Re-envisioning Medieval Allegories of Death for a Post-Darwinian Cosmos: Time, Death, and Judgement in the Art of G. F. Watts

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> And now I think the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure to us. It must present the struggle between Eros and Death . . . as it works itself out in the human species. This struggle is what all life essentially consists of . . . And it is this battle of the giants that our nursemaids try to appease with their lullaby about Heaven.
>
> -- Sigmund Freud

Scholarship on the Victorian painter George Frederic Watts (1817-1904 has contextualized his *oeuvre* primarily in relationship to Victorian ideologies that look backward to conservative cultural traditions rather than forward to modernist progressive notions of cultural transformation. Indeed, Watts' symbolic paintings on the theme of death and its relationships to time, eros, and morality, which I will examine here, adopt a conservative medieval system of allegorical representation that assumes a fixed correspondence between the notational system of art and an ideally structured universe. However, while Watts presumes that the viewer is aware of the original theological references in his allegories, he does not appropriate them merely to re-embody them in the present, but as a strategy for rewriting them to accommodate modern concepts of scientific evolutionary theory. Following Frederic Jameson's general argument in *The Political Unconscious* (1981 , I will argue here that Watts' strategy of rewriting opens the allegorical form to multiple meanings and supplementary interpretations that undermine the medieval presumption of a single master narrative or divine transcendental signifier (58 . As Jameson observes of New Testament reinterpretations of Old Testament texts, when sacred allegories are rewritten, the "illusions of religion are read as the complement of a positive social functionality and decoded as the figure and projection of an essentially human energy" (70 , at least on an unconscious level. Because allegory as a form inherently implies the absence of presence, it is a particularly appropriate for evoking death. Indeed, Walter Benjamin describes it as a melancholy cult of ruin, a "death's head" that signifies "an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity..." (183-184, 223 .

By all accounts, Watts was by temperament a melancholy pessimist,[1] thus, it is not surprising to discover that death is *lietmotif* that recurs in his work throughout his career. According to Mrs. Russell (Emilie Barrington, his friend and biographer, he had felt its presence within himself from his earliest days (154 . His obsessive preoccupation with tropes of death doubtless originated in circumstances of his grief over the deaths of his three brothers from measles and his mother from consumption before he was nine years old (Blunt 2-5 . Mary Watts, his second wife and biographer, described these events as remembrances "fought with pain" (*Annals* I 36 , and in later life he seldom spoke about them or about his subsequent unhappiness living under the care of his worry-worn father, an unsuccessful piano-tuner and manufacturer, and with two elder step-sisters with whom he felt little rapport. However, his youthful existential angst is clearly visible in *The Wounded Heron*, his first exhibited painting, painted in 1837 at the age of twenty. A large bird in the throes of death fills the foreground of the canvas. Its silhouetted claws, extended in an expressive gesture that conveys the agony of mortal pain, puncture the line of a ragged curve created by the contour of its wings. The suffering of the bird, a traditional symbol of the soul, conveys Watts' intense sensitivity to the vulnerability of beauty to dissolution, a theme that would pervade his future art. The claws of the dying heron also direct the viewer's attention to a distant horse and rider in a pocket of deep background space. Through preparatory drawings Watts scholars have identified this lonely rider as a self-portrait of the artist, who was an avid horseman and falconer (Watts, unpublished catalog; Loshak 121 . The specific psychic origins of the painting may lie in a childhood accident in which Watts was responsible for the death of a pet bird. Fifty years later, he would recall that this incident caused him intense guilt and the "acutest suffering" he had ever felt (Barrington 145 . It seems likely that this unusually intense response to the death of his pet was, at least in part, a displacement of suppressed irrational feelings of responsibility for the death of his mother, a frequent syndrome in children who lose a parent at an early age. In any case, *The Wounded Heron* elicits empathy, not only for the doomed bird's agony, but also for the isolated, distant hunter adrift on an empty horizon beneath a vast and overwhelming sky.

Given Watts' melancholy nature, achieving a tone of optimism in his work was a constant struggle, yet, along with Matthew Arnold, whose writings he admired, he argued that it was necessary for the modern artist to provide public icons of hope and compassion rather than dwell on inner suffering and uncertainty (Arnold, "Preface to Poems, 1853" in *Poems*; Watts, *Annals* III 3 . His theological perspective on death was unorthodox. Although he had been raised as an Evangelical, as a young man he had lost his faith in religious dogma. However, he also repudiated the utilitarian

materialist empiricism that permeated Victorian culture. The mystery of death and the loss of Christianity's promise of transcendence haunted him, and he envisioned his art as a quest to provide a spiritual substitute for the lost certainties of the past. Like Arnold and John Morley, the Liberal editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, he aspired to adapt the medieval allegorical language of traditional Christianity to the task of articulating a vision of the cosmos that would be compatible with modern science yet continue to supply an ethical and spiritual basis for modern life (Arnold, "The Bishop and the Philosopher" 346, Morley's *Rousseau*, quoted in Knickerbocker, 154; Watts, *Annals* II 243 . He referred to his modernized theological allegories as his "suggestive" paintings (Watts, *Annals* II 215 , contending that "the sense of the beautiful in the highest manifestation is religious" (Watts, *Annals* I 240 . Unlike well-known contemporary images of death by French artists, such as Gustave Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (1849 or Claude Monet's *Camille on her Death Bed* (1879 , Watts wanted, he said, to "paint ideas, not things" (West and Pantini xxi . He wanted to paint the idea of death rather than the event itself, creating images that would be "in every sense the very reverse of realistic" (Barrington 135 . Although his early public successes as an artist were based upon his portraits and history paintings, he declared that it was only by his "suggestive" pictures that he wished to be remembered (Watts, *Annals* I 228 .[2]

Watts painted his earliest "suggestive" painting, *Time and Oblivion*, in 1848 during an especially difficult period of loneliness and despair. He described it as "solemn and sad and hard, for solemn, sad and hard are the conditions, an organ chord swelling and powerful but unmodulated" (Watts, *Annals* II 244 . According to Mrs. Barrington, Orcagna's late medieval *Triumph of Death* in the Camposanto in Pisa (1325-50, now attributed to Francesco Triani had made an "indelible impression" on him, not only because of its obvious horror but also for its "solemn mystery," and its representation of death as an "all-powerful will" that carries out "the laws of nature . . . to which men should resign themselves without fear and with the trust of children who accept with obedience their father's control" (Barrington 135 . *Time and Oblivion* likewise contemplates death with stoic implacability. Over the top of the painting, Watts inscribed the words "Whatsoever the heart findeth to do, do it with all the might, for there is not work or desire, not knowledge nor wisdom in the grave where thou goest." The allegorical figures of Time and Oblivion are represented as abstract emblems set on an eternal backdrop, posed in mid-air above a terrestrial globe. Time is shown as an ageless, idealized youth rather than the more usual old man, although he still holds the conventional scythe. His torso is classically bare, and he is clearly lit by an orb of light. He symbolizes the always fresh and creative present moment. Oblivion, her face hidden and her body concealed in Greek garments, steps forward,

lifting her dark, enveloping cloak. Her lower body ends in a spiraling swirl, which frames a deep black hole that symbolizes the impenetrable mystery of death. Time's hand rests familiarly on her shoulder, and they wade together through the rhythmic sea of life. They are presented as aspects of the same remote, incomprehensible power which has little concern for individual human needs or desire.

In 1868, after a hiatus of twenty years, Watts returned to his "suggestive" pictures, producing three more major paintings on death that elaborate upon the theme of *Time and Oblivion*: *Love and Death*, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, and *The Court of Death*. Love and Death was a popular symbolist subject, but Watts' rendition of the theme differs dramatically from other contemporary interpretations, such as Edvard Munch's *Death and the Maiden* (1893 or Odilon Redon's *Death: I am the one who will make a serious woman of you; come let us embrace* (1896 . It represents the figures of Love and Death as adversaries rather than as lovers and avoids the erotic components, as well as the horrific elements that would become standard fare in symbolist iconography. Moreover, Watts' Death figure is not the macabre yet magnetic male skeleton, which Munch and Redon have adapted from medieval and Renaissance works like Albrecht Dürer's *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1497-98 or Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Dance of Death* (1538 , but a forceful matronly figure in Greek dress.[3] Watts' Death is mysterious; her back is turned toward the picture plane, and her face is hidden. She dominates the composition through the unswerving vertical line of her body, which is enforced by the rippling plunge of her gown as it cascades to the ground. This empathetic downward thrust is slowly reversed by a mounting rhythm in the deep folds of her shroud-like dress, which direct the eye gradually backward toward the opening in a door — a symbolic passageway from life to death.[4] Watts accelerates the backward motion toward the door with the strong, adamant gesture of Death's right arm. In the area between the figure of Death and the door, Love, not a voluptuous nude, but a child-like Eros, makes an impassioned counter-thrust to bar Death's entry. Clearly, there is no contest in this unequal confrontation. All the youthful beauty and emotional sincerity of love cannot halt the relentless approach of Death. Death casts a literal shadow over Love, and some of the forget-me-nots growing near the door have been plucked and scattered on the steps. In the lower right corner, a bird, an emblem of the human soul, observes the universal drama. These are rather heavy-handed allegories, but the import of the painting can be read abstractly, and more compellingly, in the tension filling the narrow, curving space at the heart of the painting between the massive figure of Death and the fragile form of Love. This delicate crescent shape is created when Love instinctively recoils as he gazes into the face of Death. Mary Watts aptly observes that the contour of the wing of "young love

impotent against the inevitable" in *Love and Death* repeats the tragic pathos of the bird's wing in his first exhibited picture, *The Wounded Heron* (Watts, *Annals* I 27 .

Watts' passionate visions of Death as a sublimely beautiful but unapproachable Greek goddess, and of Love as a romantic Eros figure raging impotently against an emotionally indifferent universe, were inspired by his desire to express sympathy for the grief of his friend and patron, Lady Lothian, over her inability to prevent the premature death of her husband from consumption.[5] Its sonorous color harmonies, its thick, sensuous impasto, and the tremulous lines of its drapery convey an aura of solemn sorrow. Intended to provide consolation for this senseless tragedy from an agnostic perspective, the painting offers no particular hope of immortality to the bereaved. Indeed, another of Watts' patrons, Manchester businessman Charles Rickards, asked him to soften his austere view of death by inserting a cross into the picture to signify the possibility of hope for an afterlife, but Watts refused (Watts, *Annals* I 307 . However, while the unyielding figure of Death evokes the inexorable force of natural law,[6] her feminine gender implies that she is part of life's perpetual renewal. Indeed, it was a common observation among Victorian intellectuals influenced by scientific thinking that death's purpose in the wise design of creation must be nature's way of maintaining a fresh and hopeful tone, thus making possible the continuation of life by relieving the old and worn with fresh replacements (Watts' catalog notes for his one-man exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1884; Barrington 135 .[7] Watts' Death is implacable, yet there is consolation for the sufferings of the individual in the contemplation of the welfare of the race as a whole, and, if youthful Love will not embrace Death in the symbolist prescription, neither, as his instinctive recoil reveals, will he allow himself to be suicidally buried beneath her insistent bulk. Death has come for another, and Love will ultimately move aside with melancholy grace. Watts is deeply sympathetic to the pain of the anguished lover in a pitiless universe, but, in the end, he counsels a stoic acceptance of death and dissolution.

In *Orpheus and Eurydice,* Watts reconfigures his meditation on love's tragic inability to vanquish death, this time in a mythological guise with personal undertones. Orpheus is the mythical counterpart of the creative artist, and, as such, he can be read as an idealized self-portrait. Watts' characterization of Eurydice is similar in type to Ellen Terry, the teen-aged actress he had recently married in a determined effort, at the age of forty-seven, to attain a cherished dream of love and family. In any but the legal sense, the marriage lasted less than a year,[8] and the artist's grief over its collapse is evidenced in the emotional tenor of the picture. Watts depicts the climactic moment in the Greek myth when Orpheus' passion for his wife, whom he has just rescued from the underworld, causes him to look

back at her, breaking the conditions of her release and resulting in her irrevocable return to the land of the dead. A heart-rending gap between the two figures, a motif we have already noted in *Love and Death*, is the compositional and emotional crux of the picture.[9] The agitation of Orpheus' emotions are evoked by the wind-whipped, frazzled edge of his drapery. The curve of his hard, powerful back is limply echoed in Eurydice's soft, dropping trunk, leading the eye downward in wave-like intervals that parallel the descent of Orpheus' hopes. Eurydice's left arm still hovers over her lover's head, but her right arm falls lifelessly toward the underworld and her head turns to follow. She has already lost the flush of life, and a shadow falls between Orpheus, rigid with desire, and his fading dream, producing a sexual tension that demonstrates that the symbolist strain of deadly eroticism was not a totally alien concept to the Victorian painter. Behind the figures a flame-like cypress, which simultaneously suggests burning passion and consuming death, reinforces the downward motion of the composition. A vacant-eyed owl, symbolic of the unconscious and of death, looms in the background. A wilted flower falls across Eurydice's leg, and Orpheus, in his grief, has dropped his lyre, suggesting that even art, the source of his spellbinding power, cannot compensate for the loss of love.

The Court of Death, Watts' third painting on the theme of death, from 1868 (reworked until 1881 , transforms the medieval vision of Death as a horrifying skeleton into a regal but comforting maternal figure who embraces her children. This colossal painting, which measures 67" x 108" and occupied an entire wall of the largest gallery at the New Gallery exhibition in 1886, was originally executed for placement in a mortuary chapel in a cemetery for paupers. Watts was told of a project to open such a cemetery where coffins would be collected for a mass burial service to save expense. He was disturbed by such cold calculation and began to work, unasked, on a design to help dignify the building. The scheme for the paupers' cemetery was ultimately dropped, but he continued work on his design, attempting to produce an agnostic icon for the masses (Watts, *Annals* I 228 , stating:

> I hope to be able to paint and present [it] to public institutions at Manchester or elsewhere; wherever, in fact, I might feel they would best perform their mission . . . I have about twelve or fifteen very large pictures which it will be a great point of conscience to paint, and I can only hope to succeed by giving up the rest of my life to them (Watts, *Annals* I 284 .

The Court of Death is an enlargement of the courtly juries arrayed behind the figure of Christ as divine judge in paintings like Giotto's *Last Judgment* fresco from the Arena Chapel (1305 . Outraged since childhood by orthodox Christianity's vengeful God who threatened errant humanity

with eternal damnation, Watts sought to counter the terror of punishment after death by replacing the figure of Christ as a vengeful judge with a winged angel of death who resembles an enthroned madonna. A frontal, hieratic female deity lit by a shaft of heavenly light dominates the center of the huge canvas. Two guardian powers, Silence and Mystery, stand on either side, protecting the secrets of the unseen world. They partially lift the veil that divides the realm of the living from the realm of the dead, uncovering a glimpse of everlasting light and purity. Dressed in a green mantle with red lining, which suggests the conflation of fertility with sacrificial blood, the figure of Death sits regally above her subjects, holding a new-born babe on her lap. The child rests upon a blanket of white grave-clothes that unwinds from Death's lap to the floor. When Watts' patron, Manchester businessman Charles Rickards, objected that the painting was too grim, Watts was unpersuadable, declaring that

> the suggestion that even the germ of life is in the lap of Death, I regard as the most poetic idea in the picture, the key-note of the whole. You say it produces disagreeable impressions! This proves that the picture is not one for a drawing-room — the fastidiousness of modern tastes being taken into account. It is a work of great gravity and character, and — as with a dramatic poem or an epic — it cannot be made up wholly of delightful fancies (Watts, *Annals* I 308 .

Indeed, the array of symbolic figures which Watts depicts at the foot of Death's throne meet their fate with solemnity and sense of weary relief (Macmillan 235 . There is a warrior, an aged king (who resembles the artist , and a cripple. According to Watts, they represent the world of pomp and pride, "all sorts and conditions of men, who have come to render their last homage to the Universal Queen" (Mullen and Gage #34 . A lion, the strongest and most dignified of all beasts, sits humbly, like the rest, at the feet of Death. A young girl, pale and suppliant, lays her head on the shroud. Beneath her, in dark shadow, a hunched and wrinkled old woman is silhouetted in profile. According to critic Hugh Macmillan, the touch that contemporaries found most pathetic was the toddler, who plays on the floor with the train of the shroud in innocent delight (234 . These three female figures, the young girl, the old woman, and the toddler, form a chain that represents the three stages of life. The fact the Death is also female links her to this chain of life and suggests that death is an integral part of nature's process of renewal and evolutionary growth. Thus, the figure of Death is not simply a ghostly echo of Mary, Queen of Heaven, stripped of dogmatic overtones; she is also a redeemed Queen of the Night.

Watts painted many variations on the theme of *Time, Death, and Judgment*. The image was originally conceived in the mid 1960s as a two-figured composition called *Time and Death* and was later elaborated upon

with the addition of a third figure, as in the version dating from c.1895 from Sheffield City Art Galleries (42" x 32" , which I will discuss here .[10] Like the Sheffield painting, most of these variations bear the same warning of the imminence of oblivion that appeared on his earlier *Time and Oblivion* along with the adage, "He that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap."[11] According to Mrs. Barrington's catalog for Watts' New York exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in1884, it was the only painting that Watts conceived in a vision. It shows monumental figures of Time, Death, and Judgment emerging from a lighted area beneath a sacred arch formed by the darkness of oblivion. The scene is set in a celestial realm; the sun, a symbol of light and consciousness, rises and sets behind Time on the left, and a crescent moon, a symbol of darkness, the unconscious, and transformation, rises at the lower right behind Death. Time is depicted as a vigorous ever-youthful male with an aloof, dispassionate expression and an ideally proportioned nude, bronzed torso. His lower body is wrapped in a dark red swath of cloth with deep, expressive folds that spiral around him in heavy waves. Beneath this voluminous drapery, his left foot strives forward into the viewer's space with a stately gait. With his right arm he extends a scythe for reaping. On his head, he wears a delicate, winged crown with a large, sparkling jewel that emits a star of white light over his third eye. Death is represented as a beautiful young woman with a melancholy countenance. Her body is passive; she lowers her head and closes her eyes. Her pale marble pallor and the darkly shadowed, rhythmic folds of her ashen gray drapery evoke the ruins of the Elgin Marbles.[12] Together, they wade through the stream of life. An electrically charged flame-red sliver of agitated negative space between the upper torsos of Time and Death draws the viewer's eye downward, like a divine arrow, toward the bottom center of the composition, where, hidden in the shadows, Time and Death clasp hands. Thus, they are seemingly antithetical, cosmic twin powers who are clandestinely mated, and their union is the secret knot at the heart of creation.[13] While Death's face was hidden in *Time and Oblivion*, his impassive countenance is revealed here. On her lap, she gathers the plucked flowers of humanity in all stages of development, ranging from the incipient bud to the wilted blossom (Spielmann 24 .

Judgment, the third allegorical presence in the composition, is represented as a powerful, red-haired, Amazonian deity clad in flame-red clothes that billow back into space on the right side of the canvas. She hovers in the air above the matter-bound figures of Time and Death. With one hand, she brandishes an avenging sword; with the other, she suspends a scale, a symbol of "Eternal Law," behind the head of Time. Her muscular, outstretched, Michelangelesque arm conceals her intentions by obscuring her face. However, there is a thin line of brown trim on her monumental

bodice that focuses the viewer's eye on her breasts, making a cross pattern over her heart at the axial center of the canvas in an area directly above the clasped hands of Time and Death. This visual link suggests that, despite the appearance of nature's indifference to human suffering and loss, a benign altruistic force is shaping the unfolding of the cosmos and nurturing it toward a condition of spiritual perfection. Watts had always been outraged that orthodox Christianity's vengeful God eternally punished people for what they couldn't help. He rejected the dogma of eternal damnation, asserting of his pictures that "they should appeal purely to human sympathies, without reference to creed or dogma of any kind" (Watts, *Annals* I 307 . He saw this imposition of mental suffering as an abomination and tried to counteract the terror of punishment in death. As an agnostic last judgment, the painting is an admonition to humanity that life is brief and death is unswerving, but that a moral force which evaluates ethical behavior dwells within the cosmos and shapes its destiny.

In response to the sudden deaths in the late 1980s of his friend Matthew Arnold and the Emperor Frederick, as well as to his own approaching mortality, Watts became increasingly uncertain whether death was a dreamless sleep or a new beginning. He speculated, "perhaps the incompleteness argues for that other existence," adding that "life here, with its intimation of perfections, could never be all that man is intended to know; he must develop elsewhere. I feel sometimes as if the human being was an atom in a great whole—that we are all but as people moving in a dream, and that the dream is from One Brain" (Watts, *Annals* II 118 . The softening of his conviction that death is synonymous with oblivion is reflected in works like *The Messenger of Death* (1884-85 and *Death Crowning Innocence* (1887 , which expand upon his earlier conception of Death in *The Court of Death* as an enthroned mother deity. *The Messenger of Death* is specifically addressed to those who mourn an aged loved one. An old man who resembles the artist has collapsed with exhaustion into a chair, surrounded by symbols of his worldly interests. The messenger of death is conceived as a stately maternal figure wearing a crown that implies victory over human suffering. She approaches him and places her hand on his arm with commanding gentleness. At her breast, she holds a child, who will replace the spark of vitality that has faded from the body of the old man. He is framed by a dark, impenetrable wall, but behind the regal representative of death there looms a brilliant light that suggests the presence of benign cosmic intentions which are hidden from the gaze of the living. Watts did not fear death. Mrs. Barrington states that his personal dread of it consisted only of a fear of leaving before his work was complete, observing that he referred to death as his "own familiar," hoping to encourage those who feared it to see it as an inevitable pilgrimage in a journey home (Watts, *Annals* II 191 .[14] Mary recalled that he referred to death as the "great

white angel" (Barrington 191 , or "the gentle nurse that puts the children to bed" (West and Pantini xxi . He admonished her that she should not mind "when the day comes for me to take that journey," because "it leads to better things." He made an analogy between human life as a candle and the soul as a flame, "the material consumed by the air until at last it disappears," declaring that he wanted to be cremated. This was a controversial decision since, because the Church objected to its pagan associations and feared that it would impede the reunion of the body with the soul at the time of the resurrection, it was technically illegal in England until as late as 1902.[15] Watts, however, saw it differently. He contended that cremation "proves how little of us is really material. We go into flame and air, and what is left is but a handful of ashes," adding, "I like the thought that the material is compelled to follow the spiritual. The older I grow the more I am aware that the only real existence is the spiritual (Watts, *Annals* II 317 .

Death Crowning Innocence was intended to console the grief of a mother whose child had recently died (Barrington, 194 . Such an event is always an inexplicable tragedy, but especially traumatic for parents who could not accept the Christian presumption that the child had been called by God to heaven. While Watts' figures are more generalized, his composition alludes to a popular fashion (often photographic for commemorating an infant death by showing the child's grieving mother holding her dead baby, a convention, which, like Watts' painting, was a modern adaptation of the Renaissance *mater dolorosa* image. Watts depicts a motherly figure of Death cradling a lifeless child who seems only to have drifted into a peaceful sleep. She is a tender and strong mother who exhibits no grief. Her wings form a comforting, protective mandorla around the child. With one hand, she gently holds the baby's hand; with the other, she crowns him with a halo. Mother Nature, in the form of death, reabsorbs the tiny child into her matrix with a tender embrace.

In an attempt to give visual form to divine mystery, Watts developed this maternal angel of death in a variety of paintings during his last years.[16] Prominent among these is *The All-Pervading* (1887-c.1893 . This huge painting, which measures 162.6" x 109.2" and is now in the Tate Gallery, was inspired by the play of light and shadow on the walls created by the glass bead and decorative drops of an elaborate chandelier in a drawing room he used as a studio during a visit to Malta (Watts, *Annals* II 104-105 . It features a monumental figure with her impenetrable face in shadow that bears a disconcerting resemblance to Watts' earlier representations of Death. Her folded wings form the almond shape of a mandorla, a symbol of the transfiguration of material fecundity into transcendent spirituality. Seated under an arch of pale gray light that emerges out of the depths of the void, she wears voluminous white and gold garments, which vaguely

suggest classical dress and envelop her body in veils of mysterious inner white light that inexplicably glow in the darkness. A dark halo, created by the rounded space between her folded wings, frames her bowed head. In her lap, at the level of her womb and at the mathematical center of the picture, she holds a luminous green orb with vaporous edges and patterns of star-like points of light that suggest the spirals of the galaxies. Watts described it as "the Globe of the Systems" (Winter Exhibition of the Works of G.F. Watts, New Gallery, 1896, not traced, cited in Bryant, 268 , implying its relationship to the modern science of astronomy. He envied the astronomer's capacity to see the universe from a non-egocentric viewpoint and his immersion in the immensities of space and time. At Sara Prinsep's salon at Little Holland House in 1857, he had cultivated a friendship with the astronomer Sir John Herschel, and in later life he liked to visit the astronomer Sir James South at his home in Camden Hill, where he looked at the rings of Saturn through a telescope, marvelling that it was a sight that dwarfed all others (Watts, *Annals* I 201 .[17] However, the painting also has connotations of psychic prophecy. Barbara Bryant suggests that Watts' "Globe of Systems" resembles a crystal ball, citing his abiding interest in spiritualism and his election to the Society for Psychical Research in 1884 (72 . Moreover, like Mary Watts, she notes that Watts' conception of *The All-Pervading* alludes to Michelangelo's Sistine Sibyls (Watts, *Annals* II 230-31; Bryant 26 .[18] By conflating the figure of Death with traditional representations of the compassionate Madonna and an ancient seer who foresees humanity's fate, Watts suggests that human destiny unfolds through cycles of birth, death, and renewal in an ongoing natural process of evolution that moves toward the development of ethical feeling. He often spoke of the "solemn mystery" inherent in the carrying out of the laws of nature by an all-powerful will (Barrington 29 , declaring that "religion is the constant desire to do right" (Watts, *Annals* II 221-222 , and that conscience constitutes dignity here and reward or punishment hereafter (Watts, *Annals* II 324 . He asserted that science, with its sublime perspective, is spiritual and that spiritual experience is compatible with a scientific inquiry (Watts, *Annals* II 242-243 , and envisioned *The All-Pervading* as a secular altarpiece. In 1904, the year of his death, he installed a smaller replica of the painting in an arched compartment in the Watts Chapel at Compton, where it remains today (Bryant 268 .

Watts described these "suggestive" paintings as "ethical reflections" (Watts, *Annals* III xii . In them, he sought to construct an abstract language of emotionally laden color and line with which to paint his feelings about the presence of a moral intention within the cosmos. " Art," he asserted, "is not illusion, but something else entirely . . . I don't want to be anecdotal, or fanciful, or realistic, not even poetic; what I want to paint is spiritual" (Watts, *Annals* III 6; II 258 . He had a theory of curves in which he saw

every part of the contours of figures in Phidias's panathenaic frieze on the Parthenon as fractions of great circles. In the flatness of these curving outlines, he perceived a suggestion of immensity, observing that

> The circle is the only perfect form, equal in all its parts and complete. All lines bounding any form whatever will, if absolutely followed to the end, resolve themselves into circles; hence it will result that the impression of magnitude in complex form (the human form for example will depend upon the sweep of the line composing the parts of the form. Lines with a visible sweep suggest vitality, movement and direction. Circles imply centers. All creation is full of circles which revolve into each other. The divine Intelligence must be the center of all (Watts, *Annals* I 317 .[19]

He applied his theory of circles not merely to the sphericalization of the figural form but to the composition as a whole. Thus, in works like *The All-Pervading*, the very arrangement of the shapes of the painting imply a benign force at work behind the universe. Moreover, he wanted his "suggestive" paintings to explain themselves "as the solemn effect of music." He referred to them as "anthems" and hoped that they would arouse a higher spiritual and emotional response through their harmony of line and color, like "an organ tone" (Barrington 41; Watts, *Annals* II 244 .[20] "I do not know," he mused, "whether the world has grown out of or not yet come to my view that the highest art is that which, taking for its means of expression line and colour descriptive of human form, should perhaps, more like music than poetry , suggest the highest emotions, sentiment, and phrases of thought as the outward manifestation of humanity (Watts, *Annals* III 21 . He declared that "religion is nothing unless it is the music that runs through all life" (Watts, *Annals* II 245 , and his aspiration to lift art to the level of music equated it with the divine act of creation.

Watts' radically unorthodox explorations of the expressive possibilities of abstract line and color were intimately entwined with his quest to envision death in cosmic terms as an aspect of a spiritualized natural law rather than a merely individual experience bound to historical time. His images of death comprise a modernized teleological narrative of humanity's destiny that replaces a Judeo-Christian omnipotent, external deity with a naturalized, more fragile, internal divinity, an essentially human energy that is gradually revealed in time as humanity's ethical and aesthetic sensibilities evolve.[21] This narrative is inherently transgressive because, like all stories of desire, it inevitably defines itself against the repressive law of tradition. Moreover, because it retains ghostly traces of the superseded certainties of the past, it unsettles and destabilizes the assumption of a single, fixed Truth, while endorsing a forward-looking trajectory of developmental growth. For these reasons, I would propose that Watts' "suggestive" paintings on the theme of death have stronger affinities with

twentieth-century modernist agendas of utopian liberation from the bonds of the past and with avant-garde conceptions of art as an agent of psychic and cultural transformation than has generally been acknowledged.

SUNY - Geneseo

NOTES

1 Watts once told his friend Mrs. Barrington that "no one but the fanatic is happy." She reveals that Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621 , a treatise on all aspects of the disease, was one of his favorite books (Barrington 154, 71 . Throughout his life, Watts suffered from periodic bouts of despondency, at one point, even considering prussic acid as a suicidal solution (Chapman 45 .

2 Ironically, Watts's present reputation rests primarily on his numerous portraits of famous Victorians rather than on his allegorical "suggestive" pictures, which have been criticized for their vagueness.

3 The mourning figures on classical sarcophagi are likely sources for this image. Allen Staley has also noted a resemblance to the central figure in Antonio Canova's monument to Maria Christina, Duchess of Saxe-Teschen, in the Augustiner-Kirche in Vienna (*The Victorian High Renaissance* 78 .

4 In his catalog for the 1974 Watts' exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, Christopher Mullen observes that both the symbolic door and the female death figure have precedent in Gustave Moreau's *The Young Man and Death*, which was on display at the 1865 salon. Although Watts was not in Paris at this time, he may well have known of the painting through reproductions (entry #24 . However, unlike *Love and Death*, Moreau's picture retains the sexual component in the relationship between the allegorical figures. Staley has aptly suggested that the idea of a doorway to the soul may have derived from a painting closer to home, Holman Hunt's popular *Light of the World,* painted between 1851 and 1853 (78 . Both pictures, of course, respond to similar doorway metaphors in earlier works like Hans Baldung Grien's *The Young Woman and Death* (Musée d'art ancien, Brussels . Significantly, Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann identifies the gateway or doorway image as an archetype for the transition from life into the earth womb of the underworld (*The Great Mother*,1963, pp.157-158 .

5 The man was the eighth Marquess of Lothian, whose portrait Watts began in 1862. The Marquess died in 1870.

6 D. H. Lawrence lauded the painting for "the blurred idea that Death is shrouded, but a dark embracing mother, who stoops over us, and frightens us because we are children" (47 .

7 Bishop Paley first proposed this idea in *Natural Theology* (1814 as an example of the wise design of creation. In "In Memorium A.H.H.," Tennyson echoes Paley's ideas, if less serenely, writing of nature as "careful of the type," but "careless of the single life." George Meredith likewise worshipped the earth as a cruel mother who was both protective and destructive in poems such as "Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn," where he detects the "smells of regeneration" in autumn's "breath of decay." In "Woods of Westermain," Meredith sees man as Nature's experience, her consciousness and her voice. He urges that man focus his animal energies as a foundation for his spiritual life in a harmony of blood, brain and spirit. These arguments had the advantage of allowing nature an overall benevolence of intention in spite of numerous and obvious specific instances of her cruelty.

[8] Watts married Ellen Terry in February of 1864. By January of 1865, they were legally separated for reasons that were deliberately obscured. They were divorced in 1877 so that Terry could remarry, which she did shortly after the final decree.

[9] This composition recalls the Hellenistic Pasquino group, which depicts Menelaos with the body of the dead Patroclus. A version of this statue stood in the Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence where Watts, who lived in the city from 1843 to 1847, would likely have seen it.

[10] There is an oil sketch in the Ashmolean Museum for the sixties. Watts sold a design with only two figures called *Time and Death* to Charles Rickards in 1868, which is now in the Chicago Art Institute. There is a large version of the theme in the National Gallery of Canada dating from some time between 1865 and 1886. There are two other large versions that Watts gave to St. Paul's Cathedral in 1893 and to the Tate Gallery in 1900. The composition was also executed in mosaic on the facade of the Church of St. Jude in Whitechapel, and Watts included it in the background of his self-portrait, painted for the Uffizi Gallery in Florence in 1879 (Staley and Coffey 87-88 .

[11] The third background figure of Judgment in the Chicago picture appears to have been an afterthought, since it is rather awkwardly positioned and incongruous with the proportions of the rest of the painting. There is another large version of *Time, Death, and Judgment*(43" x 32" in the Sheffield City Art Art Gallery dating from 1895, as well as one in St. Paul's Cathedral, and yet another at the Tate Gallery in London.

[12] Watts adored Phidias and kept casts of his work in his studio throughout his life (Watts, *Annals* II 82 .

[13] In the initial picture, there were only two figures, with the figure of Judgment (originally called Nemesis added later, thus allowing the element of morality to enter this rarefied world of deified natural power (Barrington 92 .

[14] For further discussion of the theological and psychological implications of Watts' semi-conscious transformation of the gender of his deity, see Board, "Modernizing the Grail Quest."

[15] The law was finally changed after a long battle by the Cremation Society and through the influence of an article by Sir Henry Thompson in 1874 entitled "Cremation: The Treatment of the Body After Death." Even after the law had changed, cremations in England were rare. By 1912, there were only about one thousand per year (Morley 91-101 .

[16] These include *The Recording Angel* (1890 , *Dweller in the Innermost* (1885-86 , *The Sower of Systems* (1902 , and *Destiny* (1904 .

[17] Watts began a drawing for a portrait of Herschel at Little Holland House but never completed it.

[18] Bryant also notes Watts' assertion, made while he was working on *The All-Pervading*, that Michelangelo's Prophets and Sibyls were equivalents of "the noblest poetry" (26 .

[19] He originally published these ideas in 1879, in an article in *The Nineteenth Century Magazine* called "The Present Condition of Art."

[20] In his popular *History of Modern Painting* (1896 , Richard Muther, the keeper of prints at the Munich Pinakothek, compared the style of "the great Watts" to "Whistler's misty harmonies dissolving in vapour" (III 644 .

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