked by a freeing of the imagination from religious fear and domination. Artists became free to explore the sensual aspects of nature, including the human body. As a result the visual arts produced during the Renaissance, rather than its literature, come to dominate the popular image of this period. As with Roscoe, Quinet views the Renaissance as a time of individual self-realisation, and cosmopolitanism, with certain individuals able to transcend their nationality and become internationally revered. Most significantly, with regard to the work of both Ruskin and Fry, Quinet viewed the fifteenth century as that moment when art, religion and politics decisively parted.

To explain the background against which Michelet and Quinet produced their interpretations of the Renaissance, it is useful to return to d'Agincourt and one of his earliest critics. In his *Dissertation sur les peintures du Moyen Âge, et sur celles qu'on a appelées gothiques* (1812), the French artist and theorist Palliot de Montabert questioned the then current low estimation of medieval art. He praised the work of the Italian primitives over that of Raphael. He proclaimed "decadence" a condition of the sixteenth century, not of the art of the middle ages, and questioned the right of his own generation to disparage the latter art which had been produced "with so much zeal and so much simplicity."¹⁰ These were all words that were to find a direct expression a generation later with Ruskin, and a century later with Fry. It was the nature of the "zeal" referred to

that was to prove so problematic for nineteenth-century historians of the Renaissance. It is clear that Paillot de Montabert was referring to the religious passion which informed the production and reception of these works. This was of course a passion produced by and in service of the Roman Catholic Church. For those French writers, Romantic, Royalist and Catholic in outlook, the loss of this religious zeal was a source of deep regret rather than celebration. In celebrating the Gothic art that had exemplified those values they saw a way both to regain and reconnect the wider society with its traditional Catholic faith. Some, such as François-René Chateaubriand took a middling approach, balancing their Romanticism with reason. Thus he was able to admire the material advances, and much of the art, of the Renaissance, while decrying it for a moral dissolution that would result in the disaster of the Reformation. Others, though, took a narrower approach.

In France the renewed interest in Gothic architecture and early Italian painting became directly associated with political Catholicism. Particularly influential in this regard were the historians and conservationists, Alexis-François Rio and Comte de Montalembert. Rio was part of the Roman Catholic revival in France and acquainted with spokespeople for Catholicism throughout Europe. In 1836, following a visit to Rome, he published *De la Poésie Chrétienne*. This was a work of analytical scholarship, but also of subjective, emotional response before works of art. He sought to identify and measure the sum of “Christian poetry”¹¹ expressed through a particular work of art. It was, argued Rio, these spiritual qualities rather than any technical accomplishments that gave a work of art its true value.

The renewed regard, in Europe, owed much to a friend of Rio’s, Charles-Forbes-René, Comte de Montalembert.¹² It was Montalembert’s letter to Victor Hugo, “Vandalisme en France” (1833), that had helped prevent the ruination of many Gothic monuments. His polemical *Du*

¹⁰ Ibid p36.

¹¹ See Bullen 1995 p82

vandalisme et du catholicisme dans l'art (1839) attacked the neglect of ecclesiastical monuments by a secular French state. This activity was closely connected with his ambition of restoring Roman Catholicism to its previous central position in French national life. He was to support both the right of the Catholic Church to run French schools and the re-establishment of Benedictines and Dominicans. His 1836 publication *Histoire de Saint Élisabeth de Hongrie* was an attempt to restore hagiography in France, and with it a renewed taste for superstitious tales of the lives of the saints.

I have given this brief examination of the debates surrounding the identification, nature and consequence of the Renaissance in order to provide some context in which the works of Ruskin first appeared. Doing so illustrates something of the dilemma faced by Ruskin, and later by Fry. While Ruskin was one of those writers who, as Bullen argues, helped fix the idea of the Renaissance in popular imagination, he trod a distinct path. He agreed with Michelet and Quinet that the Renaissance marked a decisive turning point in European cultural and social life. Like them he was profoundly opposed to any expression of political Catholicism, as advocated by Rio and Montalembert. However he agreed with Paillot de Montabert in mourning the loss of “zeal” that had found an expression in pre, but not post, Renaissance art. Instead, as with Rio, he found the art of the Pre-Renaissance, in his case particularly with architecture, could directly express to him a spiritual value that would later be lost. Again he accepted with Roscoe, Michelet and Quinet that the Renaissance had been marked by a new sense of self-realisation. However, where they saw this as signifying a growth of artistic and political freedom, he agreed with Paillot de Montabert that in politics it entailed a loss of ancient liberties, while in the arts it signified the triumph of the human ego over the sincerity of religious expression.

Fry began his writing on Renaissance art a generation after Ruskin. It did not therefore fall

¹² See Bullen 1995 pp76 - 80

to him to help define the nature of the Renaissance as a cultural event. He accepted the broad view of Michelet and Quinet that the fifteenth century marked a great watershed in European culture. As I will explain, of particular importance to him was the notion of a parting of the ways between art, politics, religion and science. Again he accepted the analysis of more recent scholars of the Renaissance, whether it be Jacob Burckhardt's argument that it marked a period of individual self-realization, or John Addington Symonds' emphasis on the role played by great individuals. Crucially, however, he shared key characteristics with Ruskin: a deep emotional connection to certain pre-Renaissance works; a belief that they were expressive of a sincerity that would be lost, and a deep antipathy to the culture that had produced them.

Chapter 2

Protestantism and nineteenth-century British Art History

In the previous chapter I have looked at the wider, European, context in which Ruskin's, and later Fry's, writing appeared. In this chapter I would like to examine how both men were placed within the wider sweep of nineteenth-century British art history. First I will reiterate the challenge faced by both Ruskin and Fry. As critics and historians, they were non-Catholics engaged in interpreting an art form that had traditionally been dominated by Roman Catholic artists producing work to serve the needs of the Catholic Church. In their different ways both Ruskin and Fry were antipathetic to the values and practices of Catholicism, yet both could also feel a direct and personal emotional response before works of art produced by that culture.

With Ruskin the discomfort he felt before Catholic imagery can be clearly related to religious dogma. The story of how Ruskin's writing was deeply affected, throughout his life, by his changing religious beliefs has been frequently examined. In this, and later chapters, I do not pretend to add anything new to the already extensive literature on this point. Rather I will argue that certain themes and ideas that found an expression in Ruskin's work were echoed and refined by Fry. Both men can be seen as belonging, in part at least, to a specifically British, Protestant, tradition of art criticism. It was the early work of Ruskin, published between 1843 and 1853, that most directly reflected his Evangelical upbringing. Therefore, in arguing that the writing of Fry can be seen within a religious context, it is with these early works by Ruskin that Fry's own writing should be compared.

It would be useful to first give a brief account of the background against which Ruskin's writings first appeared. The Evangelicalism, within which Ruskin was raised, was a movement within the Protestant Christian world that had begun as a reaction against features of orthodox

theology and the religious outlook of the early Enlightenment. Its doctrines drew on the inherited example of an earlier Protestant divinity. As a movement, it was largely lay and anticlerical in nature. Its ideas and influences were to suffer no perceptible check to their development until the middle and later years of the nineteenth century.¹ The leading nineteenth-century author of Evangelical tracts, with a circulation of twelve million, was John Charles Ryle. It was Ryle who identified the “five distinctive doctrinal marks by which members of the Evangelical body may be discerned”.² Ryle had pronounced: “The first leading feature in the Evangelical Religion is the absolute supremacy it assigns to Holy Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice, the only test of truth”.³ For Evangelicals, it was individual scrutiny of the Bible that was the source of religious truth, not tradition, ecclesiastical authority or ceremony. This scrutiny was aided by religious tracts and lengthy sermons. It was thus a strongly literary culture, with *The Evangelical Magazine* of this period containing no references to architecture or the visual arts.⁴ As Andrew Tate has written:

The perspective of Victorian Evangelicals on the visual arts was imbued with suspicion. The use of images in worship was synonymous with Roman Catholic idolatry, and paintings, other than explicitly *Protestant* work, were viewed as either extravagant or heretical.⁵

Divisions between Catholics and Protestants had, since the Reformation of the sixteenth century, been a feature of British life. The passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829 saw that conflict move from the directly political towards the cultural arena. In the visual arts, as elsewhere, it became a question of identifying what was integral to the national culture.

As William Vaughan has argued, the 1820s saw the naturalistic tradition of genre and landscape supersede history painting as the dominant characteristic of British art. Many observers linked this

¹ See Eliot-Bins, *Victorian Religion* (Lutterworth Press, 1936)

² George P. Landow, *The Aesthetic And Critical Theories Of John Ruskin* (Princeton University, 1971), p. 248.

³ Ibid p248

⁴ Michael Wheeler, *Ruskin's God* (Cambridge University Press) p 21

tendency directly with the Protestant tradition.⁶ Again, as Vaughan argues, it was significant therefore that the year of the Catholic Emancipation Act also saw the publication of books on art history by two Scots from Presbyterian backgrounds: J. S. Memes and Allan Cunningham. In his *History of Sculpture, Painting and Architecture* (1829), Memes made explicit the centrality of Protestantism in shaping and defining British life, and how the visual arts now reflected this identity. He stated that:

The Reformation, by restoring to the human mind the uncontrolled exercise of its own faculties, by unlocking the barriers by which the will and the powers of free enquiry had been imprisoned, has stamped upon every British institution, as upon every British talent, the worth and manliness of independent character. Our fine arts, though the last to feel, do at length experience this happy influence.⁷

From 1829-32, Allan Cunningham published his three volume work, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors and Architects*. This was to become the most popular account of British art in the Victorian age, with six editions being produced between 1829 and 1909. A series of biographical records, *The Lives* presents a boldly Protestant interpretation of the development of British art. Here early artistic efforts had been hampered by the connection with Roman Catholicism. For Cunningham, as with Memes, the rejection of Catholicism has allowed the development of a mindset both independent and progressive.

Cunningham argued that the poor quality of religious art of the early middle ages was the fault of foreign born artists, not native British artists, who had been serving a foreign church. Thus: “It was in the interests of Rome to supply us with painters as well as priests, whose mutual talents and zeal might maintain, and extend, and embellish religion.”⁸ For Cunningham it is through the

⁵ Andrew Tate, *Ruskin's Artists, Studies in the Victorian Visual Economy* ed. Robert Hewson (Ashgate, 2000), p135

⁶ William Vaughan, ‘The Englishness of English Art’ *Oxford Art Journal*, 13.2.90, pp.11-23

⁷ J S Memes, *History of Sculpture, Painting and Architecture* (Edinburgh 1829) p209

⁸ Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptures and Architects* (1829-32) Volume 1

study of nature that British art had originally established itself and it was in the reflection of nature that it must remain rooted. The allegorical painting of the Italian Renaissance, brought to Britain by foreign artists, was described as:

This bastard offspring of learning (that) swarmed in our palaces and churches. The pedantry of poets, the mysteries of the church, and the grotesque combinations of heraldry, all united in encouraging this absurd deviation from truth and nature.⁹

In this interpretation of history it is Hogarth, rather than Reynolds with his exposition of the “Grand Style” and championing of the Old Masters, whose art, writing and practice are in accord with the English character. Hogarth’s theory of beauty is grounded in the study of nature, while his paintings provide a portrayal of authentic English life, often within a moralistic and dramatic narrative.

The success of Cunningham’s *Lives* is unsurprising. As Dianne Sachko Macleod has explained, the early nineteenth-century notion of artistic deference to patronage was to atrophy as spending expanded to reach new heights in the mid-Victorian art world. Collecting became a standard feature of the moneyed middle-class and this class in turn sought to redefine the culture in its own image.¹⁰ Popular subjects contained a clear moral or social message. The monthly *Art Journal*, (formed in 1839 as *The Art Union*) promoted contemporary English artists to this new market, accusing the aristocracy of only being interested in the Old Masters. Appreciation of art became an ingredient in the make-up of the successful man. It served as both an investment, and proof that the purchaser cared for more in life than simply the accumulation of wealth. Those, like Cunningham, who could provide a historical and moral justification for contemporary taste, were assured of a wide audience.

Cunningham offered one possible model for the British, Protestant, art critic. However, with

⁹ Ibid p7

¹⁰ See Diane Sachko Macleod, *Art and the Victorian Middle Class* (Cambridge University Press, 1996)

his scepticism of the conventions of both history painting and art produced in the service of the church, it was a model based on a highly limited and parochial outlook. Something of this attitude can be seen in the first volume of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, a book whose arguments are derived largely from English sources and paintings in English collections. It was following his journey to Italy in 1845 that Ruskin was henceforward to face the more complex problem of engagement with the art and architecture of Catholic Europe. As Francis Haskell has pointed out, different styles and periods of Italian art were more easily assimilated within English taste than others.¹¹ In the city of Rome itself the classical heritage was artistically above controversy. The Renaissance masterpieces could be admired as exemplifying the canon of "high art" and thus viewed in a manner that denuded them of their religious significance. To engage with art that had not been neutralised by the embrace of the connoisseur presented a greater problem.

The danger posed to the Protestant onlooker by this earlier school of art was expressed by the Reverend Hobart Seymour. A determined opponent of the Roman Catholic Church, in 1848 Seymour had travelled to Rome to denounce religious life there. While travelling he found himself captivated "by the works of Giotto, Pinturicchio, Beato Angelica, Francia and the early works of Raphael". These he found:

exquisitely passionless and motionless... as if they could hear nothing but the music of the harps of heaven, as if they could see nothing but the holiness of the skies, and as if they could feel nothing but the happiness and peace of paradise... There was a soft and sweet luxury of indolence in such a life, that might not unnaturally create such an ideal as this... And such is the general and powerful effect of these pictures on my nature, that I never contemplate them without being drawn toward that kind of recluse and contemplative religion, which they seem designed to embody, and to be all the less fitted for that active and stirring benevolence which is an essential of a living Christianity... I had previously no idea - I could not conceive how painting could possibly exercise an influence almost magical, in alluring and seducing some persons to the church of Rome.¹²

¹¹ Francis Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art* (Phaidon), p66

¹² Seymour, quoted in Haskell p66.

Given the fears expressed by the Reverend Seymour, it is unsurprising that Protestant writers of the period felt the need to justify their interest in painting dating from before the period of Raphael. As Haskell explains, one of Britain's earliest champions of Piero della Francesca, the Scottish critic and historian James Dennistoun, felt the need to announce that there was "no compulsory connection" between "the present reaction in favour of Romanist views, prevalent in England among a class of persons, many of whom are distinguished by high and cultivated intellect" and appreciation of early Italian art.¹³ This defensiveness did however point to a wider truth. As previously mentioned, on the continent the renewed interest in Gothic architecture and early Italian painting had become associated with political Catholicism. Particularly influential in this regard were Alexis-François Rio and Comte de Montalembert. Montalembert had defended the rights of Catholics throughout Europe, including those in Ireland.¹⁴

This later point is significant. It shows how opinion about Gothic Art could easily become entangled with contemporary, British, political and religious debate. The strength and nature of that debate, and why any association of the Gothic style with the Roman Catholic Church could prove so troubling for some, can be seen in an extract from the first volume of Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (1852) In Appendix 5 of that volume ("Papal Power In Venice") Ruskin quotes approvingly "the following passage, written by my father in the year 1839...a passage remarkable as much for its intrinsic value, as for having stated, twelve years ago, truths to which the mind of England seems but now, and that slowly, to be awakening";

"We hear it said, that it cannot be merely the Roman religion that causes the difficulty [respecting Ireland], for we were once all Roman Catholics, and nations abroad of this faith are not as the Irish. It is totally overlooked, that when we were so, our government was despotic, and fit to cope with this dangerous religion, as most of the Continental governments yet are. In what Roman Catholic state, or in what age of Roman Catholic

¹³ Ibid p69

¹⁴ See Catholic Encyclopedia

England, did we ever hear of such agitation as now exists in Ireland by evil men taking advantage of an anomalous state of things - Roman Catholic ignorance in the people, Protestant toleration in the Government? We have yet to feel the tremendous difficulty in which Roman Catholic emancipation has involved us. Too late we discover that a Roman Catholic is wholly incapable of being safely connected with the British constitution, as it now exists, *in any near relation.*"¹⁵

For Ruskin therefore, and for many British Protestants, Roman Catholic emancipation was incompatible with both reasoned government and political liberty. Medieval Christian art, championed on the continent by spokesmen for political Catholicism, carried with it troubling associations. It could be viewed by some as representing those aspects of Catholicism they most feared and rejected: superstition, monasticism, social control and political domination. Therefore, as Lindsay Errington has described, the Protestant writer investigating the art of this period could feel the need to justify their choice of subject matter and reassure their readers that they had not succumbed to the lure of Rome.¹⁶ Before returning to Ruskin, I would like to, briefly, look at how two other writers of this period dealt with this problem.

For Lord Lindsay, with his *Sketches of the History of Christian Art* (1847), and Mrs Jameson with her *Sacred and Legendary Art* (1848), the study of the past could be justified if it helped meet the artistic needs of the present. As Lord Lindsay argued:

It is easy to reply - what is the need of this? They - the artists - have Moses and the prophets, the frescoes of Raphael and Michelangelo - let them study them. Doubtless, - but we still reply...it is not by studying art in its perfection - by worshipping Raphael and Michelangelo exclusively of all other excellence - that we can expect to rival them, but by re-ascending to the fountain-head - by planting ourselves as acorns in the ground those oaks are rooted in, and growing up to their level - in a word, by studying Duccio and Giotto that we may paint like Taddeo di Bartolo and Masaccio...

Let a few such artists arise among us, and the nineteenth may yet rival the fifteenth century. And why doubt it? Germany has done much already - England may do much, possibly more.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ruskin 9 p 423-424

¹⁶ Lindsay Errington, *Social and Religious Themes in English Art 1840-6* (Garland Publishing, 1985)

¹⁷ Quoted in Errington, p256

For Mrs Jameson, medieval art could also serve a contemporary purpose, if viewed from the perspective of a nineteenth-century Protestant.

We are critical not credulous. We no longer accept this polytheistic form of Christianity.... Our puritanical ancestors chopped off the heads of Madonnas and Saints, and paid vagabonds to smash the storied windows of our cathedrals; - now they are coming back to us or are we not rather going back to them? As a Protestant, I might fear lest in doing so we confound the eternal spirit of Christianity with the mutable forms in which it has deigned to speak to the hearts of men...but I must also feel that we ought to comprehend, and to hold in due reverence, that which has been consecrated to the holiest aims, which has shown us what a magnificent use has been made of art, and how it may still be adapted to good and glorious purposes, if, while we respect these time-consecrated forms and types, we do not allow them to fetter us, but trust the progressive spirit of Christianity to furnish us with new impersonations of the good - new combinations of the beautiful.... I hate the destructive as I revere the progressive spirit.¹⁸

Ruskin however did not value Gothic art, like Lord Lindsay, as a means to a Renaissance end.

Neither did he, as Mrs Jameson seemed to suggest, believe that his Christianity was of a more progressive nature than the religion of those artists who had created the works he so admired.

Instead, as I will explain in the next chapter, he sought both to extol the worth of Gothic art for its own unique value and to connect his own religious values with those of its creators.

¹⁸ Ibid pp256-8

Chapter 3

John Ruskin and *The Stones of Venice*

John Ruskin can be regarded as part of a wider British, Protestant, movement in art history. Published in three volumes between 1851 and 1853, *The Stones of Venice* was Ruskin's attempt to make medieval art, specifically architecture, palatable to a contemporary audience. He was also arguing that this medieval art could be a guide to the future. Alongside his earlier work, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), Ruskin's history of Venice was an attempt to shape the art of the present by influencing contemporary architectural debate in Britain. In so doing, he was explicitly challenging both the High Church, and the Romanist, claim to the Gothic style. Here Ruskin was directly challenging the work of one man in particular, the Roman Catholic convert, and fellow devotee of the Gothic style, Augustus Welby Pugin. Pugin's 1836 work *Contrasts* had compared what he regarded as the degraded state of contemporary architecture with the glories of the medieval, and hence Roman Catholic, past. Pugin was to write of the architectural style as something deeply connected with the wider society, an expression both of that society's spirit and social structure. These ideas were directly parallel to Ruskin's own. Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* should also therefore be seen as Ruskin's attempt to claim Gothic Architecture for his own Protestant religion.

Ruskin's work was also a political, anti-Roman Catholic, intervention and warning. *The Stones of Venice* was written against the background of the "Papal Aggression", that had seen the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in England. As the quote about Catholic emancipation cited in Chapter 2 demonstrates, Ruskin believed any accommodation of Roman Catholicism posed a danger to political stability and liberty. He therefore viewed this restoration by British political leaders as an act of cowardice that would lead to moral decay. Venice, once a great naval power,

had itself declined through political and moral corruption. The fortunes of Venice could be charted in her architecture, with the apogee of the Republic finding expression in the Gothic style and her decline being marked by the adoption of the Renaissance. The return to Gothic architecture advocated by Ruskin was also a call to moral renewal. Thus he called on the public to “cast out utterly whatever is connected with the Greek, Roman, or Renaissance architecture, in principle or in form...the whole mass of the architecture, founded on Greek and Roman models, which we have been in the habit of building for the last three centuries... It is base, unnatural, unfruitful, unenjoyable, and impious”¹. He urged the public to build instead “our own ancient Gothic” , which is “animated serviceable, and faithful...flexible to all duty, enduring to all time, instructive to all hearts, honourable and holy in all offices...and in all its form is symbolical of the faith of Christianity.”²

Ruskin therefore broke from the popular nineteenth-century narrative of continuous cultural progression. With *The Stones of Venice* he presented a story of achievement followed by decline, one that had for Ruskin a poignant contemporary relevance. In writing *The Stones of Venice* Ruskin was driven by despair at both the modern improvements to Venice and that city’s neglect of its past. In 1841 he had written:

...looking sometimes to the glimmering mosaics in the vaults of the Church; sometimes to the Square, thinking of its immortal memories; sometimes to the Palace and the Sea. No such scene existed elsewhere in Europe, - in the world; so bright, so magically visionary, a temple radiant as the flowers of nature, venerable and enduring as her rocks.³

Revisiting Venice in 1845, he described the railway bridge as “entirely cutting off the whole open sea and half the city, which now looks as nearly as possible like Liverpool at the end of the

¹ Ruskin, *The Library Edition* edited by E.T. Cook & Alexander Wedderburn, 11 p226

² Ibid 11 p227

³ Ibid 10 (x/vii)

dockyard wall.”⁴ Despite Ruskin decrying its modernisations, John Batchelor has maintained that, Ruskin “loved [it] and experienced sheer sensual pleasure in being within the city. But his driven sensibility did not allow “sheer” sensual pleasure.”⁵

To add to his desire to make the medieval palatable to a contemporary, Protestant, audience, and to influence the direction of architectural design, was therefore an overriding psychological need to connect the art that he loved with his own sense of personal, moral values. For Ruskin this meant the necessity of establishing the connection between the creation, and appreciation, of art and his Christian religion. The three volumes of *The Stones of Venice* present a series of interconnected theological arguments, art criticism and historical narrative to achieve this aim. Toward the end of the third volume of his work, Ruskin summarises the cumulative argument which he has been presenting to the reader. He begins by addressing the problem of pre-Christian art:

The various nations who attained eminence in the arts before the time of Christ, each of them, produced forms of architecture which in their various degrees of merit were almost exactly indicative of the degrees of intellectual and moral energy of the nations which originated them...Many of these various styles of architecture were good, considered in relation to the times and races which gave birth to them; but none were absolutely good or perfect, or fitted for the practice of all future time.⁶

Pre-Christian architecture is here assigned a place by Ruskin in the historical record analogous to that given in Christian theology to the twelve Sibyls of antiquity and the Old Testament prophets. While acceptable for their age, their greater significance is in foretelling the coming of the Christian era. Likewise, the architecture of the pre-Christian age should not be viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a promise of what is to follow, namely the Gothic. As Ruskin continues;

The advent of Christianity for the first time rendered possible the full development of the soul of man, and therefore the full development of the arts of man.

⁴ Ibid 4 (41)

⁵ John Batchelor, *John Ruskin No Wealth but Life: A Biography*, (Pimlico, 2001) p103

⁶ Ruskin, 11 (356)

Christianity gave birth to a new architecture, not only immeasurably superior to all that had preceded it, but demonstrably the best architecture that *can* exist; perfect in construction and decoration, and fit for the practice of all time.

This architecture, commonly called “Gothic,” though in conception perfect, like the theory of a Christian character, never reached an actual perfection, having been retarded and corrupted by various adverse influences; but it reached its highest perfection, hitherto manifested, about the close of the thirteenth century, being then indicative of a peculiar energy in the Christian mind of Europe.⁷

Having begun with the broad proposition that it is only through Christianity’s influence on the human soul that the arts can reach their full development, it naturally follows that the production, and appreciation of these arts becomes a statement of man’s heightened moral consciousness. What was it in the Gothic style that made it, for Ruskin, closest in its nature to an expression of the Christian character, and how did he relate this to his own Protestant interpretation of Christianity?

Ruskin gives his answer in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*, “The Nature of Gothic”. As Ruskin writes;

In the 13th and 14th paragraphs of Chapter XXI, of the first volume of this work, it was noticed that the systems of architectural ornament, properly so called, might be divided into three: -1. Servile ornament, in which the execution or power of the inferior workman is entirely subjected to the intellect of the higher; -2. Constitutional ornament, in which the executive inferior power is, to a certain point, emancipated and independent, having a will of its own, yet confessing its inferiority and rendering obedience to higher powers; -and 3. Revolutionary ornament, in which no executive inferiority is admitted at all.⁸

Ruskin claims that the first of the three systems, Servile ornament, was the style of the pre-Christian, pagan, Greek, Ninevite and Egyptian schools. Surely here, however, this style also serves as an expression of one of the principles of the Roman Catholic system that he rejected, namely there was a clear separation to be drawn in the church between the clergy and the laity. In his

⁷ Ibid 11 (356)

⁸ Ibid 10 (188)

pamphlet “Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds” (1851), Ruskin had sought to explain how the word “Church” should be understood. As Michael Wheeler writes, having analysed the use of the term “church” in the New Testament, Ruskin came to

...the important conclusion that “the Church is a body to be taught and fed, not to teach and feed”. Ruskin’s main aim... in *Notes on the Construction of Sheepfolds* is to disabuse those who have come to believe that the Church is the clergy, some of whom should be called ‘priests’. A minister of religion, he argues, is God’s ‘Messenger’, not His ‘Representative’.⁹

This Protestant idea of what the nature of the Church should be, and what the clergy is not, finds its equivalent architectural expression in Ruskin’s fuller description of Gothic architecture given in volume one of *The Stones of Venice*. Thus:

We have with Christianity, recognised the individual value of every soul; and there is no intelligence so feeble but that its single ray may in some sort contribute to the general light. This is the story of Gothic architecture, that every jot and tittle, every point and niche of it, affords room, fuel, and focus for individual fire. But if you cease to acknowledge this, and you refuse to accept the help of the lesser mind, if you require the work to be all executed in a great manner. Your business is to think out all of it nobly, to dictate the expression of it as far as your dictation can assist the less elevated intelligence; then to leave this, aided and taught as far as may be, to its own simple act and effort; and to rejoice in its simplicity if not in its power, and in its vitality if not in its science...we have the medieval system, in which the mind of the inferior workman is recognised, and has full room for action, but is guided and ennobled by the ruling mind. This is the truly Christian and only perfect system.¹⁰

Turning to Ruskin’s third system of architectural ornament, the Revolutionary, this too diverged from his Protestant ideal. Returning to John Ryle’s five distinctive doctrinal marks that defined Evangelical belief, number four was; “the high place which it assigns to the inward work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man. Its theory is that the root and foundation of all vital Christianity in any one, is a work of grace in the heart.”¹¹ However:

⁹ Wheeler p84

¹⁰ Ruskin 9 (291)

In examining the nature of Renaissance, we concluded that its chief element of weakness was that pride of knowledge which not only prevented all rudeness in expression, but gradually quenched all energy which could only be rudely expressed; not only so, but for the motive and matter of the work itself, preferred science to emotion, and experience to perception.¹²

From the Renaissance onwards, therefore, architecture and the other visual arts had offended against the Protestant idea that it was the individual's inner religious feeling, rather than any good works they might have performed, that was central to achieving their personal salvation. If art was to be valued as an expression of the human soul, then what Ruskin termed the "Pride of Science" had, for the past three centuries, produced an architecture that was essentially soulless. As Ruskin put it:

Our leading principles in teaching, and in the patronage which necessarily gives tone to teaching, are that the goodness of work consists primarily in firmness of handling and accuracy of science, that is to say, in hand-work and head-work; whereas heart-work, which is the *one* work we want, is not only independent of both, but often, in degree, inconsistent with either...art is valuable or otherwise, only as it expresses the personality, activity, and living perception of a good and great human soul; that it may express and contain this with little help from execution, and less from science; and that if we have not this, if it show not the vigour, perception, and invention of a mighty human spirit, it is worthless. Worthless, I mean, as *art*; it may be precious in some other way, but, as art, it is nugatory.¹³

Taken as a whole, the three volumes of *The Stones of Venice* switch from generalised statement to particular example. It was in the second and third volumes of *The Stones of Venice* that Ruskin established the general argument for Gothic being the "truly Christian" style of architecture. What was undeniable, however, was that this Gothic architecture had been produced during a period when the whole of Western Europe owed allegiance to the Roman Catholic Church. It is in the first volume that Ruskin addresses, and seeks to circumvent, this problem by claiming for his chosen city of Venice a proto-Protestant past.

¹¹ Landow p245

¹² Ruskin 11 (200)

Ruskin begins this process by giving his own version of Venetian history in his opening chapter, “The Quarry”. It is a history that divides the story of the city into two periods: “the first period, of nine hundred years, presents us with the most interesting spectacle of a people struggling out of anarchy into order and power”.¹⁴ This period of growth, then triumph, is followed by “five hundred years, during which Venice reaped the fruits of her former energies, consumed them, - and expired.”¹⁵ Ruskin provides a broad political analysis of this history, whereby the strong Republic that marked Venetian growth, gives way to an oligarchy that oversees her decline. The fortunes of the city are directly linked to changes in the favoured style of architecture, as the Gothic gives way to the Renaissance. This, in turn, is connected to the changing religious outlook of its inhabitants.

Ruskin addresses directly the question of Papal power in Venice, referring to “the magnificent and successful struggle which she maintained against the temporal authority of the Church of Rome.”¹⁶ However it is in his account of the individual religious spirit of its inhabitants that Ruskin builds his case that, in her period of greatness, Venice had been a de-facto Protestant state. He informs his reader that:

The evidence which I shall be able to deduce from the arts of Venice will be both frequent and irrefragable, that the decline of her political prosperity was exactly coincident with that of domestic and individual religion.

I say domestic and individual; for -and this is the second point which I wish the reader to keep in mind- the most curious phenomenon in all Venetian history is the vitality of religion in private life and its deadness in public policy.¹⁷

With the words “domestic and individual religion”, Ruskin directly relates his conception of Venetian religious values, during its greatest age, with his own Protestant values. It is the constant

¹³ Ibid 11 (201)

¹⁴ Ibid 9 (19)

¹⁵ Ibid 9 (19)

¹⁶ Ibid 9 (27)

¹⁷ Ibid 9 (23)

individual scrutiny that defines Christian belief, and this is not reliant on either clerical hierarchies or religious ceremony. This is a theme Ruskin emphasises throughout this chapter, thus:

The habit of assigning to religion a direct influence over all *his own* actions, and all the affairs of *his own* daily life, is remarkable in every great Venetian during the times of the prosperity; nor are instances wanting in which the private feeling of the citizens reaches the sphere of their policy, and even becomes the guide of its course where the scales of expediency are doubtfully balanced.¹⁸

And again:

There are, therefore, two strange and solemn lights in which we have to regard almost every scene in the fitful history of the Rivo Alto. We find, on the one hand, a deep and constant tone of individual religion characterising the lives of the citizens of Venice in her greatness; we find this influencing them in all the familiar and immediate concerns of life... And we find as the natural consequence of all this, a healthy serenity of mind and energy of will expressed in all their actions... With the fullness of this spirit the prosperity of the state is exactly correspondent, and with its failure her decline”.¹⁹

Ruskin therefore related both the general Gothic style and his favoured period of Venetian history to Protestantism. This generalised interpretation was harder to justify when it came to the description of particular buildings where overtly Catholic imagery was evident and this most obviously so when it came to the description of Catholic churches, such as that of St Mark's given in the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*. As Michael Wheeler has noted, Ruskin was at this time concerned with theological arguments within Anglicanism as to the role and efficacy of Baptism. He gives a reading of the interior of the church that addresses these concerns.²⁰

As Wheeler says in an earlier description of the church of Torcello, Ruskin had referred to “the Protestant beholder”²¹ and it is towards this figure that he addresses his guide to St Mark's. He begins by taking the reader into the church via the Baptistery, rather than the more commonly used north porch. While Ruskin explains that this is to avoid entering from the contemporary squalor of

¹⁸ Ibid 9 (25)

¹⁹ Ibid 9 (26)

St Mark's Square, he has already begun his distinctly Protestant reading of the church interior. The north porch was the entrance used by contemporary Venetians wishing to worship in their favourite side chapel dedicated to the Virgin. In entering via the Baptistery Ruskin "softens the impact of the extraordinary interior of St Mark's upon the untrained English Protestant eye by repeating the familiar route taken by a visitor to a church at home - through the door, past the font, and into the main body of the building."²² Once inside the Baptistery Ruskin notices "a single ray of light that glances across the narrow room, dying as it falls from a window high in the wall, and the first thing that it strikes, and the only thing that it strikes brightly, is a tomb."²³ The visitor is thus guided towards the tomb of Doge Andrea Dandolo, a figure from what was, according to Ruskin, the great "Protestant" age of Venetian history.

In contrast to the illuminated tomb Ruskin notes that "The light fades away into the recess of the chamber towards the altar, and the eye can hardly trace the lines of the bas-relief behind it of the baptism of Christ."²⁴ Just as the "Protestant beholder" is invited to contemplate the tomb of a man for whom religion was a matter of individual scrutiny and choice, so he is directed away from the architectural centrepiece of Catholic ritual and its role in entering the church of Christ. In contrast however: "on the vaulting of the roof the figures are distinct".²⁵ On the surrounding walls the imagery:

...is legitimated through reference to England's greatest Puritan writer (Milton) ... Ruskin chooses to spell out to an endangered England the "warning" which a now ruined Venice embodies here in the Baptistery, where, in contradistinction to catholic doctrine, his Protestant interpretation of its iconography emphasizes choice, and the convert's Baptism by fire, in a passage crammed with favourite Evangelical types of baptism and appropriate

²⁰ Wheeler p74 - 75

²¹ Ruskin 10 (26 - 7)

²² Wheeler p91

²³ Ruskin 10 (85)

²⁴ Ibid 10 (86)

²⁵ Ibid 10 (86)

biblical texts.²⁶

From the Baptistery, Ruskin moves into the main body of the church. Here again he gives a reading of the interior that accords with the beliefs of the “Protestant Beholder”. He describes the decoration thus:

Under foot and over head, a continual succession of crowded imagery, one picture passing another, as in a dream; forms beautiful and terrible mixed together...the passions and pleasures of human life symbolised together; and the mystery of its redemption; for the mazes of interwoven lines and changeful pictures lead always at last to the Cross, lifted and carved in every place and upon every stone.²⁷

Ruskin’s Evangelical readership would have understood the significance of this passage. In response to the Papal Aggression the Evangelical Alliance had, in 1851, held a gathering with the purpose of listing “those doctrines of our common Protestantism” that faced subversion from Rome.²⁸ Amongst the five listed the second was the declaration of “the perfect Atonement made for sin by the once offered sacrifice of the cross, and the sole mediation and intercession, founded up it, of the glorified Son of God”.²⁹

Ruskin is therefore inviting his readers to discount imagery that they may find distasteful or be uncomfortable as they make their way through the church. What matters is that these images lead to the redeeming message of the Cross. This is a message Ruskin emphasises again in the same paragraph, where the image of the Cross is:

conspicuous most of all on the great rood that crosses the church before the altar, raised in bright blazonry against the shadow of the apse. And although in the recesses of the aisles and chapels, when the mist of incense hangs heavily, we may see continually a figure traced in faint lines upon the marble, a woman standing with her eyes raised to heaven, and the

²⁶ Wheeler p92

²⁷ Ruskin 10 (88)

²⁸ Wheeler p81

²⁹ Ibid p81

inscription above her, “Mother of God,” she is not here the presiding deity. It is the Cross that is first seen, and always burning in the centre of the temple; and every dome and hollow of its roof has the figure of Christ in the utmost height of it, raised in power, or returning in judgment.³⁰

In the third of his “doctrines of our common Protestantism” the Revd Dr Steane had affirmed “justification by faith only, through the blood and righteousness of Christ.”³¹ In his description Ruskin reiterates this emphasis on individual faith rather than church ritual. Contained within Ruskin’s visual description of the interior of St Mark’s is a denigration of Catholic doctrine and a reaffirmation of the Protestant one. The Protestant faith in the meaning of the Cross is “raised in bright blazonry”; the Catholic altar stands in “the shadow”. Similarly in the aisles and chapels the figure of The Virgin is shrouded in the mist of Catholic ritual. Ruskin reassures his readers that here she is “not the presiding deity” and that therefore her traditional Catholic role as intercessor is negated by “the figure of Christ in the utmost height”.

Ruskin now develops the idea of how the interior of St. Mark’s, and by implication religious art of other kinds, should be read. He accepts that in all religions some are drawn to “the stage properties of superstition...employed by all nations, whether openly savage or nominally civilized, to produce a false awe in minds incapable of apprehending the true nature of the Deity.”³² These references again express Ruskin’s deep anxiety about the use made of the visual image. Indeed he comments that “I have never known a man who seemed altogether right and calm in faith, who seriously cared about art”.³³ From here he again directly addresses the problems faced by the discerning art critic who is also a devout Protestant. He acknowledges that “all truly great religious painters have been hearty Romanists, there are none of their works which do not embody, in some

³⁰ Ruskin 10 (89)

³¹ Ibid 10 (125)

³² Ibid 10 (90)

portions of them, definitely Romanist doctrines”, but he asks the viewer to look beyond the immediate offence this might cause and to see instead in the artist’s work, “those deeper characters of it, which are not Romanist, but Christian, in the everlasting sense and power of Christianity.”³⁴

What are these deeper, characteristics that, for Ruskin, define a truly Christian art? He seems to suggest that for both the artist and the viewer it is the sincerity of religious feeling that is of crucial concern. This sincerity is associated by Ruskin with “a childish trust that the picture does indeed represent a fact! It matters little whether the fact be well or ill told: the moment we believe the picture to be true, we complain little of it being ill-painted”.³⁵ This simple acceptance that an artist was depicting “an accredited truth” was lost with the Renaissance, when the artist was “no longer regarded as the narrator of a fact, but as the inventor of an idea”.³⁶ As Ruskin explains, this was not so much a shift in the sincerity of religious belief, but in the possibility of art to convey an unmediated and sincere expression of that belief:

I do not mean that modern Christians believe less in the *facts* than ancient Christians, but they do not believe in the representation of the facts as true. We look upon the picture as this or that painter’s conception; the elder Christians looked upon it as this or that painter’s description of what had actually taken place.³⁷

It can be argued that here Ruskin conflates the skill and invention by which the Renaissance artist presents his subject to the public with the ritual by which Catholicism presents Christianity to its adherents. Both act as a barrier to the individual scrutiny of Biblical truth that defines Protestantism. From here it is a short step for Ruskin to give his own Protestant interpretation of the Mosaics of St. Mark’s. While they may be unsophisticated as works of art,

³³ Ibid 10 (125)

³⁴ Ibid 10 (125)

³⁵ Ibid 10 (127)

³⁶ Ibid 10 (127)

³⁷ Ibid 10 (127)

...we are not for that reason to suppose that they were ineffective in religious teaching. I have spoken of the whole church as a great Book of Common Prayer; the mosaics were taught its illuminations, and the common people of the time were taught their Scripture history by means of them, more impressively perhaps, though far less fully, than ours are now by Scripture reading.³⁸

Having made this comparison, Ruskin proceeds to give an interpretation of the meaning of the mosaics that accord with aspects of his own Protestant theology. What is significant, however, is the process by which he has turned the visual into the literary. While they may be visually impressive, the mosaics of St. Mark's should be regarded by the spectator as another, if intellectually less rigorous, method of imparting the same knowledge that Protestants now learnt through Scripturally based teaching.

It can be seen therefore that in *The Stones of Venice* Ruskin presented a particular interpretation of Venetian art and history that sought to separate from both the direct and explicit connection with Catholicism that he found so problematic. His writings provided an argument whereby historical periods, artistic styles, and even the decoration of individual buildings could be placed within a Protestant narrative. Schools of art that had previously been dismissed by art historians, such as Memes and Cunningham, or feared by those such as the Revd. Seymour, could now be reassessed. Ruskin broke from this crude parochialism and developed an appreciation of pre-Renaissance art that had begun to find an expression in the writings of Lord Lyndsay and Mrs Jameson. A Protestant audience was assured that enjoyment of such works did not necessarily place the viewer in the same company as proponents of political Catholicism, such as Rio and de Montalembert.

³⁸ Ibid 10 (129)

Chapter 4

Roger Fry's Cultural Background

Roger Fry's Cambridge education has been widely credited with having been the decisive influence in shaping his later writings on art. It was here that he developed what Christopher Green has described as his "compelling faith in reason and the idea of civilization".¹ His choice of degree subject, "Natural Sciences", confirms his reputation as someone preferring to deal with observable phenomena rather than engage in metaphysical speculation. Clearly, both intellectually, and socially, Cambridge was to have a lifelong importance for Fry; however, this abiding influence is a subject that has been extensively examined before. Perhaps due to his rejection of overt religious belief, less consideration has been paid to his Quaker upbringing. It is true that his biographer, Francis Spalding, has credited this background with helping to shape his personal character, giving him "a disregard for establishment, a willingness to stand apart from mass opinion and trust the evidence of one's own experience".² However, I believe that more attention should be given to how far the social and theological particularities of nineteenth-century English Quakerism may themselves have left a lasting psychological and intellectual influence that helped shape his writings on art.

I would like first to examine how far Fry's interpretation of art history was both English, and Protestant, echoing in many ways the earlier writings of John Ruskin. Here three works, by Fry, are of particular interest; his 1899 monograph *Giovanni Bellini*, his 1901 essay on "Giotto", and his 1917 lecture "Art and Life". These works, coming as they do at different stages of his career, provide examples of Fry's developing interpretation of the relationship between art and the society that produced it. How far these ideas of historical relation influenced his developing aesthetic ideas,

¹ Christopher Green, *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry's Version of Art* (ed.) Christopher Green (Merrell Holberton 1999).

² Francis Spalding, *Roger Fry Art and Life* (Granada Publishing, 1980).

as he moved towards his later formalist theory, can then be discussed.

It would be useful in discussing Fry's attitude towards art, religion and history to begin with a brief synopsis of his own early religious and cultural influences. Fry's awareness of art as a child was certainly more limited than Ruskin's had been. He was however given lessons in how to draw and also encouraged in his early interest in watercolour. The widespread effect of Ruskin's writings on subsequent generations was felt in the Fry household. Roger Fry had himself begun to read Ruskin at the age of sixteen and was to remain outwardly enthused by him, at least until he visited Italy in 1891. Through his aunt he was related to one of the leading Gothic revival architects of his day, Alfred Waterhouse.

At Cambridge this connection with the ideas of Ruskin was deepened by Fry's friendship with Charles Robert Ashbee. Ashbee's parents had played a prominent part in the early Arts and Crafts Movement. In 1888, Charles was to found the Guild of Handicraft, training a group of craftsmen to produce artefacts in accordance with the aims of Ruskin and William Morris. It was through Ashbee that Fry was elected to the Cambridge Fine Arts Society in 1886. Both students frequently spent time sketching together, where Fry's affinity with Ruskin was further evidenced by the fine draughtsmanship he developed in the detailed drawings he made of Gothic carvings, elaborate facades and ancient buildings.

As with Ruskin, Roger Fry was raised in a household that had an interest in both scientific development and the arts. In choosing to read natural sciences at Cambridge, Roger Fry was following his father's own interest in botany and entomology. Edward Fry had only been prevented from pursuing a scientific career at either Oxford or Cambridge by the religious tests then enforced on all entrants. This shared interest in science is testament to the importance of Edward Fry in shaping his son's interests. It prompts the question as to the nature of Edward's religious beliefs and whether these were to leave an abiding influence on Roger Fry. I would argue that while the Fry

household did not display the overt and narrow sectarian bias, against the Catholic church, that was such a prominent feature of the Ruskin household, from Edward Fry's personal conception of Christianity a strong antipathy does emerge towards traits commonly regarded as prominent within the practice and celebration of Roman Catholicism.

In 1897 Edward Fry was to explain the development of his religious opinions, in notes later included in a memoir compiled by his daughter Agnes in 1921.³ Here he makes clear that, although raised within the Quaker tradition, his own faith was somewhat idiosyncratic. Disputes within the Quaker church had left a lasting impression him. As he was to state "the miserable questions about dress and address, and the disputes about orthodoxy which I remember when young, produced a chasm in my feelings between myself and systematic Quakerism which I have never got over."⁴

Edward was to define his own faith as:

...a thing of the heart and soul of the individual man, apart alike from art and from politics...It has always appeared to me an essentially moral thing - a thing relating not to our physical or even our intellectual nature, but to us as moral beings.⁵

He stated of his beliefs:

This conception of religion has had many consequences in my mind, and perhaps in my life. It has made the notion of the sacraments as things essential entirely impossible. How can water applied outside, or bread and wine taken into the body, touch the moral nature of man? By miraculous or superhuman agency, it may be replied; but such an agency is not moral. It has made me willing to concur in various forms of worship, and to regard differences of form as unimportant. At the same time it has made insistence on form especially repulsive to me.⁶

As he recognised himself, "Holding the views which I do...it is no wonder that my religious life has

³ Agnes Fry, *A Memoir of Sir Edward Fry* (Oxford University Press, 1921).

⁴ Ibid p168

⁵ Ibid p169

⁶ Ibid pp169-70

been a solitary one: that I have felt that no one quite understood my position or my thoughts”.⁷

Edward Fry therefore does seem to exhibit traits that would later present themselves in the writings of his son Roger, including a willing sense of intellectual isolation.

For Edward Fry, as with John Ruskin, personal faith helped define public pronouncement and political allegiance. Edward Fry, indeed the wider Fry family, was actively involved in the politics of their day. In this regard it is pertinent to note the changing political allegiances of Edward Fry. As his daughter Agnes stated, Edward had been in his earlier life “strongly Liberal”.⁸ However his opposition to Gladstone’s policy of Irish Home Rule led him to join the Liberal Unionists, a group that split away from the main party in 1886. As previously stated, the first volume of *The Stones of Venice* had contained a passage warning of the dangers posed to Britain, and its constitution, by Catholic Emancipation, contrasting “Roman Catholic ignorance in the people, Protestant toleration in the Government.”⁹

Home Rule was, likewise, an issue in which political and constitutional issues were intimately entangled with questions of national and religious identity. Any parliament sitting in Ireland was bound to be dominated by Roman Catholics. Therefore while intellectually opposition to Home Rule did not, in itself, equate with anti-Catholicism, such sentiment was however particularly widespread amongst many who opposed the passing of this act. Many Quakers, fearing for the fate of their co-religionists in a Catholic dominated parliament were amongst those who opposed Irish Home Rule. Roger Fry was himself to agree, while at Oxford, with his father’s views on the subject.

For Fry, from an early age, art was a subject that combined high moral purpose with

⁷ Ibid p167

⁸ Ibid p237

⁹ Ibid 9 p423

constant technical enquiry, as it had been for Ruskin. In a letter to Ashbee, dated October 1886, he wrote:

There is a standard of beauty somewhere, and if there is not, the sooner we chuck the whole business the better. Just as to a morally-minded person it is inconceivable that there is not a right and wrong absolutely, to which we constantly approximate, so to the artistically-minded man it is inconceivable that we have not got something at which we constantly aim.¹⁰

Later that month, in another letter to Ashbee, Fry was to more explicitly link the appreciation of art with his own personal form of metaphysical belief. He was also to hint at his later view that art was an expression of fundamental truths, and that these were to be found in its formal values, rather than in its use as a conveyor of overt propaganda. He was to write:

I do not think we have been wont to lay enough stress on the value (as a means, no doubt, but a very important one) of pure aesthetics as apart from the emotional end...art should be moral but should regard morality from the point of view of its intrinsic beauty and not its goodness. But I am fully persuaded that the aim of all art and all life is ultimately the worship of God in its broadest sense.¹¹

It was in 1891 that Fry took his first trip to Italy, at a time when his taste was still relatively unformed. That Fry could be decided in his hostility to a specifically Catholic art is indicated in a number of letters to his friends. Writing of St. Peter's, he echoed Ruskin's opinion that the style of the High Renaissance was less suited to the expression of a sincere Christian faith than the more familiar Gothic:

Of course it doesn't impress one like a great Christian Cathedral, but it is the most perfect expression of the Christianity of the Borgias and della Roveres that one could conceive. It is splendidly mundane - untinged by any religious or altruistic emotion - all based on power and wealth and the intellect that could scramble beat for them.¹²

¹⁰ Denys Sutton, ed., *Letters of Roger Fry* (Chatto & Windus), Volume 1 p109

¹¹ *Ibid* p110

¹² *Ibid* p125

Here the opinions of the young Roger Fry compares closely with a young Ruskin and his assessment of the same Cathedral, given during his first visit to Rome in 1840. Of St Peter's, Ruskin wrote:

The style of the Italian churches in general...and of this in particular, is *not* adapted for sacred architecture. One interior like that of Chartres...would be worth all the churches of Italy put together.¹³

On his first visit to Italy, and sustained exposure to a Catholic culture, Fry could display the reaction of a man made uncomfortable by the visual expressions of an alien faith. Thus while visiting Florence, again during the 1891 trip, he was to write "I get rather sick of these attitudinising saints with their heads cut open or their entrails coming out."¹⁴

¹³ Batchelor p45

¹⁴ Sutton p141

Chapter 5

Roger Fry and Bellini

It was during his second visit to Italy, in 1894, that Fry was to undertake a serious study of Italian Renaissance art in preparation for a series of lectures for the Cambridge Extension Movement. It was from one of these courses, on the early Venetian painters, that his first book emerged: a monograph on Giovanni Bellini. It was this work that was to establish Fry as an authority on Italian Renaissance art. How far did this early work place Fry, like Ruskin, within the tradition of an English, Protestant, interpretation of art history?

At this stage in his development as an art historian, Fry draws clear links between the artist, his work and the wider society within which he lived. Bellini is placed within the context of the wider Venetian society that produced him. As Fry says of Bellini:

What counts as much as anything in the formation and well- balanced temperament which his pictures reveal, was the more general circumstances of his Venetian birth... It is necessary, therefore to summarise briefly the conditions of Venetian life in the fifteenth century.¹

Fry is therefore free to begin his work by constructing his own interpretation of Venetian history, and the life of the Venetian State. As Ruskin had done in the first volume of *The Stones of Venice*, Fry draws parallels between the Venice of the past and contemporary Britain. He emphasises Venetian isolation from the other States of Italy:

In political constitution, in religious ordinance, in dress, in customs and manners, in the greatest affairs as well as in the minutiae of daily life, the Venetians were unique and peculiar... His consciousness of this isolation was only equalled by his pride in it; he was always Venetian before he was Italian. To us who enjoy a somewhat similar isolation, and are not displeased at arousing a similar envy abroad, the Venetian is likely enough to appear

¹ Roger Fry, *Giovanni Bellini* (At The Sign Of The Unicorn, 1899) p1

justified.²

Fry also follows Ruskin's path in seeking to separate the Venetian state from its Catholic heritage. Fry attempts a similar manoeuvre when interpreting the religious faith of the Venetian people during the time of Giovanni Bellini. Having noted how Venice lacked the enthusiasm of Florence for the new Classical culture promoted by men such as Alberti and Malatesta, Fry argues that the Venetians were:

...in a sense too genuinely pagan to care about the echo of a paganism of the remote past...in the attitude of her governors to religion she seemed a survival into modern times of a Greek city-state. S. Mark, indeed, was as much the deity of Venice as Diana was of Ephesus; and on the strength of his divine tutelage the Doge lost no opportunity of declaring the independence of Venice from Papal jurisdiction.³

Ruskin had given an interpretation of the Catholicism practiced by the people of Venice, during the Gothic period, that seemed to correspond closely to his own Evangelical Protestantism. Fry credits the Venetians with holding a view of religion that is in accord with his own sense of rationality, and perhaps social convention. Thus while religious belief in Venice was:

...pre-eminently orthodox...religion was cultivated for its immediately beneficial effects, for the orderliness and respectability which the regular habits of religious observance were found to engender, as well as for the opportunities which it provided for symbolising the idea of the State, rather than for any metaphysical realities underlying it.⁴

For Fry then the Venetian temperament was not propitious towards religious extremism:

Her citizens were never tempted by their religion into the extravagances of saintliness. Neither a S. Bernardino nor a Savonarola could have arisen near the Rialto...The attitude of Venice to Christianity was determined ...by the peculiarly positive temperament of her citizens, by their efficient common sense, their aversion to all that was strained or excessive.⁵

² Ibid p2

³ Ibid p4

⁴ Ibid pp4-5

⁵ Ibid p5

This description of Venice, as a pragmatic, almost proto-Protestant Republic is however challenged by his own analysis of the works of Giovanni Bellini. Fry claims a particular religious fervour can be found in the earlier works of the artist. Drawing a clear link between the religious feeling expressed in these paintings and the temperament of the artist, Fry argues that:

Now these subjects are treated by Bellini with an insight of sympathy so intense as to make one suppose him to have chosen them deliberately as an expression of feelings prevalent with him at this period of his life...in the case of Bellini's early works the feelings of pity and love are expressed with such frequency and such intimate intensity, as to make any other construction of his character impossible.⁶

He is therefore driven to explain how such religious feeling could have arisen in the Venetian state already described. He does so, in part at least, by attributing it to outside influences. "The reaction of Giovanni's generation...was a reaction of feeling...a revulsion from the premature paganism which had sprung up in the courts of Rimini and Ferrara."⁷ This reaction was exacerbated by "the revivalist propaganda of S. Bernardino". As he explains, "This visit of the great saint to Venetia, with the contagious fervour for Christian ideals which it provoked, may well have been a contributory cause of the more religious attitude to life expressed by Giovanni's generation...to which his early works give such intense expression."⁸

Having established the social background against which Bellini's paintings appeared, Fry turns to the works themselves. He divides the works into two periods. For Fry the early works express a religious passion that the latter works gradually lose. As he explains regarding those early works: "The mere titles of the pictures are instructive; the *Crucifixion*, the *Transfiguration*, the *Pieta*, the *Agony in the Garden*, all are religious subjects; but more than that, subjects which involve

⁶ Ibid p22

⁷ Ibid p22

⁸ Ibid p23

the profoundest sentiments of Christianity.”⁹ How does Fry approach these early works? As he writes it is the “technical problems” that the paintings present that most occupy his attention.¹⁰ Here the early influence of both Giovanni Morelli and Bernard Berenson become apparent.

Giovanni Morelli was an Italian protestant, of French Huguenot descent. He had trained as a doctor and comparative anatomist. Fry had studied his work intensively, during his trip to Italy, in 1894. Morelli’s claim to have developed a scientific method for studying an artist’s work, one that relied on detailed morphological comparisons, appealed to Fry, the Natural Scientist. It was an approach to art history that concentrated on the empirical evidence presented by the art objects themselves, as a means to determining authorship of a given painting, rather than extraneous documentary evidence. Bernard Berenson was the leading exponent of the Morelli method. He had devoted himself to the correct attribution and cataloguing of Italian Renaissance painting. Fry would have become familiar with Berenson’s first three essays on Italian regional schools of Renaissance art: “The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance”, (1894), “The Florentine Painters of the Renaissance” (1895) and “The Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance”(1897). Fry was to acknowledge the debt he owed to Berenson in the introduction to his monograph on Bellini. As previously referenced, by Francis Haskell, those works of religious art most easily assimilated into the culture of Protestant England were those deemed to be “High Art”. The connoisseur could value such works for their aesthetic value alone, in a way that denuded them of their original religious significance.

Fry arranges the works of Bellini, as far as he is able, in chronological order. He begins with a description of the **Crucifixion** (Correr Museum, Venice) (see Plate 1) and here the influence of Morelli is clear. Discussing differing opinions as to the correct attribution of the work, Fry writes:

⁹ Ibid p22

¹⁰ Ibid p22

This picture, although not universally accepted, has the following characteristics of his early work: the disproportionate length and straightness of the forearm, the obtuse insertion of the thumb which gives to the large metacarpus a regular pentagonal form. The face...is characteristic in the drawing of the eyes, the well marked sockets and the rounded angles of the mouth¹¹

This anatomical dissection of the figure of Christ by Fry is complimented with a brief discussion of Giovanni Bellini's development as an artist, and how this painting shows him moving away from the style of his father, Jacopo, and "towards a more rigorous definition of form" that was favoured by the Paduan school.¹² Thus he mentions "the motive of the skull-like rock, jointed with unnatural regularity, the soldiers with their long thin legs and high shoulders, the landscape with its forms defined by innumerable nearly parallel contours".¹³

¹¹ Ibid p14

¹² Ibid p15

¹³ Ibid p15

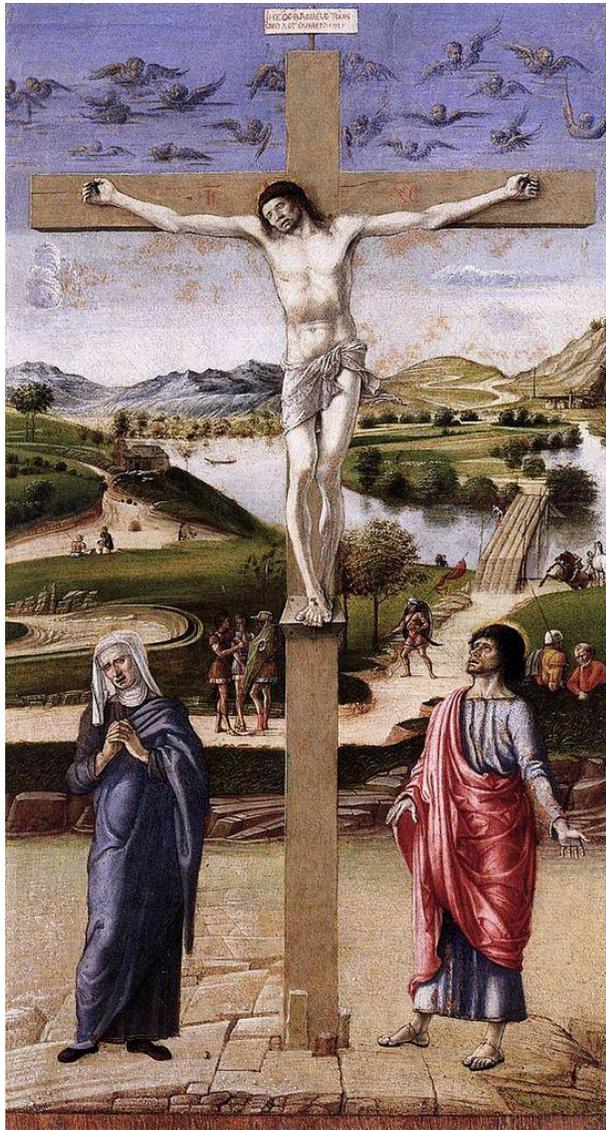


Plate 1: Giovanni Bellini *Crucifixion* (Correr Museum, Venice)

What is striking about Fry's analysis is the author's lack of engagement with the work as a religious object. As Oskar Batschmann and Rona Goffen have suggested, the background of the painting, a populated landscape showing meadows, cliffs and a meandering river, presents a narrative that places the events of the crucifixion within a defined historical and physical setting.¹⁴ Those background figures depicted, however, remain psychologically distant from the central scene of

¹⁴ See Oscar Balschmann, *Giovanni Bellini* (Reaktion Books Ltd. 2008), pp41-42 and Rona Goffan *Giovanni Bellini* (Yale University Press, 1989) p12

execution and mourning that is the subject of the painting. In the foreground, on a flat background, the figures, of Mary, Christ and St. John are depicted in a historical manner. They form a separate, large scale group, within their own pictorial space. It is the emotional reaction of the Virgin, and of St. John in particular, that gives the work its emotional power. It is through them that the viewer approaches the central iconic image of the Christian church, that of the crucified Christ. Fry presents this object of religious devotion to his readers through the prism of a discussion that focuses on style and technique in a manner that dilutes its Catholic context.

This pattern is again evident in Fry's discussion of two more of Bellini's early works; the **Transfiguration** (Correr), (see plate 2) and **The Blood of the Redeemer** (National Gallery), (see plate 3). Bellini's *Transfiguration* depicts that moment when Christ manifests his divine nature to his disciples, Peter, James and John. Having led the disciples up Mt Tabor:

He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him... a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. (Matt. 17: 1-3)¹⁵

Fry begins with a description of Bellini's *Transfiguration* that again emphasises style over content.

He notes that the painting is one in which:

Paduan characteristics are intensified... grace is sacrificed entirely in the research for perfectly defined form: it is the work of a student pushing a new theory of design to its furthest limits... The position of every line is here arrived at more by thought than by vision. The a priori method of design could scarcely go further.¹⁶

¹⁵ The Bible, Authorised King James Version

¹⁶ Fry, *Giovanni Bellini*, p15



Plate 2: Giovanni Bellini *Transfiguration* (Correr Museum, Venice)

When Fry does respond to the subject of the painting, he does so in a manner that seems to downplay the metaphysical nature of the event in favour of one that seeks to reduce it to a more mundane, human, level. As stated, it is at the transfiguration that Christ manifests his divine nature. Bellini emphasises this point through the separation of the celestial figures of Christ and the prophets from the earthly figures of the three disciples. Moses, Christ and Elijah stand upright on a

raised outcrop, aware only of each other and of the voice of God. Below them, the three disciples are shown clinging to the ground, adopting various poses suggesting fear and submission. St. Peter sits awkwardly, shielding with one hand his eyes from the light. St. James lies lengthways, facing away from the three figures placed above him, and like St. Peter he shields his head with one of his hands. It is however the figure of St. John that Fry comments on. Here he uses a physical description to speculate as to the feeling of the disciple. Thus, “The movements of the figures are harsh and tense; the St. John bends his foot and cramps his toes with a muscular effort, suggestive of uneasiness and distress which more or less pervade the whole picture. The mood is one of strained anxiety and terrible pathos.”¹⁷

It is what Fry leaves out of his description of St. John that is as revealing as what he includes. As he turns away from the figure of Christ and the two Prophets, St. John gazes upon a leafy tree sapling that grows out of the rocky ground. Beside it is shown the cut stump of a large tree. It is the symbolism of this motif that gives meaning to the theme of the painting. It acts as a prefiguration of Christ’s death and resurrection and so of the New Covenant replacing the Old. Bellini is therefore presenting an image that represents much more than simply the emotions of “anxiety and pathos”. Instead it is one that expresses the message of hope that is at the heart of Christian belief; that salvation has become possible through the redemptive sacrifice and subsequent resurrection of Christ.

Why then does Fry downplay the clear theological message that the painting contains? One answer is his reluctance to engage with a clear presentation of Catholic dogma. Here there is also, however, a typically Protestant favouring of the literary over the visual as the best means of conveying a religious message. Fry refers to “an intimate tenderness in the expression of Christ’s

¹⁷ Ibid pp15-16

pathetic appeal (reinforced by the quotation from Job on the cartellino)".¹⁸ Bellini has not however given Christ the passive role in the drama that this description suggests. He is the dominant figure both pictorially and emotionally, the recipient of awe from the disciples and deference from the Prophets. This visual impression seems to be negated in favour of the quotation on the cartellino: "Miseremini Mei, Saltem Vos Amici Mei,"; "Have pity on me, O you my friends (for the hand of God has touched me) (Job: 19:21)."¹⁹ Fry's use of this quote to define Bellini's depiction of Christ is to, mistakenly, view the Transfiguration as an isolated image. This is demonstrably an error as it was originally part of an altarpiece containing two flanking panels. It is possible that one of these panels would have contained an image of Job, venerated as a saint in Venice. Despite his suffering Job maintained faith in his Redeemer. Taken as a whole, therefore, Bellini's altarpiece represents an expression of Hope rather than Pity.

Fry's reluctance to engage with the theological significance of Bellini's work becomes more apparent in his approach to *The Blood of the Redeemer*. Having noted that "The subject of this picture is a rare one in Italian art",²⁰ he offers the reader little guidance as to the significance of the imagery depicted. Instead he again moves on to a discussion of style, this time noting the artist's "feeling for atmospheric tonality...the treatment as regards tone relations is such as the linear perspective would lead us to expect...This picture also marks a change to a thinner and more liquid impasto than had originally obtained hitherto."²¹ There is a good reason why Fry should here concentrate on questions of style and technique over those of content. This painting, in particular, can be read as a direct comment on the centrality, and meaning, of the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic Church.

¹⁸ Ibid p16

¹⁹ The Bible, authorised King James Version

²⁰ Fry, *Giovanni Bellini*, p18

²¹ Ibid pp18-19



Plate 3: Giovanni Bellini *The Blood of the Redeemer* (The National Gallery, London)

Bellini's image depicts a post-Crucified Christ holding the Cross in the bend of his left arm, in a manner more usually associated with the banner of his Resurrection. With his left hand he presses blood from the open wound in his side, which falls into a chalice, held by an angel kneeling at his side. Christ's right arm is extended above the angel, opening his hand to reveal a further mark of the Crucifixion, but also to make a gesture of approbation and cooperation. Rona Goffen argues that this image seems to have a utilitarian function, serving as the door of a tabernacle: "The Eucharistic Christ of the door would thus provide access to the sanctified Host within the shrine..." With this image, "Christ offers himself again; he actively participates in renewing his sacrificial

offering for our salvation, filling the chalice of the Mass with his blood.”²²

As I have argued, Fry had described earlier works by Bellini - the *Crucifixion*, the *Transfiguration* and the *Blood of the Redeemer* - in a manner that emphasised the technical and stylistic qualities over that of narrative. If, as he argues, Bellini was experiencing an intensity in his own religious feelings at this time, then Fry seems to negate the metaphysical and theological expression, of this faith, in the paintings. Fry divides Bellini’s career into two phases, centred around the 1460s, arguing that:

This decade marks a climax in Bellini’s life. At last truly himself, free from all outside influences, he expresses with an intensity which never infringes on the claims of pure beauty, the profoundest sentiments of Christianity, pity and love. The intensity of feeling gradually declines from this time onward.²³

Can this division in Bellini’s career be seen as evidence of Fry’s “Protestant” interpretation?

Having made the 1460s the period when feeling and technique are most allied to effect, in Bellini’s art, Fry notes that “at this period Bellini’s works are confined to two subjects - the Virgin and Child and the Pieta.”²⁴ Two things can be noted about these subjects. The first is that they are subjects that most clearly express those “profoundest sentiments of pity and love” in a manner that most emphasises the human, as opposed to the divine, nature of Christ. As such they are images that have a universal appeal, separate from the ceremonial or theological weight other images might carry. Secondly it should be noted that images of the Madonna and Child were primarily images of private devotion, set up on an interior wall or on a house façade. This Marian imagery was an attempt to secure a personal connection to the Virgin and to commend the household to her protective intercession. This was still Catholic imagery and belief, but used in a manner that made the home and individual action, rather than the church and collective ceremony, the place and

²² Goffe, p82

²³ Fry, *Giovanni Bellini*, p25

manner of ritual. As such it could be regarded as a precursor to later Protestant ideas of worship.

This helps explain why Fry claimed Bellini's later works exhibited a decline in the artist's own religious feeling. As well as their style and content, the critic was reacting to the context in which this works were intended to be displayed. Here I will look at Bellini's **The Coronation of the Virgin**, (S. Domenico, Pesaro) (see plate 4). Fry begins his description of *The Coronation of the Virgin* by noting that it "is the first of those large altarpieces on which, more than anything else, Bellini's contemporary fame rested".²⁵ Having established the importance of the work, what is noteworthy is how far he evades engaging with what the central motif of the altarpiece represents in Catholic iconography.

Fry begins his description by giving priority to the backdrop against which the characters in the painting appear;

The arrangement here is unique and singularly fitted to bring out to the full Giovanni's powers as a landscape painter. For here the landscape (with its towers lit by the rays of the setting sun relieved against a sky of gold barred with purple clouds) has, by virtue of the carved marble frame which encloses it, something of the unfamiliarity and impressiveness of a landscape seen unexpectedly in a mirror. It is natural to speak first of the landscape, because at first sight the coronation and the attendant saints seem almost accessory to it.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid p25

²⁵ Ibid p29

²⁶ Ibid p29



Plate 4: Giovanni Bellini *The Coronation of the Virgin* (S. Domenico, Pesaro)

Turning to the subject of the painting Fry writes that:

Though the feeling is still distinctly religious, it is more distant, more aloof and impersonal, than heretofore. And with that aloofness on the artist's part from any one emotional *partis pris*, there comes a wider range of sympathetic observation and the power of conceiving a number of distinct types with varying ranges of emotions.²⁷

From this statement it seems Fry is rejecting the idea of the altarpiece as a unitary pictorial object that is an expression of doctrinal faith, and, instead, dismantling it into a number of individual parts. His emotional response to the painting comes in the form of inferring the moral character of the four Saints, who are viewed as distinct, “perfectly realised and concrete types”.²⁸ Thus:

²⁷ Ibid p29

The S. Francis is the least aetherealised, the most human conception of the man in Venetian art, and the most convincing in its rendering of spiritual passion. The S. Jerome is a perfect expression of the dogmatic theologian whom abstruseness of his studies has cut off from human intercourse; but it is in the S. Paul that Bellini's concentrated realism is most felt. Even he never conceived anything more convincingly self-consistent than this imposing figure, perfect alike in the slow gravity of its movement and in the large design of its drapery, but most sublime as an expression of a rare type of character, in which the saint and the man of the world are harmonised. The organiser of Christianity might well have been a man of such rapid insight, such a plausible and imposing presence, so gifted, so polished, and with such power to command, as Bellini has here conceived him.²⁹

From this interpretation of the character of the four Saints, Fry moves on to an analysis of the predella paintings (see plate 5). Here his comments focus first on the possible influence of Gentile Bellini, leading to a detailed description of costume and equipment that adds little to our understanding of the religious significance of Bellini's imagery:

The jack-boots of S. Paul, with their peculiar wrinkles, are entirely in Gentile's manner; the jerkin is certainly not Venetian, and is probably some Byzantine costume; but it is in the horses that we find the most convincing proof of the knowledge of Gentile's Eastern sketches. The horse in Italian art before this time was always the destrier; this horse, peculiar for its small compact build...is the horse (possibly a descendant of the Greek horse of which we are here forcibly reminded) which is to found to this day in the uplands and mountainous districts of Turkey.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid p30

²⁹ Ibid p30

³⁰ Ibid p30



Plate 5: Giovanni Bellini *Predella painting from the Pesaro Altarpiece*

Fry ends with further examination of the predella, and the perceived failure of Bellini, “as he not unusually does, to suggest convincingly sudden or vehement movement”.³¹ Beginning with a description of the background scenery and use of a painted architectural framework, Fry has moved outwards to discuss Bellini’s painting of the four saints and then scenes from the predella. What is remarkable in this description is the manner in which it ignores the central characters and event celebrated by the altarpiece, namely the coronation of the Virgin by Christ. Traditionally depicted as a happy occasion, her “seventh joy” as she is reunited with Christ in glory and crowned Queen of Heaven, here the mood is more restrained. The sombre figure of Christ is shown crowning his mother, who bends before him in an act of humility that recalls her demeanour at the Annunciation.

³¹ Ibid p31

As such, it is a reminder that her role in the Incarnation merited her exemption from the corruption of death, and instead she ascended into heaven. The landscape admired by Fry provided another reminder of the unique nature of the Virgin, depicting one of her attributes, a fortress enclosed by a wall. Next to Christ are the confessor saints, Jerome and Francis, who have spread the word of the church as the translator of the Vulgate and by preaching to the faithful in their own language. Next to Mary stand martyrs of the church Peter and Paul. Bellini has created a scene meditative contemplation on the central role of The Virgin, and so also of Mother Church, as the vehicle through which individual faith is renewed and expressed. It is therefore an image that is both personal and collective.

This collective and yet personal form of worship is a possibility that Fry seems to reject, as can be seen with his analysis of another of Bellini's large altarpieces, the **S. Giobbe** altarpiece, (Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice) (see Plate 6). Here Bellini depicts the enthroned Madonna and Child. To the left Bellini places St. Francis, St. Job and John the Baptist. To the right are St. Sebastian, St. Dominic and St. Louis of Toulouse.



Plate 6: Giovanni Bellini *S. Giobbe Altarpiece* (Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice)

For Fry, Bellini here reaches the point where his dominant impulse is aesthetic. In contrast to the religious fervour that characterised his early life and works Fry states that:

Here Bellini's attitude is increasingly impersonal. His delight is not in the expression of profound emotion, but in the creation of types, with a view to their pictorial possibilities more than their significance as expressions of religious ideals of character.³²

In pronouncing on Bellini's psychological state, Fry suggests that in creating the altar piece Bellini lacked the religious sincerity that was present in his earlier, smaller scaled works, and those intended for private devotion. However he also implies that the spectator's relationship with such an altarpiece must necessarily be "impersonal". In doing so he affirms the Protestant idea that a grand

³² Ibid p30

ceremonial altarpiece, serving as the pictorial centrepiece of a central Catholic ceremony, cannot contain within it a dual function. It cannot express, and serve, both the collective (that is ceremonial) needs of the wider Catholic Church and also allow the individual worshiper their own personal, emotional, connection with the art work. Instead the Protestant idea that individual scrutiny alone is the authentic expression of religious belief shapes Fry's analysis. That Bellini was, in fact, conscious of the need to connect the individual and collective expression of religious emotion with the *S. Giobbe* altarpiece can be seen by examining both the positioning and gesturing of the figures of St. Francis and the Madonna and Child depicted in this work. As David Rosand has pointed out, the perspective construction, with its low horizon, eases the observer's visual access to the monumentalised figure of the enthroned Madonna and Child. It is with the figure of St. Francis that Bellini provides a direct link, between the church audience and the subject depicted. It is this figure that looks out to the audience "with a gesture that simultaneously displays his stigmata and beckons us into the realm of the holy."³³

³³ David Rosand, *Painting in Sixteenth Century Venice* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) p29

Chapter 6

Roger Fry and Giotto

Fry's analysis of Bellini should be placed alongside his 1901 essay on Giotto as marking an early attempt to follow Ruskin in placing Catholic art within a constructed Protestant framework.¹ In his essay on Giotto, Fry's attempt to Protestantize the artist's work centres on the central, cultural, role he gives to the person of St. Francis.

Fry begins his essay by distancing the advent of the Christian religion from an initial influence on artistic style. The same could not however be said of the influence of St. Francis. As he says "We find abundant evidence in studying early Christian art that Christianity at its origin exercised no new stimulating influence upon its development, but if it were claimed for the Franciscan movement that it brought about the great outburst of Italian art the position would be harder to refute".² Why is Fry willing to credit St. Francis with this degree of influence, not granted to the previous centuries of Christian teaching? One answer is that, through his own interpretation of the life of St. Francis, Fry is able to create a favourable theological setting for the works of a favoured artist. According to Fry his influence was so profound that "what St. Francis accomplished, the literal acceptance by official Christendom of Christ's teaching, was tantamount to the foundation of a new religion."³ This "new religion" with its egalitarian ethos and emphasis on individual moral scrutiny was distinctly Protestant (if not Quaker) in its nature. As Fry explains:

What he effected within the bounds of the Church, for a time at all events, was only accomplished for later times by a rupture with the Papal power. He established the idea of the equality of all men before God and the immediate relationship of the individual soul to

¹ See Roger Fry, *Vision And Design* (Penguin Books Ltd., 1937)

² Ibid p112

³ Ibid p112

the Deity. He enabled every man to be his own priest.⁴

Having created an image of St. Francis more in accord with nineteenth-century Quakerism than medieval Catholicism, Fry then attempts to link this “Protestant” theology of St. Francis with subsequent artistic production. Starting with the figure of St. Francis he refers to “the aesthetic element in his teaching...his conception of holiness was almost as much an aesthetic as a moral one.”⁵ This “aesthetic element” consisted of:

...a perfectly harmonious attitude to life rather than a purely moral one...S. Francis...was actually a poet before his conversion, and his whole life had the pervading unity and rhythm of a perfect work of art...his feelings for moral and aesthetic beauty were intimately united. Indeed, his life, like the Italian art which in a sense arose from it, like the Gothic French art which was a simultaneous expression of the same spirit, implies an attitude, as rare in life as in art, in which spiritual and sensuous beauty are so inextricably interwoven that instead of conflicting they mutually intensify their effects.⁶

Fry therefore is following a process. He credits St. Francis with creating a new spiritual understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Having established, to his own satisfaction, the essentially “Protestant” nature of this new dispensation, Fry then claims that its effect is to both generate a new style of art, one Fry himself much favours, but also that the spirit of this new dispensation is extant within this style of art itself. Fry is here, then, very close to Ruskin’s earlier claim, in *The Stones of Venice*, that the art of the Gothic could be categorised as essentially a Protestant art, both in its execution and in its essence. This “Protestant” categorisation of St. Francis, his followers, and the art he inspired, is allied with an attempt to shift the focus of the Christian story in a manner that downplays its metaphysical nature. Fry makes the bold claim that the influence of St. Francis was such that:

⁴ Ibid pp112-3

⁵ Ibid p113

⁶ Ibid pp113-4

...his followers rewrote the New Testament from the Franciscan point of view, emphasising the poetical and dramatic elements of the story. In particular they shifted the focus of interest by making the relationship of the Virgin to her son the central motive of the whole.⁷

As previously mentioned, with regard to Fry's monograph on Bellini, the subject of the Madonna and Child is one that has a universal appeal that, without diminishing its religious significance, could be read as emphasising the human, rather than the divine, aspect of the Christian story. As such, it is an image that avoids the troubling prospect of Mariolatry that could arise, for a Protestant, in encountering a depiction of the Virgin. The fact that this was Fry's intention - in his relating of imagery to theology, to emphasise this human element - is shown when he says, of the followers of St. Francis, that they "did for the Christian legend very much what Pindar did for classical mythology; without altering the doctrine they brought into full relief its human and poetical significance."⁸

Fry's theme, that St. Francis was both the inspiration of a new style of art and that his interpretation of Christianity is a pre-cursor of Protestantism, is reinforced in his analysis of Giotto's **Confirmation of the Rule**, (Upper Church, Assisi), (see plate 7). In this fresco, Giotto shows the moment when Pope Innocent III grants St. Francis, and his followers, permission to preach.

Fry begins his analysis of the fresco by returning to a familiar concern with questions of form and stylistic comparison, derived from the Morelli method. Thus he notes:

Giotto's close connection with the artists of the Roman school. Their influence is not confirmed to the figures and drapery; the architecture...with its minute geometrical inlays, its brackets and mouldings, derived from classical forms, is entirely in the manner of the Cosmati...Giotto is at this stage of his career not only less accomplished, but he has nothing of that painter's elegant classical grace.⁹

⁷ Ibid p114

⁸ Ibid p114

⁹ Ibid p126

However, for Fry, it is not, yet, his technical skill that marks Giotto as an artist of such rare and ground-breaking achievement. Rather it is because:

He has instead, the greatest and rarest gift of dramatic expressiveness. For though the poses, especially of the bishop seated on the Pope's left, lack grace, and the faces show but little research for positive beauty or regularity of features, the actual scene, the dramatic situation, is given in an entirely new and surprising way.¹⁰

Fry is in no doubt as to the significance of the historical event depicted, namely the Confirmation of the Rule. As he writes, "Of what overwhelming importance for the history of the world this situation was, perhaps Giotto himself could scarcely realise."¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid pp126-7

¹¹ Ibid p127



Plate 7: Giotto, *Confirmation of the Rule* (Upper Church, Assisi)

For Fry, however, the true significance of the event Giotto depicts would only become apparent to a later audience, one by implication, influenced by Protestant doctrines. As Fry writes;

Of all that this acceptance involved no one who lived before the Reformation could understand the full significance, but Giotto has here expressed something of the dramatic contrasts involved in the meeting of the greatest of saints and the most dominating of popes, something of the importance of the moment when the great heretic was recognised by the Church.¹²

In explaining why this event was of “overwhelming importance”, Fry compares the doctrines of the Franciscan movement with an earlier religious sect, the Waldensians. A friend of Fry’s, Bertrand

¹² Ibid p128

Russell, was later to give a description of the Waldensians that echoes, in part, Fry's description of the Franciscans. As Russell explains of the movement:

These were followers of Peter Waldo, an enthusiast who, in 1170, started a 'crusade' for observance of the law of Christ. He gave all his goods to the poor, and founded a society called the 'Poor Men of Lyons', who practised poverty and a strictly virtuous life. At first they had papal approval, but they inveighed somewhat too forcibly against the immorality of the clergy, and were condemned by the Council of Verona in 1184. Thereupon they decided that every good man is competent to preach and expound the Scriptures; they appointed their own ministers, and dispensed with the services of the Catholic priesthood.¹³

The later part of Russell's analysis, of Waldensian doctrine, compares closely with Fry's contention, previously mentioned, that St. Francis "established the idea of the equality of all men before God and the immediate relationship of the individual soul of the Deity. He enabled every man to be his own priest."¹⁴ However it is in Fry's description of St. Francis as "the great heretic" that the comparison between St. Francis, and his movement, with the Waldensians breaks down. By describing St. Francis as "the great heretic" Fry implies that St. Francis and his movement, while being granted recognition as a new religious order within the wider Church, nevertheless remained, in some sense, essentially separate from it. It is an interpretation however that is not supported by either the historical record, or by Giotto's fresco.

In comparing the Franciscans to the Waldensians, Fry downplays the fundamental difference in the respective development of the two movements. The actions of the Waldensians resulted in an actual break with the Catholic Church. They rejected the authority of the Pope, along with various church rites, and were excommunicated in 1184. Thereafter they were to be persecuted as heretics. In contrast the Franciscans were to remain fully within the body of the wider Catholic Church, fully acknowledging the authority of the Papacy and church hierarchy. Indeed the

¹³ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (Allen & Unwin, 1965) p440

¹⁴ Fry, *Vision And Design* p113

Franciscans were to perform a valuable service in maintaining the established order. As Russell argues:

The Church, in the early thirteenth century, was in danger of a revolt scarcely less formidable than that of the Sixteenth. From this it was saved, very largely, by the rise of the mendicant orders: St Francis and St Dominic did much more for orthodoxy than was done even by the most vigorous popes.¹⁵

This historical narrative would have been well understood by the contemporary audience for Giotto's fresco. He expresses the nature of the relationship, between the new religious order and the wider Church. He depicts St. Francis and his followers kneeling before an enthroned Innocent III. They wear the tonsure, itself a symbol that they recognise, and accept, Papal authority. The bishops who accompany the Pope, either seated or standing, together give the Episcopal group a physical domination that reflects their status. Giotto therefore depicts St. Francis as a supplicant of the Church hierarchy and so, also, reflects the fact that the Franciscans were to become a loyal religious order within the Catholic Church. Indeed, following the founding of the Inquisition in 1233, the Franciscans were to join the Dominican order in upholding and enforcing church orthodoxy. In his negation of the historical record Fry has created his own image of the Franciscan movement, that in turn serves to Protestantize the art of Giotto.

Another parallel, between Fry and Ruskin, can be found in the former's description of Giotto's decoration of the Arena Chapel at Padua (begun in 1305) and Ruskin's approach to St. Mark's (Venice), with his advice to his protestant readers to regard "the whole Church as a great book of Common Prayer".¹⁶ Fry is in no doubt as to the significance of Giotto's work at Padua. As he writes, it "remains the completest monument to his genius".¹⁷ He begins his analysis, of the

¹⁵ Russell pp440-41

¹⁶ Ruskin 10 (140)

¹⁷ Fry, *Vision And Design*, p139

chapel's decoration, with general remarks on the style and skill of the artist, where his familiar emphasis on formal values again serves to distance the modern viewer from the religious nature of the works. Thus:

In the composition of the separate scenes Giotto here shows for the first time his full powers. Nearly every one of these is an entirely original discovery of new possibilities in the relation of forms to one another. The contours of the figures evoke to the utmost the ideal comprehension of volume and mass...I doubt whether if in any single building one can see so many astonishing discoveries of formal relations as Giotto has made here.¹⁸

Moving on to a description of individual frescoes, Fry places a familiar emphasis on the human, as opposed to the metaphysical and theological, elements of the images chosen for discussion. As he notes of the “**Noli me tangere**” (see plate 8), “Giotto was, I believe, the first artist to represent the Resurrection by the *Noli me tangere*...it is characteristic of Giotto to choose a subject where the human situation is so intimate and the emotions expressed are so poignant.”¹⁹

In his descriptions of the Joachim and Anna Frescoes it is this regard for the mundane that he finds so affecting. So in Fry's description of the cycle of frescoes depicting “**Scenes from the Life of Joachim**”, (see plate 9), Fry remarks:

The sad figure of Joachim is one never to be forgotten. In every incident of his sojourn in the wilderness, after the rejection of his offering in the temple, his appearance indicates exactly his mental condition. When he first comes to the sheepfold, he gazes with such set melancholy on the ground that the greeting of his dog and his shepherds cannot arouse his attention; when he makes a sacrifice he crawls on his hands and knees in the suspense of expectation, watching for a sign from heaven; even in his sleep we guess at his melancholy dreams...²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid p139

¹⁹ Ibid p140

²⁰ Ibid, p141-2



Plate 8: Giotto, *Noli Me Tangere* (Arena Chapel, Padua)



Plate 9: Giotto, *Scenes from the Life of Joachim* (Arena Chapel, Padua)

In the culminating fresco of the Joachim cycle, “**The Meeting at the Golden Gate**” (see Plate 10), Fry makes clear the unusual emotional connection he feels with the subject matter of the Joachim Cycle. He notes “in the scene where he meets his wife at the Golden gate on his return, Giotto has touched a cord of feeling at least as profound as can be reached by the most consummate master of the arts of words.”²¹



Plate 10: Giotto, *The Meeting at the Golden Gate* (Arena Chapel, Padua)

²¹ Ibid p142

Why does Fry admit to such an unusual emotional connection to the subject matter of the frescoes in the Joachim Cycle? I would argue that it is because he places these works within a “literary”, and hence Protestant, tradition. While this placing is not as overt as that used by Ruskin, it is this literary context that equates Fry’s reading of the Arena chapel with Ruskin’s earlier reading of St. Mark’s. This in turn raises the question of what is meant by a “literary” work when referring to a visual image. Here I would like to look first at the parallel Fry himself draws between certain of the frescoes and literature. Continuing on from his statement that in his work *The meeting at the Golden Gate*, Giotto can be compared with “the most consummate master of the art of words”, he compares the process by which visual and literary art is created:

It is true that speaking of these one is led inevitably to talk of elements in the work which modern criticism is apt to regard as lying outside the domain of pictorial art. It is customary to dismiss all that concerns the dramatic presentation of the subject as literature or illustration, which is to be sharply distinguished from the qualities of design. But can this clear distinction be drawn? The imaginings of a playwright, a dramatic poet, and a dramatic painter have much in common, but they are never at any point identical. Let us suppose a story to be treated by all three: to each, as he dwells on the legend, the imagination will present a succession of images, but those images, even at their first formation, will be quite different in each case, they will be conditioned and coloured by the art which the creator practices, by his past observation of nature with a view to presentment in that particular art. *The painter, like Giotto, therefore, actually imagines in terms of figures capable of pictorial presentment, he does not merely translate a poetically dramatic vision into pictorial terms*”.²² (My italics).

The italicised part of this passage points to a, self-evident, difference between the literary and visual arts. What points to a connection between these art forms is the sentence: “Let us suppose a story to be treated by all three: to each, as he dwells on the legend, *the imagination will present a succession of images*” (My italics). The italicised phrase could refer to the many components that make up an individual fresco. However, used as it is within the context of a comparison with literary form, and following reference to the Joachim Cycle, here I believe it refers to a number of individual frescoes

²² Ibid p142

that cumulatively tell a particular story. This process of continuous narrative, whereby each part gains in strength through reference to its predecessor, is one of two reasons that that these works may be called “literary”.

There is a second way in which the Joachim Cycle may be defined as “literary”. The Joachim Cycle gains much of its power only when the beholder is fully acquainted with the background story that the frescoes illustrate, these being derived from the “Golden Legend” and apocryphal New Testament literature. Without such knowledge of the events depicted in the Cycle, and in particular that the “Meeting at the Golden Gate” is the moment when the Virgin is conceived, the profound emotional charge that Fry describes when viewing these frescoes would surely have been much diminished.

A contrast can be made here with Giotto’s “**Pieta**” (see Plate 11). That this fresco depicts an event of the utmost significance would be readily apparent to the most casual of viewers, even those with only the most basic previous religious education. However, while the Joachim Cycle frescoes elicit Fry’s praise, and as mentioned previously, a clearly expressed emotional connection, it is noticeable that he becomes much more circumspect when regarding the *Pieta*. Fry’s description of this fresco states:

...the impression conveyed is of a universal and cosmic disaster: the air is rent with the shrieks of desperate angels whose bodies are contorted in a raging frenzy of compassion. And the effect is due in part to the increased command, which the Paduan frescoes show, of simplicity and logical directness of design. These massive boulder like forms, these draperies cut by only a few large sweeping folds, which suffice to give the general movement of the figure with unerring precision, all show this new tendency in Giotto’s art as compared with the more individual characterisation, of his early works. *It is by this consciously acquired and masterly simplicity that Giotto keeps here, in spite of the unrestrained extravagance of passion, the consoling dignity of style.*²³ (My Italics).

This description of the *Pieta* contains two distinct parts that require further analysis. In the Joachim

cycle, Fry has regarded style, composition and narrative as allied, arguing that “It is mainly by means of the composition and the general conception of pose and movement that Giotto expresses the dramatic idea.”²⁴ With his account of the *Pieta* however he creates a dichotomy whereby style is actively set against, what he regards as, an overblown expression of that subject matter.



Plate 11: Giotto, *Pieta* (Arena Chapel, Padua)

²³ Ibid pp140-1

Why does Fry here go further than his previous method, of merely using the formal qualities of a work to avoid discussion of the subject matter? One possible reason is that the *Pieta* represents one of the central iconographic images of Christianity and here Giotto explicitly links the metaphysical with the human realm to create his “impression ... of a universal and cosmic disaster“, with the angels sharing the grief and mannerisms of the human mourners. Unlike either the *Noli me Tangere* or the frescoes of the Joachim cycle this fresco does not depend for its impact on the observer having experienced the cumulative effect of the preceding frescoes, and their literary backstory. As such both the emotional power of the *Pieta* and its standing in the Arena Chapel as an “independent” visual image gives it a status analogous to an altarpiece, as a likely centre piece of religious devotion. It is this combination of religious imagery and raw emotion that Fry seems to revile from when he talks of the “the unrestrained extravagance of passion”. In its place he offers the chance to experience Giotto, as an artist concerned with the formal practicalities of design and composition. He seeks to contain, and excuse, the emotional impact that the image would have, on the devout viewer, by referring his readers to what he terms, “the consoling dignity of style”. This style, having its origins in the, pre-Christian, Classical world offers an alternative, and more sophisticated, reason to value the *Pieta*. As he writes:

The great Italians inherited from Graeco-Roman civilization the urbanity of a great style. And nowhere is it felt more than here, where Giotto is dealing with emotions which classical art scarcely touched.²⁵

Fry ends his description of the Arena Chapel frescoes by alluding to the allegorical figures of the virtues and vices. Without the need to humanise, or negate, overt Christian iconography, Fry is less restrained in his use of language to describe “Giotto’s intuitive understanding of the

²⁴ Ibid p141

²⁵ Ibid p143

expression of emotion”.²⁶ With these figures Fry argues that Giotto has “in some succeeded in giving not merely a person under the influence of a given passion, but the abstract passion itself, not merely an angry woman, but anger.”²⁷ To achieve this end entailed for Giotto “an excursion beyond the region of experience; no merely scientific observation of the effects of emotion would have enabled him to conceive the figure of Anger.”²⁸ However this acknowledgement of the limits of “scientific observation” is qualified by Fry in a manner that again draws parallels with the writing of Ruskin, in *The Stones of Venice*. Ruskin had legitimised his description of the iconography of St. Mark’s baptistery through reference to England’s greatest Puritan writer, Milton. Fry concludes his comments on the figure of Anger, and on the Arena Chapel itself, with an allusion to another great English protestant poet, William Blake. Giotto’s accomplishment “required an imagination that could range the remotest spaces thus to condense in visible form the bestial madness of the passion, to depict what Blake would have called the “diabolical abstract” of anger.”²⁹ Fry concludes his essay on Giotto by placing him within a wider cultural and historical context that alludes to the argument of Quintet that the fifteenth century marked the separation of art and religion:

But the fascination Giotto’s art exercises is due in part to his position in the development of modern culture. Coming at the same time as Dante, he shares with him the privilege of seeing life as a single, self-consistent, and systematic whole. *It was a moment of equilibrium between the conflicting tendencies of human activity, a moment when men such as Dante and Giotto could exercise to the full their critical and analytical powers without destroying the unity of a cosmic theory based on theology.*³⁰ (My italics).

Fry’s 1901 essay on Giotto marks the moment of greatest convergence between Fry and

²⁶ Ibid p143

²⁷ Ibid p143

²⁸ Ibid p143

²⁹ Ibid p143

³⁰ Ibid p148

Ruskin in their approach to art history. With his work on Bellini, Fry had followed Ruskin in creating an image of Venice that accorded the city a quasi-Protestant status, making it analogous, in many respects, to contemporary Britain. In so doing he had also followed Ruskin in legitimising an interest in the art of that city. Fry had continued this method, of presenting Catholic art within a Protestant framework, by claiming for St. Francis a key role in influencing the development of pre-Renaissance Italian art, and therefore the work of Giotto. St. Francis himself is in turn portrayed, by Fry, as a proto-Protestant. As the italicised sentence above shows, this enabled Fry to conflate the theological with the aesthetic in a manner clearly reminiscent of the ideas expressed by Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*. With his designation of St. Francis as a protestant, Fry has followed Ruskin's argument, used to justify his own preference for the Gothic, that the medieval church, while nominally Catholic, already contained within it an identifiable Protestant element. Fry is here also following Ruskin by drawing a direct link between religious belief and artistic skill. Giotto, he explains, is working at a time where the "critical and analytical" power of the artist is still in tune with their religious belief; that is, a time when the creation of a work of art was solely the sincere expression of individual religious feeling and before what Ruskin termed "the pride of knowledge" intruded upon an artist's consideration.

Chapter 7

Narrative or Form: Roger Fry as a Protestant Curator and Historian

Fry notes of the moment of intellectual and artistic unity that Giotto experienced, that it “was in its nature transitory: the free use of all the faculties which the awakening to a new self-consciousness had aroused, was bound to bring about antitheses which became more and more irreconcilable as time went on.”¹ Here I believe Fry is also identifying a problem with his early approach to art history. It was a problem that had also, if for different reasons, become apparent to Ruskin at a similar stage in his own career. As I have argued, in seeking to diminish the connection between certain works of art and the Catholic church both men had constructed an alternative, “Protestant”, setting in which these works were created and viewed. This similarity in approach to art history presented both Fry and Ruskin with a similar difficulty. It was only tenable, for either man, to maintain a convincing “Protestant” narrative if they restricted their analysis to a relatively narrow range of works, defined by period and location.

For Ruskin the solution to this dilemma presented itself through a crisis of faith; one that was to be resolved, in the 1850s, by a change in the nature of his religious and aesthetic beliefs. Ruskin himself identified his emotional reaction to an 1858 encounter with Veronese’s *Presentation of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon* as the moment of his “unconversion”, when he was to leave the Evangelical Protestantism of his youth “to be debated of no more”.² While he may have been over precise in identifying the exact moment of his changed viewpoint its effects were to be profound. He came to accept that the, previously feared, sensual and mundane accepts of art could also be an authentic expression of the divine. This, in turn, involved accepting the religious sincerity of those

¹ Fry, *Vision And Design*, pp148-9

² *Ruskin’s Artists* (ed.Tate), p131

artists his previous Evangelical Protestantism had regarded as representing a period of degenerate Catholic belief. As he argued during an address delivered in March 1860:

Once I thought ...that the greatest religious art is that which presents the religious element free from all connection with earthly things. A painter of the southern Italian schools...painted only saints and angels, and these generally he put in the skies, far away from anything earthly. This is one kind of religious art. Another, and as I now believe a greater kind of religion is that which is mixed up with the every-day life of men; and this was the religion of the great Venetians. Veronese and Titian...treated the scenes of this human life in a true human manner, pouring into them their religious faith.³

Having rejected the sectarian Protestantism of his earlier writing, Ruskin was able to expand on those ideas his early works already contained, namely of the intimate relationships between art, morality and the society that produced it. This in turn led him to become increasingly concerned with the social and economic questions of his own day.

Elisabeth Prettejohn has described the approach taken by Ruskin as “centrifugal, constantly expanding from the work of art out to its wider relationships either to the natural world or to the social context.”⁴ However this expansion outwards only became universally applicable once Ruskin had shed his original sectarian beliefs. Prettejohn contrasts Ruskin’s method with that of the man she credits with establishing the path Fry was to follow, the art critic and historian Sidney Colvin. Colvin had established the study of fine art at Cambridge, as Slade Professor (1873-85). As early as 1867 he had advanced a formalist interpretation of art arguing that:

The only perfection of which we can have direct cognizance through the sense of sight is the perfection of forms and colours; therefore perfection of forms and colours - beauty, in a word - should be the prime object of pictorial art. Having this is the chief requisite; and spiritual, intellectual beauty are contingent on this, are something into the bargain.⁵

Prettejohn characterises this approach as:

³ Ruskin, 16 (470)

⁴ Elisabeth Prettejohn in *Art Made Modern* p35

...centripetal, constantly converging on the immediate qualities of the work itself. Fry is often taken to task for neglecting the historical and social contexts of art; in a sense he is blamed for following the Cambridge tradition of Colvin rather than the Oxford tradition of Ruskin.⁶

However, Prettejohn is neglecting how Fry originally followed the example of Ruskin. His work on Bellini first looks outwards to the political and religious situation of Venice. In his essay on Giotto he stresses the influence of the teachings of St. Francis on the development of Italian art. With his early writings on Bellini and Giotto he emulates Ruskin in creating a “Protestant” setting against which both artists worked. With Fry, therefore, the “centrifugal” (or what might be termed the social) method of Ruskin precedes the “centripetal” (or formalist) method of Colvin. It is when Fry, again like Ruskin, reaches the limits of this particular narrow approach that he is compelled to adopt a new method of aesthetic analysis.

For Fry, in contrast, the path to a more widely applicable means of aesthetic judgement involved a deepening of what might be termed “Protestant” traits that were already present in his criticism. These traits were ones that emphasised the private, emotional experience of an individual before a work of art, and neglected the public function that work may have had, and its role in expressing a collective and ritualistic sense of religious devotion. Fry’s use of Morrelli’s morphological method of analysis had previously enabled him to stress the physicality of the natural world and in so doing to negate the metaphysical content of a painting. A work of art became primarily an object of aesthetic consideration, a question of technique, style and of comparison to previous works. Open to this interpretation, its religious origins - and hence its theological significance - became neutralised in the process. This emphasis on form, over content,

⁵ Ibid p34

⁶ Ibid p35

was to be deepened. This was to be accompanied by the abandonment of another method previously used, by Fry, to distance artworks from their cultural and historic setting. For Ruskin a change in religious belief facilitated a widening in his aesthetic and social analysis of art. That there was an intimate connection between much of European art and the Roman Catholic Church could now be accepted as an unproblematic historical detail. Rather than follow the example of Ruskin, Fry was to take the more radical step, of arguing that a complete separation could, and should, be made between a work of art as an object worthy of aesthetic consideration and that same object as a cultural artefact. The former relied on the spectator making an independent and personal judgement of taste; the latter required an understanding of the historical processes that had formed the background to the object's creation.

In 1906, Fry became Curator of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. An article for the *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* published in March 1907, entitled "Ideals of a Picture Gallery", demonstrates this next stage in Fry's development as an art critic. He begins the article by asking what the spectator expects their experience of a picture gallery to be. He juxtaposes two conflicting ideas, namely; "an opportunity for the exercise of the historical imagination or the food of a deep and intense imaginative life."⁷ Having thus drawn a distinction between the "historical" and the "imaginative" understanding of art, and stated that, "both are desirable ends, either may become the basis for museum arrangement", Fry gives existing examples of these, alternative, approaches. Beginning with the "historical" approach he notes that;

Of late years Signor Corrado Ricci has shown what can be done upon the former basis. He has arranged the Brera so that all the works of a particular school and epoch of Italian painters find themselves together in a single gallery... The arrangement is, in fact, rigidly historical, a joy to the connoisseur, but sometimes a trial to the artist. Truth shines there with a clear and naked light, but Beauty sometimes shyly retreats from the glare.⁸

⁷ Fry, *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (March 1907) p58

⁸ Ibid p59

This approach to curatorship is contrasted with:

an older museum like the Louvre or [previously] the Uffizi...we find no such clear statement of purpose. We find in each a single room, the Salon Carré in the Louvre and the Tribuna at Florence, arranged not historically, but at least in intention, artistically, in each we find collected together what were supposed to be the masterpieces of various schools and various ages...the majority of pictures in either room are indisputably among the greatest expressions of human imagination which Europe has produced.⁹

Having advanced the notion that an antipathy existed between two differing methods of presenting art objects, Fry is here developing his argument to suggest that there are two different experiences that can occur during the appreciation of the visual arts. These two experiences can be summarised as being that of the “connoisseur” (or the historical experience) and that of the “artist” (or the aesthetic experience). Fry was himself both connoisseur and artist and his writings expressed both parts of his personality. In a sense, therefore, he is not only presenting his reader with a false choice but also making an explicit change of direction in his own method of aesthetic judgement. Previously his writing had used examples of both the historical and the aesthetic style of analysis. This is why, in his works on Giovanni Bellini and Giotto it had been necessary to follow the example of Ruskin in creating a plausible “Protestant” narrative against which both artists’ work could be assessed. Here he is now freeing himself from the need to provide that Protestant narrative to concentrate on the “artistic” method of understanding. The end part of the sentence regarding the Brera Gallery suggests that Fry now regards this as the superior method of appreciation; it was, after all, with the “historical” method of presentation that the discerning viewer could feel that *“Beauty sometimes shyly retreats from the glare”*.

In arguing that the Metropolitan Museum should organise its galleries according to the “aesthetic” method of presentation, Fry admits that they would be making a virtue out of necessity.

⁹ Ibid p59

As he writes:

Anything like a strict historical method is impossible...we can only present isolated points in the great sequence of European creative thought. We have as yet no Byzantine paintings, no Giotto, no Giottoesque, no Mantegna, no Botticelli, no Leonardo, no Raphael, no Michelangelo. The student of the history of art must either travel in Europe or apply himself to reproductions...But in the meanwhile, whether we will or no, we are thrown back for our leading notions upon the aesthetic rather than the historical idea.¹⁰

The role of the Curator therefore becomes, for Fry, the arrangement of the gallery in a manner that underlines to the visitor that some of the exhibits are more deserving of prolonged attention than others. The object of this exercise is to educate the spectator in Fry's own "aesthetic" method of art evaluation and appreciation. As he continues in the article:

We must, in fact, so arrange the galleries that it shall be apparent to each and all that some things are to be more worthy than others of prolonged and serious attention. It is only by some such emphasis upon what has high and serious merit, that we can hope in time to arouse an understanding of that most difficult but most fascinating language of human emotion, the language of art. It is a language which is universal, valid for all times and in all countries, but it is a language that must be learned though it is more natural to some than to others...of those that admire from affectation at least a few may stay to feel and understand.¹¹

Fourteen years later, when his public reputation as an advocate of modern French painting was well-established, Fry was to return to the question of sensibility and the choice between the "historical" and the "aesthetic" approach to art criticism. His 1920 essay "Retrospect" in part examined the nature of the initial reaction to his championing of the Post-Impressionist artists at the 1910 Grafton Galleries exhibition. I will return to this subject in the next chapter. For now I will note that from his later perspective Fry was to say of his critics: "If I may judge by the discussions in the press to which this exhibition gave rise, the general public failed to see that my position with regard to this movement was capable of a logical explanation, as the result of a consistent

¹⁰ Ibid p59

¹¹ Ibid pp59-60

sensibility”.¹² Arguing that the qualities he appreciated in the Post-Impressions were the same ones he had found in the Italian Primitives, Fry noted that this innate understanding of the principles of design was unequally distributed and so brought to the fore the conflict between two types of aesthetic appreciation. As he noted:

It was felt that one could only appreciate Amico di Sandro when one had acquired a certain considerable mass of erudition and given a great deal of time and attention, but to admire a Matisse required only a certain sensibility. One could be fairly sure that one’s maid could not rival one in the former case, but might by a mere haphazard gift of Providence surpass one in the second.¹³

What is noteworthy is the emphasis placed in these two pieces of work on the importance of sensibility over factual knowledge.

As I shall show, although written in a different context, and well before he was embroiled in the Grafton Galleries exhibition storm, the ambitions expressed in Fry’s 1907 “Ideals of a Picture Gallery” closely echo the latter essay’s elucidation of why the Post-Impressionist Exhibition proved so controversial. The 1907 article shows that even before his championing of Post-Modernism, Fry was articulating what were to become key doctrines of his Formalist theory. These were:

1. Concern with “the aesthetic rather than the historical idea”.
2. The belief that art is the “language of human emotion”.
3. That this language exists outside of a limited historical and cultural context, but is rather “a language which is universal, valid for all times and in all countries”.
4. The belief that such a language “is more natural to some than to others”.

As a Curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fry was in a position to put his new theoretical position into practical action. In the spring of 1906 Fry arranged for the Museum’s Gallery 24 to be

¹² Fry, *Vision And Design* pp234-5

¹³ *Ibid* pp234-5

rehung. Exhibits were selected for their aesthetic interest rather than to portray a particular school or historical period. To prepare this exhibition, the Gallery was redecorated according to Fry's close personal direction. He personally mixed the new colours for the walls to achieve the desired effect. Several paintings were reframed, with Fry teaching the gilder Cennino Cennini's method of gilding. In a letter to his wife Helen, Fry was to describe the result:

The walls are quite perfect in colour - old gold over pure ultramarine; it is quite light and yet all the colour tells like anything. It's really stunning and I did the wood-work in one coat, pure raw umber and white over a burnt sienna stain, and it has a wonderful *smalto* effect - quite lovely. The pictures look superb and the Bramantino panels...look splendid worked into the architrave over the doors. Forgive my enthusiasm, but it's got so near to the fruits of victory I can't help it.¹⁴

What is clear here is that in encouraging the spectator to engage on an aesthetic, rather than historic level, Fry attaches great importance to providing an appropriate setting for those works he wishes to display. The original artist and the curator become collaborators in affording the spectator the opportunity to regard the objects presented in this new manner. That this new method of display was, at heart, deeply antipathetic to the historical method can be seen in further actions undertaken by Fry in his position as a Museum Curator.

In the summer and autumn of 1906 Fry travelled to Europe with the intention of acquiring works for the Metropolitan Museum. To further enable this task he sought the assistance of the, French-based, American sculptor and collector, George Grey Barnard. In a letter to the Director of the Metropolitan Museum, Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke, Fry discussed the methods employed by Barnard: "Mr Barnard has been at the head of quite an elaborate organization of *chercheurs* who have ransacked small country villages and peasants' houses and it appears that a great many of Moliniers's [Curator at the Louvre] best pieces have been found in this way and have passed

¹⁴ *Letters of Roger Fry*, Volume 1 pp263-4

through Mr Barnards hands.”¹⁵

Examples of Gothic architecture were amongst the works Fry sought to acquire for the Museum. At the suggestion of Barnard, Fry visited the abandoned Benedictine monastery of Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa. Situated at the foot of Mount Canigou in the Pyrenees, the monastery had been founded in 878, with the cloister building dating from the twelfth century. St. Cuxa’s monks had departed in 1791, when France declared the Civilian Constitution of the Clergy. In purchasing the cloister, and then shipping it to New York, Fry was literally distancing the building from its national and religious origins. That this was Fry’s intention is illustrated by a letter he sent to Sir Purdon Clarke informing him of his new acquisition: “Mr Barnard’s cloister, is quite complete I believe, and is said to be a superb example of Romanesque art. Also, I believe the French Government tried to make it a *monument historique* but were just too late.”¹⁶ (115)

I would like to end this chapter by examining an essay where Fry directly addresses the question of the historical relationship between art and the wider society. As the essay “Art and Life” was first given as a lecture to the Fabian Society in 1917, and first published in *Vision and Design* in 1920, it offers a perspective from the later stages of Fry’s career, and therefore the chance to examine continuities in argument and in methodology from his earlier work. Fry begins his essay “Art and Life” by observing how art works are commonly evaluated:

When we look at ancient works of art we habitually treat them not merely as objects of aesthetic enjoyment but also as successive deposits of the human imagination. It is indeed this view of works of art as crystallised history that accounts for much of the interest felt in ancient art by those who have but little aesthetic feeling and who find nothing to interest them in the work of their contemporaries, where the historical motive is lacking, and they are left face to face with bare aesthetic values.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid Volume 2 p268

¹⁶ Ibid Volume 1 p281

¹⁷ Fry, *Vision And Design*, p11

If, as Fry argues, it is the aesthetic interpretation that should be regarded as the true basis on which to judge art works, then the historical ideas must be challenged. This is what he sets out to achieve in the essay “Art and Life”: to refute the idea of a correspondence between art and its historical and social setting. He writes:

When we look at thirteenth-century sculpture of Chartres or Beavis we feel at once the expression of a peculiar gracious piety...which we perhaps associate with the revelation of just such a type of character in S. Francis of Assisi. A study of Salimbeni's chronicle with its interminable record of squalid avarice and meanness, or of the fierce brutalities of Dante's Inferno is a necessary corrective of such a pleasant dream.¹⁸

This leads him to argue that:

It would seem that the correspondence between art and life which we so habitually assume is not at all constant and requires much correction before it can be trusted...Let us consider the great revolutions in art and see if they coincide. And let me try to say what I mean by life as contrasted with art. I mean the general intellectual and instinctive reaction to their surroundings of those men of any period whose lives rise to self-consciousness. Their view of the universe as a whole and their conception of their relations to their kind.¹⁹

Fry then states that: “Perhaps the greatest revolution in life that we know of at all intimately was that which effected the change from Paganism to Christianity... men's minds [focused] on the spiritual as opposed to the material life which had preoccupied them for so long.”²⁰

This great change in “men's attitude to the universe” was not however reflected in a dramatic change in artistic style: “The subjects changed and became Christian, but the treatment was so exactly similar that it requires more than a cursory glance to say if the figure on the sarcophagus is Christ or Orpheus, Moses or Aesculapius.”²¹ For Fry: “The next great turning point

¹⁸ Ibid p12

¹⁹ Ibid pp12-13

²⁰ Ibid p13

²¹ Ibid p13

in history is that which marks the triumph of the forces of reaction towards the close of the twelfth century”. He acknowledges that “Here undoubtedly a change in life corresponds very closely with a great change in art - the change from the Romanesque to the Gothic”.²² However he doubts that a causal connection can be made between the two events. While the social change was “one of reaction - the sharp repression by the reactionary forces of a gradual growth of freedom - the change in art is merely the efflorescence of certain long prepared and anticipated effects.”²³ Fry ascribes the advent of Gothic art to processes internal to the arts themselves, in architecture to “the answer to certain engineering problems which had long occupied the inventive ingenuity of twelfth-century architects”; and in the figurative arts to “a new self confidence in the rendering of the human figure, a newly developed mastery in the handling of material.”²⁴ Coming next to the Renaissance, Fry finds that:

Here for the first time in our survey we may, I think safely admit a true correspondence between the change in life and the change in art. The change in life... was towards the recognition of the rights of the individual, towards complete self-realisation and the recognition of the objective reality of the material universe which implied the whole scientific attitude... In art the change went *pari passu* with the change in life each assisting and directing the other - the first men of science were artists like Brunelleschi, Ucello, Piero della Francesca and Leonardo da Vinci.²⁵

Fry describes the seventeenth century as a period of artistic social continuity that did not find a correspondence in the artistic developments of the period. Caravaggio “who first discovered the surprising emotional possibilities of chiaroscuro and who combined this with a new idea of realism... the literal acceptance of what is coarse, common, squalid or undistinguished in life”²⁶, from this revolution followed:

²² Ibid pp. 13-14

²³ Ibid p14

²⁴ Ibid p14

²⁵ Ibid p15

...not only a great deal of Rembrandt's art but the whole of that movement in favour of the extravagantly impressive and picturesque, which culminated in the romantic movement of the nineteenth century. Here then is another surprising want of correspondence between art and life.²⁷

Fry moves on to the eighteenth century. Here he argues:

Art goes to court, identifies itself closely with a small aristocratic...it becomes a luxury. It is no longer in the main stream of spiritual and intellectual effort, and this seclusion of art may account for the fact that the next great change in life - the French Revolution and all the accompanying intellectual ferment - finds no serious correspondence in art.²⁸

Fry notes the connection between the French Republicans and David, with his "peculiarly distressing type of the ancient Roman - always in heroic attitudes, always immaculate, spotless and with a highly polished "Mme. Tussaud"²⁹ surface." He argues, however, that the movement of art was in the other direction to David, it "lay in the gradual unfolding of the Romanticist conception of the world - a world of violent emotional effects, of picturesque accidents, of wild nature."³⁰ This brings to a conclusion the section of the essay that directly addresses the historical narrative of Western art, from the Classical period to the nineteenth century. It is, Fry acknowledges, a "violently foreshortened view of history and art", but one that, "will show I hope, that the usual assumption of a direct and decisive connection between life and art is by no means correct."³¹

Regarding this essay, Christopher Reed, drawing on an observation first made by Virginia Woolf, argues that as a piece of work it should be seen as a direct response to the Great War. It was Fry's attempt to "salvage some optimism for art from the general collapse of European society at

²⁶ Ibid p16

²⁷ Ibid p16

²⁸ Ibid p16

²⁹ Ibid pp16-17

³⁰ Ibid pp16-17

³¹ Ibid p17

the time. Fry's essay 'helps to explain how he survived the war,' Woolf wrote".³² It is certainly true that Fry, and the rest of his "Bloomsbury" social circle, were greatly opposed to the prosecution of the war and hence to the prevailing, popular, attitudes of the time. Fry himself refers to the conflict within the body of his essay. He does so in a manner that seeks to disabuse those of his listeners who may believe an artistic "silver lining" might be salvaged from the ongoing conflagration. After the conclusion to the first part of his essay (the previously quoted remark that, "a direct and decisive connection between life and art is by no means correct"), he states that "It may, I hope give pause to those numerous people who have already promised themselves a great new art as a result of the present war, though perhaps it is as well to let them enjoy it in anticipation, since it is, I fancy, the only way in which they are likely to enjoy great art in any kind."³³

While it is true therefore that the essay "Art and Life" should be read with regard to the turbulent period within which it was written, it also, I believe, expresses ideas that were long present in Fry's writing. The essay shows again both Fry's continuing antipathy to the Roman Catholic Church and, in particular, towards the notion that it may have had a positive influence on artistic development. Fry argues that there were, indeed, periods in history when the wider social environment directly influenced artistic progress. In the case of the Catholic Church however it is noticeable that when his essay acknowledges its effect it is to decry the result. Thus he does allow that during the Middle Ages the preaching of St. Bernard of Clairvaux did, "in one small particular",³⁴ have a direct effect on art. This was to influence the architects who worked for the Cistercian order in, what he judges to be, a negative manner. Here the upshot of such belief expressed by St. Bernard was, Fry writes; "a peculiar architectural hypocrisy".³⁵ Bound by the

³² Christopher Reed, *A Roger Fry Reader* (ed. Reed) (Chicago University Press, 1996) p3

³³ *Vision And Design*, p17

³⁴ *Ibid* p148

³⁵ *Ibid* p14

teaching of St. Bernard to give their churches the appearance of simplicity, they also desired to make them as imposing as possible: “The result was a peculiar style of ostentatious simplicity. Paray le Monial is the only church left standing in which this curious and...depressing evidence of the direct influence of the religious reaction on art is to be seen”.³⁶

Moving on to the Renaissance, it is interesting to note that Fry finds in this period a moment when:

For once art and other functions of the human spirit found themselves in perfect harmony and direct alliance, and to that harmony we may attribute much of the intensity and self-assurance of the works of the great Renaissance artists. It is one of the rarest of good fortunes for an artist to find himself actually understood and appreciated by the mass of his educated contemporaries.³⁷

In his earlier, previously mentioned, essay on Giotto (first published in 1901), Fry had identified an earlier phase of artistic and cultural harmony that had found an expression in that artist’s work. In this same essay Fry had identified this moment of harmony as “in its nature transitory”.³⁸ He goes on to suggest, as Ruskin had before him, that it was the new, self-aware, artistic faculty that was a characteristic of the Renaissance artist that had helped end this earlier period of cultural and social harmony. Fry therefore seems to contradict his own earlier historical analysis. Namely the desire to identify what he had termed in his Giotto essay, “a moment of equilibrium between the conflicting tendencies of human activity...when men such as Dante and Giotto could exercise to the full their critical and analytical powers without destroying the unity of a cosmic theory based on theology”.³⁹ However in moving this “moment of equilibrium” from one historical era to another, Fry does not, I believe change one of the fundamental ideas expressed in both essays. Namely that the “conflicting

³⁶ Ibid p14

³⁷ Ibid p15

³⁸ Fry, *Vision and Design* p148

³⁹ Ibid p148

tendencies of human activity”⁴⁰ can, during certain periods, find a unity of purpose in the expression, and appreciation, of an aesthetic idea; when a work of art can signify a balance between the emotional and the rational expressions present in the wider society.

In this regard a distinction can be made between the development of the writings of Ruskin and Fry. By explicitly linking his early criticism and historical analysis with his Protestant theology, itself based on an immutable, revealed, truth, Ruskin’s early ideological approach to the subject was necessarily brittle. A change in religious belief was bound to lead to a corresponding revision in aesthetic judgement, and vice-versa. As previously mentioned, this change in both his theological outlook and in the nature of his art criticism occurred with Ruskin in the 1850s. In contrast with Ruskin’s original, theological, approach, Fry explicitly linked his criticism to the empirical methodology of his natural science background. He allied this to his own emotional response before a work of art. As such any criticism and historical evaluation was therefore, by its nature, provisional. Past aesthetic and historical judgements could be subject to revision and change, if new evidence became available. Such new evidence could include both a re-evaluation of a work’s formal qualities or Fry’s own changing, emotional, reaction to an artist and their works. Fry’s constant exposure to new artistic experiences, such as his discovery of Cézanne and the works of the Post-Impressionists, meant that, as he said himself:

My aesthetic has been a purely practical one, a tentative expedient, an attempt to reduce to some kind of order my aesthetic impressions up to date. It has been held merely until such time as new experiences might confirm or modify it.⁴¹

Given this Fry was able to constantly revise both aesthetic judgement and historical context without fundamentally disrupting the underlying methodology by which such judgements were originally made.

⁴⁰ Ibid p148

I have argued that Fry's early writings displayed evidence of a distinctly Protestant interpretation of art history, of a type that that was so clearly evident in the early work of Ruskin. With his flexibility of approach, however, Fry - in contrast to Ruskin - was able to maintain this sectarian bias into his later analysis. It is this continuity that is displayed in Fry's 1917 essay "Art and Life". There is a similarly negative appraisal of Catholic influence on art that follows on from his description of the cultural achievements that defined the Renaissance. Fry writes:

The Catholic reaction retarded and impeded the main movement of Renaissance thought, but it did not really succeed either in suppressing it or changing the main direction of its current. In art it undoubtedly had some direct effect, it created a new kind of insincerity of expression, a florid and sentimental religiosity - a new variety of bad taste, the rhetorical and overemphatic.⁴²

In two, brief, passages therefore the Catholic Church is described as exemplifying: "ostentatious simplicity, depressing evidence, insincerity and florid and sentimental religiosity".⁴³ As such he is writing firmly within the, earlier noted, nineteenth-century tradition of a British Protestant art history, innately suspicious of the influence of the Roman Catholic church on artistic production; a tradition that, as I have argued, had found expression in Fry's own early criticism and art history writings.

Having denied a direct connection between life and art in their respective historical paths, Fry then seeks to explain the forces that do drive artistic development. He argues that with: "this special spiritual activity of art we find it no doubt open at times to influences from life, but in the main self contained - we find the rhythmic sequences of change determined much more by its own internal forces."⁴⁴ This, in turn leads to what he terms "the real subject of my inquiry, the relation of

⁴¹ Ibid p230

⁴² Ibid pp15-16

⁴³ Fry, *Vision and Design* p14 and p230

⁴⁴ Ibid p18

the modern movement in art to life.”⁴⁵ Here Fry reiterates the argument begun a decade earlier in his article “Ideal of a Picture Gallery”, where he stated that there is a distinction to be made between the aesthetic and the historical idea and that some are more able to appreciate the latter than the former. The “Ideal of a Picture Gallery” article was itself a development of a previous method of separating certain art works from their original, Catholic, background and use. With both Giovanni Bellini and Giotto, Fry had sought to create a, self-defined, Protestant background against which certain works of art were produced. To advance this aim he had created his own, self-defined proto-Protestant narrative for Venice against which to set the works of Giovanni Bellini, and for St. Francis, against which to set the work of Giotto. I have argued that the ideas first expressed in “Ideal of a Picture Gallery” can be viewed as a response to the limitations of his earlier methodology.

⁴⁵ Ibid pp17-18

Chapter 8

Ruskin, Fry and Objective Beauty

The aesthetic Ruskin advanced during the years of his greatest commitment to the Evangelical, Protestant cause, intimately linked the appreciation of beauty to moral perception, and hence to the divine. This, in turn, demanded that he present to his readers an objective standard by which beauty was to be judged. Ruskin's religion taught him that man was a fallen creature and so no more free to hold his own, subjective, set of aesthetic values than he was to hold his own, subjective, set of moral values. Rather, with each, he must be guided towards the correct understanding.

Consequently in the second volume of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin sought to present a set of principles through which an objective standard of beauty could be reached. To achieve this end he set out both to refute what he regarded as false opinions held about the nature of beauty, and to advance his own idea of what he termed the Theocratic faculty.

The questions as to whether an objective standard of beauty existed, and the relationship between aesthetic and moral judgement, was an early concern of Fry. In 1886, while still a student at Cambridge, he wrote to his friend C.R. Ashbee arguing that:

There is a standard of beauty somewhere, and if there is not, the sooner we chuck the whole business the better. Just as to a morally-minded person it is inconceivable that there is not a right and a wrong absolutely, to which we constantly approximate, so to the artistically-minded man it is inconceivable that we have not got something at which we constantly aim.¹

Later that year, again in a letter to Ashbee, he stated that:

I do not think art is as simple as I used to think it. I do not think that we have been wont to lay enough stress on the value (as a means, no doubt, but a very important one) of pure aesthetics as apart from the emotional end. I am also very much mixed about its relation to morality. I think that the best way I can put it to myself is that art should be moral but should regard morality from the point of view of its intrinsic beauty and not its goodness.

¹ *Letters of Roger Fry*, Volume 1 p109

But I am fully persuaded that the aim of all art and all life is ultimately the worship of God in its broadest sense.²

In these letters the connection between early Ruskin and early Fry is evident. The concern of both men to establish an objective standard of beauty is allied with the belief that such beauty would, in itself, be moral. What is also clear, from the second letter to Ashbee, is that even at this initial stage of his concern with questions of aesthetic evaluation, Fry is unwilling to share the certainty in his own beliefs that was such a feature of Ruskin's writing in *Modern Painters*, Volume II.

Looking back at his career, in 1920, following the development of his Formalist theory Fry was to emphasise the role doubt had played in his work, writing that "I have never believed that I knew what was the ultimate nature of art. My aesthetic has been a purely practical one, a tentative expedient".³ This later quote is in the voice of Fry the Natural Scientist and Cambridge rationalist. It is one where opinions on aesthetics are contingent, dependent on empirical evidence, and so, supposedly, divorced from the earlier concern for questions of moral value. In developing his formalist theory, however, Fry - like Ruskin - sought to identify an objective standard of beauty. I believe that in so doing he also introduced his own set of moral values that drew on aspects of his religious upbringing.

In the previous chapter I drew a comparison between Ruskin's interpretation of art history, and that of Fry's. I argued that both men sought to distance certain works of art from their Roman Catholic origin. As Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* provided a clear example of this practice it was, primarily, against this work that I compared writings by Fry that, I believe, follow the same practice. As stated, it is in *Modern Painters*, Volume II, that Ruskin provides the most complete presentation of an aesthetic theory that is in accord with his, then, evangelical religious beliefs.

² Ibid p.110

³ Fry, *Vision And Design*, p230

Therefore in arguing that in developing his formalist approach to art criticism Fry incorporated his own set of moral values, it is again the ideas expressed by Ruskin in *Modern Painters*, Volume II, that I shall compare with Fry's own formalist beliefs. I will begin by examining to what extent Ruskin and Fry shared a common set of aesthetic principles by examining a number of questions they both attempted to answer about the attributes that an object should, or should not exhibit, in order to be regarded as a work of art.

Chapter 9

Ruskin, Fry, and False Opinions Concerning Beauty

Before fully developing his own aesthetic theories, Ruskin analyses, in Chapter IV of *Modern Painters*, Volume II, “False Opinions Held Concerning Beauty”. Here he states that “Those erring or inconsistent positions which I would at once dismiss are: the first, that the Beautiful is the True; the second, that the Beautiful is the Useful; the third, that it is dependent on Custom; and the fourth, that it is dependent on the Association of Ideas.”¹ The idea that the Beautiful is the true, perhaps derived from Keats, was not an influential proposition at the time, and one quickly refuted by Ruskin with the observation that “To assert that the Beautiful is the true, appears, at first, like asserting that propositions are matter, and matter propositions.”² The second proposition, the argument that the beautiful is the useful, is also summarily dismissed by Ruskin, who argues that “It is to confound admiration with hunger, love with lust, and life with sensation; it is to assert that the human creature has no ideas and no feelings except those ultimately referable to its brutal appetitive.”³ The argument that the beautiful is the useful is therefore a theory that rejects Ruskin’s own belief, that beauty should be contemplated for its own sake to meet a spiritual, and hence moral, need. Instead his desired disinterested and objective search for this beauty was replaced with a selfish, and hence subjective, physiological need.

Likewise, it was Ruskin’s equation of beauty with morality that led him to reject the proposition that beauty was the result of custom. If, like morality, beauty had an unchanging and objective nature it could not be dependent on something as arbitrary and changing as mere custom.

¹ Ruskin 4 (66)

² Ibid 4 (66)

³ Ibid 4 (67)

He did allow that familiarity and custom may have some effect on an individual's perception of an object but argued that this did not relate to that same object's inherent qualities or any genuine appreciation of beauty. He argues that:

There is a very strong preference induced in most minds for that to which they are accustomed over that they know not, and this is strongest in those which are least open to sensations of positive beauty. But however far this operation may be carried, its utmost effect is but the deadening and approximating of the sensations of beauty and ugliness. It never mixes, nor crosses, nor in any way alters them; it has not the slightest connection with, or power, over their nature.⁴

Ruskin then turns to an argument close in type to that of Beauty being derived from custom. This is the proposal that Beauty is dependent on the association of objects with pleasant or interesting ideas. This he considered "the most weighty" of the arguments he rejected and was the one he spent longest attempting to refute.⁵

He first rejects the theory of Association with the argument that it is purely a self-contained aesthetic theory offering an explanation of the nature of Beauty disconnected from a wider moral or spiritual order.⁶ As Ruskin states:

If the arguments on the subject be fairly sifted from the mass of confused language with which they are always encumbered, and placed in logical form, they will be found invariably to involve one of these two syllogisms: either, Association gives pleasure, and Beauty gives pleasure, therefore Association is Beauty; or the power of Association is stronger than the power of Beauty, therefore the power of Association *is* the power of Beauty.⁷

Ruskin does allow however that "it is necessary for us to observe the real value and authority of association in the moral system, and how ideas of actual beauty may be affected by it".⁸

Ruskin identifies two kinds of Association, that he terms the Rational and the Accidental.

⁴ Ibid 4 (68)

⁵ Ibid 4 (70)

⁶ Landow, p104

⁷ Ruskin 4 (70)

The Rational type of Association he defines as “the interest which any object may bear historically, as having been in some way connected with the affairs or affections of men”.⁹ Ruskin quickly rejects this idea as a misuse of language, “a misuse involving the positions that in uninhabited countries the vegetation has no grace, the rock no dignity, the cloud no colour, and that the snowy summits of the Alps receive no loveliness from the sunset light, because they have not been polluted by the wrath, ravage, and misery of man.”¹⁰ He then turns to what he calls Accidental Association, defined as “the accidental connection of ideas and memories with material things, owing to which those material things are regarded as agreeable or otherwise, according to the nature of the feelings or recollections they summon.”¹¹

Ruskin acknowledges the power that association has in effecting a person’s aesthetic judgement. As he notes:

...there is probably no one opinion which is formed by any of us, in matters of taste, which is not in some degree influenced by unconscious association of this kind. In many who have no definite rules of judgement, preference is decided by little else, and thus, unfortunately, its operations are mistaken for, or rather substituted for, those of inherent beauty.¹²

Ruskin is however forced to reject the possibility that Accidental Association provides a sound basis by which Beauty should be determined, for the same reason he has previously denied that Custom could offer the same. Namely that it allows the intrusion of a subjective measure of judgement to replace one based on a divinely ordained, and so universally applicable, set of aesthetic values. As he writes:

It is evident that the full exercise of the Associative faculty is inconsistent with absolute and incontrovertible conclusions on subjects of theoretic preference. For it is quite impossible

⁸ Ibid, 4 (71)

⁹ Ruskin 4 (72)

¹⁰ Ibid 4 (72)

¹¹ Ibid 4 (73)

¹² Ibid 4 (73)

for any individual to distinguish in himself the unconscious under working of indefinite association peculiar to him individually, from those great laws of choice under which he is comprehended with all his race. And it is well for us that this is so, the harmony of God's work is not in us interrupted by this mingling of universal and peculiar principal.¹³

The varying degree of power Ruskin attributes to the two types of identified Association, Rational and Accidental, in influencing judgements of beauty, points to the Protestant nature of his criticism in *Modern Painters*, Volume II. As seen, the idea that Rational association should impinge on a genuine aesthetic evaluation is briefly dismissed as a mere misuse of language. If, as Ruskin argues, Rational Association is concerned with objects that “historically” have a connection “with the affairs or affections of men; an interest shared in the minds of all who are aware of such connection”,¹⁴ then such objects would certainly include the range of artworks historically associated with the history and ceremonies of the Catholic Church. In contrast the possible influence of Accidental Association on those making an aesthetic evaluation is more in keeping with those traits identified in the previous chapter as Protestant in type. Accidental Association is, by its nature, personal and arbitrary, rather than collective and weighted with predetermined historical significance. As such it is likely to evoke an individual, rather than collective, emotional reaction, and one unconnected with any given religious ceremony.

These rejections of assumptions others might hold as to the nature of beauty, and hence art, can be compared to Fry's own ideas. Unlike Ruskin in *Modern Painters*, Volume II, Fry did not provide a single defined list of those beliefs he regarded as erroneous when it came to defining the nature of beauty. In his attempt to analyse the nature of the graphic arts, however, his writings contain their own examples of what beliefs should be discarded when considering the true nature of aesthetic experience. These can, in turn, be compared to the three substantial, negative, examples

¹³ Ibid 4 (74)

¹⁴ Ruskin 4 (71)

put forward by Ruskin.

Throughout his writings Fry consistently rejects the argument that the beautiful should be equated with the useful. He does so by advancing an argument similar in tone to Ruskin's; that a distinction is to be made between the physiological and the spiritual life. As he argues in "An essay in aesthetics" (1909):

The graphic arts are the expression of the imaginative life rather than a copy of actual life...I think that the artist might if he chose take a mystical attitude, and declare that the fullness and completeness of the imaginative life he leads may correspond to an existence more real and more important than any that we know of in mortal life. And in saying this, his appeal would find a sympathetic echo in most minds, for most people would, I think, say that the pleasures derived from art were of an altogether different character and more fundamental than merely sensual pleasures, that they did exercise some faculties which are felt to belong to whatever part of us there may be which is not entirely ephemeral and material.¹⁵

In his 1920 summary to the collection of essays published as *Vision and Design* Fry states that "As to the value of the aesthetic emotion...It seems as remote from actual life and practical utilities as the most useless mathematical theory."¹⁶ These are two of many possible examples in Fry's work which show that he shared Ruskin's dismissal of the assertion that the beautiful is the useful. As with Ruskin, this approach was to remain a constant theme in his writings. Before examining similarities between Ruskin and Fry's ideas regarding the nature of association in evaluating art, I would like to emphasise an important point regarding the common stance taken here by both men with regard to the idea of utility. With neither man did the rejection of the idea that the beautiful is the useful arise out of already established ideological positions, at least with regards to the visual arts.

Beginning with Ruskin, it was during the most explicitly Evangelical period of his life that

¹⁵ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p27

¹⁶ Ibid p27

he would first reject the idea that the beautiful is merely the useful. As Landow has argued, “at this point in his career Ruskin was not only concerned to emphasize the needs of the human spirit, of which beauty was the most important one, but he was also opposed to Utilitarianism, with which he apparently connects this aesthetic theory.”¹⁷ It is clear why Ruskin would be opposed to the theory of Utilitarianism as a general guide to social conduct. It was a philosophy that argued that no specific moral principles were absolutely certain and necessary. As such it was clearly in conflict with Ruskin’s, deeply held, religious belief.

Ruskin’s Evangelicalism placed literature at its cultural centre. In contrast to the belief of the Roman Catholic Church, religious icons were not deemed objects of veneration, acting as intercessors between the earthly and celestial realms. Neither did religious imagery, such as painted altarpieces, play a direct role in religious ceremonies. Rather such icons and church decorations were regarded with suspicion, as possible examples of idolatry. In the practice of his religion Ruskin was free of the affecting connection between faith and object that a Roman Catholic would naturally experience.

With his Evangelical, Protestant, background Ruskin could have regarded the visual arts as existing to serve purely utilitarian ends. With regard to the Roman Catholic Church a malign interpretation would be that they helped the church hierarchy propagate a false interpretation of the Christian faith. On a more benign level, as Ruskin had proposed in his previously mentioned description of the mosaics of St. Mark’s, in *The Stones of Venice*, images were a way by which the “common people of the time were taught their Scripture history”.¹⁸ As with those contemporary, explicitly Protestant, works accepted by Evangelicals in his own time, the visual arts could serve as a surrogate for the written word, useful in educating those people lacking other means to understand

¹⁷ Landow, p98

¹⁸ Ruskin 10 (129)

the history and doctrine of the Protestant church.

To have regarded the visual arts as merely an expedient substitute for the written word was, however, not in Ruskin's nature. As stated at the beginning of this essay, it was the direct, emotional, response that Ruskin felt before certain works of art that caused him such concern. The man who had proclaimed in *The Stones of Venice* (1846) that "men in a high state of moral culture are often insensible to the influence of material beauty",¹⁹ was nevertheless disturbed by the potential power of the visual image to corrupt its beholder. As a diary entry of 1849 observed: "There are some ideas of vulgarity, or crime, which no words, however laboured, would succeed in suggesting to a gentle heart or a pure mind; but the brutal painter has the eyes at his mercy".²⁰ This was written after viewing Veronese's *The Marriage at Cana*. As such it serves as a warning to himself, to be wary of the sensuous pleasure he derived from that artist's work. Such pleasure was to be equated with the unedifying hedonism that was itself part of the doctrine of utilitarianism. It was in an attempt to align this deeply felt, and troubling, emotional response to art with his precepts of his Evangelical faith that would lead Ruskin to develop the theory of beauty expounded in *Modern Painters I*, Volume II.

The assertion that, ideologically, Fry could have allowed for the idea of a Utilitarian basis for beauty first requires some explanation. In examining his aesthetic theories I am not arguing that Fry should be placed within any fixed belief system, analogous to Ruskin's early Protestantism. That is, he did not explicitly express a clearly identifiable ideology that was external to the visual arts, and with which his own aesthetic theories had to be aligned. While, in *Modern Painters* Volume II, Ruskin was driven to create a theory of beauty as an expression of man's moral and

¹⁹ Ruskin 4 (210)

²⁰ *Ruskin's Artists*, Studies in the Victorian Visual Economy: Paper from the Ruskin Programme, Lancaster University. Edited by Robert Hewison Ashgate London 2000 p135

religious nature. Fry could state, in his 1920 essay “Retrospect”:

A certain scientific curiosity and a desire for comprehension have impelled me at every stage to make generalisations, to attempt some kind logical co-ordination of my impressions. But on the other hand, I have never worked out for myself a complete system such as metaphysicians deduce from *a priori* principles. I have never believed that I knew what was the ultimate nature of art.²¹

Fry’s lack of preconceived notions as to the purpose of art, and his advocacy of the “scientific method”, suggest an outlook that would be amenable to a Utilitarian view of the visual arts. As with Ruskin, the option was open to Fry to regard works produced for the Catholic Church from a purely sociological perspective. As such they could be analyzed as objects performing a utilitarian role in the advancement of a religious ideology. As seen in the previous chapter, however, Fry consistently sought to distance such works from the direct embrace of Catholic observances and history.

The rejection of a Utilitarian explanation for art was to be a constant feature of Fry’s writing, remaining part of his approach after he became known for his formalist ideas. Here I will briefly mention the influence of two men, in particular, whose theories might have persuaded Fry to adopt a more utilitarian approach to the graphic arts. Like many of his generation, Fry had been influenced by the work of the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen. Published in 1899, Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* had advanced the idea of “conspicuous consumption”. Here Veblen argued that aesthetic appreciation was shaped by: “The requirement of conspicuous wastefulness”. It was this that acted as “a constraining norm selectively shaping and sustaining our sense of what is beautiful, and guiding our discrimination with respect to what may legitimately be approved as beautiful and what may not.”²² This directly functional approach to the question of aesthetic appreciation was certainly of interest to Fry. In his essay “Art and Socialism” (1912), he acknowledged the power of Veblen’s argument, stating that:

²¹ Fry *Vision And Design*, pp229-30

²² Torstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, (ToLc, 1899; reprint Macmillan, 1988) p128

The fact is that the average man uses art entirely for its symbolic value. Art is in fact the symbolic currency of the world. The possession of rare and much-coveted works of art is regarded as a sign of national greatness...The social man, then, lives in a world of symbols, and though he presses other things into his service...he finds in art the richest reservoir of symbolic currency.²³

The high degree of “finish” in a painting, valued by so many patrons of High Victorian art, was an example of just such a functional approach to art appreciation. Part of the aesthetic appeal of these works was derived from the fact that they were a visual expression of the many hours expended in their production. As such they were therefore a direct signifier of their likely expense, and so a clear expression of the wealth and social status of the owners.

Fry was to retain an interest in this sociological explanation for the value given, by society, to the visual arts. In his 1926 book, *Art and Commerce*, Fry mentions Veblen by name, and again expounds on the idea that art, in modern society, retains its importance as a signifier of social class. He writes that:

...the warrior caste in any primitive society had a right to the biggest spoils of successful warfare. A man was known as a member of that caste by the trophies he was able to display...Modern societies have not altogether forgotten these facts, and consequently, the gentleman is known by the hints - sometimes blatant, sometimes subtle - which he throws out to all the world that he possesses spoils and is one of our conquering class.²⁴

Fry therefore recognised that art did indeed fulfil a utilitarian role, both for some members of society and in the wider culture. However he consistently rejected the idea that this was an adequate explanation for the emotional reaction of the individual towards a work of art. He did so by reaffirming the idea in the, previously mentioned, “An Essay in Aesthetics” that there was a distinction to be drawn between; “One the actual [or instinctive] life, the other the imaginative

²³ Fry, *Vision and Design*, pp 229-30

²⁴ Roger Fry, *Art and Commerce* (Hogarth Press, 1932) p. 90

life.²⁵” The view expressed in his essay “Art and Socialism” was to remain a constant throughout his career. Here he stated that “Art as a symbolic currency is an important means of the instinctive life of man, but art created by the artist is in violent revolt against the instinctive life, since it is an expression of the reflective and fully conscious life.”²⁶

Fry and Ruskin therefore both discarded the notion that the role of art was strictly functional, serving as a form of social signifier. In *Modern Painters*, Volume II, Ruskin had also rejected the idea of art as a sensual experience serving a purely hedonistic end. That a devout Evangelical Christian should reject such a purely worldly role for art was understandable. In the case of Fry, it is less clear why he should reject the idea that the main, or only, function of art was simply to provide pleasure for its recipient. Later in this chapter I will argue that Fry, like Ruskin, attached a particular moral value to the appreciation of art that went beyond a simple hedonistic appreciation.

Here I would like to mention the influence on Fry of Professor Denham Ross of Harvard University. Fry had met, and admired, Ross during his time in America. In 1907 Ross had published *A Theory of Pure Design: Harmony Balance Rhythm*.²⁷ Here through the study of non-representational forms, Ross had discussed the question of what attracts the eye to a particular composition, concluding that a composition’s attractiveness was dependent on the unity between a number of formal relationships within that work. Fry referenced the conclusions of Ross in his own examination of pictorial order contained within his essay “An Essay in Aesthetics”. Here he stated that:

One chief aspect of a work of art is unity; unity of some kind is necessary for our restful contemplation of the work of art as a whole... In a picture this unity is due to a balancing of the attractions of the eye about the central line of the picture. The result of this balance of

²⁵ Fry, *Vision and Design* p24

²⁶ *Ibid* p66

²⁷ Denham Ross, *A Theory of Pure Design: Harmony, Balance, Rhythm* (Boston Houghton Mifflin, 1907)

attractions is that the eye rests willingly within the bounds of the picture. Dr. Denham Ross of Harvard University has made a most valuable study of the elementary considerations upon which this balance is based in his "Theory of Pure Design." He sums up the results in the formula that a composition is of value in proportion to the number of orderly connections which it displays.²⁸

For someone educated within the tradition of scientific empiricism, the idea that the mystery of aesthetic appeal is to be found through the application of a certain, pre-determined, formula would have a natural appeal. It is interesting then to examine both why Fry rejects this idea, and how in doing so his own ideas compare with those of Ruskin. In "An Essay in Aesthetics" Fry continues with his summary of the work of Ross. He notes that:

Dr Ross wisely restricts himself to the study of abstract and meaningless forms. The moment representation is introduced forms have an entirely new set of values. Thus a line which indicated the sudden bend of a head in a certain direction would have far more than its mere value as a line in the composition because of the attraction which a marked gesture has for the eye. In almost all paintings this disturbance of the purely decorative values by reason of representative effect takes place, and the problem becomes too complex for geometrical proof.²⁹

Fry, then, seems to initially accept the possibility that Ross's formulaic approach, in determining the cause of aesthetic appeal, might have a realistic application. He then seems to qualify this remark by noting that such an approach is only realistic when concerned with purely abstract art. He then seems to diverge from the advocacy of a purely formal approach to art appreciation. Fry argues that the introduction of representational elements in a work (and here he uses the bend of a head as an example) presents an insurmountable obstacle to any further such systematic investigation into an artwork's innate appeal. Such representation would, he argues, create a situation in which any attempted analysis would become too unwieldy, and unusable.

This appears to be an unlikely concession to the power of representation by Fry. The quoted

²⁸ Fry, *Vision and Design* p35

²⁹ Ibid p35

extracts above, taken from “An Essay in Aesthetics”, represent Fry’s earliest advocacy of a formalist approach to art criticism. Taken to its logical conclusion there should be no innate difference, when adopting such a purely formalist criticism, between the analysis of an abstract artwork, and that of a representational work of art. Why then does Fry seem to adopt a stance antithetical to his own criterion? An answer can be found through examining an earlier reference, made by Fry, in an unpublished lecture, written in 1908 and delivered for a philosophical society at Oxford University. As he writes:

An elaborate system of what we may call aesthetic dynamics has been evolved recently by Dr. Denham Ross of Harvard, explaining the principles upon which unity is attained in works of graphic art, and his theory of pure design is a most important contribution to aesthetics, but he has studied it from the point of view of purely sensuous satisfaction, while I wish to insist that the unity created by the artist is coloured throughout by the emotional values attached to every element of the design.³⁰

This passage reveals, again, Fry’s connection to Ruskin in opposing a strictly utilitarian approach towards aesthetic appreciation. Here Fry decries the methodology of Ross explicitly because it aims towards the understanding of “a purely sensuous satisfaction”. Ross presents a mechanistic and structural approach to art that negates the, empirically unquantifiable, “emotional values” upon which both Ruskin and Fry believe a work of art is dependent.

The idea that Beauty could be derived from Association is one that Fry rejected, in varying degrees, throughout his career. In contrast to Ruskin the belief that art should, and could, be separated from any associated idea was one that deepened over the years. An example of this development can be found in the footnote, added in 1920, to his original 1901 essay on Giotto. In the previous chapter I have described how Fry sought to present Giotto, both in style and imagery, in a distinctly “Protestant” manner. Now in a reprint of this essay in *Vision and Design* he feels able to go further in distancing the art works from the story they present, how they are depicted, and how

they should be appreciated. He notes that:

I should be inclined to disagree wherever in this article there appears the assumption not only that the dramatic idea may have inspired the artist to the creation of his form, but that the value of the form for us is bound up with recognition of the dramatic idea. It now seems to me possible by a more searching analysis of our experience in front of a work of art to disentangle our reaction to pure form from our reaction to its implied associated ideas.³¹

By the 1920s, Fry's intent that artworks should be distanced from wider cultural background had moved on, from their original religious and historical associations, to include the nature of art appreciation in contemporary culture. An example of this is to be found in his June 1925 essay for *The Nation and Athenaeum* titled "The Religion of Culture"; reprinted as the chapter, "Culture and Snobbism" in his 1926 book *Transformations*. This essay uses a review of a collection of essays by the late Sir Claude Phillips, entitled "Emotions in Art", as a starting point for a wider discussion about the nature of the extant cultural establishment.

Sir Claude was a convenient figure around whom Fry could hang his observations. Born in 1846, he had established a reputation as one of the leading art historians of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sir Claude had served as the first keeper of the Wallace Collection and, until his death in 1924, had been the art critic for the *Daily Telegraph*. For Fry, therefore, he represented both the preceding generation and the conventional mores he wished to challenge. Fry does so through the use of an extended metaphor that compares the prevailing "Culture" to an established religion. As he notes of Sir Claude:

He was a charming and witty companion...But like other ecclesiastics, when he entered the Temple indued with his priestly garments, his whole manner changed. His language took on the peculiar unction of almost all devotional writing, and he bowed perpetually before the great Gods of his Temple and rarely alluded to one of them without some time honoured and sanctifying epithet.³²

³⁰ Ibid p35

³¹ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p112

Having set a distinctly ecclesiastical tone with which to review the achievements of Sir Claude, Fry develops his argument. He draws a confluence in type between the nature of that critic's artistic appreciation and religious ceremony. Referencing Sir Claude's work as a critic, in *The Daily Telegraph*, he notes that:

Throughout these pages we hear "the blessed mutter of the Mass"- a Mass in which the names of all the deities and saints and all the great works are brought up in succession. It hardly matters whether Sir Claude Phillips says anything about their works or not; the main purpose is served if one after another their glorious names are brought to the worshipper's mind, in order to arouse his reverent awe and conduce to his edification.³³

It is significant that Fry uses, as a metaphor, the image of the Mass with which to decry the approach to art criticism of Sir Claude. In so doing he develops an idea inherent in his earlier writings on Bellini and Giotto. That is, that there is an "authentic" and an "inauthentic" way in which to appreciate art. A genuine aesthetic appreciation can only be gained by those able to separate the formal qualities of an art work without being swayed by its ceremonial purpose or propagandising intent.

In the essay "Culture and Snobbism" Fry expands on the idea of two distinct types of cultural consumer. He suggests that for many of his contemporaries a specific cultural canon now operated as a form of secular religion. As with its predecessor this new creed worked against an authentic aesthetic appreciation. Fry states that: "Decidedly Sir Claude Phillips was a great High Priest in that religion of culture which is so well adapted to the emotional needs of polite society". Fry then asks "what relation, if any, has this religion to the religion of culture?"³⁴ He answers this question by noting of the work under review:

So far as I can find, there is no single piece of strictly esthetic appreciation in the whole of

³² Roger Fry *Transformations: Critical And Speculative Essays On Art* (Chatto & Windus, 1926) pp56-7

³³ Ibid pp56-7

³⁴ Ibid p58

this book. Not once does Sir Claude come into contact with the actual vision of the artist... Sir Claude did not accept definite images from pictures. He allowed the vision to set up in his mind an emotional state in which the vision itself was lost in the vague overtones of associated ideas and feelings.³⁵

This description of the error made in aesthetic evaluation by Sir Claude, and his followers, aligns Fry closely with Ruskin's earlier assertion that Association could cause an erroneous artistic appraisal. Ruskin had referred to Rational Association and Accidental Association and it seems to be the former that Fry is most clearly referencing in this essay. He attacks those for whom the "religion of culture" is a means of social acculturation rather than individual feeling. He accepts that for such people art does provide a genuine pleasure, but it is a pleasure of a type inconsistent with a genuine aesthetic experience. Rather such emotional rewards they gain from an art work are mediated through a sense of cultural accumulation and social accomplishment. Therefore, like Ruskin, Fry is drawing a parallel between Rational Association and a hierarchical church. As he writes:

No doubt, then, Sir Claude derived a very genuine enjoyment from works of art, but I think that enjoyment was obtained without any direct communion with the artists' sensibility; what he saw and felt was the dramatic interpretation of the scene and its decorative setting, but most of all he felt the status of the work in questioning the hierarchy of art, its cultural value, the exact degree of reverence which it might rightly claim from the devout. Reverence is, indeed, the key to all such religious attitudes, and reverence is, of course, as inimical to true esthetic experience as it is to the appreciation of truth.³⁶

As mentioned, Ruskin made a distinction between Rational Association and Accidental Association; attributing greater power to the latter. In rejecting all forms of Ruskinian Association, Fry does not make any such clear distinction of type.

Where the essay "Culture and Snobbism" deals with "high" art, Fry's 1919 essay for the

³⁵ Ibid pp58-9

³⁶ Ibid pp59-60

Athenaeum, “The Ottoman and the Whatnot” examines the wider field of the furnishing and decoration of the home of a member of the “upper bourgeoisie”. Both classes of object are treated in the same, emotionally detached, analytical manner. In this regard Fry, the twentieth century theorist, is able to present a more consistent approach to the evaluation of an art object’s aesthetic value than Ruskin, the Victorian sentimentalist. In “The Ottoman and the Whatnot”, Fry considers the effect of historical association on the appreciation of “Any works made with something beyond a purely utilitarian aim”,³⁷ and concludes that such objects:

...can either affect our aesthetic sensibilities or they can become symbols of a particular way of life. In this aspect they affect our historical imagination through our social emotions. That the historical images they conjure up in us are probably false has very little to do with it; the point is that they exist for us, and exist for most people, far more vividly and poignantly than any possible aesthetic feelings.³⁸

³⁷ Fry, *Vision and Design* p42

³⁸ *Ibid* p42

Chapter 10

Ruskin and Typical Beauty

I would now like to discuss those positive attributes both Ruskin and Fry believed a work of art should exhibit. I will begin by comparing Ruskin's concept of Typical Beauty with Fry's own formalism. The theory of Typical Beauty advanced in *Modern Painters*, Volume II, represents Ruskin's attempt to align a classical theory of Beauty, (that saw beauty as an objective quality residing within the object itself), with his own theocentric system of aesthetics. Drawing on earlier concepts that emphasised the orderly nature of Beauty (widespread in the eighteenth century)¹ Ruskin argued that such Beauty was itself a symbol of Divine order, or; "the symbolizing of divine attributes in matter".² The theory of Typical Beauty is therefore an attempt to, objectively "briefly distinguish those qualities or types on whose combination is dependent the power of mere material loveliness,"³, all the while claiming that these identified attributes gain their power through their connection to a celestial order. Ruskin identifies six aspects of Typical Beauty, each with its own sub-heading: (1) infinity. (2) unity. (3) repose. (4) symmetry. (5) purity. (6) moderation.

Beginning with "Infinity, "or The type of Divine Incomprehensibility", Ruskin notes in the spectator:

...the love, namely, of a light distance appearing over a combatively dark horizon...the light of the declining or breaking day, and the flakes of scarlet cloud burning like watch fires in the green sky of the horizon... the level twilight behind purple hills, or the scarlet arch of dawn over the dark troublous-edged sea.⁴

¹ See Landow pp115–116. Alexander Pope, Francis Hutcheson, John Dennis and Roger de Piles were amongst those that had emphasised order as an aspect of beauty.

² Ruskin 4 (74)

³ Ibid 4 (76)

⁴ Ibid 4 (79)

Asking what is unique to light effects of this kind he declares, “whatever it be, must be one of the most primal and most earnest motives of beauty to human sensation.”⁵ It is not, Ruskin argues, through forms displayed, positiveness of hue, or intensity of light that:

...this strange distant space possesses its attractive power...But there is one thing that it has, or suggests, which no other object of sight suggests in equal degree, and that is - Infinity. It is of all visible things the least material, the least finite, the farthest withdrawn from the earth prison-house, the most typical of the nature of God, the most suggestive of the glory of his dwelling place.⁶

Having thus equated an observed light effect with infinity, and thence to divinity, Ruskin states that no work of art which presents the possibility to depict such light “can be perfect, or supremely elevated, without it, and that, in proportion to its presence, it will exalt and render impressive even the most tame and trivial themes.”⁷ Ruskin credits all “truly great” painters with following this approach which, as the above sentence indicates, recognises the effect formal values can have on the perception of subject matter. He reserves greatest praise however where subject matter and formal rules are complementary, most notably in “The earlier and mightier painters of Italy, [where] the practice is commonly to leave their distance of pure and open sky of such simplicity that it in nowise shall interfere with, or draw attention from, the interest of the figures; and of such purity that, especially towards the horizon, it shall be in the highest degree expressive of the infinite space of heaven.”⁸

Ruskin now develops his argument for the power of representations of infinity by giving more examples of this quality being manifested in material form; the first of these being; “the

⁵ Ibid 4 (80)

⁶ Ibid 4 (81)

⁷ Ibid 4 (84)

⁸ Ibid 4 (84)

curvature of lines and surfaces”⁹. Here Ruskin is unable to draw a clear connection between his theological and aesthetic ideas (as was the case with distant light and the celestial realm) and so does not insist on the meaning of curvature. Instead he asserts “positively, and have no fear of being able to prove, that a curve of any kind is more beautiful than a right line, I leave it to the reader to accept or not, as he pleases, that reason of its agreeableness which is only one that I can at all trace; namely, that every curve divides itself infinitely by its changes of direction...all forms of beauty are composed exclusively of curves”.¹⁰

This contention brings to mind the work of an earlier English artist’s aesthetic theory. In 1753, William Hogarth had published his work *The Analysis of Beauty* where, amongst other things, he had argued for “the peculiar qualities of these serpentine-lines, and the advantages of bringing them into compositions, where the contents you are to express, admits of grace and elegance...I have distinguished these lines so particularly as to give them the titles of *the lines of beauty and grace*”.¹¹ This similarity was no coincidence. Ruskin was familiar with the work of Hogarth and would reference him throughout his career. In Volume III of *The Stones of Venice* (1853) he would refer to “Hogarth’s reversed line of beauty”;¹² while in his 1858 Cambridge Inaugural Lecture, Ruskin named Hogarth as “one of the greatest painters in our schools of painting in England”.¹³

Ruskin finds another expression of Infinity in the use of colour and tone, noting that; What curvature is to lines, graduation is to shades and colours. It is their infinity, and divides them into an infinite number of degrees. Absolutely without graduation no natural surface can possibly be, except under circumstances of so rare conjunction as to amount to a *lusus naturae*.¹⁴

⁹ Ibid 4 (87)

¹⁰ Ibid 4 (88)

¹¹ William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty*, (London 1753) p52

¹² Ruskin 11 (8)

¹³ Ibid 12.(95)

As “all the graduations of nature are so subtle, and between degrees of tint so slightly separated”, [the artist could only] “suggest the idea of them”.¹⁵ In so doing they should avoid the faults of either depicting, “such continuous lines and colours as are both disagreeable and impossible; or, receiving the necessity of gradation as a principle instead of a fact, use it in violently exaggerated measure, and so lose both the dignity of their own work, and, by the constant dwelling of their eyes upon exaggerations their sensibility to the natural forms... So we find the majority of painters divided between the two extremes of insufficiency and affectation”.¹⁶

For Ruskin, Turner provided an example to emulate. In *Modern Painters*, Volume I, using the depiction of *A mass of mountain seen against the light* as an example, Ruskin noted that “the old masters would have settled the matter at once with a transparent, agreeable, but monotonous grey... Turner only would give the uncertainty; the palpitating, perpetual change... the unity of action with infinity of agent.”¹⁷

The second of Ruskin’s types of Typical Beauty was “Unity, or the Type of Divine Comprehensiveness”. As usual, in *Modern Painters*, Volume II, Ruskin provides a theological justification for his aesthetic theories. All kinds of unity were an expression of a connection to the Divine. Again Ruskin adopts an eighteenth-century idea, this time the widely held opinion that Beauty is an expression of order. So each part of an object must relate to its whole, and each object to the wider composition. It is not surprising therefore that while he names various kinds of Unity, it is Unity of Membership, or, Essential Unity that he describes as “the great unity of which other unities are but parts and means; it is in matters the harmony of sounds and consistency of bodies,

¹⁴ Ibid 4 (89)

¹⁵ Ibid 4 (89)

¹⁶ Ibid 4 (89)

¹⁷ Ibid 3 (294)

and among spiritual creatures their love and happiness and very life in God.”¹⁸

It is out of the need for unity that Variety arises. Variety, in itself, is not a type of beauty. Rather it can add to the quality of unity. Again calling Essential Unity “the most important whether in moral or in those material things with which we are presently concerned”,¹⁹ he observes that “it cannot exist between things similar to each other. Two or more equal things cannot be members one of another, nor can they form part of a whole thing.”²⁰ Such similar objects require a third, different to both, in order to achieve unity. Ruskin gives as an example two arms united by a body. Observing that even then the two arms must be opposed, he concludes that for unity to occur there must be variety; such variety, however, should be received by the beholder as a quality that accomplishes unity. Practical examples of variety serving to fulfil other types of unity are also given. Ruskin refers to a unity of emotion that can be shown when a variation of expression in figures is balanced through their exhibiting similar gestures. Ruskin finds examples of this in early Italian art, with the greatest examples being by Fra Angelico.

Ruskin describes “Unity of Sequence” as the means by which different quantities are connected to each other in certain relations. He describes this connection as “Proportion”. The formal quality Ruskin is concerned with is what he terms “Apparent Proportion”. This he considers:

...one of the most important means of obtaining unity amongst things which might otherwise have remained distinct in similarity; and it may consist with every other kind of unity, and persist when every other means of it fails, it may be considered as lying at the root of most of our impressions of the beautiful. *There is no sense of rightness or wrongness connected with it; no sense of utility, propriety, or expediency.*²¹ (My italics)

The italicised sentence again emphasises that with his theory of Typical Beauty, Ruskin is offering

¹⁸ Ibid, 4 (95)

¹⁹ Ibid 4 (95)

²⁰ Ibid 4 (95)

²¹ Ibid 4 (102)

his own formalist theory of art criticism. The “Apparent Proportion” he refers to appeals visually, rather than intellectually. That is, it is immediate, disinterested and instinctive. This is in contrast with Ruskin’s idea of “Constructive Proportion”, or the adaptation of quantities to function. This appeals to the mind, rather than the eye, and so while it may be an agreeable quality, cannot itself be considered an attribute of beauty. Ruskin concludes his description of Unity by giving a practical example of “Apparent Proportion”. As he has throughout his description of Unity, Ruskin draws on the work of eighteenth-century theoreticians, here returning again to Hogarth and “The Line of Beauty”. Ruskin shares Hogarth’s assertion that curves are more beautiful than straight lines, however not all curves are equal in their beauty. Equal lines and angles have no connection or unity of sequence. The circle is therefore the least beautiful of all curves. Lines that bear some proportion, or in which the angle varies, produce curves that imply connection between the infinitely small segments and so are the most beautiful of curves. The simplest of the beautiful curves are the conic and the various spirals. In looking for man-made examples of constructive proportion, Ruskin turns to architecture rather than painting, such as in his reference to Gothic spires and roofs.

Ruskin’s next example of Typical Beauty is “Repose, or the type of Divine Permanence”. Ruskin writes “Repose, as it is expressed in material things, is either a simple appearance of permanence and quietness...or else it is repose proper, the rest of things in which there is vitality or capability of motion actual or imagined.”²² As the above description implies, and Ruskin admits, “Repose” is not easily defined or illustrated. It lacks the clearly defined physical attributes of previous types, such as light, curvature, and variety that, in turn, could have a readily identifiable artistic expression. Ruskin does however insist on its importance and does so in a manner that draws attention to the many potential faults a work of art lacking in this particular quality could exhibit. He begins by noting that the desire exists “in rightly disciplined minds for the evidences of

repose in external signs...no work of art can be great without it.” He continues:

There is no art...but its results may be classed by this test alone; everything of evil is betrayed and winnowed away by it, glitter and confusion and glare of colour, inconsistency or absence of thought, forced expression, evil choice in subject, over accumulation of materials, pretence, over decoration, over division of parts in architecture...in whatever art, great or mean, there is yet degrees of greatness or meanness entirely dependent on this single quality of repose.²³

Perhaps because of the difficulty in giving precise technical examples of this quality of repose, for both artist and viewer, Ruskin seems here to describe the quality of repose more by its absence than its presence. Concomitantly he seems to attribute moral impropriety to those works of art that are not to his particular taste. A clear example of both these aspects of his criticism is to be found in his treatment of the Laocoön. He begins by informing his reader that:

I believe... that by comparing the disgusting convulsions of the Laocoön with the Elgin Theseus we may obtain a general idea of the effect of the influence, ...[the quality of repose]... as shown by its absence in one, and presence in the other. Of two works which as far as artistic merit concerned, are in some measure parallel.²⁴

Having embarked on a comparison he makes no further mention of the work chosen to exemplify the quality of repose, the Elgin Theseus. However, returning to the work lacking that quality, the Laocoön, he writes: “I suppose that no group has exercised so pernicious an influence on art as this, a subject ill chosen, meanly conceived and unnaturally treated, recommended to imitation by subtleties of execution and accumulation of technical knowledge.”²⁵

²² Ibid 4 (114)

²³ Ibid 4 (117)

²⁴ Ibid 4 (119)

²⁵ Ibid 4 (119)



Plate 12: Athenodoros of Rhodes, Polydoros of Rhodes, Agesander of Rhodes,
Laocoön and His Sons (Vatican Museums)

Some of Ruskin’s criticism of the Laocoön can be related to topics identified in the previous chapter. That he is so vehemently against using the story of the Laocoön as a subject suggests that this is a narrative - a pagan priest, and his sons, being killed by a serpent sent by a pagan god - not readily incorporated into the schematics of Christian typology. In decrying the influence of the Laocoön on artistic style, (subsequent to its rediscovery in 1506), and in placing that influence on “subtleties of execution and accumulation of knowledge”, Ruskin is foreshadowing his complaint in *The Stones of Venice*, that technical skill was to replace sincerity of emotional expression, post-Michelangelo. Separate from subject and technique, however, Ruskin’s objection to the “meanly conceived and unnaturally treated” grouping of the Laocoön does indicate the nature, through its

absence, of repose. The central figure (Laocoön) is shown at a moment of maximum exertion, most clearly bodily, but also emotionally. All of his powers are, vainly, expressed in a singular, dramatic, moment with no intimation of reserve strength, physically or spiritually.

As mentioned, Ruskin had selected the Elgin Theseus to exemplify the quality of repose; then refraining from articulating, in this particular example, why this is so. When he does offer a reasoned argument for a specific sculptural work exhibiting the quality of repose, he moves onto more comfortable ground, both in subject matter and period. As he writes: “In Christian art, it would be well to compare the finer feeling among the altar tombs of the middle ages, with any monumental works after Michel Angelo.”²⁶ He selects as his example a work by the leading sculptor of the Sieneese School, Jacopo della Quercia. The work chosen to showcase repose is that artist’s tomb of Ilaria del Caretto, wife of the ruler of Lucca, Paolo Guinigi. (Lucca Cathedral, c.1406) Ruskin writes of this work: “I name it not as more beautiful or perfect than other examples of the same period, but as furnishing an instance of the exact and right mean between the rigidity and rudeness of the earlier monumental images, and the morbid imitation of life, sleep, or death, of which the fashion has taken place in modern times.”²⁷

Early in this chapter, Ruskin states that one of the greatest pictorial manifestations of repose is to be found in the work of Michelangelo. In a footnote to this chapter he directly compares an example of this artist’s work with that shown in the Laocoön. The work of Michelangelo’s he selects for comparison (taken from one of the corners of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel), is *The Plague of the Fiery Serpents* (Plate 13).

²⁶ Ibid 4 (121)

²⁷ Ibid 4 (122)



Plate 13: Michelangelo, *The Plague of Fiery Serpents*, (Sistine Chapel, Vatican City)

Comparing this work to the Laocoön, Ruskin notes: “the awfulness and quietness of Michel Angelos treatment of a subject in most respects similar...his gigantic intellect reaches after repose and truly finds it, in the falling hand of the near figure, and in the deathly decline of those whose hands are held up even in their venom coldness to the cross.”²⁸ There is a clear theological reason why Ruskin should value Michelangelo’s treatment of his subject above those of the sculptors of the Laocoön. The story Michelangelo illustrates, taken from the Book of Numbers, serves Christian typology as an illustration of repentance, and subsequent salvation. Likewise, the tomb of Ilaria del Carretto, by Jacopo della Quercia, can be placed within a clear Christian context; depicted as in life, and death, she awaits her final judgement, in hope and expectation.

However there are aesthetic, as well as theological, reasons why Ruskin identifies these two works as showing the quality of repose. Both identify an historical moment, when skill and faith

²⁸ Ibid 4 (123)

were in equilibrium. In the case of the Ilaria del Caretto tomb, this moment is placed between the unskilled uniformity of earlier examples and the skilled, yet sentimental and insincere, attempts that were to come later. Similarly, with the work by Michelangelo, Ruskin notes that the artist treats a subject of high drama with restraint, eschewing the potential for dramatic immediacy and intimating at a favourable prospective outcome. The subject of repose therefore demonstrates how interconnected the aesthetic idea and the theological ideal was in Ruskin's theory of Typical Beauty. It also shows how personal taste influenced what were intended to be objective standards. Subject matter certainly plays a part. So too however does personal preference. Ruskin's visceral dislike of the Laocoön expresses a personal distaste for the overtly dramatic and explicitly expressed, in favour of the restrained and implied. That such qualities are themselves difficult to precisely define, and therefore flexible in application, shows the value of the idea of repose to Ruskin's aesthetic theory. A work of art may be placed or removed from the wider canon, according to the viewer's personal preference; the decision being justified by appeal to a higher, supposedly objective, aesthetic standard.

With his next chapter on Typical Beauty; "Of Symmetry, Or The type of Divine Justice", Ruskin returns to a more easily defined, technical definition. As he writes: "We shall not long be detained...as its nature is universally felt and understood. In all perfectly beautiful objects, there is found the opposition of one part to another and a reciprocal balance obtained".²⁹ He explains how this quality is met in practical terms:

Hence the necessity of what artists require as opposing lines or masses in composition...A mass of subdued colour may be balanced by a point of a powerful one, and a long and latent line overpowered by a short and conspicuous one.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid 4 (125)

³⁰ Ibid 4 (125)

Ruskin's further analysis on the artistic representation of symmetry, both when that quality is present and when it is absent, reveal more as to the purpose and temperament that underlies his attempt to define the nature of Typical Beauty. To note the effect of an artistic responding to the need for symmetry he returns to the work of Giotto, writing: "the balance at least is preserved even in pictures of action necessitating variety of grouping, as always by Giotto."³¹

Of the absence of symmetry in an art work he notes:

Where there is no symmetry the effects of passion and violence are increased, and many very sublime pictures derive their sublimity from the want of it, but they lose proportionally in the diviner quality of beauty. In landscape the same sense of symmetry is perceived...even to artificialness, by the greatest men and it is one of the principal sources of deficient feeling in the landscapes of the present day that the symmetry of nature is sacrificed to irregular picturesqueness.³²

In this passage Ruskin is again demonstrating how far his theory of Typical Beauty is grounded in Neo-Classical ideas of beauty as a form of order. In his first volume of *Modern Painters* Ruskin had argued that the sublime could be contained within definitions of the beautiful. Three years later, with the second volume of *Modern Painters*, while he acknowledged that in art and nature the sublime could have a pleasing effect, he still felt compelled to accept the view of his eighteenth-century predecessor, Edmund Burke, that the beautiful and the sublime should be regarded as distinct categories. As previously mentioned, by regarding the appreciation of beauty as a moral act, Ruskin had been obliged to provide an objective, disinterested, set of aesthetic standards. Some aspects of Typical Beauty, such as his ideas on the expression of infinity, could contain within them some aspects of the sublime, such as vastness. The wider understanding of the sublime, however, was of a disordering, emotional, and subjective, aesthetic experience; or, as Ruskin described, "the effects of passion and violence". In rejecting the sublime as an aspect of beauty, Ruskin was

³¹ Ibid 4 (126)

³² Ibid 4 (127)

certainly making a criticism of much contemporary art. It was also however a decision Ruskin was obliged to make through fidelity to his own aesthetic theory. In arguing that Typical Beauty was the manifestation of the divine, in material form, Ruskin was proposing an aesthetic system that was, by its nature, immutable and complete. It was to be accepted alongside, and as part of, his similarly based ethical system. As such it was incapable of the dissolution and subdivision implied in the inconsistent and ambiguous concept of the picturesque, a category that sought to place itself between the beautiful and the sublime as a whole.³³ Ruskin ends this short chapter by drawing a distinction between the quality of symmetry and that of proportion. While proportion is the connection of unequal quantities, symmetry is the opposition of equal quantities.

After Symmetry, Ruskin identifies the next aspect of Typical beauty as “Purity, or the type of Divine Energy”. Again this is a short chapter, this time with little practical instruction. In this chapter the only clear way in which Ruskin relates his ideas of purity to artistic production are in a few short sections on colour where he observes: “If in compound hues any are overpowered and killed by the rest, so as to be of no value nor operation, foulness is the consequence; while so long as they act together, whether side by side, or from pigments seen one through the other, so all the colouring matter employed may come into play in the harmony desired...purity results.”³⁴ In nature, and by implication in artistic practice, he also notes that transparency and lustre, both beautiful in themselves, are incompatible with the highest beauty as they destroy form. It is, he argues, the full perception of form that gives the greater idea of the divinely typical character of the object; more so than colour.

Elsewhere his concept of purity seems both to draw on and contradict aspects of the previously observed types. He writes of purity as a type of divine energy, giving as an example

³³ See Landow pp239 - 40

³⁴ Ibid 4 (128)

light. However it is “not *all* light, but light possessing the universal qualities of beauty, diffused or infinite rather than in points”.³⁵ This argument does seem to gainsay his assertion regarding symmetry that, “a mass of subdued colour may be balanced by a point of powerful one”. Here Ruskin may be concerned primarily with chromatic effect rather than tonal value. A more telling example of contradictory instruction can be found however within the chapter on infinity. Ruskin argues for light as one of the qualities that can communicate this particular type. Here though, (as previously mentioned) he advises the reader that the “absolute necessity . . . is of no more than a luminous distant point”.

Why then does Ruskin describe the use of light in the chapter on purity with such careful notation? Earlier in his chapter on infinity, Ruskin had described the effects of certain light sensations (such as light over a comparatively dark horizon, or the light of a breaking day) as one of the most instinctive and sincere of human reactions. However, according to his previous admonitions against association, light cannot of itself be regarded as a separate source of beauty, as it performs too many obviously beneficial functions. He is forced therefore to have to use light as an exemplifier of other qualities that together exemplify Typical Beauty, most clearly of Infinity, but perhaps also of Symmetry. By making reference to “not *all* light” in this chapter he is implying the exercise of restraint by a force capable of greater power; indeed if purity itself is divine energy then that restraint comes from an origin capable of exercising infinite power. Light here, therefore is used to exemplify the quality of repose. This raises another question; why does Ruskin include the material of light in his chapter on the quality of repose at all?

The reason can be found in the same chapter where Ruskin directly addresses various assumptions that the discussion of purity may raise amongst his readers. He states:

³⁵ Ibid 4 (129)

It may seem strange to many readers that I have not spoken of purity in the sense in which it is most frequently used, as a type of sinlessness. I do not deny that the frequently metaphorical use of it in Scripture may have and ought to have much influence on the sympathies with which we regard it, and probably the immediate agreeableness of it to most minds arises far more from this source than from that to which I have chosen to attribute it.³⁶

This paragraph points to the difficulty inherent within Ruskin's project. In *Modern Painters*, Volume II, he is attempting to reconcile a complete aesthetic theory with a set of theological beliefs, in a manner that makes the understanding, and love, of beauty an allegory for Christian practice and faith. He is doing so for an expected readership of Evangelical Protestants who, like him, are steeped in the metaphorical language of the Scripture and of their own accompanying sermons and commentary. This is a difficult balance to maintain. In this instance, the strength of the "purity" metaphor is such that Ruskin seems compelled to extend his discussion of this type, even at some cost to the consistency of his aesthetic ideas. While in this case Ruskin is able to show a degree of elasticity in his approach, it also points to the underlying brittle nature of the attempt to conflate two separate entities, the aesthetic and the theological, into one coherent message. I mention this here because later in this thesis I will discuss the nature of Fry's attempt to give a moral framework to his own aesthetic system, and why the sources he drew on provided for a much more flexible and adaptable system.

The last of Ruskin's types of Typical Beauty he names as "Moderation, or the type of Government by Law." He places this attribute of Beauty last as he considers it to be a restraint and safeguard of the rest, and in this regard it is the most essential of them all. While Beauty may be obtained without one of its other constituents, the lack of such moderation and restraint is destructive of all beauty. Here, again, the interrelationship between theological and aesthetic concerns seems very apparent. Ruskin refers to "an attractive power, usually expressed by the term

“chasteness, refinement, or elegance.” There is “...an under-current of constantly agreeable feeling, excited by the appearance in material things of a self-restrained liberty”. This is opposed to “the loose, the lawless, the exaggerated, the insolent, and the profane”.³⁷

In works of art Ruskin finds a, partial, application of moderation in the quality of finish, exactness, or refinement. These qualities are desirable as they are time-consuming and require technical ability to accomplish, and so are an expression of care and power. It follows therefore that any work, professing completion, that does not exhibit these qualities can only be favoured through an imperfection of general taste. It should be noted, however, that Ruskin does not regard “finish” as a part or constituent of Beauty but as the full and ultimate rendering of it. As he writes “so that it is an idea only connected with the works of men for all the works of the Deity are finished with the same, that is infinite, care and completion: and so what degree of beauty exist among them can in no way be dependent upon this source, inasmuch as there are between them no degrees of care.”³⁸

From this it is clear that Ruskin had no one set idea of the phenomena called “finish”. If nature contains, within itself, its own perfect standard of finish, which artificial productions can only try to approximate, then the artist is obliged to find the means they believe most appropriate to reflect nature in their own work. Artistic styles may vary widely, but what is important is the sincerity of the artist’s ambition and the veracity of the resultant work to their motif. This explains why Ruskin was able to find an artistic truth in artists with styles as various as Turner and Landseer. It is also a subject I will discuss later in this thesis with regard to Fry and his assessment of the works of Cézanne.

³⁶ Ibid 4 (129)

³⁷ Ibid 4 (140)

³⁸ Ibid 4 (141)

Chapter 11

Roger Fry and Defining Formalism

It was with his introduction of the Post-Impressionists, at the Grafton Galleries exhibitions of 1910-12, that Roger Fry became widely known as Britain's leading advocate of a formalist approach to art criticism. He would later borrow the term "significant form" from his friend Clive Bell's 1914 book of aesthetic ideas *Art*, to define the qualities he sought in an art object. What were the formal qualities valued by Fry, and how do they compare with the previously described formal values advocated by Ruskin?

The closest Fry came to Ruskin, in providing a prescriptive list of those formal qualities a painting should contain, is to be found in his 1909 "An Essay in Aesthetics" (republished in *Vision and Design*). In this essay Fry notes that: "It seems probable that our appreciation of unity in a pictorial design is of two kinds".¹ He identifies these as "decorative unity" and "successive unity". Fry characterises the latter thus: "It depends upon the forms being presented to us in such a sequence that each successive element is felt to have a fundamental and harmonious relation with that which preceded it."² Fry begins by noting that successive unity is familiar to the audience through music and literature. He then identifies the part it plays in the graphic arts. As a first example, Fry refers to certain, scrolled, Chinese landscape paintings, such as those depicting a river's journey to the sea, that are of such length that the whole picture cannot be taken in at once. He notes of this example that "when this is well done, we have received a very keen impression of pictorial unity."³ Fry also suggests that:

¹ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p36

² Ibid p36

³ Ibid p36

In looking at drawings our sense of pictorial unity is largely of this nature; we feel, if the drawing be a good one, that each modulation of the line as our eyes pass along it gives order and variation to our sensations. Such a drawing may be almost entirely lacking in the geometrical balance which we are accustomed to demand in paintings, and yet have in a remarkable degree unity.⁴

With regard to his example of Chinese art, a very broad comparison can be made between Fry's successive unity and Ruskin's second type of Typical Beauty "Unity". Both express the idea that each part of a composition should relate to the wider whole. Further comparisons can be made between Fry's identification of "successive unity" as a component of drawings and Ruskin's own set of formal qualities. Ruskin's own "Unity of Sequence", whereby different quantities are connected to each other in certain relations would be one possible example.

In comparing the formal values of Fry and Ruskin, however, it is important to note that Fry, himself, relegated what he termed "successive unity" to a secondary position. "Successive unity" performed the role, according to Fry, of "merely gratifying our demand for sensuous order and variety".⁵ As previously mentioned, in "An Essay in Aesthetics" Fry had discussed the limitations of Dr. Denham Ross's attempt to devise a concise formula that would explain the "purely sensuous satisfaction" that a work of art could offer. In this same essay he now develops his own ideas more fully writing that:

Let us now see how the artist passes from the stage of merely gratifying our demand for sensuous order and variety to that where he arouses our emotions. I will call the various methods by which this is affected the emotional elements of design.⁶

Fry then proceeds to identify these "emotional elements of design":

⁴ Ibid p36

⁵ Ibid p36

⁶ Ibid p36

The first element is that of the rhythm of the line with which the forms are delineated. The drawn line is a gesture, and that gesture is modified by the artist's feeling which is thus communicated to us directly.⁷

The second element is mass. When an object is so represented that we recognise it as having inertia, we can feel its power of resisting movement, or communicating its own movement to other bodies, and our imaginative reaction to such an image is governed by our experience of mass in actual life.⁸

The third element is space. The same-sized square on two pieces of paper can be made by very simple means to appear to represent either a cube two or three inches high, or a cube of hundreds of feet, and our reaction to it is proportionately changed.⁹

The fourth element is that of light and shade. Our feelings towards the same object become totally different according as we see it strongly illuminated against a black background or dark against the light.¹⁰

A fifth element is that of colour. That this has a direct emotional effect is evident from such words as gay, dull, melancholy in relation to colour.¹¹

I would suggest the possibility of another element, though perhaps it is only a compound of mass and space: it is the inclination to the eye of a plane, whether it is impending over or leaning away from us.¹²

How do these "emotional elements of design" compare to Ruskin's own formalism, as expressed in his concept of "Typical Beauty"? It is the first two of Fry's elements of design that can be most directly compared.

The first of Fry's "emotional elements" is named as the "rhythm of the line". This seems to be the same quality previously mentioned by Fry in his advocacy of drawing as exhibiting

⁷ Ibid p36

⁸ Ibid pp36-7

⁹ Ibid p37

¹⁰ Ibid p37

¹¹ Ibid p37

¹² Ibid p37

“successive unity”. The difference here appears to be in whether primacy is given to the experience of the artist or the spectator. With line used as an example of “successive unity”, Fry seems to place his emphasis on the perception of the viewer. As, previously mentioned, he writes; “the line...gives order and variety to our [the viewer’s] sensations”. With the rhythm of the line used as an example of an emotional element of design, Fry places his primary emphasise on the state of mind of the artist, as they produce their work. As he writes; “The drawn line is the record of a gesture...modified by the artist’s feeling”.

This contradiction between two possible means by which a work of art should be evaluated, the emotional response of the spectator or the feeling of the artist, can be reconciled if the work of art is viewed as a means of emotional communication. As stated, it is in Fry’s “An essay on Aesthetics” that Fry comes closest to defining those formal and objective qualities that an artwork should contain. Yet even here it is emotion, whether received by the viewer or expressed by the artist, that is the crucial factor for Fry in evaluating a work of art.

Again, as previously mentioned, Fry’s use of line as an example of sequential unity can be compared with Ruskin’s own idea of “unity of sequence”, itself part of the Typical Beauty quality of “Unity”. With Fry’s use of line as an emotional element of design another, perhaps closer, comparison to Ruskin is possible. In a December 1918 article for *The Burlington Magazine*, “Line As A Means Of Expression In Modern Art”, Fry examined further the connection between an artist’s emotional state and their use of line. In this essay Fry identifies: “at least two kinds of aesthetic pleasure to be derived from linear design - the pleasure of rhythmic sequence in the line itself, which I call the calligraphic element, and the pleasure derived from the suggestion to the mind of plastic form, which I call the structural element.”¹³

As Fry refers to the “rhythm of the line” in identifying the emotional elements of design it is

the calligraphic use of line that is here significant. Fry notes that; “The calligraphic line is the record of a gesture, and is in fact so pure and complete a record of the gesture that we can follow it with the same kind of pleasure as we follow the movements of a dancer.”¹⁴ Fry argues that in a drawing the artist is forced to find a compromise “between the infinite complexity and fullness of matter” and “the bare abstraction of mind”. It is the artistry of the great draughtsman to:

...obtain a lucid and recognisable order without losing the fullness, the compactness and infinity of life. The quality of line which, while having an intelligible rhythm, does not become mechanical is called its sensitiveness. *And here the most obvious thing is clearly that the line is capable of infinite variation, of adapting itself to form at every point of its course...* there is a possibility of expression in pure line, and its rhythm may be of infinite different kinds expressive of infinite varieties of mood and condition. (My italics).¹⁵

The italicised part of this passage shows a clear connection between Fry’s ideas on line and Ruskin’s argument that the curvature of a line is representative of the quality of Infinity. As previously mentioned, Ruskin had written; “every curve divides itself infinitely by its changes of direction”. Again, as I have previously mentioned, Ruskin’s argument brings to mind the work of William Hogarth and his “Analysis of Beauty”. There is also, therefore, a connection between Fry’s own analysis of the use of line with the earlier English artist and theorist. Indeed Fry’s observation that a line can be followed with the same pleasure that we experience when following a dancer is an analogy that would have appealed to Hogarth.

In his “Analysis of Beauty” Hogarth notes that “It is known that bodies in motion always describe some line or other in the air...And thus having form’d the idea of all movements being of lines, it will not be difficult to conceive, that grace in action depends on the same principle as have

¹³ *The Burlington Magazine* (Dec 1918) pp62-9

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

been shewn to produce it in forms.”¹⁶ And later in the same chapter: “No doubt, as the minuet contains in it a composed variety of as many movements in the serpentine lines as can be put together in distinct quantities, it is a fine composition of movements.”¹⁷ Fry recognised an historical continuity in his criticism when in “Line As A Means Of Expression” he noted “the tendency of English drawing...is to lean towards the calligraphic aspect, and this is no doubt an inherited tradition of English art.”¹⁸

With the second of Fry’s emotional element of design, mass, another connection with the writing of Ruskin can be found. Fry had already stated that with a representation of mass, “we can feel its power of resisting movement”. Elaborating further on the varying effects, produced by the various elements, of emotional design Fry notes that “when these emotional elements are combined with the presentation of natural appearances, above all with the appearance of the human body, we find that the effect is indefinitely heightened.”¹⁹ As previously mentioned, Ruskin had identified “Repose, or the type of Divine Permanence” as the third element of Typical Beauty. As an example of this, “difficult to define or illustrate” quality he had turned to Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel. Fry turns to the same artist, and a work from the same setting, to illustrate his own description of the quality of mass. Fry echoes both the sentiments and the language of Ruskin. He writes: “When, for instance, we look at Michelangelo’s “Jeremiah,” and realise the irresistible momentum his movements would have, we experience powerful sentiments of reverence and awe.”²⁰

A more general comparison can be made between the formal values elucidated by Fry, in

¹⁶ Hogarth, p140

¹⁷ Ibid p147

¹⁸ The Burlington Magazine (Dec1918) p62-9

¹⁹ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p38

²⁰ Ibid p38

“An Essay in Aesthetics”, and by Ruskin in “*Modern Painters*”, Volume II. Ruskin’s concern in his theory of Typical Beauty was to identify “those characteristics of *mere matter*” that could evoke an emotional response from the spectator. That is to say, it is a theory that is, initially, rooted in man’s reaction to the physical environment. This is also true of those emotional elements of design identified by Fry. As he explains in “An Essay in Aesthetics”:

Rhythm appeals to all the sensations which accompany muscular activity; mass to all the infinite adaptations to the force of gravity which we are forced to make; the spatial judgement is equally profound and universal in its application to our life; our feeling about inclined planes is connected with our necessary judgements about the conformation of the earth itself; light again, is so necessary a condition of our existence that we become intensely sensitive to changes in its intensity.²¹

Fry notes that the emotional effect of colour is neither as deep or determined as that of the other elements of design. This is, he argues, because “Colour is the only one of our elements which is not of critical or universal importance to life”.²² For Fry then the initial emotional reaction to the formal values expressed in an art work is “based upon the fundamental necessities of our physical and physiological nature.”²³

This is also true of Ruskin. Where they differ is that with Ruskin that initial, instinctive, reaction is credited to a metaphysical origin, that is “The characters... enumerated are not to be considered as stamped upon matter for our teaching or enjoyment only, but as the *necessary perfection* of God’s working, and the inevitable stamp of his image on what he creates.”²⁴ What is clear however is a wider similarity of approach by both Ruskin and Fry as they discuss their respective formalist criteria. Both identify the physical elements in a work of art: rhythm of line, representation of mass, space, light and colour; and both assume an innate emotional response from

²¹ Ibid p37

²² Ibid p37

²³ Ibid pp39-40

the spectator when these elements are expressed in a work of art. Both men draw on the work of Hogarth and both argue that English painting contains a certain “calligraphic” quality, in both expression and appreciation. They also both recognise the influence of the academic school of practice and criticism, as exemplified in England by the first President of the Royal Academy Joshua Reynolds. In 1905, Fry wrote an introduction to an edition of Reynolds’s fifteen *Discourses*, first delivered to the Royal Academy between 1768 and 1790. Here Reynolds had declared: “The *gusto grande* of the Italians, the *beau ideal* of the French, and the *great style, genius, and taste* among the English are but different appellations of the same thing.”²⁵ This manner of painting he termed the Grand Manner. Through subject matter and style its aim was to transcend the mundane and the particularised, in favour of the elevated and idealised. As Reynolds wrote in his third Discourse, “the whole beauty and grandeur of art consists, in my opinion, in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind.”²⁶

For Reynolds, as with Ruskin and, in part at least, Fry, Michelangelo provided an example to demonstrate his theory. Again with all three it was the Sistine Chapel that provided the particular illustration. Ruskin had used the depiction of the plague of fiery serpents to exemplify the quality of “Repose”. Fry had used Michelangelo’s “Jeremiah”, taken from the same source, to show his idea of mass and, so I have argued, repose. Reynolds’ portrait in the Grand Manner of the actress Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse is credited by Fry as offering proof of Reynolds’ prolonged study of the Sistine Chapel, as he evidently shares the widespread opinion that it was influenced by Michelangelo’s depiction of the prophet Isaiah.

With his introduction to the *Discourses* Fry shows that he shares with Ruskin the belief that

²⁴ Ruskin 4 (143)

²⁵ Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses* (Penguin Books, London 1992) p104

²⁶ *Ibid* pp105-6

the visual arts were open to being evaluated in a systemic manner. Despite his reservations about Reynolds as an art critic, Fry notes that:

...we shall certainly be ready to admit his value as a teacher...Reynolds' contention was that art was not a mechanical trick of imitation, but a mode of expression of human experience, and one that no civilised human society could afford to neglect; that this expression required for its perfection serious intellectual effort, and that, however diverse the forms it might take, it depends on principles which were more or less discoverable in the great masters of the great traditions of past masters.²⁷

Fry however is not uncritical of Reynolds stating that;

Reynolds' limitations are obvious enough to us; for him classical sculpture was summed up in the Apollo Belvedere and the Portland Case, and Italian painting began with Michelangelo and Raphael...he was a child of his time...The two great discoveries made since Reynolds wrote are the discovery of Greek as opposed to Graeco-Roman art, and the discovery of the art of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance.²⁸

Fry then states what was, as I have previously mentioned, a common theme in both his own art history writing and that of Ruskin's in their evaluation of Gothic and early Renaissance art: "Our warmest affections have turned from a later to an earlier stage of that [artistic] development; we love sincerity and intensity of feeling more than the artifices of a careful rhetoric."²⁹

Fry has attempted to define an objective criteria by which a work of art can be evaluated. This formalist approach has however emphasised that the spectator's appreciation of artistic sincerity and strength of feeling is a key factor in giving a work of art its value. As with Ruskin, formal qualities in a work of art are not therefore an end in themselves - that is a means by which the artist can demonstrate their technical ability - but serve as a means to an end. This is the communication of emotion from artist to spectator.

²⁷ Reed pp105-6

²⁸ Ibid pp41-2

²⁹ Ibid p42

Chapter 12

Roger Fry and Impressionism

Having examined the formal values that both Ruskin and Fry sought in an artwork, beginning first with Fry I would now like to discuss how each man envisioned the nature and practice of the artist. A starting point is with Fry's reaction to a style of painting that at first engaged his sympathy. In the retrospective to *Vision and Design* (first published in 1920) Fry looks back on his early career and notes "a brief period during which I was interested in the new possibilities opened up by the more scientific evaluation of colour which the impressionists practised".¹

These new possibilities of a "scientific" form of artistic practice had been described by one of the leading practitioners and theoreticians of French Impressionism, Camille Pissarro, in a letter to his son Lucien in February 1887. He writes:

De Bellio...tells me that research in physics on colour and light can be of no more use to the artist than anatomy or the laws of optics...By Jove if I didn't know how colours behaved from the researches of Chevreul and other scientists, we would not have been able to pursue our study of light with so much confidence. I would not make a distinction between local colour and illumination, if science had not brought it to light. And the same goes for complementaries, contrasts, etc."²

The researcher credited in this letter is the French industrial chemist Eugene Chevreul. As the director of the dye works at the Gobelins Manufactory in Paris he had examined the manner in which the colours of two different objects affect each other, publishing the results in *The Law of Simultaneous Contrast* (1839). In his *On Colours and their Applications to the Industrial Arts* (1864) he produced his colour circle diagram explaining the way pigment colours mix. In his desire to advance what he termed a "scientific" Impressionism (to distinguish it from the "Romantic"

¹ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p232

² Paul Smith, *Impressionism Beneath the Surface* (Orion Publishing Group 1995) pp126-7

Impressionism of Monet), Pissarro also came under the influence of the American amateur artist and theoretician Ogden Rood. In 1879 Rood had published *Modern Chromatics, with Application to Art and Industry*, a work rapidly translated into French and German. Here he advanced a theory of colour vision based on the three constants of purity, luminosity and hue; and in so doing sought to revise Chevreul's taxonomy of primary and secondary colours.³

With his training in the Natural Sciences, this "scientific" approach offered an obvious appeal to Fry. It offered the promise of an explanation for the transcendent emotional effect of a work of art and the empirical means with which to create that effect. Fry's early enthusiasm for Impressionism was also part of a wider cultural shift within British art. Both his interest in the possibilities opened up by this new school of art, and his evaluation of contemporary British art as moribund in nature, put Fry in tune with many members of his generation. As Kenneth McConkey argues:

During the final quarter of the nineteenth century a series of seemingly unrelated events conspired to change the character of Victorian painting...there were sudden tensions of a type not experienced before. This was the result of widespread dissatisfaction with art education, which led students in unprecedented numbers to take the channel packet-boat to learn their craft in Paris. There was dissatisfaction with the Royal Academy and a desire to see its exhibition practices overhauled. There were broader questions of style and subject matter, and new patrons whose taste had to be educated...The increased curiosity for the special prestige of Paris drew French art of all types to London, where it was absorbed by young painters. Impressionist and Salon Naturalist painters like Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley and Jules Bastien-Lepage all worked in London, and the display of their work was an occasion for critical dispute in the community of young painters. More than in previous decades there was a sense of a whole generation physically pressing against its fathers.⁴

On leaving Cambridge, and with ambitions to become a professional artist, Fry was part of this wider movement, in thought, and in attitude. He initially trained as a painter at a small school run

³ See Smith, pp126-7

⁴ Kenneth McConkey, *Impressionism In Britain* (Yale University Press, 1995) pp12-13

by Francis Bate, the author of an 1887 pamphlet “The Naturalistic School of Painting”. Fry found Bate’s intellectual approach sympathetic, with his advice on “how to analyse your impressions than how to move your pencil.”⁵ In January 1892 he followed many contemporaries to France, training for a short time at the Académie Julian in Paris.

In 1894 Fry wrote an unpublished article intended for the *Fortnightly Review* in which he reflected on the nature of this new movement in art, titled “The Philosophy of Impressionism”. In this essay he examines the nature of Impressionism, and here can be seen the beginnings of his disillusionment with this style of painting. Fry began this essay noting that “If as some hold, the word Impressionism is really a useful one, accurately reflecting a certain definite tendency in art, it may be worthwhile to investigate it from a scientific standpoint in order to redeem it from a misuse which would render it valueless.”⁶ He notes in Impressionism the confluence of different schools of thought. He refers first the “Heraclitean theory of the flux of phenomena” and notes in this ancient Greek philosophical idea “the most salient feature of Impressionism”:⁷

The Impressionists realise above all things the truth that absolute rest and absolute identity are mental abstractions and have no counterpart in external nature. He realises that he cannot paint the same river at two different times any more than Heraclitus could step down twice into it.⁸

In this manner the modern artist is in tune with the tendencies in modern thought that view the world as a process. There are no fixed and immutable states of perception. Instead consciousness consists of a series of contingent and fleeting sensory impressions: “in metaphysics, in politics, in ethics, in science - we have exchanged the static for the dynamic position.”⁹

⁵ Spalding p.31

⁶ Reed p12

⁷ Ibid p13

⁸ Ibid p13

⁹ Ibid p13

In parallel with this idea of a constant flux, “the world process is due not to the interaction of separate and self-contained objects, but of objects whose very nature lies in the relations to other things...all our knowledge of the objects of external nature is not really a knowledge of those objects but only of the mutual interaction that takes place between them and ourselves.”¹⁰ It is clear how, with Impressionism, this realisation would affect pictorial depiction. Local colour contrasts and tone were both constantly changing. Each individual artist would perceive these qualities in a personal manner. Therefore there could be no “fixed” representation of any particular object or scene. Two artists could have a simultaneous, yet unique experience of the same scene. The same artist would constantly experience the same scene in a changing manner depending on their time of contemplation. As Fry writes, for the Impressionist “the analysis [is] not of objects of sight but of the nature of visual sensation”.¹¹

Fry continues his essay “The Philosophy of Impressionism” by placing himself alongside the evolutionary view of painting, first expressed by Vasari, whereby there is a continuous move by artists towards a greater pictorial verisimilitude to external nature. As he states:

Common sense, having accepted any innovation, such as for example as linear perspective, will not allow the artist to go back on his own traces...And so the history of painting viewed from this standpoint...is the history of a new series of realms of nature created at each successive step by some original genius and gradually opened up by his disciples for the convenience and delight of the average public.¹²

Where Vasari saw the High Renaissance as the culmination of this process, Fry finds it in the work of the Impressionists.

Fry then seems to accept a basis in optical science for the methodology of the Impressionists. He acknowledges that, in their insistence on the contingent nature of visual

¹⁰ Ibid p13

¹¹ Ibid p13

experience, they are in tune with wider currents of contemporary thought. He views the resulting Impressionist paintings as representing the fruition of a long developing pictorial development. Why then was his enthusiasm for Impressionism as a general style to prove short-lived? There are, I would argue, a number of interconnected reasons. They include both concerns as to how the artist should attempt to depict the external world, the underlying nature of this external reality and, connected to both of these, the question of how a painting should be received by the viewer. I will discuss Fry's thoughts regarding these questions later in this chapter, in relation to Ruskin's ideas on the same subjects. Here I will concentrate on the reason already alluded to in the 1894 essay.

Fry notes that Impressionism no longer views objects within a painting as a selection of carefully balanced, but separate, entities. Therefore one of the compositional results of Impressionism is a breakdown in traditional methods of maintaining pictorial unity. As he writes:

The close and inevitable relation of every object to its surroundings which comes of ceasing to view each object as a separate entity has lead Impressionism to aim at a new unity of colour harmony in their pictures...a unity brought about by the all-pervading influence of the colour and quality of the atmosphere at the particular moment he has chosen to represent.¹³

One of the results of this new emphasis on colour values was the flattening of the picture space.

This effect was further enhanced by the Impressionist treatment of tonal values. As Fry argued;

Here again the Impressionist has proclaimed the importance of the change produced by atmosphere, its levelling tendency, making lights less vivid, and throwing a film of bluish light across the deepest shadows. And for this unifying effect of the medium through which we see, *he has been willing to sacrifice something of solidity, to forgo the full rotundity and insistent modelling of older painters.* (My italics)¹⁴

The words here italicised also return us to Fry's retrospect to *Vision and Design*, and the "new

¹² Ibid p15

¹³ Ibid p16

¹⁴ Ibid p16

possibilities opened up by the more scientific evaluation of colour which the Impressionists practised”.

These words express the central reason for Fry’s rapid disenchantment with Impressionism as a style. As previously mentioned, in his discussion of the emotional elements of design, Fry had judged the elements of mass and line to have greater emotional impact than the use of colour. Having stated his early interest in the potential innovation Impression had to offer, Fry offers his reflections towards this style:

I came to feel more and more the absence in their work of structural design. It was an innate desire for this aspect of art which drove me to the study of the Old Masters and in particular, those of the Italian Renaissance, in the hope of discovering from them the secret of that architectonic idea which I missed so badly in the work of my contemporaries.¹⁵

The reference here to artists of the Italian Renaissance is significant. As mentioned in the previous chapter in the 1890s, Fry was to come under the influence of the American art historian Bernard Berenson. In his 1896 work *Florentine Painters of the Renaissance*, referring to Giotto’s “Madonna Enthroned” (Uffizi), Berenson was to coin the term “tactile values” to describe the viewer’s impression of a figure, or object, presenting real and solid presence within the picture space. It was this quality of architectural volume that Fry found missing within Impressionism. As Christopher Green argues: “Those Impressionists canonized by Fry qualified only if he could think of them as essentially counter-Impressionists.”¹⁶

Thus, among those favoured by Fry was Degas. Here Fry found an artist who was both a pupil of the *École des Beaux-Arts* and an assiduous student of the Old Masters; knowledge of whose works was expanded during his extensive periods of resident in Italy. Degas was only loosely attached to the main body of early Impressionist thought. His work was not primarily

¹⁵ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p232

¹⁶ Green, *Art Made Modern* p180

concerned with either landscape or with expressing the shifting effects of tone, colour and atmosphere. Instead his work was noted for its draughtsmanship; he saw himself as following in the footsteps of Ingres. This was an opinion with which Fry concurred, indeed the critic was to extend Degas's pedigree back further still:

The French, with all their supposed "intransigence," their theoretical love of revolution, are in many ways more traditional than we are. The tradition of Ingres lives in Degas; and how far back through Poussin does that not take us?¹⁷

A more instructive example still of Fry's criticism of Impressionism, as a general style, can be found in the technical manner in which he praises the work of Renoir. In a 1919 essay, published in *Vision and Design*, Fry notes that;

When he chose he [Renoir] was capable of logical construction and vigorous design...Renoir seems to have accepted a very simple general plastic formula...The figure presents itself to his eye as an arrangement of more or less hemispherical bosses and cylinders and he appears to arrange the light so that the most prominent part of each boss receives the highest light...The picture tends thus to take the form of a bas-relief in which the recessions are not into the profound distances of pictorial space, but only back, as it were to the block out of which the bossed reliefs emerge.¹⁸

Here, therefore, it is the implied solidity, if only partially realised, of Renoir's figures that meet with Fry's approval. After touring Italy in 1880-1, already believing that he had "travelled as far as Impressionism could take me",¹⁹ Renoir was to turn to Ingres, Raphael and the Old Masters for new inspiration. It is this later work, in particular, that meets with Fry's approval.

Fry was particularly effusive in his praise for Renoir's *Les Parapluies*, acquired by the Tate Gallery in 1917.

¹⁷ Fry, *Watts & Whistler Quarterly Review*, April 1905

¹⁸ Fry, *Vision And Design*, pp218-9

¹⁹ Oxford Dictionary of Art



Plate 14: Renoir, *Les Parapluies*, (National Gallery London)

It is significant that this was a work completed by the artist in two stages. It was begun in 1880-1 with Renoir still using the bright palette and loose brushwork of his early style. Returning to the work in 1885-6, and influenced by his new found “classicism”, Renoir was to depict the dominant female figure (seen to the left of the frame) in a more clearly defined linear style. In this reworking, the original colours were muted and the umbrellas added. The painting therefore now exhibited those formal qualities favoured by Fry. Previously it had relied on harmonies of colour and tone. Now Fry praised a harmony of rhythm created by clearly defined, solid, structures occupying

pictorial space.

In his essay on Renoir, Fry explains, with evident approval, the formal qualities he finds in the work of Renoir:

Renoir's drawing takes on the same fundamental simplicity [as Cézanne's]. An Ingres arrived at the simplified statement necessary for great design by a gradual elimination of all the superfluous sinuosities which his hand had recorded in the first drawing from nature...His full, rounded curves embrace the form in its most general aspect...He continually increased the amplitude of his forms until, in his latest nudes, the whole design is filled with a few perfectly related bosses...at the end even his smallest studies have structural completeness.²⁰

Fry was to grow increasingly critical of Impressionism as his career progressed, viewing many of its practitioners as producing works that lacked the qualities of "design" he so valued. However this sense that, at its most mundane, Impressionism could simply involve a faithful, but unconsidered, transcription of nature (dismissed by Fry as "naturalism") is also implied in his early work.

Returning to his 1894 essay "The Philosophy of Impression" Fry was to write:

We have still to consider how far even truth to visual impressions is a just aim for the Impressionist, and it must strike the reader that though we have inquired into the nature of Impressionism we have left both art and beauty on one side. Are we then to accept Keat's famous line and, saying that truth is beauty, leave the art of painting as an ingenious and useless branch of the science of optics?²¹

²⁰ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p219

²¹ Reed, p20

Chapter 13

Fry, Ruskin and Aesthetic Emotion

Fry's initial rejection of the contemporary art of the Impressionists in favour of the art of the Italian Renaissance, as the main focus of his study, was because he believed the former lacked, as a general style, the formal qualities he believed a work of art should possess. As shown earlier in this thesis, Fry attributed the intensity of the viewer's emotional response to an artwork to an innate reaction to the expression of these formal qualities. It followed from this that such works as the Impressionists produced would inevitably be lacking in this emotional power. As he stated, this dissatisfaction with work from his own era led him to the study of the Old Masters. I would now like to examine further the question of what Fry considered to be the purpose of a work of art, and therefore to be the purpose of the artist.

I will return here to Fry's reflections on his early career, expressed in the *Retrospect to Vision and Design*. Fry notes that:

In my youth all speculations on aesthetic had revolved with wearisome persistence around the question of the nature of beauty. Like our predecessors we sought for the criteria of the beautiful, whether in art or nature. And always this search led to a tangle of contradictions or else to metaphysical ideas so vague as to be inapplicable to concrete cases.¹

Indeed as a, previously quoted, letter from his time as a student at Cambridge stated "There is a standard of beauty somewhere, and if there is not, the sooner we chuck the whole business the better."² This concern, to define the nature of beauty, can be attributed to the nature of his Cambridge empiricism and his study in Natural Sciences. There is a need to categorise and clearly define a phenomena: in this case, "beauty". This in turn stems from a belief that a particular,

¹ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p236

² Sutton, Vol 1 p110

observed, reaction, such as an emotional response to a work of art, must have a quantifiable cause whose characteristics can be clearly and objectively defined. This search for an objective standard of beauty also implies that, if found, it would elicit a standard, universal response. That is each individual would have an equal capacity to experience aesthetic pleasure. As his thought on aesthetics deepened it was a position he would move away from.

In another letter sent that same week Fry was to concede of his search for an objective standard of beauty: “I do not think art is as simple as I used to think it.” He continues; “*I do not think we have been wont to lay enough stress on the value (as a means, no doubt, but a very important one) of pure aesthetics as apart from the emotional end.*”³ (my italics). Both of these letters were written by Fry in October 1886, soon after his arrival at Cambridge. They show both his early interest in analysing the nature of beauty and his awareness that it was perhaps not a subject amenable to an empirical inquiry, in the manner he could apply to the natural sciences. The italicised section here quoted is particularly significant given his remark in “Retrospect” about “defining the nature of beauty”. It implies that, here, Fry draws a distinction between what may be termed the two sides of that definition. The emotional reaction to a work of art centred on the spectator, and the “pure aesthetics” or formal qualities of a work of art residing in the object itself. This was, of course, a restatement of the traditional conflict between aesthetic subjectivism and objectivism.

I have argued in the first chapter that for Fry, as for Ruskin, the immediate, emotional response each could feel before a work of art was the motivating factor that drove further enquiry and explanation. I have further argued that it was the emotional reaction evoked by specifically Catholic works of art that was particularly problematic, leading both men to develop a “Protestant” interpretation in their approaches to art history and criticism. Amongst this “Protestant” approach

for Fry was the decision to place primary emphasis, in discussing a painting, on that work's formal qualities, at the expense of its historical and social context. In so doing he laid the groundwork for his later, fully formalist theory.

It is unsurprising that the influence of his Cambridge education should, as the second letter shows, move him away from what he termed "the emotional end" of aesthetic investigation towards a concentration of an artwork's self-contained physical properties. As Christopher Green writes: "His [Fry's] Natural Sciences course at Cambridge consolidated a determination to deal only with phenomena".⁴ In this he was opposed to the, then influential, idealist philosophy of his school and Cambridge contemporary J.M.E. McTaggart. Again as Green writes;

From the start, Fry kept out of McTaggart's metaphysical enterprise, preferring to think about concrete "Appearance" rather than in the abstract...Invited to speak to a philosophical society in Oxford nearly forty years later, after McTaggart's death in 1925, he would still find it necessary to place himself on the side of appearances against metaphysics, mentioning "the late Dr. McTaggart" and remarking that he (Fry) had "never understood anything he [McTaggart] expounded to me."⁵

Green also notes however that; "He [Fry] was prepared to contemplate "the Absolute", but only as revealed in phenomena."⁶ This is an acknowledgment that the thorough-going materialism that Fry's 1925 remarks about McTaggart suggest was not the full story. Despite his expressed distaste for metaphysical speculation, Fry rejected the idea that the "merely sensual pleasures" that art could afford the spectator were an adequate explanation for the emotional power they could exert, considering that "the pleasures derived from art were of an altogether different character...more fundamental...felt to belong to whatever part of us there may be which is not entirely ephemeral

³ Sutton, Vol. 1 p110

⁴ Green, p15

⁵ Ibid pp15-16

⁶ Green, p16

and material.”⁷

The reason for returning to these letters, and to this early stage in Fry’s intellectual development, is that the problem of how to reconcile the personal emotional experience an art object could evoke with the reason for that reaction - i.e. the quantifiable, formal qualities in the object itself that meet an objective standard of beauty - remained an ongoing concern of Fry’s. Fry was to describe how he found a way out of this seeming impasse through his encounter with a work on aesthetics by Leo Tolstoy. He was then to synthesis what he considered to be the central insight of Tolstoy (that art was a means to communicate emotion) with his own, already present, analytical instincts to arrive at his formalist theory. Before turning to Tolstoy, however, I would like to return to the early work of Ruskin, and an important differentiation between him and Fry concerning the criteria of the beautiful. As I have stated, questions as to the nature of beauty were a matter of concern and speculation for Fry in the early part of his career. The same was not true for Ruskin. For him that question already had a self-evident answer. In *Modern Painters*, Volume I, in a chapter titled “Of Ideas of Beauty” he addressed the question thus:

Any material object which can give us pleasure in the simple contemplation of its outward qualities without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful. Why we receive pleasure from some forms and colours, and not from others, is no more to be asked or answered than why we like sugar and dislike wormwood. The utmost subtlety of investigation will only lead us to ultimate instincts and principles of human nature, for which no farther reason can be given than the simple will of the Deity that we should be so created.⁸

I will return to this passage from Ruskin, and why it is significant, presently. First, as mentioned, I will discuss the impact of Tolstoy’s book *What is Art?* on the development of Fry’s own ideas.

Tolstoy had originally published his collection of essays titled *What is Art?* in 1896. It was

⁷ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p2

⁸ Ruskin, 3 (109)

translated into English in 1899 by Aylmer Maude, a friend of Fry's. The importance of this work to Fry is made clear in the "Retrospect" to *Vision and Design*. Fry refers to the problem of how to define beauty, previously discussed, noting that:

always this search lead to a tangle of contradictions or else to metaphysical ideas so vague as to be inapplicable to concrete cases.

...Tolstoy saw that the essence of art was that it was a means of communication between human beings. He perceived it to be *par excellence* the language of emotion...a work of art was not the record of beauty already existent elsewhere, but the expression of an emotion felt by the artist and conveyed by the spectator.⁹

The particular passages from "What is Art?" that were to have such an effect on Fry are the following:

In order to define art correctly it is necessary first to cease to consider it as a means to pleasure, and to consider it as one of the conditions of human life. Viewing it in this way we cannot fail to observe that art is one of the means of intercourse between man and man.

Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced or is producing the art, and with those who, simultaneously, previously, or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression...

The peculiarity of this...means of intercourse, distinguishing it from intercourse by means of words, consists in this, that whereas by words a man transmits his thoughts to another, by art he transmits his feelings...And it is on this capacity of a man to receive another man's expression of feeling and to experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based...

Art begins when one person with the object of joining another or others to himself in one and the same feeling, expresses that feeling by certain external indications...

Only if the spectators or auditors are infected by the feelings which the author has felt, is it art.

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colours sounds, or forms, expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art.

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected

⁹ Fry, *Vision and Design*, 236-37

by these feelings and also experience them."¹⁰ (Author's italics)

Fry credits his enthusiasm for Tolstoy's analysis by claiming, first, that it provided a way forward from the endless attempts to define the nature of beauty. As he writes in "Retrospect": "It was Tolstoy's genius that delivered us from this *impasse*, and I think that one may date from the appearance of "What is art?" the beginning of fruitful speculation in aesthetic...above all, his suggestions that art had no special or necessary concern with what is beautiful in nature".¹¹

Having thus credited Tolstoy with having moved the aesthetic argument onto more fruitful ground, Fry notes that Tolstoy, in the same work, has also defined the role of the artist. This is to communicate to the viewer a specific emotion felt by that artist at the time of an art work's creation. The exact date of Fry's reading of *What is Art?* is not known. However Fry does allude to the influence of Tolstoy's work in his, unpublished, 1908 lecture, delivered to a philosophical society at Oxford University, "Expression and Representation in the Graphic Arts." This lecture, in turn, formed a basis for Fry's 1909 "An Essay in Aesthetics" published in the *New Quarterly* and the first statement of his formalist theory. As Fry wrote in "An Essay In Aesthetics";

I have admitted that there is beauty in Nature, that is to say, that certain objects constantly do...compel us to regard it with that intense disinterested contemplation that belongs to the imaginative life...but that in objects created to arouse the aesthetic feeling we have an added consciousness of purpose on the part of the creator, that he has made it on purpose not to be used but to be regarded and enjoyed; and that this feeling is characteristic of the aesthetic judgement proper.¹²

I would now like to return to Ruskin, and three passages taken from *Modern Painters*, Volume I. As with Fry, here Ruskin was to reject the notion that the role of the artist was merely to provide a faithful transcription of nature. In chapter IV, "Of Ideas of Imitation", Ruskin writes:

¹⁰ Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* trans. Maude, (OUP, 1899) pp120-3

¹¹ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p236

Ideas of imitation, then, act by producing the simple pleasure of surprise...the mean and paltry surprise that is found in jugglery. These ideas and pleasures are the most contemptible which can be received from art. First, because it is necessary to their enjoyment that the mind should reject the impression and address the thing represented, and fix itself only upon the reflection that it is not what it seems to be. *All high or noble emotion or thought is thus rendered physically impossible, while the mind exults in what is very likely a strictly sensual pleasure...* To the ignorant, imitation, indeed seems difficult, and its success praiseworthy, but even they can by no possibility see more in the artist than they do in the juggler, who arrives at a strange end by means with which they are unacquainted.¹³ (My italics)

This passage reveals that for Ruskin, as with Fry in his criticism of Impressionism, mimesis is not, in itself, an adequate ambition for the artist. As the italicised sentence shows Ruskin, here at his most Evangelical, is also anxious to distinguish mere sensual pleasure from “All high or noble emotion”. As stated earlier, this was a distinction also made by Fry for whom the “merely sensual pleasure” that art could afford the viewer was an inadequate explanation for the emotional impact an artwork could effect.

The second passage is taken from Chapter V in the same volume of *Modern Painters*, “Of Ideas Of Truth”. Here Ruskin develops the distinction between “truth” and “imitation”. Again here a comparison can be made with Fry. Ruskin states that;

The word Truth, as applied to art, signifies the faithful statement, either to the mind or senses, of any facts of nature...The difference between ideas of truth and of imitation lies chiefly in the following...Imitation can only be of something material; but truth has reference to statements both of the qualities of material things, *and of emotions, impressions, and thoughts. There is a moral as well as a material truth, - a truth of impression as well as of form, - of thought as well as of matter; and the truth of impression and thought is a thousand times the more important of the two.* Hence, truth is a term of universal application, but imitation is limited to that narrow field of art which takes cognizance only of material things.¹⁴ (My italics)

¹² Fry, *Vision and Design*, p39

¹³ Ruskin 3 (104)

¹⁴ Ruskin 3 (133)

The third passage is taken from *Modern Painters*, Volume I, from part 11 chapter 1 of that book, titled “Of Ideas Of Truth In Their connection With those Of Beauty And Relation”. Here Ruskin draws a distinction between two possible aims of the artist. As he writes: “the landscape painter must always have two great and distinct ends: the first, to induce in the spectator’s mind the faithful conception of any natural objects whatsoever; the second, to guide the spectator’s mind to those objects most worthy of its contemplation, and to inform him of the thoughts and feelings with which these were regarded by the artist himself.”¹⁵ Ruskin now asks what it means for the artist to accomplish the first end, and notes:

In attaining the first end the painter only places the spectator where he stands himself; he sets him before the landscape and leaves him. The spectator is alone. He may follow out his own thoughts as he would in natural solitude; or he may remain untouched, unreflecting and regardless, as his disposition may incline him: but he has nothing of thought given to him; no new ideas, no unknown feelings, forced on his attention or his heart.¹⁶

If he is to follow this approach the work of the artist is:

...likely to degenerate into, or rather, in nine cases out of ten, it never goes beyond, a mere appeal to such parts of our animal nature as are constant and common [that is the appeal is only to sensual pleasure]...It also tends to induce constant repetition of the same ideas, and reference to the same principles; it gives rise to those *rules* of art which constantly excited Reynolds’s indignation when applied to the higher efforts it is the source of, and the apology for, that host of technicalities and absurdities which in all ages have been the curse of art and the crown of the connoisseur.¹⁷

This denunciation of mere imitation is contrasted with the artist who attempts to match the second suggested aim of the artist. Here, Ruskin notes:

...in attaining the second end, the artist not only *places* the spectator, but *talks* to him; makes him a sharer in his own strong feelings and quick thoughts; hurries him away in his own enthusiasm; guides him to all that is beautiful; snatches him from all that is base; and leaves him more delighted, - ennobled and instructed, under the sense of having not only

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ruskin 3 (133)

¹⁷ Ruskin 3 (134)

beheld a new scene, but of having held communion with a new mind, and having been endowed for a time with the keen perception and the impetuous emotion of a nobler and more penetrating intelligence.¹⁸

The passage just quoted is very similar, in both language and overall meaning, to that section of Tolstoy's *What is Art?* that had such an effect on Fry. It explicitly states that the aim of the artist should be to communicate their own emotional state with the audience for their artwork. It is therefore also very similar, in language and overall meaning, to Fry's own summary of Tolstoy's influence on his approach to aesthetics that he provided in "An Essay in Aesthetics" and again in "Retrospect". As such it provides a useful point at which to briefly sum up the argument I have made so far in this chapter about the parallel nature of Ruskin and Fry's aesthetic ideas.

It can be seen therefore that, for their own reasons, both Ruskin and Fry sought an objective standard by which to evaluate art. Consequent on this, both men rejected a number of ideas as offering an inadequate basis on which to base an aesthetic system. Both men grounded their own aesthetic theories on an analysis of how the artist depicts the material world. They are both concerned with the nature of the spectator's reaction to certain formal qualities inherent within the artwork, believing such a reaction is instinctive rather than intellectual in origin. Where they differ is that Ruskin and Fry attribute the ultimate origin of these instinctive reactions to different sources. Ruskin did not feel Fry's initial need to question the nature of beauty. His aesthetic was centred on the premise that it was a natural part of divine will that instinctive pleasure should be taken from some material forms, whether occurring in nature or man-made, and not from others. The formal values that Ruskin was to expound in *Modern Painters*, Volume II, related back to this original premise. As has been discussed it was a premise that Fry was to adopt as he developed his own formalism.

¹⁸ Ruskin 3 (135)

This brings us to Fry's realisation that it was the transmission of emotion that was the essence of art. The passages quoted from Part II, Chapter 1 of *Modern Painters*, Volume I, shows, Ruskin preceded both Tolstoy and Fry in defining the role of the artist as the communication of emotion. Ruskin's formalism, as defined in *Modern Painters*, Volume II, was, in effect, a technical description of why certain relationships of line, mass, tone and colour could transmit this emotional content from the artist to the viewer by appealing to innate instincts held by that viewer. This was a position Fry was to adopt in developing and explaining his own formalist theory, albeit by replacing Ruskin's ascription of a metaphysical origin for such innate instincts with his own psychological explanation. As I previously stated, Fry's early desire to find an objective "standard of beauty" implied that, if found and displayed, it would elicit a common response. By naming the transmission of emotion as the defining characteristic of a work of art, Fry is reducing this potential universal reaction to an art object to a more intimate and subjective criteria response relating to the psychological make-up of two individuals.

Chapter 14

Roger Fry and the 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibition

I have reviewed the relationship between the theoretical writings of Ruskin, as expressed in *Modern Painters*, Volumes I and II, and those of Fry, as he developed his formalist approach, because I would now like to discuss a defining period in Fry's career: the two Post-Impressionist exhibitions held in London between the years 1910 and 1913. It was these exhibitions that introduced both new styles of art and the nature of Fry's aesthetic criticism to a wider British public. Fry developed and expanded his critical theory in a series of articles responding to often hostile criticism and widespread scepticism, occasioned by these exhibitions. It is therefore important to remember that, as a prelude to embarking on what was widely regarded as a decisive break from the aesthetic norms of conventional taste, Fry had moved towards, rather than away, from ideas expressed in the mid-nineteenth century by Ruskin.

Writing in 1945 the critic, author, and colleague of Fry, Desmond McCarthy, referred to "the Art Quake of 1910".¹ He was discussing the exhibition "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" held at the Grafton Galleries, Dover Street, London, from the 8th November 1910 to the 15th January 1911, and to the reaction it provoked. In January 1910 Fry had first met Clive Bell, the husband of the artist Vanessa Bell, and himself a writer on art and literature. The three had discussed the possibility of staging an exhibition that would, as Bell was later to recall "show the British public the work of the newest French painters".²

In October of that year Fry, Desmond McCarthy and Clive Bell met in Paris with the intention of selecting works, from both dealers and private collectors, to appear in the proposed

¹ Desmond McCarthy, *Listener Magazine*, February 1945

² Clive Bell, *Old Friends* (Chatto & Windus 1954) p54

exhibition. Fry had not arrived in Paris with a pre-determined list of what particular works to show, as McCarthy would recall he was seeing many of the works for the first time. It was to be, however, a selection demonstrative of Fry's own personal taste in contemporary art. Again, as McCarthy was to note:

In Paris we spent day after day looking at the pictures and nearly all of those which Roger preferred were at our disposal. I remember his raptures. He would sit in front of them with his hands on his knees groaning repeatedly "Wonderful", "Wonderful".³

Further paintings for the exhibition were selected by McCarthy during a trip to Holland and Munich, including a number of Van Goghs acquired from the artist's sister-in-law Mme Gosschalk-Bonger. It was not until almost all the paintings had arrived in London that a name was decided for the exhibition. "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" was decided upon as a matter of expediency, rather than in an attempt to definitively categorise a new school of art. As McCarthy was to recall, under questioning from a journalist Fry was to exclaim "Oh, let's just call them Post-Impressionists, at any rate they came after the Impressionists."⁴

The heterogeneous nature of the works displayed was acknowledged in the opening sentence of the exhibition's catalogue, which stated "The pictures collected together in the present Exhibition are the work of a group of artists who cannot be defined by any single term."⁵ Despite its title, only eight paintings out of the two hundred and six paintings and drawings shown at the exhibition were by Manet. In contrast Cézanne was represented by twenty-one works, Van Gogh by twenty and Gauguin by thirty-seven. Other artists exhibited included Denis, Vlaminck and Roualt. Although the exhibition was to prove so controversial with critics and public alike when judged purely as a selection of contemporary art, Fry's selection was actually quite conservative. No living

³ Desmond McCarthy *Listener Magazine*, February 1945

⁴ *Ibid*

artist was represented by more than eight works.⁶ Many of the works shown were twenty or thirty years old. The exhibition included Picasso, but he was represented by two rather conventional works including *Nude Girl With A Basket Of Flowers*, lent by Gertrude Stein, rather than any works from his Cubist phase. Again only three works by Matisse were displayed, although it was that artist's *La Femme aux Yeux Vert* that was to provoke the most critical comments of the whole exhibition. That the exhibition, as a whole, was to achieve such notoriety was, in itself, a demonstration of how British public and critical opinion had become isolated from developments in Continental art for at least a generation.

The catalogue for the exhibition, written by Desmond McCarthy from notes provided by Roger Fry, attempted to explain the underlying principles of the “new” art to a bewildered public. It began by attempting to distinguish the Post-Impressionists from their recent Impressionist predecessors. What marks out the Post-Impressionists as a distinctive group is that:

In no school does individual temperament count for more. In fact, it is the boast of those who believe in this school, that its methods enable the individuality of the artist to find completer self-expression in his work than is possible to those who have committed themselves to representing objects more literally. This, indeed, is the first source of their quarrel with the Impressionists: the Post-Impressionists consider the Impressionists too naturalistic...Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh all learnt at the Impressionist school...but, nevertheless, the connection of these artists with the Impressionists is accidental rather than intrinsic.⁷

The catalogue goes on to further explain the nature of the difference between these two schools of art. It begins by noting Post-Impressionism began in the 1880s as a reaction against the precepts of the Impressionist school that was, by then, winning its hard won fight for cultural respectability.

Here the catalogue turns to the idea first explored by Fry in his 1894 essay “The Philosophy

⁵ Catalogue for the 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibition

⁶ See J Falkenheim, *Roger Fry and the Beginnings of Formalist Art Criticism* (UMI, 1973)

⁷ Cat. 1910

of Impressionism”, that Impressionism did not represent the radical change in direction its supporters and opponents first thought; it was instead the culmination of a move begun during the Renaissance towards greater verisimilitude towards natural appearance. It states that:

The main current of Impressionism lay along the lines of recording hitherto unrecognised aspects of objects; they were interested in analysing the play of light and shadow into a multiplicity of distinct colours; they refined what was already illusive in nature...But the receptive, passive attitude towards the appearances of things often hindered them from rendering their real significance. Impressionism encouraged an artist to paint a tree as it appeared to him at the moment under particular circumstances. It insisted so much upon the importance of his rendering this exact impression that his work often completely failed to express a tree at all; as transferred to canvas it was just so much shimmer and colour. The “treeness” of the tree was not rendered at all; all the emotion and associations such as trees may be made to convey in poetry were omitted.⁸

This passage reveals the scale of Fry’s ambition with the 1910 exhibition and the sweeping nature of the change in taste that he was hoping to provoke. Although Fry was already expressing his disillusionment with Impressionism as early as the 1894 essay, it was still regarded, amongst both public and critics, as an avant-garde movement whose works were barely assimilated into the wider artistic canon. Here Fry was criticising it as a movement that had already run its course, and from a perspective that many people would have found difficult to understand. For the general public, the argument that Impressionism represented the culmination of a long movement towards fidelity to natural appearance in art would have appeared anomalous. The high standard of “finish” seen in so many Victorian paintings would still, to them, better have represented that quality.

For the many artists and critics still enamoured of Impressionism, the nature of the criticism of that movement in the catalogue would have appeared particularly cutting. In 1904 the Australian artist Mortimer Menpes had published a memoir of his time as a follower of James McNeill Whistler titled, *Whistler as I knew Him*. Here he noted the excitement generated amongst its followers by the possibilities opened up by Impressionism in the 1880s:

⁸ Ibid

We were continually asking one another to guess at what hour such-and-such a picture was painted. A follower would suggest eleven-fifteen - because at that time the shadows were stealing round the hay-stack and forming a particular pattern. The school was becoming scientific. To be able to tell the time of day from a picture was astounding.⁹

As Fry was to state it was the thought of art “becoming scientific” that had first drawn him to Impressionism. It was the resulting possibility “To be able to tell the time of day from a picture” that had helped turn him away from the movement. In describing the Impressionist artist as having a “receptive” and “passive” attitude towards natural appearances, Fry was making a particularly pointed statement. As can be seen from the passage in Menpes’ book, in so doing he was criticising the Impressionist artist, and by implication enthusiasts for that movement, on the grounds of their own choosing. Where they validated an artist and his work through their ability to faithfully transcribe fleeting appearances, Fry was identifying them as mere ciphers for the same reason. This was perhaps one of the reasons for such a visceral hostility to the exhibition expressed by artists and critics that considered themselves to be of progressive cultural opinion.

Having summed up the achievements and the limitations of the Impressionists, the catalogue now turns to the ambitions of the Post-Impressionist artists displayed. It imagines a collective address from these artists to their immediate predecessors, that states:

You have explored nature in every direction, and all honour to you; but your methods and principles have hindered artists from exploring and expressing that emotional significance which lies in things, and is the most important subject matter in art. There is much more of that significance in the work of earlier artists who had not a tenth part of your skill in representing appearance. We aim at that; though by our simplification of nature we shock and disconcert our contemporaries, whose eyes are now accustomed to your revelations, as much as you originally disconcerted your contemporaries by your subtleties and complications.¹⁰

This passage is in accord with Fry’s belief that art is about the communication of an emotional

⁹ Mortimer Menpes, *Whistler as I Knew Him* (A and C Black, London 1904) p16

¹⁰ Cat. 1910

state, experienced first by the artist and then passed on to the viewer of their work. Fry credits Tolstoy for granting him this understanding as to the purpose of art; however, as I have argued, such an idea was already present in the early writings of Ruskin. Significantly this supposed message from the Post-Impressionists also alludes to another connection, between Fry and Ruskin. This is the argument, common to both, that the improvement in the technical skills of the artist, and thus accuracy of depiction, that marked the progress of religious art during the Renaissance was accompanied by a concomitant decline in the religious sincerity that underpinned that artist's production of such works. That is to say the artist, even if subconsciously, prioritised the expression of artistic ability over the communication of an emotional experience of religious faith. This idea, that earlier artistic styles represented a more sincere means of emotional expression, less corrupted by worldliness, is one I discussed in the first chapter, in relation to Ruskin and Gothic architecture and Fry and the Italian primitives. There I related it to the belief, held by both men, that such art was produced by a more authentic religious culture, which they, in turn, identified as essentially "Protestant" in its nature. Although they may have chosen to depict a secular, rather than religious, subject matter, Fry suggests a similar path was followed by the Impressionists. They, like their Renaissance predecessors, have achieved a technical virtuosity in the depiction of actual surface appearance that has "hindered" them from "exploring and expressing that emotional significance that lies in things".

The implication that to return to an earlier age in art history was to return to a more authentic form of representation was continued in the catalogue as it addressed the role of the work of Manet in the exhibition. As the catalogue stated: "Manet, it is true is...regarded as the father of Impressionism. To him Impressionism owes much of its power, interest, and importance."¹¹ Why then is he given primacy of place in an exhibition of Post-Impressionist artists? The reason can be

found in Fry's reaction to the 1906 London, International Society Exhibition where he encountered two later works by Cézanne, *Nature Morte* and *Paysage*, that were to change the direction of his career. I will discuss this encounter later. Here what is significant is the connection Fry made between these works by Cézanne and earlier works by Manet. Reviewing the exhibition for the *Athenaeum*, Fry noted:

From the *Nature Morte* one gathers that Cézanne goes back to Manet, developing one side of his art to the furthest limits. Manet himself had a little of the primitive about him, and in his early works so far from diluting local colour by exaggerating its accidents, he tended to state it with a frankness and force that reminded one of the elder Breughel. His *Tête de Femme* (188) in this gallery is an example of such a method, and Cézanne's *Nature Morte* pushes it further.¹²

In the catalogue Fry develops this earlier assessment of Manet's artistic legacy. As the catalogue (and so Fry) explains;

The artists who felt most the restraints which the Impressionist attitude towards nature imposed upon them, naturally looked to the mysterious and isolated figure of Cézanne as their deliverer. Cézanne himself had come in contact with Manet and his art is derived directly from him. Manet, it is true, is also regarded as the father of Impressionism. To him Impressionism owes much of its power, interest, and importance. He was a revolutionary in the sense that he refused to accept the pictorial convention of his time. He went back to seventeenth-century Spain for his inspiration. Instead of accepting the convention of light and shade falling on objects from the side, he chose what seemed an impossibly difficult method of painting, that of representing them with light full upon them. This led to a very great change in the method of modelling, and to a simplification of planes in his pictures which resulted in something close to linear designs. He adopted, too, unknown oppositions of colour. In fact he endeavoured to get rid of chiaroscuro.¹³

Fry continues with his analysis of the career on Manet:

Regarded as a hopeless revolutionary, he was naturally drawn to other young artists... and through his connection with then and with Monet he gradually changed his severe closely constructed style for one in which the shifting, elusive aspects of nature were accentuated. In this way he became one of the Impressionists and in his turn influenced them.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Fry *Athenaeum*, 13 January 1906

¹³ Cat. 1910

¹⁴ Ibid

Having explained why, and how, Manet was the forerunner of the Impressionist movement, Fry moves on to explain why Manet, in turn, should be regarded, also, as the precursor of Post-Impressionism. Here he credits Cézanne with seizing upon “precisely that side of Manet that the Impressionists ignored...Cézanne aimed first at a design which should produce the coherent, architectural effect of the masterpieces of primitive art.”¹⁵ The argument presented in the catalogue is that Manet has found a new way forward for art by returning to seventeenth-century Spain for inspiration. Cézanne has now carried this progressive torch forward by drawing upon the methodology of an even earlier period of history: quite when I will discuss shortly. The catalogue credits Cézanne with inspiring a new generation of artists who:

...recognise in him a guide capable of leading them out of the *cul de sac* into which naturalism had led them...[however this artist]...did not use consciously his new-found method of expression to convey ideas and emotions. He appealed first and foremost to the eye, and to the eye alone. But the path he indicated was followed by two younger artists, Van Gogh and Gauguin, with surprising results.¹⁶

It is by utilising the methods pioneered by Cézanne that Van Gogh is able “to express in paint his strongest emotions...of conveying the wildest and strangest visions conceived by any artist of our time.” While Fry notes the emotional power of Van Gogh’s work it is still an art that, “in the main accepts the general appearance of nature”¹⁷.

In its assessment of Gauguin, the catalogue notes that he “is more of a theorist [than Van Gogh]. It argues that this is because:

He [Gauguin] felt that while modern art had opened up undiscovered aspects of nature, it had to a great extent neglected the fundamental laws of abstract form, and above all had failed to realise the power which abstract form and colour can exercise over the imagination

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

of the spectator. He deliberately chose, therefore to become a decorative painter, believing this was the most direct way of impressing upon the imagination the emotion he wished to perpetuate.¹⁸

In identifying here Gauguin as an artist who has made a deliberate choice “to become a decorative painter”, Fry seems to be damning with faint praise. In his “An Essay In Aesthetics”, Fry had spoken of “a merely decorative unity” that, again, is capable of “merely gratifying our demand for sensual order”. Now he is suggesting that, as an artist, Gauguin deliberately aimed for this, limited, effect. I will return to Fry, and his assessment of Gauguin shortly, as I believe it gives an interesting insight into his psychological reaction to the criticism the 1910 exhibition generated. In the catalogue, however, Gauguin is still identified as an artist whose work harks back to a more “authentic” age of representation; As Fry notes “In his Tahitian pictures by extreme simplification he endeavoured to bring back into modern painting the significance of gesture and movement characteristic of primitive art.”¹⁹

Fry now turns to the artist he believes has most fully progressed along the path first indicated by Cézanne. He notes that: “In the work of Matisse, especially, this search for the abstract harmony of line, for rhythm, has been carried to lengths which often deprive the figure of all appearance of nature. The general effect of his pictures is of a return to barbaric, art.”²⁰ By crediting Matisse with a return to “barbaric” rather than mere “primitive” art, Fry seems to be suggesting that the artist (in this case Matisse) most far advanced along the path set out by Manet, then Cézanne and Gauguin has to look furthest back into the past to find their artistic equivalents. It would be wrong however to suppose that Fry was overly concerned with establishing such a set schematic chronological order in which to compare artistic achievement across the ages. The term “barbaric”,

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

when applied to art, could, in European terms alone, refer to any of a number of styles and ages in art history that are not in a line of descent from a Classical foundation. As mentioned earlier, the catalogue to the 1910 exhibition compares the paintings of Cézanne to “the masterpieces of primitive art”. As with the term “barbaric”, it is not made clear if Fry was making a specific comparison and if so with whom. A number of possibilities present themselves.

In March 1908 Fry had written a letter to the *Burlington Magazine*, “to enter a protest against a tendency, which I have noticed, to treat modern art in a less serious and sympathetic spirit than which you adopt towards work of the older masters.”²¹ By “modern art” Fry means that art which will “follow straight on the heels of the true Impressionists”, such as Monet. At the 1910 exhibition this art will be termed Post-Impressionist. Here it is termed Neo-Impressionism. More specifically, Fry is referring to the work of Cézanne and Gauguin. Such modern art was, Fry argued; “the work of perfectly serious and capable artists...I can see no reason to doubt the genuineness of their conviction nor their technical efficiency”.²² The letter is intended primarily as a justification of the artistic practices of Cézanne and Gauguin. To this end in the catalogue Fry had drawn an historical parallel, arguing that:

Impressionism has existed before, in the Roman art of the Empire, and it too was followed, as I believe inevitably, by a movement similar to that observable in the Neo-Impressionists—we may call it for convenience Byzantinism. In the mosaics of Sta Maria Maggiore...one can see something of a transformation from Impressionism in the original work to Byzantinism in subsequent restorations. It is probably a mistake to suppose...that Byzantinism was due to a loss of technical ability to be realistic, consequent upon barbarian invasions. In the Eastern Empire there was never a loss of any technical skill; indeed nothing could surpass the perfection of some Byzantine craftsmanship. Byzantinism was the necessary outcome of Impressionism, a necessary and inevitable reaction from it.²³

Fry argues that the process of artistic development that saw Roman naturalism replaced by

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ 1910 Catalogue

Byzantine stylization has been repeated in our own age. As he writes:

Two artists...Cézanne and Paul Gauguin, are not really Impressionists at all. They are proto-Byzantines rather than Neo-Impressionists. They have already attained to the contour, and assert its value with keen emphasis. They fill the contour with wilfully simplified and unmodulated masses, and rely for their whole effect upon a well-considered co-ordination of the simplest elements.²⁴

The idea that in the 1910 catalogue the comparison between Cézanne and Gauguin and “primitives” is a comparison of the Post-Impressionists artists to “Byzantinism” is reinforced through reference to another source. In January 1910, also in the *Burlington Magazine*, Fry had provided an introductory note for his translation of an article on Cézanne by the French artist and critic Maurice Denis, titled, “Cézanne -I.” Here Fry notes that:

M. Maurice Denis discusses at length the position of El Greco in the composition of Cézanne’s art. One point of interest, however, seems to have escaped him. Was it not rather El Greco’s earliest training in the lingering Byzantine tradition that suggested to him his mode of escape into an art of direct decorative expression? And is not Cézanne after all these centuries the first to take the hint El Greco threw out?²⁵

Here then, again, it is the art of Byzantium that acts as the inspiration for Cézanne, with El Greco serving as a conduit for that influence.

It should also be noted that Fry’s view of Byzantine art as drawing its form from a “necessary and inevitable” reaction to Roman naturalism precedes his discovery of the work of Cézanne. As Christopher Green writes:

In a lecture for the Cambridge Extension scheme series “Transition from Classical to Modern Art”, written in 1897, Fry first sets out his view of Byzantine art as a reaction to the naturalism of late Roman painting that, by “a return to elementary symbolism”, provided the “basis of rigid and traditional formalism” necessary for the great development of “the great painting of Italy”, and speculated that such a return might be possible again.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Fry, *The Burlington Magazine*, January 1910

²⁶ Green, p142

All of this would seem to suggest that Fry was drawing a specific parallel with Byzantine art when repeatedly describing the work of the Post-Impressionists as “primitive”. However this is not necessarily the case. The appellation “primitive” was widely used throughout the period of Fry’s career to distinguish European art produced from the late-thirteenth century to the mid-fifteenth century from its, then thought, more distinguished successors. Throughout his career Fry was to hold the Italian primitives in high esteem, arguing that they should be valued for their own qualities, not because they provided an evolutionary path towards the achievements of the High Renaissance. He was to attribute his enthusiasm for Post-Impressionist art to his finding in their work these same qualities. As he explained in “Retrospect”:

I think I can claim that my study of the Old masters was never much tainted by archaeological curiosity. I tried to study them in the same spirit as I might study contemporary artists, and I always regretted that there was no modern art capable of satisfying my predilections. I say there was no modern art because none such was known to me, but at the time there was one who had already worked out the problem which seemed to me insoluble of how to use the modern vision with the constructive design of the older masters. By some extraordinary ill luck I managed to miss seeing Cézanne’s work till some considerable time after his death.²⁷

In a 1919 letter to the current Poet laureate Robert Bridges, Fry was to make explicit the connection he saw between the Italian Primitives and the Post-Impressionists, writing that “I have all my French pictures hung at last, with a few Italian Primitives still left among them. It terrifies cultured people to see that they are exactly the same thing.”²⁸ In that same year Fry was to write of the essential qualities that were to be found in the work of the Italian Primitives, and of the artistic achievements of the natives of one Italian city in particular. As he explains in an essay “The art of Florence”, occasioned by the 1919 “Burlington Fine Arts Club Exhibition of Florentine Paintings”:

It is the great distinction of the Florentine artists that, however much their curiosity about

²⁷ Fry *Vision and Design* p233

²⁸ Sutton, Vol. 2 p451

particular forms may have been excited, their high intellectual passion for abstract ideas impelled them more to the study of some general principles underlying all appearance. They refused to admit to the given facts of nature except in so far as they could become amenable to the generalising power of their art. Facts had to be digested into form before they were allowed into the system... Giotto, indeed, had left the tradition of formal completeness so fixed in Florence that whatever new material had to be introduced it could only be introduced into a deeply recognised system of design.²⁹

It seems then that in relating the Post-Impressionists to “Primitive” artists Fry is speaking of a certain kind of artistic sensibility. This sensibility could be found, as in the case of Byzantine art, when artists moved away from a naturalism that had become excessively technical and empty of feeling content, towards a style more capable of expressing emotional content. In contrast with the Italian Primitives he is admiring a moment in Western art before such a move towards excessive naturalism occurred, when the artist’s desire to express emotion had not yet become subordinated to their aspiration to display their technical ability. Fry is arguing that the work of the Post-Impressionists, now on display, is the result of just such a fundamental change in artistic sensibility. With the art of the Impressionists the long move in painting, that had begun with the art of the high Renaissance, towards ever greater fidelity to natural appearance reached its apogee, and as with late Roman naturalism has no power left to convey personal attitude and emotion.

As Fry writes in the exhibition catalogue:

Before dismissing such pictures as violently absurd, it is fair to consider the nature of the problem which the artist who would use abstract design as his principle of expression has to face. His relation to a modern public is peculiar. In the earliest ages of art the artist’s public were able to share in each successive triumph of his skill, for every advance he made was also an advance towards a more obvious representation of things as they appeared to everybody. Primitive art... consists not so much in an attempt to represent what the eye perceives, as to put a line around a mental conception of the object... The development of primitive art... is the gradual absorption of each newly discovered detail into an already established system of design. Each new detail is hailed with delight by their public. But there comes a point when the accumulations of an increasing skill in mere representation begin to destroy the expressiveness of the design, and then, though a large section of the public continues to applaud, the artist grows uneasy. He begins to try to unload, to simplify

²⁹ Fry, *Vision and Design*, pp. 150-1

the drawing and painting, by which natural objects are evoked, in order to recover the lost expressiveness and life. He aims at synthesis in design; that is to say, he is prepared to subordinate consciously his power of representing the parts of his picture as plausibly as possible, to the expressiveness of his whole design. But in this retrogressive movement he has the public, who have become accustomed to extremely plausible imitations of nature, against him at every step; and what is more his own self-consciousness hampers him as well.³⁰

In the catalogue Fry attempts to explain, to what he anticipates will be a doubtful audience, that while the new style of art “is inevitably disconcerting”, the artists involved do not lack the technical skills of their widely accepted contemporaries. They are, rather, driven by a different impulse. Their art is not an attempt to replicate physical appearance but to discover ways whereby art can regain its expressive power. To defend both the exhibition and the artists involved, Fry has given a highly condensed version of his beliefs about the nature of artistic development and about the purpose of art. Namely, that art moves from an initial desire to represent an emotional reaction towards the desire for ever greater accuracy in representation. As the technical skill of the artist grows and representation becomes ever more lifelike there is a co-responding falling away of the original emotional response. If art consists in the transmission of emotion from artist to viewer there is as also, as a consequence, a co-responding diminution in the viewer’s emotional response to that work of art. These are in essence the arguments advanced by both Fry and Ruskin in expressing their preference for pre-Renaissance over Renaissance art. Here Fry has applied those arguments to the work of the Post-Impressionists.

³⁰ Cat. 1910

Chapter 15

Reaction to the 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibition

The critical response to the 1910 exhibition has been extensively covered. It was the hostile, and often extreme, nature of the reaction to the Post-Impressionist work on display that has helped cement the 1910 exhibition as a key moment in the development of art in Britain. In a letter to his father, dated November 24th 1910, Fry was to comment on the controversy his exhibition had generated:

I have been the centre of a wild hurricane of newspaper abuse from all quarters over this show of modern French art. I fear you would not like the pictures, but I believe them to be serious efforts at a more expressive art than we have had for several centuries. I was much gratified that Fred Brown, the London Slade Professor who has always been rather antagonistic to my ideas and began by scoffing, wrote me a most generous retraction, saying that he had been completely converted to the ideas embodied by these painters. It really is the beginning of a return to Byzantine and Early Christian art and I suppose corresponds with the newer tendencies of thought of the rising generation which are all in favour of constructive rather than destructive thought.¹

Here we can see a reiteration of the argument made by Fry in his 1908 letter to *The Burlington Magazine*; that a parallel should be drawn between the creative drive and purpose of the Post-Impressionists and that of the Byzantine artists in their reaction against late Roman naturalism. The letter also shows Fry's intellectual self-confidence. It emphasises just what a large claim Fry was making for the Post-Impressionists. This particular group of artists, he declared, exhibited a vitality and expressive power not seen in European art for several centuries. Despite the criticism the exhibition has attracted, he remains firm in his belief that he is pointing the way forward, that the "rising generation" are with him and not with the "destructive" critics.

In her 1939 biography of her friend, Virginia Woolf was to reflect on Fry's reaction to the passions aroused by the first Post-Impressionist exhibition. She noted of Fry that:

At the time he was both amazed and amused. He was surprised at the interest that the pictures excited in a public normally indifferent to pictures... Desmond McCarthy records that in the midst of the uproar Roger Fry “remained strangely calm” and “did not give a single damn”. The pictures themselves, in all that they meant, were of absorbing interest to him.²

This, however, was only part of the story. While Fry may have remained sanguine in the face of hostility by the general public, and of critics whose opinions he already held in low regard, some criticism did have an effect. As Woolf relates: “there was one element in all this hubbub that roused Roger fry to anger. That was the attitude of the cultivated classes - the attitude expressed by Wilfred Blunt in his diary.”³

In an entry dated 15th November 1910, Blunt recorded his impression of a visit to the Grafton Gallery. Although it was not published at the time of the exhibition, Blunt’s reaction gives an indicator of how the project was regarded by those Woolf and Fry considered the “cultivated classes”. As Blunt wrote:

To the Grafton Gallery to look at what are called the Post-Impressionist pictures sent over from Paris. The exhibition is either an extremely bad joke or a swindle. I am inclined to think the later, for there is no trace of humour in it. Still less is there a sense of a trace or skill or taste, good or bad, or art or cleverness. Nothing but that gross puerility which scrawls indecencies on the walls of a privy. The drawing is on the level of that of an untaught child of seven or eight years old the sense of colour that of a tea-tray painter, the method that of a schoolboy who wipes his fingers on a slate after spitting on them... Apart from the frames, the whole exhibition should not be worth £5, and then only for the pleasure of making a bonfire of them. Yet two or three of our art critics have pronounced in their favour. Roger Fry, a critic of taste, has written an introduction to the catalogue, and Desmond McCarthy acts as secretary to the show... They are the works of idleness and impotent stupidity, a pornographic show.⁴

It was in response to criticism of this kind, some from former friends and colleagues, that Fry was

¹ Sutton p338

² Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry* (Hogarth Press 1940)

³ Ibid p158

⁴ Quoted in Woolf pp156-7

to develop his formalist theory, this time as it related to specific works and specific artists rather than as an abstract theory. It is important, therefore to have some idea of the nature of the criticism the 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition received.

While Blunt's reaction to the exhibition may seem extreme, his criticism of the exhibition was echoed in many published reviews, most particularly by Robert Ross, the art critic for the *Morning Post*. Ross was an old acquaintance of Fry's. In 1903, as director of the Carfax Gallery, he had organised a successful exhibition of Fry's own paintings. His review of the 1910 exhibition, titled "The Post-Impressionists at the Grafton Gallery: Twilight of the idols" appeared on the 7th November. Picking up on Fry's argument that the aim of the Post-Impressionists was to express emotion, Ross commentated that "The emotions of these painters (one of whom, Van Gogh, was a lunatic) are of no interest except to the student of pathology and the specialist in abnormality". Noting the involvement of Roger Fry in organising the exhibition he declared "a certain feeling of sadness that distinguished critics whose profound knowledge and connoisseurship are beyond question should be found to welcome pretension and imposture." Sharing Blunt's opinion that the works on display should be burnt, "as the source of the plague", Ross ended his review in somewhat apocalyptic tone by noting that the exhibition had opened on the 5th November and that it was evidence of "the existence of a widespread plot to destroy the whole fabric of European painting."⁵

It was the (anonymous) review in *The Times* that encapsulated the general reaction to the 1910 exhibition. It noted:

It is to be feared that when [Roger Fry] lends his authority to an exhibition of this kind, and gives it to be understood that he regards the works of Gauguin and Matisse as the last word in art, other writers of less sincerity will follow suit and try to persuade people that the Post-Impressionists are fine fellows, and that their art is the thing to be admired. They will even declare all who do not agree with them to be reactionaries of the worst type.

⁵ Ross, *The Morning Post*, 7th November 1910

It is lawful to anticipate these critics, and to declare our belief that this art is in itself a flagrant example of reaction. It professes to simplify, and to gain simplicity it throws away all that the long-developed skill of past artists had acquired. It begins all over again-and stops where a child would stop...Really primitive art is attractive because it is unconscious; but this is deliberate - it is the rejection of all that civilisation has done, the good with the bad...It is the old story of the day of Theophile Gautier - the aim of the artist should be "Épater le bourgeois" and by no means to please him! Such an aim is most completely realised by the painter Henri Matisse, from whose hands we have a landscape, a portrait, and a statue...Three are enough to enable us to Judge the depth of the fall, in these strange productions, we will not say from the men of long ago, but from three idols of yesterday - from Claude Monet, from Manet, and from Rodin.⁶

This review, and the comments of Blunt and Ross, identify the main sources of hostility to the 1910 exhibition. They express surprise and regret that a critic of Roger Fry's established, and establishment, reputation should be promoting these works at all. They deplore the lack of, commonly recognisable, technical skill in the art on show. Blunt's comparison of the art of the Post-Impressionists to that of children was shared, by both critics and public. The sincerity the artists displayed was questioned. There was a fear that the whole event was either an elaborate joke staged at the public's expense, or if sincere that the paintings were really the work of artistic charlatans simply unable to create more edifying works. Finally there was the suggestion that even if the Post-Impressionists were both sincere and gifted artists, the project, as articulated by Fry, to undo the acquired skill of centuries and begin anew with a simplified, but more expressive art, was simply not possible. The artists involved could not deny their place in the chronology of an historical process of artistic development, and pretend to the innocence of a previous age. Some of Fry's answers to these criticisms were already contained in the exhibition catalogue. Others were delivered in a series of three articles published in *The Nation* magazine during the run of the show.

The general question of curatorial and artistic sincerity was one that could only be taken on faith. In an article for *The Nation* published on the 19th November 1910 Fry responded to this

⁶ Quoted in Woolf pp154-5

accusation, writing:

I have been accused of a strange inconsistency in admiring, at one and the same time, the accredited masterpieces of ancient art and the works here collected together, which are supposed to typify the latest and most violent...reactions against tradition which modern art has seen. Without being much interested in the question of my own consistency, I believe that it is not difficult to show that the group of painters whose work is on view at the Grafton are in reality the most traditional of any recent group of artists. That they are in revolt against the photographic realism of the nineteenth century, and even against the tempered realism of the last four hundred years, I freely admit.⁷

Reviewing the press reaction to the exhibition in 1920, Fry still felt that the artists and his own sincerity had been questioned through a failure by many to recognise the consistency in Fry's aesthetic concerns and the historical precedent for the work of the artists involved. As he said:

If I may judge by the discussions in the press to which this exhibition gave rise, the general public failed to see my position with regard to this movement was capable of a logical explanation, as the result of a consistent sensibility. I tried in vain to explain what appeared to me so clear, that the modern movement was essentially a return to the ideas of formal design which had almost been lost sight of in the fervid pursuit of naturalistic representation.⁸

Perhaps the most common form of derision directed at the Post-Impressionists was that their work resembles that of children. This was a common refrain of both critics and public. In her biography of Roger Fry Virginia Woolf, recorded that "Parents sent him childish scribbles which they asserted were superior to the work of Cézanne."⁹

In many ways this was a strange criticism to make. The connection between the Post-Impressionists and child art had already been made by Fry himself, both, by inference, in his "An Essay in Aesthetics" two years previously and, more directly, in the exhibition catalogue. In his 1909 essay, and keen to stress the distinction between the imaginative and real life, Fry had noted:

⁷ *The Nation*, 19th November 1910.

⁸ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p 234

⁹ Woolf, p154

That the graphic arts are the expression of the imaginative life rather than a copy of actual life might be guessed from observing children. Children, if left to themselves, never, I believe copy what they see, never, as we say, “draw from nature,” but express with a delightful freedom and sincerity, the mental images which make up their own imaginative lives.¹⁰

In the exhibition catalogue Fry, again, make this point, but this time drawing a more direct parallel between the considered aims of the Post-Impressionists and children’s art. He writes:

Primitive art, like the art of children, consists not so much in an attempt to represent what the eye perceives, as to put a line round a mental conception of the object. Like the work of the primitive artist, the pictures children draw are often extraordinarily expressive. But what delights them is to find they are acquiring more and more skill in producing a deceptive likeness of the object itself. Give them a year of drawing lessons and they will probably produce results which will give the greatest satisfaction to them and their relations; but to the critical eye the original expressiveness will have vanished completely from their work.¹¹

Fry then is arguing that the natural development in a child’s expressive and technical ability in art mirrors the process undergone in Western Art. In the early stages the power of expression is dominant. This expressiveness then becomes subordinated to an increased power of representational likeness. With both the child’s art and, Fry suggests, with the work of recognised artists, those lacking in critical awareness will welcome this development, while those more attuned to expression in the arts will not. With the child this early expressiveness is a naturally occurring phenomenon. With artists, as Fry states, “here we are dealing with men and not children”.¹² Therefore, as mentioned previously in his 1908 letter to the *Burlington* and again in the catalogue, the desire to recapture the expressive power of art necessitates a conscious retrogression in the powers of representation.

This conscious decision to return to the expressiveness of the primitives raises the question suggested by *The Times* reviewer. Was such a deliberate return to a previous state of artistic

¹⁰ *Vision and Design*, p26

¹¹ Cat. 1910

development even possible, or was it the case that “Really primitive art is attractive because it is unconscious”? This question recalls a somewhat similar debate sixty years earlier following an exhibition, at the Royal Academy, of works by John Everett Millais and his fellow Pre-Raphaelite William Holman Hunt. In a letter to *The Times*, John Ruskin had defended the artists against what he regarded as the “scornful as well as severe” criticism they had received. It should be pointed out that the specific grounds for Ruskin’s defence of the Pre-Raphaelites was for reasons directly opposed to Fry’s defence of the Post-Impressionists. For Ruskin, Millais and Hunt were to be praised not for sloughing off the conventions of naturalism, but for showing a greater fidelity to natural appearance than had been recognised by the critics. As Ruskin argued:

The pre-Raphaelites intend to surrender no advantage which the knowledge or invention of the present time can afford to their art. They intend to return to early days in this one point only...they will draw, either what they see or what they suppose might be the actual facts.¹³

What can be compared however are the reasons and motivations behind Ruskin and Fry’s advocacy for the two respective groups of artists, and also their defence of the artistic motivations that drove both movements.

As with Fry and the Post-Impressionists, Ruskin claimed in his defence of the Pre-Raphaelites to be primarily motivated by aesthetic, rather than wider, cultural considerations. As he said in his letter regarding Millais and Hunt’s possible religious inclinations “No one who has met any of my writings will suspect me of daring to encourage them in their Romanist and Tractarian tendencies.”¹⁴ Next both Ruskin and Fry saw both movements as a necessary reaction against the conventions of an art form that had lost vitality. As Ruskin wrote “from Raphael’s time to this day

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ruskin, Letter, *The Times* 13th May 1851

¹⁴ Ibid

historical art has been in acknowledged decadence.”¹⁵ Finally there was Ruskin’s retort to critics he regarded as mistaken for “presupposing that the intention of these men was to return to archaic art instead of archaic honesty.”¹⁶ This latter quote is very close in spirit to Fry’s defence of the Post-Impressionists as artists driven to find new artistic ways of expressing emotional truth. Taken as a whole, Ruskin’s defence of the Pre-Raphaelites shows again his belief that pre-Renaissance art had an emotional sincerity, religious in nature, that was later lost. As I have argued previously, this was also a belief shared by Fry, an idea that drew on the Protestant belief of an original Christian church that was essentially Protestant in nature, but that was later corrupted by Catholic dogma, and practice.

In his first article for *The Nation*, Fry himself draws a comparison between the Post-Impressionists and the movement Ruskin had defended. He argues that the artists displayed at the Grafton Gallery had achieved what before had only been hinted at, noting that:

They represent, indeed, the latest, and I believe the most successful, attempt to go behind the too elaborate pictorial apparatus which the Renaissance established in painting. In short, they are true pre-Raphaelites. But whereas previous attempts - notably our own pre-Raphaelite movement - were made with a certain conscious archaism, these artists have, as it were, stumbled upon the principles of primitive design out of a perception of the sheer necessities of the actual situation.¹⁷

The November 19th article in *The Nation* also addressed one of the central concerns of those who had reacted so negatively to the Post-Impressionist exhibition. As Fry himself stated:

Why should the artist wantonly throw away all the science with which the Renaissance and the succeeding generations have endowed mankind? Why should he wilfully return to primitive or, as it is derisively called, barbaric art?¹⁸

For Fry the answer to this question was clear. As he continued: “The answer is that it is neither

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ *The Nation*, 19th November 1910

wilful nor wanton but simply necessary, if art is to regain its power to express emotional ideas, and not to become an appeal to curiosity and wonder at the artist's perilous skill."¹⁹

This was the same basic answer that Fry had given before, both in his "An Essay In Aesthetics" and in the exhibition catalogue. His concerns about an art based purely on representational skill can be found as early as his 1894 essay on Impressionism. What is noteworthy is that in each case Fry was framing the debate as a matter purely concerned with the internal dynamics of artistic development. This was not so with the wider audience for the exhibition. In their review of the debate aroused by the 1910 Post-Impressionists exhibition, Ian Dunlop and William C. Wees show how far the paintings on display fed into other un-related public anxieties.²⁰ These included the questions of Irish Home Rule, the Suffragette movement, industrial unrest and public morality. For the physician and artist T.B. Hyslop, the paintings on display were the work of the insane, and those who supported them threatened future cultural wellbeing. Writing in *Nineteenth Century* on January 9th 1911, he declared: "Degenerates often turn their unhealthy impulses towards art, and not only do they sometimes attain to an extraordinary degree of prominence but they may also be followed by enthusiastic admirers who herald them as creators of new eras in art."²¹ This article was, in turn, based on a lecture recently given by Hyslop that Fry had himself attended. As Virginia Woolf recorded: "Dr Hyslop lectured on the exhibition in Roger Fry's presence. He gave his opinion before an audience of artists and craftsmen that the pictures were the work of madmen. His conclusions were accepted with enthusiasm."²²

Here I will return, and expand on, an earlier used quote. Previously I drew a brief comparison between Fry's ideas as expressed in "Ideals of a Picture Gallery", published while he

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Dunlop, *The Shock of the New*, (W&N 1972) and Wees *Vorticism & the English Avant-garde* (MUP, 1972)

²¹ *Nineteenth Century* Jan 9th 1911

was director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a passage from “Retrospect” published thirteen years later. I did so to argue for a consistency of approach with regard to art appreciation. That is, how the spectator’s sensibility before an art work was of more value than any historical knowledge of that object. In the context of the immediate reaction to the 1910 Post-Impressionist’s exhibition, the full quote gives an important insight into a related, but somewhat different, aspect of Fry’s writing. This is how ingrained the approach to art history developed by Fry in his evaluation of the Italian Primitives was; and how it was naturally transferred to other schools of art. Writing in 1920, about the events of 1910, Fry was to note that;

The accusation of anarchism was constantly made. From an aesthetic point of view this was, of course, the exact opposite to the truth, and I was long puzzled to find the explanation of so paradoxical an opinion and so violent an enmity. I now see that my crime had been to strike at the vested emotional instincts. These people felt instinctively that their special culture was one of their social assets. That to speak glibly of Tang and Ming, of Amico di Sandro and Baldovinetti, gave them a social standing and a distinctive cachet. This showed me that we had all along been labouring under a mutual misunderstanding, *i.e.* that we admired the Italian primitives for quite different reasons. It was felt that one could appreciate Amico di Sandro when one had acquired a certain considerable mass of erudition and given a great deal of time and attention, but to admire a Matisse required only a certain sensibility. One could feel fairly sure that one’s maid could not rival one in the former case, but might by a mere haphazard gift of Providence surpass one in the second. So that the accusation of revolutionary anarchism was due to a social rather than an aesthetic prejudice.²³

This extract is very significant of a feature of Fry’s thought that deserves further consideration.

With the benefit of hindsight - and this passage comes after ten years of reflection - it is not just Fry who would have found so much of the reaction to the 1910 Post-Impressionist overwrought and at times even hysterical. However, at the time, the basic premise that underlay much of the criticism would not have seemed so far-fetched. Many people perceived the Post-Impressionists as representing a fundamental break with established artistic convention. Why should not a radical

²² Woolf p157

²³ Fry, *Vision and Design*, pp234-5

change in artistic practice also, at its most extreme, presage a similarly radical change in social convention, or at least be an understandable cause of social unease? This fear echoes that nineteenth-century fear discussed earlier, that exposure to Roman Catholic art could in some way lead to a corruption or weakening of Britain's Protestant faith. There are two points that arise out of this 1920 reflection that require further development and I will examine each in separate chapters. The first, alluded to by Fry, is the social context against which the 1910 exhibition appeared. The second is Fry's reference to erudition and social standing. I believe both points give an insight into the nature of Fry's own particular Protestant approach to the question of aesthetic appreciation.

Chapter 16

The Social Uses of Art

The shock of the 1910 Exhibition was in part due to the wider power for good then invested in it. That there was an intimate connection between cultural expression and other aspects of human behaviour was certainly something that the previous generation had been raised to believe, not least by Ruskin. This belief was not, of course, unique to Britain. However, as has been noted, Britain was a Protestant country, lacking in a long established tradition of explicitly religious art that it could draw on in periods of social uncertainty. Moreover Britain was also a country undergoing profound economic, political and social change. A newly moneyed and greatly expanded middle-class was anxious to assimilate artistic taste with social position. I have previously referenced the work of Dianne Sachko Macleod in relation to this point. Here I would like to further extend the analysis of the connection between art and the wider society and how it was used to address one of the greatest anxieties of the age.

The extension of the franchise in 1867 had given a new urgency to the perceived need to create a more unified national culture. It was in the 1860s that Matthew Arnold had published *Culture and Anarchy*, in which the appreciation of the arts was given the power to add to the stability of the nation. Here he had written: “Through culture seems to lie our way not only to perfection but even to safety... We nevertheless may do more perhaps, we poor disparaged followers of culture, to make the present, and the frame of society in which we live, solid and seaworthy, than all our bustling politicians can do.”¹ A concrete example of this linkage between social concerns and artistic expression was provided, in 1901, with the founding of the Whitechapel

¹ Arnold, quoted in Francis Borzello, *Civilising Caliban; The Misuse Of The Arts 1875-1980* (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1987)

Art Gallery. The Whitechapel Art Gallery grew out of a social theory that was put to a practical test. The social theory was that of cultural philanthropy and the test came with a series of fine arts exhibitions, organised by the Rev. Samuel Augustus Barnett, and held at St. Jude's School, Commercial Street, Whitechapel, every year from 1881 to 1898. It was from these exhibitions that the Whitechapel Gallery was to take its early ethos, and sense of mission. It is useful to briefly examine the intellectual background to the idea of cultural philanthropy, and the fears it sought to address.²

Late Victorian society had seen the emergence, in both Britain and continental Europe, of degeneracy theory. This counterpoint to evolutionary theory argued that evolutionary progress could be undone by regressive processes. It paid particular attention to the supposed degenerative dangers in modern industrial society and the seemingly remorseless growth in urbanisation and concomitant growth in numbers of the urban poor. This was a fear that united men of religion and science. The founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth, had compared East Enders with "African pygmies", while the scientist and humanist T.H. Huxley was to liken them to "Polynesian Savages".³ It is with regard to this theory that the earlier referenced fears expressed by Dr. Hyslop should be placed.

There was a directly evangelical side to Barnett's activity. On becoming vicar of St. Jude's, Barnett was to discover that 95% of East Enders never attended a church. For this he blamed the church, stating; "We may as well face the fact that our forms of service have ceased to express the religious wants of the people".⁴ For Barnett, art exhibitions offered a new, more effective, way of spreading the Christian message. Barnett had also been influenced by the writings of Ruskin and

² See Borzello p32-39

³ Briggs & McCartney, *Toynbee Hall The First Hundred Years* (Routledge & Kegan 1984) p19

⁴ Borzello p33

Arnold and saw art as both a potential unifying force in society and a means to challenge the dangers of degeneration. If, as Ruskin had argued, art was the visible sign of national virtue, then it followed that exposure to the finest examples of art would be conducive to increased personal virtue. At the root of the theory of cultural philanthropy therefore was the call for the cultural enlightenment of the working class. As such it offered an alternative to the more traditional approach to charity. Unwilling to accept, for the time being, the need for the State to assume some responsibility for social welfare, instead it was widely argued that giving money to the poor had a demoralising effect on them, sapping their will to work and lowering their moral standards. In her memoir of her husband, Charles Booth, Mary Booth was to write of the attitudes at the time: “The simple, warm hearted, and thoughtless benevolence of former ages was held up to reprobation. Those who desired to help the poor were exhorted not to give their money, still less food and raiment, but to give themselves, their time and their brains.”⁵ Poverty was to be blamed on moral deficiency as much as moral deficiency was to be blamed on poverty. Cultural philanthropy would improve the character of the poor, refine their minds, make them more responsible and thus break this circle.

The first of the East End fine arts exhibitions ran from the 14th to the 22nd of April 1881, and were held at St. Jude’s School, Commercial Street. Despite a three pence admission fee, ten thousand East Enders passed through the turnstiles during this period. Canon Barnett’s experiment was deemed a success and the following year the admission fee was abolished, leading to a threefold increase in visitors. The exhibitions were to become a regular feature of the East End spring until 1898, and in 1901 the Whitechapel Fine Arts Exhibition was given permanent form with the opening of the Whitechapel Art Gallery.

⁵ Ibid p33

The shows organised by Barnett were of a high quality. Works by the pre-Raphaelites seem to have been particularly favoured. In 1883 Holman Hunt's *Strayed Sheep* and his *The Light of the World* were shown side by side. The symbolism of the lost sheep and the good shepherd who could guide them back to the flock was clear. Other artists to be exhibited included Turner, Rubens and Canaletto. Social realism was not allowed. The purpose of the exhibitions was to present to the East End poor an uplifting alternative to the often depressing realities of their lives. As Barnett wrote to his brother: "Artists don't look at fact to find truth. Those that do look at fact, like Zola, look to find horror and sensation."⁶ It was with the catalogue Barnett prepared for the exhibitions that he saw a special opportunity to spread his message. This was not to be an exercise in art appreciation, but a means to explain the moral message he believed the paintings contained. Barnett himself admitted that he had little sense of aesthetic appreciation, telling his wife: "This century expects every man to understand art, so we talk a little about it. I am conscious of failure to really value it."⁷

Consequently, biographical or stylistic information in the exhibition catalogues was rare. Writing of Rossetti's *Marigolds*, shown in the 1887 exhibition, Barnett noted:

A typical picture in the so called "aesthetic School", in a room in which all is perfect and beautiful harmony, even to the marigolds which repeat the colour of the girls hair. Everything is in good taste, not because it has cost much money but because it has cost much thought.⁸

The message being directed to the Whitechapel poor here was obvious. Barnett also shared the traditional English appreciation of landscape painting; however this was not for stylistic and aesthetic reasons, but because it was deemed to offer an idealised alternative to life in the East End. Attempts were made to connect the East End poor to the scenes depicted. *Evening on the Hills*, by H.E. Bowman, exhibited in 1884, was described as: "A landscape such as may be found in Surry,

⁶ Ibid p30

⁷ Ibid p59

within twenty miles of Whitechapel”.⁹

The East End fine arts exhibitions proved to be a social, as well as a popular, success. The future prime minister, Lord Rosebery, was to deliver the opening address at the first exhibition in 1881. Other open day speakers during the run of exhibitions included William Morris in 1884, Henry Irving in 1891 and the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1893.¹⁰ The list of lenders to the exhibitions was also indicative of its success and included Royal Academicians, philanthropists such as Henry Tate, Members of Parliament, dealers, clergymen and the aristocracy. As noted, the culmination of these exhibitions was the opening, in 1901, of the purpose built Whitechapel Art Gallery. It represented a concrete expression of the belief in the civilising power of art and its potential to affect behaviour and create a common culture. The opening address for the new gallery was given by the man who had spoken at the beginning of this social experiment twenty years earlier, Lord Rosebery. His speech expressed the guiding hopes behind the theory of cultural philanthropy. As he noted:

If you offer this civilising agency, these rooms, this gallery, as a place where a rough fellow who has nothing else to do can spend his time, you offer him an option which he has not had before and which if he avails himself of it cannot fail to have the most favourable results. You cannot test these things by mere results in figures. If you put £100 into an investment of this kind, you can only sow a seed, believing and hoping that it will bring up its crop in time.¹¹

This background gives added weight to Fry’s observation that the reason the 1910 post-Impressionist exhibition was so controversial was because the members of a particular social class found their individual “social assets” threatened. As previously noted, in reference to the work of Dianne Sachko Macleod, for at least two generations preceding Fry’s exhibition the collecting and

⁸ Ibid p63

⁹ Ibid p67

¹⁰ Ibid p65

¹¹ Ibid p20

displaying of contemporary art was part of a cultural pattern. The newly moneyed middle classes had found in art a means of expressing and cementing the dominance of their own values. Through the collection of art, and widespread dissemination of reproductions, these values had been helped to be communicated to an expanded national and international audience.

The theory, and practice, of cultural philanthropy shows this was a continuing process as Meacham notes. In his essay “The Intellectual Aristocracy”,¹² Noel Annan argues that several generations of Victorians, bound together by ties of kinship and friendship, also came to share a set of common ideals and reforming ambitions. They belonged to what the historian Harold Perkin has labelled a “fourth class”, distinct from the landed aristocracy, the entrepreneurial middle class, and the industrial working class. These were the sons of the growing professional upper-middle class and gentry¹³. They shared a common culture, a public school education grounded in the universality of Christianity and the classics. They saw their role as to provide a disinterested national leadership that could reconcile the conflicting interests of class and create a new social consensus. The nature of this new social consensus was to be “defined by those who took upon themselves the task of redefinition”¹⁴, and art was to be one of the tools at their disposal.

Fry himself belonged to this very class of people, as did many of those whom he had identified, and who self-identified, as “the cultured public”. In staging the Grafton Galleries exhibition, and displaying works that were both technically innovative and that contained no clear moral message, Fry was therefore challenging much more than any given individual’s personal taste or sense of social position. He was seen as either negating, or holding up to ridicule, the intellectual, emotional and material investment that a significant part of society had made in the cultural value

¹² Noel Annan *The intellectual Aristocracy* in J.M. Plumb (ed.) ‘Studies in Social History – A tribute to G.M.Trevelyan’ (Longman & Co London 1955)

¹³ See Standish Meacham, *Toynbee Hall and Social reform 1880-1914* (Yale University Press 1987)

¹⁴ Meacham p2

of art, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. That so many had recently considered Roger Fry a reliable guide through the complexities of the art world seemed to have added insult to injury. As Fry noted:

I found the cultured public which had welcomed my expositions of the works of the Italian Renaissance now regarded me as either incredibly flippant or, for the more charitable explanation was usually adopted, slightly insane. In fact, I found among the cultured who had hitherto been my most eager listeners the most inveterate and exasperated enemies of the new movement.¹⁵

If mainstream public opinion in the decades preceding Fry's 1910 exhibition was one that had facilitated such social experiments as Barnett's East End exhibitions, then there had also been a countervailing artistic current. Drawing on the work of the philosopher Victor Cousin, who first coined the phrase "art for art's sake", the Aesthetic movement had emerged in Britain in the 1860s and would challenge the perceived worthiness regarding the role of art in society that the theory of cultural philanthropy exemplified. I do not propose to discuss in depth the history of the Aesthetic movement in late nineteenth-century England. However it is useful to compare what are regarded as the basic sensibilities of the movement with Fry's own attitude towards the place of art in the wider society.

In this regard the figure of James Abbott McNeill Whistler provides a useful starting point. In his 1890 work *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, Whistler stated what may be taken as the basic creed of the Aesthetic Movement, writing:

Art should be independent of all claptrap - should stand alone and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like. All these have no kind of concern with it, and that is why I insist on calling my works "arrangements" and "harmonies".¹⁶

¹⁵ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p234

¹⁶ Whistler, Chapter 'The Red Rag' *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London 1890) William Heinemann

These views seem very close to those of Fry, as either directly expressed or demonstrated in his art criticism, at least since his evaluation of Bellini. With Fry's writings, the idea that a work of art should be evaluated as an entity in its own right, independent of wider societal concerns, can be traced back to his adoption of the methodology of both Berenson and, above all, Morelli. Should Fry's promotion and defence of the Post-Impressionists be viewed, then, as the critic taking part in already well-established debate: here on the side of Whistler and so, by implication, against Whistler's erstwhile court opponent, Ruskin? Two essays written prior to the 1910 exhibition suggest that this is not the case. Instead, as I will argue, they will indicate a closer connection between Fry and those advocates of art's moral mission than either side would first realise.

It was only six years previous to the 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition opening that the most nationally revered contemporary artist, George Frederick Watts, had died. Watts' work had received both great critical and popular success. As an artist he was acclaimed both for his technical skill, (comparisons with Michelangelo were common), and for investing his work with a moral purpose, whether directly or through allegory. For this later reason he was a popular choice for the Rev. Barnett's series of East End Exhibitions.

Fry had, himself, considered the achievement of Watts in an article for *The Quarterly Review* (April 1905), titled "Watts and Whistler". This essay was written one year before Fry's discovery of the work of Cézanne and in his analysis of Watts' artistic achievement Fry seems to be at a point of balance in his criticism between the past and his future direction. Perhaps because Watts avoided explicitly Catholic imagery, the fact that his work was expressly didactic and made use of symbolism to express metaphysical notions is not at this point in time as problematic for Fry as it would become. Fry therefore feels able to acknowledge the power of associated ideas, but praises Watts for rendering these ideas in a pictorial, rather than literary form. Thus "for the most part, Watts's allegories do convey a definite idea in purely pictorial language by relying on the

associated ideas of the objects represented; and these ideas gain immensely in their appeal to the emotions by the manner in which they are rendered, that is to say, by purely pictorial and not literary elements in the work of art.”¹⁷

The idea that certain spiritual values could be expressed in a purely pictorial form was one that looked back to Fry’s earlier essay on Giotto and the Arena Chapel. Here Fry had given certain images clearly associated with the Christian narrative, such as the “Noli me tangere”, and turned them into representations of more universal themes, in this case with Mary Magdalene representing the concept of longing. As previously noted, with regard to Giotto and the Arena Chapel, such a clear separation between the literary and the pictorial forms as Fry attempts is itself problematic; raising the question of how far previous, literary, knowledge of a subject does influence final pictorial impression.

As said, however, the influence or otherwise of previously acquired associated ideas on aesthetic judgement was one that was of greatest concern to Fry in the early part of his career. In this essay Fry speculates about Watts’ future reputation, and considers that technically Watts will be judged as a “great improviser” rather than a “supreme creator”. The difference being that:

The great creators revealed some new aspect of form, and discovered some new rhythm. They expressed great conceptions in forms moulded anew specially to fit them, while the improvisers modified and adapted to the expression of their own conceptions material that had already been quarried.¹⁸

Comparing this passage to his defence of the Post-Impressionists, it seems the qualities that Fry found missing in Watts’ work were the ones he was to find in the works displayed at the 1910 exhibition. This impression is strengthened towards the end of “Watts and Whistler”, as Fry continues to outline the deficiencies he found in Watts’ work. As he writes:

¹⁷ Reed p35

¹⁸ Ibid p37

Watts stopped short of [a] penetrating intelligence of form. He felt keenly the main scaffolding of his design, ...but he could not go on to fill out the main masses with a content expressive throughout its whole texture...The design in its main line is almost always grand, but it is not completely woven. With him generalisation means to often abstraction.¹⁹

Fry's comments on Whistler in the 1905 *Quarterly Review* article can be taken in conjunction with an appreciation of his work, occasioned by the artist's death, published in *The Athenaeum* in July 1903. Here Fry begins by praising the "artistic probity" of Whistler, noting that:

There are certain things that are the essence of the painter's craft, and whoever neglects these in order to point a moral, or do indulge a craving for cheap sentiment, or to satisfy an idle curiosity, is guilty, however unconsciously, of an imposture. It was these essential qualities of pictorial art that Mr. Whistler insisted on to a generation that demanded bribes to the intelligence and the emotions before it could pocket the insult of pictorial beauty.²⁰

This praise however seems limited to a particular context, this being the overt moralising and sentimentality of so much of the popular art of the period. As Fry said "...Mr Whistler's mordant humour turned for him the vague idealism and the sentimental romanticism of his day to utmost ridicule."²¹ Fry then turns to his main criticism of Whistler's aesthetic beliefs as expressed in that artist's 1885 "Ten O'Clock Lecture". It was here, Fry contends, that Whistler: "Threw over much that belongs to the scope of pictorial art, and narrowed unduly his view of its legitimate aim."²²

In his "Ten O' Clock Lecture", Whistler had stated a version of the argument, already mentioned, that he would make in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. In the lecture he stated that:

Beauty is confounded with Virtue, and before a work of Art is asked: "What good shall it do". Hence it is that nobility of action, in this life, is hopelessly linked with the merit of the work that portrays it - and thus the people have acquired the habit of looking, as who should say, not at a picture but through it, at some human fact that shall, or shall not form a social point of view, better the mental, or moral state - so we have come to hear of the painting that elevates, - and of the duty of the painter of the picture that is full of thought - and of the

¹⁹ Ibid p38

²⁰ Fry, *Mr Whistler* 'The Athenaeum' July 1903 pp133-134

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

panel that merely decorates.²³

There is much here that Fry would agree with, principally that subject matter, and hence utility, should not be confused with artistic merit. It is with Whistler's refusal to distinguish between art and decoration that a fundamental disagreement occurs. As Fry notes in his 1903 essay on Whistler:

Along with sentimentality, which he rightly saw as the bane of our age and country, he denounced all sentiment, all expression of mood in art, until he arrived at the astounding theory, enunciated in his "Ten O Clock," that pictorial art consists in the making of agreeable patterns, without taking account of the meaning for the imagination of the objects represented by them... The forms presented were to have no meaning beyond their pure sensual quality.²⁴

As seen earlier when proposing his formalist approach, Fry had rejected the idea that "sensual pleasure" should be the ultimate purpose of art. In reproving Whistler for failing to distinguish between sentimentality and sentiment in art, he was accusing the artist of failing to distinguish between the trite and contrived attempt to gain popular approval and the sincere emotional response of the artist toward their subject that was a necessity in the production of a true work of art.

Moreover Fry emphasises the centrality of the natural motif for the artist. He notes of Whistler's theory:

as a working theory for an artist of extraordinary gifts it was unfortunate, since it cut away at a blow all those methods of appeal which depend on our complex relations to human beings and nature; it destroyed the humanity of art. What Mr. Whistler could not believe is yet a truth which the history of art impresses, namely, that the sight is rendered keener and more discriminating by passionate feeling-that - that the cold abstract sensual vision which he inculcated is, in the long run, damaging to the vision itself, while the poetical vision increases the mere power of sight.

In his criticism of Whistler's theory, therefore, Fry comes close to the language of Ruskin.

For both Fry and Ruskin an intense, emotional, engagement with the natural world is a necessity if the artist is to move beyond either mimesis or abstract sensuality, that "mere power of sight"²⁵

²³ Whistler, "*Ten o'clock*" – Public Lecture given at Princes Hall London 20th Feb 1885

²⁴ Fry, *Mr Whistler* The Athenaeum July 1905 pp133-134

²⁵ Ibid

offered to the ordinary artist, and instead to communicate the “poetical vision” of the truly great artist. In claiming that, at times, Whistler could achieve this greatness Fry draws on the reply directly made to Whistler’s “Ten O Clock Lecture” by the poet and critic Algernon Charles Swinburne. Thus Fry notes of Whistler that: “the painter himself was not up to his own theories. As Mr. Swinburne pointed out at the time, he infringed them flagrantly by expressing in his portrait of his mother a tenderly filial piety which transcends the facts of an arrangement in black and grey.”²⁶

In his 1905 summary of the achievements of Watts and Whistler, Fry returns to Whistler’s art theory. Here in a style redolent of Ruskin, he castigates Whistler in religious terms. He writes:

Whistler’s creed was absolute and unbending. He asserted the unique nature of the sense of beauty, its uselessness, its separation from all other human faculties, and its supreme claims...If there be such a thing as a religion of beauty, Whistler was its hierophant. To an unbelieving and sentimental generation he proclaimed its severe and unaccommodating dogmas with all the paradoxical insolence of a true prophet. The world laughed; and the terrible irony of his situation lay in the fact that, on the main issue, a stupidly emotional world was right and the prophet wrong. For beauty cannot exist by itself; cut of from life and human realities it withers. It must send down into other layers of human consciousness and be fed from imaginatively apprehended truth, as in religious art, or from human sympathy, as in dramatic art, or from a sense of human needs and fears in the face of nature, as in all great landscape art.²⁷

Given what Fry writes here, it is useful to turn to an analysis of the 1910-12 Post-Impressionist exhibitions given by Charles Harrison in his book *English Art and Modernism 1900-1910*.

Discussing the diversions that the Post-Impressionist exhibitions both provoked and exposed amongst British artists and critics, Harrison states that:

the significant argument was between those like Fry and Bell who saw progress in art as involving the assertion of the autonomy of aesthetic experience, and those like Sickert who felt that art needed to be underwritten by the security of its references to a world of “gross material facts”...The fiercest arguments were thus those which centred not so much upon the works themselves as upon the aesthetic criteria employed to distinguish them. How was the “aesthetic response” to be separated out from other responses? By what was it provoked? How were values to be recognized and established? How was art itself to be recognized?...the defenders of Post-Impressionism appeared, for all their involvement in the

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Reed p26 - 27

latest French art, to be asserting common cause with the Whistler of the “Ten O’ Clock Lecture”.²⁸

A discussion of the aesthetic theories of Clive Bell, or of other supporters of Roger Fry during and after the Post-Impressionist exhibitions, would be outside the remit of this dissertation. It is clear though that Harrison argues for a direct connection between the aesthetic ideas of Fry, that underlay his promotion of Post-Impressionism, and those of Whistler, as proposed in his “Ten O’ Clock”. However, as the quoted extract from Fry’s essay on Watts and Whistler shows, five years before the first Post-Impressionist exhibition Fry had decisively repudiated Whistler’s credo of “art for art’s sake”, one shared with the Aesthetic Movement. He is in fact arguing that it is essential for art to be connected to something beyond itself, those “other layers of human consciousness”. This something could be the dramatic arts, religious belief, or a reaction to the “gross material facts”²⁹ presented to the artist by the natural world. It was Sickert who coined the previous phrase, and in so doing he was arguing that the artist should engage with all aspects of modern, urban life. Fry, in contrast, emphasises the role of the natural world in inspiring landscape. He therefore places himself closer to the language and ideas of Ruskin, rather than those of Sickert. It is noteworthy also that Fry writes of “Imaginatively apprehended truth” when referring to the possible sources of artistic inspiration, in particular religious inspiration. This echoes both Fry’s and Ruskin’s approach to the work of the Italian primitives. Here both men valued the sincerity that came from an instinctive marrying of religious emotion and artistic practice. It was this that produced the formal qualities so valued by Fry, which found their exemplar in the works of Giotto. In contrast, while later artists had greater technical ability, their intellectually derived stylistic approach lacked the sincerity and psychological insight of their predecessors. A consistency of approach can therefore be found

²⁸ Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (Yale University Press 1981) pp48-50

²⁹ Sickert, *Idealism* in ‘Art News’ 12 May 1910

between Fry's early writings on the Italian primitives, his 1905 assessment of Watts and Whistler and the arguments put forward in defence of the Post-Impressionists.

Chapter 17

Roger Fry and The Defence Of Post-Impressionism

Was Fry consistent in his defence of the works displayed at the 1910 Post-Impressionists exhibition? Here we can turn to another of Fry's reply to his critics, this one given in an article published in *The Fortnightly Review* May 1st 1911. This article serves as the most complete contemporary encapsulation of his theoretical defence of the Exhibition, given as a direct address to his critics. Fry begins by dividing the audience for the exhibition into three categories:

First, those who, like myself, admire it with enthusiasm. Secondly, those who think the exhibition is a colossal farce got up for the deception and exploitation of a gullible public... Finally... the class of those who are frankly puzzled, and yet inclined to doubt the explanations of fraud or self deception which are put forward by the second group. In the main, I mean to address myself to this last class, to the intelligent but doubting inquirer.¹

Having identified his audience Fry turns first to the question of artistic integrity. Here he compares the Post-Impressionists favourably with those artists who commit:

...the sin of compromising with the public demand for pictures which arouse curiosity or gratify sentimental longings. This sin is so frequently and so openly committed by the artists of modern times that we scarcely feel indignant at it, we certainly do not rush to denounce it in the papers in the way that has been done of late with regard to the works in this Gallery.²

Fry thus begins his defence of the Post-Impressionist artists by contrasting their artistic sincerity with that of artists who would pander to popular taste.

With this in mind it is worth noting that in reply to the critical reception the Exhibition received, the artist that Fry was least willing to defend was Paul Gauguin. In his December 3rd 1910 article for *The Nation*, Fry wrote:

¹ This article was delivered as a lecture at the Grafton Gallery at the close of the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition. Reed, p99

² Ibid pp99-100

Of Gauguin I find it harder to speak. With him one must make excuses and concessions if one is to be perfectly honest...I do not always feel sure of the inner compulsion towards the particular form he chooses. I cannot shake of an occasional hint of self-consciousness. Of the desire to impress and impose; in fact, of a certain rhetorical element.³

There is a clear implication here that Gauguin's work exhibits those faults already denounced in others; namely that it is designed to pander to an audience rather than being the result of an artist following an inner conviction. Fry seems further confirmed in this opinion of Gauguin when noting that he was one of the few artists to have received critical praise during the exhibition. He observes that the Director of the National Portrait Gallery, C.J Holmes:

...has put out a little pamphlet on the exhibition...It is welcome as being a quite sincere and open minded effort at a just appreciation of the works on view, and the artists, so far as they are represented at the Grafton Gallery. But Mr. Holmes seems to me too much of the schoolmaster. He goes round with a set of principles, applies them in turn to each of the pictures, and reads of the result. He finds Cézanne clumsy, frequently incoherent, and, though a sincere artist, of modest rank...I cannot withhold admiration for the courage of Mr. Holmes's patronising estimate of Cézanne, in view of the almost complete unanimity of opinion among foreign critics in giving him a much more exalted position...Gauguin naturally gets rather good marks from Mr. Holmes. His qualities are, indeed, more easily estimated by the critic's measuring line than those of more elusive and spontaneous artists.⁴

As well as showing Fry's own ability to make patronising estimates of others, this aside on C. J. Holmes reveals something of Fry's own attitudes at the time of the 1910 exhibition. He clearly sees himself as performing a missionary role, bringing news of already critically sanctioned continental art to a parochial and unenlightened audience. It also points to an apparent contradiction in Fry's aesthetic philosophy. Again it is implied that Gauguin is something of a formulaic artist, producing work to meet an already established and easily quantifiable standard. In contrast Cézanne is praised as an artist producing works that are not so readily reducible to such a mundane and mechanical analysis as that provided by Holmes. Fry's expressed formalism should place him in sympathy with Holmes's approach, that a work's value can be gauged through rational measurement of objectively

³ Fry, *The Nation* 19th Nov 1910

defined quantities. Instead he seems to adhere more to the Romantic notion of the artist as an individual of transcendent imagination, spontaneously producing art in response to their emotional reaction to the natural world. This was to remain an often noted contradiction in Fry's formalist philosophy and one I will address shortly.

Returning then to the summation of Post-Impressionism in the May 1911 *The Fortnightly Review* article, Fry here proposes that Post-Impressionism is an attempt to provide a solution to a problem, explaining that

My object in this lecture is to try to explain what this problem is and how these artists are, more or less consciously attempting its solution. It is to discover the visual language of the imagination. To discover, that is, what arrangements of form and colour are calculated to stir the imagination most deeply through the stimulus given to the sense of sight.⁵

In praising the artistic integrity of the Post-Impressionists, Fry was reiterating themes already discussed. He had already written how emphasis on ever more accurate natural representation, while arousing the viewer's curiosity and admiration, came at the cost of a lessening of the artist's power to express emotional conviction. As said, alongside this Fry rejected any attempt to appeal to the viewer through anecdotal and sentimental subject matter. In both these regards, Fry was in accord with ideas already advanced by Ruskin.

What I wish to look at now is how, while appealing to those members of the public agnostic about the art presented at the 1910 Exhibition, Fry returns to and then expands on previous themes. First is his, previously mentioned, rejection of Whistler's belief that beauty, and by that he meant art, could exist "cut off from human life"⁶. As I have mentioned, parallels have been drawn between Fry's formalism and the creed advocated by Whistler in his "Ten O' Clock". Such a connection was denied by Fry in essays published before the 1910 Exhibition. As Fry both formulated and clarified

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

his own aesthetic ideas in the wake of reaction to this exhibition, did he maintain this distance from Whistler?

In his essay for *The Fortnightly Review*, Fry re-emphasises the distinction he had already made in his 1909 “An Essay In Aesthetics”; that a distinction is to be made between the actual (or instinctive) life and the imaginative life. He states that it is to the latter that the artist should directly speak. This is achieved not through work aiming for a direct likeness to external nature, but through the expression in the work of certain formal qualities. I have also previously discussed the type of formal elements Fry believed constituted the “visual language of the imagination” and thus what an artwork should contain if it were to “stir the imagination”. Again I have compared these formal elements to Ruskin’s own formalism, as expressed in his idea of “Typical Beauty”.

Having thus stated the purpose of the artist Fry writes:

And now I must try to explain what I understand by this idea of art addressing itself directly to the imagination through the senses. There is no immediately obvious reason why the artist should represent actual things at all, why he should not have a music of line and colour. Such a music he undoubtedly has, and it forms the most essential part of his appeal. We may get, in fact, from a mere pattern, if it be really noble in design and vital in execution, intense aesthetic pleasure.⁷

What is noticeable about this passage is Fry’s recognition of a possible theory of art he had recently rejected. In his 1903 essay on Whistler, Fry had said of that artist:

he arrived at the astounding theory, enunciated in his “Ten O’ Clock,” that pictorial art consists in the making of agreeable patterns, without taking account of the meaning for the imagination of the objects represented by them—that, indeed, the recognition of the objects was not part of the game. The forms presented were to have no meaning beyond their pure sensual quality, and each pattern of colour was to be a single musical note, by grouping which a symphony, as he himself called it could be made.⁸

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Reed p105

⁸ Ibid p22

The similarity between Fry's 1903 analysis of Whistler's theory of art with his own theoretical musings while defending the 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibition are obvious. Does this mean that, despite earlier denials, Fry's championing of Post-Impressionism is marked by a fundamental change in his aesthetic philosophy; one that places him in the camp of Whistler, rather than Ruskin? In this regard what is of crucial importance is that Fry still considers the idea of a "musical" abstract form of art to be only a theoretical and not a practical proposition. In reality, he argues "the actual world of nature is so full of sights which appeal vividly to our imagination - so large a part of our inner and contemplative life is carried on by means of visual images, that this natural world of sight calls for a constant and vivid apprehension on the part of the artist."⁹

This would again place Fry alongside Ruskin in emphasising that reaction to, and depiction of, the natural world was the central part of the artist's calling. It does so, however, in a manner that emphasises the practical advantages to the artist of following this approach. The resultant work would, he argues, have a direct emotional appeal to the spectator because recognition of natural forms is such an innate part of human psychology. This rejection of the theoretical "abstract" extended, however, beyond the evident artistic impracticalities of its construction. It is a development of Fry's argument, previously mentioned in regard to his 1908 lecture "Expression and Representation in the Graphic Arts", for rejecting the system of "aesthetic dynamics" advanced by Dr. Denham Ross, namely that a purely abstract work of art, while exhibiting "decorative unity", could provide only "sensuous satisfaction". For Fry, as with Ruskin, such a work would lack the "emotional values" that are to be found only in a work's relationship to the natural world.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid pp100-01

¹⁰ See Reed p70

Chapter 18

The Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition

Fry's "Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition" opened at the Grafton Galleries on 5th October, 1912, running until 12th December of that year and then re-opening for another month on 4th January 1913. I will briefly discuss how Fry further refined his formalist theory in reaction to critical comment on this exhibition, before addressing previously mentioned contradictions within this theory. A more international exhibition than its predecessor, the 1912 display included a large number of works from England and Russia as well as France. Accordingly, the Exhibition catalogue was divided into three prefaces, with Clive Bell the spokesman for the English group, Boris von Anrep for the Russian group and Fry concentrating on the French artists. I shall therefore be concentrating on the debate about the latter group.

The first thing to note about the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition is that, with exceptions, it received a far more favourable response than the first. This was despite the fact that, with its wider and more contemporary selection of paintings on display, including up to date work by Picasso, it was perhaps more challenging to the audience than its predecessor. There are various reasons why this may have been so. The large number of works by English artists on display reassured a still insular audience that Post-Impressionism was not a solely continental movement. The initial shock of the 1910 Exhibition had passed and the critics and public were now more willing to engage with Post-Impressionism as a movement worthy of a more measured consideration. There was a general sense of critical opinion moving along with, rather than against, the ideas represented by Post-impressionism. This change in mood was captured in a 1911 *Observer* article by the critic P. G Konody. Here he noted:

Scarcely a year has gone by since Gauguin, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Matisse and their artistic

kinship burst upon the peace of the land at that memorable Grafton Gallery exhibition which caused so much derision, amusement, indignation and exaggerated enthusiasm. Scarcely a year-but the battle is over and won, and Post-Impressionism has taken firm root amongst us. We have become so accustomed to it - and to the new jargon it has introduced into art criticism - that the exhibition of paintings by Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin is in no way bewildering and does not impress one as at all abnormal.¹

It is perhaps, however, Konody's reference to "the new jargon" that points to the most significant reason for the more positive reception accorded to the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition. As Jacqueline Falkenheim has written:

...the new language that Post-Impressionism introduced into art criticism...was an important factor in securing a permanent place for the new art in the minds of the British public...that language descriptive of the relationship among areas of colour, the extension of space, and other structural elements, which avoids making reference to subject matter or to associations with the external world beyond the picture plane itself.²

In contrast to the lengthy debate following the first Post-Impressionist exhibition, Fry's response to reaction to the second exhibition was here limited to just one article, "The Grafton Gallery: An Apologia", published in *The Nation*, 9 November 1912. Here Fry defends Post-Impressionism by reiterating themes already discussed in relation to the first Post-Impressionist exhibition. Thus he contends that the movement is a return too, rather than a repudiation of, the classical tradition of emphasis on design and structural unity. It seeks to overthrow only the decadent art of the contemporary age, whose appeal is in its bland imitation of the natural world. As he writes:

Many critics, too, have exaggerated the destructive and negative aspect of this art, affecting to find in it a complete repudiation of all past tradition. I certainly should like to hope that it will be destructive of the great mass of pseudo-art, but it is destructive not by reason of its denials but of its affirmations. By affirming the paramount importance of design, it necessarily places the imitative side of art in a secondary place. And since it is true that the demand for mere imitation and likeness has, in the last five hundred years or so, gradually encroached upon the claims of design, this art appears to be revolutionary. But in its

¹ Falkenheim p29

² Falkenheim p29

essentials it is in line with the older and longer and more universal tradition, with the art of all countries and periods that has used form for its expressive, not for its descriptive, qualities.³

While here Fry reiterates a by now familiar argument, what is interesting is the language with which that argument is framed. He rejects the arguments of his critics that he has repudiated past traditions. Instead he is repudiating, indeed destructive of, a movement in art that has come to lay false claim to those earlier traditions. He offers affirmations that he is returning art to a purer original form that represents “the older and longer and more universal tradition”. This is a tradition that puts emphasis on a felt emotional response and places its faith in the true claim of design over the false one of imitation.

Fry is utilising the language of Protestant reform drawn from a source shared by Ruskin. A shared Protestant belief was that through the Reformation they had returned to an early and more genuine version of a faith, overthrowing a Roman Catholic Church that had become decadent, insincere and corrupted. Both Fry and Ruskin had applied a version of this belief in their historical analysis of art, explicitly stating in the case of Ruskin, implying in the case of Fry, that the pre-Renaissance they favoured had been of a Protestant nature. Ruskin had believed that in its age of greatness, Venice and its people had been closer in spirit to Protestantism than to the Catholicism they ostensibly professed. It was this Protestant Spirit that had both inspired and been inspired by the Gothic architecture he loved. St. Francis as depicted by Fry is a decidedly Protestant, indeed Quaker, figure. Fry had asserted that it was St. Francis rather than the Pontiff who had embodied the true spirit of early Christianity. By so doing he had inspired Giotto. In his defence of Post-Impressionism Fry repeats this pattern. He emphasises that they are returning art to an earlier, uncorrupted state.

³ Fry, *The Nation* 9 Nov 1912

In accord with this reforming zeal is the forcefulness with which Fry denounces criticism of the exhibition. He writes:

The prosecution has had time to develop its ideas with volume and vehemence. There is something admirable in the reckless courage with which a large section of the press has damned the Post-Impressionists. It shows that British Philistinism is as strong and self-confident and unwilling to learn by past experience as ever it was.⁴

Where Fry does recognise a change in one critic's opinion it is used to damn the rest, thus;

Sir Claude Phillips [art critic for the *Daily Telegraph*]...with a candour and courage worthy of his sincere devotion to art has withdrawn the suggestion of charlatanry made against Matisse - in spite of facts like these which might give a less expert critic pause, the generality of critics have given vent to their dislike and contempt in unequivocal terms.⁵

While the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition did receive its share of negative reviews, Fry here seems to overplay the extent of critical hostility. As mentioned, by the time of the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition the general critical and public mood was much more receptive to the idea that the Post-Impressionist's were serious artists that, at least, deserved measured consideration. Moreover it was Fry himself who had helped provided the language through which a critical engagement with the works of the Post-Impressionists could be attempted.

The use of this new vocabulary of art criticism could be found throughout the critic's reaction to the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition. Having two years previously dismissed the work of Matisse as childish, P.G Konody himself now praised, in the *Observer*, Matisse's use of "decorative colour, rhythmic line and expressive simplification". Fry's identification of the Post-Impressionists as following in the classical tradition was also gaining some acceptance. The critic of *The Times* described Derain's *La Fenêtre sur le Parc* as:

...a picture in the great classical French tradition. It looks Post-Impressionist mainly because the artist has simplified all his forms further than any artist of the 17th century and

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

because he has tried to keep the mass of paint alive rather than smooth.⁶

Reflecting the changing climate of opinion that marked the reception of the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, Fry goes some way in recognising the recent shift in critical opinion, at least with regard to Cézanne:

Two years ago Cézanne's works drew down the most violent denunciation. He was "a butcher who had mistaken his vocation," a bungler who could never finish a picture, an impostor, he was everything and anything that heated feelings and a rich vocabulary could devise. This year he is always excepted from abuse. He, at least, is a great master.⁷

Fry however argues that this recent appraisal of Cézanne comes at a cost to the wider movement he [Fry] wishes to promote, stating that "... but whatever advantage might be given by this concession is instantly taken back by the statement that he is not a Post-Impressionist, and has nothing to do with the rest."⁸

In his article for *The Nation* Fry presents no evidence that the acclaim Cézanne now receives from the critics is thus qualified. It is at best a somewhat selective statement. As can be seen from the 1911 P.G. Konody quote, Cézanne was certainly included by one prominent critic as securely within the canon of Post-Impressionist artists. Fry contrasts the new acceptance of Cézanne as a "serious" artist with the reception still given to Matisse. While he notes that; "the generality of critics have given vent to their dislike and contempt in unequivocal terms", here Fry again seems to overplay his argument. The critical hostility to Matisse was by no means as uniform as Fry suggests, with many critics attempting to engage with the artist using terms similar to Fry himself. Writing of Matisse, Fry notes;

In his painting, ... we find the idea of equivalence by means of amplification. In order that each form may have its full significance in the whole, may hold its own in the equilibrium

⁶ Falkenheim p27

⁷ Fry, *The Nation* 9 Nov 1912

⁸ Ibid

of all the forms, it must be ample and as simple as possible. It is because he has followed out this scheme so fearlessly that his designs have their singular compelling power. This is particularly observable in the great decoration of the *Dance* where the rhythm is at once so persuasive and so intense that figures that pass in front of it seem to become part of the rhythmic whole. The rhythm passes out of the picture and imposes itself surroundings.⁹

As previously mentioned the idea that Post-Impressionism was concerned with the simplification of forms had already been alluded to in *The Times* critic's discussion of Derain's "La Fenêtre sur le Parc". The critic for the *Observer*, P.G. Konody referred to Matisse's *La Dance* as "a real master of superb decorative colour, rhythmic line and expressive simplification"¹⁰. This appraisal was echoed by the critic of the *Spectator* who, while maintaining reservations about the artist, nevertheless accepted that it would be "unjust not to recognize the general sense of rhythm in the lines of the dancing figures with joined hands by M. Matisse"¹¹.

Taken as a whole, then, in the short period between the 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibition and the second, held in 1912, Fry had been remarkably successful in effecting a shift in critical thinking about Post-Impressionism. He had played the leading role in creating in Britain a new vocabulary with which to discuss contemporary art. As a result the nature of critical discourse had been extended on to ground of Fry's own choosing. Critics could now discuss a work in terms of volume, rhythm, plasticity, structural unity, and all the other new "jargon" of formalism. The connection Fry sought to establish between Post-Impressionism and much earlier periods of art history was also beginning to be at least understood, if not universally accepted. As he said himself, by the time of the second Post-Impressionist exhibition Cézanne was already acquiring the status of an "Old Master". Alongside this, the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition had helped inspire a new generation of British artists. So much so that the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition was to

⁹ Reed p114

¹⁰ Falkenheim p27

¹¹ Falkenheim p26

include an “English Group” as a distinct section, including in its number Frederick Etchells, Wyndham Lewis and Eric Gill. The second Post-Impressionist exhibition was to have a deep influence on the coming generation of English artists. It included work by two Slade students, Stanley Spencer and Edward Wadsworth, while another of their contemporaries, Paul Nash, was to recall in his autobiography that at the time of the second Post-Impressionist exhibition; “the Slade was then seething under the influence of Post-Impressionism”.¹²

All of this points to the influence of the two Post-Impressionist Exhibitions at the Grafton Galleries in 1910 and 1912. As the driving force behind the staging of the exhibitions, and as the figure most engaged in the debates that followed, it also points to the deep and lasting impact of Fry in helping to shape and influence public and artistic taste.

¹² P Nash *Outline: An Autobiography And Other Writings* (London 1948) p92

Chapter 19

Fry and Kant

The view that the Post-Impressionist Exhibitions established Fry as the leading art critic of his day is widely shared. As has been shown, this was certainly to be the view of, amongst others, Fry's friend, the critic and art historian Kenneth Clarke. What should be noted, however, is how unwilling Fry seems to have been to acknowledge the nature of his own success. Indeed his sense of cultural isolation seems to have increased, rather than decreased, in line with his growing influence. Fry's response to the uproar occasioned by the 1910 exhibition had been a series of articles and lectures in defence of Post-Impressionism. In doing so, he maintained an amused stance in the face of the overt hostility and mockery, patiently explaining and defending the aims and meaning of Post-Impressionism. His response to criticism of the second Post-Impressionist exhibition consisted of only his 9 November 1912 article for *The Nation*. As has been said, despite a wider cultural acceptance of Post-Impressionism as a serious artistic movement, he feels the reaction to the exhibition: "shows that British Philistinism is as strong and confident and as unwilling to learn by past experience as ever it was"¹. This was not to be a passing phase. As Christopher Green has argued:

by the end of the 1914-18 war [Fry] actually considered the small group to which he belonged not a success but a marginalized failure...[in 1928]...Fry had pronounced in print the failure of the onslaught on public taste he had led as impresario of the Post-Impressionist exhibitions in 1910 and 1912, and confessed that the artists involved (including himself) had been forced by the obduracy of the British middle classes to set aside their ambitions for a new public "monumental art" and accept the limitations of easel painting for a few supporters. In 1928 as in 1910, Fry painted and wrote from what for him were the margins.²

This raises the question; why did Fry, in contrast to contemporary and later commentators, seem to

¹ Fry, *The Nation* 9 Nov 1912

regard his own influence as having been so marginal? This question can be placed alongside earlier mentioned problems that arise out of Fry's writings. Some of these can be broadly identified with the question as to the nature of aesthetic appreciation that had concerned eighteenth-century scholars such as Kant, namely the problem of taste and the tension between aesthetic objectivism and aesthetic subjectivism. Certainly Fry's writing abounds with such tension as he attempts to reconcile his personal deeply felt response before a work of art with his need to also identify the objective, universal traits that such a work should both express and contain.

It is interesting in this regard to refer to Fry's preface for the French section of the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition. Here he stated of the artists displayed that:

They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life. By that I mean that they wish to make images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by the close-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness as the things of actual life appeal to our practical sensibilities.³

As Desmond McCarthy was to note in an article for *The Eye-Witness* (10 Oct. 1912), the appeal to a "disinterested and contemplative imagination" provided a clear link with the aesthetics of Kant⁴. In the "Critique of Judgement", Kant had defined taste as; "the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of a liking or disliking devoid of all interest. The object of such liking is called beautiful."⁵ The person judging the object must be aware that they are doing so devoid of any personal interest in the existence of that object, be it sensual or moral. Only if these conditions are met may the object be termed beautiful. As Kant wrote, "Only the liking involved in the taste for the beautiful is disinterested and free since we are not compelled to give our approval by any

² Green, p.13

³ Fry, Preface to the Catalogue for the 1912 Post-Impressionist Exhibition

⁴ See McCarthy *The Eyewitness* 10 October 1910

⁵ I Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Pluhar, (Hackett Publishing Co.) p53

interest, whether of sense or of reason.”⁶ When these conditions are met, argued Kant, an aesthetic judgement could be made based on the mere form of an object (free from any “associated ideas”) and that forms interaction with universally shared mental powers. A judgement of taste, therefore, is a judgement made with the consciousness that all personal interest is absent, but also that it involves a claim to being valid for everyone: “In other words, a judgement of taste must involve a claim to subjective universality.”⁷

There are certainly aspects of Kant’s aesthetics that seem to apply to Fry’s own aesthetic ideas. Kant’s argument for a disinterested aesthetic response accepted the idea that pleasure could be derived solely from an object’s formal qualities. Fry’s own formalism had argued that a work of art should be judged according to its formal qualities, and not through any associated idea it expressed. He had sought both to identify those qualities inherent within an artwork that would give it universal appeal. McCarthy is right then in detecting similarities between Fry’s defence of the Post-Impressionists and Kant’s own aesthetic theory. However it would be wrong to view Fry’s aesthetics as merely an imitation of Kant. I would like here to examine some significant differences between the two men and then suggest an alternative model against which Fry’s beliefs can be compared.

The most noteworthy difference between the aesthetic philosophies of Fry and Kant can be found with Kant’s suggestion that a disinterested or “pure judgement of taste” is universal. This supposition was itself grounded in the belief that there was a common capacity for felt response to aesthetic stimuli. Although Kant accepted that this was not realized in practice, it nevertheless remained a goal that must be worked towards to validate his theory. This was a concept that Fry seems to reject in both practice and theory. Fry used the opportunity of an article for *The Nation* (7,

⁶ Ibid p52

⁷ Ibid p54

February 1914) entitled “Blake and British Art” to reflect on “what this odd activity called art really means”. Here he noted:

No amount of proof of its [art’s] inutility prevents its continuance. We note that while the mass of mankind can proceed happily through life without taking any serious concern in it, the minority, who do care about it, is so determined and wilful, that the majority tacitly accept their statement of its importance, even to the extent of paying very large sums every year for its maintenance and encouragement.⁸

Having thus stated that those who took an active interest in art were a passionate, yet small minority, of the general populace Fry moves on to discuss the contrasting ways in which art is appreciated. He states:

In the graphic or plastic arts, in so far as definite objects are represented, information will be conveyed. Let us take as an example the *Death of Procris* in the National Gallery. Let us leave out all that might be conveyed by the title and by a knowledge of the legend... There is still this much information conveyed, there is lying a young women who has just died of a wound in her throat, and over her head bends a kneeling man with a goat’s legs, while a dog watches his movements.⁹

Having given this practical example of a subject, Fry moves on to consideration of form. He begins by noting that:

We should admit that every artist in the world might have painted this picture, and that every picture would have been a different and distinct work of art. Everyone would also, I believe, admit that these different dispositions of the forms through which similar information was conveyed would have a direct influence on our feelings, would put us in various moods as we passed from the contemplation of one to another version of the subject.¹⁰

Fry now considers how these two elements of pictorial composition, subject matter and form, will affect the emotional response of potential spectators. He writes:

Let us suppose that a number of people, all of whom have some familiarity with imaginative life, look at the various pictures of the same subject. They will be seen as to belong to two classes. One class will feel vaguely and unconsciously the effect on their general state of

⁸ Reed p154

⁹ Ibid p154

¹⁰ Ibid p154

spirit of the dispositions of forms and colours, but will consciously dwell almost entirely on the emotions of pity, tenderness, remoteness from ordinary experience, or what not, that this collocation of phenomena produces. The other class will feel so acutely the effect of such and such depositions of form, such and such quantities of colour, related in such and such a particular way, that they will think of the dead women, the fawn, and the landscape only, as it were, out of the corner of their minds.

There will be, in fact, a great difference in the focussing of consciousness between these two classes of people. The first class will demand of the formal arrangements that they be such as to predispose them to a vivid perception of the feelings aroused by the images. The second class will demand of the images that they be such as to enable them clearly to grasp the disposition and ordering of the forms.¹¹

Fry then speculates as to the nature of emotional response to the image displayed that these two classes of viewers will feel:

It is probable that the emotions felt by these two classes of people will be different. The first class, those whose consciousness is fixed on the content, will probably be able to give some kind of vague definition to their emotions, will be able to indicate, at least roughly, the general complexion of their states of spirit, by words like tragic, pathetic, gloomy, weird. Uncanny, and so forth, while those whose consciousness has been fixed all the time upon the form, will have had emotions to which no verbal description applies; they could only get at them, if at all, by wild shots, by similes and metaphors, and they would probably content themselves, in the long run, by saying that they felt the beauty of the work of art...I have tried on a previous occasion to give these two groups the well-worn names of romantic and classic, calling those romantic who dwell most easily and consciously on the associated ideas of images, and those classic whose deepest meanings are aroused by form.¹²

This extract points to the significant difference between Fry and Kant when it comes to the question of emotional response. While Kant argues for a common standard of felt response to an artwork, Fry clearly identifies two distinct types of said response.

The first, here termed the romantic response, is a conscious reaction to the painting's narrative content. As such it will be both dictated by the imagery presented and easily described, as Fry states, through the use of "words like tragic pathetic, gloomy weird, uncanny and so on". The

¹¹ Ibid p155

¹² Reed p154-6

second type of emotional response, here termed classic, relate to those people whose reaction to an image is determined primarily by its formal components. Fry makes clear that this is an involuntary, unconscious response. In contrast to the romantic response, the feelings aroused through classic response cannot be easily encapsulated. In attempting to do so it is necessary to resort to metaphor and simile. By stating that those attempting to define this classic response are, in the end, content to speak of the beauty they find in the work of art that elicited this response, Fry strongly implies that beauty is itself a concept that can only be properly understood by one group of people.

It is important to note here that Fry is not conflating the classic response with the educated response; if by educated, it is meant a person in possession of a wide cultural knowledge. If that were so then a movement towards Kant's concept of a universal felt response would be readily available through the provision of wider cultural education. Instead he is speaking of an instinctive response, one innately held or not, regardless of social background. The above article was written in 1914 and can therefore partly be viewed as a response to the controversy surrounding the two Post-Impressionist exhibitions.

Fry's assertion that there were two distinct and innate types of felt response to art was one that was to become more clearly defined. In his 1917 essay "Art and Life" he was to write:

The artist of the new movement is moving into a sphere more and more remote from that of the ordinary man. In proportion as art becomes purer the number of people to whom it appeals gets less. It cuts out the romantic overtones of life which are the usual bait by which men are induced to accept a work of art. It appeals only to the aesthetic sensibility and that in most men is comparatively weak.¹³

As previously stated, while in practice Kant had accepted that felt response to art may differ he nevertheless maintained the supposition of a universal standard of taste that should be worked towards. In the above quotation from "Art and Life", Fry explicitly rejects such a notion. Not only does he maintain that there are two types of felt response, the romantic, responding to associated

¹³ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p22

ideas, and the classic (here renamed the aesthetic sensibility) responding to form, but suggests that the distinction between the two is likely to be exacerbated. The new movement in art, that began with the Post-impressionists, is moving in such a direction that for fewer and fewer people it will be their unconscious feeling for an artwork's form that will dominant their emotional response to said work. It is this response that Fry has already equated with beauty.

In his article "Blake and British art", Fry again credits Tolstoy and his essay *What is Art?* stating that since this works' publication "it has been generally admitted that the function of art is the expression of emotion, and that if a work of art conveys information, it does so merely as a means to an emotional end."¹⁴ I have earlier argued that Ruskin preceded Tolstoy in making that assertion. However putting aside the question of accreditation, what I wish to discuss here are some questions that arise out of Fry's assertion of this idea. These relate, again, to how far Fry's ideas on aesthetics differ from Kant's, and also how the question of art as a means of emotional transference raises apparent contradictions in his own theoretical position.

Kant identified three different type of judgement, or liking: that for the agreeable, that for the good, and that for the beautiful. It was only through a disinterested observation that a judgement of the beautiful could be made. In defining the function of art as the expression and reception of emotion Fry, at times, appears to be moving away from the disinterested observation he claimed in the preface to the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition and aligning his own ideas closer to Kant's definition of a liking for "the good". Kant defined a liking for the good as "what by means of reason, we like through its mere concept".¹⁵ The liking of the good therefore was connected not just with the presentation of the object, but also with its existence. As such judgement of the good was directed to concepts and so could not be a true aesthetic judgement. As Kant stated: "The good

¹⁴ Reed p154

¹⁵ Kant p48

always contains the concept of a purpose, consequently a relation of a reason to a volition (that is at least possible), and hence a liking for the existence of an object or action. In other words it contains some interest or other”.¹⁶ With a liking for the good, the viewer esteems the object for what it represents and so, for this reason, attributes to it a value. It is not necessary for this object to contain a known concept for a person to find the object beautiful. It is necessary for that person to identify a known concept with the object for them to find it good.

Fry has stated that an art object is a means of communicating emotion from its creator to its viewer. It follows from Kant’s description of the good, that if an artwork is to be judged in a disinterested manner such emotion as it does communicate must be morally neutral. Any deviation from this and then appreciation of the artwork will, in effect, be a judgement of the good. This was something Fry seems to have accepted when commenting on the influence of Tolstoy, in his 1920 essay “Retrospect”. Here Fry stated:

Tolstoy saw that the essence of art was that it was a means of communication between human beings. He perceived it to be *par excellence* the language of emotion. It was at this point moral bias led him to the strange conclusion that the value of a work of art corresponded to the moral value of the emotion expressed. Fortunately he showed by an application of his theory to actual works of art what absurdities it lead to.¹⁷

Despite this statement Fry had, himself, applied his version of Tolstoy’s “moral values”. In March 1912, an exhibition of thirty-five works by the Italian Futurists opened at the Sackville Gallery, London. The exhibition was part of a European tour, financed by the self-styled director of the Futurist movement, the poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, that would take in fifteen European galleries over the next two years. The catalogue for the Sackville Gallery exhibition contained three Futurist documents translated into English: the “Initial Manifesto of Futurism” (20 February 1909),

¹⁶ Kant p49

¹⁷ Fry, *Vision and Design*, p236-7

the “Technical manifesto of Futurist Painters” (11 April 1910), and an introduction written by the exhibitors declaring their desire to replace the “tumbling and leprous palaces of Venice” with “the rigid geometry of large metallic bridges and manufactories with a waving hair of smoke”.¹⁸ In many ways the reaction to the Futurist exhibition echoed the reaction to “Manet and the Post-Impressionists”. Amongst the viewing public it was something of a *succès de scandale*. The majority of critics reacted with suspicion and hostility to the new work. Amongst many young British artists the exhibition was greeted enthusiastically. Nevinson was to exhibit the first British Futurist work at an exhibition of the Allied Artists Association, in 1913, and, despite Wyndham Lewis’s vocal dissociation from Marinetti, the influence of the Futurist style and creed could be seen in the soon to be realised Vorticist movement.

This was an exhibition then that, as with “Manet and the Post-Impressionists”, challenged what its critics regarded as a moribund and parochial artistic establishment. Fry, now considered as a leading figure of Britain’s artistic avant-garde, might have been expected to be supportive of such a project. However in his review of the exhibition he sides with the majority of critics who were hostile to the Futurists. While some of his rejection of the Futurists is couched in the conventional terms of art criticism, that is a critique of pictorial design, what is significant is the moral tone Fry adopts in expressing his hostility to the overall aims of the movement. He reviewed the exhibition in an article for *The Nation* (9 March 1912) entitled “The Futurists”.

Fry notes at the beginning of his review that while the art of the Futurists is an expression of deeply-held beliefs, their ideology is one he, and he implies that others, find distasteful:

It is interesting to find painters who regard their art as a necessary expression of a complete attitude to life. Whatever one thinks about the content of their strangely nihilistic creed, one must admit that they hold it with a kind of religious fervour, and that they endeavour to find an expression for it in their art.”¹⁹

¹⁸ A.G Robbins, *Modern Art in Britain, 1910-14*, (Merrell Holberton in association with Barbican Gallery, 1987)

¹⁹ Fry, *The Nation* 9 March 1912

It is the negative aspects of the Futurists' belief system to which Fry returns. He first notes the methodology employed by the Futurists when producing their work, and that this approach has illustrious predecessors:

What is common to the group is the belief in psychological painting. The idea of this is to paint not any particular external scene, but, turning the observation within, to paint the images which float across the *camera obscura* of the brain... The idea of painting from the mental image is no new one, though it is one that artists might practise more than they do. Blake roundly declared that to draw from anything but a mental image was vain folly.²⁰

What has thus far been a comment on a particular, though unoriginal, process of artistic creativity now becomes for Fry an implied moral judgement. He writes:

But he [Blake] drew form mental images only when, stimulated by some emotional exultation, they attained to coherence and continuity of texture. Probably a great many of Rembrandt's sketches are the result of distinct mental imagery, but it was a mental imagery stimulated by reading the poetical prose of the Bible.²¹

For Fry then it is not the methodology of the Futurists that is at fault but the source of their motivation. They draw their inspiration from the modern, urban landscape. In contrast the two artists here named by Fry are inspired by, so Fry implies, much more exalted sources. In the case of Blake this included Milton, Dante and the Bible; in the case of Rembrandt, it was again the Bible. It is at the end of his review of the Futurist exhibition that what had earlier been implied becomes explicit. Here Fry comments directly on the moral nature of the Futurist dogma. He notes:

What the Futurists have yet to learn, if their dogmas still retain the power of growth, is that great design depends upon emotion, and that, too, of a positive kind, which is nearer love than hate. As yet the positive elements in their creed, their love of speed and of mechanism, have failed to produce that lyrical intensity of mood which alone might enable the spectator to share their feelings.²²

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

It is clear that here Fry has moved far from the Kantian notion of a disinterested judgement. Instead he gives a highly personal reflection on what he regards as the failure of the Futurist painters displayed at the Sackville Gallery. It is a failure rooted in moral inspiration. While design depends on, and communicates, emotion, that emotion must be of a positive kind, “nearer to love than hate”. For Fry the nihilism that he identifies as the overarching inspiration of the Futurist philosophy is so negative a state of mind that it directly affects the ability of the artist to produce great design and hence great art. Those “positive elements” of the Futurist creed are not in themselves sufficient elements for the artist to draw on to compensate for this emotional state of mind. Futurist art fails therefore to generate the intense emotional connection between artist and viewer that is a mark of great art. In his summation of the deficiencies of Futurist art, Fry therefore expresses the very fault for which we have seen he was to criticise Tolstoy, namely; “It was at this point that his moral bias led him to the strange conclusion that the value of a work of art corresponded to the moral value of the emotion expressed.”²³

Fry’s formalist theory demanded that a work of art be judged solely according to its formal relationships and not through any associated ideas. His review of the Futurists showed the difficulty he had in maintaining this stance. Here his aesthetic judgement was clearly affected by his distaste for the nihilistic creed that he associated with the movement. Fry attempts to sidestep the problem of his personal moral judgement affecting his aesthetic judgement. He declares that the attempt by the Futurists to express, what he perceives to be, hateful ideas has compromised their ability to communicate with an audience by limiting the efficacy of their pictorial design. To reiterate, he states “great design depends upon emotion...which is nearer to love than hate”. It is clear from Fry’s review of the Futurist exhibition that there was a contradiction between his formalist premise

²³ Fry, *Vision and Design* p237

and his expressionist approach to art criticism. While in theory he could advocate an artistic assessment judgement based only on the art object, free from all associated ideas, in reality the type of emotion he believed the artist was attempting to communicate seems to have been a determining factor in his judgement of their art's worth.

Chapter 20

Roger Fry: Theory and Reality

The practical result of the failure of an artwork to communicate some form of emotion, from the artist to the spectator, can be seen in an article Fry wrote for *The Nation* (14 March 1914) entitled “Two views of the London Group: Part 1”. In this overview of a group of contemporary British artists, exhibiting at the Goupil Gallery, Fry gives an assessment of the work of Wyndham Lewis.

He states;

He [Lewis] is by nature highly gifted, and by training highly accomplished, so that whatever he does has a certain finality and completeness. In front of his abstract designs one has to admit to their close consistency, the clear and definite organizing power that lies behind them. But it is rather the admission at the end of a piece of close reasoning than the delighted acceptance of a revealed truth. He makes us admit his power; he does not invite us to feel as he felt. So that wonders what, after all, it was that he felt, unless, indeed, it was mainly the consciousness of his own exceptional ability, and that is always likely to interest him more than the spectator.¹

In assessing Fry’s criticism of Lewis there are a number of points to first note. The first is the history of animosity between Fry and Lewis, dating to the previous year and a dispute over a commission to decorate a room at the Ideal Home exhibition. This may account for some of the tone of Fry’s criticism. Secondly, as has been noted, Fry was never entirely won over to the idea of purely abstract design. What is of central importance, however, is that although Fry commends Lewis for his natural talent and training and he praises the works displayed for their consistency, and organization of their designs, he still states that the paintings displayed by Lewis fail as works of art. Why is this?

In his “An Essay in Aesthetic”, Fry had asked what it was that we desired in experiencing a work of art. He stated: “the first quality that we demand in our sensations will be order, without

¹ *The Nation* 14 March 1914

which our sensations will be troubled and perplexed, and the other quality will be variety, without which they will not be fully stimulated.”² It is clear from Fry’s praise of his skill and design that Lewis has met these initial demands. They are also, however, qualities that might also be found in the natural world. Fry next identifies that quality that is unique to a work of art. He argues that:

In our reaction to a work of art there is something more - there is a consciousness of a peculiar relation of sympathy with the man who made this thing in order to arouse precisely the sensations we experience. And when we come to the higher works of art, where sensations are so arranged that they arouse in us deep emotions, this feeling of a special tie with the man who has made them becomes very strong. We feel that he has expressed something which was latent in us all the time, but which we never realised, that he has revealed us to ourselves in revealing himself. And this recognition of purpose is, I believe, an essential part of the aesthetic judgement proper.³

Fry’s criticism of Lewis is therefore in accord with this extract from “An Essay in Aesthetics”. The art of Lewis fails “to make us feel as he felt”. This causes Fry to question if Lewis actually felt any deep emotion when creating his paintings beyond, it is implied, a solipsistic satisfaction with his own skill as an artist. Fry’s criticism again exposes the contradictory nature of Fry’s ideas. This again raises a question as to the nature of Fry’s formalism.

Fry’s praise of Lewis suggests that the artist has met the first of Fry’s two criteria for identifying a work of art. He has created a painting that displays the necessary formal qualities to be regarded as such. A thronging formalism suggests that formal qualities are, theoretically, able to be objectively assessed. However Fry’s reaction to the work of Lewis is highly personal in nature. He writes as if the particular feelings he experiences before the work of Lewis should be shared by others, but gives no reason why this should be so. The language Fry uses in criticising the, perceived, failure of Lewis to communicate emotion to the audience is distinctly religious in tone, noticeably at odds with any supposed empirical and detached observation. Thus the sense of “close

² Fry, *Vision and Design*, p33

³ *Ibid*, p34

reasoning” that the art of Lewis causes the spectator to feel when viewing the art is unfavourably contrasted with the “revealed truth” that a truer artist might induce. Such language is in accord with Fry’s statement in another previously referenced essay “Art and Life” where he spoke of “the great importance of aesthetic feeling for the spiritual existence of man”.⁴

If the purpose of art is to evoke an emotional response, and the cause of that response resides in the formal qualities of the art object itself, and not on any contingent associated ideas, can the nature of these formal qualities be clearly defined? In this regard the timing of Fry’s article, “A View of the London group” is significant. It appeared a week after a review, again in *The Nation* of a book by his friend and, sometime colleague, Clive Bell entitled *Art*. In this article, entitled “A New theory of Art” (*The Nation*, 7 March 1914) Fry was to comment on two terms he would later borrow from Bell; “aesthetic emotion” and “significant form”. His article has its own significance in so far as Fry recognises the difficulty of actually defining these terms. As he writes:

Mr. Clive Bell’s book is as simple and suggestive as its title. He sets out to state a complete theory of visual art...He begins by inquiring what quality is common to all works of visual art and peculiar to them. He finds it to be the possession of “significant form.” How do we recognize significant form? By its power to arouse aesthetic emotion. The reader will at this point ask: What is aesthetic emotion? And Mr. Bell will reply, the emotion aroused by significant form. Which seems to bring us full circle.⁵

The reviews here quoted from, namely of the Futurist Exhibition at the Sackville Gallery and of Lewis at the Goupil Gallery, when taken alongside the comments made about Tolstoy in Fry’s 1920 essay “Retrospect”, show apparent contradiction within Fry’s own writings. According to his remarks in “Retrospect” it is a “strange” idea that “a work of art should correspond to the moral values of the emotion expressed” that if applied practically would lead to “absurdities”. Yet as his review of the Futurists show Fry did, in practice, apply a clear set of moral values in

⁴ Ibid p22

⁵ *The Nation* 7 March 1914

criticising their work. As his review of Lewis showed it was not sufficient for an artist, however highly talented and trained to use reason and intellect alone to produce a work of art. If the viewer, in this case Fry, felt they had failed to communicate sufficient emotional involvement with the subject matter then the work could not be deemed a success. There is certainly something of this circular argument deployed by Fry in his, previously noted, criticism of Wyndham Lewis.

According to Fry, the work of Lewis has failed to evoke an emotional response in the viewer. Lack of this emotional response is evidence of an undefined failure of design. This again points to the difficulty in clearly defining the nature of Fry's formalism. Was it a classical, objectivist, theory where the aesthetic response was a measure of an object's internal, formal qualities and therefore one capable of universal application? Was it a romantic, subjectivist theory whereby the aesthetic response was an individual's emotional reaction to a work of art and had no necessary wider application? As has been argued, the contradictory nature of Fry's aesthetic seems at times to favour both possibilities. Indeed in his preface to the catalogue for the French section of the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition, Fry seems to present an amalgam of the two, whereby an artwork should communicate a set of morally neutral, yet deeply felt, emotions from the artist to the individual viewer and that the viewer's emotional response to the artwork should be universally applicable. This involves him in the semantic contortion of arguing that Post-Impressionism is a "Classic art" that "records a positive and disinterestedly passionate state of mind."⁶

Discussing the reputation of Fry as a critic and theorist the art historian Christopher Reed has noted that Fry has been attacked:

...for being too logically compelling or for developing his theories too rigorously. It is only through the retrospective filter of formalism's later sway over the arts that Fry's tentative and inconsistent writings have come to seem systematic and rigid - and even calculated and cunning. Later formalists overlooked Fry's inconsistencies in favour of a narrative of

⁶ Ibid p198

coherent evolution toward pure abstraction.⁷

This charge that Fry was an inflexible theorist is one that Reed rejects. It is also one that Fry would have found puzzling. Returning to a quote from “Retrospect”, as Fry looked back at his career he noted:

I have never worked out for myself a complete system such as metaphysicians deduce from *a priori* principles. My aesthetic has been a purely practical one. My aesthetic has been a purely practical one, a tentative expedient, an attempt to reduce to some kind of order my aesthetic experience to date.⁸

As has been shown the varied and complex aspects of Fry’s criticism refute the charge of him being a doctrinaire theorist. As an obverse to the censure of Fry as too rigid and systematic in his art criticism, other commentators have focused on the expedient nature of Fry’s approach. Here the suggestion is that the apparent inconsistencies in Fry’s ideas on art are so great as to negate the suggestion of even an attempt at a generalized aesthetic theory. As an example of this form of criticism, Reed mentions the essay by the cultural critic Berel Lang, “Significance or Form: The Dilemma of Roger Fry’s Aesthetic”.⁹ In this essay Lang discusses how Fry, in placing the individual expression and experience of emotion at the heart of the production and reception of art, seems to challenge his own formalist aesthetic.

Berel’s argument is not without merit, as examples previously mentioned show.

Commenting on this aspect of Fry’s work, Reed writes that Fry’s “expressionistic vocabulary...reveal Fry’s formalism to be neither mechanical nor hermetic”. He continues:

It may seem odd to defend Fry from his critics by, in effect, emphasizing his muddle-headedness...As was noted...Fry’s subjectivity - including his doubt - is central to his formalism, which he always emphasized was a “tentative expedient” contingent on new experience. Even in his sixties, Fry could be found in the Louvre, as he reported, “forgetting all my theories and all I’ve ever written and thought and trying to be absolutely passive to

⁷ Reed p127

⁸ Fry, *Vision and Design*, pp129-30

⁹ *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 21. 2 (Winter 1962) pp167-76.

my impression". This insistence on subjectivity amounted, Fry's contemporaries complained, to a virtual "horror of systematic aesthetics".¹⁰

As stated the contention that Fry was an unbending theorist is one that is not supported by the evidence. However, in the final part of this thesis it is the alternative interpretation of Fry that I wish to challenge. This is the view, as expressed by Reed, that Fry's work should be seen as a largely contingent response to developing circumstances and new experiences. Far from the "muddle-headedness" mentioned by Reed, I will argue for an overall consistency in Fry's work that encompasses both his writings as an art historian and as a theorist and critic. As in the preceding chapters, I will relate Fry's ideas to concepts found in Ruskin's own theocentric system of aesthetics, as expressed in *Modern Painters*, Volume II, in this case his concept of the "Theoretic Faculty". I will argue that, as with Ruskin, though far less overtly, the influence of certain theological ideas present in his own religious upbringing can be found in Fry's own writings about art.

¹⁰ Reed p127

Chapter 21

Ruskin and the Theoretic Faculty

Ruskin's writings on the "Theoretic Faculty" were concerned with the question of how this beauty was to be conceived. This he regarded as a more complex subject, as he stated at the beginning of his enquiry:

The investigation now before us, which being not of things outward, and sensibly demonstrable, but of the value and meaning of mental impressions, must be entered upon with a modesty and cautiousness proportioned to the difficulty of determining the likeness, or community, of such impressions, as they are received by different men; and with seriousness proportioned to the importance of rightly regarding those faculties over which we have moral power, and therefore in relation to which we assuredly incur a moral responsibility.¹

Having thus recognised the difficulty of the task he has set himself, in the first part of this passage, Ruskin has gone on to emphasise its importance. The "Theoretic Faculty" is directly concerned with questions of morality. It is for this reason that it is so named. As George Landow has written:

At the time, however, when Ruskin was writing *Modern Painters*, the idea was current that theories of beauty should be divorced from the study of morals and made the subject of aesthetics, a separate discipline. Alexander Baumgarten, a German philosopher, had introduced the term "aesthetic" in 1735 with the suggestion that the study of beauty should be concerned merely with the adequacy of the object to perception, that is aesthetics should be a separate, independent concern dealing only with pleasures of perception. Baumgarten's ideas were already well known in England...[Ruskin] insists several times [in *Modern Painters*, Volume II] that calling the perception of beauty aesthetic is "degrading it to a mere operation of sense" (4.35), when it is in fact an operation of the moral faculty, *theoria*, and hence should be called "theoretic". Ruskin probably borrowed the name of his contemplative moral faculty, *theoria*, from Aristotle and formed its adjective, *theoretic*, so as to have a counter-term that he could oppose to Baumgartner's "aesthetic" which would permit him to relate beauty to a faculty concerned both with the beautiful and the good.²

Or as Ruskin himself wrote, commentating on his choice of terminology:

¹ Ruskin, 4 (36)

² Landow pp158-9

The Theocratic faculty is concerned with moral perception and appreciation of ideas of beauty. And the error respecting it is, the considering and calling it Aesthetic, degrading it to a mere operation of sense, or perhaps worse custom... Now the term "aesthesia" properly signifies mere sensual perception of the outward qualities and necessary effects of bodies... But I wholly deny that the impressions of beauty are in any way sensual; they are neither sensual nor intellectual, but moral : and for the faculty receiving them, whose difference from mere perception I shall immediately endeavour to explain, no term can be more accurate or convenient than that employed by the Greeks, "Theoretic".³

Naming those subjects that were properly the object of theoretic contemplation Ruskin wrote:

It would appear... that those pursuits which are altogether theoretic, whose results are desirable or admirable in themselves and for their own sake, and in which no farther end to which their productions or discoveries are referred can interrupt the contemplation of things as they are by the endeavour to discover of what selfish use they are capable (and of this order are painting and sculpture).⁴

The appreciation of beauty was therefore an autonomous experience of the mind alone, separate from utilitarian function, bodily appetite, material desire, or custom. As such it was neither what Ruskin termed "subservient to life, or practical... in the common sense of the word Useful".⁵ Nor was its indulgence capable of excess.

The Theoretic faculty was both the ability to experience beauty and the recognition of this beauty as a Divine gift. As Ruskin stated;

The pleasures of sight and hearing are given as gifts. They answer not any purpose of mere existence... these pleasure have no function to perform, so there is no limit to their continuance in the accomplishments of their end, for they are an end in themselves, and so may be perpetual with us; being in no way destructive, but rather increasing in exquisiteness by repetition.

Herein then we find sufficient ground for the higher estimation of these delights; first, in their being eternal and inexhaustible, and secondly, in their being evidently no means or instrument of life, but an object of life. Now in whatever is an object of life, in whatever may be infinitely and for itself desired, we may be sure there is something of the divine; for God will not make any thing an object of life to his creatures which does not point to, or

³ Ruskin 4 (42)

⁴ Ibid 4 (43)

⁵ Ruskin 4 (46)

partake of Himself. . . Now the mere animal consciousness of . . . pleasantness I call Aesthesis: but the exulting, reverent, and grateful perception of it I call Theoria. For this, and this only, is the full comprehension and contemplation of the Beautiful as a gift of God: a gift not necessary to our being, but added to, and elevating it, and two fold; first of the desire, and secondly of the thing desired.⁶

Ruskin's concept of the Theoretic faculty is therefore intimately connected to his ideas on Beauty. In *Modern Painters*, Volume II, Ruskin had identified "Typical Beauty" as the "Symbolization of Divine attributes in matter".⁷ As has been discussed, Ruskin had sought to identify both those forms and qualities that expressed Typical Beauty and to refute false ideas concerning the nature of beauty. This was, as he said, an investigation into "things outward, and sensibly demonstrable"⁸. The Theoretic faculty was concerned with the perception and experience of those forms and qualities that had been thus demonstrated as containing beauty. This explains the shared language between Ruskin's concepts of theoria and his concept of "Typical Beauty"; such as the rejection of objects "subservient to life", and the recognition of beauty as both symbolizing and being a gift of the Divine.

I will return now to Ruskin's contention that the Theocratic faculty was an operation of the moral faculty. This raises an apparent problem. Ruskin had stated that an investigation of the Theoretic faculty was to be undertaken in "seriousness of proportion to the importance of rightly regarding those faculties over which we have moral power, and therefore in relation to which we assuredly incur a moral responsibility"⁹. In speaking of a faculty over which we have power and through which we incur responsibility Ruskin might seem to suggest that the Theoretic faculty involves the exercise of choice. This in turn implies a deliberate exercise of the intellect, and the conscious decision in the making of a true or false choice. However the notion that the Theoretic

⁶ Ibid 4 (47)

⁷ Ibid 4 (210)

faculty was indeed concerned with the exercise of the intellect was something Ruskin explicitly rejected. This rejection was connected to his belief that the proper appreciation of beauty was itself a moral act. Ruskin begins his explanation as to the moral nature of the Theoretic faculty by again emphasising its nature as a gift. As he stated: “the general law for all these pleasures is, that, when sought in the abstract and ardently, they are foul things; but when received with thankfulness and with reverence to God’s glory, they become Theoretic.”¹⁰ This he then links to his analysis of ideas of beauty, noting that:

It will now be understood why it was formerly said in the chapter respecting ideas of beauty, that those ideas were the subject of moral, and not of intellectual, nor altogether of sensual perception; and why I spoke of the pleasures connected with them as derived from “those material sources which are agreeable to our moral nature in its purity and perfection.” For, as it is necessary to the existence of an idea of beauty, that the sensual pleasure which may be its basis should be accompanied first with joy, then with love of the object, then with the perception of kindness in a superior intelligence, finally with the thankfulness and veneration towards that intelligence itself; and as no idea can be at all considered as in any way an idea of beauty, until it is made up of these emotions...and as these emotions are in no way resultant from, nor obtainable by, any operation of the Intellect; it is evident that the sensation of beauty is not sensual on the one hand, nor is it intellectual on the other, but is dependent on a pure, right, and open state of heart, both for its truth and for its intensity.¹¹

This is a long quotation that raises a number of questions that require further explanation. The first is, the question previously raised: what does Ruskin mean when he describes the working of the Theoretic faculty as a matter of moral, rather than intellectual perception? To answer this I will return to the work of George Landow, and his description of the nature of the emotionalist ethics that Ruskin was here expressing.

Landow traces the development of this emotionalist moral theory through the writings of Locke, Shaftesbury and, in particular, Adam Smith’s *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*. Landow takes

⁸ Ruskin 4 (36)

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid 4 (48)

¹¹ Ibid 4 (49)

from the latter this quote from Smith:

It is altogether absurd and unintelligible to suppose that the first perceptions of right and wrong can be derived from reason, even in those particular cases upon the experience of which the general rules are formed. These first perceptions, as well as all other experiments of which any general rules are founded, cannot be the object of reason, but of immediate sense and feeling...If virtue, therefore, in every particular instance, necessarily pleases for its own sake, and if vice as certainly displeases the mind, it cannot be reason, but immediate sense and feeling, which, in this manner, reconciles us to the one, and alienates us from the other.¹²

Landow notes;

Smith's assertion that the first perceptions of moral right as well as everyday moral decisions are made by the emotions, and not by reason, is accepted by Ruskin as one of his moral and artistic premises. According to Ruskin, the imagination is not only "dependent on acuteness of moral emotion; [but] in fact, all moral truth can only thus be apprehended."

Ruskin was familiar with Smith's moral treatise, but since the emotionalist ethics it propounded were so widely accepted and could have been encountered anywhere from Wordsworth to Dickens, it is improbable that he derived this conception of morality from any one source. Ruskin's acceptance of this kind of ethical theory explains how, when he believed that beauty was instinctive and non-conceptual, he could find beautiful something that today we believe requires the exercise of conceptual thought.¹³

It should be emphasised again here that for Ruskin moral understanding and the appreciation of beauty were part of the same faculty. Both were indicative of and a gift from God. Therefore the instinctive response to beauty was a question of moral or ethical concern. It is also worth noting more on the psychological nature of the response to beauty that concerned Ruskin. As Landow points out:

Another premise of emotionalist moral theory...was the notion that the study of the processes of the mind, chiefly of emotions, was the proper sphere of moral philosophy...Much of the time it is difficult to tell whether by moral Ruskin means ethical or whether he means psychological, and one is forced to conclude that he did not differentiate between a philosophy of mind and a philosophy of morality. It is not that Ruskin aligns the two subjects, but rather that for him psychology and moral philosophy had

¹² Landow p155

¹³ Landow pp155-6

never been separated.¹⁴

For Ruskin the instinctive reaction was therefore innately a moral reaction. As Landow continues;

Ruskin could use the term “moral” to mean simultaneously “ethical” and “referring to all mental process.” From this point of view, then, Ruskin’s statement about beauty becomes somewhat clearer: “Ideas of beauty, then, be remembered, are the subjects of moral, but not of intellectual perception”. By this statement, I take it that Ruskin refers both to the fact that he believes aesthetic perception to be unconscious and automatic, and also to his belief that aesthetic responses are made by the same faculty which make moral evaluations.¹⁵

For Ruskin then the aesthetic response was both a moral act and an instinctive one.

Ruskin was clear as to the Divine source of this instinct, stating:

Why we receive pleasure from some forms and colours, and not from others, is no more to be answered than why we like sugar and dislike wormwood. The utmost subtlety of investigation will only lead us to ultimate instincts and principles of human nature, for which no farther reason can be given than the simple will of the Deity that we should be so created. We may indeed perceive, as far as we are acquainted with his nature, that we have been so constructed as, when in a healthy state of mind, to derive pleasure from things that are illustrative of that nature; but we do not receive pleasure from them because they are illustrative of it, nor from any perception that they are illustrative of it, but instinctively and necessarily, as we derive pleasure from the scent of a rose.¹⁶

That Ruskin identified the moral response with the instinctive response has been noted, as have a number of possible intellectual sources, identified by George Landow, from whom Ruskin could have derived the idea. These include Locke, Shaftsbury and Adam Smith. While all of these may have influenced Ruskin, as the above quote as to the Divine origin of this instinct indicates, it should again be remembered that Ruskin’s aesthetic theories were a direct product of his religious thought. As David Melville Craig has suggested, Ruskin’s Theoretic faculty is Christian and teleological in nature.¹⁷ Ruskin does not consider the subjective, inner, response to beauty as an end

¹⁴ Ibid p156-7

¹⁵ Ibid p.157

¹⁶ Ruskin 3 (109)

¹⁷ D Craig, *John Ruskin and the Ethics of Consumption*

in itself: that would be to equate it with a mere sensual pleasure. Rather the instinctive response to beauty directs man towards God, being itself God given and also illustrative of His nature.

By asserting the primacy of the instinctive over the intellectual reaction to beauty Ruskin raises another question. As he himself asks: “in what way an impression of sense or the preference of one may be a subject of will, and therefore of moral duty or delinquency”¹⁸? His answer shows once again how his aesthetic theories were ultimately based upon on his theological beliefs. He writes:

I answer, that over immediate impressions and immediate preferences we have no power, but over ultimate impressions, and especially ultimate preferences we have; and that though we can neither at once choose whether we shall see an object red, green, or blue, nor determine to like the red better than the blue, or the blue better than the red, yet we can, if we choose, make ourselves ultimately susceptible of such impressions in other degrees, and capable of pleasure in them in different measure. And seeing that whatever power of any kind is given, there is a responsibility attached, it is the duty of men to prefer certain impressions of sense to others because they have the power of doing so. And this is precisely analogous to the moral world, whereby men are supposed not only capable of governing their likes and dislikes, but their whole culpability or propriety of actions is dependent upon this capability; so that men are guilty or otherwise, not for what they do, but for what they desire, the command being not Thou shalt obey, but Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, a vain command if men were not capable of governing their affections.¹⁹

This quote shows again how, in Landow’s description, Ruskin could use “moral” to mean simultaneously both “ethical” and “referring to all mental processes”. Ruskin grants that over an initial “impression of sense” we have no power but does not accept that this state of mind is immutable. Ruskin believed that, with the right of guidance, the mind could be conditioned in a manner that made it more susceptible to beauty. This ongoing process of mental development was itself moral in nature, leading as it did to towards a fulfilment of God’s intentions. As Ruskin had stated in *Modern Painters*, Volume I:

Of these primary principles of our nature, education and accident operate to an unlimited extent; they may be cultivated or checked, directed or averted, gifted by right guidance with

¹⁸ Ruskin 4 (52)

¹⁹ Ruskin 4 (52)

the most acute and faultless sense, or subjected by neglect to every phase of error and disease. He who has followed up these natural laws of aversion and desire, rendering them more and more authoritative by constant obedience, so as to derive pleasure always from that which God originally intended should give him pleasure, and who derives the greatest possible sum of pleasure from any given object, is a man of taste.²⁰

Taken together these two quotes explain Ruskin's early sense of mission in writing about art. For him to love beauty was to love God. The Theoretic faculty was a gift from God and it was therefore a duty, "precisely analogous to the moral world"²¹ that the origin of this gift should be understood and its powers cultivated to the utmost extent. Ruskin accepted that the Theoretic faculty was a gift unevenly distributed. As he stated "I have, throughout the examination of Typical beauty, asserted our instinctive sense of it...Now the instinctive sense of it varies in intensity among men, being given, like the hearing ear of music, or some more than to others".²²

This did not however absolve the responsibility of each individual to develop the faculty as far as possible, any more than they might be excused the responsibility to develop their wider moral sense. Indeed for Ruskin they were one and the same. The is in turn placed an ethical responsibility upon those who combined piety with a highly developed Theoretic sense to educate the wider public as to the true nature of beauty, and so art. Ruskin considered himself just such a man hence the proselytising nature of the first two volumes of *Modern Painters*.

²⁰ Ruskin 3 (10)

²¹ Ruskin 4 (52)

²² Ibid 4 (211)

Chapter 22

Roger Fry and the Theoretic faculty

Ruskin's concept of the Theoretic faculty was a direct extension of his Evangelical faith. I have discussed it at some length because I believe Fry developed his own version of the Theoretic faculty that was, in turn, influenced by doctrines drawn from his own Quaker background. I will begin by giving a brief outline of those aspects of Quaker theology that find an echo in Fry's writings on art. I have previously mentioned that Roger Fry's father, Edward Fry, was somewhat idiosyncratic in his religious beliefs. However, he maintained his connections with the church and Roger Fry was raised within the mainstream of the Quaker faith.

The first thing to note is that Fry was raised within the liberal theology that was to become the orthodoxy amongst Quakers from the 1870s onwards. As Elizabeth Isichei has noted, one of the key concepts of this theology was the idea of progressive revelation, the belief that:

God's truths are timeless and unchanging, but God's revelation of them to humanity is gradual. At any given time, God's revelation of Himself to men is adapted to the current conditions of human thought and behaviour.¹

Evangelicals, such as Ruskin, who regarded scripture as the sole source of authority, could write and speak with great sureness. However they found their faith threatened by new scientific and historical discoveries; be they the Darwinian theory of evolution, geological discoveries as to the age of the earth or modern biblical criticism. Ruskin's own work is illustrative of this. The aesthetic theory proposed in the *Modern Painters*, Volume II, drew its certainty from the certainty with which he held his own faith. Although strong within this limited context it proved to be extremely brittle. When Ruskin wavered in his own religious beliefs he was forced to abandon his early aesthetic theory. That Fry admitted the contingent nature of his own aesthetic ideas has been

¹ Elizabeth Isichel, *Victorian Quakers* (OUP 1970) p34

attributed to his Cambridge education in the Natural Sciences. This is true of Fry himself, who attributed his interest in making aesthetic generalisations to “A certain scientific curiosity”². It can also be seen however that being open to new ideas was part of the intellectual climate of his own religious upbringing. New discoveries, whether in science or history, did not trouble those who believed in the doctrine of progressive revelation. Indeed they could be seen as a move towards a higher truth. As a result, I would argue Fry’s aesthetic ideas were to maintain a consistency of overall approach, while being flexible in their application. They were free from the brittleness of a system based on a dogmatic religious ideology. They were also however able to assimilate old ideas with new and deal with the often ambiguous questions raised when discussing aesthetics (such as those surrounding judgement and taste) in a manner that might have proven difficult if based strictly on the scientific method. As Fry said of his method of enquiry:

“I have always looked on my system with a certain suspicion. I have recognised that if it ever formed too solid a crust it might stop the inlets of new experience, and I can count various occasions when my principles would have led me to condemn, and when my sensibility has played the part of Balaam with the effect of making temporary chaos of my system. That has, of course, always rearranged itself to take in the new experience.”³

I have discussed examples of this approach in relation to Fry’s work on early Renaissance Italian art and on the work of the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. I will shortly discuss how Fry also applied and developed his ideas through exposure to an even wider range of art objects from diverse ages and cultures. I will discuss this in relation to another aspect of Quaker theology that, I believe, had an influence on Fry’s aesthetics.

The doctrine of progressive revelation had been advanced and shaped in the wake of Darwin’s theory of evolution and modern Biblical criticism. One consequence of its widespread acceptance amongst Liberal Quakerism was the undermining of certainty in the literal truth of the

² Fry, *Vision and Design* p229

whole of the Bible. Quakers would continue to believe that the Bible was, to an extent, inspired; however it was not a book equally convincing in all its parts. The liberal theologian Edward Wordsell outlined the precepts of the new approach in an 1888 address to his co-religionists “The Gospel of Divine Help”. Here he stated “the essay pre-supposes that an evolutionary interpretation of outward nature may be true, and that in the records contained in the Old Testament there may be an admixture of the legendary, and of survivals from previous heathendom.”⁴ Again, as Isichei argues, in accepting the fallibility of the Bible, Liberal Quakerism was denying itself a certain source of theological knowledge. Profoundly aware of this they sought a new foundation on which to base the faith. They found it in arguing that knowledge of the Divine was to be gained through individual intuition and personal experience. In so doing they were re-discovering and reintegrating the early Quaker belief in the Light Within.

Under the influence of the founder of the movement, George Fox, the Quakers had originally called themselves “Children of the Light” or “Friends of the Truth”. Fox had taken his inspiration from the New Testament passage John 1:9: “That was the true light, which lighteth everyman that cometh into the world”⁵. Advocating a return to a “primitive Christianity” the early Quakers regarded churches, a paid priesthood, creedal statements and outward sacraments as signs of apostasy. In their place Fox preached that each person could have a direct and unmediated relationship with the Divine if they “turned to the inward light”. As Fox stated in his journal: “People had no need of any teacher but the Light that was in all men and women.”⁶

It was a development of this original statement of faith that was to become the core doctrine

³ Fry, *Vision and Design* p230

⁴ Isichei p35

⁵ The Bible, King James Version

⁶ *Journal of George Fox* edited by John L Nickals, Published by The Society of Friends, 1975

of nineteenth-century Liberal Quakerism. The concept of the Inner Light retained its element of individual mysticism but now was analogous with natural reason and conscience. John Charles Ryle had defined, as one of the distinctive features of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism, as the “depth and prominence it assigns to the doctrine of human sinfulness and corruption.”⁷ Liberal Quakerism tended to reject this concept of Original Sin, and with it the Atonement theology that was also so central to Evangelism. Salvation therefore did not depend, again as Ryle stated, on a knowledge of the crucifixion as the redemptive sacrifice of Christ, interceding on behalf of man. Rather the Incarnation and the life of Christ was held up as a revelation of God to man, pointing the way to and showing the possibility of a righteous life. As Isichei writes:

Christ was a mediator in the sense of being a means of communication. The purpose of his earthly life was to show men how to live, and make holiness attractive to them by power of example. His death was not a propitiatory sacrifice, but a lesson in self-sacrifice.⁸

In place of Original Sin and Atonement theology, Quaker doctrine, thought of “all consciences as enlightened by the Spirit, though in different degrees...the accuracy with which conscience discriminates duty may vary vastly, either by differences in, “the supply of the Spirit” (to use Paul’s expression), or by difference in intellectual and moral condition either inherited or imposed by education.”⁹ It was therefore, in essence, an individualist theology independent from both church hierarchy and ritual and Scriptural exegesis. It was a personal experience of God, open to everyone, that was considered the proof of His existence. The subjective nature of Liberal Quaker theology therefore mitigated against it being a missionary, proselytizing sect.

How far did aspects of this theology influence Fry’s art criticism, and can a comparison be

⁷ Isichei p248

⁸ Isichei p37

⁹ E Wordsell *The Gospel of Divine Help* (Samuel Harrison & Co, 1888) pp37-9.

made here with Ruskin? In answering this question it is important to re-emphasise a point made previously when comparing the writings of the two men. The religious inspiration for Ruskin's early work was made explicit by the author. This is not so with Fry, where any lasting influence from his religious upbringing can only be inferred by the reader. Nevertheless as I have previously explained I believe that influence was present in the work of Fry. Here I will focus on what may be regarded as Fry's own version of the Theoretic faculty that Ruskin advanced. What may be termed Fry's Theoretic faculty developed as Fry's career progressed. I would argue that it is in his later writings, those that post-date the two Post-Impressionist exhibitions, that Fry's aesthetic theory comes closest to paralleling ideas present in Quaker theology. To show why, I will begin by examining two essays, dealing with similar subject matter, but separated by a decade.

I have previously discussed how both Ruskin and Fry believed a development in artistic skill, particularly in the area of natural representation, could come at the price of sincerity in connection to the subject depicted. For the artist a painting became a place to demonstrate their technical powers, rather than purely a means of communicating an emotion. Fry alludes to this in his 1909 "An Essay in Aesthetics", where he takes the idea to a logical conclusion. He notes: "Children, if left to themselves, never, I believe copy what they see, never, as we say, "draw from nature," but express, with a delightful freedom and sincerity, the mental images which make up their own imaginative lives."¹⁰ This was an idea he was to pursue the following year in his 1910 essay for *The Burlington Magazine*, "The Art of the Bushmen".¹¹ This was a review of the book "Bushman Drawings," copied by M. Helen Tongue, and published by the Clarendon Press in 1909.

¹⁰ Fry, *Vision and Design* p26

¹¹ In this article, and the subsequent article "Negro Sculpture", Fry expresses opinions that now seem, at best, patronising and inappropriate, but were then common parlance.

Fry begins his article by arguing that:

The primitive drawing of our own race is singularly like that of children. Its most striking peculiarity is the extent to which it is dominated by the concepts of language. In a child's drawing we find a number of forms which have scarcely any reference to actual appearances, but which directly symbolise the most significant concepts of the things represented... The child does, of course, know that the figure thus drawn is not like a man, but it is a kind of hieroglyphic script for a man, and satisfies his desire for expression. Precisely the same phenomenon occurs in primitive art; the symbols for concepts gradually take on more and more of the likeness to appearances, but the mode of approach remains even in comparatively advanced periods the same. The artist does not seek to transfer a visual sensation to paper, but to express a mental image which is coloured by his conceptual habits.¹²

Reviewing the actual drawings presented in the book, Fry praises the “extraordinary performances of the Bushmen draughtsman”, finding in them an expressive power lacking in even early Greek art. Giving an example of the latter he notes: “The man who drew it was incomparably more of an artist; but how entirely his intellectual and conceptual way of handling phenomena has obscured his vision.”¹³

Fry finds an analogy to the art of the Bushman in “the caves of the Dordogne and of Altamira in Spain, [where] Paleolithic man has left paintings which date from about 10,000 B.C, in which, as far as mere naturalism of representation goes, he has surpassed anything that not only our own primitive peoples, but even the most accomplished animal draughtsman have ever achieved.”¹⁴ Fry attributes the artistic facility of both the Bushman and Paleolithic man to the favouring of adaptive vision over intellectual analysis. As he explains:

It is not impossible that the very perfection of vision, and presumably of the other senses with which the Bushmen and Palaeolithic man were endowed, fitted them so perfectly to their surroundings that there was no necessity to develop the mechanical arts beyond the elementary instruments of the chase. We must suppose that Neolithic man, on the other

¹² Ibid pp.76-7

¹³ Ibid p82

¹⁴ Ibid p83

hand, was less perfectly adapted to his surroundings, but that his sensual defects were more than compensated for by his increased intellectual power. This greater intellectual power manifested itself in his desire to classify phenomena, and the conceptual view of nature began to dominate. And it was this habit of thinking of things in terms of concepts which deprived him for ages of the power to see what they looked like. With Neolithic man drawing came to express thought about things rather than the sensation of them, or rather, when he tried to reproduce his sensations, his habits of thought intervened.¹⁵

This passage takes us to the point of Fry's foray into amateur anthropology. He is reiterating an idea first expressed in his analysis of Italian Renaissance art. This is that over-intellectualisation of a subject, as expressed in awareness of and pleasure taken in technical ability, comes at the cost of an instinctive connection to the subject. He writes of the Bushmen therefore not to decry their achievement but to hold it up as an example to be emulated. As he writes, "The artist of to-day has therefore to some extent a choice before him of whether he will think form like the early artists of European races or merely see it like the Bushmen."¹⁶

There is certainly a Quaker precedent for the artistic approach Fry seems to be advocating in this essay. Liberal Quakerism drew on many of the precepts of an earlier, Quietist, form of the religion. Quietists were suspicious of an overly intellectual approach to religious belief, believing it interfered with an instinctive understanding of the Inner Light. This reliance on an instinctive moral sense influenced Liberal Quakerism. As Edward Wordsell stated, "Conscience can always judge of the feelings that ought to govern deeds".¹⁷ It would be wrong however to draw to direct a parallel between the aesthetic advocated in this essay by Fry and a specifically Quaker theology. As previously stated, the relationship between skill, analysis and sincerity had been discussed before by Ruskin. The reason I discuss Fry's essay "The Art of the Bushman" is for its timing, subject matter and the central role given in it to the sensibility of the artist. The 1910 essay "The Art of the

¹⁵ Ibid p84

¹⁶ Ibid p87

¹⁷ Wordsell p40

Bushmen” can be seen as a precursor to the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition that opened later that same year. It is preparing the way for a group of artists that, Fry believed, did have an instinctive grasp of form. In subsequent debates regarding that exhibition Fry would present, amongst other examples, Byzantine art as an early example of the elementary symbolism that the Post-Impressionists were emulating. In this essay he is finding the earliest possible antecedents of Post-Impressionism. I would now like to compare this article with one written for the *Athenaeum* in 1920.

In an article entitled “Negro Sculpture”, Fry reviews an exhibition of West African sculpture held at the Chelsea Book Club in 1920. Fry begins in a manner somewhat reminiscent of his review of “The Art of the Bushmen” ten years previously. He begins by praising the formal and expressive quality of the work on display. As he writes;

We have the habit of thinking that the power to create expressive plastic form is one of the greatest of human achievements, and the name of the great sculptors are handed down from generation to generation...I have to admit that some of these things are great sculpture-greater, I think, than anything we produced in the Middle Ages. Certainly they have the special qualities of sculpture in a higher degree. They have indeed complete plastic freedom; that is to say, these African artists really conceive form in all three dimensions. Now this is rare in sculpture...Complete plastic freedom with us [Europeans] seems to come at the end of a long period, when the art has attained a high degree of representational skill and when it is generally decadent from the point of view of imaginative significance.¹⁸

Much of this is familiar from previously quoted examples of Fry’s criticism. It follows Fry’s contention that it is a work’s formal qualities that give it its expressive power. This power is lost in the drive to ever greater accuracy in natural representation. Fry had found this expressive power in the works of the Italian Primitives, in Byzantine art, and as previously mentioned in the art of the Bushmen. He now finds it in this display of African sculpture. In this regard, the two essays - “The Art of the Bushman” and “Negro Sculpture” - can be seen as following a similar line of argument

using comparable examples of artworks. However, the latter essay differs notably towards its end when Fry moves on, from a discussion of the formal qualities the sculptures exhibit, to speculate about the wider culture that produced them. He writes:

It is curious that a people who produced such great artists did not also produce a culture in our sense of the word. This shows that two factors are necessary to produce the cultures which distinguish civilised peoples. There must, of course, be the creative artist, but there must also be the power of conscious critical appreciation and comparison. If we imagined such an apparatus of critical appreciation as the Chinese have possessed from the earliest times applied to this negro art, we should have no difficulty in recognising its singular beauty. We should never have been tempted to regard it as savage or unrefined. It is for want of a conscious critical sense and the intellectual powers of comparison and classification that the negro has failed to create one of the great cultures of the world, and not from any lack of the creative aesthetic impulse, nor from any lack of the most exquisite sensibility and the finest taste. No doubt, also, the lack of such a critical standard to support him leaves the artist much more at the mercy of any outside influence. It is likely enough that the negro artist, although capable of such profound imaginative understanding of form, would accept our cheapest illumining art with humble enthusiasm.¹⁹

Why has Fry added this coda to his article on the African sculptures? It is unlikely that Fry had any direct knowledge of the African culture from which the sculptures came, or the role they may have played in that culture. Indeed previously, as has been shown, he explicitly sought to separate art works from the culture that produced them. The answer to the question comes, I believe, not through viewing Fry's remarks as a commentary on the state of African culture, but as a commentary on the state of British culture. Although this essay was written ten years after the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition it should be seen as part of a continuing debate instigated by that event. Various commentators, both those who knew Fry and those writing later, have noted, for good or ill, the influence Fry had in shaping the direction and development of modern art in Britain. Those mentioned in this thesis include Christopher Reed, Stella Tillyard, Charles Harrison and Kenneth Clark. It should be remembered however that, as Christopher Green has written:

¹⁸ Fry, *Vision and Design* pp88-89

¹⁹ *Ibid* pp90-91

[Fry] by the end of the 1914-18 war actually considered the small group to which he belonged to have been a failure, despite its notoriety - the victim of majority indifference... Fry had pronounced in print [in 1928] the failure of the onslaught on public taste he had led as impresario of the Post-Impressionist exhibitions in 1910 and 1912, and confessed that the artists involved (including himself) had been forced by the obduracy of the British middle classes to set aside their ambitions for a new public “monumental art” and accept the limitations of easel painting for a few supporters.²⁰

This sense of frustration was further illustrated later that year in a letter sent by Fry to Virginia Woolf. Here he noted: “it’s really wrong. We ought to be able to protect ourselves – it’s really a curse that we have become so notorious and that means so *recherché* by all the people whose intellectual life consists in pure snobbism.”²¹

It should also be remembered that Fry had first greeted the Post-Impressionists with an almost Adventist fervour. As he noted in his 1920 essay “Retrospect”: “In the next few years I became increasingly interested in the art of Cézanne and those like Gauguin and van Gogh who at that time represented the first effects of his profound influence on modern art, and I gradually recognised that what I had hoped for as a possible event of some future century had already occurred, that art had begun to recover once more the language of design and to explore its long neglected possibilities.”²² Writing in 1930, Fry now considered that, in Britain at least, little had come of these “possibilities”. This was not the fault of the artists. As has been shown, he had long considered the Post-Impressionists to be “great artists” who had shown the “creative aesthetic impulse” and the “most exquisite sensibility and finest taste”²³ that he had also found in the African sculptures. Instead, as with the wider African society, in Britain he blamed the perceived failure of Post-Impressionism on the lack of “conscious critical appreciation and comparison.” The

²⁰ Green, p.13

²¹ Sutton, Vol.2, p630

²² Fry, *Vision and Design* p234

²³ See *The Nation* 19 Nov 1910 and 9 Nov 1912

concluding paragraph to Fry's article "Negro Sculpture" is therefore highly significant. Where Fry has previously discussed art in terms of the artistic creation, he is now stating that an ability to appreciate certain formal qualities an artwork might contain is also of critical importance in developing a creative culture. He is, in effect, making explicit what had previously been only implicit, his own version of the Theoretic faculty.

Ruskin's Theoretic faculty drew on certain concepts from his own religious beliefs. How far did Fry's own version of this faculty draw on ideas present in Liberal Quakerism? As always with Fry and his religious beliefs the influences are not explicitly stated, but must be inferred. However the influence of Quaker theology can be discerned, I believe, in a number of Fry's writings.

I will begin here by returning to Fry's 1917 essay "Art and Life". I have previously discussed how this survey of the connections, or otherwise, of historical connections between art and the wider society against which it was produced showed a continuity with Fry's earlier art history. Here I turn to the final section of that essay where he discusses developments in contemporary art. Fry notes of these developments that "art has turned its vision inwards, has begun to work upon the fundamental necessities of man's aesthetic functions".²⁴ Fry does not doubt the importance of this aesthetic function, giving it an almost religious significance. As he states: "I suppose that the scientific man of to-day would be much more ready to admit not only the necessity but the great importance of aesthetic feeling for the spiritual existence of man".²⁵ As stated, Liberal Quakerism was highly subjective in its theology. Its appeal was to an, already present, Inner Light. Spirituality was a matter of personal feeling and experience rather than doctrinal conformity. Fry has here equated the aesthetic with the spiritual feeling. In arguing that the modern artist is turning

²⁴ Ibid p21

²⁵ Ibid p22

inwards he is suggesting that aesthetic feeling is, like Quaker spirituality, to be found in the inner part of the psyche.

Fry has, then, equated the aesthetic feeling with spirituality, and pointed to the subjective nature of both emotions. I will now return to an extended version of a previously used quote to discuss where Fry predicts the direction in which certain artists are moving and speculate as to whom their new type of art will appeal. He states:

The artist of the new movement is moving into a sphere more and more remote from that of the ordinary man. In proportion as art becomes purer the number of people to whom it appeals gets less. It cuts out the romantic overtones of life which are the usual bait by which men are induced to accept a work of art. It appeals only to the aesthetic sensibility, and that in most men is comparatively weak.²⁶

Here what I have termed Fry's Theoretic faculty finds a clear counterpart in Quaker theology. As stated, the Quaker's salvation was to be achieved through responding to the Inner Light, and a personal, emotional experience of the Divine. As Edward Wordsell has said however; "the accuracy with which conscience discriminates...may vary vastly either by differences in "the supply of the Spirit" or by differences in intellectual and moral condition"²⁷. Fry's own version of the Theoretic faculty was similarly discriminating. It was a gift given in greater degrees to some more than others. Fry's own version of "the supply of the Spirit" was the instinctive response felt by the spectator to the formal qualities of a work of art. Those "romantic overtones of life", (or the narrative content of a work), were to be equated with the dogma and rituals of other denominations that the Quakers had rejected. As art relied more and more on its formal, over its narrative, qualities it was inevitable to Fry that it would come to appeal only to those with the greatest aesthetic equivalent of a "supply of the Spirit".

²⁶ Ibid p22

²⁷ Wordsell p40

The subjective nature of Quakerism mitigated against Evangelism. It was hard to teach, or measure, a deeply personal religious experience. The same can be said for Fry's own aesthetic theory. It too was primarily concerned with the individual emotional response. By understanding the nature of Fry's Theoretic faculty, certain previously raised questions can be answered. The first is why he considered his advocacy for Post-Impressionism to have been a failure, despite the, previously mentioned, evidence to the contrary. As shown, part of the response to the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition had been the development and use of a new vocabulary in discussing the works on display. As has been said, through his defence of Post-Impressionism, Fry was largely responsible for teaching a new language of critical evaluation. It was the ease with which this new vocabulary had been adopted by so many that was for Fry, perhaps, the problem. A similarity in language did not necessarily mean a similarity in sentiment. I will return here to that passage in "Retrospect" where Fry discusses the reaction to the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition. He notes of those that had objected to the Post-Impressionists, that:

...these people felt instinctively that their special culture was one of their social assets. That to be able to speak glibly of Tang and Ming, of Amico di Sandro and Baldovinetti, gave them a social standing and a distinctive cachet. This showed me that we had all along been labouring under a mutual misunderstanding i.e.that we had admired the Italian primitives for quite different reasons.²⁸

Fry's admiration for the Italian primitives was based on the formal qualities he found in their work. The same qualities he now found in the work of the Post-impressionists. As he noted of these latter works however: "It was felt that one could only appreciate Amico di Sandro when one had acquired a certain mass of erudition...but to admire a Matisse required only a certain sensibility."²⁹

It seems likely that Fry believed a similar process was at work when it came to the new

²⁸ Fry, *Vision and Design* p233

²⁹ *Ibid* p233

found enthusiasm of many for the Post-Impressionists. They had acquired a certain amount of the language of formalism as a new social asset. They could speak glibly of terms like unity and rhythm, but they did not derive the same intensity of emotional experience when viewing the works as someone with an instinctive sensibility to the new art.

There are two further apparent contradictions in Fry's writing that may find some resolution when viewed from the perspective of a Theoretic faculty. First it provides a way of reconciling a classical view with a romantic view of artistic appreciation. According to Fry, any art object contains certain inherent formal qualities. In theory these properties should be objectively quantifiable. In practice these formal qualities will be perceived differently according to a differently distributed instinctive sensibility. Individual emotional experience therefore remains the practical basis of aesthetic response. As mentioned, in Liberal Quakerism the instinctive response was equated with the moral response. I would argue that similarly Fry was never able to fully divorce the instinctive aesthetic response from moral value. While he decried art with an expressly didactic purpose and moralistic message, he valued the ability to experience aesthetic emotion through a work's formal qualities as a moral act in itself. It was this that led him to reject Whistler and the idea of "art for art's sake", something he equated with the sensuous. For Fry this was to limit the aesthetic experience, something he regarded as a transcendent experience.

Conclusion

The contention of this thesis is that Roger Fry should be regarded, in part at least, as a Protestant art critic. To that end I have examined his role as an art historian, an art critic and theorist and also as a promoter of the artworks of the Post-Impressionists. I also make a direct comparison between Fry's writing on art and the writing of John Ruskin. There are two reasons for this comparison. The first is that I believe that the influence of Ruskin's work on Fry's writing has either been underestimated or totally neglected. As has been noted in the text, Fry would himself negate any such influence on his aesthetic outlook. However, the early influence of Ruskin on Fry had been deep. Its influence was still felt at Cambridge with his attachment to the Arts and Crafts Movement. In a letter to his friend, the biographer and critic Lytton Strachey, dated April 2nd 1924, Fry writes; "As to Ruskin, what shall I say?...It made me wonder what kind of animal I was at sixteen when I read with such passionate interest."¹ Again in 1929 he was to write to another close friend, Helen Anrep, describing his early devotion to the writings of "the Ruskin idol".² Although in both letters, he was again to disclaim any long-lasting effect. I believe the influence of this early instruction in Ruskin's work was enduring. The second reason for making a connection between Ruskin and Fry is because in the early works cited in this thesis, that is the first two volumes of *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin serves as an exemplar for the role of a Protestant art critic and historian. It is here that Ruskin's deeply held theological beliefs are most clearly interconnected with his historical and critical analysis. To establish a connection between Fry and the approach

¹ *Letters of Roger Fry*, Ed. Denys Sutton, (Chatto & Windus, 1972) p640

² *Ibid* p640

taken by Ruskin in these works is to reinforce the argument that Fry can himself be regarded as a Protestant art critic.

It should be noted here that while the religious expression in Ruskin's work is explicit in its presentation, with Fry such religious feeling is implicit. This most obviously reflects the overt and evangelising religiosity of Ruskin's early years, in contrast with the gentle subsiding of Fry's own Quaker faith while still a student at Cambridge. It also indicates some of the changing nature of anti-Catholic feeling in Britain during the respective periods of each writer's career. When Ruskin was writing his early works, anti-Catholic feeling was widespread and overt, expressing itself both in violent outbreaks and legal prohibitions. By the time Fry reached maturity most of these legal prohibitions had been removed. While anti-Catholic violence still occurred its instances were fewer and more isolated. Amongst those of Fry's class and education, what often remained was a social and, expressly in the case of Fry, an intellectual disdain. However, old fears and attitudes could still easily be awakened. It is significant that Fry's father and uncle, the latter a Liberal M.P, broke with the old Liberal Party over Gladstone's support for Irish Home Rule. For a family with a trading and non-conformist background the Liberal Party had been a cultural as well as a political home. Yet they severed this link in support of their co-religionists in Ireland who feared potential Catholic domination. As has been discussed, Roger Fry supported them in this decision.

The impact of the Renaissance was central to the aesthetic concerns of both Fry and Ruskin. I have therefore provided something of the intellectual context against which their work first appeared. As referenced, the idea of the Renaissance as an encompassing cultural event was developed during the first part of the nineteenth century. Ruskin therefore began his career when ideas about the nature of the Renaissance were still in flux and it was his early work that helped fix certain cultural concepts and ideas about the Renaissance within popular consciousness. It is for this reason that I have concentrated on those historians who wrote during this same period. When Fry

began his career as an art historian, at the end of the nineteenth century, the depth of historical research and scholarship had certainly greatly increased. However this involved a deepening and developing of fundamental concepts about the nature of the Renaissance that had already been expressed. Jacob Burckhardt's contention, in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, that this was a transforming moment of individual self-realisation had already found an expression in the ideas of Quinet. In his seven volume *Renaissance in Italy*, John Addington Symonds gave what was essentially the Whig view that Renaissance culture had provided the intellectual stimulus towards personal liberty, and hence to religious and political change. Again as has been noted this was a view shared by both those who celebrated and those who deplored this great cultural change. As shown in his aesthetic assessment of the Renaissance, Fry was to closely follow that of Ruskin. Namely that pre-Renaissance art contained a power and sincerity of expression that would be lost with the increased skills in naturalistic representation that occurred during and after the Renaissance. Here they were close to the views expressed by Montalembert and Rio.

Concentrating on those historians working in the first half of the nineteenth century therefore also brings into focus the complicated path trodden by both Ruskin and Fry. They fundamentally rejected the political Catholicism of Montalembert and Rio, yet as mentioned, shared many of their aesthetic values. This emphasises what I have identified as a dilemma facing both Ruskin and Fry. They were hostile to the ideology of the Catholic Church and yet could be deeply moved by works of art produced for and in the service of that same Church.

I have first examined how both men addressed this problem as art historians. What is notable here is the similarity in approach that can be found in their early work. In the *Stones of Venice* Ruskin creates an imagined Protestant Venice against which the Gothic architecture he loved was produced. In this interpretation it is only when this style gives way to the Renaissance architecture he despised that Catholicism gains dominance and political decline and moral decay set

in. In his monograph on *Giovanni Bellini*, Fry likewise imagines Venice as nearer a Protestant than Catholic state. It is this background and the culture it produced, he implies, that helps give Bellini's small scale early work its power. When, in the second half of his career, Bellini paints a series of large scale altarpieces, the clearly Catholic nature of his art can no longer be denied. As a consequence Fry claims a diminution in Bellini's powers of emotional expression. Bellini's earlier work had also depicted religious imagery. What seems to particularly disturb Fry here is the role of the Altarpiece in a central ritual of the Catholic Church, The Mass.

In his writing on Giotto, Fry again attempts to Protestantize Catholic history. He credits St. Francis with inspiring the work of Giotto and in so doing depicts the saint as a proto-Protestant. This in turn is part of the Protestant belief that their version of Christianity is closer in spirit to the early Church than Roman Catholicism. As I argue in the main text, this was an approach Fry would utilise in defence of Post-Impressionism, this time adapted to suit aesthetic ends.

I have argued that Fry's formalism had, in part at least, a beginning in his desire to distance a work of art from its cultural origins. In his early descriptions of Catholic art, Fry downplays any description of the religious imagery and symbolism displayed. Instead he follows the methodology of Giovanni Morelli by concentrating on technical details and compositional structure. When he does provide more detailed evaluation of a work's narrative content, it is when those works express a more mundane and universal message. This can be seen in both his appreciations of Bellini's paintings of the Madonna and Child and also in his emotional response to Giotto's *The Meeting at the Golden Gate* in the Arena Chapel, Padua.

The chapter on Fry's role as Curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York explores the development of Fry's ideas as they relate both to art history and formalism. I argue that Fry's attempt to create alternative Protestant histories for the artwork that he favoured became untenable. Instead he maintained his desire to distance such works from their cultural origin by

maintaining that there was no innate connection between artistic production and the wider social culture that it had originated from. As his essay “Art and History” demonstrates, he was often inconsistent in maintaining this approach, being willing on occasion to condemn the influence of Catholicism on art he disapproved of. His role as Curator of paintings saw a deepening of his formalist approach. His arrangement of the museums’ galleries drew on his idea that there were two distinct approaches in the understanding of art. These he termed “historical” and the “imaginative”. With the historical approach to the display of art, a museum would display paintings according to a particular school or epoch. The imaginative approach to the display of art would contain no such clear statement of purpose. Instead works would be arranged not on the basis of school or history but artistically. The supposed masterpieces of various schools and epochs would be shown alongside each other. In discussing his attention that the Metropolitan Museum should adopt the imaginative method of display, Fry was also identifying to different types of art appreciation. To fully appreciate the historical method required a certain erudition. To appreciate the imaginative method required only an instinctive aesthetic appreciation. Though not yet fully formed, these ideas of two distinctive methods of art appreciation were to deepen as Fry’s career progressed. They can most clearly be seen in his 1920 essay “Retrospect”, where looking back at the controversy surrounding the 1910 London Post-Impressionist Exhibition he dryly comments:

It was felt that one could only appreciate Amico di Sandro when one had acquired a considerable mass of erudition and given a great deal of time and attention, but to admire a Matisse required only a certain sensibility. One could be fairly sure that one’s maid could not rival one in the former case, but might by a mere haphazard gift of Providence surpass one in the second.³

In the main text I discuss this concept of an instinctive aesthetic sensibility, and relate it to certain theological concepts present Quakerism.

³ Fry, *Vision & Design* p235

Fry's period at the Metropolitan Museum therefore represents a coming together of his approach to art history and aesthetic appreciation. Fry had first attempted to separate Catholic art from its original cultural context by following Ruskin's earlier example and creating an imagined Protestant background against which certain works of art first appeared. When this proves no longer tenable, Fry adapts by arguing that there is no necessary connection between any work of art and the wider social culture from which it originated. This in turn, by necessity, deepens his formalist approach. If a work of art was to be valued independently from any narrative content it might contain then it could only be judged according to its formal qualities. In reality Fry never adopted a purely formalist approach to art criticism, but always favoured some element of representation in painting. This may in part be merely connected to Fry still sharing some of the aesthetic attitudes of his generation. It also however points to his belief, shared with Ruskin, that art must maintain a connection to the outer world of nature. More telling, however, is Fry's evident disdain for the works of the Italian Futurists, although their works seem to display many of the formal characteristics Fry might be expected to approve of. It is clear that Fry objects to their work primarily out of moral disapproval for their ideological aims as expressed in their manifesto. This suggests that moral considerations external to a work of art's formal quality remained a concern for Fry.

I have described why the concept of an objective standard of beauty was so vital to Ruskin. His theocentric system of aesthetics intimately linked aesthetic judgement with moral understanding. Subjective human selection in either was unacceptable as the correct choice derived from the Divine. As his letters while a student at Cambridge show, Fry's early desire to establish an objective standard combined his still active religious belief with his desire as a Natural Scientist to explain and quantify particular phenomena. Ruskin was later to abandon a system of aesthetics so closely connected to his early religious beliefs. Fry was to later accept that he could never know the

ultimate nature of art. I have argued however that, as it developed, Fry's formalism shared certain characteristics with the theological system of aesthetics Ruskin advanced in the second volume of *Modern Painters*.

Here I first compare those concepts of Beauty that Ruskin rejected as false. Ruskin's search for an objective standard of beauty leads him to reject ideas of Association. As a comparison of their work shows, this co-responds quite closely with Fry's own belief that a work of art should only be judged according to its internal qualities.

Ruskin's rejection of utility as a standard by which to judge an artwork derived from the same source that led him to reject Utilitarianism as a social philosophy. Neither beauty nor morality were contingent on circumstance, but were derived from the immutable and unchanging will of God. It is less obvious why Fry was to so clearly reject the idea that utility could ever play a part in aesthetic consideration. As an advocate of the scientific method of analysis, and as someone who accepted his views on art were contingent and constantly developing rather than fixed, he could have been amenable to a certain Utilitarianism role for the arts. They could be used as a social signifier or to advance a particular ideology. Fry's rejection of the use of art as either a signal of social status or as a means of propaganda is clearly explicable through him maintaining the argument made in his 1909 "An Essay in Aesthetics", that there is a clear distinction between the physical and the imaginative life. This separation of the physical and the imaginative life also, in theory, explains why Fry also rejected the possibility that art could be valued for offering a purely sensuous satisfaction. This latter rejection again hints at a continuing connection between Fry and Ruskin. With Ruskin the rejection of the sensual as a possible concept of Beauty is clearly linked to his religious beliefs. Such earthly pleasures could tempt the weak and unwary to disregard God's laws and the fate of the eternal soul would always take precedence over any fleeting gratification of

mere mortal flesh. With no overtly expressed religious belief, why could Fry not accept that sensuous pleasures could play their part in defining Beauty? Fry gives his answer in his 1909 “An Essay in Aesthetics” in a manner that again places him close to Ruskin. He writes:

...most people would, I think, say that the pleasures derived from art were of an altogether different character and more fundamental than merely sensual pleasures, that they did exercise some faculties which are felt to belong to whatever part of us there may be which is not entirely ephemeral and material.⁴

In his theory of Typical Beauty Ruskin attempted to identify those positive attributes a work of art should possess. I have compared this with Fry’s identification of the formal qualities a painting should contain, as given in “An Essay In Aesthetics”. In Ruskin’s theory Beauty becomes a symbol of Divine order residing in the physical world. It is therefore an objective quality residing within the object itself. Fry’s own formalism likewise sought to define those formal qualities residing in the object itself. Fry’s reiteration of a classical theory of Beauty does not in itself connect him with any of Ruskin’s theological positions. Indeed here it is Ruskin who is aligning a theocentric system of aesthetics with the earlier classical theory of Beauty. However Ruskin also believes that there is a systemic order to nature that is divinely mandated. The role of the artist is therefore to reject superficial appearance and to communicate to their audience a sense of that underlying order. It is for this reason that he rejects mere mimesis as a proper artistic function. Much of this belief in the necessity of depicting the essential order behind superficial reality can be seen in Fry’s rejection of Impressionism. He views this movement as the highest realisation of a naturalism that began with the Renaissance. He views it as a movement dealing primarily with surface appearance and as he says in his essay *Retrospect*; “I came to feel more and more the absence in their work of structural design”⁵. He finds this structural design in the Post-

⁴ Fry, *Vision & Design* p27

⁵ *Ibid* p232

Impressionists, most notably in the work of Cézanne.

Ruskin's work on how beauty was to be conceived led him to coin the term "Theoretic Faculty". It was a theory of perception in which aesthetic appreciation was directly linked to questions of morality drawn from his religious beliefs. I argue that Fry was to develop his own version of the Theoretic Faculty that drew on aspects of Quaker theology. Ruskin had rejected the term Aesthetic as relating to mere sensual pleasure. In discussing the ability to correctly appreciate ideas of Beauty, Ruskin had chosen the term Theoretic because he considered this ability as a form of moral perception. He considered the appreciation of Beauty to be an autonomous experience of the mind alone, distinct from utilitarian function, bodily function, material desire or custom. Instead The Theocratic function was both the ability to experience beauty and the recognition of this Beauty as a Gift from God. Ruskin identified this moral perception as an instinctive ability that directed man to God. Although instinctive, Ruskin does not consider it an immutable state of mind. Over time, and given the proper instruction, the mind could be conditioned in a manner that made it more susceptible to Beauty. For Ruskin to love Beauty is to love God. His early works on art therefore express an urgent sense of mission in accord with his Evangelical Christianity.

Fry never expounded a complete system of aesthetics in the manner of Ruskin, and certainly not one directly related to any theological beliefs. However I believe he did develop his own version of the Theoretic faculty that drew on aspects of Liberal Quaker theology. As I have discussed, the Liberal Quakerism in which Fry was raised had adopted the concept of progressive revelation and in so doing accepted the fallibility of the Bible. As such they had denied themselves a certain source of theological knowledge. Seeking a new foundation on which to base their faith they had revived the early Quaker belief in the Light Within. This concept of the Inner Light held that knowledge of the Divine was to be gained through individual intuition. All consciences were receptive to God's message, however some more receptive than others. It is this concept that

provides an understanding to a key aspect of Fry's aesthetic approach. I began this thesis by arguing that Fry's formalist approach developed out of an initial impulse to distance those artworks towards which he felt an instinctive emotional attachment from their Catholic origin. With his own theory of perception he utilises ideas of receptive ability drawn from Quaker theology. The appreciation of art is an instinctive ability granted to some and not to others. Ruskin considered his own Theoretic Faculty as a form of moral perception. I would suggest that, even if only subconsciously, Fry does the same. To derive authentic aesthetic pleasure from certain works of art was in and of itself a moral act. Whereas Ruskin felt impelled to follow the pattern of his Evangelicalism and consider it a duty to seek converts to his side, Fry followed in the Quaker tradition of accepting that in the question of his own aesthetic judgements he would always be in the minority. This was something that only confirmed him in his beliefs. As he writes in the essay "Art and Life" "...the artist of the new movement is moving into a sphere more and more remote from that of the ordinary man. In proportion as art becomes purer the number of people to who it appeals gets less."⁶

⁶ Fry, *Vision & Design* p22

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